Impact of Student Motivation, Achievement, and Success in a Self-contained Special Education Classroom

By Christine Lancaster

RATIONALE

I teach a self-contained special education class for first through fourth grade students who have severe to profound learning disabilities. For students to be enrolled in my class, they have to have been unsuccessful in the general education classroom. Typically, their problems begin in kindergarten and, despite modifications and accommodations made along the way, by the end of first grade or the beginning of second grade, these students have fallen behind. They are used to not being able to do the work. They have stopped seeing themselves as learners and have developed strategies for avoiding work. They can appear withdrawn, have behavior issues, and/or can be inattentive. One student said to me on his first day in my room, "I don't read. I'll go play." Even though they are younger than eight years old, they see themselves as failures in the classroom.

After being in my classroom for a short time, I see students blossom. Those who before did not complete any homework at home, begin doing so. Children, who did not previously participate, begin to be active participants. Students who used to hide under the table when it was time to listen to a story now sit attentively on the rug during the read-aloud. Instead of flipping pages aimlessly in the book, children begin looking at the words and figure out the story from the words and the pictures. Instead of being filled with words that are copied down—even when the student doesn't know what they say, journals begin to be filled with words that have been sounded out. As these children begin to meet with success, they change.

Mine is a large, urban district where the push is towards inclusion; that is, providing remediation within the context of the regular classroom. The district is moving away from self-

contained special education classrooms like mine. I became interested in taking a look at how the experience of success impacts my students. This research has implications for my school, my district, and many other districts that are working to eliminate self-contained special education classrooms.

QUESTION

What happens when I establish a classroom environment where my first through fourth grade students with severe learning disabilities experience high levels of success?

CONTEXT

Shepard Elementary School, a pre-K-6 public school of approximately 650 students, is located a few blocks from the prestigious University of Chicago. Built in 1886, Shepard's three-story building and its playground take up one block on a tree-lined street in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago. It is a neighborhood school—any children who live within its boundaries can be enrolled at Shepard. Remaining vacancies are distributed through a lottery system directed by the Chicago Public Schools. There are three classes at each grade level. Special education programs at Shepard include two classrooms for students with severe learning disabilities, a hearing-impaired preschool, and support for hearing-impaired students of all grade levels. All students are included with the general education classes as appropriate. Shepard is a multi-racial/multi-ethnic school. Eight percent of the students are Limited English Proficient. The students are 57% African American, 18% Caucasian, 16% Asian, and 9% Latino; 34% of students receive free lunch.

My school has made its overall AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) benchmark each year. Based on statewide standardized testing, approximately 72% of the students met the standards in reading and math last year. The attendance rate is 95%. The principal has been with Shepard for

17 years and is very supportive of the staff. As an experienced special educator, the principal supports a variety of service delivery models for special education instruction, ranging from self-contained classrooms to full-inclusion classes.

My classroom has a different profile from the rest of the school. While most of the students at Shepard reside within the neighborhood, only two of my students live there. Six are bussed in because their home school is not able to meet their needs. Though 34% of Shepard students qualify for free lunch, 89% of the students in my class receive free lunch. All of my students are African-American. A third live in single parent homes. In all two parent homes, both parents work outside of the home. Mine is one of seven classrooms that serve severe to profound learning disabled students in the Chicago public elementary schools; it is one of two that serves first, second, and third graders. Our multidisciplinary program was developed to be comparable to private day schools in the Chicago area for students with learning disabilities.

I teach eight students language arts, math, and social studies. Everyone is included with the general education classes for team taught science classes. My classroom includes three fourth graders, two third graders, two second graders and one first grader. Two students are girls. For the first half of the year, we worked with a teacher's assistant for four periods of the day. Along with their services for learning disabilities, most students in my classroom also have language disorders so they receive speech and language services. Additionally, most students attend a weekly group focusing on social skills. In addition to the components of balanced literacy used throughout the school, we use a variety of multi-sensory reading programs (Wilson Reading System, 2002; the Lindamood Bell LiPS program—both scientifically-based reading systems).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004) offers a definition for learning

disabilities that is used in schools across the United States:

✳ "The term 'specific learning disability' means a disorder in one or more of the basic

psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written,

which disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write,

spell, or do mathematical calculations.

✳ Such term includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain

dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.

✳ Such term does not include a learning problem that is primarily the result of visual, hearing, or

motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural,

or economic disadvantage." (Cortiella, 2006)

Public Law 94-142 encourages districts to educate students in the least-restrictive environment

and has led to debates over the benefits and drawbacks of different educational placements for

students with learning disabilities. Least-restrictive environment is educational instruction in a

placement that encourages maximum interaction between disabled and non-disabled children at a

level appropriate to both (Baumel 2007). This can range from a student being in a regular

education class who receives support from a special education teacher in the classroom, to a

resource room model, to a self-contained special education classroom where a student is in a

separate class for most of the day. Elbaum (2002) found that students in less restrictive settings

have increased social acceptance, improved social skills, and higher self-esteem. In many

schools, when the IEP team decides the placement for a student, they are frequently guided by

such research.

In their longitudinal study, Chapman, Tunmer, and Prochnow (2000) examined the relationship between academic self-concept (how students thinks of themselves in academic settings—the extent to which they see themselves as learners) and readingrelated performance in early elementary school children. This study was based on earlier findings that academic self-concept develops in response to early learning experiences. That is, children's experiences with learning when they first begin school correspond to how they feel about themselves as learners. Students with poor pre-reading skills exhibited a negative academic self-concept. For example, those students who began school with poor phonological awareness and letter-name knowledge—not unlike many students with severe learning disabilities—were found to have a negative self-concept soon after they began school and this negative image remained relatively constant as the children progressed in school (Chapman et al., 2000). Additionally, Chapman et al. (2000) found academic self-concept predicted later reading performance. Among school-age children, it is estimated that 6% of students have specific learning disabilities in reading. Chapman and colleagues' research make it seem highly likely that selfconcept will have a major impact on these children and that the special education services that these students typically require should address the issue of self-concept.

Gottfried (1990) found academic intrinsic motivation to be related to academic achievement, IQ, and perception of competence. He also found that academic intrinsic motivation, at ages seven and eight, led to higher academic intrinsic motivation at age nine and in later elementary school years independent of achievement and IQ. Boersma, Chapman, and Battle (1979) and Elbaum and Vaughn (2003) found that there was no reliable association between self-concept and educational placement—selfcontained, resource, or inclusion. Moreover, Morovitz and Motta (1992) found that the self-esteem of students in self-contained classes is not significantly lower than that of non-learning disabled students in general education, even though self-contained students have greater difficulty in school than those in less-restrictive

placements. They also found that students in the self-contained class had self-esteem higher or equal to that of regular class students who are experiencing learning problems. Lazarus and Callahan (2000) looked at the attitudes toward reading among students in resource room settings and found that their positive attitudes equaled or exceeded the attitudes of low and average non-disabled students in the regular education classroom.

Social comparison theory suggests that students compare themselves to their peers in their class, and this may explain Morovitz and Motta's (1992) finding of high selfconcept in students in self-contained settings. It may also help to explain Butler and Marinov-Glassman's (1994) finding that children in self-contained classrooms compared themselves to others in their class as a reference group, not with their general education peers. This led to a strong, positive self-concept among children in the self-contained environment.

In addition to comparing themselves to academically similar peers in the self-contained classroom, children in these classrooms tend to receive more intensive remedial services which can lead to faster growth in academic achievement. That is, as the students' achievement levels rise, so do their self-concept and motivation (Boersma et al., 1979; Chapman et al., 2000; Elbaum & Vaughn, 2003; Forman, 1988; Gottfried, 1990). It seems that motivation, achievement, and self-concept are so intertwined that changes in one affect all three.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Between September 2006 and March 2007, I studied my students in an attempt to tease out how motivation, attitudes, and achievement interplay with each other in my self-contained, special education classroom. My data came from four sources: student work, observational and anecdotal notes, student surveys, and my teacher journal. I have focused my study on four boys—John, JJ, Detrell, and Jason— whose progress seemed typical for children in my class.

Student work consisted of writing samples from two students collected during our thrice-weekly writer's workshop. During writer's workshop, students participated in a mini-lesson, followed by independent work, conferencing time, and sharing with the class. I focused on changes in the number of words written, consonant sounds correctly represented, and sight words used and written correctly.

Observational and anecdotal notes were completed almost daily from December–March through observational checklists and note-taking sheets (see Appendices A and B). The observational checklist and anecdotal note sheets contained information that pertained to achievement, motivation, attitudes, and classroom habits by covering such areas as strategies used, book choices, independent reading behaviors, and progress with the Wilson Reading System (2002). By using these checklists, I was able to see changes in student attitudes (how they approached work by comments they made) and changes in achievement that were difficult to measure in more formal ways. Most important, this was a means to note instances of student success in our classroom and to track its impact.

A student survey (see Appendix C) was given once in January and once in March. The questions were developed to assess each student's motivations and attitudes towards school and our classroom. I wrote in my teacher journal after school approximately three times a week between October and March. I used the journal to reflect on the data gathered during the day and to synthesize my data.

Classroom Environment

We follow a pretty consistent morning routine in our classroom. I begin each morning by greeting my students at the door when they enter the room. As they unpack their bags and turn in their homework, we chat about their time since they left school. Next, they choose one or two books and settle in on the rug for DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) time. They can read

quietly with a friend. They can also use this time to read the Morning Message before we go over it as a group. The Morning Message is written on a dry erase board beside the rug. On it I post the date, the name of the student who will be first in line, our specials for the day, and any other important information about upcoming activities or activities recently completed. During DEAR time, I check everyone's homework, hold reading conferences, and practice sight words with individual students. After about thirty minutes, we move on to the Greeting—a varying set of activities all of which enable each student to be greeted by name and to greet another child by name. Next, we sit down for the Morning Message. We take turns reading the message, talking about what it says. Students are given opportunities to come up and circle different words in the message, look for different sounds or words, and correct mistakes in the message. Last, we read it together and address any questions children have about the day. Then, we move to writer's workshop.

This school year, we began using the *Writer's Workshop Model* for teaching writing. Specifically, we used Lucy Calkins' *Units of Study for Primary Writing: A Yearlong Curriculum* (2003). The workshop model is a five-stage process that begins with review of the previous session, which is followed first by a mini-lesson during which the goals for the day are introduced, then group/guided practice with the skill, independent writing (with conferencing from the teacher), and finally sharing writing. This model is easily individualized. The review in the beginning enables all students to begin at the same place. The mini-lesson focuses on one skill and seems to have a remarkable impact on my students. As I noted in my journal, Mini-lesson on stretching words to sound them out: Everyone was more successful at this than I predicted. It seemed to get kids on the right foot for working on their own too. This was highly successful before independent work and it seemed to work well! JJ stretched out superbowl to "sowpog" and back to "pad." He got more sounds correct than usual and didn't seem as frustrated. (2.20.07)

The guided practice gives struggling students a chance to practice before they try on their own, thus giving students support with new skills. And both the independent work and the sharing with the group give kids a chance to demonstrate their new skills.

Studying My Class

Using my teacher journal and my anecdotal notes, I quickly noticed that there were distinct differences between days which I described in my journal as "bad day," "frustrating," "difficult day," and days that were described as "wonderful." On bad days, the students began the day having problems. On mornings like these, a mood seemed to settle in over our classroom. Class participation dropped. Trying to get a class discussion started was often like pulling teeth. Some students would get that glazed-over look. Others would begin sniping at each other. When time for independent work came, some students seemed to plod along, not accomplishing much, while others would break down saying the work is too hard, and some would simply stare out the window. By contrast, a "good day" in my journal was one during which every student had something to share with the class, the discussions were animated, the kids got along, and they went right to work at independent work time. On these days, they seemed proud of their work, and both the quality and quantity of it increased.

I was puzzled by the contrast. As I studied my journal, it appeared to me that the difference in the days seemed to have something to do with the level of success the students felt at the start of the day. It seemed to me that when students met with failure early in the day, it affected the classroom atmosphere in a negative way. This led me to wonder what I could do to get us back on track when students felt they had failed, and to move smoothly through the rest of our morning. I began my inquiry by studying my journal and notes to see if I could identify what seemed to be causing bad days. I came up with four issues: district-mandated assessments, frequent absences and tardiness, problems on the playground before school began, and

incomplete homework. I then set about trying to find ways to handle each so that my students'
days would all become successful.

District-mandated Assessments

The district-mandated assessments seemed to be the most problematic activity that my class
encountered early in the day as is clear from the following journal entry after our first assessment
morning: …a super frustrating day for everyone today. The district-mandated Learning First
Assessment may have something to do with that. Another challenging task. Maybe this bad day
ties right into the high success classroom. Also— very frustrating to see all the
unsuccessfulness/failure at the beginning of the day. This may be something to continue to
watch. Perhaps that low success just permeated everything throughout the day. For instance,
Jason missed Friday (book fair and movie), John—missed Friday, did not do his homework, JJ—
had trouble on the playground (before school)—all started the day with very unsuccessful
activities. (12.11.06)

The assessments are pegged to grade level which means that each assessment is two to
three grade levels above the reading and math skills of my students. Despite their clear learning
disabilities, none of my students was considered so disabled as to qualify for an alternative
assessment. While I could modify the conditions of the assessment making it untimed and giving
students as much as 80 minutes to do what their grade level peers were required to do in 45
minutes, many of my students could not complete it. I was not allowed to read the reading
section of the test to those who could not read.

The most I could do was tell them to look through a question, circle words they knew,
and then try to read and answer the question. I have seen students struggle to read the first
paragraph of a five-paragraph story for 30 minutes and simply not be able to finish because they
can't read well enough to answer the questions. While the math section is read to them, no

additional explanation may be given. By the end of the assessment, students were understandably

frustrated. I tried responding to these assessment mornings (one per quarter) by giving the kids a

snack time—a rare occurrence in the morning in our classroom. I found that once we repaired the

break in routine this way, we could move into the Morning Message and then students would get

right down to work.

Frequent Absences and Tardiness

The insertion of a snack into the morning routine did not seem to help kids who were frequently

absent or late, a circumstance I described in my journal in February: John—Difficult day for

John. During DEAR time, he came in late, chose only one book instead of two, and was upset

when he couldn't switch books. He refused to read or look at his book and ended up away from

the group, sitting in a chair. During independent reading—he was given his choice of decodable

books to read—stalled at getting started by arranging his reading buddy, bean bag chair, and

choosing books. Chose book with only one word, "dot," in it. Reminded many times to read.

Appeared not to. Did not participate fully during sound drill or work with Ms. H. (classroom

assistant) Why? Just an off day? Three-day weekend? Will offer more structure tomorrow to

see what happens.

I figured that I needed to develop something that would help these children get over their

insecurity about what had been happening in the classroom when they were not there. I focused

my efforts on John, a second grade student in my class, whose frequent tardiness throughout the

year seemed to have an overwhelming effect on his ability to get down to work as well as to

work independently. I tried conferences with his mother and notes home; nothing changed. I

tried different ways of welcoming John into the classroom to try to build his self-esteem from the

moment he walked in the door; that seemed not to have an impact. Then, one day, I tried having

him sit right by me while I checked his homework. I complimented him on his well done work, and then I sent him to read. That worked!

Trouble on the playground before school—arguments, pushing and kicking—was a problem for some of my students, especially for JJ, a third grader in my class who had begun with me in first grade after only spotty preschool attendance, multiple foster homes, and physical and emotional abuse. This, too, required a special intervention. JJ and I tried leaving what had happened before school at the door of the classroom; we tried writing about it so as to let it be. Finally, I tried spending a slightly longer period of time with the Morning Message thereby giving JJ more opportunities to participate. While behavior during DEAR time remained tricky, the Morning Message could turn things around for JJ: If he was asked to come to the board for an extra turn or two to find words or sounds, his confidence appeared to grow and he became more enthusiastic about his work for the morning.

Incomplete Homework

Every once in a while, two to three students came to school not having finished their homework. The routine for checking homework and the response to incomplete homework was as follows: As homework was checked during DEAR time, I called students over whose homework was incomplete and said, "Your math/reading is not done. You will need to stand at the wall at recess." This meant that during recess they would stand by the wall, watching recess and not talking to anyone. My journal notes described the problem: Three boys did not return homework. Consequences were dealt. Difficult time for the rest of the morning with Morning Message and whole and small group work. (2.8.07)

Once I focused on this interaction, I realized that I needed to change the entire process. If students did not finish their homework, I called them over from their books and gave them a choice of either going back to their reading or finishing their homework at their desk. Everyone

chose completing their homework then and there. They still had to stand at the wall at recess, but the opportunity to finish their homework seemed to bring back their feelings of success. When they rejoined us at the Morning Message, these students seemed to feel as successful as if they had completed their homework at home. After I began this, I noted in my journal a decrease in problems resulting from incomplete homework.

Good Days

I also noted in my journal how a great day in the class seemed to lead to students tackling challenges independently. For example, JJ (the third grade child who had problems on the playground) had a severe learning disability characterized by gaps in his working and short-term memory which affected his ability to read and write. In January, he could read some sight words and knew most consonant sounds. However, he could not blend sounds into words and was most comfortable with copying. When expected to "sound out" words, he would sit and write a letter or two—rarely letters that were actually in the word. In January, we went on a field trip to see an enactment of a book we had read together. Everyone had a great time. When we got back, everyone talked about the play.

I decided we would write about it. For the first time ever, JJ sounded out a word in his writing. It was the first time he had written a sentence that I could read. He wrote, we gat no the pis in the pis srmw ming we was omos **We got on the bus and the bus started moving we was going.** He used his sounds for the words "got," "started" and "moving." He wrote with ease, not the usual struggle.

Throughout my observations of my class, I found situations when high success in our classroom environment was followed by better work and high focus throughout the day. It seemed as if giving students more opportunities to be successful helped to counteract any negativity that came from rough starts to the day.

Monitoring Student Achievement

My journal and anecdotal notes show student growth throughout the year. My best examples of change were two second graders, John and Detrell, who began the school year with many poor work habits but were showing huge progress by March. To measure their progress, I took three representative samples of their work. The writing samples were compared on the basis of:

1. Mean number of words written: The average number of words written over the three samples.

2. Accuracy of consonant sounds correct in non-sight words: This assesses the student's ability to sound out a word. For example, the word "cat" written as "ct" gets a score of 2 out of 2. "Dog" written as "dk" would get a score of 1 out of 2.

3. Total number of different sight words used: The total number of different sight words used (all three samples).

4. Mean number of sight words spelled accurately: The number of sight words spelled accurately.

5. Mean number of sight words used (per writing sample): The average number of sight words used per sample.

JOHN

When I looked through my observations and journal, I saw a change in John (second grader described above) who entered my class for half days in the last month of first grade. He had been unsuccessful in both kindergarten and first grade and was facing retention in first grade until his severe learning disability was identified. When he entered my classroom he was able to independently write only his name and "dog." He could read five sight words. He would ask to go to the bathroom or get water every time we began independent work. He often asked many

questions about topics unrelated to our discussions. It seemed as if he was doing all he could to

avoid working. His first writing of the year can be seen in Figure 1. John wrote his name (blurred

out) and two initials to stand for his brothers'. The sounds he chose to stand for his brothers'

names are incorrect.

He showed no real evidence of a story—instead, describing a similar situation every day

(see Figure 1).

Figure 1: John's writing in the Fall

Name is written accurately. Two initials are used to represent brothers' names. Neither initial is correct.	"M N m Dog" *Me and my dog*	"ME my fat dog" *Me my friend's dog*

By December, I could see changes and recorded them in the following months:

> John—Writer's Workshop: worked for 30 seconds, then began making noises. Next, he
>
> went back to saying the words slowly. Began talking about unrelated topics. Lost choice
>
> time minutes. Went back to work – erased "b" (the only letter he had written down) –
>
> John was attempting to write "bus". He has now been working on "bus" for 10 minutes
>
> and 23 seconds. Next he begins to write, and then erase, rewrite, and erase the "b" in
>
> "bus," saying that sound over and over again. (12/13/07)

John—Uses where "Christmas begins" as written on our calendar to write "Christmas begins" – sits and says words. (12/19/07)
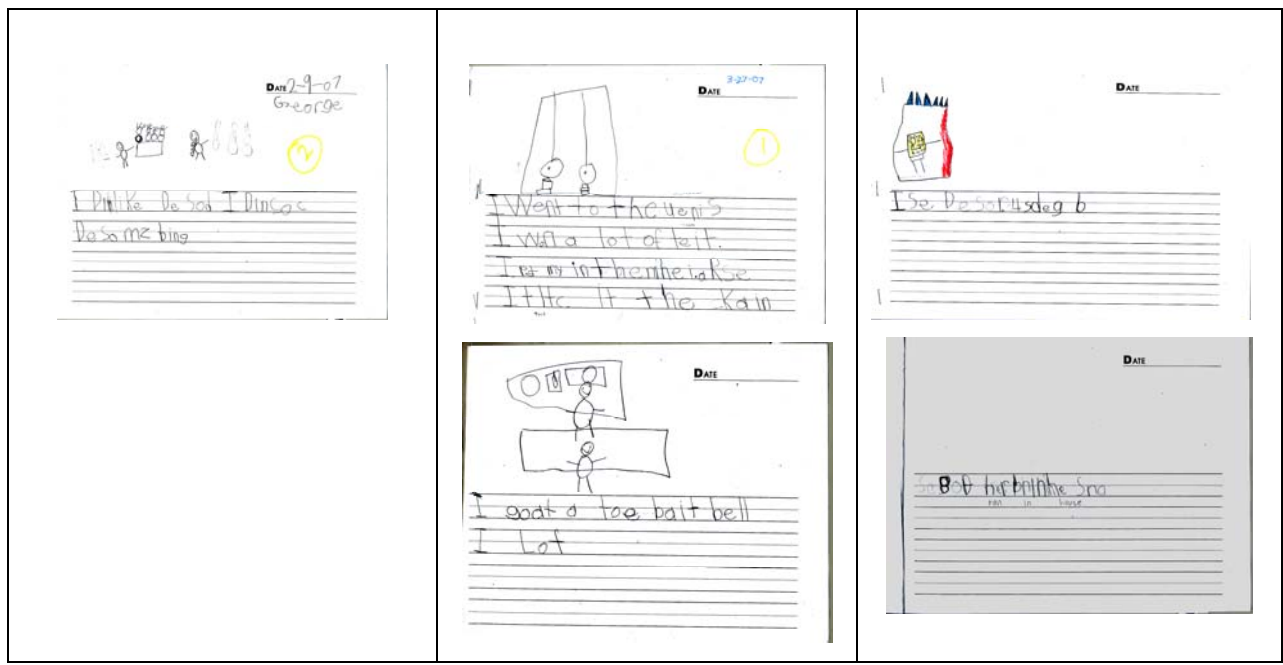
John—Used the word wall to write a few sight words; stuck to the day's topic. (1/9/07) **no stretching out of words
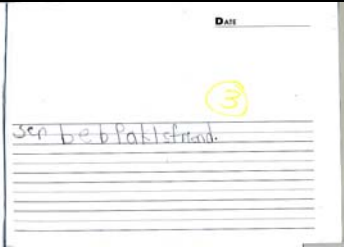
John—I worked with John to choose a work to publish – only three of nine are finished – This needs to be a goal for next quarter. (1/30/07)

John—writes one sentence using stretching words! (2/22/07)

Between September and February, John had adapted our classroom strategy/habit of stretching out words to spell them. The spring writing samples show more of a story structure. More sight words are used and more words are written (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: John's writing in the Spring

"I dinlike De Sod I Dinsos De so mz bing" *I didn't like the show I didn't show The show was boring*	"I Went to the uenis I won a lot of teit I pot my in the mhei. A Rse I tltc it the ckain I goat a toe bait bell I Lot" *I went to the Chuck E Cheeses I won a lot of tickets I put my in the machine A receipt I took it the counter I got a toy basketball I left*	"I Se De Sor4sdegb Sebob herbrinhe sno Serbeb packts friend" *I see the show 4 spongebob Spongebob runs in the house Spongebob Patrick's friend*

Changes in John's Word Use

In September, the mean number of words that John used in his stories was 3.34; by March, it was 18. The accuracy of consonant sounds correct in non-sight words grew from 44% to 62%. The number of sight words used grew from 3 to 12 and the number of sight words spelled accurately grew from 50% to 92.3%.
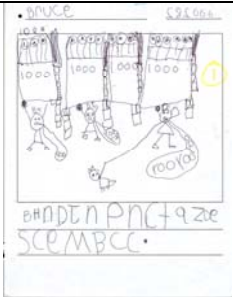
Detrell's Work

Another example of change shows in my notes on Detrell who is another student like John who came to me for the last month of first grade, and began full days in our classroom the following fall. In the regular education first grade, Detrell rarely participated appropriately. He typically sat under his desk or the table during read alouds and when he was supposed to read on his own.

There is record that he received an increasing number of discipline reports from the assistant principal for acting out in the classroom.

When he began second grade in the fall, Detrell did not read books independently. He would browse the pictures, but made no attempt to read the words (see Figure 3).
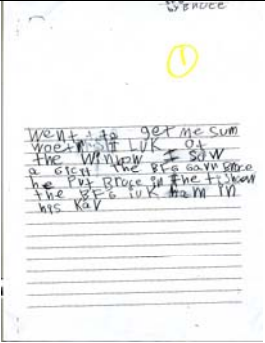
Figure 3: Detrell's writing in the fall

"DHNDJNPNCTaZoe SCEMBCC. *Detrell and DJ and PH and cat and Zoe Skeeball.*	"Detrellnmom wat to Gat the mal" *Detrell and mom went to get the mail.*	"Detrell n DJnBSD Playwdyy *Detrell and DJ play with their yoyos.*

As the year progressed, Detrell began reading books on his own during DEAR time. By March, he was attempting to read *The Butter Battle Book*. I noticed that he was decoding when possible and retelling the story. He read and re-read *Go, Dog, Go* and unsuccessfully attempted *Three Little Wolves*. By mid-March, I saw him attempt *Green Eggs and Ham* and heard him remark to himself, "Dang…I can read this" and he did read most of it; but, he abandoned it when it got too tough. By June, he had successfully read several *Little Bear* books independently.

Detrell's writing showed remarkable changes (see Figure 4). In the fall, the mean number of words in his stories was nine; by Spring, it was 42. The number of different sight words used grew from 3 to 19 and the mean number of sight words spelled accurately grew from 40% to 87%. In his reading, the accuracy of consonant sounds read correct in words that were not sight words grew from 73% to 89%.

Figure 4: Detrell's Writing in the Spring

"went to get me sum woetr I luk ot the winbow I sow a Gicit The BFG gavr Detrell he put Detrell in the tisho the BFG iuk ham in his kav"	"The tom I went to my DJ hmoe it wus new 2 cats that 2 cat a wazs sit on me. And That 2 cat wazs Ku too me 1 cat is A boy 1 cat is A girl.	"I wocup but the cat wus on me hed wiwu that cat on my hed I the cat Was Big of miman It was fribay And wen I gat Bak he was big in Detrell Said my wish cum chuw The ca is Big."
Went to get me some water I look out the window I saw a gaint The BFG grabbed Detrell he put Detrell in the tissue the BFG took him in his cave.	*The time I sent to my DJ home it was new 2 cats That 2 cat was sit on me and that 2 cat was come to me 1 at is a boy 1 cat is a girl.*	*I woke up but the cat was on me head Well that cat on my head. I the cat was big of remind me it was Friday And when I got back he was big and Detrell said my wish come true the cat is big.*

Detrell's responses to the survey question, *How good are you at reading? Writing? Math?*,

provide a nice indicator of changes in his thinking over the course of the year. In January he said,

"Sometimes I don't know how to read words, sometimes I do. If I don't know how to read words, I sound them out." He described his writing as "not really that good," but claimed, "I good at math." By March, he was claiming to be good at reading: "Yes, I keep tapping it out," and writing "because it is easy to spell words."

"Everytime I go home," he said, "my brother has me do my ABCs to see what letters I know. My mom is so proud." He saw improvement in math, too: "I good at math, because I remember in first grade I did math and now I know how to do it this year."

JASON

Like John and Detrell, other students showed changes in motivation and commensurate changes in the quality of their work. Jason was a fourth grade student who spent only one period a day— language arts—in the regular education fourth grade class. During the period, the students in that classroom were working independently or in small groups on individualized work. Because Jason had his own individualized work, he should have been successful during this time. However, the classroom teacher reported that during independent work time, he would sit and do nothing, even though he had been given work appropriate to his skill level. She also claimed that he rarely completed his homework.

His teacher and I decided to try keeping him full-time in the self-contained classroom. Jason was disappointed by the change in his schedule and his disappointment made me try to find a way to get him to complete his homework and to work independently in the fourth grade classroom. I noticed that he liked to write stories about a space alien named Zim. I gave him a blank composition book to use to draw his stories. On the days Jason came to school with his homework completed, he could go to the fourth grade class to work on his story. Once this policy was implemented, I saw a change in Jason and in his work habits which I chronicled in my journal: We pulled Jason from the fourth grade because he isn't completing any work. He

doesn't like this, but he hasn't been completing his homework, and I don't want to reward this behavior. Ms. G and I talked about putting him back in for the social experience, beginning with something he would be successful with. We should start this on Tuesday or Wednesday. Maybe this will help things out. (1.23.07)

The difference in Jason when he has done his homework vs. when he has not done his homework is huge. When his homework is done, he eagerly attacks classroom activities. When it has not been done, everything is difficult and a struggle (2.28.07). Jason has enjoyed writing his Zim story. His success in this task has begun to carry over to his other activities. His homework is complete more often and he is enthusiastic about other tasks.

JJ

In January, our class began a new reading program, the Wilson Reading System (2002). This is a systematic, scientifically proven method of reading instruction, focusing on decoding and spelling and seemed most appropriate for Detrell and JJ who seemed to flourish after we introduced this program. The success they felt appeared to carry over into other classroom activities. One day in January, JJ carried the word list we had been practicing over to the rug. He chose to practice reading his words as the other students were using their free time to talk with each other.

Survey Results

The most common question I hear from teachers and parents about my small, selfcontained, special education class is whether the students feel bad about being in a small class. I decided to survey my students, once in January and once in March, to ascertain their feelings about being in the self-contained, small class.

In both January and March, the students' responses to the questions: *What do you like about being in a small class like ours? How do you think being in a small class helps your reading, writing, and math?* were overwhelmingly about the quietness and calmness of the self-contained class (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Student Responses in January and March

January	March
• "We can all do something at once and it is more quiet. We can think more….the big class scared me to do it. There was more pressure when there is something that was hard before. Now when I do it, I feel like I did something right" • "You can put a lot of stuff in it, it looks big" • "When I was in my big class, we didn't have much teachers. They didn't go around. Now that I'm in a little class, I get more help" • "We can get more work done" • "It's not a lot of kids – it's not every loud in here"	•"You're not yelling much because Ms. G- 's kids (general education class) can do things right, but they don't. And there are so many it is hard to make them all listen." •"It's easy to listen" •"It isn't that small actually. When there are a lot of kids, usually there are a lot of problems." •"Get more work done" •"It's not that many kids. So, there doesn't have to be a lot of talking….I can learn better. In my old class a whole bunch of people used to be talking"

They also commented on getting more work done; they claimed that it was easier to learn and listen. Hearing such comments from students who did not seem to see themselves as learners at the beginning of the year was remarkable. Their responses suggest that they had begun to think about themselves as learners and of what might help them with their work.

FINDINGS/CONCLUSIONS

I began this project searching for an explanation for the changes I see in my students once they enter my class. This was especially important to me because the trend in special education seems to be to move away from self-contained classrooms and towards inclusion classes. My belief is

that students' experience of success impacts their selfconcepts and motivation which, in turn, leads to more advances in achievement. It seems to me that it is easier for severely learning-disabled students to experience such success in a self-contained environment.

As I observed and studied my classroom over the year, I was struck by the ways in which theory, research, my practice, and my students' actions seemed to coalesce to corroborate my theory. However, I do recognize that my inquiry and actions taken in response to data that I gathered were critical to my students' progress, so I can no longer claim that it is the self-contained classroom alone that makes the difference.

Part of what may be happening may be explained by the work of Morovitz and Motta (1992) and Butler and Marinov-Glassman (1994): in a small special education class, the students stop comparing themselves to the students in the regular-education setting and compare themselves instead to the students in their new situation, thereby developing a higher self-concept. Another factor may have been my developing breaks with the routine that helped children "reset" themselves, as was the case with John and the quarterly assessment, with JJ's writing, with John's absences and tardiness.

I now think that experiencing success instead of failure early in the day seems to affect motivation and achievement throughout the day—a clear demonstration of Chapman and colleagues' (2002) finding that motivation, self-concept, and achievement are deeply intertwined. And, as John and Detrell's reading progress suggests, it is not just a matter of experiencing success early in the day but throughout the day.

As their self-concept and motivation began to change, they seemed to become more comfortable in their class work and this, in turn, led to higher achievement. It is difficult for teachers to zero-in on individual students as my assistant and I were able to do with my small class. This is what makes the self-contained environment so special and so powerful. So, for example, we could take time with the Calkins' (2003) model, especially with the guided practice

which seemed to support students' use of new habits and skills when working independently: The success they felt from practicing the skills first as a group, then in the mini-lesson led to their adopting the new skills as their own.

Much of the push for inclusion seems to stem from concerns that learners' self-esteem is negatively impacted by being in self-contained classes (Zigmond, 2003). I have not seen this happen among my students. Jason, John, JJ, and Detrell are four examples from my eight students, but I could have used any of the other four as well. It is not the selfcontained classroom per se that makes the difference, but certainly the small numbers of children and the focused attention that each is able to get in that environment makes it an important part of any effort to help change the achievement trajectory of severely learning-disabled students. Since completing this study, I have also come to the conclusion that developing an inquiry-stance, which is what action research supports, is essential to practice, particularly in the special education classroom.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Assumptions that self-contained special-education classrooms are detrimental to a student's self-concept should be examined on a case-by-case basis. Early elementary students with severe learning disabilities can benefit from intensive services to build both achievement and self-concept.

Students' self-concept should be considered when deciding special education placement. Smaller class size in both special-education and regular-education classrooms would allow teachers to better differentiate instruction for their students. District mandated assessments should be examined for their impact on special education students and alternative measures of achievement should be accepted as an important part of the assessment protocol for them and all students.

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Appendix A

Behaviors Checklist/Notes

Activity _____

Date_____

	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5	Student 6	Student 7
Time on Task							
Engagement with Task (Scale of 1 – 4) includes active listening							
Working Independently?							
Using the Word Wall							
Working on Decoding Independently							
Stretching out Words							
Book Choices during DEAR time							
Class Participation/ Hand Raising							
Tackling Problems Independently							

Use this chart with: DEAR, Writer's Workshop (WW), Readers Workshop (RW),
Independent Reading (IR), Science (S), Math Problem Solving (M), Guided Reading (GR)

Appendix B

Anecdotal Notes

Date	**Name**	**Notes**

Appendix C

Survey – Spring 2007

Name: _____

Date: _____

1. What is your favorite part about our class?

2. What is your favorite learning activity that we do in class?

3. What do you like about being in a small class like ours?

4. How do you think being in a small class helps your reading, writing, and math?

5. Do you like school more or less than you used to?

6. Have you gotten better at your reading, writing, and math? How can you tell?

7. What is something at school you have improved at this year?

8. How good are you at reading? Writing? Math? (use back)