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Special Education Students' Placement Preferences as Shown in Special Education Journals

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Abstract

The purpose of this review was to determine what has been found about placement perceptions and preferences of those who are most impacted by LRE placement decisions—the students themselves. Eleven studies were found in recent issues of most frequently-read special education journals. While a variety of preferences were found, the number who expressed strong preference for the general education classroom was noteworthy. Student preference is considered to be an influential variable in the performance of the students.

Special Education Students' Placement Preferences as Shown in Special Education Journals

Although there continues to be some controversy, many professionals have concluded that the preferred placement for students with disabilities is in the general education classroom (McLeskey & Waldron, 1995). Decisions about placement are determined at the case conference by professionals and parents. Even though students may attend the meeting, their voice is rarely sought about placement decisions. In fact, student preferences about a preferred site on

the least restrictive environment continuum usually are not asked. On the one hand, this may not be deemed particularly unusual. It is rare for any student opinion to be requested about school decisions (Weinstein, 1983). On the other hand, the omission of student voice may lead to student disenchantment, discouragement, and reluctance to perform (Miller & Fritz, 2000). And it is likely that students' perceptions will influence their in-class performance (Vaughn, Schumm, & Kouzekanani, 1993).

Many professionals advance the value of seeking student voice, however. Advantages which may come from gaining student input include:

1. Assisting students in developing a commitment to learning,
2. Increasing students' intrinsic motivation
3. Increasing students' enjoyment of school experiences,
4. Improving school climate, and
5. Enhancing student self-esteem and self-confidence (Miller & Fritz, 2000).

It may be that students' views increase students' involvement, understanding, motivation to learn (Klinger & Vaughn, 1999), and their actual performance in class (Vaughn, Schumm, & Kouzekanani, 1993). Alternatively, if students do not believe that they have input into these decisions, they may sabotage programs that do not fit their preferences (Miller & Fritz, 2000).

While research studies that investigate student placement preferences have been sparse, the omission of student voice regarding placement and teaching preferences of students with disabilities has often been noted. Vaughn, Schumann, and Kouzekanani (1993) point out: "Though extensive research on teachers' perceptions has been conducted, considerably less research has focused on students' perceptions." (p. 545). Yet, student views are likely to be evidenced in the classroom and, thus, influence teachers' practices (Klingner & Vaughn, 1999).

Further, students have been found to contribute valid, thoughtful information about their learning (Vaughn, Schumm, Klingner, & Saumell, 1995).

There have been occasional instances of student preference being sought. In the 1970s, both Warner, Thrapp, and Walsh (1973) and Jones (1974) found that, as students with mental retardation progressed through the grades, they increasingly desired placement in the regular classroom. Jones' students "categorically rejected" special class placement (p. 27). The first large scale study of students' preferences was that of Jenkins and Heinen (1989). They noted that they could find no previous systematic inquiry into students' preferences. Their conclusion, after interviewing 337 2nd, 4th, and 5th grade remedial and special education students, was that students overwhelmingly prefer to obtain additional help from their classroom teacher rather than a specialist (e.g. in a pull-out resource room)

Others' Reports. Of the studies that can be identified seeking students' preferences, it is instructive to note who has **not** been asked. It is difficult to find studies seeking the opinions of students with hearing impairments. The authors have found no studies seeking the opinions of students with visual impairments or communication disorders. Gibb, Allred, Ingram, Young, and Egan (1999) note the "paucity of research related to the inclusion of students with E/BD" (p. 122). Yet, these students have been found to perceive the general education classroom setting as positive and worthwhile (Gibb, et al). One study (Pivik, McComas, & LaFlamme, 2002) sought the opinions of students with physical disabilities—though that was their opinions about school environments, not placement. These authors state: "What is lacking in the literature are empirically based studies examining the barriers to inclusion and full participation in general school settings, identified by those most impacted—students with disabilities" (p. 99). They did attest that "students are fully capable of identifying and expressing... concerns and should be allowed and encouraged to participate in evaluating inclusive environments" (p. 99).

One can find literature advising the collecting of student opinions and preferences and asserting that it is advisable to do so. The emerging literature relating to self-determination provides examples of this stance (e.g. Eisenman, & Chamberlain, 2001; Thoma, Nathanson, Baker, & Tamura, 2002). Further, opinions related to school generally may be sought (e.g. Kortering & Braziel, 2002). And there are numerous studies inquiring teachers' opinions (e.g. Cook, Tankersley, Cook, & Landrum, 2000). Still, "students with disabilities have traditionally not been involved in making decisions about their own educational programs" (Smith, 1999, p. 66). The call for this research as reflected in studies reported here is displayed in Table 1.

<Table 1 here>

Yet another reason for seeking opinions and placement preferences of students with disabilities is the legal admonition to do so. "IDEA mandates parent *and student* collaboration in the process of designing an appropriate educational program" (Evans, Cook, & Sanders, 2002, p. 60) [emphasis added]. Thoma (1999) also notes that IDEA specifies that student desires and preferences be identified, though that reference is particularly addressing transition plans.

One might argue that when parents and professionals confer, they are considering the interests of the child. However, it may well be that adults do not view placement in the same way that students do. Students do have distinct opinions and preferences, and there is evidence that adults cannot always make accurate predictions about those preferences (Vaughn, Schumm, & Kouzekanani, 1993). Therefore, the importance of seeking students' own opinions of their placement preferences is not to be disregarded.

The purpose of the present study was to ascertain what researchers have discovered about special education students' preferences toward placement, as presented in some of the most frequently-read special education journals.

Method

To find research investigating special education students' placement preferences, a search was conducted of articles in four general special education journals (*Exceptional Children*, *Journal of Special Education*, *Remedial and Special Education*, and *Preventing School Failure*), three journals targeting the education of students with learning disabilities (*Journal of Learning Disabilities*, *Learning Disability Quarterly*, and *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*), two journals targeting the education of students with mental retardations (*Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities* and *Mental Retardation*), and two journals targeting the education of students with emotional/behavior disorders (*Behavioral Disorders* and *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*). An issue-by-issue search was conducted for each journal from 1990-2002. 1990 was selected as the beginning point since that was when IDEA first specified that any student desires and preferences should be sought for specific school decisions affecting them (Thoma, 1999). Articles were identified when the article title indicated a study which included student preferences. These articles were then read to determine if inquiries were made specific to school placement preferences. Table 2. Displays the number of articles found for this question.

<Table 2 here>

Each study was read by each of the authors who, after confirming that it was a study that included student placement preference, coded it for authors and journal, year of publication, participants, setting, type of study, and results. Some of the articles had research questions in addition to the one for this study, but information was collected only which pertained to this study. The authors then met to compare information that each had coded. There was agreement among the authors for each coded item with the exception of instances in

which one researcher coded more information in “Results” than others. If the other two concurred that this information should be included, it was then added to the “Results” column.

Results

Eleven studies were found that met the criterion of study of placement preference of students with disabilities. Three studies were found in *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, two in *Exceptional Children*, and two in *Remedial and Special Education*. One study was found in each of *Behavioral Disorders*, *The Journal of Special Education*, *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice* and *Preventing School Failure*. No studies were found in *Learning Disability Quarterly* or the journals focusing on mental retardation during this period.

All studies identified used qualitative methodology—primarily interviews, though there was also the use of observation (Albinger, 1995), questionnaires (Reis, Neu, & McGuire, 1997; Whinnery, King, Evans, & Gable, 1995), or other supportive information. Two of the articles were research reviews (Salend & Duhaney, 1999; Vaughn & Klingner, 1998). We were unable to find guidelines for collective analysis of qualitative studies comparable to meta-analysis in quantitative studies; for analysis, we followed the examples provided by Vaughn and Klingner (1998; Klingner & Vaughn, 1999). In reporting results, numbers in parentheses correspond with the study numbers provided in Table 3.

<Table 3 here>

Of the 11 studies identified in over a decade of these most-read special education journals, most included or used only students with learning disabilities as their subjects (1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11); one (5) also included students with mental retardation, behavior disorders, developmental disabilities, health impairment, and hearing impairment; and one (2) used only students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Four used students only at the elementary level (1, 4, 6, 11), and one (8) used college students as subjects, asking them to reflect back on

their experiences in school. Six included general education students as control/contrast groups (2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 11), as did some of the studies in the two reviews (9, 10). The remainder included just students with exceptionalities as subjects. Number of subjects ranged from one (7) to 150 (6).

While respondents in some of the studies had experience in multiple Least Restrictive Environment settings, others did not. Thus, a study might ask students if they liked the current setting, but those students had not experienced another possibility to compare it to (6). Student responses ranged from strong feelings against any pull-out and desiring only general education classroom placement (1, 2, 3, 7, 8) to at least some of the subjects strongly preferring a pull-out, resource room form of special education (4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11). A most descriptive student statement reflecting the first position was: "If you make me keep coming to resource, I'll just be a bum on the street' (he pointed out the window). 'All the bums out there went to resource'" (Albinger, 1995, p. 621).

All the studies identified some students who preferred the general education classroom—some preferring not even to have the special education teacher provide assistance there (3). This reinforces the need to inquire about student preference, particularly considering the negative outcomes that can result from not seeking students' input described earlier. Concerns expressed by students about leaving class to get special assistance included missing something while they were out of the general education classroom (1, 6, 11), "stigma" associated with going to special education (3, 7, 10), or finding special education degrading (8), low level, irrelevant, and repetitive (3). Subjects were found who felt the general education classroom had advantages socially (2, 3), and they felt academic needs could be satisfied there (2, 7, 8). Advantages of a separate, pull-out service were viewed as getting more individualized

help (4, 5, 6,), quieter and better able to focus (4, 6) work was easier (4, 5, 6), and some felt that the general education classroom teacher embarrassed them (10, 11).

The two reviews (9, 10) found mixed results, with some of the same findings as described here. While one of these (10) found differences in preferences influenced by age of subjects, neither found it influenced by type of disability.

Discussion

The focus of this study has been on research findings as presented in some of the most frequently-read special education journals. The most dramatic finding is the paucity of research related to students' perceptions and preferences. Even though there are abundant calls for this student-centered research, those calls are not matched in quantity by actual investigations. In fact, although the two earlier reviews identified some of the same studies identified for this study, one (Salend & Duhaney, 1995) found only six studies, and one (Vaughn & Klingner, 1998) used studies from an earlier period and two dissertation studies to find eight which related to this question.

The primary quest of the authors was to discover what researchers have found about special education students' preferences about least restrictive environment placement. Do their preferences echo or contrast with opinions of professionals who discuss pros and con's of different LRE settings? Although there were a variety of preferences found, the number who argued for general education classroom preference—with or without special educator assistance in that classroom—was noteworthy. Indeed, the intensity of those feelings was clear and persuasive.

Other students indicated the value they saw in the separateness of the resource room setting. It may be that those preferences relate more to particular ages of students, types of

learning difficulties, or atmosphere of that setting compared to that of the general education classroom.

Additionally, student features in addition to just academic achievement need to be considered. Evidence in these studies showed that students also reflected on social status and number of friends, how they felt about themselves, which setting was more enjoyable, and which setting appeared to have higher academic expectations. These features appeared to have much value for students in the studies reviewed.

Certainly, the student's own preference is not the only variable to consider when making placement decisions. And it may be that students' experience is limited, or that they state preferences only for the setting they are in at the moment (Jenkins & Heinen, 1989). Therefore, they likely will not be considering the number of variables that professionals and parents do when making these decisions. However, many students do have strong preferences. These preferences can affect their classroom performance—both positively and negatively. It is important to inquire what students' placement preferences are so they know that their opinions are valued and impact the decisions adults make.

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Table 1. The Need to Consider Students' Views

<p>Children are rarely asked or told about the educational decisions that are made on their behalf. (Albinger, 1995, p. 615)</p> <p>Despite concern that special education harms students, researchers have given scant consideration to the views of the direct consumers of the service (Guterman, 1995, p. 112).</p> <p>What is lacking in the literature are empirically based studies examining the barriers to inclusion and full participation in general school settings identified by those most impacted—students with disabilities (Klingner, Vaughn, Schumm, Cohen, & Forgan, 1998, p. 149).</p> <p>It is ironic that in special education, a field devoted to improving the quality of life for people with disabilities, we have almost no acquaintance with these <i>people</i> in our literature.... It is difficult to find instances in which we hear from the people themselves....We have studied them, planned for them, educated them, and erased them. We have not listened to <i>their</i> voices (Reid & Button, 1995, p. 602).</p> <p>Few investigators have interviewed students with disabilities in order to hear from them, or give them voice. These students are the forgotten element in the educational equation (Reid & Button, 1995, p. 607).</p> <p>Seldom do they have input into what happens to them (Reid & Button, 1995, p. 610).</p> <p>Students with disabilities have traditionally not been involved in making decisions about their own educational programs (Smith, 1999, p. 66).</p> <p>The voices of students who are more affected by [inclusion] have been less frequently heard (Vaughn & Klingner, 1998, p. 80).</p> <p>Overlooked by many researchers is the fact that student perceptions are a significant</p>

variable in determining program effectiveness.... It is important that the opinions of the ultimate consumer—the students—be considered when developing new programs (Whinnery, King, Evans, & Gable, 1995, p. 9).

Table 2. Journals, Which Included Articles About Student Placement Preference

<u>Year</u>	<u>Journal</u>	<u>Number of articles</u>
1995	Exceptional Children	1
	Journal of Learning Disabilities	2
	Preventing School Failure	1
1996	Learning Disabilities Research & Practice	1
1997	Exceptional Children	1
1998	Journal of Learning Disabilities	1
	Journal of Special Education	1
1999	Behavioral Disorders	1
	Remedial and Special Education	2

Table 3. Summary of Studies: Students' Placement Preferences

Reference	Subjects & Setting	Results
1. Albinger. (1995). <i>Journal of Learning Disabilities</i>	8 students with LD, grades 1 – 6; Resource Room	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●When given a choice, preferred having resource specialist come to Gen. Ed. classroom. ●Had concerns about missing classroom work. ●Would prefer special assistance in classroom. ●Fabricated stories to protect themselves from rejection feared by classmates.
2. Gibb, Allred, Ingram, Young, & Egan. (1999). <i>Behavioral Disorders</i>	14 junior high with E/BD; 20 Gen. Ed. Inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●Overall, all students positive about being in Gen. Ed. classroom with support there. ●E/BD students saw selves as making academic, social, and personal gains. ●E/BD students felt they were important members of classroom. ●E/BD students valued special education teacher in Gen. Ed. classroom.
3. Guterman. (1995), <i>Exceptional Children</i>	9 high school with LD;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●Preference for Gen. Ed. classes. ●Would not prefer special education

	Some LD content classes	<p>assistance in Gen. Ed. classroom.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Felt special education label had negative stigma. •Perceived special education as not academically helpful, irrelevant, repetitive, not challenging.
4. Klingner, Vaughn, Schumm, Cohen, & Forgan. (1998). <i>Journal of Learning Disabilities</i>	<p>16 with LD, 16 without LD, grades 4, 5, 6;</p> <p>Each subject experienced both inclusion and pull-out</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Of students with LD, close to an even split on preferred setting. •Of Gen. Ed. students, 10 preferred LD students in pull-out and 6 either inclusion or both ways. •9 students with LD stated that pull-out helps kids learn better. •14 students with LD stated that inclusion or both ways helps kids have more friends.
5. Lovitt, Plavins, & Cushing. (1999). <i>Remedial and Special Education</i>	<p>54 high school students interviewed: 31 LD, 7 BD, 5 MR, 4 DD, 4 health imp., 3 hearing imp. 231 students with</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •130 preferred general classes, 110 preferred special classes, 29 liked both classes, and 1 didn't like any classes.. •Students tended to prefer the type of class in which they spent the most time. •Several interviewed students said they did not like special education.

	<p>disabilities surveyed but not interviewed.</p> <p>Some special education content classes.</p>	
<p>6. Padeliadu & Zigmond. (1996). <i>Learning Disabilities Research & Practice</i></p>	<p>150 LD students grades 1 – 6: 24 self-contained, 117 resource room, 9 “full time mainstream”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●79% liked going to special education class; 9.2% did not like going; 14.2% said special education “O.K.” ●Nearly 40% felt they missed something when out of Gen. Ed. class.
<p>7. Reid & Button. (1995). <i>Journal of Learning Disabilities</i></p>	<p>1 13-year-old female with LD; some information from 5 others</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●Wished to spend more time in Gen. Ed. classroom. ●Anger and frustration at being isolated. ●Felt punished by Gen. Ed. teacher for work missed while out of class.
<p>8. Reis, Neu, & McGuire. (1997). <i>Exceptional Children</i></p>	<p>12 gifted college students earlier identified as LD</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●Described special education as “scattered, unclear, and disorganized.” ●Of those who received special education services, found them “degrading.” ●Negative recollections included Gen. Ed.

		<p>teachers denying them the right to go to special education.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Reported high degree of variation in quality of special education programs.
<p>9. Salend & Duhaney. (1999). <i>Remedial and Special Education</i></p>	<p>Review: primarily students with LD; elementary and high school; pull-out, resource, and self-contained</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Varied results. •Some studies showed academic advantage of inclusion; other studies show students perform better with special education assistance. •Students concerned about activities missed when out of the classroom. •Some reported negative experiences in both settings: Gen. Ed. because teachers did not adapt; Sp. Ed. provided low-level, repetitive, and unchallenging instruction, and social stigma.
<p>10. Vaughn & Klingner. (1998). <i>Journal of Special Education</i></p>	<p>Review: primarily students with LD; 6 addressed elementary, 2 addressed secondary</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Not unanimous preference for one setting. •Secondary students' responses varied. •Preference for resource room most prevalent in studies with intermediate age students. •Reasons for resource room preference

	<p>students; self-contained resource, and inclusion settings</p>	<p>included extra help, fun activities, easier, and quiet place.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Reason for inclusion preference included social benefits; negative stigma associated with resource room; general education teacher could meet needs; and they did not miss anything.
<p>11. Whinnery, King, Evans, & Gable. (1995). <i>Preventing School Failure</i></p>	<p>16 students with LD in resource room; 16 students with LD in inclusion setting; 16 Gen. Ed. students</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Positive student responses to both settings. •Resource students more frequently responded, "I feel dumb." •Half of resource students indicated they felt left out of class activities. •Almost half of resource students felt their teacher sometimes embarrassed them. •All resource students liked going to resource room for help. •Inclusion students divided between working with LD teacher in classroom or resource room.