

Inclusive Education National Research Advocacy Agenda:  
A Call to Action

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Citation: Morningstar, M. E., Allcock, H., White, J. M., Taub, D., Kurth, J. A., Gonsier-Gerdin, J., . . . Jorgensen, C. M. (2016). Inclusive education national research advocacy agenda: A call to action. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 41*, 209-215. doi:10.1177/1540796916650975

### **Abstract**

The TASH Inclusive Education National Committee responded to Horner and Dunlap's (2012) call to ensure that future research integrates inclusive values with strong science by developing an inclusive education (IE) national research agenda. Qualitative methods were implemented to answer three questions: (a) *What is the state of IE research?* (b) *What research still must be done?* and (c) *What are recommendations for a national IE research advocacy agenda?* The findings include 15 areas organized within three domains advocating for continued research across systems level capacity building and support, building and classroom capacity for inclusive education, and student learning and development. Implications for research and policy reform are discussed.

### **Inclusive Education National Research Advocacy Agenda: A Call to Action**

In 2012, researchers Rob Horner and Glen Dunlap made the case for a renewed commitment to scientifically valid research that is socially relevant (see Horner & Dunlap, 2012). They described themes critical to rigorous research addressing evidence-based practices and multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) as a strategy for supporting inclusive practices. They also advocated that research and practice sustain and improve long-term outcomes. Researchers and practitioners involved with the TASH Inclusive Education National Committee responded by initiating a national dialogue to develop a research agenda with an overall goal of advocating for research to build capacity and facilitate change in support of inclusive education and improved outcomes.

Over the past few decades, research and practice have informed the teaching of students with severe disabilities leading to increased attention on access to general education curriculum (Ryndak, Jackson, & White, 2013). The current focus is on ensuring accountability of students with disabilities to progress in the general curriculum (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2010). To achieve this, further research is needed to transform educational systems (Sailor, 2015).

### **Educational Placement among Students with Severe disabilities**

There has been significant increase in students with disabilities served in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). For instance, in 1990 only 34% of students with high incidence disabilities spent 80% or more of their school day in general education classes, but by 2007 this percentage increased to 65%, and has remained relatively stable (McLeskey, Landers, Williamson, & Hoppey, 2012). However, similar trends are not reported for students with severe disabilities. Across most states, students with the most severe disabilities continue to receive all educational services in separate educational settings (Kurth, Morningstar, & Kozleski, 2014).

Consistent with other research, Kleinert and colleagues (2015) found that 93% of students taking the alternate assessment were predominately served in self-contained special education classes, separate schools, or home-bound instruction. These findings contrast with research supporting the positive effects of placement in general education classes.

### **Access to General Education and Improved Outcomes**

Emerging evidence of positive outcomes for students with severe disabilities when taught in general education settings is encouraging. Academic achievement, social engagement, and improved behavior are associated with general education outcomes (Feldman, Carter, Asmus, & Brock 2015; Ruppard, Allcock, & Gonsier-Gerdin, in press). Supporting students in general education classes likely leads to improved short-term outcomes such as achieving grade-level academic standards (Hunt, McDonnell, & Crockett, 2012). Students with severe disabilities can and do acquire academic, social, and functionally relevant skills across a range of general and special education settings (Spooner & Browder, 2015). Essential academic, social, and functional skills can be learned within general education using evidence-based instruction including Universal Design for Learning (UDL), systematic instruction, embedded instruction (Dymond et al., 2006).

Furthermore, the context within which instruction is provided impacts acquisition, maintenance, and generalization of skills; with evidence demonstrating inclusive settings as more effective than self-contained classrooms (Causton-Theoharis Theoharis, Orsati, & Cosier 2011). Finally, emerging research supports the notion that instructional practices paired with tiered supports are likely to improve learning for all students, including those with disabilities (Copeland & Cosbey, 2008). In fact, in a recent descriptive study of inclusive schools, classrooms using differentiated instruction and UDL appeared to have higher levels of access

and learning among all students (Morningstar, Shogren, Lee, & Born, 2015). While very few studies have investigated the relationship between levels of inclusion and student achievement for students with severe disabilities, emerging evidence supports a positive direction (Cosier, Causton-Theoharis, & Theoharis, 2013). Albeit limited, studies now point to inclusive education as a moderate predictor of post-school success related to employment, postsecondary education, and independent living (Test et al., 2009).

Research over the past forty years has demonstrated academic and social benefits of inclusion, yet the body of evidence remains incomplete. New areas of inquiry are needed to set the stage for implementing successful inclusive educational practices, supporting scaling up and sustainability of these practices, and expanding improvements in students' outcomes. Therefore, the purpose of this report is to describe an emergent research advocacy agenda developed through systematic qualitative methods and identify pressing areas for future research. Specifically, the questions to be considered were: *(a) What is the state of inclusive education research? (b) What research still must be done? and (c) What are the recommendations for a national inclusive education research advocacy agenda?*

### **Method**

An IE Workgroup made up of TASH Inclusive Education National Committee members engaged in an iterative process to identify, clarify, and refine an Inclusive Education National Research Agenda (IE Agenda). A multi-phase process was used beginning with an organized Inclusive Education Research Roundtable session at the 2012 TASH Conference where leading researchers and policy experts responded to three questions: *a) What is the state of research in your area of expertise? b) What are the burning research questions? and c) What recommendations do you have to articulate an IE National Research Agenda?* Focus group data

collection methods elicited both multiple and distinct perspectives, as well as the views of different audiences (i.e., researchers, practitioners, advocates, family members, Gibbs, 2012).

Subsequent to the 2012 Roundtable, two additional phases of data collection occurred. During the second phase, the IE Workgroup convened an open session at the 2013 TASH annual conference. At this session, participants provided input and elaboration across emerging domains (i.e., student development, classroom/building, district, state and federal policies, long-term outcomes). The IE Workgroup used an iterative comparison method to analyze input and recommendations. During the final phase, the IE Workgroup convened an open session at the 2014 TASH annual conference to conduct a member check of the IE Agenda. Large posters were used to illicit input and feedback. Participants held brief discussions, reviewed research questions, and provided input and confirmations. All members of the IE Workgroup reviewed changes and provided final confirmation of the recommendations, refinements, and alignments.

### **Findings**

Key themes emerged across three phases of an iterative research process. The findings articulate a research agenda to build capacity and facilitate transformations of inclusive education and improved student outcomes across three domains: (a) systems level capacity building; (b) building and classrooms capacity, and (c) student learning and development. Figure 1 provides an overview of the domains and subcategories of recommendations and proposed research questions. The IE Agenda articulates a compelling argument to engage in advocacy for effective and established research to continue as well as to launch new and innovative research promoting inclusive education for students with severe disabilities. The full IE Agenda and detailed research methodology is found on the TASH website at [www.tash.org](http://www.tash.org).

#### **Systems Level Capacity Building**

It is essential to improve capacities across educational systems. The IE Agenda identified and accentuated four macro-level areas of research targeting systemic reform at federal, state, and district levels:

1. *School-wide reform.* Research aligned with school-wide transformative approaches.

Understanding systems unifying general and special education, including policies to scale-up, generalize, and sustain inclusive practices and models are critical.

2. *Federal, state and local policy.* Accountability for special and general education legislation requires a shift from compliance to federal, state, and district policies supportive of inclusive educational systems. Research is needed to scrutinize how policy and regulatory language supports or hinders quality practices.

3. *Least restrictive environment and placement decisions.* Robust research regarding LRE placement is needed, given the variability both within and across states, as well as practices that usurp or engender family involvement. How districts interpret policies and procedures that influence placement is an essential question.

4. *Teacher preparation and professional development.* It is necessary to examine and clarify the dispositions, knowledge, and skills of educators to support inclusive practices.

### **Building and Classroom Capacity**

To strengthen the capacity of classrooms to support and engage all students, research is needed across multiple areas:

1. *Systematic instruction in inclusive settings.* Evidence-based practices must be examined for portability and effective use in general education classrooms to facilitate and improve learning leading to post-school outcomes.
2. *Adult roles in inclusive classrooms.* Research is needed to identify practices facilitating

student learning, engagement and development of social relationships. Research efforts must continue to explore the effectiveness of models of co-teaching, cooperative learning structures and strategies and the inclusion of students with severe disabilities..

3. *Adult roles in student participation and engagement in learning.* Efforts to expand understanding of how educators implement universally designed instruction, , use accommodations/ modifications, and support for meaningful participation in general education is needed. Comparative research is needed examining the impact of separate and inclusive programs on participation and post-school outcomes.
4. *Access to curriculum promoting state standards (SS) and College and Career Readiness (CCR).* Research is needed on how curriculum is designed and implemented to be accessible for all students with individualized instruction embedded within general education classrooms. Examining access to CCR includes developing reliable means of communication, opportunities to learn and practice self-determination and self-advocacy skills, and problem solving across activities.
5. *Building-level instructional leaders.* Researchers must deeply examine how principals and building leaders set the tone and leadership for inclusion among all staff, families, and the student body.
6. *Professional development.* Research is needed that targets effective components of professional development by examining effective practices associated with: team collaboration, working with paraprofessionals, culturally responsive practices, and supports for school wide change.
7. *Family and community involvement.* A strong research base focused on engaging families of students with disabilities must be expanded to understand family-centered and culturally



responsive engagement strategies.

### **Student Learning and Development**

Developing strong evidence of practices and interventions addressing and supporting students is essential. Four subcategories emerged for addressing future intervention research promoting:

1. *Social relationships and improving academic outcomes.* Further research is necessary to ensure that improved academic, social, and post-school outcomes focus on students with severe disabilities. Peer-mediated interventions must continue to be refined. Continuing research associated with effective practices (i.e., self-determination, cooperative learning) is needed.
2. *Instructional strategies in inclusive settings.* How students with severe disabilities learn when research-based instructional strategies are implemented in inclusive classrooms is required. Research areas to examine include a) the influence of teacher knowledge, expectations, and dispositions on specialized instruction; b) use of research-based instructional strategies (e.g., UDL); and c) progress monitoring improvements for academic skills, progress in IEP goals, and long-term post-school outcomes.
3. *Communicative competence.* Identifying communication interventions most compatible with learning in general education settings is essential. In addition, examining how student access to AAC impacts student development is needed. Research regarding how team decision making promotes or impedes AAC access is recommended; as is determining the impact of robust access to AAC on student learning and post-school outcomes.
4. *Redefining the curricular focus for students with severe disabilities.* Research is needed to examine embedded instruction related to functional skills in general education classrooms.

Careful attention must be paid to identifying the most powerful curricular experiences leading to college and career readiness and post-school outcomes.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

Existing research has demonstrated positive findings for students with severe disabilities who are educated in inclusive contexts; yet in practice, most students continue to spend the majority of their day in segregated settings (Kleinert et al., 2015). The TASH Inclusive Education National Committee recognizes the continued need to emphasize civil rights and social justice to promote educational equity for students with severe disabilities. At the same time, strong advocacy is needed to promote and support well-designed research demonstrating the capacity of students to learn, contribute, and develop alongside same-aged peers in general education classrooms; as well as to highlight school reform efforts incorporating systemic practices leading to school and post-school outcomes for *all* students. The IE Agenda articulated here is considered a living document; expanding as new issues and questions arise. It is an effort to advocate for compelling research and thereby launch the “state of the nation discussion and commentary to define the extent to which children, youth, and adults with severe disabilities and their families are participating successfully, effectively, and well in American society” (Horner & Dunlap, 2012, p. 112).

Promoting evidence-based practices is articulated among research questions associated across all three domains (systems level capacity building, building and classroom capacity, student learning and development). Ensuring students with severe disabilities are served within multi-tiered systems of support drives us to advocate for research targeting evidence associated with opportunities for access, participation, and progress in general education. Finally, the TASH Inclusive Education National Committee fully supports the need to ensure the practicality of

interventions, which means advocating for research designed and implemented in inclusive contexts first and foremost (Mayton, Carter, Zhang, & Wheeler, 2014).

To address the research needs identified in this agenda, new approaches are required. The research identified here necessitates trans-disciplinary knowledge and research to understand and address varied milieus of educational practices. Furthermore, the complexity of issues facing inclusive education for students with severe disabilities requires complex research-based solutions (McQuillan, 2008). Similarly, the unique contexts of urban and rural settings must be considered when identifying mitigating factors.

We hope others will consider whether the aforementioned IE Research Advocacy Agenda is sufficient for promoting rigor future research. An essential question still remaining is how the IE research articulated in this agenda can be carried out in light of factors associated with the socio-political context of today's schools. It is anticipated that this research advocacy agenda will provide direction and clarity for both well-established and new researchers who believe, first and foremost, that students with severe disabilities belong with and among their same-aged peers, learning and engaging in inclusive schools and communities. Understanding the complexities of such a vision for the future requires strong and well-designed research that answers the most important questions.

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Figure 1. National Inclusive Education Research Advocacy Agenda

