Including All Students: The Promise of IDEA

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Abstract

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act mandates that students with disabilities receive a "free appropriate public education" in the "least restrictive environment" (LRE). However, even with the importance placed in the law on including students with disabilities within the general education setting, students with extensive support needs are frequently educated in more restrictive separate settings. This article proposes one-way educational systems can take an actionable stance in developing core values designed to be a catalyst for change in the implementation of what LRE and access to the general curriculum were meant to be for each and every student.

Keywords: Disabilities; Education; Students; General curriculum access; Students with extensive support needs; Inclusion; Core values

Abbreviations: IDEA: Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act; LRE: Least Restrictive Environment; ESN: Extensive Support Needs

Introduction

No other education law has had more effect on people with disabilities than the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act [1]. This federal law governs the rights of individuals with disabilities and mandates that students with disabilities receive a "free appropriate public education" in the "least restrictive environment" (LRE; IDEA, sec. 1411). In accordance with the law, Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams are entrusted with ensuring initial consideration for placement for all students is in the general education classroom [2,3]. The law also mandates that students only be placed in more restrictive settings if, even with support of aids or other services, the student cannot make progress in the general education classroom ([2]; IDEA, sec. 1412). However, even with the emphasis placed in the law on including students within the general education setting, students with ESN, defined as those students who have pervasive support needs across school and home and often receive special education under the eligibility categories of autism, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, or deaf blindness [4], are frequently educated in more restrictive separate settings (e.g., separate classrooms, schools; [4,5]).

Experts in the field of special education have long argued the principle of LRE is inherently flawed and ultimately contributes to one of the more persistent inequities relating to educating students with disabilities. It has been disputed that by including the possibility for a continuum of placements, IDEA legitimizes and incentivizes segregation and confuses the need for more intensive services with more restrictive placements [6]. Given LRE has been one of the founding principles of IDEA since its passage in 1975, one might expect that students with ESN have been experiencing increased access to general education classrooms. Conversely, inclusion rates for students with ESN continue to remain dismal more than 45 years later. Additionally, it is important to note that not all students receiving special education services under the categories of autism, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, or deaf blindness have ESN. For example, many students with autism may be performing on or above grade level. Therefore, when examining national data representing these students' placements in the LRE (i.e., the general education classroom), considerations should be given to the fact that true percentage of students with ESN served in inclusive classrooms is likely less than what is reported [4].

Access to the general curriculum was codified in the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA. Prior to this date, the research regarding academic content instruction for students with ESN was extremely limited [7]. The intention of this provision was to expand the opportunities for students with disabilities to engage with general education content, ideally within general education classrooms. Unfortunately, these types of opportunities have not been actualized for students with ESN [8], likely due to a lack of clarity that allows for wide interpretation within the general curriculum provision [6]. The 1997 reauthorization of IDEA also introduced the ability for states to develop alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards. As a result of this, many states developed standards which were parallel to the state's content standards but reduced in depth, breadth, and complexity. With the development of the alternate standards, the unintended consequence promoted the idea that general education content standards, the targeted content in general education classrooms, were not appropriate for students with ESN [6].

Current Shape

Meaningful access and participation within inclusive settings has been shown to improve outcomes for students with ESN related to academics, behavior, communication, social skills, peer relationships, adaptive skills, and post-school outcomes [9,10]. However, the placement of students with ESN in general education settings still lags behind that of students with less complex support needs, leading to disproportionately higher rates of placement in separate classrooms and schools [2]. Wakeman et al. [11] confirmed that, particularly in separate school placements, there has not been a significant change in placement for students with ESN since 2012 even as academic expectations have become more rigorous.

In 2018, 6,315,228 students ages 6-21 received special education services under IDEA (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], [12]). Of those, 1,215,683 (19.2%) were eligible for special education under the classifications of autism, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, or deaf blindness. A high percentage of these students continue to be educated in a self-contained setting (i.e., included in the general education classroom for less than 40% of the day; USDOE, 2021; see Table 1). This is concerning as research has shown that students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms have better academic, behavioral, and social outcomes [9].

Table 1: Percentage of students in 2018 with autism, deaf-blindness, intellectual disability, and multiple disabilities per educational placement.

	Fully Included (>80%)	Resource Setting (40-79%)	Self-Contained Setting (<40%)	Other Environments*
Autism	39.70%	18.40%	33.40%	8.50%
Deaf-Blind	25.70%	12.80%	35.60%	25.90%
Intellectual Disability	17.40%	27.20%	48.60%	6.80%
Multiple Disabilities	14.30%	17.60%	44.80%	23.30%
All 4 categories	29.30%	21.40%	39.90%	9.50%
Note: Other environments include placement in separate schools, residential facilities, homebound/hospital placement, correctional facilities, or parentally placed in private schools.				

Possible Future

Historically, many educational policies and practices have been negatively influenced by the dominant cultural views of race and ability, which have universally contributed to inequitable educational systems and outcomes for many students, including students with disabilities [13]. For students with ESN, access to inclusive education has been and continues to be a casualty of inequitable systems. Due to these persistent inequitable systems, inclusive education requires intentional work to build and sustain it. States, districts, schools, and classrooms must take a fundamental systems approach with present and supportive leadership at each level of the system. In addition, inclusive education requires not only major changes in what many educators and families do and put into practice, but also a unifying belief that underlines and guides all of the work within a state, district, or school.

But belief is not enough. Even when everyone can agree that inclusion is important, challenges to implementation still persist. One confounding issue is that people define inclusion differently. Dr. Kristi Liu, Principal Investigator and Director of the TIES Center, a national technical assistance center on inclusive practices and policies for students with ESN, explains the issue with competing definitions of inclusion. "We discovered that while everyone claims to prioritize inclusion, people define it in a different way" (K. Liu, personal communication, June 17, 2021) [14]. To create a unified perspective, the Center created a set of core values, designed to support and promote inclusive education pertaining to each and every student, including students with ESN. "These values are imperative for everyone to reflect upon at a time when ideals regarding equity are constantly evolving and changing" (K. Liu, personal communication, June 17, 2021).

Core Value #1: Each and every student is valued and contributes to their school community and general education classrooms.

Equitable practices for all students regardless of race, gender, sexuality, religion, socio-economic status, or ability are essential components of an inclusive school. Schooling practices should reflect that each and every student is equally capable of contributing and building meaningful relationships in the school community. Exclusionary practices and the implicit biases sustaining them must be replaced with practices and beliefs that offer an expanded view of what it means to be a valued contributing member of society.

Core Value #2: Each and every student deserves meaningful and sustained access to the general education curriculum in general education classrooms.

All students have the right to a high-quality and inclusive educational experience. Ideally, districts and schools should assign students to general education classrooms in their neighborhood schools or school of choice. With the right kind of support, each and every student can benefit academically, socially, and emotionally.

Core Value #3: Each and every student is a capable learner deserving of instruction that reflects high expectations and assures learning.

Instructional teams design goals, instruction, curriculum, and learning environments supported by best practices to reduce barriers and provide flexible options that support learning. Educators must anticipate and support student success to meaningfully achieve challenging academic, social, emotional, communication, and other essential skills.

Core Value #4: Inclusive education requires ongoing and robust collaboration.

Inclusive education is a paradigm shift. It requires the shared engagement and combined skills of many people--general education teachers, special education teachers, specialized support personnel such as related service providers and technology specialists, paraprofessionals, district and school leaders, families, and students. When stakeholders engage in collaborative planning, delivery, and assessment of inclusive education, success is more likely.

Core Value #5: Leadership at the district level that keeps a sustained and systemic focus on teaching and learning is central to improving the outcomes for each and every student.

Drawing from an evidence-based leadership practice, this value supports districts to develop inclusive education by prioritizing the teaching and learning of each and every student. The school district is an essential unit of change. It has the responsibility for establishing and maintaining the focus on and coherence of instruction. This focus requires monitoring, evaluating, and refining the work to improve inclusive educational practices in each school and classroom, district wide.

Core Value #6: State and district support is needed to sustain a culture of inclusion in schools.

Sustaining a culture of inclusion in schools requires a long-term, ongoing commitment and support by the state and districts. Inclusive and equitable education has never been the norm in American schooling. Continuous support from the state and districts over many years is needed for policies and practices to reject the cultural value of separateness and promote the cultural value of inclusiveness.

Core Value #7: Effective inclusive environments are maintained through continuous improvement cycles focusing on what works and what needs to be adjusted.

Continual evaluation supports improvement of critical strategies for doing and sustaining what works-at the state, district, school, classroom, student, and family level. Ongoing job embedded professional development and learning in districts and schools is required for the implementation of effective inclusive environments.

Conclusion

As the status quo is being challenged and school reform continues to progress, Dr. Liu's call for inclusion resonates with the demand for equity for all students. Inclusive education is no small feat and now as schools are re-establishing effective systems, it might be the perfect time to enact change to support each and every student in experiencing true belonging in their schools and accessing the general curriculum in meaningful ways in all classrooms. However, there are a variety of factors that could influence LRE decisions for IEP teams. Inconsistencies in state infrastructures often restrict or inflate the reporting of students by placements. For example, each state has their own structure of how educational units are defined, which can influence factors such as funding and resources resulting in more segregated options for students with disabilities. Variability in state or district policy, as well as locale of schools (i.e., city, suburb, town, rural) can influence financial resources, which in turn may incentivize the placement of students in more restrictive settings. As a result, separate schools may have more direct access to related services and supports at a centralized location, which could influence IEP team decisions. Additionally, the availability of charter schools could also impact decisions regarding LRE for students with ESN. For example, parents of children with ESN may choose a charter school specifically designed to serve this population of students, however this in turn reduces the opportunity for these students to engage with their same-age peers without disabilities. As a result, these students may be less prepared for post-school success in inclusive environments such as the community or workplace [10].

Providing meaningful access to the curriculum in a student's LRE are critical principles of IDEA (2004); however, there has been limited progress toward the implementation of these principles for students with ESN. Clear expectations and an explicit direction for how to go beyond access to the general curriculum and promote progress in general education contexts is essential. One way to do this is the use of one set of academic standards for all students, with adaptations made to instruction rather than modifications to content. The core values proposed within this article can be a catalyst in reimagining how IDEA can promote the equitable education of every student. In order to create systematic and sustainable changes in school reform that facilitate equitable access of supports and services in general education settings for students with disabilities, educators and families must move beyond a belief in inclusion to taking a more actionable stance regarding policy, practice, and principles guided by core values that are designed to support and promote inclusive education for each and every student.

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