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**Mary Grace McNamara,
Seton Hall University**

The Disadvantage of Virtual Special Education

On March 15, 2020 the state of New Jersey was put into a lockdown due to the Coronavirus pandemic. As a result, schools were shut down, transitioning instruction from traditionally in-person to online. Since March, schools in New Jersey have not been entirely in person at full capacity, thus affecting the education of students K-12. Specifically, this article will cover observed trends in special education for middle school students.

To begin, an individualized education program is a legal document that outlines the accommodations that must be provided to a public-school student entitled to a special education (Woolfolk 2019). Accommodations are modifications that are made for a student, whether the accommodation is how the teacher teaches, how the content is delivered, or what the personalized expectation for the student is. In order to be eligible to having an individualized education program, a student must be evaluated and diagnosed by an individualized education program team at his or her school. This team can include a pediatric doctor, neuropsychologist/psychologist, maybe even speech-language pathologists or other licensed social workers. This team can diagnose and identify disabilities ranging from a language processing disorder to autism.

After the student is approved to an individualized education program, public schools are legally obligated to make modifications in the least restrictive way to the student. Meaning, a learning-disabled student has a right to participate in a regular education classroom, if his or her content is appropriately modified to maximize his or her content understanding. It must be understood, however, for students who are blind or deaf, the least restrictive environment would probably include “peers who can communicate directly with them” like with touch, braille, or sign language (Underwood 2018). Therefore, the definition of the least restrictive environment is studentoriented and legally obligated to be respected.

Children are required to be educated in the least restrictive environment possible; three approaches to this include the following:

1. Mainstreaming, which is when special education students are included in “a few general education classes as convenient”
2. Integration, which is “fitting the student into existing class structures.”
3. Inclusion, which is “reconstructing educational settings to promote belonging for all students” (Woolfolk 2019).

Albeit, in-person schools had trouble mainstreaming, integrating, and truly including because there is already a struggle in maintaining modifications and appropriately accommodating students.

Sometimes, students entitled to a one-on-one aide, were accommodated with changing, unqualified substitutes teachers. Sometimes, students were misdiagnosed as being behaviorally deviant as opposed to being appropriately diagnosed with a learning disability. Sometimes, even, a child who has explicit accommodations outlined like extra time to take an assessment, access to a calculator on math tests, or even simply just being allowed to use graph paper, did not have the simple accommodation fulfilled by the school. In-person special education as is sometimes does not truly accommodate a student.

On-line instruction contributes to unprecedented factors to middle school special education. First, students who are entitled to individual aides whether it be to help remediate content in terms they need to understand or to take notes, have a new experience due to being online. If classes are meeting together online via Zoom or another video conferencing software, does the student have to log into a separate meeting with his aide? Does he/she sit through the same class as every other student, with his/her aide logged in unable to directly accommodate that student in real time? Online educational platforms disable a student entitled to an individual aide from truly securing the accommodation he/she is entitled to. There is no substitution of equal efficacy to an in-person aide online.

Any online equivalent to having an individual in-person aide leaves the student at a disadvantage. What is the least restrictive environment to an inclusive special education? If the learning-disabled student were to be put into a breakout room with his or her aide, the student is no longer included in the regular classroom's virtual call and activities. This can be labeled as limiting and restrictive, if pulling out from the main class is not outlined in the student's individualized education program. This is not the least restrictive environment in which he/she is entitled to learn. The other option of having a student stay logged on in the entire class's video meeting, leaves the student, again, at a disadvantage. The one-on-one aide cannot accommodate the student via class Zoom or Google Meet like she or he could in-person, without interrupting class for the entire video call's participants. This too is limiting and restrictive. Therefore, an individualized education program that outlines the accommodation of a one-on-one aide cannot truly be as effective and successfully executed for a student on-line as it could be in-person.

Also, in-school middle school special education, when mainstreaming and integration is not the most optimal learning environment for some students, there is an option for separate small group classrooms. To be eligible for an individualized education program, there can be "a justification for how much of a student's program will not be in general education classroom and school settings" (Woolfolk 2019). This, for some students, provides a more intimate environment for learning specific content like English language arts or mathematics, where the student to teacher ratio is smaller. Thus, allowing more attention to a student, helping pace a class on students' needs. Small group classes can even allow for accommodated content. For example, a seventh grader with a language processing disorder can learn the same content of direct and indirect characterization, setting and tone words, and proper citations as a student in the mainstream classroom by reading a book of a fifth-grade reading level. As opposed to assigning a book of a seventh grade reading level and frustrating the student with a learning disability, the modified content allots the student more opportunity to be openminded, willing to learn, and focused. If outlined by an individualized education program, in-person small group classes allow for students to reap the same benefit of content understanding as their counterparts in the mainstream classroom.

On-line, however, students who are entitled to small group learning are disadvantaged. A benefit of small group classrooms is the smaller student to teacher ratio because a teacher can be more attentive to each individual student, whether through accessing individual benchmark achievements or even seeing the reaction of a student. Online, it is harder for the teacher to read a student's body language or to see the work in front of the student. Secondly, in-person small group classrooms allow for a community and comradery between students receiving special education through collaboration on their class's projects. They are lacking in the quality of education because group work is limited to virtual meetings and collaborating on on-line documents. Attending small-group class online incapacitates students from extensively interacting with one another and experiencing the comradery provided by being in the same room.

A student's accommodations aren't completely fulfilled in a virtual classroom, changing the roles of a parent, babysitter, or any other at-home supporter into that of an educator and/or aide. Whether or not a parent hires a tutor or plays the part of a tutor, he or she still most likely has to compensate for the lack of support usually provided by the school; an at-home adult might have to reteach content, utilize homework as a resource for teaching instead of reinforcement, and learn the content of classes, too. Overall, an at-home adult who could have just checked if homework was done and sign a middle schooler's reading log potentially has to reteach curriculum, modify notes the student's understanding, or even sit with the student through class to keep them on-task. Although a parent has a pivotal role in the educational success of his or her middle school student, he/she has an even more significant one if his/her child qualifies for a special education, traditional or not. When it comes to virtual education, resources at home, in order to having content understanding and retention equivalent to when classes were in-person, need to compensate for the lack of substantial accommodation an individualized education program can provide to a student online.

In fact, due to the COVID-19 epidemic, in 2020 a suburban, public school district transitioned from in-person instruction to an online learning platform where students participated in virtual, synchronous, group calls, read content online or from physical books at home, and turned in all assignments to be graded virtually. During this unprecedented time, a middle school student entitled to an individualized education program qualified for modified content delivery and an individual aid. However, due to the disadvantage experienced by special education students at home during these unique times, in order to maximize content understanding in the least restrictive environment possible, there needed to be intervention at home with either at-home tutors or guardian supervision.

If it were not for these at-home resources and interventions, the student would be left at a disadvantage during online instruction. In this district, some in classroom support resource teachers had failed to modify lessons individualized to the students they were overseeing. Individual aides failed to solve the issue of when it was appropriate to go into break-out rooms, leaving children without their legally obligated accommodation of an aide while in the regular classroom calls.

In a separate class specific to special education students, who need homework and review help, students' screens were unmonitored, enabling the students to go onto other websites, and even disabling the teachers from seeing the students' documents. This inhibits the teacher from correcting specific mistakes or accommodating speeds needs. Public schools are legally obligated to accommodate students in the least restrictive environment, and in this district, there were outside

resources needed to supplement and create a least restrictive environment for special education middle school students. “These standards have to be applied to real children, real schools, real educators;” in this unprecedented time of mass online education due to a global pandemic, accommodations in the least restrictive environment have to be responsive and adaptive to today’s modern on-line student (Underwood 2018).

Overall, in 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act changed the industry of education for children with disabilities and made it law “to provide a free, appropriate public education for all students with disabilities who participate in special education (Woolfolk 2019). Students with specific learning disabilities, language impairments, developmental delay, and more are entitled to a fair, least restrictive, individualized education. In person, before the pandemic, there was already a struggle to true classroom inclusion. In regard to virtual learning, there is already a struggle to even accommodate a student in any regards pertaining to content modification, providing additional resources and materials, and ensuring a student fulfills his individual benchmark. The 2020 school year has presented itself as testing to the educational system and has so far disappointed the community in need of special education. With preexisting obstacles pertaining to in-person special education, virtual learning has *only* disadvantaged the special education, middle school student.

References

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