

## 2. *Characteristics of Students in General and Special Education Language Arts Classes* by Mary Wagner, Camille Marder, and Michael Chorost

---

When teachers who teach students with disabilities in general and special education classes look out at those students, what do they see? In what ways are the students with disabilities in those two settings similar? In what ways are they different? These questions are important because students' experiences in their classrooms are shaped in part by the characteristics of the students themselves. Teachers often tailor the style and pace of instruction to the number, learning styles, and other characteristics of the students they teach.

As background for understanding the classroom experiences of students with disabilities who differ in the setting of their primary language arts instruction, this chapter describes aspects of their disability profiles, their individual and household characteristics, some of their past educational experiences, and their engagement in and social adjustment at school.

### **Students' Disabilities**

---

#### **Disability Categories**

- Language arts classes in both general and special education settings include students who span the range of most primary disability classifications (Exhibit 2-1).
- Language arts teachers in special education settings teach a group of students whose mix of disabilities is quite different from those taught by general education teachers. For example, students with disabilities in general education language arts classrooms are most likely to be classified as having speech impairments, whereas students in special education settings are most likely to have learning disabilities as their primary disability classification.
- Students with mental retardation, autism, or multiple disabilities are more common in special education than general education classes, as are students whose parents reported they have attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD).

**Exhibit 2-1**  
**Students' Disabilities, by Instructional Setting**

	Primary Language Arts Instructional Setting	
	General Education	Special Education
Percentage with district- assigned primary disability classification of:		
Learning disability	35.3 (2.0)	48.0 (2.1)
Speech impairment	49.6 (2.1)	12.2 (1.4)
Mental retardation	2.3 (.6)	17.0 (1.6)
Emotional disturbance	3.9 (.8)	8.5 (1.2)
Hearing impairment	1.0 (.4)	1.5 (.5)
Visual impairment	.5 (.3)	.4 (.3)
Orthopedic impairment	1.3 (.5)	1.4 (.5)
Other health impairment	4.6 (.9)	4.6 (.9)
Autism	.9 (.4)	2.5 (.7)
Traumatic brain injury	.1 (.1)	.3 (.2)
Multiple disabilities	.5 (.3)	3.5 (.8)
Deaf-blindness	.0	.1 (.1)
Percentage whose parents reported they have AD/HD	22.2 (2.0)	36.4 (2.4)
Sample size		
Disability categories	2,668	3,486
Parents' reports of AD/HD	2,188	2,837
Standard errors are in parentheses.		

### Functional Abilities

- Students with disabilities in both special education and general education settings exhibit a range of functional abilities;<sup>1</sup> both high- and low-functioning students are instructed in each setting (Exhibit 2-2).

<sup>1</sup> A self-care scale includes parents' ratings of how well students feed and dress themselves independently. A functional cognitive skills scale includes parents' ratings of how well students can tell time on a clock with hands, count change, read common signs, and look up telephone numbers and use the phone. A social skills scale includes parents' ratings of how often students exhibit a variety of social skills related to cooperation, self-control, and assertion.

**Exhibit 2-2**  
**Students' Functional Abilities,**  
**by Instructional Setting**

	Primary Language Arts Instructional Setting	
	General Education	Special Education
Percentage with reported scale score for:		
Self-care skills		
High (8)	85.0 (1.7)	66.0 (2.4)
Medium (5 to 7)	14.5 (1.7)	30.1 (2.3)
Low (2 to 4)	.5 (.4)	3.9 (1.0)
Functional cognitive skills		
High (15 or 16)	32.0 (2.2)	15.0 (1.8)
Medium (9 to 14)	62.7 (2.3)	63.5 (2.4)
Low (4 to 8)	5.3 (1.1)	21.6 (2.1)
Social skills		
High (18 to 22)	23.9 (2.0)	15.2 (1.8)
Medium (10 to 17)	69.2 (2.2)	67.4 (2.3)
Low (0 to 9)	6.9 (1.2)	17.4 (1.9)
Percentage reported to speak:		
As well as other same-age children	57.6 (2.4)	51.7 (2.6)
With "a little trouble"	39.1 (2.4)	34.7 (2.5)
With "a lot of trouble" <i>OR</i> not at all	3.4 (.9)	13.6 (1.8)
Percentage reported to understand others:		
As well as other same-age children	66.3 (2.3)	42.1 (2.5)
With "a little trouble"	29.6 (2.2)	43.9 (2.6)
With "a lot of trouble" <i>OR</i> not at all	4.0 (1.0)	14.9 (1.9)
Percentage whose health is reported as:		
Excellent or very good	81.8 (1.7)	63.8 (2.4)
Good	13.5 (1.7)	24.1 (2.2)
Fair or poor	4.3 (1.0)	12.1 (1.7)
Sample size	1,988	2,446
Standard errors are in parentheses.		

- Students in special education settings for language arts are more likely than students with disabilities in general education classes to have lower levels of self-care skills and functional literacy, and to have more limited social skills.
- Although students in the two settings are about equally likely to speak as well as other children of their age, parents of students in special education settings are much less likely to report that their children understand what other people say to them as well as other same-age children.
- Special education language arts settings are more likely than general education classes to include students with disabilities who are in fair or poor health.

## **Individual Demographic Characteristics**

---

### **Age and Grade Level**

- Students who receive their primary language arts instruction in special education settings are an average of one-half year older than students with disabilities in general education classes (Exhibit 2-3). This difference may reflect the fact that, among students in the SEELS age group, students with learning disabilities or emotional disturbances are older, on average, than students in other disability categories (Marder & Wagner, 2002) and make up larger proportions of students in special education settings than in general education language arts settings.
- Consistent with their older age, students in special education settings tend to be at higher grade levels. Almost 40% of them are in sixth grade or above, compared with 32% of those in general education classrooms.
- Thus, the classroom practices more common in instructing younger students may be more prominent experiences for students with disabilities in general education than in special education settings because of the age and grade differences in the two groups, apart from the differences in settings.

**Exhibit 2-3**  
**Students' Age and Grade Level,**  
**by Instructional Setting**

	Primary Language Arts Instructional Setting	
	General Education	Special Education
Percentage who are ages:		
7 or 8	23.8 (1.7)	16.1 (1.6)
9 or 10	35.3 (2.0)	30.5 (2.0)
11 or 12	30.7 (1.9)	38.6 (2.1)
13 or 14	10.2 (1.2)	14.7 (1.5)
Average age	10.0 (.1)	10.5 (.1)
Percentage in:		
First through third grades	33.3 (2.0)	23.4 (1.8)
Fourth or fifth grade	35.0 (2.0)	33.0 (2.0)
Sixth grade or above	31.6 (1.9)	38.7 (2.1)
An ungraded program	.1 (.1)	4.8 (.9)
Sample size	2,657	3,425
Standard errors are in parentheses.		

### **Race/Ethnicity and Primary Language**

- A larger proportion of the students are nonwhite in special education settings than in general education settings (Exhibit 2-4).
- The larger proportion of African-American students with disabilities in special education settings is consistent with the disability categories that are more prominent there. Mental retardation, emotional disturbance, traumatic brain injury, and multiple disabilities are the disability categories with the largest proportions of African-American students (Marder & Wagner, 2002); they also make up larger proportions of students with disabilities in special education than in general education settings.

**Exhibit 2-4**  
**Students' Race/Ethnicity and Primary**  
**Language, by Instructional Setting**

	Primary Language Arts Instructional Setting	
	General Education	Special Education
Percentage who are:		
White	70.8 (1.9)	60.6 (2.1)
African American	13.8 (1.4)	25.1 (1.8)
Hispanic	13.3 (1.4)	12.1 (1.4)
Asian/Pacific Islander	1.1 (.4)	.6 (.3)
American Indian/ Alaska Native	.7 (.3)	.9 (.4)
Other	.3 (.2)	.6 (.3)
Percentage who primarily speak a language other than English at home	14.1 (1.7)	14.7 (1.8)
Sample size		
Race/ethnicity	2,682	3,478
Language spoken at home	2,009	2,625
Standard errors are in parentheses.		

- The percentages of students in the two settings who are Hispanic or who speak primarily a language other than English at home are virtually identical.

## Students' Household Characteristics

Students in special education language arts classes are:

- More likely than students with disabilities in general education classes to be living with one parent or to be living in an institution or other nonfamilial arrangement (Exhibit 2-5).
- More likely to be from households in poverty than those of students with disabilities in general education classes, whose poverty rate is similar to that of the general population of students (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002)<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> A dichotomous variable indicating that a student's household was in poverty was constructed using parents' reports of household income and household size and federal poverty thresholds for 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). These thresholds indicate the income level for specific sizes of households, below which the household is considered in poverty. Because SEELS respondents reported household income in categories (e.g., \$25,001 to \$30,000) rather than specific dollar amounts, estimates of poverty status were calculated by assigning each household to the mean value of the

**Exhibit 2-5**  
**Students' Household Characteristics,**  
**by Instructional Setting**

	Primary Language Arts Instructional Setting	
	General Education	Special Education
Percentage of students:		
Living with:		
Two parents	78.0 (2.0)	64.0 (2.4)
One parent	18.6 (1.9)	27.5 (2.3)
With relative(s)	2.2 (.7)	4.5 (1.1)
In foster care	.5 (.3)	1.0 (.5)
Other arrangement	.7 (.4)	3.0 (.9)
In households with annual income:		
\$25,000 or less	31.0 (2.2)	43.4 (2.6)
\$25,001 to \$50,000	29.7 (2.2)	34.7 (2.5)
More than \$50,000	39.3 (2.4)	21.8 (2.1)
In households in poverty	17.3 (1.9)	28.4 (2.4)
With a head of household who is not a high school graduate	14.6 (1.7)	23.8 (2.1)
In households with another member with a disability	36.9 (2.4)	42.6 (2.6)
Sample size		
Poverty	1,918	2,431
Other factors	1,985	2,567
Standard errors are in parentheses.		

- More likely to be from households headed by someone who is not a high school graduate than are students with disabilities in general education classes, where their rate is similar to that of students without disabilities.<sup>3</sup>
- Live in households that are more likely to include another person with a disability in addition to the student receiving special education.

The relative prevalence of the above-listed risk factors among students in special education settings is consistent with the higher prevalence of students with mental retardation or emotional disturbances there. Those groups of students are among the most likely to exhibit these risk factors (Wagner et al., 2002).

---

category of income reported by the parent and comparing that value to the household's size to determine poverty status.

<sup>3</sup> Calculated with data from the National Household Education Survey, 1999.

### Parents' Support and Expectations

- Students are about equally likely to have several forms of parental support, regardless of their language arts instructional setting (Exhibit 2-6). For example, they are about equally likely to have parents who help them with homework frequently, read to them daily, and go to parent-teacher conferences.
- In other respects, students whose language arts instruction takes place in special education settings receive less parental support. They are markedly less likely than their peers in general education classrooms to have parents who attend classroom events or volunteer at school.
- Parents of students whose primary language arts instruction takes place in special education settings are less likely than other parents to have high expectations for their children's future educational attainment.

**Exhibit 2-6**  
**Parents' Support for Students' Education,**  
**by Instructional Setting**

	Primary Language Arts Instructional Setting	
	General Education	Special Education
Percentage whose parents reported:		
Helping with homework three or more times a week	53.2 (2.5)	57.5 (2.8)
Reading to students every day	31.5 (2.2)	32.4 (2.3)
Providing a computer at home	72.1 (2.2)	57.0 (2.6)
Attending classroom events	85.8 (1.6)	72.5 (2.2)
Volunteering at school	56.2 (2.3)	45.4 (2.5)
Attending parent-teacher conferences	88.3 (1.6)	82.3 (2.0)
Expecting child "definitely" to graduate from high school	78.5 (1.9)	51.3 (2.5)
Expecting child "definitely" to go on to postsecondary education	41.5 (2.3)	22.5 (2.1)
Sample size		
Homework help	1,922	1,949
Provides computer	1,985	2,461
Other factors	1,991	2,584
Standard errors are in parentheses.		



## Past Education-related Experiences

- Students whose primary language arts instruction is in special education settings are more likely than their peers in general education classrooms to have changed schools frequently and to have experienced the attendant academic and social disruption such moves can cause (Exhibit 2-7).

<b>Exhibit 2-7</b>		
<b>Students' Past Educational Experiences, by Instructional Setting</b>		
	Primary Language Arts Instructional Setting	
	General Education	Special Education
Percentage who have changed schools:		
Once or not at all	78.5 (2.0)	62.8 (2.5)
Twice	11.7 (1.6)	19.0 (2.0)
Three times or more	9.8 (1.5)	18.2 (2.0)
Percentage who ever have been:		
Retained at grade level	22.0 (1.9)	29.8 (2.3)
Suspended or expelled	8.0 (1.3)	17.9 (1.9)
Percentage who during the school year have been:		
Bullied or picked on at school or on the way to or from school	24.8 (2.0)	31.5 (2.3)
Physically attacked or involved in fights at school or on the way to or from school	18.4 (1.8)	29.7 (2.3)
Sample size	1,991	2,601
Standard errors are in parentheses.		

- Students whose primary language arts instruction is in special education settings also are more likely to have been retained at grade level at least once, and are more than twice as likely to have been suspended or expelled at some time.
- Being bullied or picked on at school or involved in fights is more common for students with disabilities whose primary language arts instruction is in a special education setting than in a general education class.

## Engagement and Social Adjustment at School

- According to parents, students with disabilities are about equally likely to find school challenging or to enjoy school, regardless of their placement for language arts (Exhibit 2-8).

**Exhibit 2-8**  
**Students' Engagement and Social Adjustment**  
**at School, by Instructional Setting**

	Primary Language Arts Instructional Setting	
	General Education	Special Education
Percentage whose parents reported (by level of agreement) that they:		
Find school challenging		
Strongly agree	32.3 (2.2)	28.8 (2.2)
Agree	53.0 (2.4)	59.8 (2.4)
Disagree/strongly disagree	14.6 (1.7)	11.4 (1.6)
Enjoy school		
Strongly agree	35.0 (2.2)	35.6 (2.4)
Agree	50.7 (2.3)	49.9 (2.5)
Disagree/strongly disagree	14.3 (1.6)	14.5 (1.7)
Percentage whose parents reported they:		
Get along with students		
Very well	61.0 (2.3)	43.9 (2.5)
Pretty well	32.2 (2.2)	42.6 (2.5)
Not very or not at all well	6.7 (1.2)	13.4 (1.7)
Get along with teachers		
Very well	69.1 (2.2)	61.5 (2.4)
Pretty well	26.6 (2.1)	30.1 (2.3)
Not very or not at all well	4.3 (1.0)	8.5 (1.4)
Sample size	2,145	2,669
Standard errors are in parentheses.		

- Students in special education settings are less likely than those in general education settings to be reported by parents to get along with teachers and students “very well”, and are more likely to be reported to get along “not very well” or “not at all well.” Even with these differences, the large majority of students in both settings reportedly get along with teachers and other students at least “pretty well.”

## Summary

---

Teachers of students with disabilities in special education classes face a different group of students than do teachers of students with disabilities in general education classes. Although both settings include some students at every ability level and subject to each individual and household risk factor, students in special education language arts classes are substantially more likely to experience each of the challenges addressed in this chapter than are students with disabilities in general education classes.

As would be expected, as a group, their functional abilities are much more limited, including their self-care, social, and functional cognitive skills. They also are more likely to be in poorer health. Consistent with their lower functional abilities, their parents have much lower expectations for their educational attainment than parents of students with disabilities in general education language arts classes.

Less predictably, students in special education settings are also exposed to an array of risk factors for poor outcomes to a significantly greater degree than their peers in general education settings. They are more likely to be poor; children of color; and living in households without two parents, with heads of household who are poorly educated and with another household member with a disability. In addition, they are less likely to receive some kinds of family support for their education.

The experiences at school of students in special education classes also are more troubled, overall, than those of students with disabilities in general education classes. They are more likely to have been retained at grade level and suspended or expelled in the past and bullied or picked on and involved in fights at school in the current school year. Despite these more difficult experiences at school, students with disabilities in both general and special education settings are about equally likely to have been reported by parents to enjoy school.

## References

- Marder, C., & Wagner, M. (2002). Demographic characteristics of elementary and middle school students receiving special education. In M. Wagner, C. Marder, & J. Blackorby, (with D. Cardoso). *The children we serve: The demographic characteristics of elementary and middle school students with disabilities and their households*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International. Available at [http://www.seels.net/designdocs/SEELS\\_Children\\_We\\_Serve\\_Report.pdf](http://www.seels.net/designdocs/SEELS_Children_We_Serve_Report.pdf)
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2001). *Income 1999*. Available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/income/income99/99tablea.html>.
- U.S. Department of Education (National Center for Education Statistics). (1999). *National household education survey*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Wagner, M., Marder, C., & Cardoso, D. (2002). Characteristics of students' households. In M. Wagner, C. Marder, & J. Blackorby, (with D. Cardoso). *The children we serve: The demographic characteristics of elementary and middle school students with disabilities and their households*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International. Available at [http://www.seels.net/designdocs/SEELS\\_Children\\_We\\_Serve\\_Report.pdf](http://www.seels.net/designdocs/SEELS_Children_We_Serve_Report.pdf)