

1. ASSESSING THE CLASSROOM EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES DURING SECONDARY SCHOOL

By Mary Wagner

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 (IDEA '97), the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), and scores of state and local initiatives culminate nearly two decades of increasing emphasis on the improvement of American education. Schools and educators are now being held accountable for the adequate yearly progress of all students, including those with disabilities. The success of these ambitious initiatives will depend on changes in many domains, including teacher preparation and training, assessment policies, standards and expectations, and funding. However, the classroom is where “the rubber meets the road.” What happens in classrooms every school day is what students experience directly and is the mechanism through which educational interventions are most likely to produce the desired changes in student achievements. Indeed, the current focus on the use of scientifically valid instructional methods underscores the importance of high-quality educational experiences in the classroom.

Yet at the national level, information on the classroom experiences of students with disabilities has been limited to data on where students are educated—whether classes are taken in general education or special education settings (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Little is known about the actual instructional experiences of students with disabilities nationally. Painting a clear picture of what goes on in classrooms is particularly challenging for secondary school students because their typical school day can involve up to six or seven classes, a broad mix of subject areas, and, for many, both general education and special education settings of various kinds (e.g., resource rooms, self-contained classrooms, individualized settings). But meeting that challenge is essential. The policies and practices that will help schools provide the high-quality education to all students for which they are being held accountable—educational programs that enable all students to achieve to their potential—must be grounded in a careful understanding of the complexities of the educational enterprise for students with disabilities as it plays out in real classrooms around the nation.

The Office of Special Education Programs of the U.S. Department of Education is working to provide the information needed to improve the education and outcomes of secondary school students with disabilities through the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2). NLTS2 is a 10-year study that is documenting the characteristics, experiences, and outcomes of a nationally representative sample of more than 11,000 youth who were ages 13 through 16 and were receiving special education services in grade 7 or above when the study began. NLTS2 findings generalize to youth with disabilities nationally and to youth in each of the 12 federal special education disability categories in use for students in the NLTS2 age range.¹ This rich source of information will support a series of reports that will emerge over the life of NLTS2.

¹ Please see Appendix A for details about the NLTS2 design, sample, analysis approach, and measurement issues. Additional information about NLTS2 is available at www.nlts2.org.

Research Questions

This report considers the following questions for secondary-school-age students with disabilities:

- As background to understanding their current educational experiences, what education-related histories do students with disabilities “bring to the table” in terms of their early experiences with services for their disabilities, school mobility, grade-level progression, and prior school disciplinary problems?
- What are the school and classroom contexts within which secondary school students with disabilities are educated? How do general, special, and vocational education classrooms differ?
- What is the pattern of course taking of students with disabilities in secondary school, and in what settings are courses taken?
- What are the characteristics of classroom instruction provided to students with disabilities, and how do they differ in general, special, and vocational education classes?
- How do these factors differ for students with different disabilities and other characteristics?

Information Sources

These questions are addressed by using data collected from parents and school staff during Wave 1 of NLTS2.

Parents

Parents or guardians² of NLTS2 study members are a key source of information on the characteristics of students, their educational histories, and their lives outside of school. In addition, parents provide their own unique and valuable perspective on “how it’s going” with their adolescent children with disabilities, both in and outside of school. Telephone interviews conducted with parents in the spring and summer of 2001 addressed these important topics; mail questionnaires were administered to parents who could not be reached by phone. An 82% response rate resulted in interview/survey data for 9,230 students; they were ages 13 through 17 at the time.

School Staff

Given the focus of this report on students’ classroom experiences, it relies heavily on information provided by staff in the schools attended by NLTS2 study members. Mail surveys were conducted with school staff in the spring of the 2001-02 school year—students were ages 14 through 18 at the time. Three surveys were conducted, with each garnering about a 60% response rate.

² For simplicity, parents and guardians are referred to here as parents.

School staff knowledgeable about students' overall school programs and special and vocational education courses. School staff were asked to identify the staff person most knowledgeable about the overall school programs of specific individual students; these persons often were special educators. A multipurpose survey was then conducted with those school staff.³ One purpose was to obtain a snapshot of each student's school program in terms of the range of courses taken at the time and the setting for each of those courses. Information also was obtained on related and support services and programs provided to students, their transition planning experiences, and some aspects of their school performance (e.g., absenteeism, disciplinary actions, overall grades).⁴ In addition to this broad view of students' school programs, the survey collected information about instructional practices in both special education and vocational education classes.⁵ Respondents were asked to report on the characteristics of specific classes (e.g., size, subject) and how teachers worked with specific individual students in the class (e.g., curriculum used, frequency of using various instructional groupings and materials, grading criteria employed). For vocational education courses taken in general education classrooms, respondents were asked to report the extent to which the kinds of classroom practices used for students with disabilities differed from those used with the class as a whole.

Teachers of general education academic classes. For NLTS2 study members who were reported by school staff to be enrolled in at least one general education academic class, teachers of the first such class in each student's school week were surveyed.⁶ The first academic class in the week was selected so that information would be provided on a wide range of objectively selected classes taken by students with disabilities. As with special and vocational education courses addressed in the student's school program survey, general education academic teachers were asked to report background information on the class, the instructional practices used with specific individual students in the class, and how they worked with the class as a whole. These separate reports on the instructional experiences of specific students with disabilities and of the larger classes in which they participated permit a comparison that addresses the question of whether secondary school students with disabilities have access to the general education curriculum. Teachers also reported on the supports they received because the specific individual students with disabilities were in their classes and on their perceptions of the appropriateness of those students' placements in their classes and of students' performance in them.

School staff knowledgeable about the characteristics of the schools attended by students with disabilities. For each school attended by an NLTS2 study member, a school staff person who could report on the characteristics and policies of those schools (often the principal) was surveyed to provide a school-level context for the classroom-level information collected in other surveys. Broad information about the school (e.g., grade levels served, whether public or private), as well as information about the student body (e.g., size, demographic characteristics, number of students receiving special education services, absenteeism and mobility rates), was collected. School policies that affect students with disabilities (e.g., inclusion of students with disabilities in content standards and mandated standardized testing,

³ This survey is referred to as the student's school program survey.

⁴ Special topic reports from NLTS2 will provide information on services and transition planning. Students' school achievements are addressed in Wagner, Marder, Blackorby, et al. (2003).

⁵ Respondents to the survey were instructed to collaborate with teachers of these classes, if needed, to provide information on instructional practices and other classroom experiences.

⁶ This survey is referred to as the general education teacher survey.

social promotion policies) also were addressed. For schools that serve 12th-grade students, information on rates of graduation, college entrance examination participation, and college enrollment was obtained. School-level information is linked to each NLTS2 study member enrolled at a given school.

Technical Notes

Readers should remember the following issues when interpreting the findings in this report:

- **Findings are weighted.** NLTS2 was designed to provide a national picture of the characteristics, experiences, and achievements of youth with disabilities nationally in the NLTS2 age range. Therefore, all the statistics presented in this report are weighted estimates of the national population of students receiving special education in the NLTS2 age group, as well as each disability category individually. Each response for each sample member is weighted to represent the number of youth nationally that are in his or her disability category in the kind of school district (defined by region, student enrollment, and proportion of students in poverty) or special school from which he or she was selected.
- **Standard errors.** For each mean and percentage in this report, a standard error is presented that indicates the precision of the estimate. For example, a variable with a weighted estimated value of 50% and a standard error of 2 means that the value for the total population, if it had been measured, would, with 95% confidence, lie between 48% and 52% (i.e., within plus or minus 2 percentage points of 50%). Thus, smaller standard errors allow for greater confidence to be placed in the estimate, whereas larger ones require caution.
- **Small samples.** Although NLTS2 data are weighted to represent the population, the size of standard errors is influenced heavily by the actual number of youth in a given group (e.g., a disability category). Groups with very small samples have comparatively large standard errors (in fact, findings are not reported separately for groups that do not include at least 35 sample members). For example, because there are relatively few youth with deaf-blindness, estimates for that group have relatively large standard errors. Therefore, readers should be cautious in interpreting results for this group and others with small sample sizes and large standard errors.
- **Significant differences.** Only differences among groups that reach a level of statistical significance of at least .05 are mentioned in the text; significance levels generally are noted in the text. Appendix A outlines a method for using standard errors to calculate the significance of differences between groups of interest.

Organization of the Report

The chapters in this report generally correspond to the research questions posed. Chapter 2 provides background information on the education-related histories of secondary school students with disabilities. Chapters 3 and 4 provide a context within which to view students' classroom experiences by describing characteristics of schools attended by students with disabilities (Chapter 3) and their overall program of courses and instructional settings (Chapter 4). Chapter 5 compares characteristics of three kinds of classrooms frequented by many students with

disabilities: general education academic classes, vocational education classes, and special education classes. Chapters 6 through 8 describe the instructional experiences of students with disabilities in those three settings. The final chapter looks across the settings and identifies key comparative findings about the instructional experiences of students with disabilities. Appendix A provides details of the NLTS2 design, sample, measures, and analysis approaches, including definitions of the disability categories used throughout this report. Appendix B provides background information on the demographic characteristics of students with disabilities represented in NLTS2 and their families. Appendix C provides unweighted sample sizes for the analyses reported in the data tables.

The following chapters provide the first national picture of the classroom experiences of secondary school students with disabilities in a single school year. These findings will be augmented in the next few years of NLTS2 as youth complete their high school careers and a more complete view of their secondary school experiences is available.