



A meta-analysis of the effects of placement on academic and social skill outcome measures of students with disabilities



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ABSTRACT

This study involved an investigation of differences between outcome measures of students with disabilities placed in more integrated settings with those of students placed in less integrated settings. A meta-analysis was conducted using the findings from 24 studies published in peer-reviewed journals from 1980 through 2013. Results from the analyses suggest that there were significant differences ($p < 0.0001$) between placement settings with the majority of students with disabilities in more integrated settings outperforming those in less integrated settings on both academic and social outcome measures. Overall these findings, combined with those from two prior meta-analytic studies, provide evidence spanning over 80 years suggesting separate settings are not as beneficial as are more integrated settings. Implications related to practice and policy, as well as avenues for future study, are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Regulations (IDEA, 2006) mandate that, “To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are nondisabled” (34 C.F.R. § 300.114 [a] [2] [i]), and that, “Special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily” (34 C.F.R. § 300.114 [a] [2] [ii]). But not all children with disabilities receive their education in the same classrooms or settings as their peers without disabilities. For example, consider 2012 data reported by the U.S. Department of Education (2014) on individuals who received services under Part B of IDEA: (a) 23.6% of the children ages three through five were educated in a separate class; (b) 13.8% of students ages six through twenty-one received special education and related services less than 40% of the time in regular education classrooms; and (c) just 13.1% of individuals identified as having multiple disabilities and 17.1% of individuals identified as having intellectual disabilities received special education and related services in the regular classroom for more than 80% of the

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day. Clearly there are differences between the amounts of time children with disabilities are educated in the general education setting.

1.1. Differences in placement settings

The prevalent practice of placing some students in general education settings and others in more restrictive separate settings begs the question of efficacy. Are students learning in both settings and are there differences favoring one setting over the other? There have been numerous articles going back many decades arguing for the preference for one type of placement over the other (e.g., Hyatt & Filler, 2011; Sailor et al., 1989; Sindelar & Deno, 1978; Taylor, 1988; Zigmond & Baker, 1996; Zigmond, Kloo, & Volonino, 2009), but far fewer actual data-based comparisons of relative gains made in inclusive versus more restrictive settings have been published in peer-reviewed journals (Wang & Baker, 1985–1986; Zigmond, 2003). Even fewer, Carlberg and Kavale (1980) and Wang and Baker (1985–1986), have attempted a statistical summary analysis of those studies.

1.2. Meta-analysis

A meta-analysis is a statistical procedure that can be used to quantitatively synthesize findings reported across a group of studies (Borenstein, Hedges, Higgins, & Rothstein, 2009; Lipsey & Wilson, 2001). At the very heart of meta-analyses are the calculations of effect sizes from individual studies that are, "... a way of quantifying the size of the difference between two groups" (Coe, 2002, p. 1). The individual effect sizes (Cohen's *d* or Hedges' *g*) are then used to calculate a summary effect, which is essentially an, "... estimate of the mean of these effects" (Borenstein et al., 2009, p. 78).

1.3. Prior analyses

Carlberg and Kavale (1980) performed a meta-analysis to summarize findings from 50 research studies from 1932 into the 1970s. These researchers found that regardless of the types of measures (academic, social, or other) used to assess student performance, placement in the regular classroom led to improved outcomes over placement in the special class environment. This was especially true for students who had IQs that were below average. However, when the researchers separated these results by disability type, they found that the ideal placement setting for students who were diagnosed as having a learning disability, behavioral disorder, or emotional disturbance was the special classroom.

Wang and Baker (1985–1986) performed a meta-analysis of the findings published in journal articles from 1975 through spring of 1984. Once again the finding was that students with disabilities who received instruction in mainstreamed settings outperformed those who received instruction in non-mainstreamed settings. They found no significant differences between overall effect sizes after factoring in such other variables as methodology used, participant grade level, diagnosed disability and level of mainstreaming. They concluded that placement setting seemed to be the variable that most influenced results.

1.4. Purpose

Though it has been argued that determining the differences between placement settings is not an appropriate question to ask (Zigmond, 2003) the fact remains that there are a large number of children with disabilities who continue to receive instruction in settings that limit access to, or simply do not include, their peers without disabilities. The continued prevalent reality of separate settings demands that questions of relative efficacy continue to be asked and variables associated with any differences be examined. Moreover, instructional strategies validated by empirical studies of comparative efficacy have increasingly been applied in both integrated and segregated settings (see Browder, Spooner, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Harris, & Wakeman, 2008; Spooner, Knight, Browder, & Smith, 2012) and so, the differences once noted may no longer be as apparent. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to perform a meta-analysis of findings from peer-reviewed journal articles published between the years of 1980 through 2013 to answer the question: Are there differences between placement of students with disabilities (preschool to high school) in more integrated settings versus placement in less integrated settings using assessments that measure academic and social outcomes reported in the most recent series of studies?

2. Method

2.1. Software used

The software programs EndNote Version 6 for Macintosh OS, Microsoft Excel 2011 for Macintosh OS, and Comprehensive Meta-Analysis Version 2 for Windows 8 were used in this study. EndNote Version 6 was used to create and house the literature database. Excel was used to perform the meta-analytic calculations. Comprehensive Meta-Analysis Version 2 was used to verify calculations and to generate forest plot graphs.

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