

9. Summary: Differences in Students' Classroom Experiences

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Language arts is a core academic content area for elementary and middle school students, both with and without disabilities. Because of numerous reports of students having poor language arts skills and the potential of direct intervention to improve those skills, reading and language arts are the focus of many legislative, policy, and practice reform efforts. For students with and without disabilities, language arts and reading begin with early acquisition of basic skills (e.g., print convention, decoding) and working with simple texts in the early elementary years. Over time, language arts instruction transitions to increasingly complex, higher order uses of language and communication, the mastery of which is essential for learning content in all other academic areas.

Although language arts instruction plays an important role in the education of students with disabilities across the disability spectrum, experiences with language arts vary dramatically for students who differ in a variety of student and classroom characteristics. The single most important distinguishing feature in those varied experiences is the setting in which instruction takes place. Students with disabilities whose primary language arts instruction takes place in a special education setting differ importantly from their peers in general education classes in the needs and abilities they bring to their learning experiences and in the instruction and support they receive in those settings. However, among students who share a given instructional setting, differences in instruction and support are apparent for those who differ in their primary disability, grade level, and other factors. Those differences are summarized below.

Diversity in Instructional Experiences

Efforts to improve student performance frequently address the organization and type of instruction students should receive. For example, NCLB seeks to ensure that students receive instruction that has been validated by rigorous evidence-based research. Although this report does not address the evidence base behind the instruction provided to students with disabilities, it describes the considerable diversity of language arts instructional activities and approaches they experience. Students with disabilities receive instruction in a variety of groupings, including whole-class, small-group, and individual instruction. Furthermore, for at least 40% of students, language arts instruction frequently includes activities such as class discussion, answering questions, taking tests, reading literature and informational materials, and practicing vocabulary and phonics. In addition, students receive an average of six accommodations or learning supports in language arts, such as increased time for tests or assignments, different or modified materials, tutors, and computer software. It is evident that schools and

teachers provide this range of instructional activities in varying combinations in their efforts to meet students' needs.

Yet, despite this diversity, some common threads run through the broader school experiences of students with disabilities. Importantly, almost all elementary and middle school students who receive special education services are general education students as well—virtually all spend some part of their school day in general education classes. Those who spend any part of their school day in those classes, on average, spend the majority of their day there. Thus, the “shared responsibility” of general and special education for achieving positive results for students with disabilities is readily apparent in their actual school experiences.

The Instructional Setting as a Reflection of Diverse Student Needs

For the last 25 years, the field of special education has been debating the merits of different types of educational settings in providing students with disabilities a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. This report has documented that the most prominent distinction in students' language arts experiences is the setting in which instruction takes place. Forty-five percent of elementary and middle school students with disabilities receive their primary language arts instruction in general education classes; the remainder receive it in special education settings—usually resource rooms, but also self-contained special education classes or one-to-one instruction. Students who represent the range of student characteristics, including ability levels and demographic backgrounds, can be found in both settings; as a group, however, students who receive their primary language arts instruction in special education settings differ dramatically from their peers with disabilities in general education classrooms. Instruction experiences also differ in many ways, as intended by the emphasis of federal special education policy since its inception on individualized approaches to helping students with disabilities achieve success.

Special education language arts classes are less than half the size of general education classes, containing an average of 10 students, and contrasting with the 23 students in the average general education class, among whom three receive special education services. But perhaps more important than their number are the differences in the characteristics of the students. Students in special education settings are more likely to bring to their learning experience a broader range of learning challenges than are their peers with disabilities in general education classes. For example, although both instructional settings have students in each disability category, students with more apparent cognitive and other learning challenges (e.g., those with mental retardation, autism, or multiple disabilities) are more likely to be in special education settings. Their functional abilities in many domains are more limited, including self-care, social, communication, and functional cognitive skills, and they are more likely to be in poorer health.

In addition to more significant challenges that may relate to their disabilities, students in special education settings also are more likely to exhibit other characteristics associated with learning challenges. Compared with their peers in general education classes, they are more likely to be living in poverty and in households with only one parent, with another person with a disability, and with a head of household who is poorly educated. Perhaps reflecting the difference in students' abilities, parents of students in special education settings tend to have lower expectations for their children's future achievements than do parents of students with disabilities in general education classes, and to be less active in supporting them at school.

With their generally more complex learning challenges, it is not surprising that the resources and instruction provided to students with disabilities in special education settings differ markedly from those provided to students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Special education language arts classrooms are more than twice as likely as general education language arts classrooms to include instructional aides. Having fewer students and more instructional staff, language arts classes in special education settings are more likely to include individual and small-group instruction than were general education classes. Although a diversity of general and reading-related activities occur in both settings, special education settings exhibit a greater emphasis on skills-oriented instruction, such as reading words at sight and phonics or phonemic skills, in contrast to the greater emphasis in general education classes on reading literature and informational materials and on writing. Further, although class work, tests, and special projects are the most commonly used means to determine grades in both settings, special education teachers place greater emphasis on in-class activities and less emphasis on attitudes or attendance in determining students' grades than their peers who teach general education classes.

Finally, the number and types of supports provided to teachers and students alike vary by setting. More accommodations are provided to more students who receive their language arts instruction in special education settings.

Disability Differences within Settings

Some kinds of experiences are notably different among students with different disabilities who share the same setting for language arts instruction. These differences suggest that the learning needs of students with different kinds of disabilities are reflected in students' instructional experiences, regardless of setting.

For example, among students with disabilities in general education language arts classes, some kinds of resources brought to bear to support students vary markedly for students with different disabilities. Whereas half of the students with traumatic brain injuries have special education teachers in their general education classrooms, no more than 20% of students with most other types of

disabilities do. Similarly, 66% of students with autism and 77% of students with multiple disabilities have classroom aides, one-on-one instructional assistants, or other specialists in their general education classrooms, compared with between 25% and 42% of students with other types of disabilities. Interpreters or readers are most often provided to students with hearing impairments in special education, but are not common for other students.

Instructional practices and accommodations also differ in some ways for students with different disabilities in the same setting. For example, more than half of students with multiple disabilities in general education classes receive individual instruction frequently, whereas only one in four students with speech impairments do so. More than half of students with speech impairments in general education language arts classes work independently, participate in class discussions, or respond orally to questions frequently, whereas about one-fourth of students with mental retardation in that setting participate in those activities frequently. Thus, schools may attempt to reflect the diversity of students' needs, not only in their placement decisions but also in individual teachers' practices within general and special education settings.

Other Differences in Instructional Settings

As with disability differences, many of the differences in instructional experiences of students who vary in demographic factors are related to the differences in their likelihood of being in general or special education settings. However, some differences within settings remain. For example, in both general education and special education settings, skill acquisition becomes less important over time. With grade-level progression, class sizes increase, as does the average number of special education students in general education classes. Further, special education settings increasingly rely on whole-class instruction as students move to middle school.

In addition, in general education classes, low income and African-American students are more likely than white students to receive individual instruction. They also are more likely than white students to concentrate on learning and practicing vocabulary. In these same settings, Asian and Pacific Islander students are much less likely than white students to engage in most of the skill-building language-arts activities.

What is special about special education? This report suggests that this often-asked question has no single answer. For some students with disabilities, language arts instruction closely resembles the instruction of their classmates in general education, and only modest numbers of supports are necessary. For others, language arts instruction occurs in special education settings with more individual attention and more extensive support. The diversity in language arts instruction points to the efforts of schools to accommodate a wide range of student needs. Future SEELS reports will examine the degree to which students benefit from the educational services they receive.

