

Does Self-Contained Special Education Deliver on Its Promises? A Critical Inquiry Into Research and Practice

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- Numerous scholars contend that students with and without disabilities benefit both socially and academically from inclusive services.
- Other researchers advocate for educating students with disabilities in self-contained settings.
- The aim of this article is to compare the literature on the rationale for use of self-contained special education classes with the practices adopted in schools by answering the following research question: What are the social, emotional, and academic experiences of students with disabilities placed in self-contained programs?
- The findings of this study suggest that the purported rationale for self-contained special education in the literature—issues of community, distraction-free environments, specialized curriculum/instruction, and behavioral supports—were not present in the six observed self-contained settings.
- Implications for school leaders are discussed and the rationales for the utilization of self-contained classrooms are strongly questioned.

The Rationale and Reality of Self-Contained Special Education

“Please know that self-deadening places are hard places to make progress and learn stuff. They don’t have people wanting you to really learn anything except: person, place or things.... nouns I know. That’s my take. But I’m just one person. I know lots of people love those rooms. More often they just play games, like Uno.... A school should be what we all love. But my experiences about broke my freaking soul.” —Victor

Quoted above is Victor, a student who was educated in a self-contained classroom for much of his life was asked to share his impressions of self-contained classrooms. He called them “self-deadening places” and spoke of the limited educational expectations he felt. He also refers to others’ love of “those rooms,” which brings us to the focus of this article, the educational debate around

inclusion and segregation and the experiences for students who are educated in self-contained contexts.

The National Report to Congress (U.S. Department of Education, 2007) shows that nationally, although 49.9% of students with disabilities receive inclusive services for 80% of their school day or more, approximately 23% of students receive their education primarily in separate special education settings. These students are most likely to have labels of autism, cognitive disability, or emotional/behavioral disability or to have multiple disabilities. It is clear that the context of educational programming for students with disabilities is a central issue for teachers, leaders, and university preparation programs.

Numerous scholars contend that students with and without disabilities benefit both socially and academically from inclusive services (Baker, 1994; Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 1994; Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004; Fisher & Mayer, 2002; Fisher, Pumpian, &

Under LRE, the general education classroom is the first place to be considered for educating a student with a disability before more restrictive options are considered.

Case law has helped interpret the meaning of LRE in schools. What follows in *Table 1* is a guide to the legal cases in placement decision that favor inclusion. This table is designed to give the reader some information about legal precedent in terms of how law is being interpreted by the courts.

No Child Left Behind

In addition to legal precedent set forth by IDEA (2004) and case law, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; 2001) has led policy makers and practitioners to consider the importance of access to general education curriculum and classes (Hardman & Dawson, 2008). NCLB requires schools to be accountable for the academic achievement of all students. Given the body of research suggesting that students with disabilities achieve higher academic gains in inclusive settings and that students who are included achieve more success after high school (Reschly & Christensen, 2006), it is no surprise that school leaders are considering access to general education classes and curriculum as a necessary step in improving academic achievement of students with disabilities (Hardman & Dawson).

Rationale for Self-Contained Settings

In spite of the body of research suggesting higher achievement in inclusive setting and the legal mandates supporting access to general education curriculum and classes, some researchers and practitioners continue to advocate for educating students with disabilities in self-contained settings. They cite various reasons for this placement preference. Kauffman, Landrum, Mock, Sayeski, and Sayeski (2005) argue that homogenous grouping presents the best approach for dealing with the heterogeneity of school populations. They back this argument by claiming a lack of empirical evidence that all teachers can teach all students within a general education setting. Furthermore, these educators state that "the goals of teaching all children well and teaching all children in the same

place and at the same time (i.e., full inclusion) are on a collision course for some students" and that "we cannot avoid the 'train wreck' of these two goals unless we give up one for the other in some cases" (Kauffman et al., p. 2). They propose that many students with disabilities need separate places to be taught different skills or content; in addition, if students are at a place where they need to be learning different things, it is necessary that they be educated in a separate environment (Kauffman et al.). Fuchs, Fuchs, and Fernstrom (1993) make an argument for the continuum of placements based on the benefits of math instruction in self-contained classes. In this experimental research, the authors found that students educated in separate classrooms were more academically prepared to reintegrate to general education. The need for specialized instruction, these researchers argue, is incongruent with full inclusion (Landrum, Tankersley, & Kauffman, 2003). Proponents of self-contained classrooms also contend that general education settings may be incapable of accommodating student diversity (Fuchs et al.). Furthermore, this group of researchers allege that the smaller class sizes in self-contained classrooms will result in more individualized instruction (Landrum et al.). They also contend that only self-contained classrooms can provide the highly structured and controlled environments that students with behavior difficulties require. Regarding social outcomes, these researchers argue that cooperative arrangements in the general classroom decreased the rejection of peers toward students with disabilities. In a recent study, however, no growth was seen in friendship or affection between students with and without disabilities (Madden & Slavin, 2001). Overall, these authors conclude that special education and self-contained placements are best able to provide educational options with more intensive services (Fuchs and Fuchs, 1994).

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Table 2: Demographic data of participants and classrooms

Classroom	State	Number of students	Classroom grade(s)	Race	Disability diagnosis
A	NY	11	4th to 6th	10 African American 1 White	Learning disabilities
B	NY	1	12th	African American	Autism
C	NY	4	1st to 3rd	White	Autism, Rett syndrome, and Down syndrome
D	IA	9	K to 6th	7 White 1 African American 1 Asian	Autism
E	MI	11	K to 4th	White	Autism, cerebral palsy Down syndrome
F	NY	5	K to 6th	White	Autism

special education, one has a doctorate in educational leadership and policy analysis, and the fourth is a doctoral student in special education. We all work at a major research university located in an urban area in the northeastern United States. This team of four has many years of practical school experience, more than 25 years combined, as teachers and administrators in public schools. Most of that experience was in inclusive settings, yet three of the team members had experience working in self-contained special education programs. Three were trained as special educators, one as a general educator and administrator. All four of us teach at a university with a strong philosophical point of view toward inclusion, and yet see self-contained special education as being widely-practiced in our area. After observing the widespread use of these self-contained practices in local and national school systems, we were moved to learn more about the research behind self-contained education, and the practice of it.

Research Methods

This study took place over the 7 years (2002–2009) since the passing of NCLB (2001) and used qualitative inquiry to examine six self-contained special education settings. This section describes the research settings, participants, data collection, and analysis.

Research Settings and Participants

We took a particular approach to selecting the settings. The two lead researchers are involved with

many school districts around the country in a variety of capacities (e.g., consulting, staff presentations, ongoing partnerships, placing future teachers in field experiences, and mentoring former university students) and purposefully only studied schools that invited us to observe their self-contained special education settings. This sample included rural, suburban, and urban districts, as well as settings for elementary- and secondary-age students. From these settings, 41 students across six self-contained special education settings in six schools within five school districts across three states participated in this study. The data for each setting is displayed in *Table 2*.

In all of these schools, each of the students received their primary instruction in self-contained classrooms comprising only students with disabilities. In three of the self-contained classrooms, students were “mainstreamed” into general education classrooms for a small portion of the day, in one case for a portion of academics, in the other two for special-area classes like art and music. The self-contained classrooms often had multiple grade levels in one classroom. Across these classrooms, there were 12 African American students, one Asian student, and 28 White students.

Data Collection

The research questions were addressed using a qualitative data collection approach of participant observation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The qualitative data included detailed observational field notes from participant observations and ongoing informal interviews with staff. The descriptive field notes

The data from all six settings in this study suggest that the self-contained classroom was not often a place where a supportive community was purposefully created or given much attention. During none of the observations did we see types of formal community-building activities or specific attention to establishing connections to peers through cooperative learning or partner work. Two examples, one from classroom A and one from classroom D (see *Table 2*), highlight the theme of community that emerged from this research.

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We saw several instances where students were allowed to treat each other in ways that compromised community and feelings of belonging. During math class in classroom A, the teacher is seated at her desk and asks from her seat, "What do you do if it is a whole number?" Ayana (a student in the self-contained class who is at the chalkboard) gives the teacher a questioning look and a little smile. Michael (another student), who is sitting at the small table close to the board, begins whispering to Ayana.

"Don't whisper to her," says the teacher.

"She's slow," says Michael.

Shawna (a third student) interjects, "You know who's slow.... your mamma." There is an "oooh" from the other students in the class.

"Hey, watch it," says Ayana.

The teacher smiles and begins writing another problem on the board. Ayana walks back to her seat and on her way says, "Stop."

The teacher says to Ayana, "What's going on?" The teacher tells Ayana to come and sit next to her. Ayana walks over to her and sits in a seat at a desk that is positioned next to the teacher's desk. Ayana says, "He [Michael] stuck out his middle finger to me." The teacher says nothing.

Later in the same class, when it was time to go to lunch, the students were all clustered at the door. Ayana began to hit Keith (another student in the self-contained classroom). The paraprofessional yells at them, "Stop that!" Keith says, "What? I didn't do anything. I didn't touch her. I had one hand behind

my back, and I was telling her I could beat her up with one hand behind my back."

In some instances these types of disrespectful behavior were tolerated or not addressed, or the students did not respond to teacher prompts to discontinue the behavior. They were common in that we saw these kinds of interactions during most observations. Researchers observed multiple instances of this behavior in more than 90% of the observation sessions for this study. It also appeared that this behavior became the norm in some settings, with students continuing to act disrespectfully to each other in mainstream settings.

The second example illustrates an entirely different problem with community. Each student in classroom D (all having the label of autism) is seated at individual study cubicles. These cubicles are positioned so that students cannot easily engage in communication with each other. Temporary wall barriers further separate students from one another. The students spent approximately half of their day at these cubicles. The students could not see other students from their seats, and the teacher indicated that this was intentional. A couple of times each day all the students would gather at a kidney-shaped table in the middle of the room. During these times a paraprofessional would stand behind each student as the teacher read a book or engaged them in a "group activity," and if they were not looking at the teacher, the paraprofessional would physically move their heads to redirect their gaze back to the teacher. The students responded to direct questions from the teacher during the observations. They never talked or were directed to communicate with, respond to, or acknowledge one another.

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 ... we found the rhetoric of self-contained classrooms as protective and safe places to be contradicted by this research.

These two representative examples demonstrate themes of community common in these classrooms. Traditionalist literature asserts that a small, protective community is necessary and that students with disabilities were "shunned" by their general education peers. However, the data from this study suggests that in these six classrooms students are being shunned and harassed by their peers in self-

behind the back curtain of the school stage while a classroom of students was practicing singing in the adjoining cafeteria. Tanner's other pull-out service occurred in the glass vestibule of one of the school doorways, which measured approximately 8×8 ft. Tanner sat on a large wooden bench that had been placed in the vestibule. Other students from the school and two classes passed the vestibule during this session.

The rationale that quiet settings with limited distraction are needed and thus provided in self-contained classrooms for students with disabilities was not evident in the classrooms in this study. Although all classrooms have distractions (general education included), the types of distractions the students in the self-contained classrooms observed here were not only frequent, they were severe. The students in these classrooms as well as the adults working there were clearly impacted by the quantity, level, and type of distractions.

Curriculum and Instruction

Students with disabilities may require individualized instruction to access content (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Some traditionalist researchers argue that this individualized instruction cannot be provided in a general education classroom (Carr, 1993; Fuchs et al., 1993; Lewis, 2002). Mock and Kauffman (2002) wrote that if students are included in the general education classroom then it will be solely the responsibility of the general education teacher to provide instruction to those students, making an individualized curriculum impossible. Other traditionalist researchers indicate that the necessary curriculum is so different from the general education instruction and curriculum that it is impossible to provide instruction to general education students and special education students within the same setting (MacMillan et al., 1996). Some researchers argue that self-contained settings not only offer a controlled and structured environment that some students with disabilities require, "they also offer a rich curriculum that helps students learn self-control, attain academic competence, and acquire employment related attitudes and skills that will improve their chances of living happily and successfully in their communities" (Kauffman, Lloyd, Baker, & Riedel, 1995, p. 7).

Our research revealed that significant portions of the school day were spent on tasks that were not

instructional or academic in nature. For example, students engaged in extended periods of noninstructional games, choice or play time, movie time, or other time that was not related to state or local standards. Students were observed "sitting around" having free computer time or looking at books while the adults in the room talked or planned together. Although it was very common to have noninstructional time and time where nothing instructional was happening, the remainder of this section includes examples of three emerging themes from our observations: a lack of structure, context-free/meaningless curriculum, and limited time with certified special education teachers.

Lack of Structure. In classroom F, the teacher was sitting at the round table close to the chalkboard. She was eating noodles out of a plastic Tupperware container. Each child had a newspaper on her or his desk, but they also have a lot of food there too. For example, one had an entire cake, one had a turkey drumstick, and two students had "family size" bags of potato chips. Popcorn was being popped in the microwave in the back of the room. This scene was typical during each classroom observation in classroom F: sometimes in the morning, sometimes around lunchtime, sometimes in the afternoon—and often the food remained out for the entire day. Whereas many regular education classrooms have snack, this differed in that there was no consistent time for snack, sometimes snack lasted for hours, and there was no predictable structure about quantity of food, when it was eaten, or how long the class would take to eat.

The second example comes from classroom A. The students in the self-contained classroom were lining up at the door to go to special-area classes. The students from classroom A are split up to go to special-area classes with other general education classes. The self-contained teacher explained that "students who go with Ms. Penny's class are going to music and students who go with Mr. Mock's class are going to art." Four students walked quietly toward the music room to meet Ms. Penny's class. When they arrived, the music teacher smiled, said hello and told them, "Ms. Penny's class has swimming today. Are you going swimming today?"

One of the students from the self-contained setting said, "We never heard about any swimming." At the same time the other students who were supposed to go to art headed there. On the way, the art teacher stopped one of the students, Keith, and

worksheets that he has completed every day since the beginning of the year, and respond to countless other seemingly pointless requests. He complied with all of these requests easily, throughout his day, but nothing was connected to any relevant content. As is known, students with autism in particular need to learn information in context with clear connections between one thing and another.

 Across the six classrooms much of the curriculum had no connection to grade-level general education curriculum, the state standards, or much else that happened in the students' daily programs.

In classroom E, during independent seatwork time, which lasted in blocks of an hour and a half during each observation, Sean, a second grader, was expected to do many worksheets. The teacher explained to the researcher, "Sean is learning to cut and paste." Incorporated into nearly every worksheet activity was a step to cut and paste a picture or number to a corresponding set of items. Sean demonstrated that he was able to cut and paste immediately, thus this stream of worksheets seemed to be leading toward acquiring no new skills. The observer noted, "It was difficult to see a connection to the general education curriculum, which is a necessary component of special education services." These findings mirror those from Vaughn, Moody, and Schumm (1998) in that what is being said is happening in the resource room or special education classroom is not what is happening.

During this time, a paraprofessional continually directed Sean to keep working. Each time Sean finished another worksheet, the assistant asked the teacher "what should he [Sean] do next?" The teacher responded by handing Sean another worksheet. The tasks that Sean was being asked to do were repetitive and not contextually related to his life. Also, when the observer asked the teacher why Sean was doing these worksheets, it was clear they were not related to any greater curricular theme but only were "important skills for Sean to learn." These worksheets consisted of circling the letter A, coloring pennies, circling the letter B, cutting out numbers, circling the letter A again, and coloring more pennies.

Both examples show a theme that permeated all six settings—in addition to a lack of academic

instruction, the instructional time was not connected to the state curriculum or to an engaging and rich curriculum, with one exception. Although in some instances the teachers in the self-contained rooms would articulate the specific skill the students needed, but it was often similar to the example of Sean mentioned above, in that it was clear to an outside observer that he had mastered the skill.

No Specially Trained Instructor. Despite the rationale that self-contained special education classrooms provide students with disabilities more contact with specifically trained special education teachers, the final theme that was evident in all settings was that these students did not receive a highly trained professional delivering individualized instruction.

In classroom E, Tanner's teacher reported that Tanner was in the self-contained room to receive more academic support. For all of the observations in this classroom, Tanner received his directions from a paraprofessional, as did the other students in the classroom. Besides the pull-out services described previously, Tanner received only one short period during each observation, usually about 10 minutes, of instruction from the trained special educator, and during that time they played the game "memory." It was clear to the observer that Tanner knew how to play memory—in fact Tanner reminded the teacher of the typical rules of the game.

In classroom D, each of the students spent nearly all of the observational time with a paraprofessional. They each had periodic interaction with the special education teacher that lasted between 1 and 3 minutes; usually this involved the teacher explaining to the paraprofessional what to do next. The primary instruction for the special education teacher came in the form of reading a picture book (typically at kindergarten level—like Eric Carle's *Clouds* book) to the whole group of kindergarten through sixth-grade students, and asking the students one by one to respond.

Charlie, a sixth grader in this room, spent 45 minutes each day being pulled in a children's wagon with the words "Autism Room" printed in large letters on it. When the observer asked the teacher why Charlie went for rides in the wagon, the teachers responded, "He likes it and it is good for him. It calms him down." It is important to note that for each observation, Charlie was never upset visibly before getting in the wagon. Because Charlie was a

not relevant to his life or to any greater educational context.

Most striking was the use of time-out rooms and restraints. Five of the six settings used intensive behavior management systems that consisted mainly of a combination of reward and punishment. We observed one student who was blockaded in a corner with no way out as desks surrounded him for more than an hour. During another observation, a student was put into the time-out room for more than 2 hours, screaming until he fell asleep. In five of the classrooms, the threat of time-out and then immediate use of the space was the first behavioral management strategy used. In these classrooms, every time the observers were present, students were carried into time-out spaces. Over the observations in each classroom, we witnessed full-body restraint of multiple students in five of the settings. These lasted from 15 to 36 minutes and often involved the same student over different observations.

A number of the students we observed across these six classrooms had challenging behaviors; however, in contrast to the rationales for self-contained classrooms, there were no well-conceived approaches to dealing with these behaviors—only rewards, threats, and a reliance on a time-out room and physical restraints. Although there are scholars who contend that challenging behaviors are better handled in self-contained classroom, we did not witness this. In fact, the reliance on threats and physical restraints combined with the meaningless curriculum and the lack of structure/schedule discussed previously seemed to be creating and not reducing negative behaviors.

Limitations

Key limitations in this study need to be noted. First, although many grade levels were represented among the participants, the sample of classrooms observed was relatively small, which can impact generalizability. The sample of six classrooms and 41 students represented a range of disabilities but did not reflect all labels of disability. Furthermore, participants represented three major racial/ethnic backgrounds. Most students were African American or White. Given the overrepresentation of Hispanic students in certain disability categories (U.S. Department of Education, 2007), lack of Hispanic students in this research must be considered. Achievement data for these students would have

strengthened this study. However, gathering achievement data was difficult because consistent achievement data such as curriculum-based measures were not kept for many of these students. Also, data were collected in multiple states over a considerable period of time.

Discussion

In looking across the classrooms examined in this study, we found a disconnect between the rationale for self-contained special education and reality in these six self-contained classrooms. In fact, after completing this study and examining our research question about the academic and social experiences of students in self-contained settings, we found it difficult to argue for fixing or improving these self-contained settings because everything we observed that could have been considered educational could have been transported to inclusive settings without compromising the education these students were receiving. Similar to the observations of Vaughn et al. (1998), the instruction occurring in the separate setting was not different or superior to that occurring in the general education setting.

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 The GAO found that the students were often not physically aggressive before the use of seclusion or restraint, that parents had not consented to the use of seclusion or restraint, and that teachers and other staff were not trained appropriately.

The administrators and teachers in these programs invited researchers to observe and study these settings, with the stated understanding that they were comfortable and sometimes even “proud” of the programming being provided. It is important to note that we were not seeing all settings and arguably we might have been seeing contexts that teachers and administrators considered to be better than others. One school administrator stated in reference to a self-contained classroom where the teachers and paraprofessionals used restraint, “The teachers in this room really know how to handle behavior problems.” In many ways this issue is mirrored in the U.S. Governmental Accountability Office (GAO) (2009), which found an overreliance on

Figure 1. Continued.

Step 2 - Data Discussion & Reflection

The next step in the audit involves taking that information collected from the observation and data collection phase and engaging schools leaders in discussion and reflection. Based on the data collected, address the questions below for each child in the self-contained setting.

Discussion/Reflection Question	Comments/Notes
What is the purpose of the separate placement and is it being met?	
How are academic goals in relation to the general education curriculum being met?	
How are social needs (interaction and development) being met? What meaningful relationships (peers w/disabilities, general education peers, adults) has the student(s) developed?	
What are the anticipated and unanticipated results of this separate placement?	
In what ways is this placement: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - achieving an essential educational purpose? - being continued out of staff convenience? - providing a way for some staff not to have to teach this student? - continuing the way things have always been done? 	
Would this placement be acceptable for our own children (daughters/sons, nieces, neighbors)?	

Step 3 - Planning Tool for Inclusive Services

Given the LRE preference of general education, the national policy focus on access to general education curriculum and classes, and the potential promise of increasing time in general education for students with disabilities in terms of social and academic growth, moving students back into the general education classroom with appropriate supports and services, and bringing those supports and services to students in general education should be seriously considered. The final part of this audit involves discussing and planning how to increase inclusive services for the specific students currently in self-contained special education settings. This audit provides guiding questions to assist in this process. This requires discussing students individually and keeping in mind the big picture and use of resources/staff for the school.

Planning Question	Comments/Notes
How could academic and social goals be achieved in the general education setting?	
What staff/other resources would need to be reallocated/redistributed to support students in general education?	
What changes/adaptations would be necessary to the curriculum and instruction, to allow students meaningful access to general education?	
What professional development do administrators, general and special education teachers, and paraprofessionals need?	

restraint and seclusion of student with disabilities. The GAO found that the students were often not physically aggressive before the use of seclusion or restraint, that parents had not consented to the use of seclusion or restraint, and that teachers and other staff were not trained appropriately. Thus, there is an urgent need for school leaders to better understand what is happening in self-contained settings and

work to harness the potential benefits of more inclusive and meaningful services for students with significant needs.

Implications for Administrators

Fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) determined that even an equal education that occurs in

- students with disabilities. *Theory Into Practice*, 45(3), 249–259.
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