RESEARCH REVIEW
Elizabeth Foster

STUDY EXPLORES WAYS TO SUPPORT MEANINGFUL INCLUSION

▶ THE STUDY
Stelitano, L., Russell, J.L., & Bray, L.E. (2020). Organizing for meaningful inclusion: Exploring the routines that shape student supports in secondary schools. *American Educational Research Journal, 57*(2), 535-575. doi.org/10.3102/0002831219859307

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Learning Forward has hosted a series of webinars focused on teaching and learning during the COVID-19 realities of school building closures and remote classes. Throughout the series, no matter what the topic, participants have asked presenters how they are addressing the needs of students with disabilities and special needs.

This repeated question about services and inclusion has been partly about how schools and districts are moving their in-school practices to an online or remote environment. However, the consistent nature of the question also raises the issue of which structures and practices intended to support students with disabilities are successful and which are not. A recent small qualitative study looks into this question and offers some insights and implications for professional learning.

In an effort to get a close look at how schools implement their commitments to including students with disabilities in general education classrooms, the researchers undertook a case study of inclusion practices at two Pennsylvania high schools.

The authors and the research base they cite make a distinction between meaningful inclusion and more surface forms of inclusion, noting that it is not sufficient or appropriate to simply include students with disabilities in general education classes, but that changes must be made to daily practice and routines to provide accessible learning opportunities and experiences for each student.

The authors also acknowledge the complexities of teaching demands and supports as well as the impact constraints of time and resources can have on achieving a collective goal such as meaningful inclusive education.

The study highlights ways in which educators' goals, relationships, interactions, workarounds, and daily routines impact meaningful inclusion and student learning. They compared two schools with different inclusion models, examining the organizational structures, practices, and day-to-day routines that impact the learning of students with disabilities.

Routines and expectations about routines serve as a lens on school organization in this study. Routines can represent the goals and commitments of the school by organizing practices and structures to meet student needs.

Stelitano and colleagues looked at both intended, expected routines (called ostensive routines) and the routines actually enacted (called performative routines). They also looked at the impact of school resources, collaboration, and interactions among general education and special education teachers on routines, inclusion, and achievement.

The findings have implications for all educators because 14% of students in U.S. public

schools qualify for special education services, and many of them receive these services in general education classrooms (NCES, 2020).

RESEARCH GOALS AND QUESTIONS

The research team compared two approaches to implementing inclusion in two high schools in different school districts: consultation and co-teaching.

Willow High School, with 1,500 students (50% of them qualified for free and reduced lunch) had been recognized as an example of positive inclusion practices via a consultation model.

Elm High School, with 555 students (41% of them qualified for free and reduced lunch) was recognized for its co-teaching model. Willow enrolled students with behavioral and emotional challenges, whereas Elm did not. Both school names are pseudonyms.

Both schools had persistent achievement gaps between students with disabilities and those in general education and had been identified by the state as not having made Adequate Yearly Progress on state accountability assessments.

Yet both schools were committed to including students with disabilities in general education classrooms as much as possible and had been recognized by the state for their inclusion practices. Both schools also had programs for students who could not, for one reason or another, be included in the general education settings.

Three research questions structured the study:

- How are Willow and Elm high schools formally organized (i.e. the ostensive or expected aspect of routines) to support the inclusion of students with disabilities?
- What routines are actually practiced (i.e. the performative aspect of routines) to support the inclusion of students with disabilities in Willow and Elm high schools?
- What are the implications of Willow and Elm's organizational routines for student support?

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METHODOLOGY

Data were collected over two years as part of a broader exploratory study about implementation of special education policies. Researchers interviewed the special education teachers in each school as well as a sample of general education teachers and district leaders. They conducted daylong observations of special educators who supported students in general education settings (not in self-contained classrooms) and analyzed artifacts.

The researchers also used a social network analysis survey to tap into informal interactions among educators. Social network research methodologies, with a systematic measuring of structures, resources, and expertise activated through educator interactions and routines, are a way to see collaboration.

For instance, analyzing a network can reveal to whom educators go for particular expertise or whom they trust with sensitive information. Denser networks with more connections are associated with a higher level of collective efficacy but a lower rate of information exchange. Centralized networks are generally associated with an ability to share information effectively but a lower level of adaptability in changing contexts.

Researchers designed this survey to measure patterns of daily staff interactions with students with disabilities, asking teachers to indicate with whom they discussed special education students or issues and to rate the frequency of those conversations.

The researchers analyzed multiple data sources in three phases aligned to their research questions, triangulating the data where possible and identifying practices that met an established definition of routines: multiple actors engaging in work that is repeated and predictable over time.

As the study progressed, the focus became the special education teachers, who emerged as the linchpins of the inclusion practices at both schools.

FINDINGS

At Willow, the intent was for special educators to serve as expert consultants for general education content-area teachers on student learning needs, specific instructional strategies, and specialized supports. But the realities of schedules and resources made this challenging.

Given staffing arrangements and

schedules that required the five special education teachers to meet with 18 general education teachers in addition to monitoring student progress, observing classrooms, and occasionally providing direct student support, the depth and quality of consultations suffered. Special education teachers were unable to spend meaningful time in classrooms or with students.

The researchers noted, "We found no evidence of special educators consulting with teachers about issues related to instruction and student learning or sharing specialized knowledge of students with disabilities."

Instead, the most prominent routine was administering tests. Although general education teachers cited this as an inclusive practice, research suggests it is not a meaningful one, and it was not the intent of the consultation model.

The consultation design also resulted in students with disabilities grouped into lower-level classes (a term used by the teachers), with the schedule arranged to ensure coverage of all students by a limited number of special education experts and instructional aides who could work in classrooms.

This meant that students with a range of disabilities were grouped into classes that "may not have afforded them the best opportunities to access rigorous general education curriculum."

While Elm also grouped its students so that special educators could support them, teachers did not indicate that these were low-level assignments. At Elm, special education teachers were scheduled to co-teach the same classes daily and work with their students in a daily study hall.

The co-teaching model design facilitated productive educator collaboration. The caseload of students for each special education teacher was less than that at Willow, and the school provided substitute teachers to cover classes during monthly co-planning sessions.

The researchers observed that teachers implemented inclusion routines mostly in the study halls, providing support to students in completing assignments and organizational skills. One special education teacher reported that teachers didn't meet to "come up with this cool, creative lesson together," but rather to communicate about their students' progress and needs. She said they spent time asking, "What do my kids owe? What are their grades?" and then committed "to make those kids make up all that work."

The study found that educators' daily routines were often at odds with the intent of the inclusion models. As educators sought to balance the expectations of inclusion with the realities of limited resources, including workload and teacher time, they were unable to engage students in meaningful learning interactions.

Teachers felt pressure to make sure students passed classes, either due to accountability concerns or a lack of understanding about modifications, which again took priority over ensuring rigorous or meaningful learning.

The social network analysis found that both schools had high-density networks, meaning that norms and information could spread easily among staff. However, the density related to special education matters was spread unevenly among staff. The interactions were by far concentrated with the special educators.

This indicated a breadth but not a depth of interactions. General education teachers weren't learning about special education, leaving the special education teachers in both settings essentially solely responsible for students' learning.

Part of the reason for this limited dispersal of information was that, given limited time and, in some cases, interest, educators looked to make their routines and interactions efficient. This meant limiting professional conversations about student needs, modifications, adapted learning goals, and instructional strategies.

In both schools, special education teachers' roles were to help students in ways that did not constitute meaningful inclusion or learning, such as helping students pass tests or meet course requirements.

IMPLICATIONS

While the study is small and the researchers acknowledge that the generalizability of results from two high schools is limited, this case study provides a lens through which we can view what it means to be inclusive as well as some harsh realities related to implementation.

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As the authors caution, "Inclusion in name only, without appropriate supports for students to access general education content, is not likely to disrupt inequitable student achievement outcomes."

STANDARDS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Beyond the informal social networks, which constitute a form of shared learning, the formal professional learning aspect of these two models is mentioned only briefly. Nonetheless, the researchers acknowledge that the finding of educators' suboptimal practices indicate a need for improved and ongoing professional learning on inclusive practices, regardless of the model.

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point, only one of every three districts in the country is requiring teachers to provide online instruction. Even fewer are ensuring there is regular progress monitoring and attendance-taking.

Too many kids have never heard from their teacher during this pandemic. Too few students are getting live instruction where they can see their teachers and friends. I know from teacher survey results that educators are already very concerned about emotional challenges and missed learning. We need to find a way to learn from the things that worked well and the things that didn't so we can get ready for next year and the next possible pandemic.

Q: What are the most common challenges?

A: In some cases, union negotiations took a long time. In others, it took an especially long time to make sure every student had a device and Wi-Fi access. Special education was a hang-up in a lot of places, as districts wanted to be sure they were in compliance with federal laws. Every district had a challenge of some kind, and some certainly had more challenges than most, but a number of districts really exhibited a can-do attitude and moved forward despite not having every piece in place.

Q: How will the database evolve to track schools' reopening plans?

A: We are watching closely. We'll be reporting on the content and organizing an expert review panel to weigh in on the most promising ones. Watch our website and Twitter feed for news.

We've also launched The Evidence Project, a network of more than 100 researchers who will be organizing to study critical questions unique to schools during this pandemic. We'll track and share new research across our network as soon as it's available.

We want to be helpful, so educators and system leaders: Please let us know how the research community can help you do your work better. We're so thankful for your efforts in this very trying time. ■

TO LEARN MORE

CRPE's COVID-19 work includes a database of state and school district responses, impact, analysis, and The Evidence Project, a network of researchers working to narrow the gap between research and policy. Visit **crpe.org** for more information and resources.

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Applying Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning could help educators reflect on how to improve professional learning for inclusive practices. It is clear from the findings that the intent of the inclusion efforts was not realized, in part because of a lack of attention to **Implementation.**

Focusing on the **Outcomes standard** could result in a clearer understanding of the learning goals and performance expectations for all students, which could lead to better fidelity and more successful teaching and learning.

The structures of both inclusion models provide opportunities for collaborative discussions in which general education teachers could learn more about successful practices of special education teachers, specific instructional strategies such as reteaching, or co-taught lessons.

However, given the strained **Resources** of both schools — especially time and workload capacity — teachers couldn't meet these goals. This resource challenge is of utmost importance. If the educators at Willow had additional time and ongoing professional learning, what outcomes might they have realized for their students with disabilities?

The researchers' theme that inclusion needs to be embedded in and implemented as part of schoolwide frameworks aligns with the **Learning Communities standard** that describes the importance of a collective commitment and a collaborative endeavor to support all students' learning.

In addition, there was no ongoing continuous improvement process to adapt the collaboration time or routines over the two years of the study. Cycles of improvement in which educators build their own knowledge and skills — with resources to support them — could realize the promise of either inclusion model.

To realize a commitment to inclusion, an understanding of what meaningful inclusion means and entails must be part of the culture of the school and inform design of teaching and learning experiences, supports, and resource allocations.

If the goal is to move beyond exposing students with disabilities to the general education curriculum to providing access to meaningful learning opportunities in general settings, this commitment must permeate the day-to-day practices of all educators.

REFERENCE

NCES. (2020, May). *The condition of education: Students with disabilities.* Author. nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgg.asp ■