

Considerations in Placement Decisions for Students with Extensive Support Needs: An Analysis of LRE Statements

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### Abstract

Special education consists of specially designed services available for students with disabilities, and should be available across placements. Students with the most significant disabilities continue to be taught in restrictive settings, despite accumulating evidence suggesting their special education services can be delivered effectively in general education settings. Every individualized education program (IEP) must contain a statement describing how the student will be provided a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. The present study used content analysis to examine least restrictive environment statements of 88 students' individualized education programs (IEPs) to determine what factors, including supplementary aids and services, were considered in making placement decisions. We further analyzed the classes and activities in which students participated in general education settings. Findings reveal supplementary aids and services were not considered in placement decisions, although a number of factors centering on curricular considerations, environmental demands, student deficit, and personnel requirements were noted in making placement decisions. We further found students primarily participated in non-academic instruction while in general education settings. Implications for policy, practice, and research are included.

*Keywords:* Least restrictive environment; inclusion; supplementary aids and services; individualized education programs; severe disabilities.

Considerations in Placement Decisions for Students with Extensive Support Needs:  
An Analysis of LRE Statements

The U.S. Department of Education reports approximately 51 million children were taught nationwide in K-12 schools during Fall 2017. Approximately 1-2% of these students are considered to have extensive support needs (ESN), defined as those students who need on-going pervasive supports across academic and daily living domains, who may be classified with disabilities including autism, intellectual disability, and multiple disabilities, and are eligible to take their state's alternate assessment (Taub, McCord, & Ryndak, 2017). This group of students has long been excluded from schools and communities (Kurth, Morningstar, & Kozleski, 2014; Smith & Wehmeyer, 2012). Yet, U.S. federal education law has consistently stated all students with disabilities have the right to receive a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act; IDEA, 2004).

In describing the least restrictive environment (LRE), Section 612(5)(a) of IDEA states students should only be removed from the "regular educational environment" when a student's needs cannot be met in that setting, even with the use of supplementary aids and services. Supplementary aids and services are defined in IDEA as "aids, services, and other supports that are provided in regular education classes, other education-related settings, and in extracurricular and nonacademic settings, to enable children with disabilities to be educated with nondisabled children to the maximum extent appropriate" (§300.42). These may include supports for physical accessibility, instructional supports, social, behavioral, communication needs, and collaborative supports (Kurth et al., 2018).

Section 618 of IDEA further requires U.S. states and territories to annually report the percentage of students who are removed from general education 80% or more of the school day,

40% or more of the school day, or are taught in entirely separate schools or classrooms. Through this acknowledgement of a continuum of placement options in the IDEA regulations, many assert IDEA in fact legitimizes a continuum of placement options and endorses restricting certain students into settings with diminished access to the activities, discourse, and curriculum of general education (Jackson, Ryndak, & Wehmeyer, 2008-2009; Sauer & Jorgensen, 2016).

Furthermore, a growing body of research documents negative consequences of teaching students with ESN in restrictive settings (i.e., settings with less access to the general education curriculum, activities, and discourse than general education settings; Sauer & Jorgensen, 2016). Students taught in more restrictive settings may experience less rigorous standards-based instruction (Bacon, Rood, & Ferri, 2016) and have less rigorous individualized education program (IEP) goals (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010) than students taught in general education settings. For example, students may be more passively engaged in learning (Pennington & Courtade, 2015), learn in distracting environments with limited access to grade-referenced curriculum (Kurth, Born, & Love, 2016), and receive more limited specialized instruction (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Orsati, & Cosier, 2011) than students who are taught in general education settings. Ruppard, Fisher, Olson, and Orlando (2018) found that students with ESN were 10 times more likely to be exposed to academic literacy content in general education settings than in more restrictive settings. Further, other researchers argue the only means of accessing the general education curriculum is within the general education classroom setting itself (Jackson et al., 2008-2009). In summarizing the research describing instruction in self-contained classrooms, Kurth et al. (2016) noted these classrooms were characterized by lack of engaging instruction or highly qualified instructors, with students denied access to effective communication and learning partners.

Conversely, research has demonstrated consistent benefits of instruction in general education settings for students with ESN. Students taught in general education settings have improved access to the general education curriculum and grade level standards (Soukup, Wehmeyer, Bashinski, & Bovaird, 2007) and improved access to highly qualified instructors (Mason-Williams, Bettini, & Gagnon, 2017). Perhaps as a consequence, students with ESN taught in general education settings experience better outcomes than those taught in separate settings, as demonstrated in a growing body of research. For example, students with intellectual disability made more improvements in literacy instruction than similar students in separate settings (Dessemontet, Bless, & Morin, 2012). Others have noted improvement in both social and communication outcomes for students with ESN taught in general education settings (Carter & Hughes, 2005; Foreman, Arthur-Kelly, Pascoe, & King, 2004). Yet, general education (inclusive) settings are not available for most students with ESN. Morningstar, Kurth, and Johnson (2017) reviewed a decade of data on access to the least restrictive environment, and found students with ESN are predominantly taught in separate classes, with little evidence of improvement in access to less restrictive settings. Similarly, Kleinert and colleagues (2015) found students with complex communication needs who use augmentative and alternative communication devices are significantly more likely to be taught in separate settings, while students with higher expressive communication, reading, and math scores are more likely to be taught in general education settings.

Preliminary research describes why this trend of persistent exclusion of students with ESN might occur. Teachers continue to identify social inclusion as more important than progress and participation in general education for students with ESN (Ballard & Dymond, 2017); consequently, inclusion in core academic instruction remains a low priority for many teachers.

Others assume the intensive services needed by students with ESN require separate settings where professional expertise is believed to reside (Mayton, Carter, Zhang, & Wheeler, 2014). Still others assume students with ESN are able to access general education by participating in alternate curricular instructional activities outside of the general education classroom, although the pace, rigor, and content of this curriculum is not comparable to that covered in general education (Bacon et al., 2016).

Student characteristics have been associated with placement in more and less restrictive settings. In analyzing placement for students with autism, White and colleagues (2007) found students with lower IQ and communication scores were more likely to be taught in more restrictive settings. Students with ESN who have higher social skills ratings are more likely to be placed in less restrictive settings (Lyons, Cappadocia, & Weiss, 2011), as are younger students (Harris & Handleman, 2000) and those with fewer externalizing behavior problems (Lauderdale-Littin, Howell, & Blacher, 2013). Researchers have also investigated teacher decision making related to placement, finding teachers place hypothetical students with more significant cognitive support needs in more restrictive settings (Segall & Campbell, 2014).

Further complicating the analysis of LRE for students with ESN is the fact most research relies on aggregate data compiled by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. While useful in describing broad trends, these data cannot well account for individual student characteristics, nor how students are included in general education (i.e., describe the classes or activities in general education in which students are present). Thus, analysis of these data provides limited information beyond percentage of time spent in setting. Finally, no known studies have analyzed actual LRE statements in student IEPs; therefore, factors considered in placement decisions are poorly understood. Given these limitations of

existing LRE research, and that over 6 million students receive special education services in the U.S. (and thus, LRE decisions are made at least 6 million times annually), the present study addresses the following research questions: (1) What factors (e.g., supplementary aids and services) do IEP teams record as considerations when making LRE decisions for students with ESN? and (2) In what classes or activities do students with ESN participate in general education, as explicated in IEPs?

## Method

### Participants

The IEPs of 88 students with ESN were obtained following approved university Institutional Review Board Procedures. The IEPs in this analysis are part of a series of studies on IEP content for students with ESN (Kurth et al., 2018). As part of this exploratory study, we solicited IEPs representing a range of placement options to fully explore the range of LRE justifications present in student IEPs. A sample of 41 teachers from six states, known by one or more of the research team members who teach students with ESN was solicited to provide one to three de-identified IEPs ( $m = 2.1$  IEPs); we purposefully solicited IEPs representing various states and a range of placement options to fully explore the range of LRE considerations in student IEPs. Once teachers masked all identifying information, they were provided to the research team for analysis. To be included in the analysis, each IEP needed to meet the following inclusion criteria: (1) IEP written for a student in grade K-12; and (2) the student had a significant support need, as evidenced by present levels sections and/or eligibility for the alternate assessment (depending on student age); see procedures section below.

The 88 IEPs ( $m = 2.1$  IEPs per teacher) were developed for students ranging in age from 5 to 18 ( $m = 10.5$ ), representing grades K to 12; because the exact age of the student could not be

determined in 10 IEPs, statistical descriptions of ages of those students are not included. IEPs from 63 males and 25 females were included, and student primary disability labels included autism ( $n = 32$ ), intellectual disability ( $n = 19$ ), orthopedic impairment ( $n = 6$ ), other health impairment ( $n = 6$ ), developmental delay ( $n = 5$ ), multiple disabilities ( $n = 7$ ), speech language disorder ( $n = 3$ ), emotional behavioral disorder ( $n = 2$ ), hearing impairment ( $n = 1$ ), and deaf-blindness ( $n = 1$ ). In eight instances, the student's primary disability could not be determined, as this information was obscured in the de-identification process. While the primary disability labels of some students represent categories typically not associated with "severe" disabilities (e.g., other health impairment), the students met inclusion criteria as being eligible to take the alternate assessment. Further descriptions of students confirmed the ESN for participating students; for example, while one student was classified in the "other health impairment" category, the student had extensive medical support needs, used a speech generating device, had intellectual disability, and impaired vision. As another example, a student with a primary disability label of "emotional behavioral disorder" also had an intellectual disability and used a speech generating device to communicate.

### **Data Collection**

Prior to collecting data from each IEP, we verified that the participating student was a student with ESN. First, disability classification was recorded for each student. Students with "low-incidence" disabilities (autism, intellectual disability, and multiple disabilities) were considered eligible for inclusion. However, because disability labels are imperfect representations of student strengths and needs, we further reviewed the present levels of academic and functional performance (PLAAFP) sections of the IEP to determine student skills and support needs. We determined the extent to which students had support needs across

PLAAFP domains (cognitive, academic, functional performance). Students who had documented support needs across these domains were included (e.g., performing significantly below grade level academically, obtained significantly low scores on measures of cognitive and functional performance, and/or required extensive supports across domains, such as self-care and communication). Finally, we examined student eligibility for state and district assessments sections of the IEP. Although there is variation across states, it is clear that the population of students who most clearly are identified with alternate assessment processes are those with significant intellectual disability (Kearns, Kleinert, Thurlow, Gong, & Quenemoen, 2015). Together, students were included who met inclusion criteria due to extensiveness of support needs as evidenced in disability label and/or PLAAFP and/or alternate assessment eligibility. Students who did not meet criteria were excluded, such as students who had a disability classification of intellectual disability but had IQ scores in the “mild impairment” range and did not have support needs across PLAAFP domains.

Eligibility and demographic information, including age, gender, and disability label were entered into a Microsoft (MS) Excel document. Next, the LRE statement of each IEP was located. The statement in the IEP was copied verbatim into a MS Excel document. Next, we used IDEA Section 618 categories to determine student placement. Students spending 80% or more of the school day in general education settings were categorized as taught in ‘inclusion’ settings. Students spending between 41-79% of the school day in general education were taught in ‘resource’ settings. Those students spending less than 40% of the school day in general education settings were categorized as taught in ‘self-contained’ classes. No students were taught in separate schools or home/hospital settings. These data were also entered in the MS Excel document. Finally, any description of classes or activities in which students participated in

general education settings was located. This information was copied verbatim into the MS Excel document.

To determine percent of time students were included in general education, each IEP was thoroughly reviewed to locate percent of time spent in general education. If this percentage was present ( $n = 2$ ), it was entered into an MS Excel spreadsheet. When the IEP document did not contain a percentage of time in general education, the research team calculated a reasonable estimate by dividing the number of minutes the students received instruction in the general education setting by the total number of instructional minutes on the IEP. This number was then multiplied by 100 to determine the percent of time in general education. This procedure was used in 46 IEPs. For 38 IEPs, the research team could not determine a percentage of time in general education using either of these methods. In these cases, we used other information contained in the IEP to estimate the category of placement (i.e., inclusion, resource, or self-contained). In one IEP, the category (resource) was reported without any percent, and this information was documented in our MS Excel sheet. In the remaining 37 instances, we examined the IEP document for descriptions of where related and special education services were provided, along with LRE statements, to assign students to a category of placement. For example, in 11 instances, IEPs referred to students being taught in general education for all services except for speech therapy; these students were assigned to the 'inclusion' category. Eleven IEPs referred to students receiving most or all academic instruction in special education settings (e.g., "reading, writing, math, speech, and OT") and some instruction in general education (e.g., "science, recess, specials") and were subsequently assigned to the "resource" category. Sixteen IEPs referred to no or very minimal time in general education (e.g., only attending lunch in general education)

and were assigned to the category “self-contained.” In two cases, we were unable to determine a category of placement even after thorough review of the IEP.

### **Data Analysis**

A content analysis was conducted to analyze data specific to the research questions. Two codebooks were developed (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) for the purposes of this study. To develop the LRE codebook, each author read all 88 LRE statements and independently developed a list of factors identified in LRE statements. The research team then met and compared factors each author had identified. Similar factors across authors were combined and defined with keywords identified, resulting in a preliminary codebook consisting of codes (factors considered), keywords, examples, and non-examples of each code. The authors then each re-coded 30% of IEPs using the existing codebook, and again met to discuss the efficacy of the codebook. This iterative process continued until the authors were confident the codebook captured the range of LRE factors described in the IEPs. The LRE codebook consists of five domains and 19 factors, as seen in Table 1.

Similarly, a codebook was developed to determine which classes or activities students with ESN attended in general education settings. To develop the inclusive class and activities codebook, a similar strategy was used. First, each author read each IEP and searched for information describing what classes or activities students were to be taught in general education settings. The research team then met and compared classes and activities each author had identified. Some classes and activities were combined (e.g., “reading” and “English language arts”) and defined with keywords identified, resulting in a preliminary codebook consisting of codes (class names), keywords, examples, and non-examples of each code. The authors then each re-coded 30% of IEPs using the existing codebook, reaching consensus on class codes.

Data analysis was completed similarly for both LRE factors and class inclusion codes. To analyze the first research question, LRE statements, we applied a dichotomous rating for each LRE statement code, so that a '0' was entered for LRE factors that were not present in the statement, and a '1' was entered for LRE factors or classes that were present in the statement. Because many LRE statements cited multiple factors in each statement, the total number of factors considered exceeds the number of LRE statements. Each author rated 35% of the LRE statements, with one author co-rating 30% of the LRE statements to ensure consistency of coding across authors. Inter-rater reliability was calculated by dividing the number of agreements by the sum of the number of ratings in agreement and disagreement (total ratings), multiplied by 100 to obtain a percentage. Inter-rater reliability was 93%. When there was a disagreement, the raters reviewed the codebook and discussed the rating until agreement was reached.

To analyze the second research question, the classes or activities students participated in general education, each author read the IEPs and searched for information describing the activities in which students participated in general education settings. This was compiled into a list. As with the LRE statements, '0' was entered if the student was not included in the named class, and a '1' was entered if the student was included in the named class. Each author rated 30% of IEPs for the presence and absence of class inclusion statements. Inter-rater reliability was calculated as previously described. Categories of classes/activities in which students participated in general education were created (academic, non-academic, recreation, and special education). These categories were used to identify the number and percentage of IEPs that explicitly stated inclusion of students in academic courses, in non-academic courses, or in no courses (only recreation or special education activities). As with the LRE statements and included classes, '0' was entered if an IEP did not state inclusion in courses within each category, and '1' was entered

if the IEP stated inclusion in a course within each category. The total number of ones in each category were summed and then divided by 88 to find the percentage.

## Results

### Student Time in General Education and Factors Considered

We could determine exact percent of time in general education for 46 IEPs (52%). Of those, students spent an average of 26% of the school day in general education settings, 28% in resource settings, and 46% in self-contained settings. Of those IEPs where placement category was estimated ( $n = 42$ ), 29% were taught in inclusive settings, 29% in resource settings, and 42% in self-contained settings. Contrary to guidelines in IDEA Section 612(a)(5), which compel IEP teams to only remove students from general education “when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily,” no LRE justification statement in this analysis referred to supplementary aids and services, nor any discussion of how these were considered when making LRE decisions. Instead, IEP teams identified a variety of other factors for making these decisions. As seen in Table 1, a total of 19 factors were identified and grouped into five domains: curricular and instructional, environmental, problematic, student, and personnel considerations. A total of 279 factors were reported in the 88 IEPs examined.

**Curricular and instructional domain.** Four factors were identified in the curricular and instructional domain. The most frequent ( $n = 26$ ) was specially designed instruction. In 13 cases, this exact phrase was used (e.g., “[Student] needs specially designed instruction ...”). In the remaining statements, variations of specially designed instruction were reported (e.g., “specialized instruction” and “specialized education”). In all instances, this statement was used to justify removal from general education for specific activities or times of the school day. For

example, “[Student] needs specially designed instruction in reading, math, sensory regulation, school behavior and social skills in the special education environment.” The need for specific interventions was the next most common factor in the curricular and instructional domain ( $n = 19$ ). In these statements, IEP teams cited a need for more intensive or individualized instruction in 10 statements, using phrases such as “direct instruction” and “individualized instruction.” In six statements, IEP teams cited the need for frequent practice, repetition, and a need for steps to be broken down for students to learn. The remaining statements referred to specialized equipment or communication supports. Once again, these statements were uniformly cited to justify removal from general education settings (e.g., Student needs “frequent repetition to meet his goals and objectives. This is only possible in a special education setting”).

Curriculum was cited 17 times in the LRE statements. Student need for alternate curricula were cited in 10 of these statements, such as student needs a “replaced curriculum” or a “functional curriculum.” In five cases, the IEP team appeared to refer to IEP goals as the source of curriculum (e.g., “Participation in regular education is not appropriate because [Student] needs to work on her specific IEP goals in the areas of functional reading, functional writing, functional math and daily living skills”). Finally, in two cases the IEP team reported the general education curriculum is not appropriate (e.g., “[Student] receives instruction [on skills] which are not part of general curriculum”). Again, each of these statements were used to justify removal from general education. The final factor in the curricular and instructional domain was instructional configuration ( $n = 16$ ). The need for small group instruction was cited in 7 of these statements, followed by one-to-one instruction ( $n = 4$ ) or some combination of these factors in five statements (e.g., “[Student] needs small group or one-to-one instruction”). All statements in this factor were cited as justifications for removal from general education.

**Environmental domain.** Four factors were identified in the environmental domain. The first factor referred to the presence of a continuum of placement options. “Continuum” thus accounted for 29 statements. In 14 of these, a general “special education setting” was referred to, as in the student would “leave the classroom to work...in a special education environment.” Nine statements referred to specific special education classrooms, such as the “intensive resource program” or “specialized program for students with significant disabilities.” The remaining six statements referred to times in which the student would be taught somewhere besides general education because the general education setting is inadequate (e.g., “away from the general education setting”). These statements were all used to support removal from general education settings. Seventeen statements in this domain referred to the inadequacy of general education settings to meet student needs. All of these statements included some statement that general education was not always appropriate, such as “[Student] has significant learning and behavioral needs that cannot be met in the regular education classroom,” or the student requires “instruction [that] is beyond what can be provided in the general education setting.” All statements in the “general education is inadequate” section were used to justify removal from general education.

Considerations about the learning environment, referred to as setting needs, were also cited as a factor considered in LRE decisions. In eight of these statements, the need for a “highly structured” learning environment was cited. The remaining statements referred to the need for quiet, calm, or distraction-free learning settings. Once more, these statements were all used to justify removal from general education. The remaining factor in the environmental domain referred to benefits of general education ( $n = 4$ ). In three of the statements, no specific reason was provided for remaining in general education for all or part of the day (e.g., “[Student] will participate with non-identified students in [general education] classes, curriculum,

extracurricular activities except while receiving special ed [sic] and related services outside the regular classroom”). One of the statements, however, highlighted specific benefits for placement in general education: “[Student] will receive the majority of special education services in his general education classroom in order to benefit from exposure to general education curriculum and positive peer modeling.”

**Problematic statements domain.** In our analysis of LRE statements, we encountered a number of statements that were problematic for various reasons, primarily relating to lack of specificity, lack of individualization, instances in which no statement was written in the IEP, and instances in which the justification statement was more of a report of current placement practices. In total, we identified 43 LRE statements that were not individualized or not measurable. In 19 IEPs, no LRE statement was found or was left blank. In seven cases, the exact same statement was used (with at times pronouns changed). For example, the statement “[student] needs specialized instruction and support not available in the general education classroom” appeared verbatim in five IEPs. In another five IEPs, there was a question, such as, “Can the needs of the student be met in a less restrictive environment?” IEP teams then answered either “yes” or “no,” and this constituted the entire LRE justification. Throughout our analysis, we found LRE statements that were not measurable or objective, such as “[Student] will be with his general education peers at all times other than when he is pulled out for special education services or nursing services.” Finally, we identified 15 LRE statements we called “not a justification,” because they were statements of current services than justification for placement decisions (e.g., “[Student] will receive OT 30 mins a week in the special ed [sic] setting and two 30-minute sessions with speech and language in the special ed [sic] setting”).

**Student domain.** Seven factors were identified in the student domain. The most prevalent was related to student deficits, which was coded 21 times. These deficit statements were used to justify placement outside of general education. For example, “Due to [Student] delays in math, language arts/reading, and life skills, she will receive direct daily instruction in the resource room to best meet her specific learning needs.” Another example of this focus on student deficits is evident in the following statement: “[Student] is functioning below grade level and requires direct, one-on-one or small group instruction in order to address her needs.” Relatedly, student behavior was coded in 11 statements, again to justify removal from general education. For example, “[Student]’s undesired behaviors interfere with her learning and the learning of others around her in general education classes. She will participate in general education classes with her peers when it is appropriate.” In six instances, the student’s IDEA disability label or medical diagnosis was used to justify their exclusion from general education. For example, “Due to his OHI diagnosis he needs [a] classroom environment that provides highly structured setting and opportunities for repeated drill and practice.” Five statements referred to student need for breaks as a reason to leave the general education setting, such as: “He may spend time out of the regular education environment for sensory breaks.” Statements referring to health and care, safety, and sensory needs ( $n = 4$  each) complete the factors in this domain, including statements such as, “[Student] requires some extra support with personal hygiene that takes him away from the general education setting. Eating also takes longer for [Student].”

**Personnel domain.** Two factors were identified within the personnel domain. The first, related services, were coded 17 times. In all instances, the student was removed from the general education setting to work with related services personnel, as illustrated in the following

statement: “[Student] will receive OT and Speech services outside of the general education classroom.” Finally, in six instances, IEP teams noted students would work with other specialized services personnel. In three of these cases, assistance from special education staff occurred outside of general education, such as: “[Student] may leave the classroom to work with special education staff.” In two instances, it appeared support from special education staff occurred in general education, such as “[Student] will receive the majority of special education services in his general education classroom...Special education services will be provided by a certified special education teacher, or by para-educators under the direct instruction of a certified teacher.” In another instance, it was not clear where special education personnel would provide support: “Without the interventions of the specialized instruction and support provided by the special education staff, it would be difficult for [Student] to learn basic concepts and coping strategies.”

### **Student Participation in General Education Settings**

Analysis of 88 IEPs revealed students with ESN were explicitly included in, and excluded from, a range of classes, activities, supports, and services. Relatively small numbers of students were explicitly included in, or excluded from, all general education settings (4% and 2%, respectively). In most cases, IEPs specified times of inclusion and exclusion. We identified a total of 163 classes and activities in which students were included in general education settings and 216 from which students with ESN were excluded. Thirty-five IEPs (40%), explicitly stated students would participate in general education academic courses, while 54 (60%) explicitly stated students would participate only in general education non-academic courses.

**Classes, activities, supports, and services in which students participated in general education classes or activities.** Students were reported to participate in non-academic classes

and activities, academic activities and classes, recreation activities, and special education activities and classes, and all activities in general education settings (see Table 2).

Approximately 29% of the general education classes/activities in the sample were non-academic activities and classes, comprised mainly of “electives/specials” and specific specials classes, such as physical education, music, and art ( $n = 47$ ). Nearly as many participated in academic activities and classes in general education settings, including literacy (reading and writing), math, science, and social studies ( $n = 45$ ). Approximately 17% of the general education classes or activities were recreation activities, which included activities such as lunch and recess. In 14% of the classes or activities students participated in general education settings, the activities were better characterized as special education activities and classes, such as adaptive physical education, occupational therapy, and community-based instruction. In 9% of the sample of general education setting class activities, the research team could not determine with certainty which activities occurred in general education settings (e.g., “center time” and “specially designed instruction in general education”). Finally, in 6 cases, the IEP team reported students participated in all activities and classes in the general education setting (4%).

**Classes, activities, supports, and services in which students were excluded.** Analysis of IEPs revealed students were explicitly excluded from general education settings for related services, academic activities and classes, individualized supports, and skills for daily living (see Table 3). Related services (e.g., speech, occupational, and physical therapy) constituted the largest area of exclusion from general education settings, with 35% of identified activities. Nearly 30% of the activities explicitly excluded academic activities and classes, including literacy and math. Students were further excluded from general education settings to obtain individualized supports in 16% of the identified activities, including services such as skill

instruction related to social and behavior needs. Students were also excluded from general education settings to receive instruction in skills for daily living in 15% of the activities. In 5 instances, the IEP team reported the student was excluded from all activities and classes in the general education setting (2%). Finally, in 1% of the cases, we were unable to determine in which classes students were excluded.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this exploratory study of student IEPs was to understand what factors IEP teams document when making LRE decisions, and to describe the general education classes or activities in which students with ESN participate. The findings of this study offer useful extensions of existing literature on LRE and inclusive education, which have relied on aggregate data to report percent of time in general education settings. Our findings offer preliminary information describing what factors IEP teams document as considerations when making those placement decisions as well as how students are included in general education settings.

Although most students in the sample spent at least part of the school day in general education settings, IEP teams identified many factors that justified their removal from these settings. In fact, nearly every LRE statement can be characterized as a description of why students should be taught outside of the general education setting. Often these justifications hinged on perceived incapacities of students with ESN to benefit from general education settings or curricula, including needs for specific interventions, types of instruction, type of curriculum, and student support needs.

A number of concerning findings emerged from our analysis of LRE justification statements, including the lack of individualized statements. Many IEPs had no clear LRE justification statement section, the section of the IEP was left blank, lacked criteria to make the

LRE statement measurable or objective, or appeared not to be individualized. In many of these cases, it would appear the IEP template used by IEP teams resulted in a lack of individualization, such as asking teams a yes / no question, or lack of sections in which IEP teams were reminded to consider all placement options and describe why a particular decision was made for that student at that time. In other cases, the open-ended nature of the prompt resulted in teams simply restating current placement practices, rather than documenting a discussion about the likely benefits and disadvantages of various placement options.

We were also concerned about factors IEP teams documented as considerations in making LRE decisions. According to IDEA (Sec. 612[29]), special education is defined as “specially designed instruction.” IDEA further stipulates students are eligible to receive special education services if they (a) have a disability and (b) need special education services by reason of their disability (Sec. 612[3][A]). Yet in our analysis, we found IEP teams justified removal of students with disabilities because of these criteria (i.e., having a disability and requiring specially designed instruction). We assert this contradicts the LRE requirement of IDEA, in which students are both assumed to have a disability and require specially designed instruction to be eligible for IDEA services, and should only be removed from general education settings “when the nature or severity of the disability of the child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily” (Sec. 612[5][A]). Relatedly, we found no LRE justification statements referring to the provision of supplementary aids and services, nor any discussion of how these were considered when making LRE decisions.

Of further concern, IEP teams made a number of unsubstantiated assumptions about students and settings. Student disability label and deficits were often cited as reasons for excluding students from general education settings. Yet the LRE statements did not offer

evidence that teams had attempted to provide supplementary aids and services that would facilitate their participation in general education, such as adapted curricula, specific instructional strategies, instructional configurations, or personnel in general education settings. Our analysis found little evidence of the reasoning of IEP team's decisions in providing these supports within the special education setting. Yet, research has demonstrated students can be taught adapted curricula in general education settings (e.g., Kurth & Keegan, 2014), that special education personnel can provide instruction in general education settings (e.g., Solis, Vaughn, Swanson, & McCulley, 2012), that various instructional configurations can be used in general education settings (e.g., Sweigart & Landrum, 2015), and that instructors can provide instruction to students who are learning different content or at different rates in general education settings (e.g., Jimenez & Kamei, 2015).

Our analysis of IEPs also described the classes and activities in which students were included, and excluded, raising further concerns. Our findings revealed students have limited access to inclusive academic instruction (39.8% of IEPs), with access to general education occurring in non-academic instruction including electives, recreation, and special education services in approximately 60% of specified activities. Our limited sample size prohibits generalization of these findings, but raises concerns that access to general education remains limited to non-academic periods for many students with ESN. Inclusive education has been demonstrated to lead to positive post-school outcomes for students with disabilities (Test et al., 2009). Academic instruction is also important because students with ESN have the right to full educational opportunity (Courtade, Spooner, Browder, & Jimenez, 2012), are capable of learning academic skills (e.g., Spooner, Root, Saunders, & Browder, 2018), and such skills prepare students for post-school outcomes (e.g., Test et al., 2009). Together, the findings of this analysis

suggest the percentage of time in general education masks the actual practice of continuing to limit access to academic instruction for students with ESN. Certainly, more research is needed to substantiate this finding, as is further research addressing methods of providing quality, inclusive academic instruction.

Similarly, our findings reveal students are excluded from general education to receive a range of related services and individualized supports. Yet, professional organizations for related services providers (e.g., American Occupational Therapy Association, 2015; American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 1996) promote inclusive service delivery in their position statements. Our findings thus highlight disconnects between endorsed, research-based practices and actual practices in both special education and related services. Another key area of exclusion in our findings is related to daily living skills. The focus on “functional” skills has a long and debated history in special education (e.g., Ayres, Lowrey, Douglas, & Sievers, 2011; Courtade, et al., 2012), and appears to be one of several key factors considered in removing students from general education. These findings reveal a need for further definition of what constitutes “functional” skills in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, along with strategies to teach said skills inclusively to students with ESN.

### **Limitations**

A key limitation of this study is the fact that IEPs were collected from a sample of convenience. Relatedly, generalizability is a limitation, due to the small number of IEPs we were able to collect for students with ESN and our method of obtaining IEPs, which represent only those IEPs selected for us to review by teachers. Teachers may have selected these IEPs for unknown reasons, and therefore interpretations of our findings should be made with caution. Additionally, contextual information about the schools themselves was absent from our analysis,

such as schoolwide initiatives aimed at supporting students in inclusive settings, which may have impacted team decisions. The study is also limited by the IEP documents themselves. In most cases, only the required components of IEPs were provided, whereas sections such as meeting notes or prior written notice pages were not included. Consequently, documentation of previous decisions or other factors considered in making placement decisions were not included.

Similarly, we were not able to access IEPs for students across years; therefore, we have only a single IEP as a snapshot in time for analysis. It is possible that having these additional pieces of information would have provided additional useful context with which to interpret decisions documented in the IEPs analyzed. Our findings are also limited in that we do not have demographic information about the teacher and other team members who wrote the IEPs; their experiences, education level, and other factors such as school policy, socioeconomic status, or other characteristics of the school or district which may have resulted in important contributions to the LRE statements. Future research should aim to collect this demographic information from IEP team members and the schools in which they operate. Finally, our methods of calculating placement and percent of time may have resulted in errors, due to the lack of clarity in many IEPs. Thus, our findings must be interpreted with caution.

### **Implications**

**Policy.** Several pivotal policy and legal decisions have great impact on the least restrictive environment provision of IDEA. These decisions question the appropriateness of restricting access to general education settings for students with disabilities. For example, the *Olmstead* case (1999) found segregation on the basis of disability is a form of discrimination. Recently, the *Andrew F. v. Douglas County Schools* case (2017) found educators must justify the extent, if any, to which a student will be excluded from students without disabilities in all three

components of general education (general curriculum, extracurricular activities, nonacademic or other school activities). Together, these arguments pose significant policy implications to the LRE provision itself, along with the continuum of services model embedded in current regulations (Turnbull, Turnbull, & Cooper, 2017). Certainly, future policy directives must clarify why and how determinations for children with disabilities should be subject to separation from the general education setting. Such policy should clearly specify what factors should be considered and how these factors should be determined, considered, measured, and monitored. Future policy directives should consider adequacy of the continuum itself. As others have noted (e.g., Sauer & Jorgensen, 2016), the continuum of placement options is inherently flawed for many reasons, including a focus on place rather than on supports. One solution for policy makers would include using a multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) approach to support students (Sailor, 2008-2009) and abandoning the existing continuum altogether. However, it remains unclear how students with ESN are participating in MTSS models (Walker, Loman, Hara, Park, & Strickland-Cohen, 2018).

**Practice.** Findings from the present analysis also suggest a number of implications for practice, three of which will be considered here. First, the IEP document itself appears to exert considerable influence on how the LRE statement is made and justified. The document also has a major influence in how clearly decisions about placement are articulated to stakeholders, including basic information about the percentage of time students will be taught in general education, and for what activities. Relatedly, the IEP forms analyzed in this study failed to document what supplementary aids and services had been considered in making LRE decisions, although this is the clear expectation of IDEA. Practitioners must have skills to work with whatever form they are provided from districts or states, and provide ample evidence describing

what supplementary aids and services had been provided previously, which of these were considered in making a placement decision, and ultimately what decisions were made. Our second implication arises from this finding, in that practitioners must acknowledge and embrace the notion that the IEP is not a form (see Chief Justice Roberts, *Endrew F.*, 2017 decision). Rather, the IEP document should represent a robust discussion of supports and services provided for a student. A final implication is for teacher educators to provide vigorous training to write LRE statements that align with supplementary aids and services, and clearly articulate all decisions related to the delivery of special education services in a measurable and objective manner.

**Research.** The research implications are closely aligned with the limitations of the present study. Thus, additional research is needed to replicate the methods of this study with a larger population of students in a range of placements and across states. This diversity in placement and states is needed to allow for generalization of findings, while accounting for factors such as the impact of varying IEP templates, state policies, local practices, and the impact of assessments (e.g., portfolio or alternate assessment) in making LRE decisions. Research examining the differential impact of student and IEP team demographics (e.g., race, age, experience, gender, grade level) may also provide useful information for researchers and practitioners. Similarly, future research should examine the factors considered by teams with greater detail; for example, what types of challenging behavior correspond with greater removal from general education settings? Likewise, how do assessment results or other evaluative data impact LRE decisions? Future research should also investigate how best teacher educators may prepare teachers to write IEPs and make LRE decisions in a transparent, objective manner. Such research should account for the fact placement decisions are “particularly vulnerable to team

members' experiences and biases" (Sauer & Jorgensen, 2016, p. 58). Research focused on teaching team members to assess their own biases prior to making placement decisions is thus critical, such as their openness to make change and their assumptions about students and families. Likewise, examination of school factors, such as financial resources, parent involvement in IEP development, and teacher knowledge of legal considerations in IEP development may provide further useful insights into LRE decisions made by IEP teams. Finally, we suggest future research continue to examine the quality of education provided to students with disabilities across settings, including the extent to which instructional goals align with state standards in varying placements, to further assist teams in making LRE decisions in the future.

### **Conclusion**

Analysis of the LRE statements and explicit statements of class and activity inclusion for students with ESN reveals possible explanations of the persistent separation and segregation of this population of students from general education settings. IEPs themselves were found to lack specificity and objective detail, and did not reference supplementary aids and services when making placement decisions, centering instead on curricular, environmental, personnel, and student characteristics. Perhaps as a consequence of these areas of emphasis, student involvement in general education was found to be limited to mostly non-academic activities.

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Table 1

*LRE Statements Domains, Factors, and Examples*

Domain and Factor	Definition or Key Words of Factor	Frequency	Percent
Curricular and Instructional		78	28.1
Specially designed instruction	“Specially designed instruction,” “specialized instruction”	26	9.3
Specific interventions	Drill and practice, steps broken down, repetition, signed English, social skill instruction, intensive instruction, individualized instruction, direct instruction, special equipment	19	6.8
Curriculum	Alternative curriculum; functional curriculum; standards (essential elements); IEP goals are curriculum; transition or vocational curriculum; replaced curriculum; adapted general education curriculum.	17	6.4
Instructional configuration	One on one instruction, small group instruction	16	5.7
Environmental		65	23.1
Continuum	Naming a specific classroom, school, or setting as needed (e.g., "intensive resource program" or "self-contained classroom", "resource"); "outside of the general ed setting"	29	10.3
General education is inadequate	“Needs that cannot be met in the general education classroom”, instruction is beyond what can be provided, student needs support not available in general education, specifically lists why general education setting is deficient (e.g., pace of instruction)	17	6.0
Setting needs	Highly structured, quiet calm learning area, quiet, calm	15	5.3
Benefits of general education	Identifies a specific benefit of placement in general education, "exposure to general education curriculum" or "exposure to typical peers"	4	1.4
Problematic Statements		58	21.0
Not individualized or not measurable	Not individualized (repeated from other IEPs – only pronoun changed), statement was not present at all, taken from form, not measurable or objective (e.g., "as appropriate, as needed")	43	15.7
Not a justification	Justification should answer the question: Why is s/he in this setting? If it doesn't answer that question, it might be more of a statement of what they are doing (e.g., states percent of time in different environments)	15	5.3
Student Characteristics		55	19.6

Student deficits	“Deficit,” “low cognitive ability,” below grade level, delays	21	7.5
Student behavior	Any mention of behavior; student is distracting to other students, lack of self-control	11	3.9
Disability label or medical diagnosis	Any mention of a disability category, refers to a medical diagnosis	6	2.1
Need for breaks	Student needs breaks, sensory breaks, leisure breaks	5	1.8
Health and care	Health, medical supports, hygiene	4	1.4
Safety	Any mention of safety (student, others)	4	1.4
Sensory needs	Any mention of sensory or regulation, "coping skills"	4	1.4
Personnel		23	8.2
Related services	Explicitly refers to an IDEA related service (e.g., OT, SLP, PT) as rationale for removal	17	6.0
Specialized services personnel	“Special education staff,” “paraprofessional”	6	2.1

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*Note.* LRE = Least Restrictive Environment; IEP = Individualized Education Program; IDEA = Individuals with Disabilities Education Act; OT = Occupational Therapist; SLP = Speech Language Pathologist; PT = Physical Therapist.

Table 2

*Classes, Activities, Supports and Services in Which Students are Included in General Education*

Domain and Class or Activity	Frequency	Percent
Non-academic activities and classes	47	28.8
Electives / specials (in general)	18	11.3
Physical education	8	5.0
Music	6	3.8
Art	3	1.9
“All non-academic”	3	1.9
Library	2	1.3
Foods	2	1.3
Auto tech	1	<1
Child development	1	<1
Environmental education	1	<1
Computers	1	<1
Advisory	1	<1
Academic activities and classes	45	27.6
Literacy (reading, writing, English)	11	6.9
Math	10	6.3
Science	9	5.6
Social studies or history	8	5.0
All academic	7	4.1
Recreation activities	27	16.6
Lunch	13	8.1
Recess	9	5.6
Extra-curricular	2	1.3
Special events (birthday parties, assemblies)	2	1.3
Transitions	1	<1
Special education activities and classes	23	14.1
Adapted physical education	11	6.9
Skills (OT, social skills, behavior, sensory)	6	3.8
Community based instruction	4	2.5
Vocational special education	2	1.3
Unclear	15	9.2
All activities	6	3.7

*Note.* OT = Occupational therapy

Table 3

*Classes, Activities, Supports, and Services from Which Students are Excluded from General Education*

Domain and Class or Activity	Frequency	Percent
Related services	76	35.2
Speech and language	36	17.4
Occupational therapy	22	10.6
Physical therapy	8	3.9
Counseling and psychological	3	1.4
Music therapy	3	1.4
Vision therapy	2	1.0
Social work	2	1.0
Academic activities and classes	64	29.6
Literacy	27	13.0
Math	23	11.1
“Functional academics”	9	4.3
Science	3	1.4
Social studies	2	1.0
Individualized Supports	35	16.2
Specially designed instruction	11	5.3
Social	9	4.3
Behavioral and emotional regulation	6	2.9
Adapted physical education	5	2.4
Sensory	4	1.9
Skills for daily living	33	15.3
Vocational	14	6.8
Daily living	12	5.8
Transition	7	3.4
All activities	5	2.3
Unclear	3	1.4