Educating Students with Learning Disabilities in Inclusive Classrooms

Jeremy Ford
jwford@boisestate.edu

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Mr. Jeremy Ford, ED. S

University of Iowa

Iowa City, Iowa

Abstract

There is great debate over including students with disabilities, in particular students with learning

disabilities, in inclusive classrooms. Several strategies are available to support educating students

with learning disabilities in inclusive classrooms including: co-teaching, differentiated

instruction, and peer-mediated instruction and interventions. Theory suggests the practice of

inclusion is congruent with social justice, but evidence suggests mixed results regarding

academic achievement typically occur. However, results of providing separate pullout

instructional services are not necessarily more likely to achieve desired results. Therefore,

educators will need to make placement decisions considering the resources available in their

school, in addition to the skill level of the students they work with, in order to make proper

decisions regarding least restrictive environment. Doing so puts the student at the center of

educational planning rather than ideological belief.

Keywords: inclusion, least restrictive environment, learning disabilities, social justice

Educating Students with Learning Disabilities in Inclusive Classrooms

Inclusion refers to the practice of students with disabilities (SWD) learning alongside their peers in general education classrooms (Gilhool, 1989). Thus, classrooms that engage in this practice can be referred to as being inclusive. The least restrictive environment (LRE) mandate in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) makes clear that educating SWD in inclusive classrooms is preferred. The LRE mandate further states that SWD should be educated in inclusive classrooms unless their disability is so severe it cannot be addressed in the general education classroom even with supplementary aids and services.

The LRE mandate and inclusion both have broad support among various interests groups including: parents, school professionals, researchers, and advocates for SWD (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998; McLeskey, 2007; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Zigmond, 2003). The principle of inclusion has been linked to social justice as well. For instance, Theoharris (2009) states inclusion is necessarily tied to social justice as the practice supports respect, care, recognition, and empathy as well as challenges beliefs and practices that directly or indirectly foster the perpetuation of marginalization and exclusion. Frattura & Capper (2007) framed the inclusion of SWD as an issue of equity as well as social justice by contending that administrators, teachers, and other educational professionals must continuously reflect on the current state of their school as it relates to social justice for SWD. In addition, Fullan (2003) suggested similar characteristics as essential for building ethical schools as social justice is a key element of educator belief systems in such schools.

Despite the appeal of the LRE mandate and inclusive practices, there is contentious debate among many stakeholders on the issue (Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 2006; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994; Kaufmann, 2002; Zigmond, 2003). At the heart of this debate are concerns regarding how

much of the school day SWD are included in the general education environment and the degree

to which inclusive practices help to achieve desirable student outcomes (McLeskey, 2007). Much

of the debate has centered on students with learning disabilities (LD) in particular. Students with

LD differ from students with other more severe disabilities as there are no physical

characteristics that accompany their disability (Raymond, 2008). Typically, the nature of their

disability is mild though it effects both their academic achievement and life out of school

(Raymond, 2008).

On the one hand, researchers have argued that the instructional needs of students with LD

can be met with collaborative efforts between general and special educators (Reynolds, Wang, &

Walberg, 1987; Sailor & Roger, 2005; Skrtic, Harris, & Shriner, 2005, Will, 1986) such as co-

teaching, thus eliminating the need for pulling students out of general education for instruction.

On the other hand, researchers have raised concerns regarding the feasibility and effectiveness of

full inclusion for meeting the academic needs of students with LD (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994; Fuchs,

Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010; Zigmond, 2003; Zigmond et al., 2009). Further, research regarding

whether or not the most effective teachers are willing to include students with special needs in

their classrooms has been mixed (Gersten, Walker, & Darch, 1888; Treder, Morse, & Ferron,

2000).

It is possible to conclude that the former group of researchers above is "winning" this

debate. That is, data from the U.S. Department of Education (2010) show that over the past two

decades the number of students with LD who are educated in the general education environment

most of their school day has increased considerably. For instance, McLeskey and Waldron

(2011) reported that the percentage of students with LD being educated in the general education

classroom for at least 80 percent of their school day went from 22 percent during the 1989-1990

school year to 62 percent during the 2007-2008 school year (see Table 1). Despite less progress

being made in this area for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities and those with

intellectual disabilities (McLeskey, Landers, Williamson, & Hoppey, 2010), it has been

concluded that the preferred model of service delivery in most of the United States for students

with LD is currently "full inclusion with co-teaching" (Zigmond et al., 2009, p. 196).

Table 1
Increase in Inclusive Placement for Students with LD

School Year	Percentage of Students with LD in General Education Setting for 80% or More
1989-1990	22
2007-2008	62

Note. LD = Learning Disability.
Source: McLeskey and Waldron (2011)

Though one may argue the inclusion camp is winning the debate, it is far from a settled

matter. This paper describes three strategies that can be used to successfully educate students

with LD in inclusive classrooms. However, I will also argue that full inclusion is neither

practical nor congruent with the LRE mandate.

Inclusive Strategies for Educating Students with LD

In this section I will discuss three methods for including students with LD in inclusive

classrooms. This discussion will include: co-teaching, differentiated instruction, and peer-

mediated instruction and interventions. First, various forms of co-teaching will be reviewed with

several selected benefits provided.

Co-Teaching

Though inclusion can occur with or without involvement from a special education

teacher, a co-teaching arrangement is typical (Solis, Vaughn, Swanson, & McCulley, 2012). By

working together the general and special education teacher are better able to provide support for

students with LD than the former could independently. As such, the need to remove students with LD for specialized instruction is eliminated. Although the definition of co-teaching is commonly simple, as suggested here, it is often operationalized broadly.

For instance, Vaughn, Schumm, and Arguelles (1997) described five evidence-based models for co-teaching. One such model is described as, *One Teach, One Assist*. In this model one teacher is responsible for instructing all students while the second provides additional support for those who need it. A benefit to using this model is that not only students with LD benefit but all students who need additional support are provided with extra instruction in the general education environment. *Station Teaching* is another model for co-teaching. Students are divided into three separate groups in this model. During a block period, each group works with one of the two teachers in addition to having an independent work time. All students are able to benefit from this model by being able to receive small group instruction. In another model, *Parallel Teaching*, teachers are required to plan lessons together before splitting students in two groups. The teachers then teach the same lesson to these two small groups. In this model not only do students get the benefits of working in small groups, teachers also benefit by learning from each other's expertise. *Alternative Teaching* is a co-teaching model where one teacher is responsible for teaching and the other is responsible for pre-teaching and re-teaching concepts to students who need additional support. Finally, in a *Team Teaching* model teachers provide instruction together in the same classroom. Teachers may take turns leading instruction or may model student behavior while the other teacher is instructing (e.g. how to take notes or ask questions appropriately).

Research regarding the effectiveness of co-teaching is limiting. For instance, Scruggs, Mastropieri, and McDuffie (2007) suggested that the model was being used less effectively than

Table 2
Comparison of Co-Teaching Methods

Method	Description	Benefits
One Teach, One Assist	One teacher instructs all students while a second provides additional support for those who need it	Students with and without disabilities can receive assistance on challenging material
Station Teaching	Students are divided into three separate groups with two groups working with one of the two teachers and the third working independently	Students with and without disabilities benefit from receiving small group instruction
Parallel Teaching	Teachers plan lessons together before splitting students in two groups, and then teach the same lesson to these small groups	Students with and without disabilities benefit from working in small groups, teachers also benefit by learning from each other's expertise
Alternative Teaching	One teacher is responsible for teaching and the other is responsible for pre-teaching and re-teaching concepts to students who need additional support	Students with disabilities, and other students struggling with challenging material, can receive additional direct instruction
Team Teaching	Teachers provide instruction together in the same classroom and may take turns leading instruction or modeling student behavior	Students with disabilities especially learn well from having behavior modeled, and students without disabilities likely benefit as well

Source: Vaughn, Schumm, and Arguelles (1997)

it could be, in particular in regards to the (lack of) a role being played by special education

teachers. Earlier, Murawski and Swanson (2001) concluded a lack of an empirical basis for the

use of co-teaching, though more recent research (e.g., Scheeler, Congdon, & Stansbery, 2010)

has used technology to provide immediate feedback to co-teachers with success. However, as

stated above co-teaching is not the only means by which to educate students with LD in inclusive

classrooms. It is possible for an individual teacher to differentiate their instruction for this

purpose as well. In the next section I will discuss the use of differentiated instruction.

Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction involves students with LD, and others with diverse learning

needs, being supplied with instructional methods and materials that are matched to their

individual needs (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & Marshak, 2012). The use of differentiated instruction

requires general and special educators to possess flexible teaching approaches as well as to be

flexible in adjusting the curriculum based upon student need (Obiakor, Harris, Mutua, Rotatori,

& Algozzine, 2012). Tomlinson (2001) provides five guidelines for successfully differentiating

instruction in inclusive classrooms: (a) clarify all key concepts and generalizations, (b) use

assessment as a teaching tool to extend, not only measure, instruction, (c) make critical and

creative thinking a goal of lesson design, (d) engage every student in learning, and (e) provide a

balance of tasks between what is assigned by the teacher and selected by the student.

Table 3
Guidelines for Successfully Differentiating Instruction in Inclusive Classrooms

1. Clarify all key concepts and generalizations
2. Use assessment as a teaching tool to extend instruction
3. Make critical and creative thinking a goal of lesson design
4. Engage every student in learning
5. Provide balance of tasks between what is assigned by the teacher and selected by the student

Source: Tomlinson (2001)

Being able to provide learning opportunities to all students within an inclusive classroom

is certainly an advantage of differentiated instruction. Despite this advantage the practice is not

without limitations. One limitation is that some students may feel stigmatized as a result of

receiving a perceived less challenging curriculum (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & Marshal, 2012).

However, this limitation can be addressed when teachers provide effective differentiated

instruction without appearing to single out any one student. Such a practice is consistent with the

system of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). A complete description of UDL is also beyond

the scope of this discussion, but it has been defined as "the design of products and environments

to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or

specialized design" (Thompson, Johnstone, & Thurlow, 2002, p.1). Thus, by addressing this

limitation, differentiated instruction can certainly be an effective method to include students with

LD in inclusive classrooms. One example of a specific way to effectively meet the needs of

diverse learners in heterogeneous learning groups, i.e. inclusive classrooms, is the use of peer-

mediated instruction and interventions (PMII; Maheady, Harper, & Mallette, 1991; Utley,

Mortweet, & Greenwood, 1997).

Peer-Mediated Instruction and Interventions

PMII are a set of alternative teaching strategies that employ the use of students as

instructors for students in their class. Consequently, when PMII are used the role of the teacher

goes from being the primary provider of instruction to that of a facilitator of peer provided

instruction. Peer provided instruction can be direct (e.g., tutoring) or indirect (e.g., modeling) and

can focus on either academic or social-emotional development (Kalfus, 1984). Several

instructional systems have been developed based on the principles of PMII. These include

Classwide Student Tutoring Teams (CSTT; Maheady, Harper, Sacca, & Mallette, 1991),

Classwide Peer Tutoring (CWPT; Greenwood, Delquadri, & Carta, 1999), and Peer-Assisted

Learning Strategies (PALS; L.S. Fuchs, D. Fuchs, Phillips, & Karns, 1994; Fuchs, Mathes, &

Fuchs, 1996).

The positive effects of PMII, in particular with students with mild disabilities such as LD,

are well documented in the literature (Maheady, Harper, & Mallette, 2001). However it stands to

Table 4

Essential Characteristics of Peer-Mediated Instruction and Interventions

Teacher becomes a facilitator of peer provided instruction
Peer provided instruction can be direct (e.g., tutoring) or indirect (e.g., modeling)
Peer provided instruction can focus on either academic or social-emotional development

Source: Kalfus (1984)

reason that effects of such, and any, instruction will depend on the individual(s) responsible for

its implementation. That is, whether or not a teacher is using PMII strategies or involved with co-

teaching or using differentiated instruction results are unlikely to be successful if few or no

adjustments are made to meet the needs of students with LD (Obiakor, 2008; Williams &

Obiakor, 2009). Thus it is reasonable for one to ask how likely students with LD are to have

their instructional needs met in full inclusion classrooms.

Effectiveness of Inclusive Strategies for Students with LD

An examination of the literature on the inclusion debate reveals the need for

distinguishing between inclusion and full inclusion (Murphy, 1996). Kaufman and Hallahan

(2005) state that full inclusion is a mandate where the needs of SWD is ignored in order for all

students to be educated together in the general education environment. As a result, Kaufman and

Hallahan (2005) argue that full inclusion does not always allow Individualized Education Plan

(IEP) teams to make the best educational decisions regarding placement in the LRE. Unlike in

full inclusion, an inclusive classroom is one in which the general education teacher had the

student for the majority of the school day with support provided by the special education teacher

as needed (Jobe, Rust, & Brissie, 1996; Salend, 2001; Shade & Stewart, 2001). Thus, IEP teams

are given flexibility to meet the needs of students in whatever ways that may be while

considering a continuum of service options consistent with the Individuals with Disabilities

Education Improvement Act (2004). A great deal of research exists that sheds light into the

effectiveness of full inclusion and resource or pullout services. This research is has been recently

well summarized by McLeskey and Waldron (2011).

Comparing Full Inclusion to Pullout in Elementary Schools

McLeskey and Waldron (2011) summarized the research on whether or not inclusive

education programs can be effective for elementary students with LD. They found that studies

have consistently found that some students obtain better achievement results in full inclusion

classrooms, but other have fared better when part-time resource support is provided. McLeskey

and Waldron (2011) also found that most studies concluded that variability between student

outcomes in the two settings is due to the unevenness in the quality of instruction. McLeskey and

Waldron (2011) conclude the research suggests that both inclusive classrooms and pullout

programs can improve academic outcomes of elementary students with LD. The key, they argue,

it the presence of high-quality instruction which can be – or cannot be – provided in either

setting.

However, McLeskey and Waldron (2011) highlight further research showing that many

students with LD make significant gains when provided with high-quality pullout instruction,

and that often gains are significantly greater compared to their peers educated in inclusive

classrooms as well. They argue that the intensive instruction provided in a small group pullout

setting allows students with LD to receive the intensified instruction they need on specific

concepts and skills. In addition they state that this type of instruction rarely occurs in general

education classrooms. Unfortunately, the research on high-quality instruction in resource and

pullout programs does not find a great deal of support for utilizing high-quality instruction as

well (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). Further, research suggests differences for how effective

inclusive practices are in elementary schools compared to high schools.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Inclusion in High School

The practice of inclusion has had greater success at the elementary level compared to the secondary level. For instance, when Casale-Giannola (2012) compared vocational and academic inclusion high school classrooms, several strengths and weaknesses for both were found. Using observations, consultation, and surveys, Casale-Giannola (2012) found academic classrooms to have strengths such as: positive teacher-student report, real-life connections to and interesting discussions of lessons, good use of strategies and modifications, use of active learning to motivate students, and good teacher collaboration. Vocational classrooms were found to have strengths such as: the presence of differentiated instruction, real-life connections, opportunities for active-learning, repetition, meaningful teacher-student relationships, and teacher expertise and passion.

In regards to the academic classrooms, Casale-Giannola (2012) found that teachers lacked strategies to support SWD and were unaware of law pertaining to special education as well as student classifications and needs. A lack of co-teaching collaboration with most schools using the *One Teach, One Assist* model was also found as was a limited use of student assessment to help determine instructional planning. Casale-Giannola (2012) also found that uneven scheduling for SWD put them at a disadvantage in the inclusion classrooms as at times they were too many or too few to serve them well.

Weaknesses for vocational classrooms included a lack of understanding regarding special education laws, issues, and individual supports as well as difficulty with classroom management. The number one weakness, what Casale-Giannola (2012) identifies as needs, was the "weak" basic skills of the SWD. This need was also noted in the academic classrooms as well as it was

pointed found these students lacked "the basic skills, reading, writing, and mathematics to function in content area instruction" (p. 32).

Thus, a need exists for students with LD in inclusive high schools to learn basic skills, yet it appears many general education teachers may not be prepared to meet that need at the current time. It seems reasonable to conclude that, just as with elementary schools, meeting student needs and helping to obtain desired academic outcomes may be able to be accomplished in inclusive classrooms but it is not a sure thing. Therefore, schools must ensure that they are helping students with LD by using the resources they have at present, while developing their capacity to do more in the long run. Figure 1 provides guidelines for how educators can consider their resources as they make placement decisions for students with LD.

Conclusion

It is possible to educate students with LD in inclusive classrooms as the LRE mandate prefers. However, full inclusion does not always produce the academic results that IEP teams desire. Though social justice has been linked to inclusion, it is important that the educators that work with students with LD be allowed to make placement decisions they believe best allow for the student's needs to be met. Such decision-making should heavily consider the need for the student with LD to obtain proficiency regarding academic skills. Failure to provide students with such skills can hardly be deemed just.

There is no doubt that the needs of students with LD, including academic needs, can be met with inclusive practices by talented teachers and other educators. However, the skills required to implement such practices (e.g., co-teaching, differentiated instruction, peer-mediated learning) likely take time to develop. In addition, students with LD often benefit from direct skill instruction in individualized or small group settings. Thus it seems prudent that the skills of the

Making Instructional Placement Decisions

Step 1. Identify the skill of concern

Step 2. Determine the instruction necessary to increase skill level

Step 3. Identify the materials necessary to teach the skill of concern

Step 4. Identify the individual(s) available in the school to teach the skill of concern

Step 5. Based on steps 2 – 4, make a decision regarding where instruction of the skill of concern will take place

Step 6. Monitor the student's progress acquiring the skill of concern to determine if placement is appropriate

Step 7. Reconsider changes in placement in response to instructionally relevant data
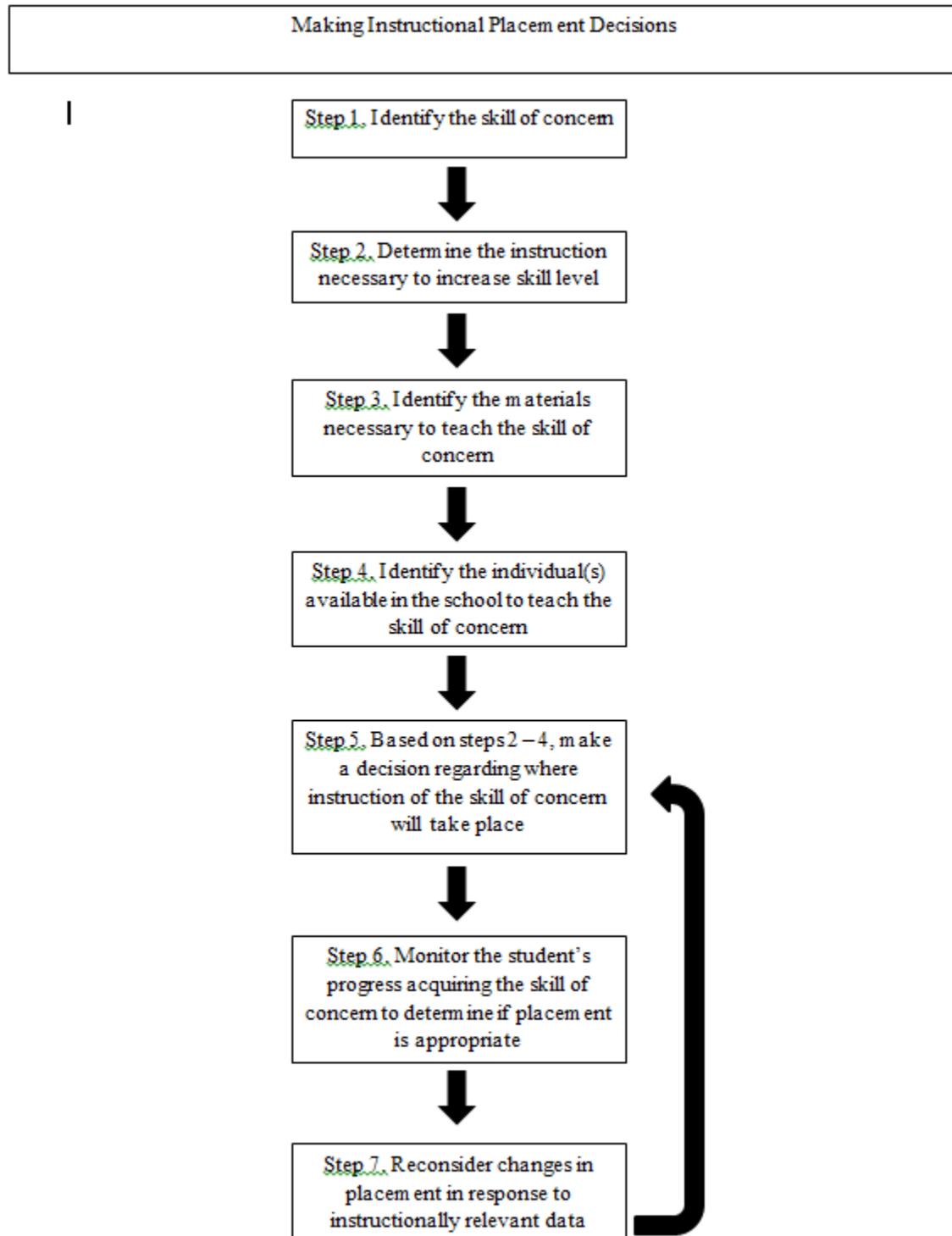
FIGURE 1. An educator guide for making placement decisions for students with LD.

teachers and others who work with students with LD (e.g., resources of the school) are

considered as well as the student's skills. In some situations it may be best for students with LD

to be taught in separate pull out classrooms with a teacher who can provide targeted skill instruction in areas where a student is struggling. In such situations, developing the capacity of school staff to meet the needs of students with LD, and other diverse learners, through inclusive practices could be made a priority. Until such a capacity exists, however, the LRE for a student with LD should be the one in which they are acquiring academic skills that are needed for success in school and beyond.

The reverse of this situation is, of course, also true. An IEP team may conclude that placing a student with LD in a general education environment with an exceptional teacher is a better decision than in a pullout resource setting. Again, the priority would be ensuring the student is acquiring the academic skills necessary to be successful. Therefore, framing placement decisions around the LRE a student is able to gain academic skills in, rather than predetermining placement due to ideological belief, is in the best interest of students with LD given the mixed results found comparing inclusion and pull out resource settings.

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