

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, &

Table 1: Inclusion-related court cases

Name of case	Description of case
<i>Brown v. Board of Education</i> (1954)	Established that education must be made available to all on equal terms. Separate but equal is inherently unequal. Advocates for people with disabilities transferred this concept of equal opportunity to students with disabilities.
<i>PARC v. Pennsylvania</i> (1972)	The <i>PARC</i> plaintiffs argued that children with mental retardation could benefit from educational programs and that these experiences did not have to be academic and could involve other training. Furthermore, the <i>PARC</i> plaintiffs argued that because the state provided students without disabilities a free education, the state could not deny students with mental retardation this same right.
<i>Roncker v. Walter</i> (1983)	This case challenged the assignment of students to disability-specific programs and schools. The ruling favored inclusive, not self-contained, placement and established a principle of portability. It is not enough for a district to simply claim that a self-contained program is superior. In a case where the self-contained facility is considered superior, the court should determine whether the services, which make the placement superior, could be feasibly provided in a non-self-contained setting (i.e., regular class). If they can, the placement in the self-contained school would be inappropriate under the Individuals With Disabilities Act.
<i>Daniel R.R. v. State Board of Education</i> (1989)	In the case of <i>Daniel R. R. v. State Board of Education</i> (1989), the court decided not to follow the Roncker test and developed its own test. First, the court must examine whether, with the use of supplementary aids and services, the child could be included in the classroom. Next, if the child could not be included, the court asks whether the child was mainstreamed to the maximum extent possible.
<i>Sacramento Unified School District v. Rachel H.</i> (1992)	In this case, the courts developed a four-part test: 1) the educational benefits from the regular classroom; 2) the nonacademic benefits of interaction between students with and without disabilities; 3) the impact of the student with disabilities on the teacher and other children in the classroom; and 4) the cost of supplementary aids and services required for mainstreaming the student.
<i>Rafael Oberti v. Clementon School District</i> (1992)	Judge ruled that the school had failed to provide a student with supports, resources, and appropriate training to be placed in the inclusive setting. Placed the burden of proof for compliance with the law's inclusion requirements on the school district and state, not the family. According to the federal judge, "Inclusion is a right, not a special privilege for a select few."

Sax, 1998; Freeman & Alkin, 2000; Fryxell & Kennedy, 1995; Hunt & Goetz, 1997; Kennedy, Shulka, & Fryxell, 1997; McDonnell, Mathot-Bucker, Thorson, & Fister, 2001; McDonnell, Thorson, Allen, & Mathot-Bucker, 2000; Peterson & Hittie, 2003; Sharpe, York, & Knight, 1994; Waldron & McLeskey, 1998). The literature shows that access to general education for all is critical for the academic progress of students with disabilities (Browder, Wakeman, & Flowers, 2006).

Least Restrictive Environment

The legal term that is used in the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) to support inclusion is *least restrictive environment* or LRE. This

law stipulates that all students with disabilities have the legal right to be placed in the LRE. The term means that, to the maximum extent appropriate, school districts must educate students with disabilities in the regular classroom with appropriate aids and supports, referred to as "supplementary aids and services," along with their nondisabled peers in the school they would attend if not disabled (IDEA). 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. And a child with a disability cannot be removed from a general education classroom merely to meet the needs of the school (34 C.F.R. 300.116 (b)(3)(e)).

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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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The rationale for self-contained special education goes beyond environmental conditions. Mock and Kauffman (2002) maintain that special educators receive specific training in their fields and that they are not trained to work with students with a variety of disabilities. These scholars state, "The training that these teachers receive is specific to the population with which they will work. Special educators are not trained to be a 'jack of all trades'; instead they are prepared to master one" (Mock & Kauffman, p. 289). In 1991, Maloney defended the necessity of separate learning classrooms for children with learning disabilities due to a need for an alternative instructional environment, as well as the use of special materials and different teaching strategies. Fuchs and Fuchs (1994) also defend self-contained placements because students have access to well-trained teachers, use of evaluation systems for tracking student progress, monitoring of student growth, and development of effective educational plans.

Many proponents of educating students in self-contained settings contend there is lack of empirical evidence for the effectiveness of inclusion (Kauffman & Hallahan, 1994). This appears to be in direct opposition to the body of research detailed previously that suggests inclusive settings generate many more benefits for students with and without disabilities across academic and social domains. In many ways separate classrooms and schools for students with disabilities continue not only because there are scholars who support these spaces, but because this is an unquestioned practice supported through teacher certification, university preparation programs, and school systems. Frattura and Capper (2007) argue that the separate funding of special education and general education maintains these separate systems. States have separate teaching certifications and many universities have separate preparation programs where faculty between special education and general education do not codesign their programs and curriculum and often times never work together. All of these factors contribute to maintaining separate special education systems. An unquestioned assumption exists that some students require a separate special education room or school (Frattura & Capper).

There has been a long-standing discussion in the field of special education about segregation and inclusion. In 1997, Brantlinger coined the term *traditionalist* to describe researchers in the discourse

community who support self-contained classrooms. She described traditionalists as those who endorse the special education traditions and rhetoric and do not see a need for restructuring special education (Brantlinger, p. 429). Fuchs et al. (1993) describe the researchers who want to keep an independent special education system as "conservatives," supporting the preservation of the continuum of placements and claiming that students with disabilities must acquire skills before being integrated into general education. Brantlinger (1997) also coined the term *inclusionists* to represent those researchers and scholars who oppose pull-out instruction, question the status quo of special education, and see a need for an overhaul of the system or a discontinuation of special education as a separate system (pp. 427–428).

The scholarly work that contends that self-contained settings are optimal and conducive for the individualized learning needs of students with disabilities served as the impetus for this empirical study. In an attempt to better understand this literature and to put it into context, the research team organized this investigation as a way to learn more about the realities of self-contained special education. The aim of this article is to compare the literature on the rationale for use of self-contained classes with the practices adopted in schools. This endeavor sought to address the following research question: What are the social, emotional, and academic experiences of students with disabilities placed in self-contained programs? Thus, we used the rationales from the literature to frame how we approached this study and the way we organized this article—*rationales* from the literature and *realities* from the data collected in this study.

Conceptual Framework

This research endeavor relies on a constructivist grounded theory framework (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Charmaz, 2005; Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001). Using this framework, "interpretation is essential" (Bogdan & Biklen, p. 26), and the researchers rely on that interpretation to address the research question stated above.

As necessitated by a constructivist framework, in order to be transparent about the interpretation of the research and the data collected in this study, it is important to position and contextualize the research team. Two of the four researchers have doctorates in

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

taken during each observation included data on student and staff behavior and dialogue. For each of the six settings, multiple researchers observed at least 3 days and as many as 20 days over the course of a 12-month period. In all cases, the team shared detailed reports of the data collection with school administration and staff. This served as a member check in that the staff both clarified what was seen as well as offered reflections to the research team.

Data Analysis

The research team met weekly to debrief and refine the data collection process as well as commence the constant comparative method of data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The researchers used a constant comparison method based in constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001) as a framework for analysis. Constructivist grounded theory is built upon grounded theory developed by Glaser and Strauss. The use of this method allowed the researchers to analyze data throughout the data collection process in an effort for each process to inform the other (Charmaz, 2005) for the duration of the research.

After the beginning of data collection, researchers developed preassigned coding systems from the literature on segregated special education services that helped focus on these particular areas of interest (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Specifically, the researchers identified major codes for data analysis including following the rationales for self-contained classrooms in the literature: *small protective community, limiting distractions, instruction, curriculum, and student behavior*. After sorting specific portions of the data according to the codes, the researchers identified subcodes (Bogdan & Biklen) and emerging themes independently (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Following the independent analysis, researchers compared findings as a way to check on selective interpretation and researcher bias (Patton, 1999).

In writing this article, we relied on areas of convergence of data. Given space limitations, the findings of this study are discussed using examples from the qualitative data that the team found to be representative of the experiences across the six settings. We recognize that lessons can be learned from outlier examples, but for the purposes of this article, the analysis of findings are reported based on themes and experiences common across the six settings.

Reliability and Validity

Ensuring reliability and validity was an essential piece in maintaining quality in this study (Patton, 2002). In order to establish reliability, we regularly reviewed each other's field notes to ensure consistency in data collection (Campbell, 1996). These checks of data allowed us to assess consistency in field notes and data collection across researchers. Golafshani (2003) indicates that many qualitative researchers equate validity with the trustworthiness and generalizability of the data collected. We recognize that the wide representation of ages and classrooms used in this study supports our ability to generalize results to other classrooms and that our member checks enhance the trustworthiness of the data. However, we acknowledge that the lack of representation of multiple classrooms at each age range or grade level poses minor threats to validity.

Findings

The major rationales from the literature on self-contained special education frame the discussion of findings. For each section, the rationale from scholars is provided to give context to the data found in these six settings, across five school districts and three states. These rationales for self-contained special education were (a) issues of community; (b) distraction-free environments; (c) specialized curriculum/instruction; and (d) behavior.

Community

Researchers who have argued for the need for self-contained settings claim that it is unrealistic to assume that all students with disabilities can be part of a general education classroom community (MacMillan, Gresham, & Forness, 1996). These scholars assert that students with disabilities are often shunned by their peers in general education classrooms, and therefore they are better off receiving an education in a self-contained setting away from their general education peers (Lewis, 2002). For example, MacMillan et al. claim that self-contained settings are more "protective" environments for students with disabilities. This suggests that self-contained settings serve as their own supportive community for students with disabilities that cannot be replicated in a mixed-ability, general education classroom.

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 "ooh" 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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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-

contained settings. We saw no evidence of a protective community; in fact the opposite appeared to be true. Additionally, classroom arrangement, instructional practices, and expectations in these self-contained classrooms severely limited peer interaction.

Throughout the observational set, no evidence of community was purposefully developed. Instances of students engaging in hostile and teasing behavior or students being isolated from each other can happen in general education classrooms as well. However, we found the rhetoric of self-contained classrooms as protective and safe places to be contradicted by this research.

Distractions

It is often the argument that students need self-contained settings because they need quiet, distraction-free learning environments. The reasoning here is that students require a “special” environment, in which to receive the “special” services, which are provided by the “specialized” instructors (Kauffman, Bantz, & McCullough, 2002). Scholars supporting the efficacy of self-contained placements use phrases such as “small group instruction,” “one-one-one instruction,” and “specialized instruction” and link them directly to the need for self-contained settings where students can receive this instruction without the distractions of the general education classroom and (sometimes more important) without distracting the general education students (Kauffman, Bantz, & McCullough; Kauffman, McGee, & Brigham, 2004; Maloney, 1991).

We provide two representative examples of the ways in which issues of distraction played out in the self-contained classrooms. In classroom E, Miles, a student with autism, was working on the Dolch sight word list. Joe, another student in the self-contained class, was hollering. Joe screamed.

The paraprofessional said to Miles, “Joe is fine.”
Joe screamed again.

The paraprofessional repeated to Miles, “Joe is fine.”

Joe was physically and forcefully moved to the time-out room that was attached to the classroom. Joe continued screaming.

Miles looked as if he might cry; his eyes fill with tears. Miles said, “Joe sad.”

Joe screamed, “Help me! You are hurting me!”

Again, the paraprofessional repeated to Miles, “Joe is fine.”

Joe’s screams gets higher, “Help! Get me out of here! You are hurting me!”

Miles covered his ears and leaned against the paraprofessional. Miles repeated, “Joe’s fine. Joe’s fine. Joe’s fine.”

The screaming from the time-out room lasted for 7 more minutes.

Miles did not work during this time, and to the observer he appeared sad, flustered, and distracted for 30 minutes after this incident.

At each observation in classroom E, the adults, teachers, and paraprofessionals talked loudly to students. Miles appeared to be distracted by that too. Teachers were talking to each other, and the paraprofessional had to remind a teacher that her side conversation was interrupting her instruction with Miles. This example is illustrative of the common students’ screams or loud noises in all of the self-contained classrooms that we visited.

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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.

In the second example of how distractions played out in the self-contained settings, Tanner, a student in classroom C, was commonly interrupted by other students. For Tanner, educational tasks were continually interrupted by loud student screams, but also by adults going in and out of the room and providing directions to other students across the room. During each observation, multiple specialists (e.g., occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech and language therapists) would enter or exit the room at different times, creating visible distractions for Tanner and other students. During one observation, the principal of this school walked through and said, “This classroom is so chaotic, I wonder how they get anything done in here.”

Additionally, half of Tanner’s time took place in noninstructional spaces. He was removed from his self-contained classroom to receive pull-out services. All of these services took place in settings that were not designed as instructional spaces. For example, Tanner’s time with the school counselor took place

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

said, "Keith, you have already done this project—you should go to another class today."

Keith turned, said nothing, and went toward music; he got to music class while the students were being told about the swimming plan. The music teacher said to Keith, "Hey, what are you doing here? What class are you supposed to be in?" Keith looked down at the floor and did not say anything. The music teacher said, "You skip this class to go to another class and then skip another class to come here?" Keith still looked at the floor and said nothing. The four students plus Keith went back to their self-contained classroom. One of the students said, "We are supposed to go swimming."

The teacher and the paraprofessional groaned and stood up. They walked the students toward to gym. The gym teacher greeted them in the hall. Ms. Penny, a general education teacher, was telling the gym teacher that she was having kids who did not bring their suits get something to read. The gym teacher looked surprised to see the students coming from the self-contained room and said to Ms. Penny and also to the students now coming from the self-contained room, "They don't need to bring anything and they will be walking while the others are swimming." The five students with no swimsuits went with the gym teacher. Three students looked visibly sad, and Keith, who had now been to three separate special area classes and not allowed in any of them, was still looking at the floor. It is important to note that Keith got sent out of gym class 12 minutes into the class time for getting into an altercation with a student and then did not "listen to the teacher." The researcher's notes from this observation raised an important question: "It is certainly likely that Keith's frustration about being bounced around and chastised set Keith up not for success but for failure. As an observer, I was frustrated just trying to figure out where we were going. I would imagine his frustration was worse."

Although the situations differed in each of the classrooms in this study, there were frequent examples of a lack of structure and schedule across all classrooms.

This example portrays the lack of structure, professional collaboration, and schedule that the

students in self-contained classroom A faced on a regular basis. This was the part of the day they are "mainstreamed" or "included" with the general education peers, but there are clear examples that they are not really part of those classrooms. More important, their schedule is clearly not set. They were bounced around from room to room: They were supposed to be swimming, but it is clear that no one, including the teacher in the self-contained room, knew about this plan. Structure, routines, and schedule are frequent rationales in the literature on self-contained classrooms as well as one of the reasons that the teacher in classroom A gave for why the students in her classroom "need to be there." This lack of structure and schedule seems to contradict the stated reasons for needing self-contained classrooms and certainly goes against meeting these students' needs.

Although the situations differed in each of the classrooms in this study, there were frequent examples of a lack of structure and schedule across all classrooms. Given the rationale that self-contained classrooms are needed to provide this kind of structure, the real lack of attending to issues of consistency and structure was clearly visible.

Context-Free/Meaningless Curriculum. The rationale in the literature states that self-contained rooms are needed to provide the specific, individualized teaching and learning that some students require. 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 addition, the curriculum was introduced via worksheets or "seatwork" with little opportunity for inquiry-based or cooperative learning. The one exception was in classroom A: There was an attempt to learn the science curriculum, because during one observation we observed a lesson on sound and how sound travels that was seemingly connected to the curriculum. In classroom C, Tanner's 6-hour day consisted of pointless tasks with little context and no connection to one another. Over the course of one observation Tanner, a 6-year-old with autism, was asked to sing "Happy Birthday" although it was no one's birthday in his class or in his family and no one's birthday coming in the next few weeks, pretend to brush his hair, sword fight, stand on one foot, pretend to fly, shake his body all over, answer questions about a Star Wars book, complete

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.

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 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

physically large sixth-grade boy, it was very hard for the paraprofessional to pull him in the wagon. Without being asked, Charlie would periodically grab and pull the railings and walls around in an effort to help the paraprofessional pull him and the wagon along.

As with both of these examples, the students in these self-contained rooms were not receiving instruction from specially trained and licensed teachers. Much of the academic work was delivered solely by a paraprofessional. Given that student work was not individualized nor particularly relevant to the needs of the specific student, it did not appear that the paraprofessionals were given significant guidance in terms of modifications and instruction. Conventional wisdom along with the rationales for self-contained special education suggest that separate settings allow students to receive more instruction from a certified special education teacher. In some of these special education settings the students were receiving their instruction from a paraprofessional instead of a special education teacher for a majority of the school day. Collectively, these 27 paraprofessionals had fewer than 8 credit hours of training in special education but were providing the majority of the instruction and service. It is also important to note that in two of the classrooms, noncertified teachers were being used because there were "not certified teachers available" to teach in these classrooms.

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 ... 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.

Behavior. In the article "What's Special About Special Education for Students With Emotional and Behavioral Disorders?" Landrum et al. (2003) suggest that students with behavior difficulties require structured settings and interventions that cannot be provided in the general education setting. This sentiment is echoed by MacMillan et al. (1996), who argue on the lack of empirical evidence that students with disabilities benefit socially or behaviorally from being included in general education environments,

suggesting that the alternative (self-contained setting) produces more beneficial social and behavioral outcomes. These traditionalist scholars contend that students with social or behavioral problems do not acquire appropriate behavior by observing it being modeled by peers without disabilities, which supports the point that if they are not learning appropriate behavior from their peers without disabilities then there should be nothing wrong with placing those students in self-contained settings.

The data from this study have provided insight into the behavioral techniques and behavioral management used across all the settings. We provide two examples of the kinds of common behavioral management in these self-contained classrooms. In classroom E, Sean displayed mild behaviors during independent work time (he slid his paper off his table, put his feet on his chair, slid under the table, stood up and tried to walk away from the assistant). He was given a 10-minute time-out for this behavior. The types of behavior management techniques used in this classroom were most often reactive and punitive. Additionally, the staff in this classroom was confrontational with Sean even though he maintained a calm and happy demeanor. Few attempts were made to examine the communicative intent behind his behavior. In fact, at one point Sean reached out for an electronic communication system and pressed the phrases "Is it time for lunch yet? I feel sad." The assistant did not respond to the communicative attempts as such; instead she said, "Time to work." Sean then pushed the buttons "Is it time for lunch yet? Is it time for computer? I feel sad." Again Sean's very clear communicative attempts were ignored, and the assistant said, "You are not finished, keep working." He finished his letter worksheet and moved on to a cut-and-paste worksheet, which he completed with assistance. During the hour and a half that Sean worked on worksheets, the paraprofessional threatened Sean four times with statements like, "Do you want to eat lunch? Well then, you better do your work." This type of behavior management technique that threatens to take away food is inappropriate for any student. However, it is particularly inappropriate for a student who has Prader-Willi syndrome and has many food issues, like Sean does. Overall, Sean's occasional noncompliance was very mild, and often understandable, because he was expected to participate in tasks for long periods of time that were

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. Self-contained special education audit.

Step 1: Data Collection

Use this tool to guide the collection of data during observations and afterwards.

Theme - Specific Data to Collect	Data	Comments/ Observations
Part A - Time: How much time each day/week is devoted to _____?		
Academic instruction?		
Individual work time?		
Rewards?		
Consequences/punishments/aversives?		
Functional skills?		
Transitions?		
Part B - Standards & Accountability: How much access to general education curriculum and content in _____?		
Reading & Writing?		
Mathematics?		
Science?		
Social Studies?		
Foreign language?		
Fine arts?		
Physical education?		
Other?		
Part C - Social Relationships: How much and what kinds of social interaction _____?		
With peers in their special education classroom?		
With general education peers?		
With general education peers their own age?		
Part C - Restraints and seclusion:		
How and when are restraints and seclusions used?		
Do the parents know each time seclusions/restraints are used?		
Have the parents/guardians given permission to seclude/restrain?		
Who is trained? In what? And are the trained staff the ones using restraint? When is this the case? When is it not?		
Part D - Use of Staff:		
Which and how many staff members are assigned to work with the students in this classroom?		
What is each of the staff members doing?		
What does the staff do when children are absent/in therapy/other times not in the room?		

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

a separate setting is inherently unequal, many students with disabilities remain in separate settings. Self-contained special education settings continue to exist in almost every school district across the United States. In many cases, school administrators often lack the knowledge and skills around issues of special education (Frattura & Capper, 2007; Sirotnik & Kimball, 1994) and therefore defer to special education professionals about what kinds of programming students with significant disabilities need. This hands-off approach results in a lack of oversight of these settings and a belief that the services being provided are appropriate and meaningful.

Nearly 25 years after significant reforms in special education and the Regular Education Initiative (Will, 1984), which recommended that special and general education personnel and programs work cooperatively to combine their skills and resources to meet the educational needs of each student, the GAO report (2009) raises similar concerns. Will expressed concerns about the effectiveness of the traditional segregated approach in providing education to students with special education needs. She stated that the “pull-out approach to the educational difficulties of students with learning problems has failed in many instances to meet the educational needs of these students and has created, however unwittingly, barriers to their successful education” (p. 412). Now, the GAO report, seen in connection with this study, raises serious concerns about what happens in self-contained settings. These settings are often offered as a legally required continuum of placements (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). However, when students with the same disabilities are being included successfully in other schools across the nation, this research builds upon the work of other scholars who raise the question, “Are there rich and lasting benefits to students with disabilities from this type of separate education?”

We offer specific implications for school administrators as a result of this research. Special education administrators and general education administrators together need to conduct an audit of self-contained settings in their schools and the settings to which they send their students in other districts or cooperatively funded programs. We recommend that this audit include significant observation and examination of the practices that occur in those settings to address the overarching question, “What is the current reality in the self-

contained classrooms?” This audit will not be effective if leaders turn this over to someone else to complete. We suggest that special education and general education administrators collect data through observation and not rely solely on asking staff for information. *Figure 1* is this audit and provides examples of the kinds of questions and data to collect in completing the observations for this audit.

Conclusion

Does self-contained special education deliver on its promises? After examining the social and academic experiences of students who attend these six classrooms, our response is no. The students in these classrooms are not receiving the purported promise of self-contained classrooms. They were not learning in a location with a protective and/or strong community. They were in much more, not less, distracting settings. Students were not receiving access to the general education curriculum in an individualized manner. Teachers and paraprofessionals were not using thoughtful behavioral interventions but were instead using threats, time-outs, and restraints. Given the empirical and legal preference for inclusive schooling stated above, moving students back into the general education classroom with appropriate supports and services should be seriously considered.

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