

# 1. *Inside the Classroom* by Jose Blackorby and Mary Wagner

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*The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB), the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997* (IDEA '97), and scores of state and local initiatives culminate nearly two decades of increasing emphasis on the improvement of American education. Schools and educators are now being held accountable for the adequate yearly progress (AYP) of all students, including those with disabilities. The success of these ambitious initiatives will depend on changes in many domains, including teacher preparation and training, assessment policies, standards and expectations, and funding. However, the classroom is where “the rubber meets the road.” What happens every school day in classrooms is what students experience directly and is the mechanism through which educational interventions are most likely to produce the desired changes in student accomplishments. Indeed, the current focus on the use of scientifically valid instructional methods underscores the importance of high-quality educational experiences in the classroom. Further, classroom practices may be more amenable to intervention than many other factors associated with academic achievement.

In an effort to characterize the classroom experiences of students with disabilities, this report focuses on language arts because of its central role in the educational programming for nearly all elementary and middle school students. However, the language arts classroom experiences of many students with disabilities are different in a fundamental way from those of their peers without disabilities. Some students with disabilities receive their language arts instruction in general education classrooms with those peers, whereas others are instructed in special education settings of various kinds (e.g., resource rooms, self-contained classrooms, individualized settings).

This report focuses especially on the differences between classroom experiences in general education settings and special education settings. Specifically, this document describes differences in seven aspects of the language arts classrooms and classroom practices of elementary and middle school students with disabilities for students who receive their primary language arts instruction in general education and special education settings:

- **Student characteristics.** IDEA '97 requires that students who receive special education services do so in the least restrictive environment appropriate to their individual needs. For some, that environment has been determined to be a general education classroom; for others, it is a special education setting. Yet little is known nationally about the disability-related and demographic characteristics of students in those different settings. Chapter 2 paints a portrait of the diversity of students with disabilities in the two instructional settings.

- **School program context.** Although the learning of language arts is central to the instructional program and fundamental skill set of students, language arts classrooms are potentially only one of several settings in the overall school programs of students with disabilities. To provide context for interpreting the experiences of students with disabilities in their language arts classes, Chapter 3 summarizes the mix of settings in those broader school programs.
- **Classroom context.** Instruction and student learning in schools usually take place in classrooms where students and teachers work together. The characteristics of those students and teachers influence the challenges the two face together, how they face them, and the resources they bring to dealing with the challenges. Chapter 4 presents information on the number of students and teachers in the classroom, the reading levels of peers in the class, and teacher qualifications in general and special education language arts settings.
- **Groupings and activities.** As they try to meet the needs of students in diverse classrooms, teachers make many decisions regarding how to organize instructional time. Chapter 5 addresses the use of whole-class, small-group, and individual instruction in teaching language arts. It also addresses general instructional activities (e.g., classroom discussion), as well as activities that focus directly on reading and language arts (e.g., oral reading, vocabulary instruction).
- **Supports for general education teachers.** General education is increasingly the preferred placement for students with disabilities. For inclusive placements to be successful, both teachers and students require support. Chapter 6 describes the types of information and supports that are provided to general education teachers who have students with disabilities in their language arts classes.
- **Student accommodations and supports.** To perform up to their ability, students with disabilities often require accommodations or modifications in the format and presentation of, or response to, instructional or assessment events. Chapter 7 describes the number and types of accommodations and supports that students receive in general and special education language arts settings.
- **Teachers' assessments of students' performance.** The evaluation of student progress is an essential part of the educational process, and the grades teachers choose to assign to students are a key metric for communicating that progress. In addition to evaluating academic progress, teachers also evaluate student behavior and administer discipline when it is considered necessary. Chapter 8 describes the importance teachers in general and special education settings place on a range of factors when they evaluate students' performance in language arts. In addition, the similarity between discipline practices applied to students with disabilities and other students in general education language arts classrooms is discussed.

- **Summary.** Chapter 9 provides a summary of the findings presented in the report.

## **An Overview of SEELS<sup>1</sup>**

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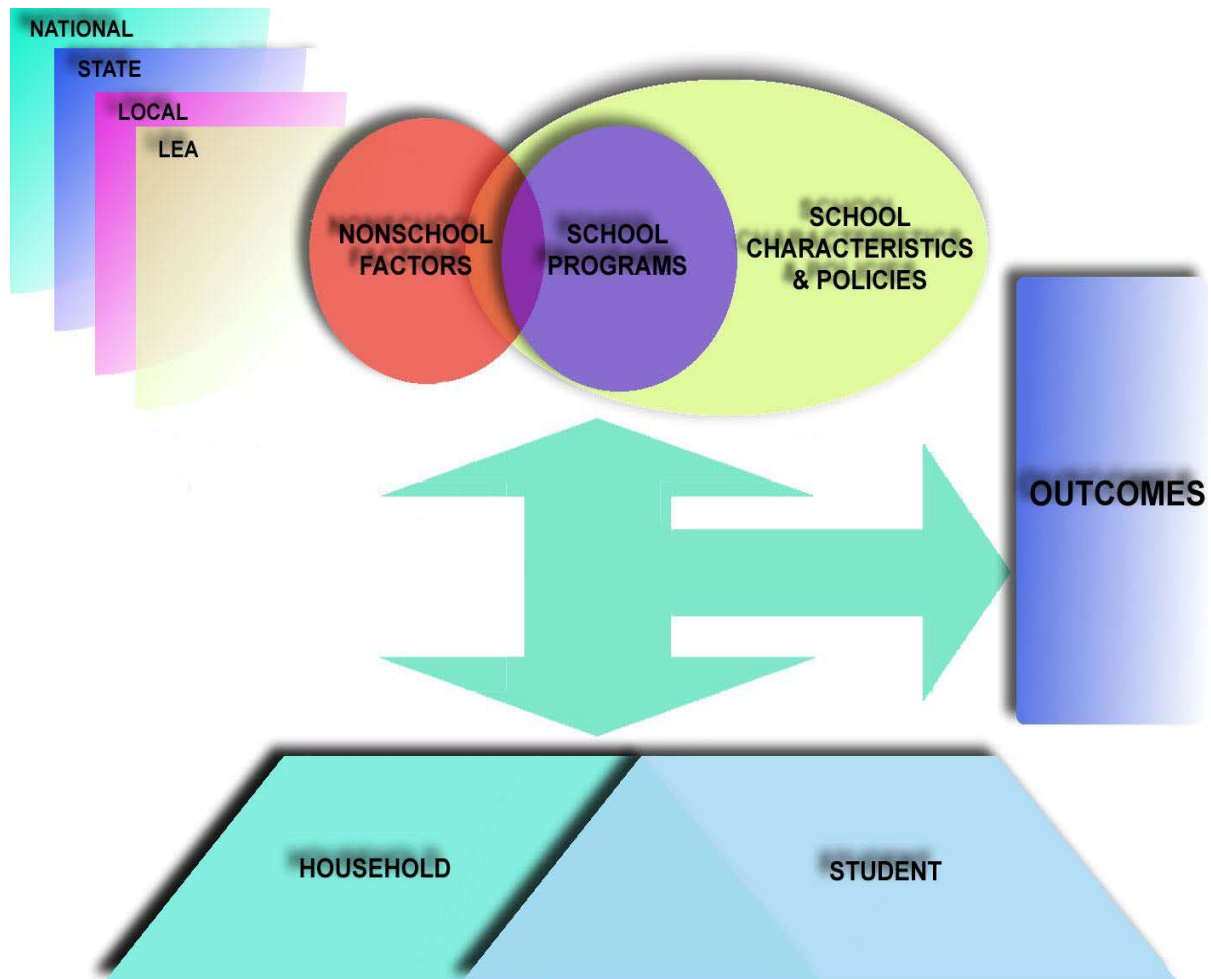
These topics are addressed using data from the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS), which is sponsored by the Office of Special Education Programs of the U.S. Department of Education and is being conducted by SRI International (SRI). SEELS includes a sample of more than 11,000 students who were ages 6 to 12 and receiving special education in the first or higher grades on September 1, 1999. The information in this report refers to the 2000-01 school year, when the students ranged in age from 7 through 14. Findings also represent students with disabilities as a whole and students in each of the 12 federal special education disability categories used nationally. Students receiving special education differ from the general population of students in important ways; however, they differ from each other just as significantly in regard to many dimensions (e.g., see Blackorby et al., 2002 and Wagner et al., 2002). A key value of SEELS is its ability to depict these important disability-related differences for students nationally.

Another valuable aspect of SEELS is its longitudinal design. SEELS will collect information for students three times over a 5-year period—years in which students undergo dramatic physical, emotional, and cognitive development. Thus, SEELS will be able to build on the information on classroom experiences contained in this report by showing the shifts in instructional settings and experiences of students with disabilities as they move from elementary to middle school and from middle to high school.

Finally, SEELS brings to bear information that represents the perspectives of parents, students, and school staff to address a wide range of topics, as depicted in the SEELS conceptual framework (Exhibit 1-1). The information on classroom experiences addressed in this report has been collected from the teachers who provided SEELS students with their primary language arts instruction in the 2000-01 school year and from school staff who were in the best position to describe students' overall school programs. This information is an important part of understanding the broader educational experiences and services of students as they change over time. As SEELS continues, this information will be combined with the perspectives of parents and students to understand such key issues as students' academic achievement; their experiences outside of school;

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<sup>1</sup> Appendix A presents details of the SEELS design and methods. Additional information is available online at [www.seels.net](http://www.seels.net).



**Exhibit 1-1 SEELS Conceptual Framework**

and the aspects of students, households, school programs, and nonschool experiences that contribute to more positive results for students over time.

To implement this ambitious analysis agenda, parent interview/survey data, direct assessments of students' academic performance in reading and mathematics, and school staff questionnaires that capture important aspects of students' schools and individual educational programs are being conducted in three waves between 2000 and 2004. The rich, wide-ranging view of elementary and middle school students as they age that SEELS is providing will support informed policy-making and improved practice for students with disabilities.

### **Technical Notes**

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An effort has been made to present the wealth of information in this report in an accessible format. Readers of the report should keep the following in mind.

- **Results are weighted.** All the descriptive statistics presented in this report are weighted estimates of the national population of students receiving special

education who were ages 7 through 14, as well as of each disability category individually.

- **Standard errors.** Means and percentages are accompanied by a standard error (presented in parentheses) which describes the precision of the estimate. For example, a weighted estimated value of 50% and a standard error of 2 for a variable means that the value for the total population, if it had been measured, would lie between 48% and 52% (plus or minus 2 percentage points of 50%), with a 95% confidence level. In general, estimates based on small samples have larger standard errors and should be viewed cautiously. Standard errors in this report are shown in data tables; those for charts can be found in Appendix B.
- **Crosstabulation variables.** This descriptive look at language arts classroom experiences examines characteristics of those experiences as they vary for students who differ in their primary disability category, gender, race/ethnicity, family income, and grade level. However, exhibits include these crosstabulations only when statistically significant differences are evident. Readers who are interested in the full set of crosstabulations can find them at [www.seels.net](http://www.seels.net).

## References

- Blackorby, J., Wagner, M., Cadwallader, T., Cameto, R., Levine, P., & Marder, C., et al. (2002). *Behind the label: The functional implications of disability*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International. Available at [http://www.seels.net/designdocs/SEELS\\_FunctionalSkills.PDF](http://www.seels.net/designdocs/SEELS_FunctionalSkills.PDF)
- Wagner, M., Marder, C., & Blackorby, J., (with Cardoso, D.). (2002). *The children we serve: The demographic characteristics of elementary and middle school students with disabilities and their households*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International. Available at [http://www.seels.net/designdocs/SEELS\\_Children\\_We\\_Serve\\_Report.pdf](http://www.seels.net/designdocs/SEELS_Children_We_Serve_Report.pdf)