

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Same District, Different Outcomes: Comparing Included v. Separate Placements of Students with Extensive Support Needs

Overview

Fifteen pairs of students with extensive support needs (ESN) were matched across twelve characteristics, including disability, age, and skill level in communication, literacy, and numeracy. In each pair of students, one student's IEP team had made the decision that the student should be included in general education for 80% or more of their day at their first and subsequent IEPs; the other student's IEP team had made the decision that the student should be separated into a special education classroom either at a general education school or a separate school. Researchers conducted observations and compared outcome data from the students' first and most current IEPs. They found dramatic differences based on placement.

A Typical School Day

Students in the general education classrooms had a significant, large effect size on several descriptors of a typical instructional day as compared with their pairs in separate classrooms. That is, the students with ESN included in general education were more likely to be

- involved in an activity that typical peers might be involved in at school,
- socially engaged, and
- engaged in peer-to-peer learning.

In 38% of the observations, students in separate classrooms were completely unengaged. This was true for only 4% of the observations of students in general education.

Progress Documented on IEPs

When compared with their matched pairs in separate classrooms, students who were included in general education showed highly significant, large effect sizes across all three skill areas. That is, students in the general education classrooms made significantly greater progress in

- communication,
- literacy, and
- numeracy.

Seventy-three percent of students in separate classes made no progress on communication and literacy and 67% made no progress on numeracy. In contrast, 100% of students in general education made progress on communication and literacy and only 7% made no progress on numeracy.

MEASURE	SEPARATE CLASS SEPARATE SCHOOL	GENERAL EDUCATION
Engagement (% of observations)	62%	96%
Communication progress (% of students)	27%	100%
Literacy progress (% of students)	27%	100%
Numeracy progress (% of students)	33%	93%

(continued)



Closing Notes

There were no differences for the level of achievement or level of disability in pairs' initial IEPs. The classrooms in this study were not chosen based on how effective the teachers were. The researchers noted that the effectiveness of instruction could have been improved in both types of placements.

Despite that, students in separate classrooms were less likely to be engaged and less likely to be interacting with one another and their typical peers. They made limited, if any, progress in communication, literacy, and math. Students in general education settings had significantly higher social and peer-to-peer interactions and made significantly greater progress in communication, literacy, and math.

Gee, K., Gonzalez, M., & Cooper, C. (2020). Outcomes of inclusive versus separate placements: A matched pairs comparison study. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 45(4), 223-240. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1540796920943469>

