

CREATING A POSITIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

CONSIDERING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES, TEACHER QUALIFICATIONS, AND CLASSROOM STRUCTURES



POLICY ISSUE

What makes a positive learning environment for students with disabilities?

Students with disabilities (often called exceptionalities) are among the most vulnerable learners in our education systems today. There are many ideas and theories about how to change this, but not much research is grounded in scientific data.



METHODS

Compared student performances in math and reading as they progress from one grade to another over time and get exposed to teachers with varying preparation levels and classroom structures.



MEASURES*

Student achievement:

End-of-grade scores for students with an individualized education plan (IEP).

Teacher preparation:

- Education
- Experience
- Licensure

Classroom:

Inclusive co-taught classroom, inclusive not co-taught classroom, and self-contained classroom.

THE KEY QUESTIONS AND FINDINGS



How does teacher preparation and classroom structures influence the educational achievement of students with disabilities?



Study included a range of exceptionalities, as defined by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, such as:

Autistic

- Behaviorally or emotionally disabled
- Speech-language impaired
- Specific learning disabled
- Other health impaired
- Other low-incidence disabilities

WHAT HELPS?



Inclusive Classroom Placement: Inclusive classrooms (rather than self-contained classroom placement), benefit students with disabilities in both math and reading, especially in grades 6 to 8.



Co-teaching: Students in inclusive classrooms tend to perform slightly better with co-teachers – two qualified teachers (usually a general and a special education teacher) working in the classroom together. Co-teaching is most helpful with math, especially in grades 3-5.



Teacher experience is a key predictor of achievement in both subjects, and the positive returns to teacher experience extend beyond the first few years of teaching. This is especially important for students with learning disabilities and speech impairments.

WHAT DOESN'T HELP?

Special education licensure and advanced degree attainment are not consistently associated with positive student achievement outcomes.

NEXT STEPS?

Further research into this area is beneficial to see if results hold outside of the North Carolina context. Suggests supported integration is the best way forward.