

# Individual education programs not being used as intended in special education

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Gone are the days when students with disabilities were placed in a separate classroom, or even in a completely different part of the school. These students often sit alongside their traditional student peers for at least part of the day, with the help of individualized education programs (IEPs).

IEPs are considered the main drivers in [special education](#) and the mechanism through which these students receive their [education](#) to meet his or her individual learning needs. However, there are challenges to implementing them in inclusive settings. A Penn State researcher is examining the role of IEPs for students with specific learning disabilities in general education settings.

In this study, published recently in the journal *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Laura Bray, assistant professor of education, explored how educators wrote, used and conceptualized the role of IEPs for students with specific learning disabilities within inclusive general education settings. "IEPs are supposed to be standards-based and tailored to the [student](#)'s needs," Bray said. "We wanted to understand how teachers draw from IEPs and utilize them in their teaching."

The researchers found that IEPs are largely aligned to the general education curriculum and not individualized. "We found that students' IEPs were responding to institutional pressures to educate students within these settings," said Bray. "However, the content of the students' IEPs offered limited guidance on providing students with special education supports and services. That being said, the IEPs still played distinctive roles in each school's unique activity system for educating students within inclusive classrooms."

To come to this conclusion, the researchers examined data from a qualitative comparative case study that explored two secondary schools organized for the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. "We looked at how IEPs were written to respond to institutional pressures to provide them a general education, how the IEPs responded to their individual education needs, other types of activities the educators would engage in to determine needs, and how IEP activities were being implemented and monitored at the schools," Bray explained.

The researchers chose two high schools in two different school districts, focusing on five students that were in 10th or 11th grade, who were identified with a specific learning disability and required modifications and accommodations in their classrooms.

Bray found that in one school, IEPs were being used as sort of a "triage" to help the students pass their courses, which is not the intent of IEPs. In the other school, Bray found that IEPs also were largely unused; however, co-teaching was used to help students with disabilities within the inclusive classrooms, and once a day these students attended a special education study hall. "We found that students in the second [school](#) had greater access to special education services," said Bray. "In both schools, while the IEPs were not being used as intended, they were still instrumental in shaping the educational supports students received."

Bray said this research is important because it will influence policy, as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is currently up for reauthorization. The IDEA ensures that children with disabilities receive free, appropriate public education and ensures special education and related services are provided to those children.

"We believe our findings will invite debate moving forward, especially as there is not much research in this area," Bray said. "This project focused on students with specific learning [disabilities](#) being educated within inclusive classrooms. In the future, we will look at other factors, such as evaluating the organization of schools for the inclusion of these students. We will also research how to better develop and implement IEPs for students being educated within inclusive settings."

**More information:** Laura E. Bray et al. The Dynamic Interaction Between Institutional Pressures and Activity: An Examination of the Implementation of IEPs in Secondary Inclusive Settings, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* (2018). [DOI](#):

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