Postschool Outcomes of Students with Disabilities Across Inclusive and Traditional Settings

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ABSTRACT

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This study looked at four high schools in four different school districts. Two of the high schools selected had a history and a reputation of including a full range of students with disabilities in the general education classes; and two high schools selected provided a more traditional approach to special education services where students spending the majority of their instructional time in resource rooms and/or self-contained classrooms. The study found that students from inclusive settings had more access to the general education curriculum, more time in inclusive settings across grade levels, had higher expectations, and more access to extra-curricular activities that resulted in higher rates for passing the state proficiency test, higher graduation rates and improved postschool outcomes.
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The ultimate goal of education is to prepare students to fully participate in the adult world by working and contributing to their community. Over the past decade or more, changes in the nation’s labor market have increased the importance of students leaving school with the skills necessary to enter the workforce or obtain a postsecondary education in order to be able to better compete in the job market.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 has led to higher academic standards for all students, including students with disabilities. This legislation has influenced state testing and graduation policies for all students. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 requires students with disabilities to have access to the general education curriculum and participate in state and district assessments. There is more of a focus on educational performance and aligning special education services with the larger national school improvement efforts.

For youth with disabilities, both these pieces of legislations support the need for effective secondary education and transition planning during the high school years to better prepare students to graduate, and for post-secondary education and careers. Additionally, access to, involvement in, and progress toward the general education curriculum are required regardless of the setting. In order to increase graduation rates and meet the requirements set forth by IDEA and NCLB, students with disabilities need to meet the rigorous standards set forth by states as well as have opportunities for evidence-based inclusive and transition practices.
Since all students must be taught the skills and knowledge needed to successfully enter the workforce and/or postsecondary education settings, the conceptual framework of this study was based on the categories of transitional practices outlined by Kohler (1996), and the challenge of equity and excellence proposed by the microeconomic theory of “instructional tolerance” (Gerber, 1988; Gerber & Semmel, 1984).

For the last decade or more, research findings and demonstration projects have shown effective transition practices that lead to improved postschool outcomes (Green & Kochhar-Bryan, 2003). Kohler (1996) best demonstrated these findings through the Taxonomy for Transition Programming. This model is organized into five categories: a) student-focused planning, b) student development, c) family involvement, d) interagency collaboration, and e) program structure. Within each of these categories, some of the most effective and promising transition practices include: 1). active student involvement in the transition planning process (Allen, Smith, Test, Flowers, & Wood, 2001; Test, Mason, Hughes, Konrad, Neale, & Wood, 2004; Thoma, Rogan, & Baker, 2001), 2). instruction in self-advocacy and self-determination (Cross, Cooke, Wood, & Test, 1999; German, Martin, Marshall, & Sale, 2000; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998), 3). student participation in the general education curriculum and life skills curriculum (Brolin, 1997; Wagner et al., 2003; Sands, Basett, Lehman, & Spencer, 1998); 4). attention to multicultural issues in transition (Geenan, Powers, Lopez-Vasquez, & Bersani, 2003), 5). family involvement (Green, 1996; Miner & Bates, 1997); and 6). interagency collaboration (Aspel, Bettis, Quinn, Test, & Wood, 1999).

Instructional tolerance theory (Gerber, 1988; Gerber & Semmel, 1984) allows for a conceptualization of mild disabilities and school success as a contextual phenomenon
that is related to the quality of the school environment. Instructional tolerance theory reflects the constraints placed on teachers such as: the number of students, heterogeneity of student ability, amount of instructional time, teacher to staff ratio, level of expertise, and access to additional resources. Given a finite amount of time, resources, and expertise, teachers and administrators are required to make decisions about where to place instructional effort and resources. The consequences of these decisions are either a decrease in within-class variance, particularly by raising the ability of students falling below teachers’ range of instructional tolerance, or to increase overall class achievement by focusing instruction on students who will most likely make sizable gains in achievement. That is, to focus instructional effort on the near average, average, and above average students. Schools, particularly at the secondary level, have traditionally tended to create homogeneous groups of children. Students are divided by age, ability level, and those considered within the “normal” range of ability and those that are exceptional. Children with learning or behavior problems are delegated to those professionals with specialized skills and more resources to meet their needs. Teachers who refer students for special education services are saying, essentially, that these students are falling outside of their range of instructional tolerance, given their skills and the instructional context.

Framed by instructional tolerance theory, postschool outcomes for students with mild disabilities can be used as indicators of the changing nature of school environments and their impact on students with special needs. Dropout rates, performance on statewide assessments, degree of inclusion in general education courses, referrals to special education, the nature of the programming for students with mild disabilities,
absenteeism, disciplinary actions, and years taken to graduate are all indicators of the success of the school environment. Instructional tolerance theory provides a framework that reflects the complex relationship between general and special education practices and student achievement.

A growing body of literature shows the positive effects of inclusive education for students with and without disabilities in the areas of academic and social relationships (Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004; Waldron & Cole, 2000; Waldron, & McLeskey, 1998). Challenges of providing inclusive education at the secondary level when compared to elementary schools have caused inclusive secondary programs to develop more slowly. These challenges include: complex curricular material, large gaps between skill level and classroom demands, broader curricular content, teachers trained as content specialists, issues of adolescence, greater pressure for accountability, and teacher autonomy (Cole & McLeskey, 1997). Tomlinson (1999) states that the challenge with mixed ability groups is trying to meet the standards of both equity and excellence. She recommends schools invest in differentiated teaching models and training for transfer.

Burke, Hagan, & Grossen (1998) describe six features of instruction that efficiently accommodate and accelerate learning of a diverse range of students in the general education classroom. These features are: organizing instruction around big ideas, using conspicuous strategies, providing students with background knowledge, using mediated scaffolding, judiciously planning and organizing reviews, and using strategy integration. Vergason & Anderegg (1991) describe educational practices that have withstood the test of time and research. These practices include: peer tutoring, direct instruction,
cooperative learning, self-instructional training, curriculum-based measurement, instructional alignment and learning strategies.

The National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine, & Marder, 2003) showed a dramatic increase in students with disabilities taking more challenging courses with more than one-fourth of the students take all their courses in general education classes. Two-thirds of the students with disabilities were instructed in both general and special education classes; however, the involvement of students with disabilities in general education courses is somewhat less for students in the later high school years.

Although progress is being made, concerns continue about the wide-spread implementation of best practices in secondary education and transitions. Baer and his colleagues (2003) found that many successful secondary and transition practices have not been widely adopted at the local school level. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between educational practices and postschool outcomes in two settings, inclusive practices and traditional practices at a local level. In order to understand the relationships, this project has three purposes. First, to compare how the postschool outcomes for students who have spent most or all of their time in an inclusive setting (e.g., English, Math, Social Studies, Science, and/or Vocational) compare to those who spent most or all of their time in more traditional settings such as resource rooms or self-contained classes. Second, to assess the comprehensive nature of transition services, a modified Taxonomy for Transition Programming (Kohler, 1996) was used to structure the survey instruments. Each cluster within four (student-focused planning, student development, interagency collaboration, and program
structure) of the five taxonomy categories and their respective practice statements were identified as program components addressed in the study. Third, to determine the differences between the classroom contexts and teaching practices in the two, inclusive vs. traditional, settings.

Methodology

Participants and Settings

Four high schools, each within four different districts, participated in the study. Two of the high schools selected had a history and a reputation of including a full range of students with disabilities in the general education classes; and two high schools selected provided a more traditional approach to special education services defined as students spending the majority of their instructional time in resource rooms and/or self-contained classrooms. For the purpose of this study, inclusive settings were defined as students spending all or the majority of their time in general education classes of English, Math, Social Studies, Science and/or Vocational Classes.

These school districts were selected to reflect similarity in demographics that could be used for comparisons (See Table 1 for school demographics). After receiving the support of the school administrators, each school identified graduating seniors or students in their last year of school with mild disabilities to participate. Consent forms were obtained from the students or guardian for a total of 65 students. Approximately 78% of the total possible students with mild disabilities leaving from all 4 high schools participated in the study. See Table 2 for student demographics.
Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected through structured interviews and surveys, document analysis, a postschool follow-up survey and classroom observations of teacher practices. Triangulation or the “cross-checking of data collected to assure the accuracy of interpretation” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998) was used to determine emerging themes, differences and similarities among surveys and observations. Written transition plan goals were compared with information gathered through interviews and observations to determine whether written goals matched student curriculum and transition activities.

The research team members responsible for the structured interviews and document analysis had an average of 9 years in the field of transition services and regularly provided training and technical assistance with schools to improve transition outcomes. The research team member who was responsible for observation of classroom practices had over 32 years as an educator; 22 of those years as an administrator responsible for teacher evaluations.

Document review

Relevant documents were reviewed using a template to chart areas including each student’s high school transcripts and experiences; transition IEPs; assessment forms used to develop the transition IEP documents; the statewide proficiency test results and the number of times taking the statewide test; student’s past documents on educational experiences (e.g., past IEPs, past academic transcripts and experiences, grade cards); and percentage of time spent in inclusive environments during elementary, middle and high school.
Chi-square analysis was used to determine the relationships between features of the IEP and the type of setting. In addition, the reviewer took field notes and reported other information such as the format of the IEP, notations of extra curricular activities or other unique information. The research team reviewed the field notes and noted emerging themes. Each of the emerging themes was examined in its relation to the quantitative analysis in those areas.

Using the same template, a second observer conducted a review of 25% of the documents or files. Interobserver agreement was 98% for all documents.

Structured surveys

Structured surveys (LeCompte & Priessle, 1993) were conducted with all students and various stakeholders. The instruments were adapted from Koher (2000) and were similar but tailored for the respective respondents and used to collect information on the extent to which transition practices were being implemented. All respondents rated the frequency with which each transition practice statement occurs within their own work using a Likert scale from 1 to 4; where 4 indicated the activities where fully implemented; 3 indicated the activities are in development and have been partially implemented; 2 indicated activities are in development, but have not yet been implemented; and 1 indicated activities have not been developed nor implemented.

Because of the lower number of respondents for the school personnel and interagency collaboration surveys, a chi-square analysis was conducted only on student surveys to determine relationships between responses to questions on current and future activities and the type of educational setting. Field notes were used to examine emerging themes and their relation to the quantitative analysis in those areas.
Student Surveys. The 36 student-focused planning questions focused on IEP development, student participation, planning strategies and future plans. Each student completed the survey in a quiet area (e.g., library) while a data collection person was present reading the questions to avoid reading difficulties, to ensure comprehension and the necessary accommodations. Students responded using a Likert-scale from 1 to 4; where 4 indicated activities always occurred; 3 indicated usually occurred; 2 indicated sometimes occurred; and 1 indicated never occurred.

Reliability data was gathered on 10% of the interviews where a second observer used a checklist for instructions as well as recorded the student’s responses. Procedural reliability was 100% for all interviews.

School personnel. School personnel (e.g., transition coordinator, special education teachers, supervisors) responded to questions similar to those asked of the students with additional questions focusing on student development activities, program structure and interagency collaboration clusters. This 53 question-instrument was adapted from the self-assessment instrument developed by Kohler (2000), focusing on planning strategies, student participation in the planning process, life skills instruction, accommodations and support, career and vocational curricula, vocational assessment, and structured work and career experiences.

Program structure questions focused on the program’s philosophy, policy, strategic planning, evaluation, resource allocation and human resource development. Finally, questions focused on interagency collaboration with an emphasis on collaborative work and service delivery.
Community Agencies. Vocational rehabilitation counselors, higher education personnel and other agency personnel completed a 35-question survey, also adapted from Kohler (2000) with a focus on individual IEP meetings, coordination procedures, interagency collaboration, interagency coordinating body (council) procedures and activities, shared resources, and organizational planning.

Exit and Postschool Follow-up Survey. Postschool outcome data was collected on each of the student participants at their exit from school and 18 months after graduation to determine postschool services and outcomes such as attending postsecondary education or employment outcomes (e.g., wages, hours, benefits), and living arrangements after leaving school. Each exit survey was completed in-person by school personnel while the follow-up survey was conducted by a research team member during a telephone interview.

Classroom Observations

Teachers with the majority of students participating in the study in their classes were observed at least 3 different times in each setting. Observations occurred during curriculum content-area times – e.g. English, Economics, Life Sciences, Social Studies by an independent observer naïve to the purpose of the study. Observations of teacher practices occurred by having the observer respond to 37 questions or areas covering planning and assessment, motivation, human relations and communication, instructional strategies, expectations and classroom management.

A chi-square analysis was used to determine the relationships between features of the educational practices and type of setting. During classroom observations, field notes
were taken by the observer and recorded on the observation form. In addition, notes or reflections were added by the observer at the end of each classroom observation.

Results

Document analysis

Each student’s transition component of the IEP was reviewed to determine evidence of goals and activities. As shown in Table 3 students from inclusive schools: tended to have more of a vision for higher education ($x^2 = 14.44, p<.01$), had more focus of the transition component at age 14 on moving forward for a diploma or exploring college preparation classes ($x^2 = 6.41, p<.05$), and had more detailed plans with specific responsibilities for the student and community agencies ($x^2 = 34.5, p<.01$). Evidence of goals for self-determination differed across settings where the majority of students (88%) in inclusive schools reported evidence of self-determination goals on their IEPs ($x^2 = 26.31, p<.01$) while only 24% for students in traditional settings. Students from inclusive schools were also more likely to pass the state graduation qualifying exam with 1 to 2 attempts (73%) compared to students from traditional services requiring 3 to 4 attempts (72%).

Themes emerged from the field notes showing that inclusive schools had a variety of activities on the IEP’s such as varsity sports, recreational activities, volunteer work, church, and employment whereas traditional schools indicated less involvement in general education courses and less general education teacher’s involvement in the responsibility for the student success. Neither inclusive or traditional settings had career or vocational assessments noted on their IEPs.
Table 4 shows the time students spent in general education classroom over their school experiences. The data showed that 75% of students in the inclusive schools spent 80%-100% of their time in the general education settings while in elementary school and gradually increased through high school compared to traditional settings where the amount of time decreased.

Student Surveys

Student feedback about their high school experience did not reveal much contrast around the issue of planning strategies (actively participating in IEP meeting, involved in decision-making, believed their voices were heard) between the two type of school settings except that students from traditional settings were more likely to know who their team leader was ($x^2 = 8.14$, $p<.05$). Students from inclusive schools were more likely to know about specific college information such as college disability services and financial aid ($x^2 = 4.44$, $p<.05$) whereas students from traditional settings were more likely to have participated in work experiences ($x^2 = 7.28$, $p<.01$). Students from both type of settings were asked about their interests and preferences; however, neither felt they directed the planning decisions. Table 5 shows responses of “always” based on their high school experience.

Two themes emerged from the field notes regarding the traditional schools: 1). numerous students took classes that had openings verses classes they really wanted to take, and 2). because most of the homeroom classes were used for the guidance counselors to work with students about college, many special education students were allowed to miss homeroom.

Transition Practices
Results from the transition practices survey from teachers and transition personnel indicated that, except for students attending their own case conference, neither setting showed that the transition practices were fully implemented. Perspectives from school personnel indicated that both settings tended to fare well in the areas of; ensuring the number of students were invited to and attended their IEP meetings (100%); ensuring that students’ voices were heard (86% vs. 77%); documented interests and preferences (88% vs. 92%); and complying with federal guidelines (100% vs. 100%). Inclusive settings were more likely to acknowledge ethnic and cultural perspectives (62% vs. 46%); support participation in general education classes (100% vs. 92%); and ensure access to post-secondary opportunities and options (78% vs. 69%). Traditional settings were more likely to have students participating in job shadowing or work study (85% vs. 44%); offer career counseling (85% vs. 56%); infuse career or vocational curriculum throughout the program (67% vs. 11%); and provide accommodations for limited English (75% vs. 44%). Practices such as social skills training, self-determination training, self-advocacy skill training, understanding disability training and independent living skills were rated as activities only partially implemented or not yet developed by both schools.

Specific themes emerged from the inclusive schools included: the need to have better communication with junior high; the need to continue to have high school teachers attend junior high IEPs to improve transition and communication; and informal training on self-determination and self-advocacy skills. Traditional settings showed a greater involvement with Vocational Rehabilitation Services.
Interagency collaboration. Individuals responding to the interagency collaboration survey included Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors, school transition personnel, post-secondary institution disability services personnel, and community agencies. Only the inclusive settings had interagency transition councils. Inclusive settings ended to have more structure and procedures in place to work with community agencies. Neither settings shared funding and resources or had joint trainings and other staff development activities with community agencies. Table 6 shows responses of the activities that were fully implemented.

Classroom Observations

Data was collected from 17 classes in the inclusive schools and 18 classes in the traditional schools. The number of students ranged from 12-23 in the inclusive classrooms and 3 to 17 in traditional classrooms. Inclusive classrooms often had co-teachers (general and special) who worked together with students.

With respect to developing and presenting lessons in a clear and logical manner, all inclusive classrooms (100.0%) “had clear defined objectives based on curriculum standards and student needs”, as compared to only 61% of the traditional classrooms ($\chi^2=8.26$, $p < .01$).

There was similarity between the two settings in “presenting material in a sequential order”, creating expectations for all students to participate, demonstrating understanding and establishing appropriate classroom rules and expectations (76.5% and 72.2%, respectively). The only difference was that almost all inclusive classrooms (94.1%) were observed to “demonstrate fairness, consistency, respect, empathy and firmness in the handling of students’ problems” as compared to 61.1% in traditional classrooms.
One major difference between the two settings pertains to the use of resources and technology that effectively support the lesson (e.g., use of projects, videos, speakers, research on specific topics). These practices were observed in all of the inclusive classrooms (100%), but only in 67% of the traditional classrooms. This difference was found to be statistically significant ($x^2=6.84, p <.01$).

The two classroom settings also differed with respect to whether they “provide student centered activities” ($x^2=6.18, p < .05$). Student centered activities were observed in all traditional classrooms (100%) and in 70% of inclusive classrooms. Another difference emerged for “monitoring students by moving among them.” ($x^2=4.25, p < .01$). The traditional settings were twice as likely as the inclusive settings to engage in this practice (64.7% and 29.4%, respectively).

The data also revealed that the two classroom settings operate very differently with respect to assessment that “sets performance standards for students based upon curricular proficiencies and objectives” ($x^2=9.95, p < .01$). In 80% of the inclusive classrooms this assessment practice was observed, only 20% of the traditional classrooms was observed.

Finally, the assessment statement “evaluates learner progress on a continuous basis” was rated very differently for the two classroom settings ($x^2=4.43, p < .01$) where 60% of inclusive classrooms and only about 17% of traditional classrooms report having engaged in this practice. Inclusive classrooms were more likely to use both formal and informal evaluation methods (e.g., portfolios, varied forms of products to demonstrate knowledge).
The field notes were processed and reviewed by the research team. Four themes were identified related to classroom practices in the inclusive and traditional classrooms, providing greater description of the classroom practices in the two settings.

1. Curriculum and instruction. The inclusive classrooms had a greater variation in instructional practices. Various formats were used to present information, including the use of overheads, outlines, oral presentations with information presented visually, and through rephrasing. The teachers in these classrooms made connections between the content being taught and real life experiences, which helped students make meaning of the information. Reteaching was a common strategy used in the inclusive classrooms. The curriculum was tied to state standards, and the inclusive classrooms had higher expectations for students than did the traditional classrooms. Students in the inclusive classrooms had more opportunities to be engaged in class discussion, research projects, and activities that required critical thinking.

The traditional classrooms had little connection to state standards, and the lessons often consisted of worksheets or individual projects. There was not a wide range of instructional strategies used in these classrooms, with a heavy reliance on textbooks. There was very little differentiated instruction, with most students doing similar types of activities (workbook pages, working on chapter questions, reading aloud). Expectations were not clearly stated for many of the activities, and it appeared that the expectations for student performance was low.

2. Student participation. As noted earlier, the inclusive classrooms had students more engaged in classroom discussions or small group discussions. In addition, it was
observed that the teachers had a high level of enthusiasm during whole group instruction, solicited participation from all students.

The traditional classrooms were student centered; that is, students were more apt to be working at an individual pace or on work that had been individualized for the student (ex. individualized packet of work). During whole group instruction, it was not uncommon to see one or two students dominate the discussion.

3. Student-teacher interaction. Because the traditional classrooms had fewer students, and because these students, in some cases, had the teacher for more than one class or more than one year, teacher/student relationships were strong. Teachers knew the students well, and provided a great deal of individual attention and support to the students. In both settings, teachers showed a great deal of respect for their students and there appeared to be good rapport between students and teachers.

4. Classroom management. Classroom management was an issue in both settings. While both the traditional and inclusive settings used a great deal of praise and encouragement with students, a sense of solid classroom management techniques was lacking with students who decided to sleep, disengage, not follow simple rules, or disrupt others.

Exit Interview and 18-month Follow-up Survey.

An exit interview was conducted for 72% of the students in inclusive settings and 88% of students in traditional settings. The remainder of the students could not be reached due to scheduling conflicts or had dropped-out of school (3 from traditional schools). The purpose of the follow-up was to determine if the students were doing what they had planned to do while in high school and determine how well school prepared
them. Students from inclusive settings were more likely to graduate with a diploma; plan to go onto post-secondary institutions (higher education and/or vocational school); and believe their high school experiences prepared them for work or school (see Table 6). Vocational Rehabilitation was the primary community agency that both groups had a connection with or were receiving services.

The 18-month follow-up resulted in responses from 56% (18) of students from inclusive settings and 44% (14) of students from traditional settings as shown in Table 7. The remainder of the students could not be reached due to moving, wrong phone numbers or disconnected phones. The interviews were conducted with the students except for 3 interviews where the parents participated. Although the number of the responses were low, the 1-year follow-up confirmed a higher number of students from inclusive settings were in college (72%) compared to those who were in traditional schools (29%). Fifty percent of students who attended traditional settings were unemployed.

Discussion

The results of this study were triangulated to determine emerging themes, distinctions and similarities among the quantitative and qualitative data. The student interviews, surveys, field notes, and observations validated a number of overarching findings of this study. The results support the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (Wagner, et al., 2003) showing more students with mild disabilities accessing general education courses, taking more of their courses in the general education setting, and classroom practices such as whole-class instruction.
Overall, inclusive settings had stronger postschool outcomes for students with mild disabilities. Based on the data, there could be a number of possible reasons for these results. First, systems within inclusive settings were more unified; they had greater collaboration among special and general educators; they worked from a presumption that students should be educated together, and they had high standards and outcomes for all students. Special education in the inclusive settings was not viewed as being separate from the rest of the school. Inclusive settings seem to view inclusion as a process and not an event, infused throughout the school for all students.

The document reviews, student interviews, and follow-up surveys indicated a greater vision, higher expectations, and increased opportunities for students to choose to go onto higher education. Students were provided opportunities that instilled a belief that indeed, higher education was possible. They were involved in extracurricular activities, were successful at meeting the general education requirements, heard the consistent message from adults that post secondary education was possible and received necessary college information. Additionally, students in inclusive settings had greater ownership in their program and greater choices in courses, thus providing them with greater empowerment over their own post school career. Their involvement in extra curricular activities outside the academic arena provided a greater sense of belonging to the school.

One very interesting finding from this study is the fact that students in inclusive settings had a greater amount of time in general education classrooms from elementary through middle school to high school, with time in general education increasing through the students twelve years of school. Having greater access to the general education
curriculum over a longer period of time indicates that a district approach to inclusionary practices is as important as time spent in general education classes throughout the years, which may impact post-secondary outcomes.

Classroom practices in inclusive setting had clearly defined instructional objectives which related to state standards. Because instruction was related to state standards, the curriculum was richer and more rigorous, resulting in students from inclusive settings passing the state proficiency test in 1-2 attempts rather than 3-4 attempts from students in traditional settings (73% and 72% respectively). General education teachers are trained as content specialist, therefore their knowledge-base of the curriculum is broader, bringing more richness to the curriculum. General education teachers are also more proficient in understanding and applying state standards in their content areas; standards that ultimately are addressed in the state assessment.

Teachers in traditional settings seemed to know their students better and implemented more student-centered activities. This may be due to the smaller class size and the familiarity of a teacher having the same students for multiple classes and over multiple years.

Although we believe the results from this study support inclusive school settings and the impact on postschool outcomes, we also acknowledge our disappointment in the data around self-determination and self-advocacy training, life skills, and use of vocational assessment to aid in transition planning. While inclusive settings were more likely to have goals for self-determination on the IEPs, school personnel felt this was an area in need of improvement.
Limitations of the Study

The results of this study are limited by our sampling method, length of time for classroom observations and length of time following-up with students. The schools, whether inclusive or traditional, may not be a representative sample of the schools across the state, making it difficult to draw conclusive inferences about the results. Future research should include participation from a larger number of students, high schools and across a larger region.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

The accountability for all students with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 legislation has shifted the discussion from whether we should provide inclusive education to how to develop quality inclusive programs for all students. The results of this study indicate that all students must have access to high expectations, a rich and rigorous curriculum, and a variety of instructional strategies to enhance learning (Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004). These high expectations lead to better postschool outcomes.

This study has important implications for both preservice and inservice programs. Special education teachers are trained to work in small groups and to individualize instruction whereas general educators are taught to teach content and large group instruction. In this study, general education teachers were teaching to a broader range of students, requiring a greater variety of teaching strategies. Both general and special educators will need more instruction and support in co-teaching, collaboration, differentiated instruction, varied teaching strategies including use of technology to better utilize each others’ skills for the good of all students. This would require restructuring teacher education programs to ensure that students in general education programs
receive adequate coursework in the knowledge base and pedagogy necessary to teach students with disabilities. Likewise, students in special education degree programs must gain the skills to collaborate with their general education peers, a knowledge base of the content standards and an understanding of the essential components of inclusive schools. If schools are going to continue to be accountable, raise expectations, and meet the needs of all students, administrators will need a greater understanding of the leadership skills necessary for inclusive and differentiating secondary schools (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000).

As schools continue to move to a more unified system of services for all students, transition planning and practices can’t be done in isolation of the larger school activities. While students with disabilities focus on transition plans, typical students focus on graduation plans. Transition plans are initiated and supported by special educators and graduation plans are initiated and supported by guidance counselors (Jorgenson, 1998). Transition planning and activities should supplement typical high school planning activities, not supplant them. This study showed how students in the inclusive settings were more involved in typical high school experiences such as general education classes, extracurricular activities, and college and work planning. This study also highlighted that teachers in the traditional settings knew their students better, most likely because of class size and greater opportunities to connect personally with students. We strongly support the need for all students to have a more personalized high school experience. The recent focus on student advisories and smaller learning communities as a part of high school restructuring can provide a more student centered approach to high schools. (Breaking Rank II, 2004)
If schools are to move to a more unified system of delivery, policies must ensure that schools and states provide the necessary resources and supports for quality inclusive education. Structures for greater personalization for students will require adequate time for professional development and planning, use of multiple assessments designed to improve student performance and the removal of disincentives that emerge from overregulation and unfunded mandates that hinder opportunities to build relationships between the students and teachers.

This study raises questions about the quality of inclusive secondary education programs and its impact on postschool outcomes. If high school reform efforts continue to move towards smaller learning communities and personalization of learning, there are a number of areas that need further investigation: 1) how is special education and inclusive education blended into the larger high school reform efforts; 2) since student involvement and connectedness are critical elements of the reform efforts, the need to infuse self-determination and self-advocacy training becomes essential for all students; and 3). there is a continued need to study classroom practices and its impact on student achievement.

Effective transition and postschool planning for high school students with disabilities continue to be a critical issue to improve postschool outcomes. Expectations from federal laws have placed pressure on educators, especially classroom teachers, to ensure success for all students. The information from this study will contribute to a growing body of research regarding effective teaching and transition practices within inclusive settings.
References


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