

Variables Considered by Educators when Determining Educational Placement for  
Children with Autism

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

in the

Educational Leadership Program

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

December, 2016

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## Abstract

Since 2000, the prevalence of autism has been on the rise, with the most current data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2016) showing 1 out of 68 children being diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder. With this growth comes an increase in the number of children served under IDEA in public schools. Educators are required under IDEA to provide children with disabilities a free, appropriate public education in the child's least restrictive environment. There is a need, now more than ever, for effective and efficient methods of assessing students with autism and ensuring placement in the most appropriate environment to meet their unique and diverse learning needs. This study was designed to contribute to the current literature on assessment variables used to determine educational placement, thus informing educators on proficient means in deciding the most appropriate placement for a child with autism. The first research question investigated the extent children with autism are included in general education classes. The second research question sought out variables used in determining placement. The third question explored the weight each variable has in determining educational placement. The final research question analyzed outside factors and influences that IEP team members take into consideration when they determine educational placement.

An online survey consisting of 39 questions was administered to analyze the variables educators in elementary public school buildings use to determine placement for children with autism. The results indicated the most widely used assessments included achievement measures and other measures including social skills assessments and the use of a functional behavior assessment. This study will assist educators with using a variety

of assessment procedures when deciding placement for children with autism, helping to ensure the student's needs are met and learning is maximized.

Keywords: autism, assessment, least restrictive environment

## Dedications

I would like to dedicate this work to my husband, Dave Portenier, without whose constant patience and love I would never have been able to achieve all that I have. It is because of you that I made it so far. Thank you for everything.

I would also like to dedicate this to my kids, Nick and Jake, who have inspired me keep going and to never give up.

Last, to my parents, whose never ending support and love made all of this possible. I owe you both so much, and will forever be grateful for all that you have done for me.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my committee and all of my professors who helped me develop my dissertation over the past several years. Special thanks to Dr. Larwin, my advisor, whose guidance and on-going support helped me accomplish all that I have.

To Fred Chovan, my mentor over the past decade, I can't thank you enough for all you have done for me. I am looking forward to many more years to come.

And to all of my families and kids I have had the pleasure working with over the years, it has been an honor getting to know each of you and be part of your team. I have learned the most from all of you. Thank you.

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## Chapter 1

### **Introduction**

Educational placement for children with autism is a significant issue due to the federal legislation requiring all students to be educated within the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Lauderdale-Littin, Howell, & Blacher, 2013). Debates are seen on both sides of the topic; advocates for full inclusion of students with autism deem that the general education setting is most appropriate in order to encourage overall success (Gordon, 2006). Proponents of more restrictive settings, for example, specialized schools and classrooms, argue more services can be offered that are concentrated on educational programming, thus, providing a greater overall benefit to the child (Harrower, 1999). In light of the controversy, it is important to understand the variables that may differentiate students from participating in general versus specialized school settings.

Although the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) has established procedures to identify the educational placement that will best meet the child's needs, the literature does not reveal specific variables that are most commonly implemented by individual school districts when consulting to make this decision. Analyzing patterns in common variables that are used by Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams can provide additional information to assist in deciding the educational setting that can best meet the unique needs of children with autism.

### **Background**

Since the passing of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) in 1975, students with disabilities are required to be educated to the maximum extent possible with their nondisabled peers (Bon, 2009). With the passing of EAHCA, students

with disabilities are entitled to a free, appropriate, public education (FAPE) in their LRE. This legislation has undergone several changes since the passing of the EAHCA, with the most recent passing of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 (Smith, 2005). The overarching implication of IDEA is that educators must develop meaningful educational programs that are based in research-based practices that produce results that improve the lives of students with disabilities (Yell, Shriver, & Katsiyannis, 2006).

Although there have been several revisions to EAHCA, the LRE principle continues to spark debate, and how to determine the most appropriate placement. Literature has stated that the cause of this debate is due to the lack of clarity in the provisions outlined in the law, such as the definition of LRE and the definition of the term “appropriate” (Howard, 2004). The ambiguity of the law, when determining the most appropriate LRE, has become a significant obstacle to educating students with disabilities and the reason why there has been an increase in the number of court cases surrounding the idea of LRE (Alquraini, 2013).

According to Ryndak et al. (2014), it is “the vagueness and imprecision of the LRE principle that has contributed to systemic non-compliance necessitating large-scale multi-year settlements to increase placements in general education settings” (p. 66). It is due to this ambiguity that parents feel the need to advocate for their children with disabilities to receive services in the least restrictive placement (Gallegos, 2010).

IDEA requires school districts to (a) educate students with disabilities with their typically developing peers to the maximum extent appropriate and (b) students with disabilities should be educated in separate classes or schools only when the severity of

their disability is such that they cannot receive an appropriate level of education in the general education setting with supplementary aids and services (Yell, 2006). Although IDEA outlines these requirements, it does not provide a clear explanation of standards that would support school districts in determining LRE, or how IEP teams should come to a decision on appropriate placement (Alquraini, 2013).

Several studies have been conducted stating the pros and cons of inclusion (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010; Thompkins & Deloney, 1995; Yell & Katsiyannis, 2004); however, there is a lack of research focusing on how to predict if a specific environment can meet the specific behavioral, academic, and social needs of the child. Careful analysis needs to occur to determine common variables that educators use to determine placement, and which factors lead to increases in academic, behavior, communication, and social skills of children with autism.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Determining the individual needs of children with autism, and the most appropriate educational placement based on those needs, is often a significant challenge for parents and professionals (Delmolino & Harris, 2011). There is a significant gap in the literature suggesting which variables should be used to decide the placement for children with autism. The specific problem to be addressed in the proposed study is to analyze the variables and assessments school districts use to determine educational placement that best meets the behavioral, academic, and social needs of children with autism.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this quantitative, survey-research investigation is to examine the variables that are used by educators to determine the educational placement of children with autism; for example, the least restrictive or most appropriate environment.

Establishing a procedure, or a common set of variables for identifying the education placement that meets the individualized needs of a child with autism will help to ensure that meaningful progress can be made (Reed, Osborne, & Waddington, 2012). This study will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent are children with autism included in general education classes?
2. What are the common variables used by school districts to determine the educational placement for children with autism?
3. How much do each of the identified variables used in determining placement influence the placement decision?
4. Are there outside factors and influences that IEP team members take into consideration when they determine educational placement?

## **Hypothesis**

H<sub>0</sub>: There is a common set of variables and types of assessments used by educators to predict the educational placement for children with autism.

H<sub>a</sub>: There is not a common set of variables and types of assessments used by educators to predict the educational placement for children with autism.

## **Research Design**

This study employs a survey-research design to investigate the variables used to determine the educational placement of children with an autism spectrum diagnosis.

There are several advantages of survey-research including the ability to reach several individuals with similar characteristics in a short amount of time. Regardless of geographic distances, responses can be sent to the researcher immediately, allowing the researcher to conduct preliminary analyses on the data as they come in, and, online survey research can save money by using an electronic medium instead of paper format (Wright, 2005). According to Nardi (2016), self-administered surveys “are more efficient tools for surveying large samples of respondents in short periods of time than interviews or other research methods, and with less expense than interviews or telephone surveys” (p. 72).

A limitation of online survey research is a low response rate. Research states that the average response rate is approximately 20% (Nulty, 2008). There are several methods to increase online survey response rates such as sending repeat reminder emails to non-respondents, sending repeat reminder emails to survey owners, and offering incentives to students in the form of prizes awarded through a lottery (Nulty, 2008).

After consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of several various data collection methods, the Internet survey format was chosen for the primary data collection. Follow-up telephone and email interviews were also selected for additional data collection.

### **Significance of the Study**

The results of the study could support the use of specific variables for educators to use to determine which placement will increase academic, social, and behavioral skills in children with autism. The findings of this investigation will support the ongoing conversations regarding placement that is least restrictive but also the most appropriate.



## **Limitations of the study**

A possible limitation of this study is the number of surveys that are returned greatly depends on the participants' willingness to participate. Research states that the average response rate is approximately 20% (Nulty, 2008). There are several methods to increase online survey response rates, such as sending repeat reminder emails to non-respondents, sending repeat reminder emails to survey owners, and offering incentives to students in the form of prizes awarded through a lottery (Nulty, 2008). Delimitations of this study are the specifications of children with an autism spectrum diagnosis.

## **Definition of Terms**

*Autism*: A developmental disability that affects an individual's communication skills, social interaction skills, and behavior. Individuals with an autism spectrum disorder must display symptoms from early childhood, even if those symptoms are not recognized until later in life. Autism is a spectrum disorder with diagnoses occurring on a continuum from mild to severe (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In this paper, the term "autism" is used to describe all individuals on the autism spectrum.

*Free, appropriate public education (FAPE)*: Schools are required to provide a free, appropriate public education to all students with disabilities. All of the services to children under this act must be provided without cost to the parents (Smith, 2005).

*Inclusion*: Students with disabilities receive their entire academic curriculum in the general education program (Idol, 2006).

*Least restrictive environment (LRE)*: To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions, or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and, special classes, separate schooling, or

other removal of children with disabilities from the general educational environment occur only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in general education classes, with the use of supplementary aids and services, cannot be achieved satisfactorily (20 U.S.C. § 1400 et seq.)

*Mainstreaming*: a form of educational programming that integrates special needs and non-special needs children in general education classrooms (Meisels, 1977).

## Chapter 2

### **Introduction**

Children with disabilities have historically been segregated from the public school system (Yell, Rogers, & Rogers, 1998). Prior to the legislation of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), in 1975, many children with disabilities did not attend public schools and often attended separate schools and institutions (Keogh, 2007). Friend (2005) reported that an estimated four million children, with disabilities in the United States, did not receive necessary supports in school, and another one million received no schooling prior to the passing of the EAHCA.

Historically, school districts in some states were permitted to turn away students based on their race or ability; however, this changed during the civil rights movement when the Supreme Court ruled the milestone decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). The ruling declared state laws that established separate public schools based on race, unconstitutional (Chinn, 2004). The courts stated if children in public schools are segregated based solely on the basis of race, the minority group is being deprived of equal protection under the law; the “separate but equal” rule does not apply in education.

The ruling of this case had implications for another segregated group of students, those children with disabilities. Parents of children with special needs applied the language of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and looked to the courts to protect the rights of their children, and, as a result, parents began filing lawsuits against their school districts, stating that their children had a right to be educated in the public school system (DeMonte, 2010). Sixty years after the ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education*, numerous

court cases and legislation were passed, defending the educational rights of children with disabilities (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Timeline of Federal Litigation and Legislation*

Date	Litigation and Legislation
1954	<i>Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka</i>
1971	<i>Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Pennsylvania</i>
1972	<i>Mills v. Board of Education of District of Columbia</i>
1975	Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA)
1982	<i>Board of Education of the Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Rowley</i>
1983	<i>Roncker v. Walter</i>
1989	<i>Daniel R.R. v. State Board of Education</i>
1990	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)
1993	<i>Oberti v. Board of Education of the Borough of Clementon</i>
1997	IDEA Reauthorized
2001	No Child Left Behind Act
2004	IDEA Reauthorized
2005	<i>Gaskin v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania</i>
2014	<i>Disability Rights New Jersey v. New Jersey Department of Education</i>
2014	<i>T.M. v. Cornwall Central School District</i>
2015	Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Two major cases that led to the development of federal legislation for children with disabilities were *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) v. Pennsylvania*, and *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia* (Gordon, 2006). In *PARC v. Pennsylvania*, the case disputed a state law that permitted public schools to deny services to children "who have not attained a mental age of five years" at the time they are chronologically eight years old (*Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Pennsylvania*, 1971). The plaintiffs argued that the state's statute's assumption, children with disabilities are not able to be educated, lacked a factual foundation and denies educational rights to children with disabilities.

These arguments were based on four main points including: (a) children with mental retardation are capable of benefiting from an education, (b) children with disabilities can benefit from an education not only based on academic experiences, (c) students with mental retardation, whose education started early, could attain a greater amount of learning, and (d) the state acceptance to provide a public education to all children and not deny students with disabilities the right to an education (Schraven & Jolly, 2010).

The defendants (13 school districts, the State Board of Education, and the State Secretaries of Welfare and Education), argued not only the administrative and financial burden on the school system, but, also, the appropriateness of their state statutes (being able to refuse to accept into the educational system any child who has not attained a mental age of five years, excuse a child from an education when approved by a certified person, and the relief of their obligation to provide an education for those children who are considered to be uneducable) (Yell et al., 1998).

The federal courts ruled that education must be provided for all children, regardless of physical or mental handicap, from six through 21 years of age. The ruling also stated that children with disabilities must be provided an education in a setting most like the settings provided for their peers without a disability (*Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, 1971). This case supported that children with disabilities should be afforded the same educational opportunities as students without disabilities, and set the stage for continued improvements regarding the educational rights of students with disabilities (Yell et al., 1998).

One year later, in *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia* (1972), the plaintiffs, parents of seven children with disabilities between the ages of eight and 16, brought suit against the District of Columbia public schools. The plaintiffs filed suit against the school district which had refused to enroll some students and expelled others, without providing an alternative education, solely on the basis of their disability, without due process of law (Yell et al., 1998). The defendants (including the Board of Education of the District of Columbia, the Superintendent of Schools for the District of Columbia, the commissioner of the District of Columbia, and the District of Columbia) claimed they did not have sufficient funds to provide special education services to these children, unless they were to take millions of dollars from the general education programs.

The U.S. District Court ruled that children with disabilities, regardless of severity, had an equal right to a public education offered in a form that was meaningful for them. Children with disabilities were also entitled to full procedural protections, including notice of proposed changes, access to school records, a right to be heard and to be represented by legal counsel at hearings to determine changes in individual programs,

and regularly scheduled status reviews. The court also stated that the school board's failure to meet its mandate could not be excused by its argument that there were insufficient funds available to pay for the services that the children needed. The court added that, if there were insufficient funds available to provide all of the needed programming, the board had to do its best to distribute the funds to ensure that no child was denied the opportunity to benefit from a public school education, and this could not impact more heavily on students with disabilities (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996).

*PARC v. Pennsylvania* and *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia* caused an eruption of legal action. According to Yell et al. (1998), these rulings set the stage for children with disabilities to have access to the same educational opportunities in the public school system. By 1973, more than 30 federal court decisions had upheld the principles of these two cases (Martin et al., 1996).

### **Education for All Handicapped Children Act**

In 1975, in response to the judicial recognition of a constitutional right to education for children with disabilities, Congress passed The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), PL 94-142 (Dilkes, 1983). This legislation secured access to public education for all children, without regard for their disabling condition. The EAHCA mandated states that accepted federal funds from the government to ensure a free and public education (FAPE), nondiscriminatory assessment, an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) for every child with a disability, and educational services provided in the LRE (Keogh, 2007). The LRE provision is defined as

to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities,  
including children in public or private institutions or other care

facilities, [be] educated with children who are not disabled, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular education environment [occur] only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (20 U.S.C. § 1412(5)[B])

Also stated in the EAHCA is the right for parents to participate in all decisions that are related to the identification, evaluation, and placement of their child. Consent must be given by the child's parents for the initial evaluation, assessment, or placement decision. EAHCA outlines due process procedures that guarantee parents' rights to appeal any decision that they do not agree with.

EAHCA was passed in order to meet four main goals: ensure special education services are available to those children who need them, guarantee fair and appropriate decisions are made regarding services for children with disabilities, establish specific management and auditing requirements for special education, and provide federal funding to assist the states provide an education to students with disabilities.

Following the passage of the EAHCA, questions soon arose regarding the definition of FAPE. In the *Board of Education of the Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Rowley* (1982), the plaintiffs, parents of Amy, a first grader, filed suit when the school district refused to provide a sign language interpreter. The school district's argument was that they were providing specialized services, including an FM amplification system, speech and language therapy, the services of a teacher of the deaf,



as well as the program made available to Amy in the general, first grade classroom. With these services in place, the school district reported that Amy was achieving passing marks and did not require any additional services to succeed (Mead & Paige, 2008).

For the first time, the Supreme Court's ruling provided a definition of FAPE as stated in the EAHCA. According to Alexander and Alexander (2011), the Court's ruling stated that the EAHCA was intended to make available a "basic floor of opportunity," which "consists of access to specialized instruction and related services which are individually designed to provide educational benefit to the handicapped child" (p. 579). According to Mead and Paige (2008), the ruling stated that a special education for a child with a disability should deliver some degree of benefit, but a school's obligation, under the EAHCA, was met by providing benefits that satisfied the minimum, rather than maximizing the child's potential. The Court found that because an array of services was already provided, and Amy was performing just as she was expected to succeed, the school district had provided Amy with an appropriate education under the guidelines of FAPE in the EAHCA (*Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Rowley*, 1982).

Soon following the ruling of *Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Rowley* (1982), another suit was filed by the parents of Neill Roncker in 1983. Heard by the U.S. Court of Appeals (6<sup>th</sup> Circuit), *Roncker v. Walter* (1983) involved parents' request for their son to continue his educational placement in their local school. The school district argued that the student was not successful, and he needed the specialized services provided at the segregated county school. The question raised in this case was whether the student could have received the specialized services that were provided in the

segregated school, in his neighborhood school. If he could, then the child's placement in the segregated setting was inappropriate.

The courts ruled in favor of the inclusive environment, despite testimony that the boy was receiving little to no educational benefit from the general education classroom. The court stated that in order for a student to be removed from the general education setting, there must be substantive benefits over general education placement, and that the school district must evaluate the social benefits of inclusion in the decision to place a student in a more restrictive environment (*Roncker v. Walter*, 1983).

From the rulings in this case, questions were brought up that are used to determine whether mainstreaming can be accomplished. This case brought forth the issue of whether or not the services that make the specialized setting more appropriate can be moved to, and implemented in, the non-segregated environment, referred to as the Roncker portability test (Yell & Drasgow, 1999). The ruling stated that if the segregated setting is considered superior, the court should determine whether the services which make that placement superior could be possibly provided in a non-segregated setting (*Roncker v. Walter*, 1983).

When determining the appropriate placement for children with disabilities, school districts will often use the standard set in *Roncker v. Walter* (6<sup>th</sup> Circuit, 1983). This was the first case in which the federal court interpreted the LRE provisions of IDEA.

### **EAHCA 1986 (P.L. 99-457)**

In 1986, amendments to the EAHCA (P.L. 99-457) were written to extend the purpose of this law to include children to five years of age. These amendments included the following: (a) guarantee FAPE to children with disabilities between the ages of three

to five years, (b) establish Early Intervention Programs for infants and toddlers with disabilities, ages zero to two years, and (c) to develop an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) for families who have a child between the ages of zero to two with a disability (Sass-Lehrer & Bodner-Johnson, 1999).

Three years following the amendments to EAHCA, in 1986, the parents of a child with Down syndrome file suit in the case of *Daniel RR v. State Board of Education* (1989), heard by the U.S. Court of Appeals, Fifth Circuit. In this case regarding the principle of the LRE, Daniel's parents requested to have their child placed in a general pre-kindergarten classroom. The educators, not long into the school year, had reservations regarding Daniel's placement. Constant, individual attention from the teacher or the aide was required for Daniel to participate, and he was unable to master the skills taught in the classroom. Modifications were made; however, in order for the teaching methods to reach Daniel's ability level, the curriculum would need to be modified beyond recognition.

The district court's ruling was in favor of the school district, and from this decision, the courts provided a two-pronged test. The first part of this test was to analyze whether education in the general education classroom, with the use of supplemental aids and services, can be achieved satisfactorily and, secondly, if placement outside of a general education classroom was needed, whether the school has mainstreamed the child to the maximum extent possible. Subsequent rulings have used this test in determining decisions regarding LRE (*Oberti v. Board of Education of the Borough of Clementon*, 1993; *Beth v. Van Clay*, 2002; *LB and JB, on behalf of KB v. Nebo School District*, 2004;

*R.C. v. Keller Independent School District*, 2013; *Wood v. Katy Independent School District*, 2015).

### **IDEA 1990 (P.L. 101-476)**

Several additional changes have been made to the EAHCA following the amendments in 1986. In 1990, the EAHCA was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), P.L. 101-476, and with it, additional amendments to the policy (Katsiyannis, Yell, & Bradley, 2001).

The focus of IDEA in 1990 was to ensure that all children with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to meet their unique needs, as well as prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living. Amendments were made including: (a) a change in terminology, such as “children” was replaced with individuals, “handicapped” changed to disabilities, and stating the individual first, and then their disability, (b) extension of eligibility to children with autism and traumatic brain injury, (c) the inclusion of transition services for students with disabilities by the age of 16 years, and (d) definition of Assistive Technology Devices and Services for children with disabilities and include this into the IEP (Smith, 2005).

Shortly after the revisions made in 1990, a case was filed in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit, again, regarding issues surrounding LRE. In *Oberti v. Board of Education of the Borough of Clementon* (1993), decided by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Circuit Court of Appeals, the parents of an eight-year-old boy with Down’s syndrome filed suit in the Court of Appeals when the Clementon School District proposed placing their son in a full-time program for children who are multiply handicapped. The Court of Appeals held that the district violated the IDEA in that school districts are required to supplement and

realign their resources to move beyond segregated settings. Before a school district makes the decision to segregate a student with a disability, they must make an effort to adapt the general education environment to make the curriculum accessible. This includes using the aids and services such as speech and language therapy, training for staff, and any other appropriate services (*Oberti v. Board of Education of the Borough of Clementon*, 1993).

### **IDEA 1997 (P.L. 105-17)**

IDEA underwent additional amendments in 1997. The IDEA revisions of 1997 (P.L. 105-17) shifted the focus of IDEA to improve instruction and learning through emphasizing the IEP as the primary means for educational planning, increasing the parents' role in making decisions regarding the education of their children, and encouraging meaningful access to the general education curriculum.

Prior to enactment of the IDEA Amendments of 1997, the law only specifically addressed the issue of discipline in a provision that permitted school personnel to remove a child with a disability to an interim, alternative, educational placement for up to 45 days if the child brought a gun to school. The 1997 Amendments included prior court decisions and held that (a) schools could remove a child for up to 10 school days at a time for any violation of school rules, as long as there was not a pattern of removals, (b) a child with a disability could not be long-term suspended or expelled from school for behavior that was a manifestation of his or her disability, and (c) services must continue for children with disabilities who are suspended or expelled from school (Conroy, Clark, Gable, & Fox, 1999).

In addition, IDEA 1997 expanded the authority of school personnel regarding the removal of a child who brings a gun to school to apply to all weapons, and to the knowing possession of illegal drugs, sale, or solicitation of the sale of controlled substances; this added a new capability for schools to request a hearing officer to remove a child for up to 45 days, if keeping the child in his or her current placement was substantially likely to result in injury to the child or to others (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

IDEA 1997 also added new provisions that required schools to conduct a functional behavior assessment (FBA), to develop positive behavioral interventions to address that behavior, and describe how to determine whether the behavior was a manifestation of the child's disability (Conroy et al., 1999).

### **No Child Left Behind Act 2001**

Before the most current reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001. This act requires that schools demonstrably improve student achievement so that all students in public schools are proficient in reading and math (Yell, Katsiyannis & Shiner, 2006). NCLB requires states to develop standards for schools to use to measure their success in improving student achievement, referred to as adequate yearly progress (AYP). Students with disabilities are included in the assessment procedures, and results are reported to determine if a school district makes AYP (Yell et al., 2008).

According to Yell, Drasgow, and Lowrey (2005), if students with disabilities were excluded from schools' accountability systems, these students would receive less attention, and would not obtain the precise academic consideration that they need. By

including students with disabilities in NCLB's assessment system, Congress made certain that schools would be held accountable for the academic performance of students with disabilities (Yell et al., 2008).

### **IDEA 2004 (108-446)**

The most current revision of IDEA occurred when Congress passed IDEA 2004, now called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, still referred to as IDEA (Smith, 2005). With the 2004 reauthorization, changes were passed that bring this legislation into alignment with the NCLB Act of 2001 (Bouck, 2009). The focus of the changes made was to increase the academic achievement of students in special education. Significant changes to this Act to align it with NCLB are the addition of the highly-qualified teacher (Hyatt, 2007), the requirement for accountability and assessment, where students are required to be evaluated to determine AYP (Alexander & Alexander, 2012).

Changes also included attention to writing measurable goals, collection of data on goals, monitoring progress, and increasing accountability for results. IDEA 2004 also changed aspects of the IEP, including the elimination of short-term objectives, unless the student is assessed using alternative assessment procedures, and the requirement of a statement of transition goals, based on age-appropriate assessments, that will be in effect when the child reaches 16 years of age (Smith, 2005). Changes also occurred to the disciplinary procedures of students with disabilities. As in IDEA 1997, a manifestation-determination hearing must be conducted in order to determine if the student's behavior is related to the disability. According to Smith (2005), in a revision to IDEA in 2004, the legislation stated that "a relationship is found if the behavior was caused by or had a

*direct and substantial* relationship to the child’s disability, or if the school had failed to implement the child’s IEP” (p. 317).

The revisions made to IDEA in 2004 brought forth new litigation surrounding what constitutes LRE for children with disabilities. In *Gaskin v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (2005), 12 students with disabilities enrolled in local school districts in Pennsylvania, and 11 state and regional disability advocacy groups filed a class action suit against the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The plaintiffs alleged that students with disabilities were denied the right to FAPE in their LRE and were not offered a continuum of services needed to assist the students to perform in the general school environment (*Gaskin v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, 2005).

The settlement agreed upon by both parties required the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) to initiate a series of reforms of its systems for implementing general supervision over special education throughout Pennsylvania. The goal was for school districts to increase their ability to provide the supplementary aids and services in general education classrooms that students with disabilities need to receive a meaningful benefit from education (*Gaskin v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, 2005). The outcome of this case resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of students who were included in the general education classrooms. According to the PDE, the percentage of early intervention children enrolled in inclusive environments during the 2005-2006 school year was 49.6%. During the 2013-2015 school year, the percentage of children enrolled in inclusive early intervention programs increased to 71.2% (PDE, 2015).

Two years later in 2007, a federal lawsuit was filed against the New Jersey Department of Education for failing to make certain students with disabilities were served



in the LRE (*Disability Rights New Jersey v. New Jersey Department of Education*, 2014). In 2014, a Settlement Agreement was filed, calling for the state to take extraordinary measures to assure that the districts with the lowest rates of inclusion in preschool and K-12 programs comply with remediation plans.

The Settlement Agreement included an LRE Needs Assessment, to be completed by the school districts with the lowest rates of inclusion, and, that enroll more than 25% of all students in New Jersey. The Settlement Agreement consists of five steps: (a) a review and analysis of placement data by the district personnel, (b) a completion of the LRE Questionnaire, (c) a site visit conducted by the New Jersey Department of Education, (d) a meeting conducted by the New Jersey Department of Education with the district personnel, and (e) the development of a training and technical assistance plan by the New Jersey Department of Education staff that is based on the results of the steps listed above (*Disability Rights New Jersey v. New Jersey Department of Education*, 2014).

In 2014, in *T.M. v. Cornwall Central School District*, the parents, on behalf of their child with an autism spectrum diagnosis, argued that the school district denied him FAPE in his LRE by offering him a placement decision for the extended school year (ESY) in a self-contained special education classroom. The issue in this case was whether or not the LRE provision, stated in IDEA, applied to the placement during ESY. The court ruled that the LRE provision in IDEA applied to ESY placements, just the same as school-year placements (*T.M. v. Cornwall Central School District*, 2014).

Although there were significant changes over the years to the original EAHCA adopted in 1975, the core principles of a child entitled to FAPE in the LRE remain the

same (see Table 2). Children with disabilities have a right to a free, appropriate public education in their least restrictive environment.

Table 2. *IDEA Provisions*

1. Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)	Schools are required to provide a free, appropriate public education to all students with disabilities. All of the services to children under this act must be provided without cost to the parents.
2. Appropriate Evaluation	A variety of assessment tools and strategies to gather information that will assist in determining whether the child has a disability and the content of the child's program.
3. Individualized Education Plan (IEP)	The IEP must include information regarding a student's present levels of educational performance, annual goals and benchmarking objectives, services and supplementary aids, and an explanation of occurrences where a student is not participating in the general classroom and why. An IEP is also required to include information on student progress as well as transition services.
4. Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)	Students with disabilities have the opportunity to be educated with non-disabled peers, to the greatest extent appropriate.
5. Parent Participation	Educators must ensure that the parents of a child with a disability are members of any group that makes decisions regarding the placement and LRE of that child.
6. Procedural Safeguards	Help parents understand their rights under federal law. Procedures are put in place to resolve disagreements between parents and schools regarding the placement of a student. If there is a disagreement, parents have the right to request mediation or due process hearings.

**Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)**

In December of 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law, replacing the No Child Left Behind Act. Under this act, the vision remains the same; high standards, accountability, and closing the achievement gap. The goals of the ESSA include: (a) ensure states set high standards to prepare them for college and career, (b) maintain accountability by providing states resources towards what works to improve schools, (c) empower state and local agencies to develop evidence-based practices and systems for school improvement, and (d) conduct annual assessments and decrease unnecessary and ineffective testing (U.S. Department of Education, Executive Office of the President, 2015).

The new ESSA requirements are more focused on teaching and learning, and gives states more latitude while maintaining federal funds for those students who need it the most. States are now able to set their own interventions for schools that are struggling in districts. The federal government will no longer specify sanctions, such as school closings, firing teachers, etc., in return for money (Peterson, Barrows, & Gift, 2016). The ESSA bans the federal government from requiring specific conditions of teacher evaluation, maintains paraprofessional certification requirements, and resets testing and accountability by giving states more flexibility in how and when they deliver the tests. States are also provided funds to review their testing procedures and decrease unwarranted tests. Requirements stay the same, however, that states must continue to test students in grades three through eight and again in high school, with all results disaggregated by student subgroup (Klein, 2015).

Another significant change is that schools can set their own content standards and aligned assessments. The federal government can no longer require the Common Core,

etc., and, since the passing of the ESSA, all but six states have withdrawn from the Common Core State Standards (Saltman, 2016). Although states are required to submit accountability plans to the Department of Education, they are now permitted to set their own accountability system. They no longer have to follow the adequate yearly progress (AYP) regulations. The state's accountability system can include more authentic evaluations of what students know and can do, as well as including non-test measures such as school climate and safety, educator engagement, and working conditions. States must ensure that the assessments are high-quality and are aligned to the state's academic standards (Weiss & McGuinn, 2016).

The signing of the ESSA into law provides states the opportunity to reshape their educational system. State education leaders are facing a great opportunity to provide more support to districts and schools in improving outcomes for students (Weiss & McGuinn, 2016).

### **The Debate**

Although there has been a number of revisions made to legislation regarding the placement of students with disabilities, there continues to be much dispute over LRE, and how to determine the most appropriate placement (Ryndak et al., 2014).

There is much research outlining the benefits of inclusive education. First, educating all students together in the general education setting increases the overall understanding of disabilities and acceptance of students who are disabled (Hines, 2001; Gordon, 2006). According to Fuchs and Fuchs (1998), advocates of inclusion believe it is the educator's job to help typically developing children change stereotypic thinking about disabilities. By creating an environment that embraces diversity, more opportunities will

be created to learn how students with disabilities can be included, respected, and valued (Villa & Thousand, 1995). Also, a benefit of inclusion for nondisabled peers is the frequent classroom arrangements of small-group instruction, individualized instruction, and helping children with disabilities in acquiring academic skills (Hunt, 2000).

Another advantage of inclusion reported in the literature is the social benefit of having a child with a disability alongside non-disabled peers. In a study conducted by Banda, Hart, and Liu-Gitz (2010), peer training and adult prompting was used to successfully increase initiations and responding displayed by children with autism to their peers without disabilities throughout the school day.

There are also several studies on the effectiveness of inclusion paired with social skills interventions including additional peer training strategies (Kamps et al., 2002; Owen-DeSchryver, Carr, Cale, & Blakeley-Smith, 2008), the use of visual prompting systems (Nelson, McDonnell, Johnston, Crompton, & Nelson, 2007), and using video modeling strategies (MacDonald, Sacramone, Mansfield, Wiltz, Ahearn, 2009; Nikopoulos & Keenan, 2007). Each of these interventions, when implemented in an inclusive environment, resulted in positive effects of social interaction skills.

Advocates for inclusion also state the increase in academic achievement among children with disabilities. According to Hines (2001), inclusive environments promote levels of achievement higher than or at least as high as those achieved in a special education classroom. In a study conducted by Hunt, Staub, Alwell, and Goetz (1994), students with multiple, severe disabilities were included into cooperative learning groups. Through the interaction with students without disabilities providing cues, prompts, and consequences, the students with disabilities acquired basic communication and motor

skills. In addition to this, the students with disabilities also generalized these skills during follow-up sessions to activities with peers in new groups.

In a meta-analysis conducted by Wang and Baker (1985-1986), the results revealed that students with disabilities in mainstreamed classrooms made greater overall academic gains than did their peers with similar disabilities in segregated classrooms. Supporting similar findings, Baker, Wang, and Walberg (1994-1995) reviewed three meta-analyses looking at the most effective educational settings for children with disabilities. The summary of this research showed that inclusion has a beneficial influence on the academic and social outcomes among children with disabilities.

While there is ample research supporting the positive effects of an inclusive environment for students with disabilities, there is also evidence supporting the other side of the debate. Gordon (2006) stated, “Critics of full inclusion argue that a one-size-fits-all standard for students with disabilities is impractical and runs counter to the individualized principles at the heart of IDEA” (p.212). Students with disabilities often have difficulty with academics because they are not able to receive enough individualized attention from the general education teacher (Bakken, 2010). More recent arguments for educating students with significant disabilities have focused on the capacity of more segregated settings to provide highly-specialized services (Kurth, Morningstar, & Kozleski, 2014). Those opposed to inclusion believe that students with disabilities have different needs than their non-disabled peers and, therefore, need services that are specific to their disabilities (Ball & Green, 2014).

Critics also stated that, in the general education environment, instruction is typically delivered as undifferentiated, large-group instruction. Smaller group-work and

individual assignments take place, however, not as often as whole-class instruction takes place (Hocutt, 1996). In the general education setting, students with disabilities can be expected to learn the same information, and often at the same pace, as nondisabled students (Hocutt, 1996; White, 2007). As children with disabilities grow older, specifically, students with autism and students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities need a curriculum that differs more and more from the general education curriculum (Eaves & Ho, 1997).

Eaves and Ho (1997) further stated that expecting children with autism to benefit and learn by watching their peers and through modeling goes against all that has been identified about how children with autism learn. To support this claim, Leaf, McEachin, and Taubman (2008) reported that “There is actually little scientific evidence showing that children with ASD (Autism Spectrum Diagnosis) actually benefit significantly from merely being exposed to typically developing children or inclusion” (p. 232).

Those opposed to inclusion also raise concerns with the behavior challenges and disruptions that students with disabilities, often severe disabilities, can bring to the general education classroom (Gordon, 2006), and if general education teachers are prepared to teach students who present such challenges. Children with autism often display challenging behaviors including noncompliance, aggression, self-injurious behaviors, and disruptions to the environment (Matson & Nebel-Schwalm, 2007). These behaviors are likely to continue in children with autism without effective intervention (Machalicek, O’Reilly, Beretvas, Sigafos, & Lancioni, 2007).

Given these amendments to IDEA, general education teachers raise concerns regarding the potential disruptive nature of students with disabilities, and how to

adequately address the needs of students who perform at levels significantly lower than their peers (Bakken, 2010). In a study conducted by Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996), 28 studies were identified where general education teachers were surveyed regarding their views of inclusion of students with disabilities. The results of this study showed that only one-third or less of teachers felt that they had enough time, skills, training, or needed resources to successfully meet the needs of their students with disabilities (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). In a more recent study, researchers interviewed secondary school teachers on their experiences to include students with special needs in mainstream education. The results showed that participants received training in the form of lectures during their teacher education programs and professional development series, but little to no training for working specifically with students who have behavioral, emotional, and social difficulties (Goodman & Burton, 2010).

In a study conducted by Rodriguez, Saldana, and Moreno (2012), two questionnaires were given to teachers about teacher attitude and the perceived needs in relation to the education of students with autism. The results showed the greatest needs were more information and training on autism, social support, and a need for more resources to meet the needs of students with autism.

### **The IEP Team**

Despite the evidence in favor of, and against inclusion, there continues to be controversy over the most appropriate placements for the child with special needs. Placement decisions are ultimately decided by the IEP team, which includes a general education teacher, a special education teacher, a representative of the local education agency (LEA), and someone with expertise to interpret the educational assessment, often



a school psychologist (Hott, Thomas, Abbassi, Hendricks, & Aslina, 2015). Hott et al. reported parents are also required to be included in the team process, and districts need to make every attempt to accommodate the parents' schedules and needs. According to IDEA (2004), other team members that may be present include individuals who have special expertise regarding the child, including related services personnel and, whenever appropriate, the student.

The IEP guides the team in determining areas of need in the child's ability to function within academic, social, and/or adaptive domains. According to IDEA regulations, the IEP must include:

- present levels of academic achievement and functional performance;
- measurable annual goals;
- a description of how progress toward meeting goals will be measured;
- the needed related services and supplementary aids and services;
- an explanation of the extent, if any, to which the child will not participate with non-disabled peers in the general education class;
- a statement of accommodations, if any, needed in assessments; and
- the projected date, frequency, location, and duration of services and modifications (Bateman, 2011).

### **Development of the IEP**

The initial step in the development of an IEP is to conduct an evaluation of the child's academic and functional levels of performance. This should include the use of standardized and informal assessment instruments, and the implementation of a functional behavior assessment. With the results, the child's educational program is then

developed consisting of (a) present levels of performance, (b) measurable goals and benchmarks, (c) special education and related services, (d) supplementary services and programming modifications, and (e) a behavior intervention plan.

Once the child's IEP is developed, placement is determined. At this time, a continuum of alternative placements is discussed that can meet the needs of the child with disabilities. Taylor (2004) discussed LRE continuum, a systematic sequence of educational placements that differ according to the degree of restrictiveness. In this continuum, it is assumed that every individual with a disability can fall somewhere in one of the placements. It is also assumed that if the child makes academic or social gains, they may move to a less restrictive placement (Taylor, 2004). Table 3 illustrates the placements in the special education continuum, ranging from home instruction and hospitals at the most restrictive end (Level VII), to general education classroom placement at the least restrictive end of the continuum (Hocutt, 1996).

Table 3. *The Continuum of Alternative Placements*

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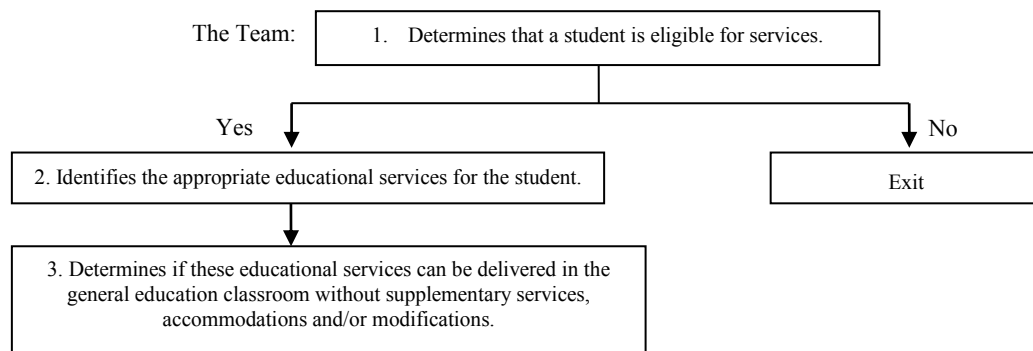
**Full Continuum of Educational Services and Student Placement**

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Level I	Attendance in general education class without supplementary instructional supports, and with or without medical supports
Level II	Attendance in general education class with supplementary instructional services delivered in the general classroom
Level III	Part-time attendance in resource room
Level IV	Full-time attendance in special education class
Level V	Special schools
Level VI	Homebound instruction
Level VII	Instruction in hospital or domiciled settings

Literature exists outlining detailed processes to provide educators with guidance when deciding LRE for students with disabilities. Rozalski, Steward, and Miller (2010) proposed the LRE decision tree (see figure 1) that can assist the IEP team with not only initially identifying LRE, but also during annual IEP reviews and reevaluation meetings.



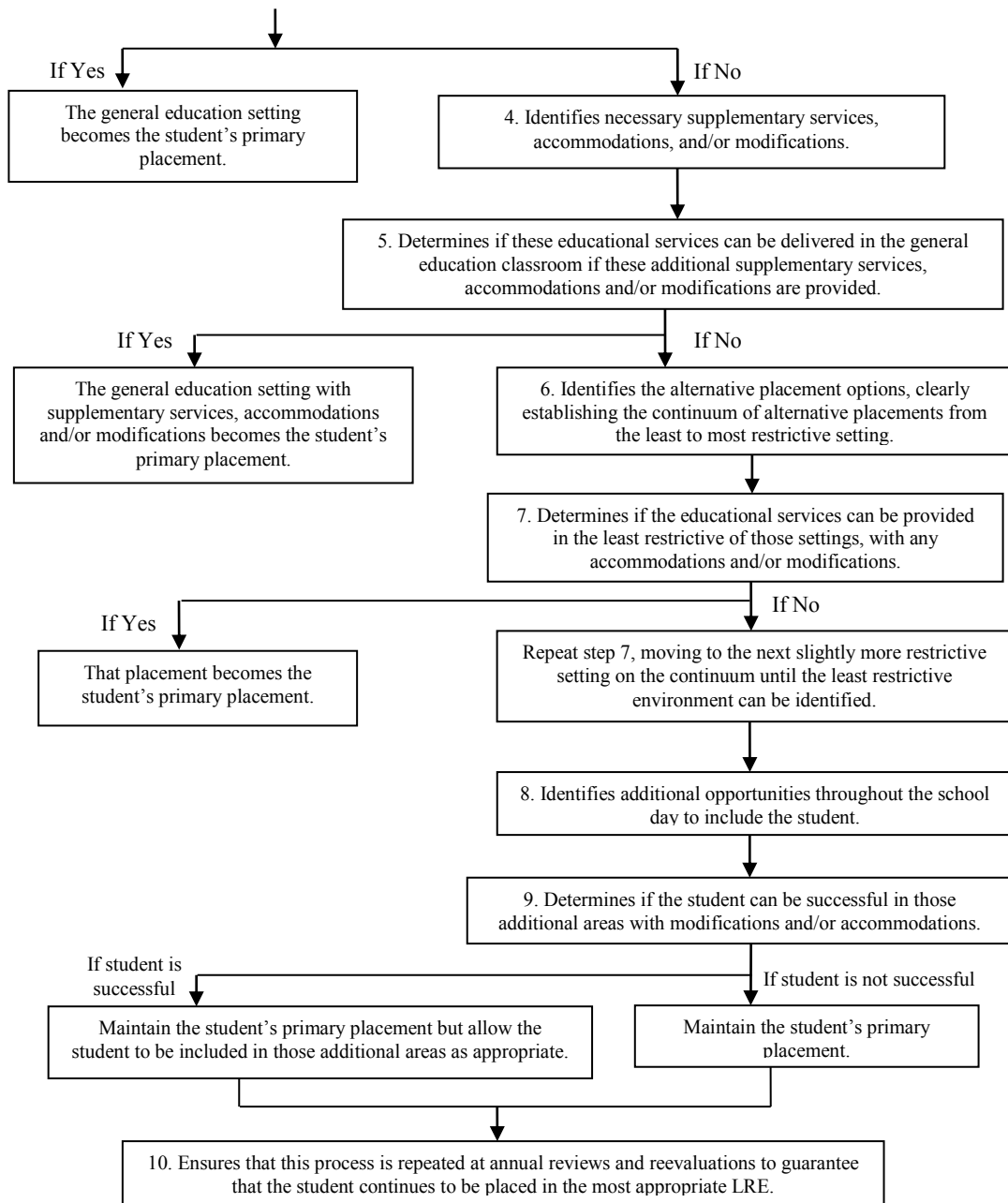


Figure 1. The LRE Decision Tree

According to data from the most recent annual report to Congress (Office of Special Education Programs, 2015), 62.1% of students with disabilities spend their day inside the general education class for 80% or more of their day (see Figure 2). The

percentages of students with disabilities in each of the listed placements has changed very little over the past five years, showing steady trends in the number of students receiving services primarily in the general education classroom.

Percentage of All Students Ages 6 through 21 with Disabilities  
Serviced in Six Educational Environments  
During the 2014-2015 School Year

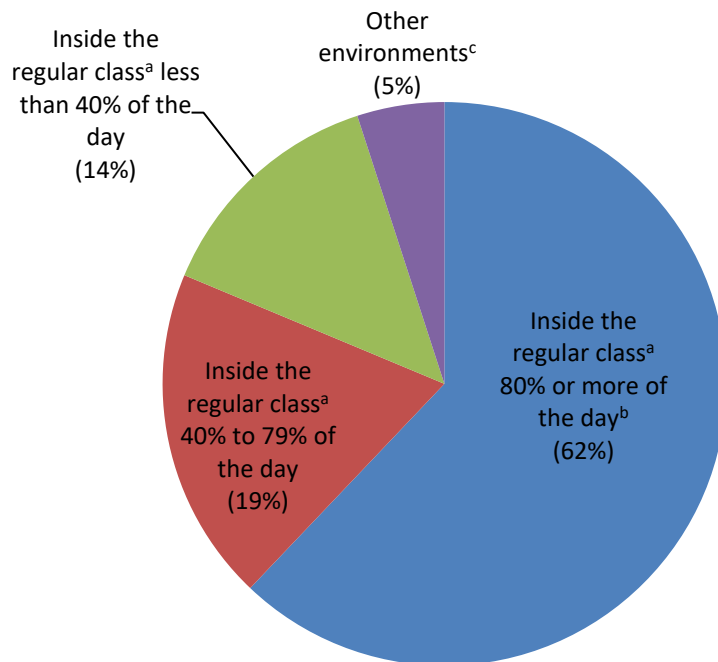
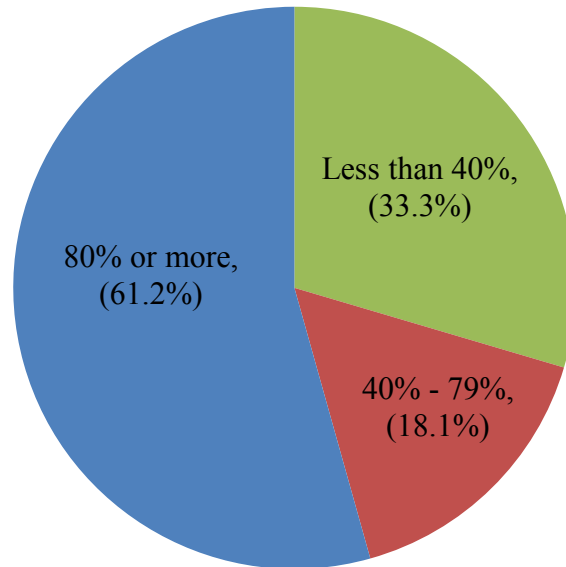


Figure 2. Percentage of Students with Disabilities in Educational Environments

Figure 3 displays the amount of time students with autism are included in the general education classroom during their school day (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

Percentage of students 6 to 21 years old serviced under IDEA by educational environment during the 2012-2013 School Year



*Figure 3. Percentage of Students with Autism in Educational Environments*

The literature has shown several shortcomings in IEP development that have been the source of several legal battles, especially for those children with an autism spectrum diagnosis (Ruble, McGrew, Dalrymple, & Jung, 2010). Ruble et al. (2010) discussed how many IEPs lack consistency with recommend practice guidelines outlined in IDEA. Examples cited include: (a) IEPs tended to include inadequate descriptions of present performance, (b) contained goals that are not specific or measurable, (c) reported expectations that are unrealistic and misaligned with the child's abilities, and (d) contained placement recommendations that appeared to be based upon eligibility criteria rather than performance.

According to Pretti-Frontczak and Bricker (2000), IEPs often (a) target non-functional skills, (b) contain little information regarding the generalization of skills and

performance criteria that will be used, (c) emphasize pre-academic skills rather than real-life skills, (d) are missing mandated components, and (e) include goals that do not address a child's area of delay. Due to these weaknesses, educators report that the IEP has little utility (Pretti-Frontczak & Bricker, 2000).

In a study by Yell and Drasgow (2000), 45 due process hearings and court cases were analyzed where parents of children with autism disputed the school district's programs. Of the 45 hearings and court cases, school districts lost 33 due to procedural or substantive errors (Yell & Drasgow, 2000). Examples cited include the school districts failed to consider evaluation data provided by the parent, evaluations did not address all areas of the student's needs, districts did not conduct evaluations prior to revising the IEP, the IEP did not address all areas of needs identified in the evaluation, and the IEP was not based on the individual needs of the student.

Capizzi (2008) reported to assist in developing meaningful and individualized IEPs, assessment data can help guide instructional planning. The assessment process is a crucial part in the development of an IEP; if it is not completed correctly, all that is in the IEP, that is based on the assessments (such as the goals and special education services), will be inaccurate (Yell, Katsiyannis, Ryan, McDuffie, & Mattocks, 2008).

Yell et al. (2008) stated that there are two types of assessments: (a) those that establish a child's eligibility for special education (standardized norm-referenced achievement tests), and (b) those that serve as a basis for establishing a student's educational program. Often, when developing the goals of the IEP, only the assessment data that were used to determine eligibility of special education is used. When this happens, criterion-referenced assessments (curriculum-based assessments, functional

behavioral assessment) are not included in the process (Yell et al., 2008) and placement recommendations will be based upon eligibility criteria rather than performance (Johns, Crowley, & Guetzloe, 2002).

These criterion-referenced assessments determine the student's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP). This section describes the academic and nonacademic concerns that interfere with the student's ability to learn and be educated (Kauffman, Hallahan, & Pullen, 2011). According to Kauffman et al., it is the PLAAFP statements that are the baseline for the goals of the IEP. If the assessments used to determine the PLAAFP statements are lacking, the absence of appropriate assessment can end up in a denial of FAPE, as seen in the ruling of *Pocatello School District* in 1991. Kauffman et al. reported the Indiana state educational agency ruled that "a district failed to provide FAPE because the IEP was based on vague and subjective PLAAFP statements that were not suitable as a baseline to measure future student progress" (p.79).

According to Yell and Busch (2012), meeting the requirements of the IEP requires assessment, programming, and progress monitoring correspond with each other, and that the IEP discusses "meaningful educational benefit" (p. 41). This can be ensured if IEP teams conduct educationally meaningful assessments, develop goals based on these assessments, implement services based on peer-reviewed research, and monitor progress frequently (Yell & Busch, 2012).

### **Autism**

Although it has been shown that assessment is a critical component of IEP development, there is insufficient information regarding the types of assessments that are



commonly conducted by practitioners during the IEP process, specifically for children with autism (Luiselli et al., 2001). Characteristics of autism spectrum disorders (ASD) include social and communication deficits, behavioral challenges, and possible comorbid conditions that make the process of assessment more challenging for educators and other professionals (Paynter, 2015). According to Durocher (2011), students with ASD may also display uneven patterns of development, where they exhibit skills that are at or above age level in some areas, but below age level in others areas of development. This pattern is observed in a scattered profile of results on formal assessment measures, as well as inconsistent presentation of skills within individual subtests that influence not only test results, but instructional programming and placement as well (Durocher, 2011).

### **Assessment Guidelines**

The literature on best-practice assessment guidelines for children with ASD reported several general themes (Durocher, 2011; Filipek et al., 1999; Ozonoff, Goodlin-Jones, & Solomon, 2005). First, assessment procedures for children with ASD should be based on a developmental perspective. Using a developmental framework provides the educator with a baseline for understanding the severity of delays in several different milestone areas (Durocher, 2011).

Second, Durocher (2011) reported that the assessment process should include information from multiple sources and be individualized based on the child's age, developmental level, and diagnosis. Despite the strengths of individual assessments, there is no single assessment that is broad enough to be used for instructional planning for a child who has deficits across all developmental areas, including the social, academic, and behavioral domains (Gould, Dixon, Najdowski, Smith, & Tarbox, 2011). Data should be

collected from measures of parent and teacher reports, observation of the child across different settings, cognitive and adaptive behavior assessments, and clinical judgments (Filipek et al., 1999). Research has also shown an increasing use of curriculum-based assessments (Mattatall, 2011), such as the Verbal Behavior Milestones Assessment and Placement Program (VB-MAPP) that identify specific deficits and/or excesses that are likely to be the most relevant for selecting treatment targets and the development of IEP goals (Gould et al.).

Finally, assessment should be multidisciplinary. Professionals from several disciplines, depending on the individual needs of the student (Dodd, Franke, Grzesik, & Stoskopf, 2014), should be included in the evaluation process, including psychology, psychiatry, speech and language, occupational therapy, and other medical disciplines such as audiology and neurology (Ozonoff et al., 2005).

### **Summary**

Although there are guidelines that have been developed, based on best practice and the critical role that systematic assessment plays in the educational planning and placement of children with autism, little is known about the types of assessments that are used for children with ASD for instructional planning and placement. The purpose of this study is to analyze the assessment process conducted by educators when developing IEP goals and determining placement for children with autism.

## Chapter 3

### Methods

#### Research Design

This study employed a survey research design intended to investigate the variables used to determine the educational placement of children with an autism spectrum diagnosis. There are several advantages of survey research including: (a) the ability to reach several individuals with similar characteristics in a short amount of time, regardless of geographic distances, (b) the ability to send responses to the researcher immediately, allowing the researcher to conduct preliminary analyses on the data as they come in, and (c) the ability of the online survey research to save money by using an electronic medium instead of paper format (Wright, 2005). Additionally, using electronic administration of the survey will reduce the likelihood of data entry error. According to Nardi (2016), self-administered surveys “are more efficient tools for surveying large samples of respondents in short periods of time than interviews or other research methods, and with less expense than interviews or telephone surveys” (p. 72).

After consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of several various data collection methods, the Internet survey format was chosen for the primary data collection. Follow-up telephone and email reminders were used to encourage participation. At the end of the survey, participants were asked to indicate if they were willing to participate in a follow up interview.

#### Participants

Educators in elementary public school buildings (including administrators, school psychologists, special education teachers, general education teachers, speech therapists,

behavior therapists, occupational therapists, and an educational diagnostician) were purposively selected to participate in this study. All participants remained anonymous to the researcher, unless the participant volunteered his/her name for a follow-up interview. There were no demographic restrictions other than only elementary building-level educators were included in the sample.

### **Instrumentation**

The researcher developed a survey to obtain specific information needed for this study. The survey questions were selected from a number of different inventories found in the current research literature. As indicated in Table 4, questions 1-11 asked participants to respond to a battery of basic demographic items.

Questions 12 and 13 were taken from *Access to the General Curriculum for Students with Significant Disabilities: What it Means to Teachers* (Agran, Alper, & Wehmeyer, 2002). The purpose of this survey was to gather opinions of teachers regarding issues related to students with severe disabilities' access to the general education curriculum. The questions retrieved from this study looked at the percentage students with disabilities have for access to the general education curriculum, as well as the type of support that is often provided for these students who are included in general education settings. No known reliability estimates have been reported.

Question 14 was taken from *Administrative Strategies that Promote Inclusion: Teacher and Administrator Perceptions from the Front Lines* (Vergon & Broderick, 1999). This study's purpose was to analyze the importance of different administrative strategies to successful inclusion, evaluate the extent which these strategies are implemented, and determine if there is a relationship between school inclusion status and

the implementation of administrative strategies. The question taken from this study looked at how the school educates students with disabilities. No known reliability estimates have been reported.

Questions 15, 16, and 17 were extracted from *Available Classroom Supports for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders in Public Schools* (Sanford, 2009). This survey was developed to assess the types of assessments that are available to students with ASDs in a variety of public school settings. The specific questions taken from this survey focused on the knowledge on autism and experiences the participants have in working with individuals with autism. The estimates of reliability of the items were reported. The Cronbach's alpha for the Use of Support subscale was  $\alpha = .958$ . For the Importance of Supports subscale, the Cronbach's alpha was  $\alpha = .976$ . The internal consistency of the Perceived Use of Supports in General Education Settings was  $\alpha = .971$ , and the internal consistency was  $\alpha = .976$ . The total measure yielded an internal consistency score of  $\alpha = .986$  (Sanford, 2009).

Questions 19 – 28 were taken from *A National Survey on the Role of the School Psychologist in the Educational Placement Decisions for Deaf Students* (Gibbons, 2009). The survey was to determine the role of school psychologists in making educational placement decisions. No known reliability estimates have been reported.

Question 29 was selected from *An Exploration of the Dynamics and Collaboration within Individualized Educational Program Teams* (Spessard, 2014). The purpose of this survey was to evaluate the participants' perceptions based on their experiences being on an IEP team. Reliability estimates were reported at  $\alpha = .902$  (Spessard, 2014).

Questions 31 – 34 were extracted from Principals’ Attitudes Toward Inclusion: Including Students with Autism in Elementary Classrooms (Weller, 2012). The purpose of the interview questions was to obtain information regarding the attitudes of elementary principals toward the inclusion of students with autism into general education classrooms as well as the relationship between their attitudes and recommendations that were made for placement. No known reliability estimates have been reported.

Table 4. *References for Survey Questions*

Questions	Reference
1 – 11	N/A; Demographic Information
12 – 13	Agran, Alper, and Wehmeyer, 2002
14	Vergon and Broderick, 1999
15 – 17	Sanford, 2009
19 – 28	Gibbons, 2009
29	Spessard, 2014
31 – 34	Weller, 2012

The questions were designed to be simple and non-time consuming, while gathering demographic information of the school district, autism knowledge and experience, assessment procedures, IEP meetings and goal selection, staff support, and the perceptions and beliefs toward inclusion. There was also a section for the participant to add additional comments, if desired, regarding the benefits of the placement. The survey consisted of 39 questions, from which the administrator, school psychologist, or teacher, checked the correct answer(s) which applied to their situation.

A pilot-testing of the survey was conducted for feedback about the content and face validity of the survey. The survey was administered to the pilot group ( $n=6$ ) in the same manner as it was to the main study, via email, and participants were asked for feedback to identify (a) any survey question ambiguities, (b) any challenging or problematic questions, (c) what they believed the survey was intended to measure, and (d) what themes the questions addressed. Feedback was provided by the pilot test respondents, including an appropriate length, easy format, and clear wording. The researcher also assessed what question adjustments needed to be made and/or eliminated if a question did not provide any variability in the responses. A full copy of the inventory is provided in Appendix A.

### **Research Procedures**

The first step in this procedure was to obtain the names of the administrators, including the superintendents, principals and special education supervisors, of the selected school districts. Contact was made with the administrators to inquire whether they would participate in the study by distributing the survey to their teachers. Once permission was received from the school administrators, the Youngstown State University Internal Review Board (IRB) protocol was submitted to the YSU IRB. After the YSU IRB approved the study, the survey was sent to the administrators for them to disperse to the participants employed throughout the district.

### **Data Analysis**

Information for research question 1 was acquired via public information from the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). The survey data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 16.0. Descriptive statistics, using

frequencies and percentages, were used to analyze the data and address the research questions. It was likely the analyses would include some type of correlational or regression analysis.

### **Limitations of the Study**

A possible limitation of this study is the number of surveys that are returned greatly depends on the participant's willingness to participate. Social desirability threats were possible, but were less likely to occur since the participants were not asked to provide any identifying information. The identity of participants who were willing to do a follow-up interview were only identified with a pseudonym.



## Chapter 4

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the variables used by educators to determine the educational placement for children with autism. This study was intended to establish a common set of variables for identifying education placement to better ensure meaningful progress can be made.

The data from this study, provided by all respondents were collected by the on-line survey and questionnaire tool, Survey Monkey. The researcher emailed each superintendent and special education supervisor across 13 school districts, requesting permission for dissemination of the survey to all elementary buildings in their district. Five of the 13 districts participated; educators in 10 different elementary school buildings in Pennsylvania received the survey. Although a reminder email was sent, there continued to be a low response rate. The survey was then sent out across 13 districts in Ohio. An email was sent to each district's superintendent, with a follow-up reminder asking for the survey to be sent out and completed. After a continued, overall, low number of responses, the survey link was sent out to a nationwide special education teachers group sponsored by the National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET). A reminder was sent out on the social group site asking them to participate in the survey.

A total of 106 educators in elementary buildings participated in this study. Due to no knowledge of the number of potential participants, a response rate was not able to be calculated. Although the researcher requested the administrator to provide an

approximate number of possible participants in their building, this feedback was not consistently provided.

Several open-ended questions were presented to the respondents. Each of the responses was coded three times by looking for common themes (per the request of the advisor). These themes were then given a score and calculated. A second reviewer coded the questions; the inter-rater agreement was 95%.

### **Demographics**

A total of 106 respondents participated in this study. Demographic variables included the following: (a) gender, (b) age, (c) race/ethnicity, (d) employment position, (e) years of experience in current position, (f) years of experience in working with children with autism, (g) years of experience in working with children with a disability, (h) educational level, (i) where the respondent spends most of his time, (j) geographic setting of school, (k) approximate class size in general education, (l) the percentage of students with IEPs, (m) amount of time students with autism have access to the general education curriculum, (n) the type of support given for the student with autism while in the general education classroom, and (o) the type of education the building provides for students with disabilities.

First, each respondent was asked to report their gender. Of the 106 respondents, 105 responses were provided. Table 5 provides a summary of the responses by gender.

Table 5. *Gender of Respondents*

Gender	<i>f</i>	%
Male	12	11
Female	93	89

As reported in the table, the percentage of female educators in the sample was higher than the percentage of male participants. According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2016), 75% of teachers in public schools are female and 25% of teachers are male. The sample in this study presented a similar pattern to that of the national average, where there is a larger representation of females than males.

Next, respondents were asked to give their age by selecting from ranges provided in five choices. Table 6 represents the ages of 105 respondents.

Table 6. *Age of Respondents*

Age	<i>f</i>	%
20 – 30	26	25
31 – 40	34	32
41 – 50	28	27
51 – 60	14	13
61 or older	3	3

The data in Table 6 reveal that the largest group of responses ( $n=34$ ) were between the ages of 31 – 40 years. The National Center for Education Statistics (2016) reported during the 2003 – 2004 school year that the average age of educators in the United States is 42.5 years old. This demonstrates that the sample of participants in this study is fairly representative of the national sample of public school educators.

Respondents were then asked to report their race/ethnicity by selecting one of the five options given, or report their race/ethnicity if it was not listed among the choices provided. The information provided from 105 participants is listed in Table 7.

Table 7. *Race/Ethnicity of Respondents*

Race/Ethnicity	<i>f</i>	%
African American	2	2
Asian	1	1
Caucasian/Non-Hispanic	97	92
Hispanic	4	4
Native American or Alaskan Native	1	1
Other	0	0

The data reported in this study show 92% of respondents were Caucasian/Non-Hispanic. This is a higher average than the national average reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), which reveals 83% of educators in the United States were Caucasian/Non-Hispanic.

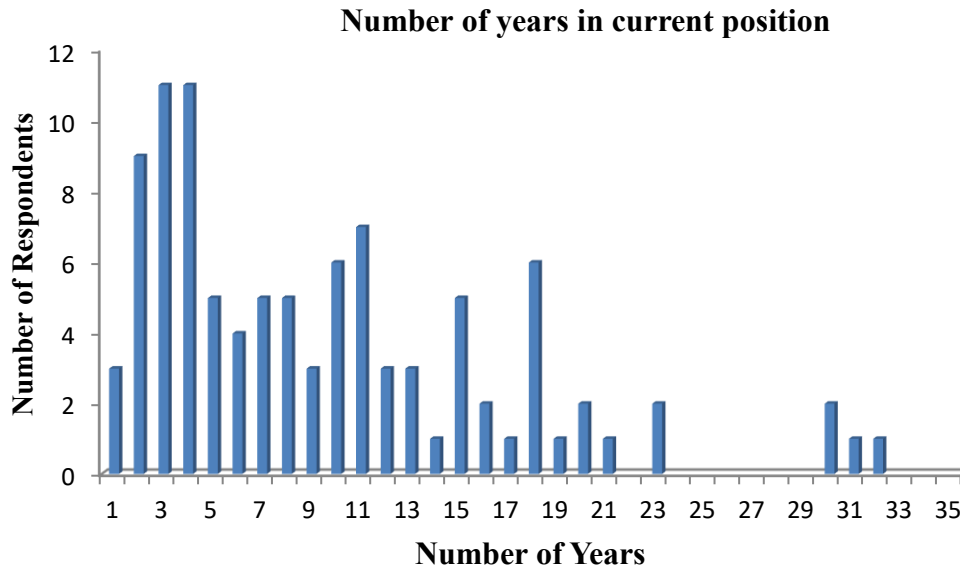
The next table summarizes the current employment position of the respondents.

Table 8. *Current Employment Position*

Current Employment Position	<i>f</i>	%
General Education Teacher	10	10
Special Education Teacher	73	70
Administrator	10	10
Paraprofessional	1	1
Specials Teacher	1	1
Speech Therapist	3	1
Occupational Therapist	1	1
School Psychologist	4	4
Behavior Specialist Consultant	1	1
Educational Diagnostician	1	1

The majority of respondents ( $n=73$ ) were special education teachers, with an equal number of general education teachers and administrators ( $n=10$ ). The next two figures summarize the number of years of experience each respondent has in their current

position and the number of years of experience working with a child with a disability.



*Figure 4.* Number of Years of Experience Each Respondent Has in Their Current Position

The next figure summarizes the number of years each respondent has in working with a child with a disability.



*Figure 5.* Number of Years of Experience Working with a Child with a Disability

The results in this study show 4% of respondents have less than three years, 36.2% of educators have three to nine years of experience, 78.1% of educators have 10 to 20 years of experience, and 13.0% of educators have over 20 years of experience working with a child with a disability.

The national average of the number of years of experience for educators working with a child with a disability is: 9% have less than three years, 33.3% of educators have three to nine years of experience, 36.4% of educators have 10 to 20 years of experience, and 21.3% of educators have over 20 years of experience (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). A comparison of the data in this study and the national average show similar patterns where the largest group of educators has between 10 to 20 years of experience working with a child with a disability.

Next, the respondents were asked to report their highest level of education completed. The following table summarizes the responses provided by 105 respondents.

Table 9. *Highest Level of Education Completed*

Highest level of education completed	<i>f</i>	%
Bachelor's degree	14	13
Bachelor's degree + 15 credits	29	28
Master's degree	28	27
Master's degree + 15 credits	5	5
Master's degree + 30 credits	20	20
Specialist degree	8	8
Doctoral degree	0	0

According to the national average, 47.7% of educators have a master's degree, with 39.9% of educators having a bachelor's degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). The sample in this study closely compares with the national average of the level of degree earned.

The next item asked respondents to state the location where they spend most of their time during the school day. Table 10 summarizes the responses from participants.

Table 10. *Location where Respondents Spend Most of Their Time*

Location where respondents spend most of their time	<i>f</i>	%
In general education settings	27	26
In special education settings	37	36
In both general and special education settings, equally	27	26
In an administrative position, supervising primarily general education	1	1
In an administrative position, supervising primarily special education	5	5
In an administrative position, supervising both general education and special education equally	6	6
Working in a position outside of the school building	2	2

The results show that the highest number of respondents ( $n=37$ ) spend their day in the special education classroom. This rate results in 36% of the sample.

Respondents were next asked to describe the geographic setting of their school.

Table 11 displays the responses.

Table 11. *Geographic Setting of School*

Geographic setting of school	<i>f</i>	%
Urban	20	19
Suburban	37	35
Rural	47	45
Not sure	1	1

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), the types of schools in 2010 – 2011 were: 26% urban, 27% suburban, and 32% rural. The comparison between the national average and the sample of data collected in this study is close, as the largest group of respondents is employed in a rural school.

The following table presents the approximate class size in a general education classroom.

Table 12. *Approximate Class Size in General Education*

Approximate class size in general education	<i>f</i>	%
0 – 9	2	2
10 – 19	9	9
20 – 29	92	88
30 – 39	1	1
40 or more	0	0

The national average class size, in public elementary schools, in 2012, was 21.2 students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). The data collected from the respondents in this study are in line with the national average; 88% of respondents reported that the average class size in the general education classrooms in their building was between 20 – 29 students.

The following table displays the results showing the approximate percentage of students with an IEP in their classroom.

Table 13. *Approximate Percentage of Students with IEPs in Class*

Approximate percentage of students with IEPs in class	<i>f</i>	%
0 – 5%	10	10
6% – 10%	18	18
11% – 15%	9	9
16% – 20%	11	11
21% or more	46	45
Not sure	8	8

The data presented in Table 13 shows that the largest group of respondents ( $n=46$ ) reported that 21% or more students in the class have an IEP. According to Carlson, Brauen, Klein, Schroll, & Willig (2002), the Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education reported that 95% of all general education teachers have taught



students with disabilities. Teachers have an average of 3.5 students with disabilities in their class (Carlson et al., 2002), or an average of 16.5% of students.

Table 14 displays a detailed account of the employment position stating the percentage of students with IEPs in class.

Table 14. *Approximate Percentage of Students with IEPs in Class by Employment*

*Position*

Approximate percentage of students with IEPs in class by employment position						
	0-5%	6-10%	11-15%	16-20%	21% or more	Not sure
General education teacher	1	3	2	2	1	1
Special education teacher	8	9	4	6	42	3
Administrator	0	3	2	3	0	2
School Psychologist	1	2	0	0	0	1
BSC	0	0	0	0	1	0
Specials teacher	0	0	1	0	1	0
Speech Therapist	0	0	0	0	2	0
Occupational Therapist	0	0	0	0	0	1
Educational Diagnostician	0	1	0	0	0	0

The data shows 42 special education teachers (57%) working in self-contained classrooms. These teachers reported 21% or more of their students are on IEPs, which accounts for such a high percentage of students with IEPs in class (Table 13).

The next table presents the responses given by participants on the type or level of support given for the student with autism while in the general education classroom.

Table 15. *Type or Level of Support Given for the Student with Autism while in the General Education Classroom*

Type or level of support given for the student with autism while in the general education classroom	<i>f</i>	%
Teacher associate (paraeducator)	78	75
Peer-mediated support	28	27
Adapted materials	70	67
Co-teaching	7	7
Consultative services	2	2
Behavior plan	2	2
Based on individual need	4	4
Not sure	7	7
None of the above	5	5

The data presented in Table 15 show the largest type of support provided for students with autism while in the general education classroom is a paraeducator ( $n=78$ ). Closely following this was the use of adapted materials ( $n=70$ ), such as picture schedules, social stories, educational modifications, and sensory manipulatives.

Table 16 reports information on the type of building that educates students with disabilities.

Table 16. *Type of Building that Educates Students with Disabilities*

Type of building that educates students with disabilities	<i>f</i>	%
A school that educates every child regardless of their disability in the regular classroom full time	8	8
A school that educates most children regardless of their disability in the regular classrooms, providing necessary supplementary aids and support services to ensure that integration occurs to the maximum extent possible.	38	36
A school that educates children with mild disabilities in regular classroom settings, while maintaining self-contained special education classrooms for the majority of children with moderate and severe or profound disabilities.	53	50
A school that educates children with disabilities in separate special education classrooms, mainstreaming in regular classrooms only those students who are capable of participating in a given subject without modifications or accommodations.	6	6

The results in Table 16 show that most elementary buildings educate children with mild disabilities in general education classrooms, while maintaining self-contained special education classrooms for the majority of children with moderate and severe or profound disabilities.

The results in Table 16 were then analyzed by the respondent's employment position. The results are displayed in Table 17.

Table 17. *The Education of Students with Disabilities in the Building by Profession*

The education of students with disabilities in the building by profession				
	A school that educates every child regardless of their disability in the regular classroom full time	A school that educates most children regardless of their disability in the regular classrooms, providing necessary supplementary aids and support services to ensure that integration occurs to the maximum extent possible.	A school that educates children with mild disabilities in regular classroom settings, while maintaining self-contained special education classrooms for the majority of children with moderate and severe or profound disabilities.	A school that educates children with disabilities in separate special education classrooms, mainstreaming in regular classrooms only those students who are capable of participating in a given subject without modifications or accommodations.
General ed. Teacher	2	5	3	0
Special ed. teacher	4	23	43	3
Administrator	1	6	3	0
School Psychologist	0	2	1	1
BSC	1	0	0	0
Specials teacher	0	1	0	1
Speech therapist	0	1	1	1
Occupational therapist	0	0	1	0
Educational Diagnostician	0	0	1	0

The results displayed in Table 17 show the largest number of special education teachers (58.9%) report children with mild disabilities are educated in general education

classroom setting while children with moderate and severe or profound disabilities are educated in self-contained classrooms. This contrasts with general education teachers, whose responses are more diverse. The largest percentage of general education teachers (50%) feel that children are educated in general education classrooms, regardless of their disability, while providing the necessary supplementary aids and support services to ensure that integration occurs to the maximum extent possible.

The next section specifically addresses each research question and the data reported by each of the respondents.

### **Research Question 1**

Research question 1 in this study was, “To what extent are children with autism included in general education classes?” For item 12, respondents were asked to report the amount of time that students with disabilities have access to the general education classroom. Their responses are presented in the Table 18.

Table 18. *Amount of Time Students with Autism Have Access to the General Education Curriculum*

Amount of time students with autism have access to the general education curriculum	<i>f</i>	%
Daily, all day	35	32.4
Daily, less than a full day	52	48.1
2 – 3 times per week	2	1.9
Once per week	3	2.8
None	3	2.8
Not sure	11	10.2

The results indicate that slightly less than half of the respondents (48.1%) stated that students with autism have daily access to the general education classroom, but less

than a full day. It is also noted that 32.4% of respondents reported students with autism spend each day, all day, in the general education classroom.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), in 2012, 39.5% of students with autism spent 80% or more of their day in the general education classroom, 18.1% of students spent 40 – 79% of their day in the general education classroom, and 33.3% of students with autism spent less than 40% of their day in the general education classroom.

In 2012, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Education (2016), 46.7% of students with autism spent 80% or more of their day inside the general education classroom, 24.3% of students with autism spent 40% - 79% of their day in the general education classroom, and 29.1% of students with autism spent less than 40% of their day in the general education classroom.

According to the Ohio Department of Education (2016), in 2012, 48.2% of students with autism spent 80% or more of their day inside the general education classroom, 21.7% of students with autism spent 40% - 79% of their day in the general education classroom, and 30.1% of students with autism spent less than 40% of their day in the general education classroom.

Table 19 displays the national and state data on the amount of time children with autism are included in the general education classroom.

Table 19. *Amount of Time Children with Autism Are Included into General Education Daily*

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Amount of time children with autism are included into general education daily	80% or more	40% - 79%	Less than 40%
Pennsylvania	46.7%	24.3%	29.1%
Ohio	48.2%	21.7%	30.1%
U.S.	39.5%	18.1%	33.3%

A limitation is that the data collected in this study for this question do not align with the national indicators; therefore, an accurate comparison cannot be made. The closest comparison that can be made is 34.2% of respondents in this study reported students with autism are included in the general education classroom all day. The Pennsylvania Department of Education (2016) reported a percentage (46.7%) of students spent 80% or more of their day inside the general education classroom, the Ohio Department of Education (2016) reported 48.2% of students are in the general education classroom for 80% or more of their day, and the national average was at 39.5% of students spending 80% or more of their day in the general education classroom.

This survey question was taken from a study investigating the access of students with significant disabilities into the general education curriculum (Agran, Alper, & Wehmeyer, 2002). A comparison was made between the results in this study and the data collected from the study where the original survey question was taken. In the study by Agran et al., (2002), 84 teachers certified in severe disabilities completed a survey looking at the access to the general curriculum for students with significant disabilities. The frequency of integration of students with disabilities was analyzed and is reported in Table 20.

Table 20. *Frequency of Integration of Students with Significant Disabilities (Agran et al., 2002)*

Frequency of integration	%
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Daily, all day	0%
Daily, less than a full day	17%
2 – 3 times per week	44%
Once per week	20%
None	19%

The results presented in Table 20 show a lower percentage of respondents reporting students have access “daily, all day” and “daily, but less than a full day,” and higher percentages of respondents reporting students who have access “2 – 3 times per week,” “once per week,” and “none” in comparison to the results found in this study.

**Research Question 2**

The second research question analyzed in this study was, “What are the common variables used by school districts to determine the educational placement for children with autism?” Variables analyzed included: (a) cognitive measures, (b) achievement measures, (c) criterion-referenced measures, and (d) other generalized measures.

The first question focused on cognitive measures. The respondents were provided five choices from which to select: verbal measure of intelligence, nonverbal measure of intelligence, measure of attention, measure of memory, or measure of cognitive processing. Respondents also had the option of selecting all that apply, selecting they do not use cognitive measures, if they were not sure which cognitive measures are used, or to list other cognitive assessments used that are not listed. Table 21 displays the data collected by each respondent ( $n=102$ ).

Table 21. *Cognitive Measures Used in Determining Placement*

Cognitive measures	<i>f</i>	%
Verbal measure of intelligence	66	64.7%
Nonverbal measure of intelligence	57	55.9%



Measure of attention	52	51.0%
Measure of memory	55	53.9%
Measure of cognitive processing	53	52.0%
I do not use cognitive measures	18	17.6%
Not sure	13	12.7%

The results indicate that verbal measures of intelligence were most frequently used with 64.7% of the respondents employing them. The remaining types of cognitive measures were selected equally by participants, ranging from 53 – 57 respondents. There were a high percentage of respondents that do not use cognitive measures (17.6%) and who responded “not sure” whether they are used (12.7%). None of the participants included cognitive measures other than those listed.

The results were examined further to analyze the employment position of respondents who reported they do not use cognitive measures or were not sure if cognitive measures were used in determining placement. The results of 18 educators who reported they do not use cognitive measures are displayed in Table 22.

Table 22. *Employment Position of Those Who Do Not Use Cognitive Measures*

Employment position of those who do not use cognitive measures	<i>f</i>	%
General education teacher	2	11
Special education teacher*	12	66.7
Administrator	1	6
Specials teacher	1	6
Speech Therapist	1	6
Occupational Therapist	1	6

\*NOTE: See Table 8 for the breakdown of positions represented.

This table shows that 66.7% of respondents who do not use cognitive measures in determining placement are special education teachers. Information provided by only

special education teachers ( $n=73$ ) was then analyzed. The results show 17.8% of special education teachers do not use cognitive assessments.

The next table displays the results of each educator ( $n=13$ ) by their employment position that were not sure if cognitive measures are used during the placement decision process.

Table 23. *Employment Position of Those Who Are Not Sure if Cognitive Measures Are Used*

Employment position of those who not sure if cognitive measures are used	<i>f</i>	%
General education teacher	2	15.4
Special education teacher*	9	69.2
Administrator	1	8
Specials teacher	1	8

\*NOTE: See Table 8 for the breakdown of positions represented.

Data presented in Table 23 show the largest position of those who reported they are not sure if cognitive measure are used are special education teachers (69.2%).

Continued analysis of the responses provided by the 73 special education teachers shows that 10.9% are not sure if cognitive measures are used.

The next question pertained to achievement measures. Respondents were asked to select all achievement measures that are used in making placement decisions for children with autism. Options included mathematical abilities, reading abilities, writing abilities, oral/aural language abilities, sign language abilities, if they do not use achievement measures to assist in determining placement, if they were not sure what achievement measures were used, or lists of any other achievement measures used but not listed as one of the choices. Table 24 displays the results.

Table 24. *Achievement Measures*

Achievement measures	<i>f</i>	%
Mathematic Abilities	87	82.1%
Reading Abilities	91	85.8%
Writing Abilities	85	80.2%
Oral/Aural Language Abilities	68	64.2%
Sign Language Abilities	13	12.3%
I do not use achievement measures.	7	6.6%
Not sure	3	2.8%

The results indicate mathematic abilities, reading abilities, and writing abilities are used by a large majority in determining placement. A high percentage of respondents (64.2%) also indicated use of oral/aural language abilities as measures used in making placement decisions. One participant reported another assessment that is used including the Functional Independence Skills Handbook: Assessment and Curriculum for Individuals with Developmental Disabilities (FISH) ( $n=1$ ). Other respondents stated that assessment measures are determined only by the school psychologist and administration ( $n=4$ ).

The results were examined further to analyze the employment position of respondents who reported they do not use achievement measures or were not sure if achievement measures were used in determining placement. The results of seven educators who reported they do not use achievement measures are displayed in Table 25.

Table 25. *Employment Position of Those Who Do Not Use Achievement Measures*

Employment position of those who do not use achievement measures	<i>f</i>	%
General education teacher	1	14.3
Special education teacher*	3	42.9

Administrator	1	14.3
Specials teacher	1	14.3
Speech Therapist	1	14.3

\*NOTE: See Table 8 for the breakdown of positions represented.

This table shows that 42.9% of respondents who do not use achievement measures in determining placement are special education teachers. After analyzing the data provided only by the 73 special education teachers, it was found that only 3% do not use achievement measures.

The data were then analyzed to see which employment positions of those who were not sure if achievement measures are used. The results of this analysis show two out of the three respondents who are not sure if achievement measures are used were special education teachers (averaging only 3% of the total number of special education teachers) and one out of the three respondents was an administrator (1% of the total number of administrators).

Next, the respondents were asked to provide information on the use of criterion-referenced assessments. The options provided included the Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills (ABLLS-R), the Verbal Behavior Milestones Assessment and Placement Program (VB-MAPP), School Function Assessment (SFA), or to select if they do not use criterion-referenced assessments, if they are not sure what criterion-referenced assessments are used, or to list any other criterion-referenced assessments that are used to determine placement but not listed. Table 26 summarizes the findings.

Table 26. *Criterion-Referenced Assessments*

Criterion-referenced assessments	<i>f</i>	%
Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills (ABLLS-R)	24	24.7%

Verbal Behavior Milestones Assessment and Placement Program (VB-MAPP)	15	15%
School Function Assessment (SFA)	14	14%
I do not use criterion-referenced assessments	39	39%
Not sure	26	26%

The results reported in Table 26 indicate that in comparison to cognitive measures and achievement measures, criterion-referenced assessments are used much less frequently to determine educational placement. According to the data, 39% of respondents do not use criterion-referenced assessments to assist with determining placement. These data do not support the recent literature (e.g., Bakken, 2010; Hintze, Christ, & Methe, 2006) stating the need for criterion-referenced assessments to determine specific deficits that are the most relevant for writing treatment targets and the development of goals.

The results were examined, further, to analyze the employment position of respondents who reported they do not use criterion-referenced measures, or were not sure if criterion-referenced measures were used in determining placement. The results of 39 educators who reported they do not use criterion-referenced measures are displayed in Table 27.

Table 27. *Employment Position of Those Who Do Not Use Criterion-Referenced Measures*

Employment position of those who do not use criterion-referenced measures	<i>f</i>	%
General education teacher	5	12.8

Special education teacher*	25	64.1
Administrator	2	5
School Psychologist	3	8
Specials teacher	1	3
Speech Therapist	2	5
Educational Diagnostician	1	3

\*NOTE: See Table 8 for the breakdown of positions represented.

This table shows that 64.1% of all respondents who do not use criterion-referenced measures in determining placement are special education teachers. When analyzing the data provided by only special education teachers, it revealed that, out of 73 special education teachers, 25 do not use criterion-referenced assessments (32.9%).

The next table displays the results of each educator ( $n=26$ ) by their employment position that were not sure if criterion-referenced measures are used during the placement decision process.

Table 28. *Employment Position of Those Who Are Not Sure if Criterion-Referenced Measures Are Used*

Employment position of those who are not sure if criterion-referenced measures are used	<i>f</i>	%
General education teacher	3	11.5
Special education teacher*	15	57.7
Administrator	6	23
School Psychologist	1	4
Specials teacher	1	4

\*NOTE: See Table 8 for the breakdown of positions represented.

The results presented in Table 28 show that 57.7% of educators who are not sure if criterion-referenced measures are used are special education teachers. Further analysis shows that of the 73 special education teachers who participated in this study, 17.8% are

not sure if criterion-referenced measures are used when assessing students for educational placement.

The next question pertaining to assessments used to determine education placement investigated general measures that may be used. These included consideration of social-emotional functioning, academic motivation, peer relationships and social skills, functional behavior assessments, independent living skills, the students preferred mode of communication, the family’s preferred mode of communication, academic history (including retention), the student’s history with assistive technology, and visual-motor skills. The respondents also had the option to check if they were not sure if any of the above measures were used to determine placement. The results of the participants’ responses are summarized in Table 29.

Table 29. *Alternative Measures*

Alternative measures	<i>f</i>	%
Social-emotional functioning	82	78.8%
Academic functioning	63	60.6%
Peer relationships and social skills	83	79.8%
Functional behavior assessment	83	79.8%
Independent living skills	51	49.0%
The student’s preferred mode of communication	54	51.9%
The family’s preferred mode of communication	37	35.6%
Academic history (including retention)	66	63.5%
The student’s history with assistive technology	55	52.9%
Visual-motor skills	56	53.8%
Not sure	4	3.8%

A summary of the data presented in Table 29 show that there is a wide range of variables and assessments that are considered when determining the placement for children with autism. The most frequently considered variables include the use of a Functional Behavior Assessment (79.8%), peer relationships and social skills (79.8%),

and the student's social-emotional functioning (78.8%). The data presented regarding this question supports the literature (e.g., Filipek et al., 1999; Luiselli et al., 2000) which states that data need to be collected and analyzed from a wide variety of measures, skills, and assessments. Case law has also supported the use of alternative measures of assessment for special education placement, specifically, the elimination of the IQ test as the sole measure (Hobson v. Hansen, 1967; Larry P. v Riles, 1979).

After closer analysis of the data, it is important to note that the results provided in Table 30 show that 79.8% of respondents use the Functional Behavior Assessment as an alternative measure in determining placement; however, it was noted earlier, in Table 15, that only two respondents reported using a behavior plan as a type of support given for the student with autism while in the general education classroom. According to IDEA (2004), the Functional Behavior Assessment is conducted when the student's behavior is a manifestation of their disability as determined by, either, the LEA, members of the student's IEP team, or parent, or if a disciplinary action is being considered for a student with a disability that would result in a change of placement. Following the Functional Behavior Assessment, the IEP team must write a behavior intervention plan (unless one already exists) addressing the behaviors of concern that impede the student's learning or that of others.

Next, a score was computed for responses for each question regarding cognitive measures, achievement measures, criterion-referenced measures, and listed alternative measures. If a response indicated that the participant used the measure, a point was given. The total number of measures indicated was then summed across each assessment



category. The average was computed across each respondent's scores. These scores are presented in Table 30.

Table 30. *Summary of assessment measures*

Summary	N Valid	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Cognitive Measures Score	75	3.19	1.19	1	5
Achievement Measures Score	98	3.58	1.00	1	5
Criterion-Referenced Score	41	1.54	0.67	1	3
Alternative Measures Score	100	6.30	2.44	1	10

The results show participants report using a large number of different assessment measures to determine placement for children with autism. This was especially true for the alternative assessment category. On average, respondents use an average of 6.3 different alternative measures to assist with making placement decisions. This supports the current literature (e.g., Gould, Dixon, Najdowski, Smith, & Tarbox, 2011), that assessment information should be comprehensive, addressing several major areas of learning and ability which allows educators to develop sound and effective treatment.

The infrequent use of criterion-referenced assessments, in comparison with the other provided choices, however, is not supported in the professional literature. There is a consistent body of research that supports the use of criterion-referenced assessments, stating that these measures provide the educator with information regarding the child's strengths as well as specific areas of need (Mattatall, 2011).

An overall number of measures were computed by adding up the number of measures for each participant ( $n=106$ ). The data show an average of 12.1 different measures used by respondents, ranging from 1 to 22 measures.

Next, the researcher asked respondents an open-ended question pertaining to what factors they consider when determining the placement for children with autism. Table 31

reports the responses ( $n=90$ ) regarding factors considered when looking at placement for a child with autism.

Table 31. *Factors Considered in Placement*

Factors considered in placement	<i>f</i>	%
Behavior	21	23.3
Social abilities	17	18.9
Academic abilities	16	17.8
Cognitive ability	16	17.8
Adaptive skills	11	12.2
Communication skills	8	9
Ability to keep pace with peers	5	6
Attention skills	4	4
Amount of needed supports	4	4
Teacher adaptability	3	3
Evaluation Team Report findings	3	3
Parent input	3	3
Sensory needs	3	3
Motor abilities	1	1
Class size	1	1
Not involved in placement decision	7	7.8

The largest number of respondents ( $n=21$ ) indicated that the student's behavior is the most commonly considered factor when determining placement. Following behavior, the next factor that is considered by respondents ( $n=17$ ) is the child's social abilities, followed by 16 respondents stating academic and cognitive abilities as important considerations.

Further analysis was conducted in order to determine who indicated they were not involved in placement decisions. The employment positions included two general education teachers, a specials teacher, and four special education teachers. Next, the participants' responses were analyzed to determine how comfortable they feel in

communicating their concerns about placement at an IEP meeting. Table 32 displays the results.

Table 32. *Comfort in Communicating Concerns about Placement*

Comfort in communicating concerns about placement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Respondent 1		X			
Respondent 2		X			
Respondent 3	X				
Respondent 4				X	
Respondent 5				X	
Respondent 6				X	
Respondent 7			X		

The respondents who reported that they do not feel they are a part of the decision-making process regarding placement corresponds closely to the degree of comfort they feel in communicating concerns about the placement for a child with autism.

Under IDEA 2004, the IEP team is comprised of the following individuals: (a) the parents of a child with a disability, (b) at least one general education teacher, (c) at least one special education teacher, (d) a representative of the local educational agency, (e) an individual who can interpret the instructional implications of evaluation results, (f) at the discretion of the child’s parents or the agency, other individuals who have special expertise regarding the child, and (g) when appropriate, the child with a disability.

Despite these guidelines, outlined in IDEA 2004, there continue to be educators who feel they do not have a part in the decision-making process regarding placement, and who are not comfortable in communicating their concerns regarding the placement of a child with autism.

### **Research Question 3**

Research question 3 was “How much do each of the identified variables used in determining placement influence the outcome?” Respondents were asked to rate the degree of influence each specific assessment has on the decision of placement including cognitive measures, achievement measures, criterion-referenced measures, and alternative measures. The options were very influential, moderately influential, a little influential, not at all influential, or not sure. The responses are summarized below in Table 33 and Figure 5.

Table 33. *Weight of Each Assessment Measure*

Weight of each assessment measure	Not at all	A little influential	Moderately influential	Very influential	Not sure
Cognitive Measures	1	11	51	27	15
Achievement Measures	1	13	41	40	10
Criterion-referenced measures	8	16	25	12	44
Alternative Measures	2	13	42	33	2

The following graph presents the results showing each assessment’s weight on the placement decision.



*Figure 6. Weight of Assessment Measures*

Table 33 and Figure 6 summarize the influence of each assessment measure in determining education placement. A large number of responses were under the “moderately influential” category. When comparing what assessment measures were used most frequently, and the weight placed on each measure, responses were consistently high in regards to cognitive, achievement, and alternative measures. Criterion-referenced measures were used the least frequently (Table 30), and were weighted with the least amount of value when determining placement.

The data in Table 33 was further analyzed to look at the employment position that places more influence on each measure investigated. Table 34 displays the results of each employment position and the weight they placed on cognitive measures.

Table 34. *Weight Placed on Cognitive Measures by Employment Position*

Weight placed on cognitive measures by employment position	Not at all	A little influential	Moderately influential	Very influential	Not sure
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General education teacher	0	2	1	1	6
Special education teacher	1	8	38	21	5
Administrator	0	1	5	3	1
School Psychologist	0	0	3	0	1
BSC	0	0	0	1	0
Specials teacher	0	0	0	0	2
Speech Therapist	0	0	2	1	0
Occupational Therapist	0	0	1	0	0
Educational Diagnostician	0	0	1	0	0

The results show that 80%, or more, of all employment positions except general education teachers (20%) consider cognitive measures to be, either, very or moderately influential.

Data were also analyzed for the degree of weight achievement measures play in making placement decisions by employment position. The data are summarized in Table 35.

Table 35. *Weight Placed on Achievement Measures by Employment Position*

Weight placed on achievement measures by employment position	Not at all	A little influential	Moderately influential	Very influential	Not sure
General education teacher	0	3	2	2	3
Special education teacher	1	9	28	32	3
Administrator	0	1	5	3	1
School Psychologist	0	0	3	1	0
BSC	0	0	0	1	0
Specials teacher	0	0	0	0	2
Speech Therapist	0	0	3	0	0
Occupational Therapist	0	0	0	0	1
Educational Diagnostician	0	0	0	1	0

The results show that 80%, or more, of special education teachers, administrators, school psychologists, behavior specialist consultants, speech therapists, and educational diagnosticians consider achievement measures to be, either, very or moderately influential. A lower percentage of general education teachers (40%) feel achievement

measures are, either, moderately or very influential; the specials teachers and the occupational therapists were not sure of the influence achievement measures have on placement decisions.

The degree of weight criterion-referenced measures play in making placement decisions by employment position was also analyzed. The data are summarized in Table 36.

Table 36. *Weight Placed on Criterion-Referenced Measures by Employment Position*

Weight placed on criterion-referenced measures by employment position.	Not at all	A little influential	Moderately influential	Very influential	Not sure
General education teacher	0	1	2	1	6
Special education teacher	7	13	18	9	26
Administrator	1	2	3	1	3
School Psychologist	0	0	0	0	4
BSC	0	0	0	1	0
Specials teacher	0	0	0	0	2
Speech Therapist	0	0	1	0	2
Occupational Therapist	0	0	1	0	0
Educational Diagnostician	0	0	0	0	1

The results show lower percentages of educators consider criterion-referenced assessments as, either, moderately or very influential. The largest percentages of educators who feel criterion-referenced assessments are, either, moderately or very influential are administrators (40%), followed by special education teachers (37%), and general education teachers (30%). The behavior specialist consultant rated criterion-referenced assessments as very influential and one occupational therapist rated criterion-referenced assessments as moderately influential. The data in Table 36 show that all school psychologists and the educational diagnostician are not sure of the influence criterion-referenced assessments have in making placement decisions.

#### **Research Question 4**

Research question 4 asked, “Are there outside factors and influences that IEP team members take into consideration when they determine educational placement?” To answer this question, respondents were asked to answer to two open ended questions. Each question was coded by looking for common themes in each of the provided responses.

The first question looked at outside factors or influences that the respondent takes into consideration when determining the LRE and placement for a child with autism. Out of 72 total responses, 13 participants reported that the student’s home life is a consideration when determining placement. The second most common outside factor reported was parent input and influence ( $n=8$ ). The results presented in this study support the literature stating that parent perspective and opinion in the type of placement for their child are instrumental to the process (Duhaney & Salend, 2000). Other factors were reported including medical conditions, outside agency support, and environmental factors; as well as variables that were already discussed earlier in the survey. These responses were not included in the analysis for this question, only those pertaining to outside factors that were not previously discussed.

The next open-ended question asked respondents to state, in their professional opinion, how much the input and/or pressure from parents affects the decision of placement for the child with autism. Out of 82 responses, 50% of respondents ( $n=41$ ) reported parents have much influence over the placement of their child with autism. One respondent stated, “Parents influence decisions too much, often schools are more worried about law suites [lawsuits] rather than what truly is best for ALL CHILDREN, not just



the one with autism.” Several others stated similar answers, including “More than they should, because I feel like they have the final say so in the long run,” and “The parents have the final say where the child is placed.” Each of these statements asserts that parents have too much influence in the placement decision.

### **Case Scenarios**

In order to examine the consistency of responding in the determination of placement, when given information about a student, four case scenarios were provided as part of the survey. Respondents were to read the scenario, and then recommended the most appropriate placement based on the information given. Choices for placement recommendation included the following options: I would recommend placement in a regular education class in our building, I would recommend placement in regular education with resource room assistance for 20% of the day, I would recommend placement in one of our regular education classes with assistance of a special education teacher for 40% of the school day, I would recommend placement in a self-contained special education classroom in our building, I would not be comfortable recommending programming for this child in our building and think that the Director of Special Education should refer this case to our Intermediate Unit or an outside agency, and I am not sure where I would recommend placement for this child.

The first scenario described Joey. The following information was provided to the respondents: “Joey is a primary student whose profile of cognitive development is uneven; his IQ was tested at 110. He demonstrates reading recognition ability at above grade level but has delays in reading comprehension. He has a short attention span and can demonstrate some hyperactivity particularly in large groups. Joey has few friends; he

has trouble relating to peers. He is easily distracted when he is given verbal directions. Teachers report that he has little interest or reaction to praise.”

Table 37 summarizes the respondent’s recommendations for placement.

Table 37. *Recommendations for Placement*

Recommendations for placement	<i>f</i>	%
Regular education class	14	13.5
Regular education class with assistance of special education teacher	35	33.7
Regular education class with resource room	36	34.6
Self-contained special education classroom	3	2.9
Not comfortable in making recommendation	1	1
Need more information	1	1
Not sure	4	4

As part of this question, there were other responses provided. These included: general education with an inclusive special education teacher co-teaching ( $n=1$ ), general education with a paraprofessional ( $n=1$ ), general education room with accommodations ( $n=1$ ), general education with resource room assistance, but with different percentages of his day ( $n=4$ ), more information is needed ( $n=1$ ), and none of the above ( $n=1$ ).

The data presented in Table 37 show highly consistent results with the largest number of respondents recommending a general education classroom with resource room assistance for 20% of the day ( $n=36$ ), or in a general education classroom with assistance of a special education teacher for 40% of the day ( $n=35$ ). These responses are similar in that they both recommend the general education room for Joey with additional assistance either from a resource room or assistance from a special education teacher.

The next scenario was about Julie. It read, “Julie is a primary student with communication difficulties. She does not initiate communication; however, she can use complete sentences when addressed directly. She does not have a hearing loss but may

seem to ignore the teachers' and students' attempts to speak with her and at times may seem overly sensitive to loud noises. Julie's parents report that she prefers to play alone and never interacts with the neighborhood children even though they have attempted to take her to play groups. Teachers also report that she wants to perform certain activities in an exact order and resists change. She can read and has some writing ability but is well below grade level."

Table 38 summaries the respondents' recommendations for placement for Julie.

Table 38. *Recommendations for Placement*

Recommendations for placement	<i>f</i>	%
Regular education class	5	5
Regular education class with assistance of special education teacher	43	41
Regular education class with resource room	24	22.9
Self-contained special education classroom	19	18.1
Not comfortable in making recommendation	3	2.9
Need more information	4	4
Not sure	1	1

As part of this question, there were respondents who listed other options for placement. These included the following: general education with resource room assistance but with different percentages of the day ( $n=3$ ), co-teaching in the general education classroom ( $n=1$ ), general education classroom with a paraprofessional ( $n=1$ ), more information is needed to recommend placement ( $n=4$ ), and none of the above ( $n=1$ ).

Given the responses made from the choices provided, 41% of respondents stated that the most appropriate placement for Julie would be the general education classroom with assistance of a special education teacher for 40% of her day. There is greater variability in the recommendations made, as 22.9% of the respondents recommended

general education class with the resource room, and 18.1% of respondents recommended a self-contained special education classroom.

The next scenario discussed a student named Peter. It read: “Peter is an intermediate student. He loves to read books and responds well to a structured environment. Peter demonstrates a particular interest in logos or the labels on clothing. He may notice a person’s clothing with little interest in the person wearing the clothes. He may wander off during instructional down time unless he is very well supervised. He does not show any interest in peers at home or at school. In the previous school, he was given one to one supervision to keep him on task. Peter eats a restricted diet. Sensory integration techniques have shown some success to keep him calm and ready for instruction. Peter is stressed and uncomfortable for much of the time in the classroom setting. He has difficulty following directions and resists instruction. Peter may repeat words or phrases that appear to have special meaning to him.”

The responses for recommendations for placement are summarized in Table 39.

Table 39. *Recommendations for Placement*

Recommendations for placement	<i>f</i>	%
Regular education class	4	3.8
Regular education class with assistance of special education teacher	23	21.9
Regular education class with resource room	6	5.7
Self-contained special education classroom	51	48.6
Not comfortable in making recommendation	8	7.6
Need more information	3	2.9
Not sure	3	2.9

Other responses were provided by respondents, and are as follows: self-contained special education room but with access to general education ( $n=3$ ), general education with a paraprofessional ( $n=1$ ), need more information ( $n=3$ ), and none of the above ( $n=1$ ).

Analyzing the responses provided in Table 39, the highest number of respondents ( $n=51$ ) felt that Peter’s most appropriate placement is in a self-contained special education classroom. Another large number of respondents ( $n=23$ ) recommended that Peter be placed in a general education classroom with assistance of a special education teacher for 40% of the day.

The last scenario provided to participants in this study was about Tommy. It read as follows: “Tommy is an intermediate student and an above average reader and has an extensive vocabulary. He is very talkative but tries to direct all conversation to his interest of trains. He is very knowledgeable in the history and construction of trains and train tracks. He is very interested in his peers but often seems too domineering in his social interactions and so his peers tend to avoid him. He tends to get into other people’s physical space and does not notice when others are upset or hurt. Tommy’s math skills are also above average for calculations; however, he has difficulty with word problems. Tommy has some difficulty following teacher directions unless they are written on the board and are very simple. He is easily distracted and therefore has trouble completing activities on time.”

Table 40 summarizes the recommendations made by respondents.

Table 40. *Recommendations for Placement*

Recommendations for placement	<i>f</i>	%
Regular education class	22	21

Regular education class with assistance of special education teacher	29	27.6
Regular education class with resource room	40	38.1
Self-contained special education classroom	4	3.8
Not comfortable in making recommendation	3	2.9
Need more information	1	1
Not sure	0	0

Other responses were provided for placement recommendations. These included: general education with outside consultation ( $n=2$ ), general education with a paraprofessional ( $n=1$ ), need more information ( $n=1$ ), and none of the above ( $n=1$ ).

The responses provided in the Table 40 show high consistencies, where 91 respondents recommend placement in the general education setting, but with different supports. A large number of respondents ( $n=40$ ) recommended placement in the general education room with resource room assistance; 29 respondents recommended placement in one of the general education classes, with the assistance of a special education teacher, and 22 respondents recommended placement in the general education classroom.

### **The Least Restrictive Environment**

The last questions analyzed were open-ended questions pertaining to the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). First, respondents were asked to provide their own definition of LRE. Common themes were analyzed and emerged from the responses.

A high number of responses ( $n=31$ ) provided definitions involving an environment where learning takes place and where students can reach their potential. Almost equally as high were the responses that included the environment where the students' needs can be met ( $n=28$ ).

These themes are consistent with the legal definition of the least restrictive environment. Examples of themes include: (a) the environment where learning takes

place, (b) where students can reach their potential, (c) the environment where the students' needs are met, and (d) the environment where supports, services, and accommodations are provided.

The researcher provided respondents another open-ended question pertaining to LRE, asking if they feel the most appropriate placement is always the least restrictive. Highly variable responses were provided in response to this question. Of 62 responses, 28 of the respondents answered yes, the most appropriate is always the least restrictive, and 34 respondents answered no, that the most appropriate is not always the least restrictive.

Close analysis of their comments revealed that the largest number of respondents ( $n=45$ ) answered with the assumption that the least restrictive environment equals the general education classroom, while the remaining respondents provided comments that referred specifically to the environment that is based on the students' needs and is individualized ( $n=20$ ). Respondent comments that support this include, "The LRE may not be appropriate for challenging behaviors and severe impairments," "If a child distracts or endangers others he should not be in a regular classroom," "Sometimes students can't be with their nondisabled peers," and "Some students require more specialized instruction."

Given these responses, a gap appears between the respondents' definition of the LRE and the most appropriate environment. The definitions provided included the critical components of the legal definition of LRE, (e.g., where learning takes place, where the student's needs are met, supports, services, and accommodations are provided); however, when asked to apply this definition, respondents replied with responses assuming LRE was the general education environment.

## Summary

A detailed analysis of the demographics revealed that 106 educators were represented in this study. The majority of participants were special education teachers ( $n=73$ ); however, general education teachers, administrators, school psychologists, a behavior specialist consultant, an occupational therapist, a paraprofessional, a special teacher, speech therapists, and an educational diagnostician also participated. A large number of participants were female ( $n=93$ ), Caucasian/Non-Hispanic ( $n=97$ ), between 31 – 40 years of age ( $n=34$ ), and had between 10 – 20 years of experience working with a child with a disability ( $n=46$ ). These data showed similar patterns with data collected and analyzed for national demographics of educators working in public school systems (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

In examining the amount of time students with autism have access to the general education classroom, a comparison can be made between the data presented in this study and the results from Agran et al., 2002. The results in this study showed higher percentages of respondents reporting that students with autism have access to the general education curriculum either daily, all day or daily, but less than a full day, in comparison to the results reported by Agran et al., 2002.

Next, common variables used by school districts to determine educational placement for children with autism were investigated. The results showed educators have a repertoire of an average of 12 different assessment measures to determine placement. Within this repertoire, educators use an average of three different cognitive assessments, four different achievement measures, one criterion-referenced assessment, and six different alternative measures. Other primary factors reported by educators that are



considered when determining education placement include the following: (a) the student's behavior, (b) social abilities, (c) academic abilities, (d) adaptive skills, and (e) communication skills.

The influence of each of these variables in determining placement was assessed. The results showed that respondents scored achievement measures as the most influential, and cognitive measures and alternative measures as moderately influential. Criterion-referenced assessments had the least influence in making placement decisions.

Lastly, outside factors and influences that are taken into consideration were evaluated. Out of 72 responses, 13 participants reported that the students' home life is considered when looking at educational placement decisions. The second most common factor reported was parent input and influence. After close analysis of the responses, 50% of participants reported that parents have much influence over the placement of their child with autism.

Open-ended questions on LRE were also analyzed. When asked to give a definition of LRE, respondents provided statements that align with the legal definition of LRE including (a) the environment where learning takes place, (b) where students can reach their potential, (c) the environment where the students' needs are met, and (d) the environment where supports, services, and accommodations are provided. These statements support IDEA's LRE provision which require schools to consider the general education classroom with nondisabled peers with needed supplementary aids and services to support the needs of the child for learning to occur (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016).

Participants were also asked to respond to whether or not they feel LRE is always the most appropriate environment. Out of 62 responses, 45% of respondents said yes, LRE is the most appropriate environment, and 54.8% of respondents reported no, LRE is not always the most appropriate environment. In the comments provided by respondents, it was also revealed that the term LRE was used interchangeably with the general education classroom.

According to legislation, this is not accurate, as the LRE mandate states educators must consider the general education classroom with needed supplemental aids and supports, but alternative, more restrictive placements can be considered education in the general education classes cannot be achieved satisfactorily with the use of supplementary aids and services. If a more restrictive placement is determined most appropriate to meet the needs of the student, this environment becomes the student's LRE (Carson, 2014).

## Chapter 5

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to examine variables used by educators to determine the educational placement of children with autism. Since the passing of legislation mandating students with special needs have a right to their least restrictive environment (LRE), the number of students receiving individualized education plans (IEPs) under the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) disability definition of autism has increased. In Pennsylvania since the 1993-1994 school year through the 2011-2012 school year, the number of students with autism increased from 498 students to 23,405 students (PaTTAN, 2016). This trend is consistent with the increasing incidence of individuals diagnosed with autism, most recently cited at 1 in 68 live births (CDC, 2016). With the increasing trend of students with autism entering the public school system, there is a need to find effective and efficient methods of assessing students to be able to place them in the most appropriate educational setting.

To determine the variables that educators use to determine the most appropriate placement, the current study employed a survey research design to investigate the assessment procedures and factors that are considered in the decision-making process. A total of 106 educators participated in this study including general education teachers, special education teachers, a specials teacher, occupational therapists, speech therapists,

educational diagnosticians, a behavior consultant, a paraprofessional, school psychologists, and administrators. All educators were employed in public elementary schools.

### **Research Questions**

This study investigated four research questions. The first question was “To what extent are children with autism included in general education classes?” The results from this study show that 32.4% of respondents reported students with autism are included in the general education classroom all day. In Pennsylvania, 46.7% of students with autism spend 80% or more of their day in general education classrooms; in Ohio, the percentage of students included in general education for 80% or more of their day is 48.2%.

According to the national average, 39.5% of students with autism spend 80% or more of their day in general education classroom. An accurate comparison between the state and national data and the data presented in this study was not possible due to the evaluation of different indicators.

The second research question in this study asked was: “What are the common variables used by school districts to determine the educational placement for children with autism?” The results revealed that the largest group of respondents uses achievement measures and alternative measures (most frequently social-emotional functioning abilities, peer relationships and social skills, and functional behavior assessments) to determine appropriate placement. The results showed that 96% of respondents use of alternative measures to assist with determination of appropriate placement. The second most commonly used variable were achievement measures; 92% of responses reported the use of this type of assessment to determine placement. Cognitive measures were also

reported to be used; however, at a lower rate than the previous measures mentioned (70.8% of respondents). The variable reported to be utilized the least when determining placement was criterion-referenced assessments (39%), despite a consistent body of literature stating the importance of using criterion-referenced assessments to determine placement, as well as to develop IEP goals (Mattatall, 2011). Researchers report that it is with these assessments, such as curriculum-based measures, more specific skill analysis can take place, leading to more accurate representation of present levels of academic achievement, functional performance, and selection of goals (Hintze, Christ, & Methe, 2006).

The third research question asked was “How much do each of the identified variables used in determining placement influence the placement decision?” Those variables that were found to carry the most weight in the outcome of placement were achievement measures and alternative measures. Closer analysis of achievement measures showed that 38% of respondents feel they are very influential and 39% feel they are moderately influential. Similar results were observed for alternative measures and considerations; 31% of respondents feel alternative measures are very influential and 39.6% of respondents reported they are moderately influential. A high number of respondents scored the use of cognitive measures to be moderately influential (48.6%) while 25.7% of respondents found them to be very influential. When looking at criterion-referenced assessments, 41.9% of respondents reported that they are not sure how much they influence the outcome of placement.

The current literature reports that children with autism present uneven patterns of development, and display a scattered profile of results on formal assessment measures

(Durocher, 2011). According to Durocher (2011), best practices in the assessment of children with autism specify that assessment should not only include information from multiple sources and settings, but also should include results from a review of records, family input, observations, standardized testing, as well as criterion-referenced assessments such as curriculum-based assessments.

The last question this study investigated outside factors and influences that are taken into consideration when educational placement is determined. Those factors reported by respondents included the student's home life and parent influence and input. These factors are consistent with current research that suggests that the parents' input is instrumental to the decision-making process of placement (Duhaney & Salend, 2000). According to Tissot (2011), parents need to be seen as an important part of the IEP team as their involvement plays a key role to the students' success.

## **Discussion**

This study sought to determine if there are common variables used to determine the educational placement of children with autism. Current literature reports cognitive limitations, social delays, and challenging behaviors that are often characteristic of autism presents an obstacle to traditional processes of assessment (Handleman & Delmolino, 2005). Due to the characteristics of autism, it is essential that assessment procedures are multidisciplinary. Information should be analyzed from a variety of sources, including parent report, medical records, standardized testing procedures, criterion-referenced measures, and observation (Durocher, 2011).

According to Dodd (2014), areas of assessment for a child with autism should address the following: (a) cognitive functioning, (b) language functioning, (c) social

communicative functioning, (d) adaptive functioning, (e) behavior functioning, (f) sensory processing, and (g) motor skill abilities. Despite the need for comprehensive evaluation measures, there is little known about the types of instruments and assessments used to assist with educational planning and evaluation of children with autism (Luiselli et al., 2001). The history of case law (e.g., *Larry P. v Riles*, 1979) tells us that the use of standardized testing alone is insufficient to efficiently assess students with disabilities, and a more comprehensive assessment procedure is needed (Ferri & Connor, 2005).

The data collected in this study supported the results of current research stating educators need to use a variety of assessment procedures to determine the most appropriate placement. Respondents reported they are able to use an average of three different cognitive measures, four different achievement measures, two different criterion-referenced measures, and six different alternative measures when determining the most appropriate placement for children with autism.

Respondents utilize a repertoire of 12 different measures on average when determining educational placement for children with autism. In addition to these assessment measures, respondents reported they also consider the following factors when determining placement: (a) behaviors of the student, (b) communication skills, (c) social abilities, (d) academic abilities, and (e) functional living skills. Outside variables that are considered when making placement decisions include the students' home life as well as the parent input and their influence.

Although respondents reported the use of a variety of assessment measures, the data presented on those who do not use achievement measures or criterion-referenced assessments is alarming. First, when analyzing the data of the employment positions that

do not use achievement measures to assist with placement decisions, 42.9% of these respondents are special education teachers (which represents 63% of participating special education teachers). Achievement assessments often do not require specific training; therefore, teachers are able to administer these tests with relative ease. Also, achievement tests are highly useful in determining which academic areas are of concern, telling how the student stands in key skills, such as reading, math, general information, and other specific school subjects (Eggen & Kauchak, 1997). According to Eggen and Kauchak (1997), achievement tests serve several purposes including: (a) knowing how well a student understands a specific content area, (b) able to track student progress over time, (c) determine if students have the pre-requisite knowledge to begin instruction in specific areas, and (d) identify learning problems. Due to the high influence these assessments have on academic instruction and planning, it is surprising that 63% of participating special education teachers report not using them to assist with determining appropriate placement.

Next, the reported data on the use of criterion-referenced assessments, including curriculum-based measures, is alarming. It was reported that 39% of participants do not use criterion-referenced assessments, and 26% of participants are not sure if they are used. When analyzing the data by the employment position, a total of 39 respondents reported they do not use criterion-referenced assessments. Of these 39 respondents, 63% are special education teachers. When looking at the overall number of special education teachers who participated in this survey, 32.9% do not use criterion-referenced assessments.



It was also reported that all school psychologists and the educational diagnostician are not sure of the influence criterion-referenced assessments have in making placement decisions. These results are startling as research suggests that school psychologists need to consider their assessments to be foundational components of three areas of educational programming including: a) diagnosis and special education eligibility, b) developing appropriate learning objectives, and c) establish baselines of skills which measures of progress can be compared (Shriver, Allen, & Mathews, 1999). Assessment needs to focus on direct skills which provide information about specific skill deficits and strengths in order to better target educational programming (Shriver et al., 1999). These assessments allow the teacher or school psychologist to assess student progress on specific instructional objectives over time (Hosp et al., 2016).

These data reported in this study present a great concern for two reasons. First, there is a wealth of literature that reports children with autism exhibit uneven patterns of development (Kuschner, Bennetto, & Yost, 2007; Mastrangelo, 2009; Ozonoff et al., 2005), and are observed in a scattered profile of results on standardized assessment measures (Durocher, 2011).

In addition to the display of uneven patterns of development, Quill (1995) discussed that children with autism often display delays in social cognition and communication, which can serve as a “cultural barrier” (p. 140) that can skew the results of a standardized test. Consequently, standardized assessments alone may have limited utility for intervention planning. Given this information, there is a need for educators to understand the relevance of non-standardized assessment measures, and to be able to

utilize them for a more thorough understanding of a child's abilities and needs that lead to more appropriate placement decisions.

The second concern over the low percentages of respondents who use criterion-referenced assessments is research has demonstrated that criterion-referenced assessments, specifically curriculum-based measures, have been used by teachers and school psychologists for over three decades and have shown to provide reliable and valid indicators for learning content material (Abu-Hamour, 2013; Fewster & Macmillian, 2002).

Research and litigation have also shown concerns in the use of standardized testing procedures as solitary means in assessing students for placement. In a review of education-related litigation (Larry P. v. Riles, 1979; Diana v. State Board of Education (1970); Hobson v. Hansen, 1967) there is a common theme of the appropriate use of assessments and the standardized testing process (Marston, 1989).

Despite the consistent body of research demonstrating the effectiveness of criterion-referenced assessments, the data in this study suggest that educators do not use this type of measure as much as other available assessments (cognitive measures and achievement measures) when determining placement for children with autism.

The results of this study also show there were seven respondents who feel they are not a part of the decision making process. These respondents included four special education teachers, two general education teachers, and a specials teacher. More than half of these respondents (57.1%) also reported that they do not feel comfortable or are neutral about how they feel in communicating concerns about placement during IEP meetings. Further investigation shows that the information these respondents provided

state that it is the administrators and school psychologists who ultimately decide the most appropriate placement. For example, one comment from a special education teacher read, “I don’t place. I teach those that administrators place in my class.” The information provided by these respondents suggests that they do not feel comfortable in communicating concerns regarding placement because it is often their administrator who ultimately decides where the child will receive their education.

### **Case Scenarios**

Four case scenarios were presented to respondents in this study. The results indicated low variability with two of the scenarios (Joey and Tommy) and two resulted in higher variability of responses (Julie and Peter). In the given scenario for Joey, the highest number of respondents (n=71) placed Joey in a general education classroom (either with assistance of a special education teacher or support of a resource room). The information provided on Joey included assessment information, academic strengths and concerns, and behavioral concerns.

Low variability in responding directly related to the type of classroom also was observed for the placement of Tommy where the majority of respondents (86.7%) recommended the general education classroom; however, the type of support needed varied greatly from no support, assistance of the special education teacher, and the resource room. Within Tommy’s scenario, much information was provided on academic abilities, social interaction skills, and behaviors.

The scenario given for Julie included information pertaining to communication difficulties, play skills, behavioral concerns, and limited academic information. The results regarding placement for Julie occurred with high variability, with respondents

replying Julie should be placed in a general education classroom (with support from the special education teacher or the resource room) to a self-contained special education classroom.

The responses provided regarding the educational placement for Peter also resulted in higher variability based on the respondent's recommendation of the type of classroom is most appropriate. The scenario on Peter included limited academic information, safety concerns, and communication difficulties. A high number of respondents (n=51) indicated a placement in the self-contained special education classroom for Peter, while less respondents (n=23) recommended placement in the general education classroom with assistance from the special education teacher.

Respondents were also provided the opportunity to write in an alternative placement or other comment. After analyzing the responses, it was revealed a total nine comments across all scenarios were made indicating a need for more information. Very little information was provided in the scenarios, and only one of the four scenarios provided formal assessment information. It was surprising to see only nine comments were made that more information was needed. The fact that little information was provided within each scenario may also explain the high variability in responding for two of the scenarios. Without enough relevant information (e.g. assessment results) on a student's strengths and skill deficits, respondents may not have been able to provide a response for the most appropriate placement.

These results from the case scenario (e.g. variability in responding and request for more information) suggest that more detailed information may increase consistency in recommendations for placement. Such information can be obtained through assessment

data, providing more insight across skill areas including cognitive skills, behavioral needs, adaptive skills, and specific skill deficits.

### **Least Restrictive Environment**

Another area explored in this study was the concept of the least restrictive environment (LRE). The respondents were provided an open-ended question asking them to give their definition of LRE. The most common themes presented in their responses include: (a) the environment where learning takes place so students can reach their potential (32% of respondents), (b) where the students' needs can be met (29% of respondents), and (c) the environment including general education and the students' same age peers (13% of respondents). The LRE provision is defined as

to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, [be] educated with children who are not disabled, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular education environment [occur] only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (20 U.S.C. § 1412(5)[B])

The responses provided by the participants in this study were in-line with the legal provisions of the LRE. According to Crockett and Kauffman (1999), in the LRE, students receive an appropriate education receiving the quality of services that the student

needs. The respondents in this study discussed the key concepts of the LRE meeting needs, the general education environment, and where learning takes place.

Next, respondents were asked if the least restrictive environment is always the most appropriate placement. The responses were split, with 45% of respondents replying yes, the most appropriate placement is the least restrictive environment and 55% of respondents saying no, the most appropriate placement is not always the least restrictive. Upon closer analysis of the respondents' comments, 73% of respondents answered this question with the assumption that the least restrictive environment equals the general education environment, and 32% of respondents reported answers based on LRE is the environment that is based on the students' needs and should be an individualized decision-making process.

Further analysis was conducted investigating the specific environment that respondents work in compared to their responses if LRE is always the most appropriate placement. When looking at the employment position of the respondents who felt LRE was the general education environment, 43.8% of special education teachers, 50% general education teachers, 30% of administrators, and 1% of school psychologists indicated this response. These data show that nearly half of the special education teachers and general education teachers feel the LRE is the general education environment and fewer numbers of school psychologists and administrators consider LRE as the general education environment.

Marx et al. (2014) discussed two ideologies regarding LRE. The first is the belief that the least restrictive environment is always the general education setting; the other is

the belief that LRE is where the students' needs may be best met. These two ideologies are consistent with the results presented in this current study.

Much research (e.g., Rozalski, Stewart, & Miller, 2010; Taylor, 2004; Williamson et al., 2006) has been conducted on LRE and the requirements outlined in IDEA focusing on the consideration of a continuum of services and the individual needs of the student (Bateman, Lloyd, & Tankersley, 2015). According to Bakken (2010), access to an effective, individualized educational setting is more valuable than mere placement in the general education classroom. Perhaps educators, while discussing the continuum of educational services and placements, should ask whether or not the general education environment will result in meaningful progress and achievement for students with disabilities (Bakken, 2010).

### **Parent Involvement**

This study investigated outside factors that affect placement decisions. Of 72 responses, only eight respondents (11.1%) reported parent input and influence is a consideration when discussing placement. Two of the original guiding principles of IDEA are shared decision-making and parent membership on the IEP team (Staples & Diliberto, 2010); therefore, parent input should have a higher role than what the results in this study show in placement decisions during IEP meetings.

Next, respondents were asked a question that was specific to parent involvement. An open-ended question was presented the influence parents have during IEP meetings, and how much of a role they play in the decision-making process. Out of 82 responses, half of the respondents ( $n=41$ ) reported parents have much influence over the placement of their child with autism. Respondents had strong opinions regarding the influence

parents have over where their child receives education, suggesting parents have too much say over the final placement decision.

There is much literature (e.g., Esquivel et al., 2008; Fish, 2006; Spann et al., 2003) focusing on parents' perceptions of the IEP process, why there is a lack of parent involvement during IEP meetings, and the legal role of the parent in placement decisions; however, there is a lack of research examining how much influence parents have in the decision-making process. Fish (2008) was the only study found that looked at parents' views on relationships with educators and the outcomes of IEP meetings; however, this study did not investigate educators' perceptions of parent influence, only the parents' views.

### **Limitations**

The researcher notes limitations in the current study that can affect generalization of the results. First, there was a small sample size. It was anticipated that 13 school districts would receive the survey; however, only five district administrators responded to the researcher confirming the survey was distributed. Due to this low number, the survey was then distributed to districts in Ohio, as well as to a nationwide special education teachers group sponsored by the National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASSET).

When other studies' sample sizes were analyzed, a comparative number of respondents were found. The sample size of four different studies on inclusion of students with disabilities was evaluated. The first study was conducted by Kern (2006) on teacher attitude regarding inclusive education. The sample size in this study was 77 who responded, with a response rate of 26.6%. The second study (Rosen, 2014) had 66



surveys returned that were used in the data analysis of teachers' perceptions of factors used in placement decisions. Another study (White, Scahill, Klin, Koenig, & Volkmar, 2007) was conducted with a sample size of 101 participants. In a study conducted by Hayes (2014) on general education teachers' perceptions on inclusion and autism, the researcher analyzed data from 79 surveys (with a response rate of 34.3%). The sample size of the current study is comparative to that of other studies on similar topics.

A second limitation is the method of dissemination. Snowball sampling was used for the school districts in Pennsylvania where emails were sent out to superintendents and special education supervisors, requesting them to disperse the survey to the elementary buildings in their district. Although a reminder email was sent, the researcher cannot be certain the emails were sent, or how many buildings received the survey link.

Another limitation to this study is how data were reported on the amount of time students with autism are included in the general education classroom. The data presented in Table 18 show whether students with autism spend either (a) daily, every day, (b) daily, but less than a full day, (c) 2-3 times per week, or (d) once per week. This presentation of data does not align with the state and national indicators (80% or more of their day, 40%-79% of the day, or less than 40%); therefore, the researcher cannot draw accurate comparisons.

Next, the use of the term criterion-referenced may not be familiar to all respondents; therefore, not allowing respondents to provide accurate feedback to questions pertaining to this type of assessment measure. Providing a specific definition of criterion-referenced would allow for respondents to provide more accurate information pertaining to their use and influence in the placement decision process. Also, additional

examples of criterion-referenced assessments within the survey question such as “teacher-made tests” that may be more familiar to respondents can be added to assist with clarification of criterion-referenced assessments.

The survey from this study was disseminated nationwide; therefore, a limitation is the inconsistent use of terminology in different states. Examples include the use of a paraeducator, one-on-one aide, and paraprofessional. In future studies, these terms would need to be defined specifically to ensure consistency of the interpretation and accurate responding.

A final limitation in survey research has to do with the response bias of the participants. Educators were asked to provide information based on their experiences and beliefs. Their responses are subjective and may not accurately portray all variables used when determining educational placement. Due to this potential bias, generalization of the results should be done with caution. Also, this was a descriptive study; therefore, it does not allow for cause and effect conclusions.

### **Implications for Educational Leaders**

As the rate of autism diagnosis continues to rise, now, more than ever, there is need for an increase in awareness of this disorder, as well as a demand for services. School districts are already struggling with decreasing budgets and increasing enrollments, and are now faced with finding a balance between providing the supports and services children with autism require and what the school district is able to provide and afford (Brock et al., 2006).

In a recent survey of school psychologists, 95% of respondents reported an increase in students referred for assessment of autism (Kohrt, 2004). With this increase, it

is essential that educators understand assessment procedures and know what assessments will be the most effective and beneficial in providing relevant information impacting placement decisions.

This study provides educators information regarding the different assessments that can be used to assist with the determination of the most appropriate educational placement for children with autism. It is essential that the assessment process is multidisciplinary. Educators must gather information from a variety of sources, not just standardized testing. The research (e.g., Durocher, 2011; Mastrangelo, 2009) reports that children with autism perform inconsistently on standardized tests; therefore, additional measures are required to obtain an accurate picture of the students' strengths and needs.

Next, educators need to be cognizant of the meaning of LRE. The continuum of educational services must be considered when deciding placement for children with autism. This continuum starts with placement in the general education classroom without supplementary supports and services. If this environment is unable to meet the needs of the student, then the next level of placement is considered, attendance in a general education classroom with supplementary supports and services. Educators need to follow this continuum of services until the team decides that the child's needs are able to be met in a specific setting. The results in this study suggest that educators confuse the meaning of LRE with the general education environment. According to Taylor (2006), the term LRE is used very diversely by educators. By presuming LRE is the general education setting, educators may overlook the therapeutic needs of the students with autism who may require more individualized, intensive services (Taylor, 2006).

### **Future Research**

There is currently insufficient information about the types of assessments that are routinely used by educators (Luiselli et al., 2000). This study's focus was to add to the literature to provide insight on different assessments that are used, and the influence each has in determining education placement for children with autism.

This study found that several respondents use achievement, cognitive, and other measures to determine placement for children with autism. Also, respondents report accurate components found within the definition of LRE. However, additional research is needed in this field in three main areas.

First, information is needed on why educators do not use criterion-referenced assessments, such as curriculum-based measures, to assist in making placement decisions. With the consistent body of literature that supports the use of these assessments, and case law that states school districts must use more than IQ tests to assess students with autism, more research needs to look specifically at reason why educators do not feel they are of high influence in the decision-making process.

Second, it was revealed that 8% of the teachers in this study do not feel they have input in placement decisions. These respondents were primarily special education teachers and general education teachers who reported they are not involved in the team decision. Under IDEA, it is the IEP team that reviews all relevant information pertaining to the child, and decides what the LRE will be to meet the child's needs. More investigation is needed to assess why educators feel they are not part of this process, and what can be done to ensure every team member's concerns are heard.

Finally, in an open-ended question, 50% of respondents reported that parents have too much influence over the decision of placement for their child with autism. There is

little known research looking at the influence parents have in the final decision of where their child will be educated. A wide range of studies focus on parents' attitudes towards inclusion; some parents advocate for inclusion while others prefer a separate placement for their child (Elkins, van Kraayenoord, & Jobling, 2003). Other studies focus on the parent as part of the IEP team, and how to increase parent involvement in the IEP process (e.g., Dunn, Constable, Martins, & Cammuso, 2016; Fish, 2006; Reiman, Coppola, & Engiles, 2010).

By law, parents are a part of the IEP team and have the right for educators to listen to their input. Additional research needs to look at the influence parents have over the outcome of placement, and how the final placement-decision is made when the school districts and parents disagree.

## **Conclusions**

Legislation (e.g., IDEA) states children with disabilities are entitled to a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. School districts are required to gather information and conduct assessments to determine a student's present level of academic achievement and functional performance, develop goals, and determine the most appropriate placement to meet the student's academic, behavioral, and social needs.

There has been much debate over the issue of LRE and the inclusion of children with autism. Research exists supporting both sides of the argument, while the law states it is up to the IEP team to ultimately decide placement. A key part of the placement process is assessment. Current literature has discussed the concerns and challenges with assessing children with autism, due to social and communication deficits, behavioral challenges,

and possible comorbid conditions (Paynter, 2015). To help with these concerns, guidelines have been recommended for the assessment procedure, including the use of a developmental perspective, gathering information from multiple sources, and including professionals from several disciplines, depending on the child's individual needs (Dodd, Franke, Grzesik, & Stoskopf, 2014).

Given the current literature and procedures outlined by IDEA, there continues to be little known about the specific types of assessments that are used and most effective for instructional planning and placement. This study analyzed the variables used in making placement decisions. The results reveal educators use a variety of measures including achievement assessments, cognitive assessments, and other measures that take into consideration the child's behavior, functional living skills, social abilities, academic abilities, home life, and parent input. A continued area of need is the evaluation and role of criterion-referenced assessments in placement decisions.

As educators gather information, it is also essential that they understand the continuum of LRE. All educational environments need to be considered, starting with the general education classroom. The child's individual needs, based on the assessments, must be considered as placement is discussed. When the placement decision is based on comprehensive assessment and individual need, learning will take place and the student will reach their potential.

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228.

## APPENDIX A

August 29, 2016

Dr. Karen Larwin, Principal Investigator  
Ms. Jennifer Musloff, Co-investigator  
Department of Educational Foundations, Research, Technology & Leadership  
UNIVERSITY

RE: HSRC Protocol Number: 016-2017  
Title: Is Inclusion More About Political Correctness than Education? A Look at How  
Educational Placement is Determined

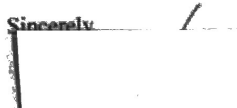
Dear Dr. Larwin and Ms. Musloff:

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed the abovementioned protocol and determined that it is exempt from full committee review based on a DHHS Category 3 exemption.

Any changes in your research activity should be promptly reported to the Institutional Review Board and may not be initiated without IRB approval except where necessary to eliminate hazard to human subjects. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects should also be promptly reported to the IRB.

The IRB would like to extend its best wishes to you in the conduct of this study.

Sincerely,

  
Mr. Michael A. Hripko  
Associate Vice President for Research  
Authorized Institutional Official

MAH:cc

c: Dr. Charles Vergon, Chair  
Department of Educational Foundations, Research, Technology & Leadership