

**Making 37 ½ Minutes Count: Teaching Learning-Disabled**

**Middle School Students in a Pull-Out Program**

**Meet the Students**

I would like to introduce you to five of my eighth grade students. Joseph, 15½ years old, repeated two grades in elementary school. None of his teachers report that he is a behavior problem but he does minimal class work and practically no homework. His reading skill and math skills are within two years of his grade level, but he goes through periods of depression in which he does not seem to care whether he succeeds in school or not.

Daniel just turned 17; he has repeated three grades- most recently the eighth. He speaks fluent English and Spanish, is personable, and craves individual attention from teachers whether it is positive or negative. He is removed from class by teachers for disruptive behavior on an almost daily basis. He rarely has a pen or pencil and does very little classwork. If he does do homework, he loses it or forgets to turn it in. His teachers' comments have been identical for the past six years: "Daniel has the potential to perform at grade level; however, his disruptive behavior interferes with his ability to stay focused and complete classroom assignments."

Deon is 15 – he repeated the seventh grade. Evaluations state he has borderline intelligence and extremely poor reading and writing skills. He has a wonderful smile and can work steadily and conscientiously at times. His moods dictate his ability to work, and he is frequently removed from class. One teacher explained, "Deon walks into my class late, gets off to a slow start copying notes, becomes distracted, and starts talking and disturbing the others. Finally, I tell him to leave." Deon says he is distracted by large numbers of students but refuses to go to a smaller special education classroom. "Teachers think I'm dumb, but I'm not! I don't need special ed."

Juan and Carl have never repeated any grade. Juan's grades waver between passing and failing. He is bilingual, very quiet, and very polite. He constantly smiles and prefers living life below the radar, but he will ask for help when he needs it. He comes to school with supplies but his homework is often incomplete. Carl is also very quiet but in an unsettling way. Last year he was polite but painfully shy. I gradually developed a strong working relationship with him. In a soft voice, he would call me over to proudly show off his completed work and good grades. This year the shyness has turned into a brooding anger. He walks away when I approach him, refuses to complete most homework and class work, and has been involved in several serious behavioral incidents. Carl is usually rude or silly when I speak to him, but two or three times, when he asked me for help, his former sweet personality has made an appearance.

**My Questions are:**

I am a special education resource room teacher. I have 45 minutes a day to work with these students. This time includes travel to and from their classrooms. There is no common preparation time to meet with the classroom teachers. There are no support materials and no professional training available from the school. How do I serve these students? How do I prepare them for high school? Does teaching learning disabled students in a pull-out program such conditions work?

**The Research says:**

Students diagnosed with learning disabilities have been educated in part-time resource rooms or in full-time self-contained special education classes since the 1970's. Public Law 94-142 required that all children receive an appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. The New York City Board of Education created at least one resource room in each school. This is supposed to be a full size or half size classroom in which a qualified teacher worked with students one to two periods a day in groups of no more than five.

Each child designated as in need of special education has an individual educational plan (IEP) which legally mandates the types of services he receives and state specific annual goals and objectives for each service. In 1994 the board arbitrarily raised the size of special education groups to eight students. Resource room teachers were not allow to alter the group size on the basis of individual or group needs. Resource room teachers were told to combine students from different classes and different grades to form groups reaching their maximum size. However, other service providers (speech teachers, therapists, counselors) were able to determine the size of their groups and never had to go above five students.

As school space became limited at the end of 90's, resource room teachers began losing their classrooms. Two or three teachers were given one room to share; closets became classrooms; some teachers were just given the hallway or told to find a room no one was using for that period. Obviously, none of these were ideal places to work with highly active, distractible children.

In 1999, a new model was introduced: **collaborative** team teaching as a form of inclusion. In this model, a general education teacher and special education teacher teach a general education class that also includes a number of special education students. These teachers work full-time together and receive extra salary for collaborative planning time. The students are integrated and more space is saved.

If this model works, why not let resource room teachers push-in part time to see the students they served in their regular classes? Instruction is not disrupted and the resource room teachers (now renamed SETSS teachers) do not need any space at all. However, no collaborative planning time is provided. Moreover, resource room teachers work with students in as many as twelve different classes with twelve different teachers. If students are seen from two or three different classes during the same period, the push-in model is impossible to implement.

Meanwhile, principals and teachers were pressured to use the push-in model by being told that research indicates that push-in (inclusive) instruction yields far better results than pull-out programs. Special education supervisors who had worked in the schools to insure that students were being properly served were eliminated when the mayor assumed control of the schools in 2003. The principals, most of whom had no background or training in special education, took on the supervisors' responsibilities.

I found research that compared both models, but none of the studies replicated the conditions under which I taught. In an article in Exceptional Children, Patricia Rea et. al (2002) investigated the relationship between placement of students with learning disabilities in inclusive and pullout special education programs and their academic outcomes. The study compared two middle school programs in a small, suburban school district and found that students in the inclusive model achieved better subject grades, higher scores on standardized tests, and had better attendance. However, teachers in these schools taught four periods a day and had two periods set aside for individual and collaborative planning. During team planning, teachers discussed curriculum concerns, classroom management, instructional strategies and student progress. During individual planning, co-teachers also met frequently to plan together. Co-teaching took a variety of forms and students were grouped heterogeneously. This is not my reality.

### **Welcome to My World**

I teach in an urban elementary school in a 110-year-old building in which two other schools are currently housed. The student population is 68% Latino and 24% African American. Seventy-nine percent of the students are eligible for free lunch. Although I am officially assigned to the elementary school, I have provided resource room services to seventh and eighth grade students in the junior high school for the past four years. The junior high school has 185 students and is run by a director with a staff of nine teachers. I have a small room (6' by 7') on the first floor; the junior

high school is on the fifth floor. These floors are separated by eight very long staircases. There is no elevator. For the first three years, I arranged my schedule to push-into classes taught by teachers with strong management skills. This allowed me to work with my students without becoming a distraction to the others. With two of the English teachers and one math teacher, I was able to collaborate and team-teach using a variety of models.

Last year, a new director took over the administration of the junior high school and five of the teachers left. Classroom behavior was out of control, and I was unable to effectively engage the attention of my students. The director encouraged me to pull students out of class, but I did not want to waste instructional time on the eight-staircase commute. I taught my students in the hallway or in an empty classroom if one was available. It was not the ideal situation, but I was able to maximize the instructional time.

This September, the director stated that she wished me to bring the students downstairs to my little room. She also insisted that I should accompany them back and forth to their classrooms, since most of them could not be relied on to travel quickly and quietly by themselves. I began the year with two groups – four seventh graders and five eighth graders- whom I served one period each in the afternoon. Eight to ten minutes of each period was spent climbing stairs, but the schedule was manageable.

Then the numbers began to grow. By December, I needed to see six seventh graders and nine eighth graders daily. According to special education mandates, I was to provide services to eight students at once. Yet, my classroom (a former closet) could only fit five students. There was no larger space regularly available for me to see them. There was no extra time in my schedule to divide them up into smaller groups, since I also served 15 elementary school students and team-taught the fourth grade for one period daily. Even if I found the space, I could give not each student the individual attention he required in a group that was 60% larger than originally intended.

The director of the junior high school told me it was up to the principal to provide me with a larger teaching space; there was nothing she could do to help. The principal sympathized with me and said he would phone a supervisor and get back to me with a response. Days and weeks passed with no change.

Meanwhile I began to push-into class to see my nine eighth graders. It was very difficult to teach. The noise and acting out behavior in some classes made it impossible for my students or me to concentrate. In other classes, the teaching style or room arrangement made it difficult for me to work with my students without distracting the teacher and the rest of the class. Moreover, I could not locate some of my students since they were in the bathroom, at the nurse, or in the office (which meant in trouble) for most of the period. I pulled out the ones I could find in small groups, but this meant I could not provide the mandated amount of support for all of them. At night, I went to sleep dreaming of schedules, students and classrooms as pieces of a puzzle that could not fit because the frame was not big enough. Then the new teacher's contract was ratified and the puzzle frame expanded. A period of 37 ½ minutes of instruction was added for four days a week.

### **37½ Minutes Can Mean a Heck of a Lot**

Beginning in February, teachers would be required to provide four periods of extended day instruction per week. My elementary school's day would run from 8:30 to 3:27 ½; the junior high school's day would run from 8:00 to 2:57 ½. I rearranged my schedule to see a group of eighth graders on Monday through Thursday from 8:00 to 8:45, which included time to escort them up the eight staircases and settle them in class. On Friday, I would push-into their math class for one period after lunch. The remaining junior high school students would be seen in two groups in the afternoon. I deliberately choose my five most challenging students for the 8:00 A.M. group. By seeing them first period I predicted they would be more focused and have no opportunity to

disappear to the bathroom, nurse, or office. They would come straight to my first floor classroom as soon as they entered the building, which would give them additional instructional time. I would review homework assignments due and give them a calm, serious and pleasant start to the day. This was my plan.

### **Putting My Plan into Practice**

My principal graciously approved my new schedule, although this meant my hours would differ from the rest of the elementary school staff and I would not be available for his extended day program. I excitedly presented my revised schedule to the junior high school director and science teacher who both told me it would not work. They said, "Very few students come to school on time- definitely not the ones you have chosen. It really isn't a good time to see them." My reply was, "Your school has always started at 8:00; the students have English, Math, or Social Studies first period depending on the day of the week. If they are not here, it's my job to get them here." I knew I needed to do everything in my power to make sure that they came to school on time.

I then conducted a group interview with the five chosen students. My questions were:

How do you feel about receiving resource room services?

Do you prefer to receive services in the classroom or in a small group? Why?

Do you think receiving services first period will help you do better in school?

This is the third year I have worked with Joseph, Daniel, and Deon. Joseph is sometimes very self-conscious when I work with him in class. He stated, "I feel like I am singled out and my mother's looking over my shoulder to make sure I did everything O.K." He wants to continue to receive resource room services because, "You explain things the teachers don't have time to explain to me and you help me whenever I need it." Deon and Daniel wanted resource room services but were ambivalent about whether they wanted services in or out of the classroom.

Daniel commented, “You embarrass me if you say you are going to call my family because I’m goofing around. The other kids tease me and say rude things about you. But I really like it when you give me extra help. I can stay focused and get my work done.” I worked regularly with Carl last year in math class. The teacher had excellent control of the class, and Carl’s grade average rose from the 60’s to the 80’s. However, the teacher left the school and Carl usually refused services in class. In the interview he stated, “I don’t need too much help, but I’ll come.” Juan smiled and stated, “I want to come downstairs for help. I can do better if the other kids don’t see you helping me. But I’m not a morning person.” None of them was happy about the 8:00 A.M. start despite the advantages of a good start to the day and less walking on the stairs.

After analyzing my notes from the interviews, I concluded that push-in teaching was beneficial at least once a week so I could gain a better understanding of the classwork, the strategies the teachers used, and the challenges the students faced in completing assignments in cooperative groups (which were not always so cooperative). However, my students could concentrate much better in my quiet little room without the constant threat of teasing and other inappropriate behavior from their classmates. In order to get them to school on time and ready to work, I needed parent cooperation. I also needed to stay in touch with the classroom teacher daily to review curriculum, strategies, and assignments.

### **The Power of Parents**

The new schedule began on Monday, February 6th. The evening of Superbowl Sunday was an excellent time to contact families; every parent answered the phone and quickly assured me his or her child would be at school on time the next day. That morning I waited expectantly at my door. At 8:05, the first three students grimly stalked in; by 8:15, all five were present. When I checked for a completed homework assignment in math, I found out none of them had even attempted to do it



(Joseph and Deon insisted there was no homework). Only one had something to write with and two had paper or a notebook.

Working with my students first period allowed me to view them from a new perspective. In the afternoon, I had mainly concentrated on classwork. By then they had borrowed or stolen paper, pencils, and pens. Now I realized how unprepared each of them was for school. They rarely copied down or brought home homework assignments; if they did they usually lost them. The students (with the exception of Juan) did not bring supplies; their book bags had old notes, crumpled tests, and sports gear. The students did bring I-pods, cell phones, gum, junk food, and beautifully kept baseball caps. They did take time to groom themselves and use a variety of men's colognes, which were overpowering in my little room. They borrowed my supplies consistently and continued to invent new excuses for what they were missing.

In order to motivate the students to pay more attention to their schoolwork, I began to call all families one to three times per week to inform them of their child's attendance, arrival time, preparation for school, current homework assignments, and weekly progress. I kept records of the dates and subjects of these calls in order to track their effects. The tone and content was kept as positive as possible concentrating on what each student needed to do and how the parent/guardian could help him. I had the benefit of working at Dial-a-Teacher, a homework help phone service, four days a week. Not only could I call the families but both the families and students could contact me anytime between 4:00 and 7:00. My students could get individual help with their homework or classwork over the phone; I had the books and assignments ready when they called.

Each student had a unique family situation, which yielded different results. Daniel's father had died six years ago which affected him deeply. He is being raised by his mother (who only speaks Spanish), his older brother and an older sister. Both siblings were pleasant and cooperative

whenever I called, although I did not have much good news to report. Daniel said he got in trouble whenever I called but his tone of voice and expression made me think he was secretly glad I did so. Often he answered the phone himself and would tell me who was available to speak to me. Then in April and May Daniel began calling me at Dial-a-Teacher on a daily basis. Every morning he repeatedly asked me what time I would be available after school and he would sometimes call me two or three times an evening. He sometimes asked for homework help, but at others times he just wanted to talk about his schoolwork in general. By listening carefully, I learned his family has a large number of pets whom he cares for, he baby-sits regularly for his four year old niece, and the quality of his spoken Spanish is excellent. Despite his failings as a student, Daniel is a mature and responsible member of his family.

Deon is being raised by a mother and step-father. Deon's mother has always shown concern about his school performance so I had developed a relationship with her over the past two years. In September Deonza placed himself in a self-contained special education class but abruptly left in November. His mother spoke of sending him to a boarding school for high school that would meet his needs. When I began to call, she was ambivalent in her reactions to my reports of his lateness, behavioral difficulties throughout the day, and missing homework. Deon would bend the truth to support his actions and I needed to patiently explain the real situation. Overall the phone calls yielded an improvement in attendance, punctuality, and work output.

Joseph is raised by a single mother who has always been very supportive of my efforts. At a fall parent conference, she had cried while speaking of the challenges of raising Joseph alone. She fears he will end up in trouble like his father. I had difficulty reaching her directly through her cell or home phone, but I was able to leave detailed messages. I noted a consistent improvement in punctuality and concentration on the days after I had left messages. Joseph stated his mother received the messages and I confirmed this with her on later dates.

Juan is raised by a single mother who speaks only Spanish. I had met her twice (once with a translator). She is a deeply caring woman who has great respect for school and teachers. My phone calls were messages sent via Joel's fourth grade sister. These were mainly about his lateness and occasional missing homework; his sister gleefully translated reports about her big brother. Sometimes I spoke to Juan's mother directly; I would cry, "Ocho horas!" and she would laugh, because she knew I meant Joel needed to get to school at 8:00. "Ocho horas!" became my catch phrase anytime I met Juan in the hallway or in class.

Carl is raised by a single mother; his brother graduated from our school the previous year. Carl's mother was the most difficult to reach. The phone numbers were usually disconnected or out of service; neither the director nor I was able to obtain a consistently working number. Carl either would not or could not give us one; letters sent home yielded no response. I did speak to Carl's mother by phone a total of four times over six months. I mentioned his changed attitude, his refusal to receive my services, and his failing grades. She promised to talk with him, but I saw no results. Carl showed up at my room about once every two weeks. When he did come he sat silently and refused to participate except on two occasions when he worked beautifully. I spoke to him individually on those days and offered him extra help. I could see how unhappy he was; but I could not force him to open up. In May and June, Carl did not come at all, and shied away from me every time I approached him in class.

In analyzing my phone records, I saw the more frequently I called parents the better results I had in attendance, punctuality, attitude, and work output. It was not always easy for me to call; I felt that I was overdoing it at times and the family members would become annoyed and resistant. But I knew as a parent what it was like to have a child who had given up on school and how frustrating it was to contact his teachers - particularly in middle school. These parents deserved a clear picture of what their children were doing and not doing at school each day.

No parent or sibling ever called me at Dial-a-Teacher although I continually reminded them of my phone number and hours. Joseph did call twice for homework help. My best success was Daniel who called regularly. Unfortunately he rarely turned any of his homework in and continued to fail all of his subjects. Daniel wanted my individual time and attention; homework help did not really matter to him.

### Goal-Setting

Once I had the students in the room I was puzzled as to where to begin. Deon needed (and still needs) an intensive phonics program, but the program I was given needed to be taught individually or to a small group of students with similar needs. The other boys did not have significant decoding problems so it was not possible to give Deon the help he needed.

However, all of the students were having difficulty passing one or more subjects. They were either failing or receiving low grades (65-70). In December I had met with each student to review his current progress report and help him set goals (grades that he realistically thought he could earn) and identify action plans to achieve these goals. As an example, these were Joseph's goals:

Figure 1: Joseph's Goals

Subject	Current Grade	Desired Grade	Action Plan
English	95	95	Continue maintaining a high average.
Social Studies	55	75	Do homework consistently. Study for the tests. Review the morning of the test.
Math	55	75	Do homework consistently. Take extra time to complete tests and check work.
Science	75	80	Change seat to improve behavior. Do homework consistently.

By February there was little evidence that any of the students had followed their plans. In order to correct this, I formed an action plan of my own. This plan could not be completely executed in the limited time I had with the students; but I decided to concentrate on the subjects taught by teachers with whom I could communicate most consistently. I developed an action plan for myself (see Figure 2).

### **Chasing Classroom Teachers**

There was no common planning time for me to meet with any of the junior high school teachers. Since I was officially assigned to the elementary school, my lunch period was different and my preparation (planning) period was scheduled during the junior high school's extended day program. I could only meet with the teachers during class time or for a few seconds as we passed each other in the hallway. I gave each teacher my phone numbers (work and home) and e-mail address. I asked them to put any instructional materials or incomplete student work in my school mailbox. None of the teachers contacted me using these means. The only way I stayed connected was by visiting the classrooms and waiting for teachers in the cafeteria or entryway at times I knew they were picking up students.

The math teacher, Mr. B., was the most communicative. I found his assignments (both classwork and homework) posted on the chalkboard daily. He gave me copies of the textbook, workbook, tests, worksheets, as well as a graphing calculator which my students shared. He also provided students' progress reports which listed grades on tests, quizzes, and assignments. He took time to answer my questions concerning any of the material. Mr. B. was willing to make accommodations for my students, but he did not lower his expectations. Therefore, I was able to clearly explain to the students what they needed to do and I was able to adapt the curriculum to accommodate their learning styles. For these reasons, I spent 60% of my instructional time with the students focusing on mathematics.

**Figure 2: My Action Plan**

Topics/ Concepts/ Big Ideas	Standards Math/Literacy	Assessments/ Evidence of Mastery/Products	Common Focus Skills	Common Strategies	Common Learning Activities
ELA :  Reader's Workshop	Skim texts to get overview of content  Show understanding of their reading in writing and classroom discussion	Reading Logs  Written responses to literature  Book Club discussion	Identify genre and its key elements  Organizing information  Recording responses in a coherent manner	Group discussion with student discussion leaders  Evaluating responses in reader's notebook  Reading conference	Book Club Discussion  Individual Reading Time  Writing responses in reader's notebook
Math:  Investigations in Impact Math In Algebra and Trigonometry  Review of Geometry	Describe and represent functions using tables, graphs, and equations	Completion of exercises in Impact Textbook and Skill Intervention  Tests, quizzes  Portfolio projects	Identifying and solving for single variables  Graphing slope equations	Explanation and application of rules  Demonstration with visuals and manipulatives as indicated	Direct teaching: taking notes as needed  Scaffolding exercises to assist students in completing them – working toward independence
Social Studies:  U.S. History	Study of U.S. history from 1876 to Present  Locate information in primary and secondary sources to develop and prove a thematic statement	Completion of daily homework assignments and class assignments  Tests and quizzes  Portfolio projects	Skim texts to get an overview or locate specific information  Identify main ideas in print and non-print sources	Skim questions for key words  Highlight answers in the text  Compare/contrast information from a variety of primary and secondary sources	Guided/Shared reading of text and notes  Guided class discussion  Writing activities as adapted from the teacher's assignments.
Science:  Earth Science (with review of Life Science)	Demonstrate characteristics of the Earth's air, water, and land  Identify parts and functions of body systems	Class assignments  Class notes  Tests and quizzes  Exit Project	Ability to skim texts to get an overview or locate specific information	Highlighting and using Post-Its to identify key parts of the text.  Using graphic organizers to assist in note- taking	Guided /Shared reading of text and notes  Completion of assignments, tests, and projects

English and Social Studies were taught by the same teacher, Ms. S. She had strong classroom management skills (she was a former army officer) which made it easier for me to push-into the class on occasion to assist the students or observe instruction. She was extremely pleasant to work with and sincerely wanted to help my students, but she was unable to clearly tell me their progress or the work they needed to complete. She would often hand me a set of worksheets or a xeroxed article in Social studies that did not follow any specific scope or sequence and varied greatly in levels of readability. The students did not have their own textbooks, but I was given one to use as a reference. In mid-March, Ms. S. left for military duty followed by maternity leave and was replaced by another teacher, Ms. T. She was also very pleasant and willing to work with me but equally vague in her student expectations and curriculum planning. Ms. T. had difficulty with classroom management so I was unable to push-in anymore. I spent 30% of my time on English and Social Studies instruction. In May, I used the textbook and test samples and my own primary source material to prepare the students for the June standardized test on United States history. All students present took careful notes and Juan requested extra individual help.

Science instruction was my biggest challenge. The teacher, Ms. N was either out of the room or giving a lecture 90% of the time I visited her classroom. When I did speak to her, she would hand me a large pile of assignment sheets, project sheets, and incomplete tests with the comment, "Joseph does nothing. Daniel does nothing. Deon does nothing. Why should I waste my time with them when I have 20 other students who want to learn?" I offered several ways I could help the students improve their performance if she could explain to me what assignments were due and when. Both the students and I were confused by her class notes. Eighth grade is supposed to study earth science but in February, Ms. N. switched over to topics in life science. She explained that she wanted to prepare the students for the standardized test in May which would cover both

curriculums. Ms. N. gave me a life science textbook; the students did not have textbooks in either subject, only class notes. Using my husband who is a science teacher as a resource, I found my own materials and spent several sessions reviewing for test. Overall I spent 10% of my instructional time on science.

After analyzing my lesson plans and anecdotal records, I realized my students' potential to succeed in school was directly related to three factors: the classroom teacher's ability to communicate clear expectations, the teacher's belief that these students could succeed, and the teacher's willingness to work with me to help the students meet these expectations. I could encourage, coax, coach, coddle, badger, and bully the students into improving their class performance, but unless the classroom teacher worked with me, I had little chance of making a significant difference.

### **Saying Goodbye**

In June I met with David, Deonza, Joel, and John to discuss the benefits and drawbacks of the 8:00 A.M. pull-out session. None of them liked coming to school on time, but all of them agreed that I gave them more help by seeing them in my little room first period.

**Daniel:** It's better than before because when you use to come into class we would never pay attention to you. Down here we have to pay attention to you because you get on top of all of us.

**Deon:** In the morning I like being in the little room because there is less distraction. I can't concentrate with a lot of kids making noise and I get all wack.

**Juan:** I like coming here in the morning instead of going upstairs. It's better because you are by yourself.

**Joseph:** You help me in math – 100%. I also got my English essays done, because Joel and I were able to do peer editing. In high school, I'd like to go to a separate room, because I want to keep a low profile.



Grade-wise the 8:00 pull-out session made a positive difference for some students. Deon's math average increased from 56% in the third quarter to 70% in the fourth quarter. His English and Social Studies teacher reported that he was consistently handing in assignments and maintaining a 75% average in both subjects.

Daniel's math average rose from a 5.2% in the first quarter to a 56% in the third quarter but plummeted to 0% in the fourth. He completed some assignment but did not turn them in. He had the best overall attendance in my program, but it was not reflected in his grades in any of the subjects. In a private interview, Daniel revealed that at seventeen he had no clear ideas about his future. He is somewhat interested in getting part-time job, but he has never had one or even applied for one.

Joseph's math average rose from a 32% in the first and second quarters to a 63.9% in the third and fourth quarters. He proudly visited me after school in the second week of June to tell me he was passing all his subjects and would not need to go to summer school. Joseph is slated to attend Brooklyn Automotive High School which will give him an academic and vocational education.

Juan's math average fell from a 65.6% in the first quarter to a 43.5% in the fourth quarter. However, he was able to complete enough assignments in the last few weeks to pass the class. He had missing assignments and inconsistent test grades. Although Juan's attendance in my program was consistently high, he would not ask questions or volunteer answers unless I worked with him alone in the room. He needed more individual instructional time from me to make a real difference.

Carl's math average fell from a 79.2% in the first quarter to a 56.3% in the fourth quarter. He was able to approach passing grades in math without my help but he failed English and Social Studies because he did not turn in any assignments.

June 26, 2006 was graduation day. Deon, Joseph, and Juan were beaming in their caps and gowns. Their families proudly took pictures. Daniel and Carl did not graduate. They will go to summer school. If they do not pass, they will repeat eighth grade.

### **The Verdict**

My conclusions did not quite fit my predictions. By providing services to these students in a first period pull-out program, I was able to see them more consistently and give them better quality instruction than when I pushed-in to the classroom in the afternoon. In the morning, the students were calmer and unlikely to be found wandering around the school. However, they were also sleepier, moodier, and just as unprepared and difficult to motivate as they were in the afternoon.

Considering the disabilities and the histories of academic struggle, resource room services for 45 minutes daily in a group of up to eight students do not nearly begin to address these students' needs. Pull-out services under the current conditions were more effective than push-in services, but neither made a significant difference. The students who graduated are not prepared for high school work and the students who failed will not get the services they need in summer school. None of the students have any clear idea of what their academic futures hold.

The students who were held back two to three times have nearly reached adult age but are going to school with students in their early teens. When they were treated as children they were rightfully resentful but they did nothing to take responsibility for their learning. Moreover, they did not try to succeed in the outside world. When I suggested that Daniel get a job, he stated he could easily work at Starbucks but did not need the money that badly. He does not picture himself succeeding in high school; he only knows he wants to get out of middle school.

If these students complete high school, they will be twenty or twenty one years old. There are no programs which allow them to complete credits in the summer in order to graduate earlier. The programs for older student take only the students that are closest to successfully graduating;

struggling students who are repeatedly retained are encouraged to pursue and Graduated Equivalency Diploma (G.E.D.) which is not of equal value to a Regents Diploma.

Each of the students lives with a single mother who cares deeply about him, but these parents do not have the knowledge or ability to get the educational services that their children require. Juan and Daniel's mothers are Spanish speaking; they are timid and hesitant when they do come to school. The mothers of Joseph, Deon, and Carl are juggling demanding jobs and other family concerns with the needs of their sons. Only Joseph and Deon have any contact with their fathers.

I chose to do my research on these students because they were the most challenging to instruct and the easiest to give up on. No one but myself held me accountable for giving them the instruction they needed. I tried to find people who cared: administrators, teachers, parents, and the students themselves. I think they all cared on some level but the problems were so complex it was easier to blame the system itself. We have to make the system work for the students. Together we have the power to do this.

### **Where do we go from here?**

- Resource room teachers must be allowed to determine the size of their teaching groups based on individual needs. If I could have seen Deon individually, I would have been able to teach him how to read which would have changed his life. Instead I was only able to help complete his work to get to the next grade which will be even more frustrating for him. The Department of Education gives me the materials, but it does not provide the time. However other students work well in groups of three or five. Speech teachers, counselors, and therapists determine the student's group size. Resource room teachers must have the same prerogative.

- All teachers and students deserve adequate work space. Reconverted closets and hallways are not environments that promote good instruction. Students need personal space to stretch, move, and think. Crowding students who have difficulty focusing into cramped areas aggravates their learning difficulties.
- Collaborative planning time must be scheduled in the school day for all teachers who share students. Cohesive instruction can only be given if teachers have time to plan lessons together and make adaptations for special needs students.
- Special education supervisors should be reinstated in the school buildings to insure that students are actually receiving the services that are mandated and the quality of instruction they deserve. Principals and directors do not have the education and training required to assume this responsibility.