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Article *in* Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities · October 2019

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Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities
2020, Vol. 45(1) 4–13

DOI: 10.1177/1540796919878134
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Why Aren't Students with Severe Disabilities Being Placed in General Education Classrooms: Examining the Relations Among Classroom Placement, Learner Outcomes, and Other Factors

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Abstract

Placement decisions for students with severe disabilities have often been based less on the students' unique learning needs but more on beliefs and presumptions about student learning, entrenched school district policies that restrict program delivery options, and other variables unrelated to student needs. In light of the benefits associated with inclusive practices for students with severe disabilities, this article examines the foregoing factors to better understand how they affect placement decisions and to identify barriers to implementing at a national level more inclusive placements. The article also addresses systems change solutions, and several new federally funded initiatives that could contribute to authentic changes in placement practices.

Keywords

inclusive practices, access to the general curriculum, placement practices, severe disabilities

The issue of inclusion has been debated for the past 35 years (Sailor & McCart, 2014). Despite growing evidence that placement in general education produces positive learner outcomes for students with severe disabilities (Shogren, McCart, Lyon, & Sailor, 2015), these students continue to be placed mostly in segregated settings (Brock, 2018; Morningstar, Kurth, & Johnson, 2017). According to the recently published U.S. Department of Education (2018) 40th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of IDEA (The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act), approximately one half of students with intellectual or multiple disabilities spend less than 40% of their time in regular classrooms per day. Furthermore, the extent to which students with severe disabilities are provided access to the general education classroom

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has remained largely stagnant for at least the last decade. Nationwide, placement practices for these students continue to remain "distinctly separatist," and discussions about their inclusion in general education classes often become "highly contentious" (Connor & Ferri, 2007, p. 64). As Connor and Ferri noted, it appears that, contrary to the evidence, special education policy makers are either uninterested or unwilling to make substantive changes in placement practices.

This article examines reasons and rationales that appear to underlie why students with severe disabilities are placed mostly in segregated settings. The discussion begins by examining perspectives on placement as a factor in student learning, and whether it matters with respect to student outcomes. Next, we offer six determinants of placement that seem impactful on how placement decisions are made, yet each has little to do with the individual educational needs of students. This is followed by a discussion of factors that should be considered if we are to promote sustainable changes in placement decisions. Finally, several federal initiatives that could make a difference in educational placement decisions are described.

Placement Context: Does It Matter?

Perceived human differences in learning potential are the driving force behind special education, and both location of services (i.e., placement) and instruction are within its purview. Kauffman and his colleagues (2016) contend that pro-inclusion advocates are overly concerned with placement when it is the quality of instruction that matters, and they argue that these advocates wrongly believe that general education is an "inherently superior environment compared to a specialized one" (p. 18) for promoting learning and ensuring social justice. They argue that the provision of effective instruction, not placement, can both promote learning and provide students with the social justice that they deserve (Kauffman, Anastasiou, Badar, Travers, & Wiley, 2016).

Advocates for inclusive placements have no quarrel with the premise that processes of instruction are, in and of themselves, part of the equation for achieving valued outcomes for students with severe disabilities. For example, in discussing future research needs related to improving educational outcomes for these students, Morningstar et al. (2017) call for ". . . more specific research focusing on educational placement *and instruction* across school years . . ." (p. 10, authors' emphasis). Arguments that emphasize quality of instruction while simultaneously de-emphasizing placement in relation to outcomes simply fail to recognize that place of instruction *is* part of instruction, and that context in and of itself matters with respect to outcomes for students with severe disabilities (Jackson, Ryndak, & Wehmeyer, 2008).

The foregoing is supported by decades of research, which continues to identify multiple benefits of inclusive placements for students with severe disabilities across academic, social, communication, self-determination, vocational, and behavioral domains. The data show (a) greater growth in academic achievement and the use of academic skills when participating in inclusive settings (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010), (b) increased communication and social interactions (Fisher & Meyer, 2002), and (c) increased self-determination skills (Hughes, Cosgriff, Agran, & Washington, 2013). Researchers also have found that students with severe disabilities exhibit greater growth in social skills, largely as a result of access to social networks and peer models (McDonnell, Johnson, Polychronis, & Riesen, 2002). Inclusive environments also benefit peers without disabilities. These students made greater progress in reading and math when served in inclusive settings (Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004). Moreover, students providing peer supports in inclusive settings demonstrate a number of positive outcomes, such as increased academic achievement, assignment completion, and class participation (Cushing & Kennedy, 1997).

When compared with self-contained special education classrooms, the general education classroom has been shown to provide (a) greater opportunities to access the general education curriculum (Soukup, Wehmeyer, Bashinski, & Bovaird, 2007), (b) enhanced access to content area expertise and age-appropriate instructional materials (Kleinert et al., 2015), and (c) increased naturalistic peer supports (Carter & Hughes, 2006). In addition, inclusive settings are associated with more rigorous and higher quality Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010), greater engagement in curricular activities (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2012), and higher levels of social engagement (Lyons, Cappadocia, & Weiss, 2011).

Determinants of Placement Decisions

IDEA (2004) provides a number of mandates to ensure that students with disabilities are educated and experience benefit. The law requires that students with disabilities (a) are provided a free appropriate public education (FAPE), (b) are educated with nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate, (c) participate and make progress in the general education curriculum, and (d) are educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE). In theory, national data on educational placements for students with severe disabilities should reflect consideration of these principles. That educational placements should reflect high expectations was recently confirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 2018 *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District* (2017) ruling, which interpreted an appropriate education as implying that each student receiving IDEA services has a right to an *appropriately ambitious* educational program, that every child should have the chance to meet *challenging objectives*, and that education programs for children with disabilities must take into account each student's *potential for growth* (Wehmeyer, 2019).

Why, then, do these students continue to be placed in the most restrictive settings on the continuum of placements? We suggest that there are six determinants of placement practices that have more to do with sociocultural and capacity factors than student educational needs: (a) perceptions of competence and resulting placement policies, (b) economic and demographic stratification, (c) biases, (d) teacher preparation and experience, (e) lack of resources and capacity, and (f) absence of knowledge of current research. These are discussed below.

Perceptions of Competency and Resulting Placement Policies

An objection to placing students with severe disabilities in general education is the belief that "such students" will not benefit from such placements, and that such placements could cause serious insult and humiliation to the student's self-esteem and trigger unwanted or challenging behavior (Kauffman et al., 2016). According to this argument, these students need to be served in more specialized [*sic*] settings that will allow them to receive the individualized instruction they need from specialized faculty, which cannot reasonably be made available in general education settings. Also, as noted by Downing (2008), teachers might feel that the demands of a high content academic classroom, as well as the different environmental stimuli in a general education classroom, might prove to be too demanding for students with intellectual disability.

These arguments do not treat students as individuals but rather as members of a generic category. They presume that all who portray these disability characteristics should be educated in the same manner and in accordance with the foregoing stereotypes of their inadequacies. This leads to an historically common district-level placement policy in districts in which all students with a particular disability label are placed together in a classroom or school, to be served by professionals with a particular educational background. It probably accounts for some of the disbelief and incredulity expressed by school professionals when families or others within their own discipline propose that more general education opportunities could be beneficial for a student.

Economic and Demographic Stratification

Although decisions about placement are theoretically associated with the needs of a student with severe disabilities, factors such as socioeconomic level and region of residency are known to be correlated with special education placement patterns. Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to be taught in inclusive general education settings compared with other students (Kurth, Mastergeorge, & Paschall, 2016), as are students living outside of major urban centers (Brock & Schaefer, 2015). There also is wide variability both among states (e.g., Morningstar et al., 2017) and within states (e.g., Brock & Schaefer, 2015) in the availability of inclusive settings, suggesting the placement for these students is dependent upon where they happen to live.

As previously noted, the setting in which a student with disabilities is to receive educational services should to be determined by the student's IEP team, applying the four IDEA principles. Hence, data

indicating that socioeconomic level and region of the country predict levels of inclusive placement raise questions as to whether IEP teams are really making placement decisions based on student needs.

Biases

Another factor that has restricted inclusive placements appears to be an inherent bias against the appropriateness or feasibility of inclusive education for students with severe disabilities. For example, Segall and Campbell (2014) used case studies to test the impact of disability on placement, finding that teachers tended to place hypothetical students with intellectual disability in settings removed from general education curriculum and peers. These biases may reflect the fact that many teachers remain fearful of serving students with severe disabilities, not knowing what either they or the students are capable of doing (Downing, 2008).

The foregoing biases also might reflect broader societal patterns of discrimination, considering that students representing diverse racial backgrounds—in particular, students of color—are overidentified in special education and more likely to be placed in more restrictive settings (e.g., Kurth et al., 2016; Polloway, Yang, & Bouck, 2019). Again, we note the four IDEA principles mentioned earlier (see the "Determinants of Placement Decisions" section), and we note that biases related to population stereotypes, fear, or prejudice should have no place in guiding placement decisions; yet, placement data research suggests otherwise.

Teacher Preparation and Experience

In addition to biases, teacher preparation might impose additional barriers to inclusive general education class placements for students with severe disabilities. Teachers' experiences, licenses, and degrees might influence their preparation to teach students with severe disabilities (Ruppar, Neeper, & Dalsen, 2016). For example, coursework involved in a teaching licensure program that focuses on students with severe disabilities can assist educators in feeling prepared to implement the individualized supports for students (Zagona, Kurth, & MacFarland, 2017). However, special education teachers who have a general education teaching license, as compared with a license focused specifically on students with severe disabilities, might feel less prepared to support the unique needs of these students. In addition, a negative factor in special education teachers' preparation might be the lack of inclusive general education class placements in which teacher candidates can practice their skills (Copeland, Keefe, Calhoon, Tanner, & Park, 2011). When educators do not know how to adapt academic content, more restrictive educational placements might result, due to the incorrect assumption that the student must be placed in a special education classroom to receive the "specialized" services from which they can receive benefit (Ruppar et al., 2016). Furthermore, teachers who lack knowledge and experience in inclusive general education class placements might not understand its value for students with severe disabilities (Agran, Alper, & Wehmeyer, 2002).

Lack of Resources and Capacity

Special education teachers often lack the resources and capacity to provide individualized services to students with disabilities who are included for part or all of their school day. For example, special education teachers might not have the time or materials to develop individualized academic instruction for these students, thus threatening a successful placement in general education. Administrators might be aware of the teachers' stresses and difficulties; however, they might not have access to the resources needed to adequately support the special education teachers at their schools (Hagaman & Casey, 2018).

Teacher shortages and attrition also can have a deleterious impact on a school district's capacity to provide inclusive educational services (Sindelar, Shearer, Yendol-Hoppey, & Liebert, 2006). Special education teacher attrition is particularly problematic because when special education teachers leave a school or transfer to another school, they might not be replaced by a teacher with similar qualifications or one who advocates for inclusive education (Hagaman & Casey, 2018; Sindelar et al., 2006).

We note, however, that resource limitation arguments such as those discussed above have to be counterbalanced by taking into account where most students with severe disabilities are being served. Special educators often might have their hands tied less by lack of resources (e.g., number of paraprofessionals) and more by the fact that their students are mostly in the self-contained setting. Hence, self-containment is as much a dilemma for teachers as it is for the students with severe disabilities.

Absence of Knowledge of Current Research

In addition to a lack of resources, lack of knowledge of current research and evidence-based practices for teaching students with severe disabilities poses a barrier to general education placement. If practices such as embedding instruction (McDonnell et al., 2002), adapting lessons (Kurth & Keegan, 2014), and aligning supports with grade-level curriculum (Kleinert et al., 2015) are not known or understood by teachers, a lack of student success in general education settings is likely to be attributed to characteristics of the student rather than the quality and effectiveness of the instruction delivered. Adding to this concern is the possibility that teaching preferences and comfort level can affect the degree to which teachers will implement practices shown to be effective methods of instruction (Johnson et al., 2014).

Facilitating Sustainable Systemic Change in Educational Placement

The evidence reviewed above suggests that decisions about student placement are seldom consistent with what we know about the benefits of inclusion, and they frequently are affected by variables unrelated to the individual needs of a student. The research that informs us of these concerns should lead our field to a renewed emphasis on systemic approaches that can broadly change practices such that inclusive services become more the norm and less the exception. Relevant elements of systems change include developing an organizational vision, operationalizing the changes, encouraging commitment to the changes, and developing team structures for communication and accountability. Each of these is addressed in turn.

Lyon et al. (2018) discussed the importance of constituents having a common vision of the desired change in practice throughout the system, verifying the value placed on the desired change. When focused on the provision of efficacious services to *all* students in an education system, *all* personnel must be committed to a common vision of those services (McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014). Ryndak, Reardon, Benner, and Ward (2007) noted the importance of this belief in relation to students with severe disabilities, stating that "When considering systemic change efforts related to building inclusive schools, a common vision of services should incorporate inclusive education, services for all students, and roles of adults at various levels (e.g., classroom, school, district) that facilitate those services" (p. 230).

Given a common vision, Metz et al. (2015) argued for operationally defining the changes in practice that are needed to reflect the vision and developing goals that delineate outcomes for the systems change process. Operational definitions of changes needed enable all personnel to participate in the implementation of the change process (Easterling & Metz, 2016).

Constituents in the system must then have a common understanding of, and commitment to, the types and amount of effort required during the systems change process such that implementation occurs across the entire system (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). Change is seldom easy and systemic change is especially difficult. Complexities inherent in systems frequently result in abandonment of initiatives before they are implemented with fidelity or widely enough to endure the passage of time (Fixsen et al., 2005). Therefore, when affecting the decision-making process related to educational placement for students with severe disabilities, it is critical to establish this common understanding. The combination of a common vision and understanding of the change process will increase the degree to which the constituents within a system share ownership for their change efforts.

Finally, implementation teams need to develop a team structure with communication procedures to promote accountability in implementation of the change across the system. Communication is key and is characterized by Ward, Fixsen, and Cusumano (2017) as a "cascading system of implementation supports" (p. 3). Communication can "cascade" vertically up or down across levels (e.g., state, district, school, education team),

as well as horizontally across sets of constituents (e.g., general and special education administrators, teachers, families) to ensure that all constituents have ready access to information and opportunities to have input.

Promising Federal Initiatives

Funded Projects

To promote systemic change as addressed above, there are several federally funded systems change and research initiatives currently underway that hold promise for affecting current placement practices for students with severe disabilities. Over the last 7 years, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) in the U.S. Department of Education has funded two national centers focused on systemic change (i.e., Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation [SWIFT] Center, 2012-2019; Time, Instructional Effectiveness, Engagement, and State Support [TIES] Center, 2017-2022) and a national center focused on studying systemic change processes (i.e., State Implementation and Scaling-Up of Evidence-Based Practices [SISEP] Center) to help state, regional, and district educational systems build capacity to implement and scale up desired changes in practice. The foci of these projects include understanding the complexities of education systems and processes that are effective in facilitating change in practice across these systems to improve outcomes for all students. Through this understanding and identification of systems change processes, the intent is to build capacity within schools, districts, and states to maintain and scale up the use of evidence-based practices across education systems.

Finally, a recently funded Institute of Education Science grant (2019-2022) is now underway for the next 3 years, which will examine the impact of different placement levels on the outcomes of students with severe disabilities. Involving seven university teams, of which the authors of this article are all part, configurations of placement, support, and instruction will be examined in relation to academic, communication, and social outcomes. This research should contribute to a better understanding of placement as a factor in the education of students with severe disabilities.

Multitiered Systems of Support

To counteract entrenched policies of separating and segregating students from general education, multitiered systems of support (MTSS) have been implemented in schools across the country. Schools implementing MTSS employ iterative and cumulative tiers of support available to all students, with educators making data-based decisions that continuously adjust their instruction in relation to student learning (Choi, Meisenheimer, McCart, & Sailor, 2017). MTSS focuses on developing flexible service provision structures and needs-based interventions for individual students, rather than remaining fixated on disability characteristics and the physical location of services (Sailor & McCart, 2014).

The data-driven aspects of MTSS, combined with its team approach to planning and problem solving, make it an educational service provision model potentially useful for all students, including students with severe disabilities (Copeland & Cosbey, 2008). Its implementation in schools requires rigorous screening procedures and interventions that, while configured to the unique needs of individual students, remain grounded in general education curriculum (Sailor & McCart, 2014). MTSS also prescribes ongoing and frequent assessment and adjustment of interventions to meet changing student needs (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010). Given these aspects of MTSS, its practices can, and should be implemented first within general education classrooms, individualizing for students based on assessment data and using evidence-based practices. Hence, the wide-scale implementation of this model could result in including students with severe disabilities from the get-go rather than their a priori placement in more restrictive settings for indefinite and typically prolonged periods of their school lives.

Future Research Needs

As indicated previously in this article, the value and benefits of inclusive practice have been well supported in the literature. This research has had a profound and universal impact on how students with severe

disabilities are educated (Agran, Spooner, & Brown, 2015). Nevertheless, there are a number of questions that still need to be addressed. For example, successful inclusion is often determined by, if not restricted to, the physical placement of students into general education settings without evaluating the "range, intensity, and quality of instruction" delivered in these settings (Morningstar et al., 2017, p. 8). Further research is needed on effective strategies that can be adapted for general education settings and used by general educators. Regarding the latter point, Kuntz and Carter (2019) observed that in most research involving students with severe disabilities, special education teachers or staff served as the interventionists and not general educators, although the research was conducted in general education settings.

A second issue that warrants further investigation is the need for researchers to expand the focus of their research by examining not only the "efficacy" of a practice (i.e., suggesting a causal or functional relation between a practice and an outcome) but to also question the "effectiveness" of the practice, that is, the nature and extent to which this practice can be used with a larger number of diverse students across varying real world (not ideal) classroom settings (Singer, Agran, & Spooner, 2017). Such research would take into consideration the ethnicity and linguistic status of participants, as well as the long-term effects of the practices. To enable practices to be scaled up and used both precisely and efficiently, it is imperative for research to inquire with whom, under what conditions, and over what periods of a time should efficacious (evidence-based) practices be applied.

Closing Comments

Placement practices based on sociocultural variables and capacity limitations do not promote the kinds of educational outcomes that we imagine were envisioned by the founders of the IDEA. Federal initiatives such as those described here can assist the field in moving forward toward living the promise of this legislation. Yet, much more is needed in our efforts to promote the inclusion of these students in general education and their access to the general curriculum. We readily acknowledge the importance of using sound instructional practices with students who have complex learning and behavioral needs. Nevertheless, we respectfully suggest that proven instructional practices are insufficient in and of themselves for realizing valued educational outcomes for these students. We believe that it will be in the delivery of evidence-based instruction *within general education environments* that real differences can be realized in the education of students with severe disabilities.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The research reported here was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R324A180024 to the University of Kansas. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.

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Date Received: April 4, 2019
Date of Final Acceptance: September 4, 2019
Editor-in-Charge: Stacy K. Dymond