

## Foundation

I believe in the sentiment of Least Restrictive Environment. I believe that socialization is such a crucial part of human development, that it's unfair for children with disabilities to be separated and ostracized further simply for the purpose of having disabilities. Even in our textbook, studies have shown that students with disabilities are able to garner and nurture more relationships with their peers through inclusion, and even acquire skills faster than if they were secluded. I do find myself thinking that there very likely are some students with disabilities who would benefit from a more restricted environment, like the students with serious emotional disturbances. I find myself coming back to the fact that there are at least a million types of disabilities, and that it would be impossible to rely on one solution or praise one solution as the end-all-be-all. More beneficial than placing all students in general education classrooms are options. I like the Continuum of Educational Services as a model, because it gives the individual some choice. In my opinion, the purpose of evaluating and re-evaluating with intentions to move towards a less restrictive environment is both good and bad – good, because re-evaluation should be always healthy and can show growth; but also bad, because I'm not so sure that every individual *needs* to be aiming for the general education classroom.

To elaborate a little more on that, I worked at a nonprofit organization that taught people, mostly youth, teenagers, and war veterans, social skills and helped them to integrate or re-integrate into society. However, one of our contentious bragging points was retention rate. Half of the organization was happy to have recurring customers – the other half had hoped the clients would take these skills and apply them in the outside world. In my opinion, and from what I'd seen with the clients, "graduation" from these types of lessons are not necessary, and not always a sign of a milestone. It feels like the same sentiment as only wanting therapy when you are sad, rather than seeing it as a frequent, recurring skill. If a student with disabilities can agree with their caretaker and their teacher that a general education classroom is the best setting for

them, I fully support them in aiming for that goal in those re-evaluations. But I fear that applying that goal to each and every student with disability is a rather capitalistic, hustle-culture ideology. Because if a student with a disability finds that they never make it past Tier II in the Continuum, will they be seen as a failure? I hope not.

I'd also like to bring up something that I've heard before and even cited before early in my teaching career. If we have a preference and goal towards putting students with disabilities in the classroom, we must rely on our teachers to expand and scaffold their lessons so they are accessible to everyone. Which is the importance of this class in particular! However, the video of the Empowering Fe Fe's in Chicago showed that we have a long way to go. Nearly every single young woman had a story about a teacher who disarmed them and made them feel less than. I do often hear sentiments from not-disabled people, especially teachers, along the lines of "I am not licensed to deal with this" or, more crudely put, "it's out of my paygrade." I don't believe that is untrue. What I do believe is that teachers desperately need to be paid more in order to continue to develop and truly nurture their students. Most of this information is inaccessible to teachers in the current system. It is important to recognize how much weight teachers are holding, especially when they are so impactful in all of their students' lives, including those with disabilities. That said, the more we strive to put students with disabilities in less restrictive environments without considering the students' true goals, comfort levels, and what success may mean to them, the more we may be overwhelming teachers in general education spaces.

### **Application**

The hypothetical case of Joe Baselovich is not a unique one, especially in Chicago Public Schools. Students are often passed to the next grade before they truly have the skills to succeed along with their peers. That said, I am of three opinions:

Perhaps because this is so common, my instinct was to place Joe in a Level 1 General education classroom. As his teacher, I would scaffold the reading and writing to cater to his skills and place him with other classmates he felt the most comfortable with. Most importantly, for his emotional responses, I would grant him either some time in a “calm down corner,” or a special hall pass. Some of the students in my current school have relationships with one of the counselors, and when overwhelmed will take a pass to go visit them for 10 or more minutes, depending on the gravity of the situation. I believe that, by giving the student the option to leave the classroom, the feeling of being trapped by the class will gradually diminish, especially if the teacher can have frequent communication with the counselor or aide that student is going to visit. Sometimes, a student, especially a young one, just needs to cool down before coming back to work.

I can also vouch for a Level II environment. Specifically, I believe a co-teacher could be useful to give Joe some more reading attention, and also to help mitigate tensions when he becomes frustrated. Those are the largest benefits to having a special education teacher, and totally depends on the funds of the school and the population of the rest of the class. I imagine a sensitive student like Joe may feel called out if he is the only student that has extra, or different, homework from the other students. But if there are other students with dyslexia or different disabilities, it could be helpful to group them together occasionally.

Lastly, I can also see Level III environment with part of Joe’s schedule in the special education room. This, however, feels very drastic to me. I do not see Joe’s situation as very dire, but if his caretakers are completely concerned about his reading level perhaps he could receive some intensive tutoring. At the 6th grade level, some students are already seeing different teachers for different periods, so it is unlikely that being in a different environment from his classmates will

disrupt him since it will be seen as a “different period” from his peers. In such a case where the 6th grade class does spend the whole day together, there may be some social stunting from removing Joe from the rest of his classmates, which is why I do not recommend this option as the first.

When we are considering the main goal of least restrictive environment is to keep the student in general education classrooms as much as possible, I think it is difficult to *not* put a student in a Level I environment if they are not actively harming themselves or others, and able to retain any amount of information. That, however, is also why it's important to garner as much information as possible and to consider the true needs and intentions of the student. Joe is a preteen who is going through many frustrations, but ultimately will be better off if he can socialize with others his age. If he can learn how to overcome his struggles among friends, he will benefit much more than doing it alone.