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## Spotlight on Inclusion: What Research and Practice is Telling the Field

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Spotlight on Inclusion: What Research and Practice is Telling the Field

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Abstract

Inclusive education needs continued exploration, as current research is ambiguous. This paper presents data across three related studies regarding inclusive education for secondary students with high incidence disabilities. One study represents a survey of curriculum and instructional environments for secondary students with mild mental impairment and learning disabilities, another presents data that explored interactions across inclusive and pull-out educational settings between students with mild mental impairment and their peers and adults, and the final study explored education in pull-out educational settings for students with cross-categorical disabilities. Overall the studies revealed that inclusive education is not a clear solution and must continue to be examined and understood at the secondary level. In particular, the data suggests that benefits and disadvantages exist to both settings.

Inclusion in education has been defined as “the commitment to educate each child, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the school and classroom he or she would otherwise attend. It involves bringing the support services to the child (rather than moving the child to the services) and requires only that the child will benefit from being in the class (rather than having to keep up with the other students)” (Rogers, 1993). Beyond being a philosophy, inclusion is also alluded at in federal education law. Since its inception, the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) has clearly stipulated that students are to be educated in the least restrictive environment, and many have taken least restrictive

environment (LRE) to signify inclusion in the general education setting (Huefner, 2000; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994).

To date the research on inclusion has been ambiguous; some research on inclusive education has suggested negative academic and social consequences. For example, students have been found to perform worse academically in general education settings (see Gottlieb, Alter, & Gottlieb, 1991; Kaufman et al., as cited in Gottlieb et al.). Research has also suggested that students with disabilities experience social isolation in inclusive settings (Fraught, Balleweg, Crow, & van den Pol, 1983; Peterson, 1982; Sale & Carey, 1995). While students with disabilities in inclusive settings have been rated lower on sociometric scales than their “non-disabled” peers, students who were likely to be eligible for special education services but not yet “labeled” have been rated even lower than students already classified (Sale & Carey), suggesting that it was not just the label or stigma that impacted a student’s rating. Other research has illustrated that while physical inclusion may occur, very little integration, or social inclusion, may actually result for secondary students with disabilities (Doré, Dion, Wagner, & Brunet, 2002). Even in naturally inclusive settings, such as a high school lunch room, little interaction has been found between students with disabilities and their general education peers (see Hughes, Rodi, Lorden, Pitkin, Derer, Hwang, et al., 1999).

On the other hand, research has illustrated positive results from the inclusion of students with disabilities (Carlberg & Kavale, 1980; Lipsky & Gartner, 1996; Sindelar & Deno, 1978). Researchers have indicated that students with disabilities make more progress in inclusive classrooms than pull-out classes, as well as participation in inclusive settings decreases the rate at which the gap grows between special education and general education students as compared to pull-out programs (Carlberg & Kavale; Lipsky & Gartner; Sindelar & Deno). Hansen and Boody (1998) found that students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms rated the classroom environment at least as high if not higher than the “non-

disabled” students in the classroom, suggesting that special education students and general education students perceived the classroom environment in reasonably similar ways.

This hotly debated topic causes controversy on both sides. Opponents of inclusion have gone as far as to declare inclusion oppressive (Zera & Seitsinger, 2000). Zera and Seitsinger noted that inclusion can result in the denial of appropriate programs for students, and as a result, harm may actually occur. Zigmond and Baker (1995) argued that special education has ceased to be “special.” They indicated that special education, whether occurring in a separate or inclusive setting, needs to remember the basis of its founding: students will need more resources, not fewer, and to focus on students’ individual needs. Others (e.g. Carlberg & Kavale, 1980; Sindelar & Deno, 1978) concluded that students benefit from inclusion, suggesting that they make more progress in inclusive classrooms than pull-out classes, or at least no benefits were found for pull-out programs.

Current research on inclusion has indicated that almost fifty percent of students with disabilities are educated in the general education classroom (i.e. inclusive classroom), meaning that they are educated outside of the general education classroom less than 21% of their day (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Almost thirty percent (28.2%) of students with disabilities are educated exclusively within inclusive educational settings in grades 7 through 12 (U.S. Department of Education, 2003; Wagner, 2004). While recent research suggests that students with special needs are taking more academically-oriented classes that prepare them for post-secondary education than compared to 15 years ago, a greater number of students are likely to spend at least some portion of their day in a special education setting (U.S. Department of Education; Wagner).

Given the increased emphasis on inclusive education and inclusive practices in schools and society and the equivocal research that currently exists regarding inclusion, research needs to continue to explore this option for educating students with disabilities. This particular article will discuss three research studies that have illuminated issues of inclusive education for secondary students with

disabilities, with a particular emphasis on students with mild mental impairment and learning disabilities.

### Methodology

This article presents data from three research projects that have explored curriculum and instructional environments for secondary students with disabilities. The first research project involved a statewide survey of secondary special education teachers in the state of Michigan (survey available upon request). The survey focused on teachers' perspectives of curriculum and instructional environments for secondary students with mild mental impairment and learning disabilities, teacher preparation and professional development, and provider satisfaction. The second research project was a multiple case study of six secondary students with mild mental impairment in three schools in the same state (i.e. Michigan). The second study focused on instructional environments that the six students were educated in as well as the interactions they had with peers or adults in the different settings. The final research project consisted of a qualitative study of the enactment of curriculum within self-contained cross-categorical programs (i.e. pull-out program). Through classroom observations and interviews, data was available regarding students' and teachers' perspective of inclusive education as well as their behavior and action towards, and within, the different instructional environments.

### *Participants and Settings*

The first study involved three-hundred seventy-eight secondary special education teachers in Grades 9-12. Sample size was determined based on a 95% confidence level with a +/- 3% sampling error (Salant & Dillman, 1994; Fowler, 2002). The 378 teachers were distributed proportionally across school population size for public schools in Michigan. Schools who met the eligibility criterion were randomly selected, with each eligible school district having an equal chance of being in the sample.

The second study involved six secondary students with mild mental impairment. These students were educated in three purposively selected districts in the state of Michigan. Four of the six students

were female and two were male. The IQ of the students ranged from 58 to 73. Two-thirds of the students were sophomores at the time of the study, one was in her junior year, and the other was a senior. All the students were relatively close in age; the youngest participant being 16 and the oldest 18.

The third study involved two rural, self-contained cross-categorical programs. These two programs combined had two teachers, four paraprofessionals, and 15 students. Across the two sites the 15 students consisted of six freshman, two sophomores, five juniors, and two seniors. The disability categorization of the 15 students involved six students with mild mental impairment, five students with learning disabilities, two students with emotional impairment, one student with Autism, and one student who was otherwise health impaired (i.e. ADHD). The two teachers in the study had each been teaching the self-contained cross-categorical programs for five years and had basically developed their respective programs.

#### *Procedure*

The first study involved a statewide survey of secondary special education teachers (survey available upon request). The surveys were mailed to the administrators of the schools randomly selected to participate. The administrators were asked to pass the survey onto the most appropriate teacher given the criteria provided (see Bouck, 2004 for a more detailed description of the procedure). Three follow-ups were conducted with non-responders. One hundred and ninety-eight surveys were returned (50%).

The second study consisted of student observations three times for an entire school day, attending the students' classes, lunchtime, and any other activities scheduled as part of their regular course of the day. During the course of the classroom observations, written fieldnotes of interactions were taken, as well as a classroom observation form was completed regarding the number and type of interactions of the student being observed with peers and adults. A single form was used for each class period of the day. Both fieldnotes and forms were completed simultaneously by a single participant

observer (form available upon request). Each student and his/her primary special education teacher individually participated in a semi-structured interview to ascertain both stakeholders' perspectives as to interactions in different educational contexts for students with mild mental impairment (interview protocols available upon request).

The third study involved classroom observations and interviews in two self-contained cross-categorical programs. Each site was observed for an entire school day two days a week for three months. A total of 85 hours was spent at one high school and 70 hours spent at the other. During the observations the researcher took fieldnotes of events, conversations, and actions that occurred within the classroom. Teachers, students, and paraprofessionals were also interviewed (interview protocols available upon request). Interviews focused on curriculum and instructional environments as well as the *ideal program* from the interviewee's perspective.

#### *Data Analysis*

The data from the survey were coded, entered into a SPSS database, and frequency distributions were run on the different variables. The data from the second study involving a case study of six students were analyzed quantitatively in terms of measures of central tendency for the interactions of the students with peers and adults. Data were also analyzed qualitatively, looking for patterns and themes. The data from the third and final study were analyzed qualitatively looking for patterns and themes that emerged across the two case studies with respect to inclusive versus pull-out educational programs.

### Results

#### *Survey*

The data from the statewide survey of secondary special education teachers consisted of 198 responses, which represented a 50% return rate of the surveys. In terms of inclusion, the teachers indicated that there was not a lot of inclusive education occurring for secondary students with mild

mental impairment as only 9% of teachers indicated this was the most utilized instructional environment (6.9% inclusion and 2.1% co-taught). In contrast, 45.5% of secondary special education teachers indicated that this was the most utilized instructional environment (35.4% inclusion and 10.1% co-taught), followed by the resource room (42.9%) for students with learning disabilities.

The survey also revealed the rates of inclusive education were slightly related to the geographical location of the school and community, as in rural, urban, or suburban. Rural schools had a frequency of inclusive education of 9.5%, similar to urban schools (10%). Suburban schools had a lower frequency rating for inclusive education at 6.6%. For students with learning disabilities, inclusion was selected as the most utilized instructional environment in urban schools (40%) and suburban schools (42.2%); however, the resource room was selected in rural schools (44.4%), followed by inclusion (41.4%).

#### *Case Study of Six*

In the second study of six student case studies, 32 classes were observed. Of the 32 classes observed, six were in the general education setting (18.75% of the classes). Of the six classes that occurred in general education settings, four of them were elective courses (66.7%), including creative or industrial arts. The majority of the other twenty-six classes could be classified as self-contained settings, as the teacher was responsible for teaching content to all special education students in a pull-out setting. Two of the twenty-six classes were work-related sites, enabling the students to get access to vocational skills while still in school. Classes within the general education setting ranged from zero to two among the six different students. Two of the six students observed each had two general education classes, two others each had one, and finally two students had no general education classes.

Across the six students, the *average number* of initiated interactions with peers was greater in special education settings than general education inclusive settings (15.61 as compared to 7.31). The *range* of initiated interactions in special education settings was smaller than the *range* in general

education inclusive settings (5.78 as compared to 9.89); hence there was less variability across students in terms of peer interaction in special education classes. Peers also initiated fewer interactions with the six students with mild mental impairment in the general education inclusive settings than the special education settings (5.98 as compared to 6.28, respectively). The *range* across the six students in terms of received interactions from peers was 7.1 in special education settings and 15.5 in general education inclusive settings, again with less variability in special education classes.

Similar results were found with interactions with adults in general education inclusive settings versus special education settings. All students had more student-initiated interactions with adults per class period in special education settings than general education inclusive settings, with an *average* of 10.07 as compared to 4.96. In addition, all students experienced more adult-initiated interactions in special education settings than the general education inclusive settings with an *average* of 5.62 interactions per class period in special education as compared to 2.2 interactions per class period in general education.

#### *Case Study of Two Sites*

The case study of the two pull-out secondary programs demonstrated the positive aspects as well as the challenges to pull-out educational settings, and hence inclusive education. The data revealed the following advantages to pull-out educational settings: it created opportunities, it provided a safe and secure environment, it developed a sense of community, it encouraged instruction within students' zone of proximal development, and it enabled greater freedom. However, there were also disadvantages or challenges with pull-out settings, suggesting that inclusive education holds some promise, such as a lack of positive peer role models and stigmatization. The students expressed a tension between being in pull-out and inclusive settings, stating they wanted to be general education classes, and then refusing to go, participate, or perform once there.

*Advantages or benefits.* Being educated in a pull-out program created opportunities, and particularly ones related to roles. The pull-out settings created opportunities for students to assume roles, such as a more knowledgeable other. The following vignette illustrates one classroom paraprofessional helping to position a student (Sara) into the role of a more knowledgeable other through using her skills in reading to assist a peer within the class.

It is fourth hour, employability class. Students have entered and are taking their seats. Mark got out his book that he checked out of the school library during third hour, *Jurassic Park*. Mark asked Brenda [classroom paraprofessional], "Do you want to help me read this?" Mrs. Buckland (Brenda) then asked if Mark was talking to her. Mark replied that he could just go talk to the media specialist, Mr. Fisher. Brenda responded by saying, "I thought you were talking to Sara because she is such a good reader." Sara then offered to read the book with Mark. Mark accepted and Sara started to read the first chapter. She sat down at Mark's table and they took turns reading. Sara helped Mark with the words he didn't know when it was his turn to read.

As demonstrated above, adults in the pull-out programs tried to create opportunities for students to be a more knowledgeable other, and this was a positive aspect of the setting. In addition to the construction of the role of more knowledgeable other within the academic classroom, the pull-out educational programs attempted to enact this role in work or vocational settings as well. The following analytical vignette illustrates the school transition paraprofessional creating the opportunity for a student to serve as a more knowledgeable other in a vocational setting.

It is second hour, math class, and Marilyn [the transition paraprofessional] is collecting three of Katie's students to take to the local grocery/hardware/video store to work. She loads Doug, Derek, and another student into her van and drives them to *Ted's* (the local store) where they are going to be working on inventory within the hardware part of the store. When they arrive Marilyn asks Derek, a sophomore who did this work at *Ted's* last year, to oversee Doug, a

freshman and who is “working” at *Ted’s* for the first time. Marilyn asks Derek to work with Doug and make sure he understands what to do.

While this situation is subtle, it illustrated that the transition paraprofessional worked to create an opportunity for a student to define himself in a new way; to see himself as a more knowledgeable other and essentially secure an apprenticeship for another student to learn a vocational skill.

Beyond creating opportunities for students to serve as a more knowledgeable other, which allowed student to assist a peer and feel positive about oneself, the pull-out setting created a sense of safety and security for students. The setting enabled students to feel safe to say “I don’t know” both literally and figuratively and seek help. For example, it was a safe environment for one student to say “I can’t tell time”, for another to suggest that a quotient “is a kind of horse”, and a different student to comment that they could not make a particular recipe in school because it had alcohol when the recipe called for barley, which she mistook as Baileys. Thus the pull-out programs provided a safe place to make mistakes and let one’s disability and weaknesses be apparent, as illustrated in the following vignette.

It is social studies and the students are working on a worksheet, finishing up their geography unit. The teacher had discussed with the class their up-coming country project and has asked students to think about what countries they might like to research. The teacher reminds students that tomorrow they are to write down three countries they might want to research, and then she will let them know what country they are researching. One student, who sits in front of the teacher’s desk, piped up. “I want to do Denver”. Another student responded back, “Denver isn’t a country stupid, it is a state.” The teacher waited a moment and then replied, “Actually Denver is a city.”

The above vignette illustrated that the student felt safe to publicly announce that Denver was a country, despite being wrong. Similarly, the second student also felt he was in a safe place to retort that Denver was not a country but a state, another wrong statement that was publicly made. Neither student displayed any signs of feeling embarrassed by their remarks in the classroom.

The creation of a sense of community for students was another benefit of the pull-out settings. Students from both pull-out educational programs were largely marginalized in their larger school settings. The teachers validated their students' marginalization, stating "sometimes really good [being accepted in the larger school setting] and sometimes they are just that special education group", as well as elaborating "always a few in my class that just naturally stick out more and take the beating; some just naturally stick out more and take the heat." These statements indicated that many of the students in the pull-out settings were teased by peers in the larger school context and had limited, particularly positive, social interaction with students outside of the pull-out educational program and/or special education setting in general.

The very essence of the pull-out educational environment (i.e. being together more than 60% of the school day) helped to create the sense of community. The students in both pull-out programs shared stories with one another and developed shared experiences. Thus, the pull-out educational programs helped to develop friendships for students, when they were otherwise largely marginalized within the larger school context. This was noted by adults in the programs, who commented that many of the students lacked friends outside of the pull-out programs.

Instruction within students' zone of proximal development (ZPD) was another benefit to the pull-out educational settings. The teachers in both pull-out programs tried to individualize education for their students, despite the heterogeneous nature of the cross-categorical programs. However, it was the attempt at individualization that produced instruction within students' zone of proximal development.

The students in both pull-out educational programs struggled academically. They struggled with understanding geography as it pertained to countries, states, and cities, as evident from the previous analytical vignette regarding students commenting that Denver was a country and then a state. These students also were challenged with calendars, reading, and other areas typically not covered in general education secondary programs. When the students were placed in the general education classes from these programs, it was often without the assistance of a more knowledgeable other, such as paraprofessional support. Despite that these inclusive classes had a classroom teacher, they also had up to and over 30 students in a class, often making the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one. The challenge with meeting students' needs from a self-contained cross-categorical pull-out program in general education settings were noted by one of the teachers, who remarked that she was going to try to "bleed out" some of her students into general education classes next year. She indicated that it was not so much for the academics they would receive in general education, as they would only be accountable for a few notes, but the social aspect.

Finally, the pull-out programs created freedom from some constraints of the institution, such as freedom in one's schedule, as students were privy to fewer requirements and more options for electives. Students in both programs took electives as freshman, which were typically not allowed with general education students until the upper grades. They were also allowed to have certain electives count as meeting the requirement of core courses, such as a health/nutrition course counting towards a science credit and a personal finance course towards a math credit, which was an attempt of the schools to meet this group of students' needs.

Students also received special concessions, as they were allowed to go to the county vocational center for programs as sophomores, whereas general education students could not go until their junior and senior years. One teacher acknowledged the concessions for her students, yet in ways felt that they were justified. She relayed concern about having alternative activities for some of her students, beyond

her classroom, electives, and the county vocational center. She indicated that the county vocational center was too difficult for her lowest students, which was confirmed by only two of her five students being invited back to the vocational center following year. The three that were not asked back were unable to handle the work requirements of the courses, yet also struggled in the pull-out programs. The teacher felt conflicted over how to educate these students and felt that there needed to be something else, such as an alternative that would let these students have hands-on activities, but met their academic, cognitive, and behavioral needs.

Freedom for these students also extended to work experiences. Special education students at the schools were granted more freedom than general education students when it came to work-release from school, per the principal's and school's rules. One transition paraprofessional discussed the rules of work-release with students. She indicated that general education students could not be placed in work-release unless the work was career-related. However, she said that it was different for special education students because they had an Individual Education Plan (IEP), which was a contract. The transition paraprofessional clarified by saying that as long as the work-release experience was safe, educational, and productive, special education student could participate if it was written into their IEP.

Freedom was also granted in the pull-out program through the "bending of the rules" or "pushing the envelope," although from an educator's perspective this may not be a benefit of the pull-out educational setting but a disadvantage. In both pull-out educational programs, students had the freedom to enter the class after the bell rang, to leave to get a drink, or use the bathroom with simply a notification that they were doing so; things that most likely would not be allowed in general education classes. While the students felt positive about these unintended consequences of a pull-out educational setting, these "freedoms" did not always present an educational advantage.

*Disadvantages or challenges.* One disadvantage to the pull-out educational model that was used in both programs was the lack of positive peer role models. While occasionally a student in one of the

pull-out programs “stepped up” to model appropriate behavior and to try to stop another student from engaging in inappropriate and/or counter-productive behavior, in general a lack of positive peer role models existed in both programs. In fact, the students actually appeared to feed off one another’s inappropriate behavior, creating a domino effect within the classroom. The programs often existed within the realm of “survival of the fittest.” As many of these students in the pull-out programs were picked on, ignored, or marginalized in general education settings, they often retaliated on classmates who were not as strong (physically or mentally) or who were “less cool”. Thus, the students tended to “prey” on their weaker classmates in terms of being mean. They made comments regarding other students’ hygiene, going as far as to publicly decree, “I can’t sit by Brett [he smells]”. Comments were also made publicly about other students’ peculiarities, such as one student’s habit of eating or chewing on pencils or another student’s weight issues or his loudness of talking. In general, both programs lacked consistency of peers modeling appropriate behavior (including student-teacher as well as student-student relationships) and leadership in terms of making good decisions.

Stigmatization was another disadvantage or negative consequence of these students being educated in pull-out educational programs. While one teacher denied that her students were aware of their “special education status”, observations revealed otherwise. For example, when one student was requested to run an errand to return the teacher’s and paraprofessional’s lunch trays during the changing of class time, he asked to wait awhile, referring to it as “embarrassing to go now.” Similarly, another student expressed hesitation with particular class activities, and implied he felt embarrassed to be part of the class and engage in those activities. He disliked class activities that involved cleaning up the school (i.e. sweeping the hallways) and picking up trash from around the outside of the school, stating that he did not come to school to do the janitor’s work, but rather he was there to learn. While he was willing to engage in academic work in the pull-out program, he resisted vocational or work-based activities, which he felt were beneath him.

One of the teachers stated that the students did not care, or were not aware of their categorical special education placement and justified her stance by stating that her students did not notice if they used math books that specifically referred to elementary grades. She also stated that her students were accepted by their peers, and felt this way because her students had gone to the same elementary school as their general education peers. However, observations did not reveal that the students had many friends outside of special education, let alone their program. Both male and female students within the programs were teased in their general education classes, sometimes to the point of provoking a fight between one them and multiple general education students. The students were also not involved in many activities at the school.

*Summary and concluding thoughts.* Students in both self-contained cross-categorical programs expressed concern over being in special education, yet did not want to do the work in the general education classes or have their freedom restricted. Students in both programs did not want to engage with the work required in general education classes, even stating “I don’t do book work.” It was a constant tension between some of them expressing that they did not want to be in the pull-out programs and not wanting to do the work in the general education program, particularly as neither special education program required a lot of work and almost never any homework. One student may have expressed it best, as he said that he did not want to be in the pull-out program, but he minded it less because the work was easier.

Despite some students’ adamant statements that they have general education classes, they had difficulty staying in them. In one program five students were enrolled in a computer applications electives course, and three were willingly pulled out by paraprofessionals to do the work in special education classrooms. These students did not want to go to the general education class, although one repeatedly commented that he did not belong in the pull-out program and wanted general education classes. Another student, who was not pulled out of the same computer class but assisted by a

paraprofessional, repeatedly begged to be allowed back to self-contained cross-categorical classroom to work. Yet, he also talked about wanting to be out of special education and how the students in his same program teased him. This situation was not unique to computers, as another student refused to go to his general education human anatomy course and instead spent the hour working on the course content with a paraprofessional in the pull-out educational setting, and actually completed more work than he did in the general education classroom according to the general education teacher.

The students presented conflicting signals because they felt confused about what they wanted, general education or special education. For instance, one teacher had wanted her students to go into the general education freshman human anatomy class for human reproduction. Yet, her students presented mixed emotions over this situation. On the one hand, the students made comments to adults from the special education program about not embarrassing them in the general education class and felt concern over some of their peers from the program embarrassing them as well. The students wanted to appear as “general education students” and blend in. Yet, they did not want to intermingle with the general education students once in the classroom and when given the opportunity to work in the general education classroom or the pull-out program classroom on assignments and assessments, they choose the pull-out educational setting. Despite the initial appeal of being in a general education classroom, being like everyone else, and attempting to mask their disability, actually being in a general education course created a vulnerable situation which was anxiety provoking.

#### Discussion

The data from all three studies have illuminated many benefits and challenges surrounding inclusive education, and its counter, pull-out programs. Not only has the data highlighted the discrepancy between students with mild mental impairment and students with learning disabilities over receiving education in inclusive settings (9% vs. 45.5%, respectively), but the conflict students felt over being in pull-out settings and inclusive settings. While these studies may have raised more questions

than they answered, they have added to the literature on inclusive education and illustrate the need to further examine pull-out and inclusive educational settings for secondary students with disabilities.

The findings across all three studies elicited many points regarding the education of students with disabilities in general education and special education classes. Clearly, there are academic and social benefits and disadvantages to both educational settings. The lack of positive role models is a large disadvantage of pull-out programs. Yet, students in the pull-out programs had friends in the small community, while many were ostracized in the larger school community, and actually interacted less and received fewer interactions from peers in the inclusive settings. Data from these studies also indicated that students felt safer in pull-out programs and were more likely to be working within their zone of proximal development (ZPD), let alone actually doing work. While students from the third study completed more work in their pull-out programs, the larger social and political context must be considered, such as *No Child Left Behind* (see Branstad et al., 2002; NCLB, 2001) and its implications for student assessment and access to the general education curriculum.

The students in all three studies were educated in Michigan, which has alternative assessments in place for students with mild mental impairment and those who function as such (e.g. students with severe learning disabilities who are educated in pull-out settings). Alternative assessment for this population stands in contrast to what occurs in many states, alternative assessments for the most severely impaired students (see Kleinert & Thurlow, 2001). Michigan is an exception as it holds high school students educated in these types of pull-out programs to different standards and assesses them on different tests. However, if states are going to hold these students accountable for the general large scale state assessment, then they must provide them access to the general education curriculum and inclusive educational settings. Thus, policy creates a conundrum, as these data illustrated that the students experienced both academic and social benefits in the pull-out settings, yet most policies stipulate inclusive settings.

While the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* stipulated that students with disabilities should be educated in the least restrictive environment, these studies illustrated that the field must continue to challenge what is the “least restrictive.” The data add to the mix of results and thoughts. Conventional wisdom suggests that the least restrictive environment is the environment that holds the least restrictions of students with disabilities, which many presume to be the general education classroom. However, the findings indicated that being in the general education classroom did place restrictions on students. It restricted their participation, their access to learning at their level (i.e. within their ZPD), and their feelings of safety within all educational placements. It also served to limit their social networks and interactions with both peers and adults, which can result in negative academic and social implications.

While there are no easy answers and it is not as cut-and-dry as some may make it seem, perhaps the answer, or at least the right direction, lies with listening to students – listening to both their words and their behavior. Students’ perspectives regarding their education need to be respected, whether their perspectives are articulated verbally or behaviorally, such as skipping one’s general education classes or locking oneself in a backroom when it was time to go to a general education class. Inclusion, or lack thereof, cannot continue to be a debate among scholars and researchers, but must reflect the needs of students – what is best for each individual student.

### *Limitations*

All three studies are limited as they were conducted within Michigan. And while this may limit generalizability to other states, the state of Michigan is of interest in special education and policy nationwide because of its unique situation such as having multiple levels of alternate assessments and providing special education services from birth to 26. Besides limitations related to the sites selected and thus generalizability constraints, limitations also exist as one researcher was used for all the

observations for the second and third studies, and little is known about the nonrespondents for the first study in which a 50% return rate was achieved.

#### *Future Directions*

Future research must continue to examine inclusive versus pull-out education settings, and in particular the academic and social benefits and disadvantages or challenges to each setting. Despite the prevalence of policy and the current political climate, the field must continue to understand what is best to meet the educational needs of students and embrace their perspective within this exploration. Furthermore, research must look to disaggregate findings on inclusive education for students of various disabilities (i.e. students with mild mental impairment, learning disabilities, etc.). Academic and social advantages and disadvantages must be understood for each group as various students have differing needs.

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