

# Special Education Integration: Benefits Beyond Students with Disabilities

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The number of children receiving special education services in the United States for the 2012-13 school year was 6.4 million students, which accounts for approximately 13 percent of the total public school environment.<sup>1</sup> The number of students who receive special education services has dramatically increased since the early 1970's through 1991, when only 4-4.7 million students with disabilities received educational services.<sup>2</sup> This increase may be attributed to the three major federal statutes Congress passed during that twenty-year period: the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1975), and the Americans with Disabilities act (1990).<sup>3</sup>

This paper will focus primarily on the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the statutory duty of placement for students with disabilities in the “least restrictive environment.”<sup>4</sup> The IDEA explicitly denotes the congressional intent that, to the maximum extent appropriate, students with disabilities should be educated alongside their non-disabled peers whenever possible.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, removal from the “regular educational environment” should occur only when “the nature or severity of the disability

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<sup>1</sup> National Center for Education Statistics. (2015). *Children and Youth with Disabilities*. Retrieved from [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_cgg.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgg.asp).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> Kaufman, M. J., & Kaufman, S. R. (2013). *Education law, policy, and practice: Cases and materials* (third edition). New York: Wolters Kluwer Law & Business.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> 20 U.S.C. §1412(a)(5)(A)

of a child is such that education in regular classes...cannot be achieved satisfactorily.”<sup>6</sup> The integration of children with disabilities into classrooms with their general education peers is often called “mainstreaming” or “inclusion.”<sup>7</sup> “Inclusion” or “full inclusion” implies that all children with disabilities will be educated in general education classrooms for most, if not all of the school day.<sup>8</sup>

Of the 6.4 million children with special education accommodations under IDEA in 2012-13, 61 percent spent 80 percent or more of their time in general education classes; however students who spent 40 to 79 percent of their school day in general classes were only represented by 20 percent of students receiving special education services, and that number dropped to 14 percent for students who spent less than 40 percent of their time inside general education classes.<sup>9</sup> Students with hearing or language impairments were more likely to be in inclusive classrooms, whereas students with intellectual or developmental disabilities were least likely to be fully, or even partially, integrated.<sup>10</sup> Several concerns have risen about how to integrate students with disabilities into general education classrooms, whether students with disabilities benefit from inclusion, and if there will be detrimental effects on students without disabilities in inclusive classrooms. While many of the concerns center on detriments to teachers and students without disabilities and the distracting effect the inclusion of their peers with disabilities may have when integrated, this paper will show that students without

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<sup>6</sup> 20 U.S.C. §1412(a)(5)(A)

<sup>7</sup> Hocutt, A. M. (1996). Effectiveness of special education: is placement the critical factor?. *Special Education for Students with Disabilities*, 6(1), 77-102.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, *supra* note 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

disabilities are benefitted from inclusion as well, both pedagogically and social-emotionally.

## II. CONCERNS REGARDING INTEGRATION

Some opponents of integration contend that if students with disabilities are fully included in general education classrooms, the additional variance in learning styles and achievement levels would demand increased individual instruction and would result in adverse side effects on the achievement levels of both students with and without disabilities.<sup>11</sup> However, studies of students without disabilities in integrated classrooms have shown no negative impacts on achievement levels.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, students without disabilities do not suffer academically from being in classrooms with students with mild disabilities or more severe educational disabilities.<sup>13</sup>

In one study, achievement test scores were evaluated between students in integrated classrooms where the class was composed of one-third to two-thirds students without disabilities and typical general education classrooms that were not integrated.<sup>14</sup> The test scores between the control, general education classroom and the fully integrated classroom showed no differences in achievement test scores.<sup>15</sup> These results are mirrored in another study, in which no distinguishable differences in achievement levels between students in inclusive classrooms and classrooms with no peers who had disabilities, supporting integration as an effective program for regular education students because

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<sup>11</sup> Semmel, M. I., et. al. (1991). Teacher perceptions of the regular education initiative. *Exceptional Children*, 58(1), 9-24.

<sup>12</sup> Horcutt, *supra* note 7.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

there were no detrimental effects.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, in one study, low, middle, and high IQ students in inclusive classrooms all attained higher achievement test scores than did their peers in the non-integrated, control classrooms.<sup>17</sup> The study revealed that no one IQ level of students in the inclusive classrooms achieved higher scores at the expense of any other IQ level.<sup>18</sup> Students with high IQ's continued to achieve commensurate with expectations for their developmental rates, even though concerns are generally centered on the contention that teachers will spend more time with students who have disabilities, causing them to neglect students with higher IQ's in the classroom.<sup>19</sup> Because the study found that high IQ students were not penalized at all by being taught in inclusive classrooms, it supports the argument that full inclusion is possible, assuming there are competent and well-trained teachers in these inclusive classroom settings.<sup>20</sup>

### III. BENEFITS OF INTEGRATION FOR STUDENTS WITHOUT DISABILITIES

While several studies have shown that students without disabilities continue achieving commensurate with their development levels and are not hurt by being taught in integrated classrooms, there may also be some evidence suggesting that non-disabled students may benefit from being taught in fully inclusive classrooms. Most notably, students without disabilities may benefit from teaching modifications that instructors apply when leading inclusive classrooms as well as gaining the social-emotional benefits of being taught with their peers who have disabilities.

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<sup>16</sup> Affleck, J. O., Madge, S., Adams, A., & Lowenbraun, S. Integrated classroom versus resource model: academic viability and effectiveness. *Exceptional Children*, 54(4), 339-348.

<sup>17</sup> Cantrell, R. P., & Cantrell, M. L. (1976). Preventative mainstreaming: impact of a supportive services program on pupils. *Exceptional Children*, 381-386.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*

### A. Effective Teaching Methods

Teachers are most effective when learning is structured and taught in small steps, when they give detailed and redundant instructions and explanations, when they provide several examples and ask a large number of questions, when they provide feedback and corrections, and when they divide seatwork into smaller assignments.<sup>21</sup> Such close monitoring and feedback-intensive practices, should, in theory, be beneficial and well suited to the needs of both special education students as well as general education students.<sup>22</sup> Research indicates that undifferentiated large-group instruction is the norm in general education classrooms and teachers do not typically adapt lesson plans in response to individual achievement or confusion.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, general education teachers are less likely to develop individual objectives or adapt or use alternative materials.<sup>24</sup> Conversely, special education teachers were more likely than general education teachers to monitor student behavior, praise students, and show positive encouragement.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, effective special education teachers were generally more prepared, began lessons promptly, made assignments more often, exhibited more teacher-directed learning, praised student responses more, and had to manage disruption less often than general education teachers.<sup>26</sup> Given these differences, it is reasonable to ask whether the techniques special education teachers use in segregated special education classrooms would be beneficial for general education teachers to employ in inclusive classrooms.

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<sup>21</sup> Rosenshine, B. Teaching functions in instructional programs. *The Elementary School Journal*, 83(4), 335-351.

<sup>22</sup> Horcutt, *supra* note 7.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.*

<sup>24</sup> *Id.*

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*

Special education teachers employ more characteristics of effective teachers, which lends itself to the conclusion that both special education students as well as general education students are likely to benefit from these effective techniques when used in inclusive classrooms. Moreover, inclusive classrooms may be the best catalyst for the shift in teaching methods of general education teachers.

Teachers in one study that compared instruction techniques of teachers in inclusive classrooms with techniques employed in general education classrooms showed that teachers in inclusive classrooms implemented many of the effective instructional behaviors and behaved significantly differently than teachers in the control group.<sup>27</sup> Teachers in the inclusive classrooms checked homework and conducted reviews more frequently and actively engaged students in seatwork and homework assignments.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, teachers in inclusive classrooms attended to appropriate student behavior more often, provided more immediate feedback and evaluation, set clearer expectations, and fostered a warm and supportive learning environment.<sup>29</sup> It was noted that student engagement was also higher overall in the inclusive classrooms, as compared to the control classrooms.<sup>30</sup>

Another study demonstrated, when students with learning disabilities were added to a general education classroom, nonacademic behavior decreased significantly as well as time devoted to waiting and classroom management, while the amount of time learning concepts remained constant.<sup>31</sup> A separate study had similar results, finding that there was

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<sup>27</sup> Rosenshine, *supra* note 21.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*

<sup>29</sup> *Id.*

<sup>30</sup> *Id.*

<sup>31</sup> Horcutt, *supra* note 7.

a significant reduction in non-instructional time and less time off-task when students with disabilities were included in the classroom.<sup>32</sup> Teachers also went from spending less than one percent of their time giving positive reinforcement to more than four percent of the time delivering positive feedback to students.<sup>33</sup>

In a qualitative study that assessed students' perceptions of teaching methods and inclusion of students with disabilities in their classes, students discussed their preferences in teaching techniques. Students perceived that teachers were most helpful when they explained lessons carefully, included format variety, and included opportunities for more interpersonal and social interactions.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, students across grade levels preferred working in mixed-ability pairs or groups, the majority of students preferring heterogeneous groups.<sup>35</sup> An overwhelming majority of students, 89 percent of the students surveyed, preferred teachers who make adaptations to meet the needs of students to teachers who did not, which was confirmed across all achievement levels.<sup>36</sup> Students did not perceive instructional adaptations to meet the special needs of certain students was occurring in their general education classrooms typically, which students found to be problematic; and they believed adaptations and accommodations would facilitate their learning as well as learning of students with disabilities.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, students with and without disabilities valued teachers who slowed instruction when needed, explained

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<sup>32</sup> Baker, J., & Zigmond, N. (1990). Mainstreaming learning disabled students: the impact on regular education students and teachers. 2-22.

<sup>33</sup> *Id.*

<sup>34</sup> Klingner, J. K., & Vaughn, S. (1999). Students' perceptions of instruction in inclusion classrooms: implications for students with learning disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 66(1), 23-37.

<sup>35</sup> *Id.*

<sup>36</sup> *Id.*

<sup>37</sup> *Id.*

concepts clearly, and taught the same materials in different ways so all students could learn.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, students clearly perceive that they are learning better and appreciate teachers who employ these effective teaching methods. However, as research shows, many general education teachers are not effectively employing these techniques and many special education teachers are. Therefore, full inclusion may prompt more general education teachers to incorporate effective teaching methods into their classrooms, thereby benefitting both students with and without disabilities.

### B. Social-Emotional Learning

Students without disabilities in inclusive classrooms may not only benefit from more effective teaching techniques, but they are also introduced to students with disabilities, who they may not have previously interacted with, which develops their ability to be tolerant of others and benefits their social-emotional health. Integration of students with disabilities has shown increased awareness of the needs of persons with disabilities, increased willingness to work with students who have disabilities, increased levels of social development in students without disabilities, and increased skills for teachers.<sup>39</sup> In a survey of teachers who taught in experimental full inclusion classrooms, the majority of educators thought the most interesting aspect of the integration was the positive reactions general education students had to students with disabilities.<sup>40</sup> Six out of nine teachers surveyed indicated that there was an increase in classmate acceptance, understanding, and realization of similarities with students who have disabilities.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Klingner & Vaughn, *supra* note 34.

<sup>39</sup> Horcutt, *supra* note 7.

<sup>40</sup> York, J. et. al. (1990). Feedback about integrating middle-school students with severe disabilities in general education classes. *Exceptional Children*, 58(3), 244-258.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.*

Furthermore, five out of eight teachers indicated that there were effects beyond class-time, such as more interactions between students with and without disabilities outside of the classroom.<sup>42</sup>

In the same study, nearly all of the students in inclusive classrooms responded “yes” to the question of whether they thought it was a good idea for their classmates with severe disabilities to be in their classrooms.<sup>43</sup> The majority of students also indicated they learned positive attributes of their peers and a portion of students indicated that they learned something about themselves.<sup>44</sup> One student responded that he learned “how important it is to treat people the same and not make fun of them.”<sup>45</sup> Inclusive classrooms may allow students to understand their peers with disabilities better, develop tolerance, and minimize stigmas associated with disabilities.

General education teachers were also shown to consider how to structure their classrooms to encourage high levels of peer acceptance for their students when students with disabilities were integrated into their classrooms.<sup>46</sup> Teachers in inclusive classrooms were more prone to promoting active involvement of all students and encouraging all students to participate and express themselves.<sup>47</sup> Teachers who were surveyed had goals to include all students, not just those who had disabilities.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, students without disabilities in inclusive classrooms can expect more acceptance within their classrooms for all students. Additionally, students without disabilities may be able to develop social-

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<sup>42</sup> York, *supra* note 40.

<sup>43</sup> *Id.*

<sup>44</sup> *Id.*

<sup>45</sup> *Id.*

<sup>46</sup> Schumm, J.S., et. al. (1995). General education teacher planning: what can students with learning disabilities expect?. *Exceptional Children*, 61(4), 335-352.

<sup>47</sup> *Id.*

<sup>48</sup> *Id.*

emotionally as a result of their integration with students who have disabilities by fostering their understanding of disabilities and tolerance amongst groups of people who may be different. Additionally, higher levels of acceptance for all students would benefit the social-emotional health and development of students with and without disabilities alike.

## V. CONCLUSION

While there has not been a wealth of research conducted on the effects of inclusion on students without disabilities, there is compelling evidence that not only would inclusion not be detrimental, it may have several benefits both pedagogically and social-emotionally. Looking forward, more research needs to be conducted on the effects of inclusion on students without disabilities that is more holistic in nature, encompassing social-emotional development and academic performance beyond mere achievement test scores. Additionally, teachers may benefit from trainings on effective instructional practices that may be appropriate for students of all ability levels so teachers feel better prepared to instruct inclusive classrooms. While the individual needs of students with disabilities must be considered when transitioning to more inclusive classrooms, a move closer to full inclusion may be the best way that students with disabilities can be afforded the least restrictive environment, as the IDEA mandates. To that end, at least one concern, that students without disabilities will suffer, can potentially be dispelled, leading to more inclusive classrooms, schools, and communities.