Invited Exchange

Policy and the Impact on Placement, Involvement, and Progress in General Education: Critical Issues That Require Rectification

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Abstract
Students with significant disabilities continue to be among the most segregated in schools. In this article, we argue that the principles of least restrictive environment and involvement and progress in the general curriculum have been interpreted in ways that perpetuate segregation, rather than increasing students’ access to meaningful curriculum in inclusive educational contexts. We examine this issue from three broad perspectives: federal policy related to least restrictive environment, interpretations of policies related to involvement and progress in the general curriculum, and the implementation of policies related to assessment of grade-level standards. We discuss implications of each of these issues for providing and increasing involvement and progress in general education contexts and content.

Keywords
inclusion, educational policy, severe disabilities

With the passage of legislation that mandates involvement and progress in the general curriculum and contexts for all students, the field has been poised on the brink of enacting practices that are consistent with evidence-based practices resulting in equitable and excellent involvement and progress for students with significant disabilities. We contend, however, that policy makers and administrators from both general and special education have not sufficiently developed the policies and procedures to enact such practices in classrooms across the country (Sommerstein, Sommerstein, Sommerstein, Sommerstein, & Ryndak, in press). In addition, researchers have not adequately answered questions that compel change of current policies.

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Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities 39(1)

regarding what and where to teach students with significant disabilities. Educational systems inherently resist systemic changes in services, leading to substantial lags between what we know about educating students with significant disabilities in general education contexts and what occurs in practice (Ryndak, Jackson, & White, 2013). Unfortunately, practitioners have not questioned the efficacy of services through rigorous methods that include collecting data on students’ long-term and post-school outcomes from instruction on both general curriculum content and ecologically based person-centered content, as well as general education and special education contexts. Such data would allow practitioners and policy makers to reflect on how services should change to achieve better academic and functional outcomes, which is necessary to identify and implement effective systems change efforts (Ryndak, Reardon, Benner, & Ward, 2007). Finally, parents have struggled with ensuring equitable involvement and progress in the general curriculum and contexts for their children with significant disabilities (Obiakor, Harris, Mutua, Rotatori, & Algozzine, 2012). We contend that the lack of attention to these issues, both individually and collectively, has resulted in the stagnation of students with significant disabilities in segregated special education settings, with little progress toward their inclusion in the full range of general education contexts (e.g., classrooms, lunch rooms, field trips, clubs) with their grade-level classmates, and little progress toward both sets of students engaged together in instruction in general education content.

In this article, we identify issues that emanate from policies across levels of impact and leverage (e.g., federal, state, district, school, universities); discuss how such policies promote or impede the movement of students with significant disabilities to general education contexts; and offer suggestions for how policies and procedures might be changed to positively affect placement in general education contexts. To do so, we conceptualize access to general education broadly, allowing discussions of placement and instructional context, as well as involvement and progress in the general curriculum. Furthermore, we conceptualize policy as including policy-to-practice efforts, and address three critical policy areas related to (a) least restrictive environment (LRE), (b) involvement and progress in the general curriculum within general education contexts, and (c) the impact of alternate assessment on students’ inclusion in the general curriculum and contexts. The manner in which these three areas collectively are interpreted and implemented by states, districts, and schools contributes to poor educational and life outcomes for students with significant disabilities.

Policy Related to LRE

Although the U.S. Congress has expressed a preference for general education class placement for students with disabilities since the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (1976; now the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act [IDEA] of 2004 [2005]), the LRE principle in the law codifies and sanctions segregated educational placements through its regulatory support of a continuum of alternative placements that are then institutionalized by states and districts. The statute language related to the LRE principle is vague and has led to the need for parents to advocate strongly for their children with significant disabilities to receive services in the least restrictive placement of their choice (Gallegos, 2010) and, over time and geographic regions of the country, conflicting judicial rulings in LRE cases (Board of Education v. Rowley, 1982; Oberti v. Board of Education of Borough of Clementon School District, 1993; Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 1972; Sacramento City Unified School District v. Holland, 1994). This vagueness and imprecision of the LRE principle has contributed to systemic non-compliance necessitating large-scale multi-year settlements to increase placements in general education settings (Gaskin v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2005; P. J. v. State of Connecticut, 2002; P. J. v. State of Connecticut State Board of Education, 1992). This combination of sanctioning segregated educational settings and imprecision in the LRE principle and statute language contributes to state and district practices that continue to segregate students with significant disabilities from their grade-level general education contexts, grade-level curriculum content, and grade-level peers.

Variations in state-to-state LRE data for students with significant disabilities are striking, suggesting specious if not discriminatory decision making. According to the 31st Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of IDEA, the percent of students with intellectual disabilities educated in general education
classes for 80% or more of the day ranged from 3.9% in Hawaii to 56.9% in Iowa (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs, 2012). When reviewing federal data on placement of students with disabilities, P. Smith (2007) found that nationally, “between the 1992-1993 and 2002-2003 school years, the percentage of students with intellectual disabilities who received their education in regular education classrooms for more than 79% of the time grew by a very small 3.84%, from 7.11% to 10.95%” (p. 298). Racial and ethnic variations in placement point to further inequities with placement decisions. For instance, LeRoy and Kulik (2004) found that Black and Hispanic students were 2.5 and 1.8 times, respectively, more likely than their White peers to be in segregated school settings, with this trend continuing (Klingner & Harry, 2006).

The continuum of placements articulated with the LRE policies legitimizes unstated organizational tendencies to continue to fill existing segregated settings with an allocated special education teacher with students who have individualized education programs. By sanctioning such policies, combined with large investments of capital and personnel in segregated settings, the system perpetuates strong incentives to maintain these placement options (Taylor, 1988, 2004). For example, between 2000 and 2007 (i.e., the most recent data in the 31st Report to Congress; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs, 2012), the percentage of all students with disabilities ages 6 to 21 educated in general education classes for 80% or more of the day increased from 46.5% to 57.2%, a change of +10.7% (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs, 2012). In comparison, when considering only students with intellectual or multiple disabilities from 1997 to 2007, the percent of students educated in general education classes for 80% or more of the day increased from 12.6% to 16.4%, a change of +3.8% for students with intellectual disabilities, and 10.0% to 13.1%, a change of +3.1% for students with multiple disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs, 2012). In addition, the high expenditures associated with both transporting students to and from centralized segregated classes and schools, and operating those segregated classes and schools, result in less money being available for local schools (Parrish, 1995). For instance, between 1997 and 2006 the percentage of all students with disabilities ages 6 to 21 educated in general education classes for less than 40% of the day decreased from 20.4% to 17.6%, a change of −2.8% (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Similarly, the percentage of students with intellectual disabilities ages 6 to 21 educated in separate schools increased from 5.2% to 5.9%, a change of +0.7%; and the percentage of students in residential facilities decreased from 0.56% to 0.4%, a change of −0.16%. Thus, over this 10-year period and using the most recent national data available, there has been little or no movement of students with significant disabilities from segregated settings to general education classes, while there has been substantial movement for students with disabilities in general.

Given the extreme variations among states, as well as the essentially stagnant rate of change to inclusive general education settings for students with significant disabilities, these data strongly suggest that the LRE principle is flawed both conceptually and in its implementation. At its most extreme, the LRE principle legitimizes segregated settings as acceptable for some students. For instance, the U.S. Department of Education accepts “no change” in LRE placement data for the most restrictive settings as an acceptable Annual Performance Plan target, even in states that have a long history of educating students with disabilities in highly restrictive placements (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The LRE principle infers that placement decisions are made based on objective data and sound professional judgment; however, both the considerable state-to-state variations in placement (Parrish, 2011) and the disproportionate segregation of students of color marginalized by both their race and disability (A. Smith & Kozleski, 2005) indicate otherwise.

The current structure of systems based on the LRE principle supports the maintenance of continuum of services, leading to a variety of related misperceptions about educating students with disabilities. First, it leads to continued misinterpretation of special education as a specific location, rather than a set of supports and services to be delivered in any location (IDEA, 2005). Second, it leads to placement decisions based on the misperception that as a student’s need for more extensive services increases, so does the student’s need for a more highly restrictive placement. Third, compounding this misperception is the incorrect belief that
students must earn the right to move across the continuum, from more to less restrictive settings, by making improvements in academic, functional, and behavioral performance (Nisbet, 2004; Taylor, 1988). Fourth, the limited placement options historically provided for students with significant disabilities leads to incorrect assumptions about the students’ abilities and disabilities, as well as their potential for short- and long-term acquisition of knowledge and skills (Kliewer, Biklen, & Kasa-Hendrickson, 2006). Together these misperceptions, incorrect beliefs, and inherent problems with the LRE language relegate students with significant disabilities to segregated settings, a situation that has been maintained since the passage of PL 94-142 (Nisbet, 2004).

Such flaws in federal policies and statutes associated with the LRE principle, as well as their implementation at state and local levels, beg several questions that remain unanswered, including “Can improvements in Federal monitoring related to LRE lead to substantial changes in students’ involvement in general education content and contexts?” and “Is the LRE principle itself so flawed that new policies are necessary to afford students with significant disabilities equitable access to the curriculum, educational environments, and quality instruction all correlated with positive educational and life outcomes?”

**Policy Related to Involvement and Progress in the General Curriculum**

IDEA of 2004 mandates that students with disabilities be involved in the general curriculum “in order to (i) meet developmental goals, and to the maximum extent possible, the challenging expectations that have been established for all children, and (ii) be prepared to lead productive and independent lives, to the maximum extent possible” (§682[c][5][A]). The law allows education teams to make individualized decisions about what “involvement” and “the general curriculum” comprise, resulting in substantial disagreement among teachers and researchers about what constitutes the general curriculum and where and how students should learn it (Dymond, Renzaglia, Gilson, & Slagor, 2007). Jackson, Ryndak, and Wehmeyer (2008-2009) stated that access to the general curriculum means incorporating instruction across general education contexts with grade-level peers, in which the general educator and other education team members collaboratively design, implement, and evaluate the effectiveness of instruction. Thus, all instructional and non-instructional activities in which grade-level peers are involved (e.g., instruction on standards-based curriculum content, service learning opportunities, school-sponsored clubs) are part of the grade-level experience and reflect multiple aspects of the general curriculum. This approach to defining involvement in general curriculum content and contexts is consistent with research supporting increased time in general education results in higher quality individualized education programs (Hunt, Goetz, & Anderson, 1986), more time engaged in general curriculum (Wehmeyer, Lattin, Lapp-Rincker, & Agran, 2003), and better academic and social outcomes for students with significant disabilities (Fisher & Meyer, 2002); with no detrimental effects for grade-level general education peers (e.g., Fryxell & Kennedy, 1995). Furthermore, studies conducted over the last two decades and summarized in literature reviews indicate that students with significant disabilities can learn a broad range of grade-level academic content (Browder, Spooner, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Harris, & Wakeman, 2008; Browder, Wakeman, Spooner, Ahlgrim-Delzell, & Algozzine, 2006; Spooner, Knight, Browder, Jimenez, & DiBiase, 2011) and can learn these skills in general education contexts (Hudson, Browder, & Wood, 2013).

Despite both legislation and research supporting involvement in the general curriculum within general education contexts, the majority of students with significant disabilities continue to receive their educational services in separate, self-contained special education settings. One persistent barrier to involvement in the general curriculum is the skepticism of teachers and other educational team members about the appropriateness of general education contexts for instruction. For example, teachers have expressed concerns that the skills needed for independence are incompatible with the content and difficulty of the general curriculum taught in general education contexts (Agran, Alper, & Wehmeyer, 2002; Ruppar, Dymond, & Gaffney, 2011) and that activities in general education classes provide limited opportunities for students with significant disabilities to learn life skills (Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). These concerns resonate with Ayres, Douglas, Lowrey, and Sievers (2011) who cautioned that the current prioritization of the general curriculum has led to the standards-based curriculum and functional curriculum approaches being viewed as mutually exclusive (Brown, in press), yet others argue they need not be (McDonnell, Hunt, Jackson, & Ryndak, in press). Furthermore, Agran
et al. (2002) also proposed that teachers might not understand what can be gained from involvement in the general curriculum or how involvement can be achieved. The misperception that the general curriculum cannot be blended with ecologically based person-centered objectives seems to result in students’ exclusion from general education contexts, thereby resulting in lack of access to the general curriculum.

At the systems level, school districts implement formal and informal policies that dictate the content to be taught and the contexts in which instruction will be provided. Often, the standards-based general curriculum is used as a justification for segregation of students with significant disabilities, who then are taught “the standards” via decontextualized instruction in segregated settings, rather than being involved in the full general curriculum, as required by the law (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Orsati, & Cosier, 2011). Then, to ensure that students in segregated classrooms have “access” to the general curriculum, districts have adopted curriculum packages marketed as “standards-based” and “specifically designed for special learners” (n2y, n.d.). Clearly, for change to occur at the district level, policies addressing equitable access to both general curriculum content and contexts must be adopted.

Because IDEA does not specifically require students to learn general curriculum content in general education contexts, wide and disparate interpretations of what constitutes general curriculum content and contexts for instruction are found across states, schools, districts, and teacher preparation programs. There are many compelling questions that advocates for students with significant disabilities must address, including “What can be done to shift the prevailing view that standards-based curriculum content and functional curriculum content are incompatible?” “How can districts be encouraged to bring multi-tiered systems of support into their existing standards-based general curriculum, rather than implement commercial and expensive curricula in segregated settings?” and finally, “What other changes are necessary to mitigate existing barriers to involvement in the general curriculum and contexts for students with significant disabilities?”

Policy Related to Alternate Assessment and Progress in the General Curriculum

Assessment tools and procedures can substantially influence the attitudes, beliefs, and practices of special and general education teachers. The IDEA of 1997 and the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act [ESEA, 2002] (in the past referred to as the No Child Left Behind Act) require that all students, including those with the “most significant cognitive disabilities,” are included in state accountability measures and approaches, including large-scale assessments. Both IDEA and ESEA mandate that students with disabilities be included in assessments aligned with state content standards. For students with the “most significant cognitive disabilities” states are mandated to use alternate assessments. Thus, the development and use of alternate assessments for students with the “most significant cognitive disabilities” are critical components of any discussion of involvement and progress in the general curriculum.

When considering the content on which students are assessed, both IDEA and ESEA are clear that students should be involved and make progress in the state’s established general curriculum content standards. Specifically, IDEA notes that states shall provide for alternate assessments that “are aligned with the State’s challenging academic content standards and challenging student academic achievement standards ....” (§612[a][16][C][ii][I]). Similarly, according to federal guidance related to ESEA, a state is allowed to define alternate achievement standards for students with the “most significant cognitive disabilities,” provided those standards (a) align with the State’s academic content standards, (b) promote access to the general curriculum, and (c) reflect professional judgment of the highest achievement standards possible (U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

There are at least three issues related to assessment of grade-level standards for students with the “most significant cognitive disabilities” with which teachers and administrators struggle. First, in relation to curriculum content, perceptions of grade-level standards as inappropriate for students with the “most significant cognitive disabilities” can occur. Second, also related to curriculum content is the perception that functional skills are the essential content to be taught to students with significant cognitive disabilities. Third, in relation to assessment is the perception that the assessment itself must be done in a segregated context. This last stance seems to emanate from beliefs that alternate assessments are too divergent from the
general curriculum. In addition, because of the structure of the assessment itself, teachers believe that all of the student’s time must be on completing items or compiling evidence for the alternate assessment, leaving no time left for other instructional needs.

While alternate assessments are based on the content of the Common Core State Standards, the data collected for the assessment often are defined narrowly and too disconnected from the general curriculum. The three issues outlined above, coupled with state pressure for teachers to be accountable for students achieving annual yearly progress (AYP) targets, makes the continued use of segregated classes inevitable, although not appropriate. Research has shown that the more time students spend in general education classes and other inclusive contexts, the more likely they are to be involved in high-quality instruction in the general curriculum (Jackson et al., 2008-2009). Given such outcomes, we should be focused on critical design of alternate assessments to ensure the tests reflect student learning in high-quality inclusive instruction. To ensure the creation of alternate assessments that support inclusive practice, we are left with a host of questions, including “How should states’ policies support the initial use of new online alternate assessments so that the assessments are not gatekeepers used to justify continued segregated placements as the LRE?” “How should professional development be altered to ensure that all teachers understand and can provide instruction on general curriculum standards?” “How will teachers support the needs of students who participate in alternate assessment within general education contexts?” and “What guidance around alternate assessment should be provided to ensure the assessment process supports more inclusive practices?”

Conclusion

Providing supports and services for students with disabilities in general education is not a new concept. It has its origins as a civil rights argument prior to the passage of PL 94-142 in 1974 (Sailor, 2002). Efforts to desegregate students with disabilities have concentrated on placement as part of its progression throughout various reform movements (e.g., mainstreaming, regular education initiative, integration; Artiles, Kozleski, & Gonzalez, 2011). After nearly three decades of research, however, the arguments now focus mostly on students with significant disabilities, and have shifted from “should we do it” to “how do we do it” (Sailor, 2002). In addition to these shifts in research, there has been an emergence of a more rigorous role for federal monitoring and enforcement policies, and for policy implementation, particularly as they pertain to the implementation of the LRE policy. This has been building to the enforcement of policies that move students from settings that are more restrictive to settings that are less restrictive, and a focus only on placement of students with disabilities to a focus on fundamental and sustainable systems change that transforms education for all students (Burrello, Sailor, & Kleinhammer-Tramill, 2013; Ryndak et al., 2007; Sailor & Rogers, 2005; Skrtic, Sailor, Gee, 1996; P. Smith, 2010). This shift toward policies that support comprehensive and sustainable school reform that facilitate the provision of supports and services in general education settings for students with disabilities, including those with significant disabilities, predominantly has occurred only in limited pockets of excellence, primarily at the district or school level (Kozleski & Smith, 2009; Ryndak et al., 2007; P. Smith, 2010). More recently, the emergence of models of schoolwide supports and services for all students is most evident in research and policies specific to schoolwide positive behavioral interventions and supports (Sprague & Horner, 2006) and multi-tiered systems of supports (Chard et al., 2008). Indeed, the convergence of advocacy, research, and federal policies toward the inclusion of all students in general education is evident with the substantial federal investment in the Department of Education grant, Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT) Centers, that has as its mission “eliminating the silos in education by bridging general and specialized education to create powerful learning opportunities for students and teachers and promote active, engaged partnerships among families and community members” (swiftschools.org).

As articulated in this article, ongoing tensions still exist when considering issues specific to education for students with significant disabilities. Irrespective of earlier debates of inclusion as only focused on placement, researchers have articulated that the debate continues over the “role of inclusive schooling within the larger context of educational reform” (Hunt & Goetz, 1997, p. 3). As is evident, the complexities of access to general education curriculum, as identified under IDEA and ESEA, has to a large degree created stumbling blocks to systems-wide educational reform. Clearly, federal policies and monitoring procedures
for ensuring that states educate students with disabilities in the LRE has perpetuated a continuum of services that sanctions segregated settings for students with significant disabilities. In addition, as a metric for federal monitoring of educational progress, the LRE principle is inadequate, especially given current policies whereby states are not required to decrease the number of students with disabilities who receive educational services in the most restrictive settings. By inherently propagating the continuum of service delivery, LRE policies work in conflict with extant research related to the provision of effective instruction in the general curriculum within general education contexts, and with current federal policies that encourage systems-wide educational reform. Many researchers have articulated this sentiment. For example, P. Smith (2010) once again reinforced the notion that LRE should be eliminated and replaced with “notion of nonrestrictive environments” (p. 227) first described by Taylor, Racino, Knoll, and Lutfiyya (1987).

The policies and procedural interpretations of involvement and progress in the general curriculum have at their core a perhaps unintended, but no less detrimental, effect on students with significant disabilities. Certainly, the accountability shifts of both IDEA and ESEA have required schools to include all students, including students with significant disabilities, in their accountability systems; identify how the progress in the general curriculum will be measured for all students; and report assessment results for all subpopulations in schools. The concepts of involvement and progress in the general curriculum often are not well-understood and few districts have developed clear policies or procedures for effective implementation (Agran et al., 2002). This has led to specialized curriculum historically taught in segregated settings being emphasized in general education contexts, thus replacing some of the general curriculum, rather than education teams identifying and providing accommodations and modifications on general curriculum content within the general education contexts. For instance, Wehmeyer et al. (2003) reached this conclusion in a study in which students with intellectual disabilities were observed in both inclusive general education and segregated special education settings to determine their level of access to the general curriculum. These researchers found that classroom setting and ecological variables substantially affected access, with students in segregated settings engaged in tasks related to a state or district curriculum content standard at approximately half the rate of matched sample peers in general educational settings. These results have been supported by more recent research with similar findings, that inclusive general education settings lead to substantially greater levels of access to content (Soukup, Wehmeyer, Bashinski, & Bovaird, 2007).

Unquestionably, both general and special education policy substantially affect educational placements of students with disabilities, as well as their involvement and progress in the general curriculum. While states and district have made much progress in moving students with high incidence disabilities to general education settings and ensuring their participation in state and district large-N assessments, the same cannot yet be said related to students with significant disabilities. Their stagnation in segregated special education settings and, thus, their lack of involvement in the general curriculum, in general education instructional activities, with general education contexts, and with general education grade-level peers has been perpetuated, despite changes in the laws and policies. In addition, there remain numerous concerns about the potential for accurately reflecting the progress of students with significant disabilities with the use of alternate assessments that currently are being developed. The overarching concern is that positive systemic and sustainable educational reform will occur for both general and special education students, but without effectively addressing the needs of students with significant disabilities. We have described the rationale for these concerns and identified critical policy-driven issues related to placement, curriculum and instruction, and measuring progress, and suggest these issues require rectification if students with significant disabilities truly are to be seen as equal participants in our educational system, and are to receive services that are both excellent and equitable to the services received by their grade-level peers.

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) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.
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