What are special education classrooms like?

This will vary year to year, teacher to teacher, and school to school. One certainty about special education classrooms is the student to teacher ratio and the automatic assignment of one or more education assistants. Another certainty for students with intellectual disabilities or developmental disabilities, is that the programming is usually “life skills alternative curriculum” as early as grade 4; and individual education plans are the same or similar for all students in the classroom. Beyond this, very little is reliable because of the high concentration of needs in the classroom which can change each year.

A January 2020 paper, Alternate Curricula as a Barrier to Inclusive Education for students with Intellectual Disabilities, explored the impacts of alternative curriula on students with intellectual disabilities. The authors concluded that the default curriculum for all students should be the general education curriclum, that is the approved government curriculum. Alternative curricula was found to be a barrier to inclusive education, with separate curricula leading to separate spaces. Ultimately, the long-term implications are reliably that these students "continue to follow the trajectory of dependence and isolation established throughout their schooling experiences."

In terms of the actual classroom experience, this 2011 research paper to find out more about whether special education classrooms deliver. A main conclusion was the following:

> The findings of this study suggest that the purported rationale for self-contained special education in the literature - issues of community, distraction-free environments, specialized curriculum/instruction, and behavioral supports - were not present in the six observed self-contained settings.

Finally, it is common that students in these classrooms are dismissed from school earlier than their typical peers, so they receive less “instruction”.

In sum, the research indicates special education classrooms can be difficult places without any long-term benefits.