

Outcomes Following Participation in Special Education in the United States: A Review of the Literature

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Objective:

This literature review aims to determine the state of the literature outlining quality-of-life (QoL) outcomes relating to children with disabilities participating in special education in the United States. Following review of the literature, we seek to identify gaps to provide suggestions for areas of improvement and need for further research in special education outcomes.

Background Information:

In 1973, section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act was passed and states that children with disabilities may not be excluded based on reason of disability. The Individual with Disabilities Act (IDEA) mentioning inclusion in education systems, was passed in 1975 (National Council on Disability 2018). Although there is no federal definition of inclusion, it is supported by law under the equal opportunity and least restrictive environment policy of the IDEA (Ppifa 2019). The least restrictive environment policy states that students with disabilities should not be removed from regular classrooms solely because of needed modifications in general education classrooms. As of 2019, the rate of inclusion, defined in this case by students spending at least 80% of their time inside the general classroom, stands at roughly 65% in the U.S. (NCES 2021). Inclusion rates have only increased 5% since 2009 (NCES 2021). In data sourced from 2015-2016, Iowa had a rate of inclusion of 65.63%, slightly above the national rate of inclusion at 62.69% (IDEA Series 2018). In 2016 there were 6 million students with disabilities, which equates to about 3.7 million students who spent 80% or more time in general classrooms (IDEA Series 2018).

In the report "The Segregation of Students with Disabilities" from the National Committee of Disability, it was stated that the stagnancy of inclusion rates in the United States is legitimized by the Least Restrictive Environment policy allowing segregated settings to be acceptable for some students (IDEA Series 2018). In some cases, separation from general education classrooms is appropriate, but should be determined based on discussion between the student, family, and staff. When appropriate, inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms has been shown to promote higher levels of social interaction between neurotypical and neurodiverse students (McGregor et al. 1998). Despite this information, Whemeyer et al (2021) found that students with intellectual and additional disabilities were four times more likely to spend 40% or less of their education in general education classrooms. The study also identified that the majority of inclusive education time was spent in activities such as recess and the cafeteria.

Methods:

A literature review was conducted to identify research conducted in special education regarding inclusion practices and quality of life outcome measures. Key search terms were

utilized across group members such as “quality of life,” “special education,” “inclusion,” and “outcomes.” Databases such as PubMed, Google Scholar and InfoHawk were utilized in the initial search. A matrix was created for tracking relevant research articles and included a summary of key information for articles such as study name and design, information about the population, details about the educational environment, methods, results, and limitations. A total of thirty relevant articles were pulled for further review by group members. They were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: relevance to the public-school setting, separated into United States and all other foreign countries, research conducted within the past ten years and not exclusionary to any specific disability diagnosis. After these criteria were defined, we were left with thirteen articles. Each group member read all the included articles at that time. Due to limited information from the initial literature search, a secondary search was later performed utilizing databases such as ERIC and PsychInfo using similar search terms. The information gathered from the secondary review focused on present data relating to frequency of inclusive practice in schools and various social outcomes for individuals with disabilities during or following K-12 education.

Results and Discussion:

Our initial search was met with limited results. Of the 30 initially identified articles, only 3 were identified looking at quality of life outcomes focused on students with disabilities in an educational study. One was a small cohort study conducted in the United States from 20 years ago (Watson & Keith, 2002), whereas the others researched quality of life measures for Spanish children with disabilities but focused on the validity and reliability of the assessment tools (Heras et al., 2021; Gómez et al., 2020). We found no QoL evaluations of students enrolled in special education in the United States within the past 20 years. Given our initial intent to utilize data to identify gaps within special education service provision as it relates to quality of life, the absence of data told us about as much as data could have.

As a result of this, we refocused to discern if other forms of data collection outside of our initial parameters would bear fruit. This second search provided expert pieces, editorials, and literature reviews highlighting the stagnation of inclusion within special education. Additionally, along with other disparities of outcomes, individuals with disabilities post-graduation face a 44.6 percentage point disparity in employment as compared to their nondisabled peers (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022) and make up 38% of US incarcerated population despite making up only a quarter of the US population as a whole (US Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021). This further exploration made clear that robust evaluation of these programs and their impacts on client populations was lacking.

To adequately address the inequity of outcomes for young persons with disabilities, the data on individual outcomes of their schooling must be rigorous and relevant to ensure quality education and individual growth. We discovered a distinct lack of literature wherein QoL measures are utilized as outcome measures within special education service provision, despite numerous available tools. Unfortunately, there is limited longitudinal data linking special education interventions with post-graduate outcomes (Kanaya et al, 2019; Watts et al, 2019) and without appropriate long-term outcome evaluation measures, ideally including QoL, both the stagnation of inclusive education and the outcomes for young adults with disabilities are unlikely to change.

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