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Mental Health Outcomes when Including Students with Disabilities in the General Education Classroom

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a federal mandate requiring students with disabilities in the United States to be served in their least restrictive environments (LRE). The Least Restrictive Environment clause states that students with disabilities can only be segregated from general education classes and peers when the “nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.” Additionally, the ruling in the Board of Education, Sacramento City School District v. Holland (1994) requires schools to educate students with disabilities in a general education setting if they can make academic or non-academic progress with “supplemental aids and services.” The only time a school or district can remove a student with a disability from a general education classroom is if the child has been given supplemental services and supports in the general education classroom and the child is still “disruptive” in this setting or if the cost of placing a student in the general education setting is too high.

According to the Center for Education Statistics, 7.2 million students between the ages of 3-21 received special education services in the 2020-2021 school year. The majority were receiving services related to a specific learning disability followed by speech, language, and other health impairments. Only 5% of all students with disabilities receive services related to emotional disturbance impairments (depression, anxiety, etc.) despite elevated comorbidity rates of mental health issues across all disabilities. According to CDC data, 6 in 10 children with ADHD had at least one other mental, emotional, or behavioral disorder (CDC, 2021) including notably high rates of depression. Mental health should be an issue of concern for all students with disabilities.

We propose Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams first consider placement in general education, inclusive classrooms for students with disabilities instead of more restrictive special education placements. Inclusive schools have been found to improve overall student engagement in the classroom, socialization, and therefore, mental health (Specht, 2013; Webster, 2014). The most common due process dispute with parents was due to placement (Mueller & Carranza, 2011); highlighting the importance of focusing on placement for students with disabilities. When compared to pull out services or separate classrooms, students in an inclusive classroom experience positive socialization, feelings of belonging, and increased confidence. Increased socialization and confidence have been shown to be protective factors that positively affect mental health. Inclusive classrooms also allow students without disabilities to learn and engage with students with disabilities. Disabilities exist in the world, and it is important that, from a young age, individuals be more accepting of natural differences.

One major barrier to implementation of inclusive educational models is the added costs that could potentially be placed on schools and districts when shifting from their current model of special education to an inclusive model. While some parents might prefer specialized classrooms or schools, there are a variety of private schools that offer those services. However, the focus of public education, as highlighted in IDEA, should be to

provide free, appropriate, public education that's equal for all students. Historically, it has been argued that there have been consistently higher costs associated with the increased resources needed for students with disabilities (Banks, 2020). Contrary to this, a seminal study in the field contended that inclusive special education “most likely” does not result in additional costs as compared to other special education delivery models (McLaughlin & Warren, 1994). In some districts, McLaughlin and Warren (1994) found that savings occurred as a result of a shift to inclusion. Specifically, because students with disabilities were not being bussed to special schools and were instead able to be served in their home school, transportation costs declined as well as the cost the district was paying to special schools to service their students with disabilities. Additionally, in the shift to inclusion, students with disabilities, who were previously in small, self-contained classrooms with a low teacher-to-student ratio, are now placed in the general education classroom. Teachers and aides from the self-contained classrooms now co-teach and work alongside the general education teachers in inclusive classrooms. It is important to note that schools may not need additional resources to implement inclusion with fidelity, only a restructuring of current roles and responsibilities.

Preschools have also shown lower costs in inclusive models as compared to traditional segregated education models (Odom, Parrish & Hikido, 2001). Both in resources and work per hour, the funding for additional aides in general education classrooms to ensure inclusive education have resulted in lowered costs for districts. While there are not many studies done in secondary schools, the research showing positive results during early intervention, along with the savings preschools and elementary schools can have, can cause a ripple effect into the education that is received by all students in secondary schools.

Each state funds special education differently and through various formulas (e.g., student count, resource ratio, pupil weights, etc.) (Kolbe, 2021). How states choose to fund special education can also financially incentivize (or incentivize) inclusive education placements over segregated placements (Kolbe, 2021). Additionally, in theory, IDEA has financial support through the wording in its policy. Yet congress has consistently underfunded their promise of 40% of the needed funding to cover IDEA (Banks, 2020). With the recommitment of Congress, the influx of funding for our most vulnerable students can support even more schools with the transition to inclusive special education models.

We are confident that if students with disabilities are placed in general education classes with their age-level peers, all students – students with disabilities and students without disabilities– will thrive by learning alongside each other. We urge IEP teams to, in the future, more thoughtfully consider the placement of general education and inclusion for students with disabilities, particularly for the mental health benefits.

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