

SHIFTING LEAST RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENTS IN A LARGE URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Abstract

This study examined the efforts of one large urban school district to implement support to schools in increasing their rates of students being served in inclusive settings. The authors evaluate a process whereby the district used a self-created *LRE/Achievement at a Glance Tool* to measure programs, services, and learner outcomes for students with disabilities, and provide specific recommendations and supports to administrative teams in targeted schools. Results indicate statistically significant increases in the number of students who were fully included as well as statistically significant increases in average time students with disabilities spent with their nondisabled peers. Math and reading proficiency levels for students with and without disabilities are also reported. Implications for best practices in supporting inclusion in urban districts are examined, such as the importance of documenting and examining inclusive practices and further training for educators and administrators in ethical principles and practice.

Keywords: inclusive practices, school reform, compliance, students with disabilities

Schools, particularly in urban settings, continue to struggle with how or where to best educate students with disabilities. In 1975, the Education of all Handicapped Children Act (later renamed the Individual with Disabilities Education Act; IDEA) introduced the concept of instructing students in the least restrictive environment (LRE), mandating that students with disabilities be educated, to the maximum extent possible, alongside the general student population. The notion of LRE is that the environment is determined as appropriate on a student-by-student basis (Koegel, Matos-Freden, Lang, & Koegel, 2012; Wehmeyer, Lattin, & Agran, 2001). Arguably, this component of IDEA has had the most influence on students with disabilities being included in general education settings (Dybvik, 2004; Itokonen, 2007). Yell and Katsiyannis (2004) and Koegel et al. remind us that placement decisions should not be based on severity of disability, disability label, availability of educational or related services within a particular setting, availability of space, or administrative suitability; all are illegitimate reasons for choosing placement.

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However, mere placement in general education setting is only part of the concern. IDEA (2004) mandates that students with disabilities, regardless of placement, have access to the same curriculum and standards based instruction that their nondisabled peers receive. The purpose of this mandate is to ensure that students with disabilities have access to a demanding curriculum, are held to high expectations, and are not excluded from accountability measures stemming from school reform (Wehmeyer, Lattin, Lapp-Rincker, & Agran, 2003). As a result of this legislation, we have seen an increase in inclusive practices and a decrease in the use of separate educational models (Osgood, 2005; Ryndak, Taub, Jorgensen, Gonsier-Gerdin, Arndt, Sauer & Allcock, 2014). In fact, nationally, the inclusion rate has increased to 61% of all students with disabilities spending at least 80% of their time with their nondisabled peers (United States Department of Education [USDOE] National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013). However, in urban districts, the shift towards inclusion often lags behind the national averages. For example, the district discussed in this paper had an inclusion rate of 50% for 2013. The district's population is significantly diverse with approximately 67% of the population being Hispanic, 23% being Black-non-Hispanic, and 8% being White non-Hispanic. Instructional staff in this large urban setting is made up of approximately 23% White non-Hispanic 26%, Black-non-Hispanic, 49%, Hispanic, and 1.8% Other.

Inclusive Practices in Urban Settings

Although inclusion research has suggested that access to the general education curriculum through inclusive programs has several potential educational and social benefits, lower academic achievement among students with disabilities and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds persists in the era of inclusion as measured by performance on state tests (Barrocas & Cramer, 2014). Culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities are often excluded from the general education classroom (Koegel et al., 2012; Reid & Knight, 2006) or do not receive educational equity within the general education setting (Artiles, Bal, Trent, & Thorius, 2012) where poor urban children spend significantly less time directly engaged in academic learning than do their suburban counterparts (Artiles, 2015), thereby leaving students with a lack of access to the necessary supports and services that would level the playing field and potentially provide equitable educational opportunities.

Specific learning disabilities (SLD), the most common disability label, has shifted in demographics from primarily White students to students from culturally and linguistically diverse background (Carlson et al., 2003). For students with SLD in urban settings, their education is likely to take place in more restrictive environments than their suburban peers. This suggests that the amount of time a student with a disability spends in the general education setting is highly correlated to the student's race (Ferri & Connor, 2005). Culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities are overrepresented in more restrictive educational environments (Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, & Feggins-Azziz, 2006), suggesting that students with disabilities who are also culturally and linguistically diverse are more likely to be served in separate settings or in high poverty, low-quality schools that don't effectively address considerations such as race, ethnicity, culture, language, or disability (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009; Kozleski & Waitoller, 2010).

Conceptual Framework

In order to design a comprehensive school reform approach that facilitates optimum learning for all students, regardless of any risk factor, Frattura and Capper (2006) developed an integrated comprehensive services model that includes four components: (a) focusing on equity, (b) establishing equitable structures, (c) implementing change, and (d) providing access to high-quality teaching and learning. The goal of this model is to prevent student failure, and this is accomplished by building teacher capacity to reach the diversity of students, a need that is essential for large urban settings (Kozleski & Waitoller, 2010). In addition, to providing comprehensive school reform, the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) resulted in the USDOE, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) establishing a new accountability framework, using quantifiable indicators related to student outcomes, to monitor states, and the states to monitor the local education agencies (LEAs) implementation of a free appropriate public education (FAPE). Under the revised accountability system, also known as Results-Driven Accountability (RDA; USDOE Office of Special Education Programs [OSEP], 2015a), the emphasis shifts from mere compliance to a framework of improving results for students with disabilities. These improved results for students with disabilities are to be demonstrated via student outcomes in areas such as assessments, graduation rates, and early childhood outcomes. As part of the current accountability system, states are required to submit a State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report to the USDOE identifying targeted performance for specific indicators (e.g., time with non-disabled peers; achievement in reading and mathematics) related to learner outcomes.

Along this vein, in reforming the service delivery model in one large urban district in order to address the indicators on the State Performance Plan, particularly those indicators that address inclusion (defined in this state as students with disabilities spending 80 % or more of the time with their non-disabled peers) and increasing the achievement rate in mathematics and reading, a local monitoring tool was created by one LEA. The theoretical frameworks established through the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Special Education Professional Ethical Principles and Practice Standards (CEC, 2009) were used to guide the development of the *LRE/Achievement at a Glance Tool*.

The *LRE/Achievement at a Glance Tool* consists of nine educational domains: (a) exceptional student education (ESE) program delivery, (b) inclusion practices, (c) learning areas, (d) materials and equipment, (e) assessment, (f) instructional delivery, (g) behavior, (h) parental involvement, and (i) professional development. When used, this tool provides a “picture” of the programs, services, and learner outcomes of students with disabilities at a specific school. Under each of the domains, there are specific standards of practice listed that are rated (evidence = 3; partial evidence = 2; and limited evidence = 1) by the reviewer based on an observable evidentiary artifact. In implementing this tool, an initial review was conducted by school district-level special education staff at 56 schools. The results were then reviewed with administrators at each school and a list of recommendations, including follow up activities, related to specific domains were provided. The purpose of this study was to determine if the recommendations provided to these schools via the *LRE/Achievement at a Glance* review process and the support that followed served to improve the inclusion and achievement of urban students with disabilities.

Methods

This study examined the inclusion rates (based upon the 80% of the school day criteria), average time spent with nondisabled peers, reading achievement, and math achievement of students with and without disabilities at 56 schools before and after a thorough review process that took place during the 2013 -2014 school year in one large urban school district. The review process that took place was the *LRE/Achievement at a Glance* review process.

LRE/Achievement at a Glance Review Process

This process consisted of four parts: (a) data collection prior to the school visit, (b) school visit with observations of specific students within the context of their program using the *LRE/Achievement at a Glance - Student Observation Tool*, (c) compiling the review results, and (d) meeting with school site administrator(s). Schools were informed of the review prior to the on site visit through an electronic mail message as well as through a follow up telephone call from district special education staff.

Prior to the review, overview information on the state of the school's special education program was collected. In order to facilitate the classroom "walkthroughs," a group of students (typically 8-10) were selected at random from the students with disabilities at the school to be observed in their respective classrooms. The *LRE/Achievement at a Glance- Student Observation Tool* was used to conduct the walkthroughs. The student observation tool consists of six out of the nine domains from the *LRE/Achievement at a Glance*: inclusion, learning area, materials and equipment, assessment, instructional delivery, and behavior. In addition to the specific domains, the educational environment (i.e., general education, resource room, special class) where the student is provided instruction is also delineated in the *LRE/Achievement at a Glance- Student Observation Tool* as part of the demographic data. The student's special education program was reviewed in relation to each of these domains since these domains pertain to essential educational practices (CEC, 2009) that would have a direct impact on learner outcomes. The students were not aware they were being targeted and the observations were conducted via classroom "walkthroughs".

These classroom "walkthroughs" were conducted at each of the 56 schools with a minimum of two staff members assigned to conduct each "walkthrough". Each staff member completed his or her own evaluation and then the evaluators met to discuss their ratings and settle on a final score, thus attending to inter-rater reliability. The evaluators then worked together to develop recommendations for the school. The data (evidence = 3; partial evidence = 2; and limited evidence = 1) pertaining to the standards under each of the six domains were calculated for each of the students. The totals for each of the *LRE/Achievement at a Glance* domains, including the three domains not included as part of the student observation tool: program delivery, parental involvement, and professional development, were used to complete the Total Points per Domain section of *LRE/Achievement at a Glance Tool*. The Total Points per Domain section was used to calculate the grand total for the review. The grand total determined the schools provision of services to students with disabilities by prescribing one of the following classifications: outstanding – meets requirements; good – needs assistance; fair – needs intervention; and needs improvement – needs substantial interventions.

The classification was used to inform schools of the results of their evaluation and recommend appropriate follow up activities to the school site administrator. It should be noted

that in many instances the entire school leadership team met with district staff to review the recommendations at the conclusion of the site visit. The follow-up activities, the final part of the review process, were delineated and included goal completion date and personnel responsible (school or district). The follow up and support included but was not limited to such activities as professional development for both special education and general education teachers and reviewing and revising master schedules.

Research Design and Analysis

Paired sample *t*-tests for the raw scores were used to determine the statistical differences of the mean of the school inclusion rates, the average time spent with peers, the percent of students achieving adequate yearly progress in reading (with and without disabilities), and the percent of students achieving adequate yearly progress in reading (with and without disabilities) at the start of the 2013 school year (prior to the LRE intervention) and at the start of the 2014 school year (after the implementation of the LRE intervention). Then Pearson's correlations of each were run to find any correlations between the difference scores from prior to and after the implementation of the LRE intervention to show the changes of inclusion rate by each of the other specific variables.

Results

Results of the paired samples *t*-test showed a statistically significant increase in both the inclusion rate ($t = -8.97, p < .01$) and the average amount of time that students with disabilities spent with their non-disabled peers ($t = -12.17, p < .01$). Results of a power analysis (Howell, 2012) showed that all variables had a high power with the exception of changes in math achievement for general education students. See Table 1 for the paired samples *t*-test results.

Table 1
Paired Samples T-Test

Variable	2013		2014		<i>t</i> -value	<i>df</i>	Power
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Inclusion Percentage	50.28	26.43	83.38	18.52	8.97**	54	0.99
Average Time with Peers	68.05	16.42	88.81	8.12	12.17**	53	0.99
Students Proficient in Math (SE)	22.11	12.54	23.75	12.56	1.06	55	0.99
Students Proficient in Math (GE)	52.66	11.93	52.57	15.2	-0.06	55	0.17
Students Proficient in Reading (SE)	17.14	10.87	17.66	11.17	0.37	55	0.97
Students Proficient in Reading (GE)	50.26	10.66	50.66	12.84	.46	53	0.85

Note. SE = Special Education, GE = General Education; percentage of student in proficient was used for both SE and GE.

** $p < .01$.

The results of Pearson's correlation indicated that the changes in the inclusion rate showed significant correlations with changes in the average time spent with peers with a

Pearson's correlation coefficient of .675 ($p < .01$). The changes in the inclusion rate also showed significant correlations with changes in the mathematics proficiency of general education students with a Pearson's correlation coefficient of .299 ($p < .05$). Other statistically significant correlations were found between math proficiency for students with disabilities and reading proficiency for students without disabilities ($r = .362, p < .01$), math proficiency for students without disabilities and reading proficiency for students without disabilities ($r = .480, p < .01$), and math proficiency for students without disabilities and math proficiency for students with disabilities ($r = .352, p < .01$). See Table 2 for the correlations among the variables.

Table 2
Correlation among Placement and Achievement Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Inclusion	-					
2. Time with Peers	.675**	-				
3. SE Reading Proficiency	-0.048	0.004	-			
4. GE Reading Proficiency	0.164	0.159	-0.173	-		
5. SE Math Proficiency	-0.014	-0.108	0.124	.362**	-	
6. GE Math Proficiency	.299*	0.159	0.026	.480**	.352**	-

Note. SE = Special Education, GE = General Education.

** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$

Discussion

Findings of this study show that through the LRE review process and the supports provided to schools, the inclusion rates and the average time that students with disabilities spent with their nondisabled peers significantly increased. The average time with peers variable captures the average amount of time all students with disabilities spend in general education settings, even if it is less than 80% of the school day which is the requirement in order for a student to be counted towards the inclusion rate. This means that in addition to the increases in inclusion rates, students who were not included 80% of the day or more were still included for a larger portion of the day than they had been previously.

The overall average inclusion rate (students included for at least 80% of the day) for these 56 schools went from 50% (well below the national average) to 68% (well above the national average) in just one year. This is remarkable growth in just one year, particularly for urban schools such as the 56 that were targeted in this study. As federal mandates and accountability measures compel school districts to focus on both meeting the demands for students to be educated in the LRE as well as to show improved results, student placement is merely the first step (McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014).

While statistically significant increases were not found in the reading or math proficiency levels of students with disabilities, the rate of students meeting proficiency in each of these areas did show an upward trend. It is possible that over time in the general education settings, these changes will become significant. Nevertheless, the fact that there were no significant decreases in proficiency rates for any of the students in these schools (with general or special education

designation), show that shifts in placement did not have a negative effect on the academic proficiency levels of either group. This is in line with previous findings (e.g. Barrocas & Cramer, 2014; Murawski, 2006; Redmon, 2007). As Barrocas and Cramer note, "...although this study did not find statistically significant differences in achievement, as the law (IDEA) requires that students are educated in the least restrictive environment possible, if students can achieve equally in a segregated or inclusive setting, certainly students should be included by default" (p. 47). It is apparent from the proficiency scores that the rapid increase in inclusion at these schools did not negatively affect achievement rates, thus the LRE for the students in these schools should be the general education classroom. If students can perform as well in the general education classroom as in a segregated setting, then the law would deem the less restrictive setting as the most appropriate.

It is not surprising that the increased inclusion rates were correlated with increased amount of time spent with peers. One interesting finding was the correlation between inclusion rates and the math achievement of general education students. This relationship is one that warrants further exploration. Other relationships (i.e. between math proficiency for students with disabilities and reading proficiency for students without disabilities, math proficiency for students without disabilities and reading proficiency for students without disabilities, and math proficiency for students without disabilities and math proficiency for students with disabilities) seem to imply that as schools raised their proficiency rates in one subject area or for one group of students they were more likely to see proficiency increases in other subjects and with other students. This could be related to the model used that made recommendations and actionable plans directly with administrators as reform efforts were systemic and may have been occurring schoolwide. It is worth further exploration into specific schools that showed increased proficiency to see what types of reform were occurring. The model described in this study involved an element of follow up support for administrators in the way of logistical support and professional development training. The effects of such support may take longer than one school year to "show up" in students' test scores. The proficiency levels of these schools should be followed to see if these upward trends continue. Indeed, the equality of access for the students with disabilities in these schools improved after the *LRE/Achievement* process.

Implications and Conclusion

These findings have implications for state and local policy makers, school administrators, educator preparation programs, and researchers. Monitoring frameworks such as the tool used in this study can be used by states and other LEAs to address the new results driven accountability system required by the USDOE (USDOE, 2015b). The framework could result in LEAs developing their own customized tool to review school site special education program implementation which can address such issues as the scheduling of students with disabilities, an issue impacting many schools nationwide. This tool can also provide documentation that including students with disabilities in the general education program does not have a negative impact on their performance (Cole, Waldron, & Maj, 2004; McLeskey et al., 2014) and rather may have a positive result on students. School administrators, who typically do not have a background in special education (McLeskey et al., 2014), could benefit from having a tool that they could easily use to assess the IDEA requirements through the observation of standards of practice (DiPaola, & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Furthermore, school administrators who lack the knowledge and expertise related to the provision of services and instruction to students with

disabilities can consider general education placements and scheduling for students with disabilities with little hesitation since there does not appear to be negative impact (Cole et al., 2004). Educator preparation programs would benefit from ensuring that coursework has the depth of knowledge in the field of special education that are found in the CEC's *Special Education Professional Ethical Principles and Practice Standards* (2009; Hamilton-Jones & Moore, 2013; Kozleski & Waitoller, 2010). The implementation of these standards ensures that a program for students with disabilities focuses on positive learner outcomes.

Under the RDA system (USDOE OSEP, 2015a), the focus is on improving results for students with disabilities. Although many states provide monitoring information and assessments, there is a need to have a practical framework for LEAs to use when monitoring the implementation of LRE requirements with the focus on learner outcomes. A tool that can be used by district and school level staff is essential to ensure that students with disabilities are being provided quality instruction in the LRE. Finally, further research is needed to identify what educational practices and standards assessed through *LRE/Achievement at a Glance Tool* resulted in schools that both increased the inclusion rate as well as reading and/or mathematics achievement. A more in-depth examination of the process can serve as a guide to other urban districts in how to increase both the rate and quality of the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings.

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