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Alone in a Crowded Room?  
First-Year Students' Views on the Inclusion of Students  
with Special Needs in High School Classrooms

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## Introduction

“The inclusion of pupils with learning difficulties in ordinary schools and classrooms is part of a large world-wide human rights movement which calls for the full inclusion of all people with disabilities in all aspects of life.” (Florian, 1998, p. 15)

I was enrolled in a course titled *Children with Special Needs* in Copenhagen, Denmark during the spring 2010 semester. We learned about the global move towards creating more inclusive settings for people who have special needs (Florian, 1998, p. 15). We focused on the Danish inclusive education policies and observed the inclusion of students with special needs in mainstream classrooms. The Danish schools were expected to accommodate all students but as we visited several schools and institutions committed to providing educational services for those who have special needs, we quickly realized that each location had its own interpretation of an inclusive environment. Giangreco (1997) found that schools that had successful inclusive education practices had similar features that included: “collaborative teamwork, a shared framework, family involvement, general educator ownership, clear role relationships among professionals, effective use of supportive staff, meaningful Individual Education Plans (IEPs), and procedures for evaluating effectiveness.”

As we analyzed the educational context of these students, we often referred to Urie Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory. This theory “views the child as developing within a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment” (Berk, 2009, p. 26). These various levels are known as the child’s microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem which include factors such as laws, values, neighbors, parents’ employers, and schools among other things. In my study, I will focus on “the innermost level of the environment, the microsystem, [which] consists of activities and

interaction patterns in the child's immediate surroundings" (Berk, 2009, p. 26). The relationships formed within the school comprise a child's microsystem that could greatly impact their development.

In 2006, a Trinity College senior studied teachers' perceptions of inclusion within mainstream schools after teaching these students for one full year. As a result of her qualitative study consisting of interviews and observations in a Hartford public school, McEachern (2006) found that teachers were not prepared to receive the students with special needs in their classrooms. They were initially shocked and did not feel that the school had provided enough training to prepare for this transition. As a result, they adapted to this new situation with the help of other teachers and external resources. Many even recognized the benefits of mainstreaming despite all of the obstacles (McEachern, 2006).

In my study, the focus was on a different relationship within each child's microsystem – the relationship with his or her peers. My interviews with students who are not classified as having special needs focused on their experiences and opinions regarding the inclusion of students with special needs in mainstream classrooms, particularly in high school. My main research question is: "How do college students view the inclusion of students with special needs in classrooms?" More specifically, I ask, "Why do they support or oppose it? Did their high school experience affect their views?" Insight into these peers' perspectives should allow us to determine the type of environment created within the schools that may affect the student's development. I argue that ignorance regarding inclusion has led to division between students, strengthened by confusion, frustration, and bullying. I also argue that students view inclusion positively but support it under certain circumstances. And lastly, I argue that earlier exposure during elementary or middle school provides students with more evidence to make strong claims.

## Literature Review

The United Nations, among other organizations, has played an active role in advocating for the rights for people who have special needs. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, the UN Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities in 1993, and the UNESCO Report on “the education of children with disabilities (Salamanca Statement)” all emphasize inclusive education as a right that should be granted for students with disabilities (Florian, 1998, p. 15). In the United States, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) amended in 2004 claimed that all students deserve: “a Free, Appropriate, Public Education (FAPE), an appropriate evaluation, an Individualized Education Program (IEP), procedural safeguards, parent and student participation in decision making, and a Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)” (Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center, 2009).

Although the current trend is toward inclusive education practices, it is a controversial topic. Nelson, Palonsky, and Carlson (2000) outlined the debate in the chapter titled *Inclusion and Mainstreaming: Special or Common Education* in Critical Issues in Education. In the argument to support inclusion, one point they explained is that, “Separation of exceptional children from the mainstream of children in schools has been recognized as traumatic for those who have been separated, whether by race, gender, or abilities” (p. 421). On the other hand, one point the counterargument explained is that:

“With children of all abilities and disabilities mixed in a class and school, the chance increases that the special needs of select students will be missed. The focus will shift away from giving special attention to individual children’s strengths and disabilities and shift toward conforming to group standards imposed by state officials, meeting community expectations in test scores, or facing other accountability measures of group success” (p. 432).

Both sides place an emphasis on how the students' particular needs may be met and whether one group would suffer more than the other. Researchers have published many studies that illustrate support for inclusion (Nelson et al., 2000). Such studies often focus on the benefits for both groups.

One study, however, focused on the costs for students who do not have special needs. Fletcher (2009) examined the effects of first grade students with serious emotional problems on their classmates without these problems. He found that those without the problems had lower math and reading scores than other first grade students who were not in inclusive classrooms. He also found that students who were in classrooms all day with those who had the problems (full inclusion) had lower test scores than those who were in these classrooms for part of the day (partial inclusion). These findings led him to encourage others to reevaluate inclusion in mainstream classrooms for the costs that it could have on their peers' academic work.

In Life As We Know It: A Father, a Family, and an Exceptional Child, Michael Bérubé is aware of this cost to the "regular" students' academic benefits that opponents of inclusion emphasize. His book focuses on his experience raising a son who was diagnosed with Down Syndrome. Initially, he and his wife were not familiar with anything regarding the condition. This experience has enabled him to not only learn from parents in similar situations but to also educate other parents, in addition to all readers, regarding the struggles and joys of raising a child with a special need. While explaining the opposition for inclusive education, he wrote,

"The conservatives' basic argument runs like this: Resources are finite, as is the patience and training of teachers, and the inclusion of disabled children in regular classrooms will only prevent 'normal' kids from getting the services *they* need. For doesn't justice demand we attend to tomorrow's leaders before we attend to a cohort of children who – with luck – may end up flipping burgers or pushing brooms?" (p. 204)

He then outlined the several assumptions within this argument and expressed how baffled he is by the fact that people can still hold these views when data shows that students without disabilities sometimes require more of the teacher's attention. He asked, "Yet why are we so susceptible to the notion that all the regular kids are regular and all the special kids are irregular, like mismatched socks?" (p. 207-208)

Although adults' attitudes regarding inclusion in classrooms are important to know, it is equally important to learn of the peers within the classrooms. These are the students who will interact with those who have special needs and determine whether a hostile or welcoming environment is created. Wong's (2008) study involved the measurement of students' attitudes towards their peers with disabilities in a secondary school in Hong Kong. The students completed one questionnaire during the beginning of the year and a second during the end. The scores indicated that students' attitudes did not change after a year of having students with disabilities in the same classroom. The attitudes of students who participated in educational programs that promoted social acceptance, however, did have a positive change.

Students might not all agree that these educational programs will help students adjust to inclusive education policies. Shokoohi-Yekta and Hendrickson (2010) asked American and Iranian high school students in general education inclusive schools to complete the Student Friendship Perception Survey (SFPS) regarding their views on friendships with people who have disabilities. The results indicated that both groups felt that friendships were possible to form although neither perceived them as easy to form. More American students felt that adults could not help facilitate these friendships. They also tended to believe that these friendships have more benefits for those who have special needs. More Iranian students tended to believe that students without special needs should initiate the friendship. Although many in this study feel that adults

cannot help, it would be interesting to intervene with a program that has proven successful in other schools.

One successful program involves the creation of a buddy system where students with different abilities are paired to interact with one another. Calabrese, Patterson, Liu, Goodvin, Hummel, and Nance (2008) examined how the Circle of Friends Program (COFP) assisted with the social inclusion of those who have special needs. After the approval from sponsors, recent high school graduates would go to a special education school to interact with their assigned buddies. Calabrese et al. (2008) learned of the perspectives of sponsors, mentors, and the parents of children with disabilities through focus groups, interviews, and an online survey. A great majority from each group had positive feedback. They found that buddies often reported this interaction serving as a life-changing experience that had an important role in their lives. These interactions can also help improve the social environment within the school, especially after longer periods of interaction.

The social environment of an inclusive school may range depending on whether the student with special needs is surrounded by students without special needs that have personal connections with other students who have special needs. McDougall, DeWit, King, Miller, and Killip (2004) conducted a study in which they measured the attitudes of ninth grade students in Ontario, Canada regarding their peers with disabilities after one year. The students completed the first questionnaire during the fall of the school year and the second during the spring. High scores on a questionnaire indicated more positive attitudes towards these students. Their results showed that although 61% of the students expressed “slightly above neutral to very positive” (p. 302) attitudes, a significant 21% expressed “slightly below neutral to very negative” (p. 302)

attitudes. Their results also showed that students who personally knew someone with a disability had significantly higher scores than those who did not.

Current research focused on the inclusion of students with special needs includes accounts of the two groups' personal attitudes, behaviors, and interactions. It provides readers with more insight into the school environment. These studies, however, do not focus on the long term effects of this interaction within the classroom. Students may have realized more costs or benefits of their high school's inclusion policies after moving to a new school. Now that Trinity College first-year students have become familiar with our community, I expect that they are ready to compare it to their high school experience.

## **Methods**

I chose to conduct a qualitative study because I wanted to fully understand each of the participants' unique experiences. I hoped that the interviews would eliminate or minimize any confusion regarding the inclusion of students with special needs in classrooms. I wanted to provide the participants with the opportunity to describe their views, ask questions, and clarify any points concerning the focus of my project. The interviews provided the flexibility needed to analyze the details of each discussion.

### *Participants*

The director of Trinity College's Institutional Review Board invited a random sample of Trinity College first-year students who attended high schools in Connecticut to participate in my study. The students who were interested contacted me via email. I chose to limit my participants according to these two criteria in order to increase the validity of my findings with a more comparable group. Additionally, I hoped that first-year students would recall their high school experiences more vividly than the upperclassmen. I preferred a random sample of students

because of my position regarding the topic. Many of my peers know that I have worked with the population who has special needs in a variety of contexts. Many also know that I studied inclusive education practices during my semester in Denmark. I did not want anyone to assume that I am a strong supporter of inclusion who would be offended if they opposed it. I preferred to hear of their honest opinions and reflections without a concern for my position.

I interviewed a total of five students - Stacy\*, Tom\*, Mandy\*, Carmen\*, and Brandon\*. Stacy, Tom, and Carmen all attended boarding schools. Mandy attended a boarding school during her last two years in high school. She had previously attended schools outside of Connecticut. Brandon attended his district's public high school. Four of the five participants having attended boarding schools served as a limitation to my study, especially because IDEA applies to public education. The students with special needs in the boarding schools, if any, might not have been easily noticed by their peers without special needs due to tracking. The students without special needs who later attended Trinity may have been in more advanced courses, already separated from their peers who may have learning disabilities. These four students, although uncertain of their responses, described the extra services for tutoring and help outside of the classroom as their school's form of inclusive education. Brandon was the only student who recalled having students with learning and physical disabilities within the same building.

### *Structure of Interviews*

The wide variety of views regarding the implementation and effectiveness of an inclusive education motivated me to begin this project. As I prepared the interview questions (Appendix), I wanted to address several aspects of inclusion in order to find more overlapping themes from the participants' diverse experiences and opinions. I began each interview with the question: "What

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\* Pseudonyms were given to all participants.

are your initial thoughts when you hear ‘inclusion of students with special needs in mainstream classrooms?’” I assured them that these thoughts did not have to represent their views. I wanted to learn about how familiar they were with the topic and whether most of the information they initially associated with the phrase was positive or negative. Although each participant mentioned similar themes regarding bullies or the negative effects of labels, they each mentioned that they had not discussed or thought about this before they agreed to participate in this study. Most of them hesitated before they answered this first question. Stacy’s reaction was to admit her confusion as she stated, “Uhm...well, that was one of my questions - I didn’t know what you meant by inclusion exactly.” Once we clarified the phrase “inclusion of students with special needs,” each interview’s structure varied according to their general impressions and personal experiences.

I allowed the participant to lead the discussion if they had any significant experiences or points that they wished to immediately address. I did not want to influence any of their opinions. During each interview, I asked for a general description of their high school including its accessibility (“Were there any ramps or elevators?”), whether they knew of its inclusive education policies (if any), and their academic interests. If they have had any interactions with people who have special needs, I would ask them to elaborate on these experiences and mention any positive or negative reactions from other students. Each interview concluded with the following questions: “What are your current views of inclusion? Do you support or oppose inclusion in mainstream classrooms? Would you encourage someone to attend a school that has inclusive education policies?”

## **Analysis of Findings**

### *Division due to Ignorance*

The term “ignorance” tends to have a negative connotation. Ignorance, however, is simply the lack of knowledge regarding a particular subject and can be changed with an explanation or discussion. If the peers surrounding the students who have special needs are ignorant of their disabilities and therefore do not fully understand all of the students’ conditions, their ignorance may lead them to misunderstand the situation. They may bully, mock, or stigmatize these students rather than welcome them into the classrooms.

Carmen spoke of the frustration that could result from this ignorance:

“I have actually never really seen it first hand, but I think it can be challenging because you have the students who don’t have special needs getting frustrated with those other students. And the students with special needs don’t really know what else to do so I think that it can be difficult to mix the two together, especially at a high school level where not everyone understands a disability or something like that.”

In this hypothetical situation, neither group was fully aware of the situation so neither could improve the classroom environment. If the students who were not classified as having special needs knew why the other students behaved in a certain manner or needed extra help, they might not have reacted in frustration. If the students with the special needs could explain their situation to the others, they could have also attempted to address this frustration.

Once a few students begin to label other students and react with a certain attitude towards them, they can also influence the reactions from other students. Stacy illustrated this as she explained that, “You can see that if those particular persons, if they want to speak up in class, they usually are identified as people that hold the class back when they ask questions because it was something that was already said that they didn’t quite get and then they just ask again. So people tend to not really respond well, which is not good.” Once these students are already identified among their classmates as the ones who ask the questions that have already been

answered, their peers may have a negative reaction each time they raise their hand. The students may then reply to their peers' negative reactions with even more hostility, ignore the comments to continue asking questions, or they can feel intimidated enough to stop participating in class. This could create a division among the students in the class and defeat the purpose of inclusion.

If the students are in the same building but not in the same room as one another, even fewer opportunities to address ignorance may be present. This separation may also increase the likelihood of a division between students. Brandon recalled a reoccurring situation that he noticed in the hallway during his high school years:

“I mean, I wouldn't say negative reactions but you would hear comments and, I don't know, just comments that would even bother me. People who were just insensitive to the fact that they have problems and I mean sometimes they...I remember one of them specifically, he had something wrong with him so he would walk slower. And they wouldn't say anything to the person but if the person was behind them or next to them then they would say, why can't this kid walk or walk faster, just stuff like that that was just really insensitive to just those people in general.”

Ignorance of the student's disability could have had a major role in the repetition of students' comments. Whether it was the targeted student or those surrounding him or her who heard the comments, they contributed to a less welcoming environment. If the students were more aware of the nature of the disability, they would ideally be discouraged from continuing the comments.

Students' actions as a result of their ignorance do not always have to immediately lead to negative consequences within the community. When Mandy described her niece's experience of attending an elementary school with her paraprofessional, she mentioned, “I know that when she was in the first grade, she didn't get why no one else had a special buddy...When she was little, she wondered why but it wasn't like the other kids would say anything. I don't think they understood...She thought she was cooler than everyone else. She had this 20 year old woman walking with her all the time. It was really funny. She was really proud of it.” Although Mandy's

niece was not bullied or mocked, this situation showed that neither she nor her peers understood why she had a paraprofessional help her throughout the day. The students did not bother her and she was able to develop her own conclusion; but her situation could have been easily misunderstood and had negative consequences. Informing the niece or her peers of the reasons and benefits of having a paraprofessional would allow everyone to continue to educate others to cease the ignorance and avoid any negative circumstances.

The students, both those with and those without special needs, could even use these explanations to educate people outside of their classroom or school building. While discussing a school that does not have inclusive education policies, Tom explained, “That school doesn’t have an accurate representation of what they would face after school. If they did have that experience in the first place, maybe afterwards they would know how to deal with those, with those types of situations in the future.” Tom suggested that the students may not feel prepared or comfortable enough to interact with people who have disabilities without this initial experience in the classroom. These responses demonstrate a trend of ignorance that leads to misunderstanding and confusion illustrated by students’ positive or negative reactions to those involved in the situation. An increased awareness or understanding may lead to a more welcoming, inclusive environment.

It is understandable for students to be ignorant of the circumstances in an inclusive classroom, especially since the adults that surround them also might not know enough to educate them. Bérubé (1996) explained, “Sometimes I think it’s regrettable that disability law places so heavy stress on the benefits to the disabled child; for when ‘inclusion’ is handled with the care and sensitivity that it deserves, its benefits are truly universal” (p. 206). While referring to a school in Boston that has a principal who is blind, Bérubé (1996) mentioned, “that because of inclusion, their nondisabled students have not only become socially and psychologically mature

but have registered better test scores in their ‘traditional’ areas (verbal and mathematical) as well” (p. 206). Our policymakers are not familiar enough with the effects of successful inclusive education. We, therefore, cannot expect students who are less familiar with the situation to make decisions that would avoid division between groups. It is unfortunate, however, because the frustration and bullying will continue unless this ignorance is addressed. Students may continue to divide due to differences that could be explained in an attempt to give students the agency to decide whether or not they wish to continue to remain distant from their peers.

These divisions and behaviors that shape each student’s microsystem can certainly have an effect on his or her development. When students who have special needs are mocked and excluded from particular groups because of their condition, they may feel resentment towards these bullies. Additionally, they may feel resentment towards themselves for having this condition that is the subject of the comments. They may wish to avoid returning to school or entering public areas where people could potentially target them. On the other hand, they may even wish to retaliate and physically harm their peers. If the bullies do not realize the consequences their actions could have, they may continue to treat all students who have special needs in this manner. This cycle could be continuous until the groups are educated regarding special needs and inclusive education. Once they are better informed, some may be more inclined to avoid the bullying or frustration that leads to the division and negative experiences.

### *Conditional Support*

Overall, students held positive views regarding the inclusion of students with special needs in mainstream classrooms. When asked about their current views, specifically whether they supported or opposed inclusive education policies, they chose to support it but only under

certain circumstances. These circumstances included how the conditions of the students' disabilities could affect the classroom environment and interactions between the two groups. Brandon recalled his school experiences as he explained, "I'm absolutely fine with it. I have no problem with it. It's never really bothered or affected me. If they are capable of being in the class then that's it, I'm fine with that." Because the students Brandon recalled in the classroom were mentally and physically capable to keep up with the lessons, he did not notice any negative consequences due to sharing a classroom with them.

On the other hand, Stacy considered those students whose presence could produce negative consequences within the classroom as she explained, "Honestly, it depends on the severity of each person's case. Because if you have someone that really really (sic) has ADD or ADHD, they might be a disruption to the class just by the nature of that disorder and what it makes them do...But if it's mild and it's just a matter of, 'Just repeat it one more time for me. I didn't quite catch it the first time,' that's fine." Although Stacy mentioned during her interview that "it's good to have them in the classroom," she was also concerned for the progress of the class as a whole. An inclusive classroom will consist of students with different capabilities, strengths, and weaknesses depending on each subject and assignment. It is the teacher's responsibility to make sure the students understand each lesson while making sure the required content for the year is covered. Each student's success, however, could be affected if the teacher must focus her attention on an individual that continuously disrupts the lessons. It could not only affect the other students' progress but it could also affect the other students' perceptions of this individual and create a negative atmosphere that is not conducive to their learning.

Carmen expressed concern for the students' perceptions of one another as she mentioned:

“It would be the best case scenario if we could include everyone together because I think when you start separating groups of people, things get messy... I think when you start separating groups, it gets really tricky. I just think it depends on the degree of the disability. So if you have someone who really cannot be in a classroom with other students, the best case for both student and the teacher, and the other students, is to be in a separate classroom. But if you have kids who have a minor form of ADD, ADHD, whatever, that’s fine. Put them in the same classroom, let them learn with everyone else and if they need help, then they go and get help. If they need to ask questions in class, fine.”

Similar to Brandon and Stacy, Carmen does not see the issue with inclusion as long as the disability enables the student to effectively interact with the students and teacher. This focus originated from her worry that potential friendships or friendly exchanges with the students may not occur if the students are separated. Learning in a different setting could create an even more visible division than what may already be present due to physical or behavioral differences.

These responses suggested that inclusive classrooms work best when the students’ disabilities do not become a distraction for the teacher and other students. The purpose of having everyone in the classroom together is for everyone to learn together. These students believed that all students could be negatively affected if the focus of learning time is always on a particular student’s behavior rather than the lesson. If the behavior is not an issue, then including them in the classroom should not be an issue either. Brandon, Stacy, and Carmen attempted to polish their concerns for the classroom environment with expressions of support for including their peers who have special needs. Their claims, however, closely related to Fletcher’s (2009) concerns regarding the success of the students who are not classified as having special needs. These students did not specifically mention a decrease in students’ math, reading, and test scores (Fletcher, 2009) but their focus on the degree and severity of the students’ disabilities may have implied this.

The students' sentiments of conditional support may be expressed in a variety of ways through their behaviors. These attitudes and behaviors that comprise one another's microsystems have an effect on one another's development. These peers may decide to ignore or reject their classmates because of their different capabilities. A hostile social environment may form that could lead these students to avoid similar groups outside of the classroom and in society as well. These peers may choose to welcome their classmates with no expectations from their different capabilities but rather view it as a learning experience in itself. A welcoming social environment may form that could motivate all of the students to seek friendships outside of those who are similar to them now that they may feel more comfortable.

#### *Earlier Exposure*

I decided to focus my study on first-year students' high school experiences because I expected them to recall these experiences better than earlier educational experiences. Surprisingly, most of the students told accounts of when they first encountered someone with special needs during elementary or middle school. This earlier exposure to these students allowed them to have more confident claims and a stronger view than a student without this early experience as they reflected upon these experiences during high school and college.

Carmen recalled a student in elementary school who had a back brace and received assistance from a paraprofessional as she mentioned, "I saw that (referring to assistance from a paraprofessional) once but...Yea, I definitely saw it in second grade. There was one student we had...I don't remember what disability she had or anything like that. All I remember is that she had to wear a back brace..." I then asked, "How did students react to her with the back brace? [Was it there since the] first day? Happen during middle?" Carmen responded:

“I think it was a long time. I only moved to this school during the second grade. I think it was just a general curiosity. People, not like a jealousy, like a well why does she have someone helping her? It was more like why is this person helping her? Not like a distaste for her but it was more just like a curiosity. Why is this person there? What’s wrong with this girl? Instead of like, she gets help, I want help, too.”

As we continued to discuss this student, Carmen told accounts of how this student’s personality, not her disability, led the students to laugh at her. While we discussed the possibility that these “side comments” could be related to her special need, we wondered if age could be a factor in how the students reacted to this student. Carmen confidently concluded:

“I think there are still...assholes everywhere you go but when there are so many students without disabilities and then there is one who has a very visible disability, everyone just sort of talks about that. But as you get older, as you meet more older people, I think you sort of balance this out. No, I definitely think it was an age thing. Because even I used to think some stuff like that when I was younger. But you get older, you see things, you learn things, so I think it’s an age thing.”

Brandon noticed these older students’ reactions during his transition to high school. Most of the students I interviewed defined the inclusion of students with special needs in high school as the extra support for students who needed extra time on the exams or needed someone to reinforce the lesson after learning it from the teacher. Brandon was the only student who recalled students with learning and physical disabilities in his high school. In fact, when I asked if their presence was a surprise, he replied, “No, even throughout middle school and elementary school, I remember there was (sic) people who...not the same ones, but I know this one girl who I had been going to school with since the 4<sup>th</sup> grade, and she always had a helper come around to go to every class. So it wasn’t something that we hadn’t seen before, it was just more people once you’re in high school.” This is the same student who had confidently claimed, “I’m absolutely fine with it,” as we discussed his support for inclusion. Brandon and his peers, because they were already accustomed to these students since elementary school, did not have to adjust to them in

high school. They already knew some of them and had a basic understanding of the others' situations. The exceptions were the ones who teased these students due to their ignorance of their peers' conditions. These students may have moved to the community during high school and might not have had the same awareness as the others.

On the other hand, Stacy's account was more similar to Carmen's as she explained:

"I think it's a hard subject to tackle because I did go to public school where there was just an entire class full of special needs students. And they took them out, they took them out from the other kids. I don't know if that's the best approach. It might be. [Samantha: This is in middle school?] Yea, this was middle school. But keeping them interacting with the other students, I mean, there is a less tendency to make fun of them because they are not labeled as these kids."

Stacy's middle school experience led her to support inclusion because she had already witnessed how the other students labeled and ridiculed those who had to leave certain classes. This earlier exposure helped her confidently identify the main issue she saw with separation – the bullies. These responses indicated how elementary and middle school experiences still affected their current views. It provided them with more support for their claims.

In contrast, Tom could not recall seeing anyone with special needs in his elementary and middle schools. Instead, he predicted, "I think that...I think that just because, just excluding a few students and putting them in a separate classroom isn't, wouldn't be helpful. I guess it's sort of like segregation." As he reflected upon the possible issues with separation, he was very hesitant as he articulated his response. His repetition of words and long pauses suggested that he may have not felt confident enough to make a strong claim due to his lack of experience.

In fact, Tom mentioned learning more about inclusion from a newspaper article that described a situation in which a professor did not want to grant a student his doctorate. The student had a condition that did not allow him to take exams. The student had fulfilled all of the

requirements except for the exam that he could not take. The professor did not want to eliminate this requirement for this one student. The school, however, said they were required to give the student his doctorate as long as he substituted the exam with something else. When I asked Tom how he felt about the school's decision, he replied, "I don't know enough details about the situation." When I then asked about his views on any possible advantages or disadvantages of an inclusive classroom, he replied, "I don't really have any. I think that students should be allowed to have the same benefits as those students who don't need the accommodations. But other than that, I haven't thought about it." Earlier exposure to these students in elementary or middle school may have helped Tom develop stronger claims similar to Carmen, Brandon, and Stacy.

Knowing people who have disabilities may affect someone's attitude regarding inclusion or the confidence of their claims. Many of the students who had completed Mc Dougall et al.'s (2004) study held positive attitudes towards their peers with disabilities. Students who reported knowing someone with a disability tended to have more positive attitudes than their peers who did not report knowing at least one person. In my study, the students who were personally familiar with an inclusive environment from a young age spoke more confidently about students' reactions. Carmen was sure students' reactions would mature with age. Brandon was sure he was accustomed to the exposure in high school because it was just a few more people added than he had during elementary and middle school. Stacy was sure separate classrooms in one building led to bullying. Tom's inexperience did not allow him to make these claims.

This exposure and these claims, as part of each other's microsystems, could either help or hinder one another's development. If more students like Carmen reflected on childhood teasing as something you grow out of with age, these students may become the leaders for promoting a welcoming environment once they reach the higher grades. Students like Brandon who were

already accustomed to having these students in classrooms and did not view it as a bother could share their experiences with peers who are hesitant or inexperienced like Tom. If students like Stacy realize the negative effects of the separation, they may be more willing to accept everyone in one classroom together. These welcoming classrooms could positively affect the development of a student with special needs. They may feel more willing to interact with others who do not have disabilities in a variety of settings for they will not fear rejection or ridicule.

### *Limitations*

Although these five students mentioned similar themes during the interviews, I cannot generalize that this is how all first-year students reflect on their inclusive education experiences with such a small sample. I especially cannot generalize because I did not interview students with a wide variety of educational backgrounds since four of the five had attended boarding schools in Connecticut. Also, the students who mentioned attending a school with inclusive education practices when they were younger had previously attended public schools before the boarding schools. This once again narrows my sample to students with even more closely related backgrounds.

## **Conclusion**

### *Medical and Social Models of Thinking*

The medical model of thinking in schools focuses on the student's impairment. The "faulty child" is diagnosed, labeled, assessed, monitored, and organized into therapists' schedules. Students are separated to receive these services while their "ordinary needs are put on hold" (Disability Equality, 2010). Although the five students who participated in this study were not familiar with inclusive education policies and practices, their common themes of conditional support of students with special needs in classrooms and division between groups due to

ignorance aligned with the medical model of thinking. Their views suggest that it is the student with special needs that should adjust to society rather than society that should adjust to the student.

On the other hand, the social model of thinking in schools focuses on the students' strengths. The "valued child" is included and welcomed for their diversity. Parents and professionals who wish to assist this child often go through a training themselves to learn how to help the child rather than attempt to change the child. Barriers within society are identified and solutions are developed (Disability Equality, 2010). It is interesting that even the students who mentioned an earlier exposure to students with special needs focused on the individual's impairment. The stronger claims they supported with experience did not suggest the ways in which one could change the structure of the school to create a more welcoming environment for these students. Instead, their references explained how they had become accustomed to having these students in the same classroom as them.

If these students who claim to have no or minimal experience learning about or discussing inclusive education follow the medical model of thinking, our society seems to be sending the message that this is the correct manner of thinking. Researchers, professionals, and people interested in the topic must think whether or not this is the thinking model we want to influence those who are less familiar with the topic. Do we want society to view these students as "faulty children" or do we want to view these students as "valued children?" (Disability Equality, 2010) Are we satisfied with the current solutions prevalent in our society? Can we work together to eliminate or revise these solutions in order to create more welcoming environments for students who have special needs?

### *Future Research*

An international move towards more inclusion of students with special needs in mainstream classrooms has led to a great debate regarding its costs and benefits. Politicians, administrators, concerned citizens, and families strive towards creating schools that are conducive to each child's learning. A perfect model does not exist although many schools have developed their own methods that work best within their communities. A collaborative effort on this matter is necessary, including both groups of students' opinions. Their satisfaction and willingness to cooperate with these practices is a crucial factor to its success. Policies can force these students to learn in the same building but they cannot guarantee that students will have positive attitudes toward one another. Further research can be conducted to determine how these students' attitudes and behaviors affect one another's development and contribute to the classroom environment. Ideally, the research would provide suggestions for creating successfully inclusive environments.

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## Appendix: Interview Questions

**First question:** What are your initial thoughts when you hear “inclusion of students with special needs in mainstream classrooms?”

What has influenced these thoughts?

### **Background information**

What are your academic interests?

What has influenced these interests?

What high school did you attend?

### **High school experience**

Did your high school have inclusive education policies? What were they?

How did you know? Was it well-known around the school?

Did you ever hear anyone discuss inclusive education?

Do you have many any friends who have physical/learning disabilities?

Do you remember how these friendships began?

Did you have any interactions with this population outside of school?

### ***Additional questions for those who attended high schools with inclusion:***

Did your school have inclusive education policies before you arrived?

If there was a transition during your time there, please describe the changes.

Did the students with special needs have a paraprofessional assist them with their daily schedule?

If so, how did the other students react to these people in the classroom?

Did you feel comfortable approaching these students?

Please describe the level of interaction you had with these students.

Please describe any efforts from your high school to create a welcoming environment for all.

Please describe any significant experiences or discussions that may have occurred regarding inclusion in your school.

Do you recall any experiences where they were bullied or excluded?

**Current views of inclusion**

What are your current views of inclusion?

What has influenced these views?

Do you support or oppose inclusion in mainstream classrooms?

Are you involved in any programs where you interact with this group?

Has this influenced your academic or career interests?

**Ideas for the future**

Would you encourage anyone to attend a school that has inclusive education policies?

Why or why not?