How do students feel about being in special education classrooms?

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This has not been studied a great deal, but a PhD dissertation, written in 2000, entitled **Children's Perceptions and Attitudes about Special Education** concluded the following:

> *Through a qualitative analysis of the interview data, eight themes emerged, the most salient of which showed that the participants had an inadequate understanding of special education policies and procedures and perceived that they were excluded and victimized for receiving special education support. The stigmatizing experiences triggered sad and angry feelings and many students longed to be more included and integrated.*

Another 2011 paper, which evaluated whether self-contained classes deliver on their promises, quotes student Victor, who states:

> Please know that self-deadening places are hard places to make progress and learn stuff. They don't have people wanting you to really learn anything except: person, place or things... nouns I know. That's my take. But I'm just one person. I know lots of people who love those rooms. More often they just play games, like Uno... A school should be what we all love. But my experiences about broke my freaking soul.

Victor is described in the paper as a student "who was educated in a self-contained classroom for much of his life and was asked to share his impressions of [these] classrooms. He called them 'self-deadening places' and spoke of the limited educational expectations he felt."

Our observations similarly lead us to conclude these classrooms are low expectation environments, particularly for students identified as developmentally disabled or intellectually disabled. Rather than the "most enabling" environments, as they are often described, they are disabling beyond the actual

disability.

It does not surprise us that some students or families would love these spaces - students lives *may be* very pleasant and enjoyable, depending on the program; while at the same time, for students with intellectual disabilities, the programs are largely unencumbered by the idea of "growth mindset", because no one expects very much of them as learners. These students are by definition, determined to have an inability or limited ability to profit from an education either at all or within the regular classroom: these base line concepts are fully embedded into the definition of students who are "exceptional" on the basis of "mild intellectual disability" or "developmental disability". Several years ago the province was looking to update these definitions, but in the end, the initiative went no where.

Special education classrooms can often, though not always, ensure parents do not get frequent calls about their students needing to be picked up or kept home. At the same time, a concentration of students with high needs in one classroom may mean that students with disabilities may be disproportionately impacted by aggression, even if they themselves are not particularly aggressive.

For some families in special education schools, parents reflect on the benefits they observe, including community they immediately develop, and the security they may feel that their children have specialized staff and supports. This feeling is not universally shared amongst the parents of complex-needs children, many of whom are represented in IAO. Some of our families started in these settings and left, feeling their children were being held back, were treated as less capable than they actually were or are, and/or that their children lost opportunities they would have had if they were in the regular classroom.

Ultimately, while segregated sites *may* make the day-to-day experience a happy one for some students, and easier for their families, it does nothing for them in the longer-run when school is over: their children have no meaningful engagement with work or community. Given the near universally poor outcomes for our most marginalized students, it is a wonder that special education classrooms persist as a dominant model in special education at all.