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COMMENTARY

Classmates with Disabilities and Students' Non-Cognitive Outcomes

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Recent trends in U.S. schooling have witnessed an increase in the number of students with disabilities being placed in general education classrooms: to date, more than 50 percent of students with disabilities receive over 80 percent of their entire schooling from within the general education classroom. This trend of placing an increasingly greater number students with disabilities in general education classrooms has raised questions among policymakers, practitioners, and parents about the effects that this practice has not only on students with disabilities but also on their classmates without disabilities. These issues arise in dialog for students as early as at school entry.

In the little empirical research that does exist on the effects of classmates with disabilities on others, the literature has focused exclusively on achievement. However, nothing is known about the peer effects of classmates with disabilities on the *non-cognitive outcomes* of other students. It is true that recent federal and state policies do emphasize accountability through achievement and testing. However, because young children spend a large part of their formative years in classroom settings, the classroom environment itself becomes the primary means by which young children not only learn information but also simultaneously develop non-cognitive skills. Hence, these non-cognitive skills (i.e., defined in this study as problem behaviors and social skills) are as critical as achievement to examine

Based on assessing students in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (a national sample created by the U.S. Department of Education), the findings in this study indicate that kindergarten and first grade students tend to have higher problem behaviors and lower social skills when in classrooms with greater numbers of classmates with disabilities. The largest influence arises from having classmates with emotional and behavioral disorders. That said, the effects are also present (just not as large) when examining other categories: learning/communication impairments, mental/developmental delays, and physical impairments.

Given the growing practice of mainstreaming, what's important for policy is knowing what factors may aid in lessening any negative effects resulting from being a student in a classroom with classmates with disabilities. I find that many variables can serve as protective factors. For example, being a non-disabled student with higher individual academic ability tends to lessen the negative effect from having classmates with disabilities. Second, having more experienced teachers tends to lessen the effects from having classmates with disabilities. Third, as the percentage of students reading below grade level decreases, it lessens the negative effect that students with disabilities may have exerted on other students' non-cognitive outcomes. Fourth, more teacher training in special education also can lessen problem behaviors or improve social skills for those students in classrooms with students with disabilities.

These findings are important for California. As more and more of our districts are faced with increased pressure from federal and state policy to place students with disabilities into general education classrooms, the findings from my study can guide school practices to more efficiently address how to improve the classroom context. Additionally, as more students in our state's schools

are identified as having a disability, we can utilize the information in my study to determine how to design supportive learning environments for all members of a classroom setting that may be directly or indirectly affected by trends in schooling practices. Moreover, my study shows that we can guide these school practices to more efficiently address how to improve the classroom context not only by focusing on academic achievement, but also on non-cognitive outcomes that are highly correlated with school, economic, health and general lifetime success.

The full study is in Michael Gottfried, Classmates With Disabilities and Students' Noncognitive Outcomes, Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, March 2014, vol. 36 no. 1, 20-43.

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