

**Student Motivation, Achievement and Success: Their Interactions  
in a Self-contained Special Education Classroom  
for Students with Severe Learning Disabilities**

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**Rationale:**

I teach a self-contained special education classroom for students in first through fourth grade 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. On average, they begin in a regular kindergarten class. By the end of kindergarten or beginning of first grade, it is apparent that these students are struggling much more than typically developing students. At this time, modifications and accommodations are made in the classroom. Next, the school's IEP team usually tests these students. After being found to have a learning disability, these students generally stay in their general education class and are pulled out one to two periods a day, or seen in the classroom, through the inclusion model, for remediation. By the end of first grade or beginning of second grade, these students are still failing in their classroom. They are not making the expected gains in their learning. They continue to fail. This is typically the point where students are then enrolled in my self-contained classroom.

By the time children are eligible for my classroom, they have failed in all other school settings. They are used to not being able to do the work. They have stopped seeing themselves as learners. They do not believe they can do it. These students have developed strategies for avoiding work. They can appear withdrawn, have behavior issues or be inattentive.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 8 years old, they see themselves as failures in the classroom.

As my students begin to experience success in our classroom, I see them change into learners. Each one begins to take risks. Children begin to listen more carefully to stories. More hands are raised. Discussions begin to flow. Children seek out opportunities to learn. Other teachers and parents comment on these changes. After only a few months, these learners are quite different from the ones who came in. Students who used to hide under the table when it was time to listen to a story now sit attentive on the rug during the read-aloud. Instead of flipping pages aimlessly in the book, children begin to look at the words and figure out the story from the words and the pictures. Journals begin to be filled with words that have been sounded out, instead of being filled with words that are copied down – even when the student doesn't know what they say. As these children begin to be successful, they change.

I am interested in taking a better look at how the experience of success impacts my students. I work in a large, urban district where the push is towards inclusion and away from self-contained special education classrooms. I feel the self-contained classroom is very important for many students. It gives them the opportunity to be successful in a whole group setting and to be an integral part of a classroom environment. Instead of continuing to feel discouraged in the general education classroom, these students are able to feel the success that most students feel every day. This can have implications both in my school, my district and many other districts that are working to eliminate self-contained special education classrooms.

**Questions:**

What happens when I establish a classroom environment where my second – fourth grade students, with severe learning disabilities, experience high levels of success at their individualized levels?

**Subquestions:**

1. What changes do I see in student achievement?
2. What changes do I see in students' motivation towards their classwork?
3. What changes do I see in student's attitudes in the classroom?
4. What changes do I see in classroom habits and strategy use?

**Context**

Shepard Elementary School\*, a Chicago Public School, 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 it's boundaries can be enrolled at Shepard. Remaining vacancies are distributed through a lottery system directed by the Chicago Public Schools. Shepard is a Pre-K through Grade 6 school of approximately 650 students. There are three classes at each grade level. Additionally, Shepard houses many special education programs, including two classrooms for students with severe learning disabilities, a hearing-impaired preschool and support for hearing-impaired students of all grade levels. The principal and teachers at Shepard support the inclusion model of special education. All students are included with the general education classes as appropriate. Shepard is a multi-racial/multi-ethnic school. Eight percent of students are Limited English Proficient. The students are 57% African American, 18% Caucasian, 16% Asian, and 9% Latino; 34% of students receive free lunch.

Shepard Elementary School has made its AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) each year. Approximately 72% of students met the standards in reading and math last year, based on statewide standardized testing. The attendance rate is 95%. The principal has been with Shepard for 17 years, and she is very supportive of the staff. As a previous special educator, the principal supports special education students at our school. A variety of service delivery models are used for special education instruction, ranging from self-contained classrooms to students who are fully included. Recently, language arts instruction has been focused on balanced literacy.

The characteristics of my classroom are different from the overall characteristics of Shepard. I teach a classroom for students in first through fourth grade who have severe to profound learning disabilities. Ours is one of 7 classrooms of its type in the Chicago Public Elementary Schools. We are one of two classrooms like ours that services 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 (who entered our classroom in February). Two students are girls. For the first half of the year, we worked with a teacher's assistant for four periods of the day.

While most of the students at Shepard reside within the neighborhood, only two of my students live in the neighborhood. Six students are bussed in because their home school is not able to meet their needs. Only one-third of Shepard qualifies for free lunch – 89% of my class receives

free lunch. 100% of the students in my classroom are African-American. 33% live in single parent homes. In all two parent homes, both parents work outside of the home.

Students come to my classroom when they have been unsuccessful in all other school settings. Usually, my students begin school in kindergarten in a general education classroom. As the progress onto first grade, it is apparent they are having great difficulty in school –they may fail a grade. After being evaluated by their school and being found to have severe learning disabilities, they generally remain in the general education classroom and begin receiving “pull out” special education services. When these are not successful, a more restrictive placement, my classroom, is considered. The students entering my classroom as first, second and third graders are essentially non-readers. They have received very little success at school. As a result, they are hesitant to participate and often exhibit some difficult behaviors. They do not see themselves as learners. In their former classes, they tended to not participate and were often lost to what was going on. They see school as something “not for them”.

After being in my classroom for a short time, I typically see my students blossom. Students who before did not complete any homework at home, begin doing their work at home. Children who did not previously participate, begin to be active participants in our classroom. Because I can be sure each and every student understands and can follow our classroom routine, my students do not feel lost any longer. They begin to see themselves as learners and begin to act that way as well.

While my classroom is a self-contained classroom, the students do not seem to feel like our separate class is a type of stigma. All of our students are matched with a general education classroom where they attend science class along with other activities throughout the week. They sit at these classes lunch tables and line up with them at recess. Our students attend library, music and gym with the general education classrooms. Our classroom has an “open door” policy and students from other classes are frequently stopping by to share something with us or to spend some time in our room doing their own work.

Along with their services for learning disabilities, most students in my classroom also receive speech and language services due to language disorders. Additionally, most students also attend a weekly social-work group focusing on social skills at school. Three students receive occupational therapy services. Due to the extensive learning needs of our students, we use multisensory reading programs (Wilson Reading System, the Lindamood Bell LiPS program) in addition to the components of balanced literacy. Each student has an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) that is reviewed annually. This IEP contains most of the learning goals for that student for the year. These documents, along with state standards, drive instruction in our classroom.

\*names have been changed

## **Literature Review**

Among school-age children, it is estimated 6% of students have specific learning disabilities in reading. These students typically require special education services. 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 their least restrictive environment, leading 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 nondisabled children at a level appropriate to both (Baumel 2007). This can range from a student being in a regular education class, receiving 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 professional opinion that students in less restrictive settings have increased social acceptance, improved social skills, and higher self-esteem. The belief is more time in the regular education classroom, the better for the student. In many schools, when the IEP team decides the placement for a student, they are frequently guided by these beliefs. However, in my self-contained, special education classroom, the self-esteem and the motivation of students seem to rise as time goes on. I do not see the negative effects often believed to be an effect of the self-contained classroom. This led me to research the topics of self-esteem and self-concept, tied to academic motivation and achievement, particularly in special education settings.

In a longitudinal study, Chapman, Tunmer and Prochnow (2000) examined the relationship between academic self-concept (how a student thinks of himself in academic settings – the extent to which they see themselves as a learner) and reading-related performance in early elementary school children. This was based on earlier findings that academic self-concept develops in response to early learning experiences. That is, a child’s experiences with learning when they first begin school correspond to how they feel about themselves as a learner. Negative experiences in early schooling affect self-concept. Students with poor pre-reading skills exhibited a negative academic self-concept. For example, the 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 remained relatively constant as the children progressed in school (Chapman et al., 2000). As the children continued in school, those found to have a negative self-concept stayed that way, and those found to have a positive self-concept (see themselves as learners) remained that way. Additionally, Chapman et al (2000) found academic self-concept predicted later reading performance. Positive academic self-concepts led to higher reading performance later. The impact of this on students with learning disabilities is clear. These students, who are unsuccessful in their early learning develop negative self-concepts about themselves as a learner; this can contribute to lower reading performance in later years. It becomes difficult to see what comes first – lower academic self-concept or lower reading performance – they affect each other.

Examining academic intrinsic motivation (a child’s internal motivation to learn), Gottfried’s (1990) findings were two-fold. First, academic intrinsic motivation is related to academic achievement, IQ and perception of competence (the belief of one’s self as a learner). Second,

academic intrinsic motivation in the early elementary years is a significant predictor of motivation in later elementary school years, independent of achievement and IQ. Higher academic intrinsic motivation, at ages seven and eight, led to higher academic intrinsic motivation at age nine (Gottfried, 1990). The relationship between academic self-concept and early achievement corresponds to many of my observations of my class. Children enter my class after being unsuccessful in the regular education setting. Their low achievement in that setting reflects in how they see themselves as learners – their perception of competence. At a young age, they seem to believe that academics are too hard for them. As they spend time in my classroom, their attitude begins to change. They are more motivated to learn. What changes in their self-concept? Can success be the motivator? Does special education placement make a difference?

The findings of a meta-analysis of self-concept and students with learning disabilities by Elbaum and Vaughn (2003), suggest educational placement is not the overriding determinant of self-concept in students with learning disabilities, finding no reliable association between self-concept and educational placement. The special education placement – self-contained, resource or inclusion – did not have an effect on how the students saw themselves. During a time when the trend is full inclusion for all students, we need to look at the attitudes and motivation of students in all settings. Lazarus & Callahan (2000) looked at the attitudes toward reading of students in resource room settings and found their attitudes equaled or exceeded the attitudes seen in low and average non-disabled students in the regular education classroom. Other researchers suggest higher self-concept corresponds with higher social support, no matter the school placement (Elbaum & Vaughn, 2003). School placement may not be the determining factor in academic motivation and self-concept.

Profession opinion is special education services given in a self-contained class negatively affect the self-esteem of students; however, many studies found opposite results; including full-time placement in a self-contained class accompanied by improvement in academic self-concept (Boersma, Chapman & Battle, 1979). The self-esteem of students in self-contained classes is not significantly lower than that of non-learning disabled students in the general education, even though self-contained students have greater difficulty in school than those in less restrictive placements (Morovitz & Motta, 1992). Additionally, students in the self-contained class had self-esteem higher or equal to that of regular class students who are experiencing learning problems. In their study, students in the resource room setting experienced the lowest self-esteem (Morovitz & Motta, 1992). Social comparison theory, that students compare themselves to their peers in their class, may explain higher self-concept in students in the self-contained setting. To a student in a self-contained class, they are not as different because they are comparing themselves to their peers in the self-contained class. Comparing themselves to students in the general education, they would seem much further behind. Because students in the self-contained class have less opportunity to interact with regular education students in academic settings, they have fewer threats to their self esteem. Additionally, because all of the students in the self-contained classroom need extra help, the students do not feel they are the only ones in this situation. This leads to a higher self-esteem (Morovitz & Motta, 1992). Butler & Marinov-Glassman (1994) found 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 stronger self-concept. This may be a factor with my students. When removed from the general education class, they begin to compare themselves with other students in their situation, leading to a higher self-concept.

In addition to comparing themselves to academically similar peers in the self-contained classroom, children in these classrooms receive more intensive remedial services, leading to faster growth in academic achievement. As the students' achievement levels rise, so does their self-concept and motivation (Boersma et al., 1979; Chapman et al., 2000; Elbaum & Vaughn,

2003; Gottfried, 1990). The combination of these two factors, a rise in achievement and a change in reference group, may likely explain the changes in self-esteem and motivation I see when students enter my classroom. Motivation, achievement and self-concept are so intertwined, changes in one affects all three.

Improving the academic skills of our learning disabled students has a positive effect on both achievement and self-concept (Elbaum & Vaughn, 2003). An increase in self-concept and perception of competence leads to more growth in achievement. The areas are so intertwined, it is similar to the chicken and the egg argument. Students who begin school with difficulty develop a lower academic self-concept. A lower self-concept has been shown to lead to lower growth in achievement. This cyclical nature makes it difficult to tease out which one comes first. My classroom can address both areas through a model of high success for all students. This may explain the changes I when students enter my classroom.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

I began collecting data in September 2006 to track the changes in my students that I typically see throughout the year. Based on the reading I had done and previous observations, this was an attempt to tease out how success, motivation, attitudes and achievement interplay with each other in the self-contained, special education classroom. I continued to collect data through March 2007. The data came from four sources.

**Student work** consisted of writing samples from our thrice-weekly Writer's Workshop. During Writer's Workshop, students typically participated in a minilesson, followed by independent work and conferencing time, followed by sharing with the class.

**Observational and anecdotal notes** were completed almost daily through an observational checklist and a note taking sheet (see appendix). I completed these from December 2006 – March 2007 to track classroom habits, attitudes and student work. The checklists covered areas such as strategies used, book choices, and independent work.

A **student survey** (see appendix) 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 self-contained classroom.

My **teacher journal** was kept from October 2006 – March 2007. I wrote in it after school approximately 3 days a week.

The above tools were used to look at my classroom environment, student achievement, student motivation, student attitudes and classroom habits. Writing samples from two students allowed me to address their achievement in writing over time by looking at changes in the number of words written, number of consonant sounds correctly represented, number of sight words used and number of sight words written correctly. The observational checklist, anecdotal note sheets and teacher journal contain information that pertains to achievement, motivation, attitudes and classroom habits. This includes notes and observations on independent reading behaviors and progress with the Wilson Reading System, a scientifically based reading instruction program used in our classroom. The student survey was used to examine each student's motivation and attitudes towards school and our self-contained classroom.

## *Classroom Environment*

As I began observing the effects of my classroom environment, using my teacher journal and my anecdotal notes, I quickly noticed the effect when our day began with interactions focused on times the students were not successful. As I wrote about it in my journal, the words “bad day”, “frustrating” and “difficult day” came up again and again. For example,

12/11/06

...a super frustrating day for everyone today. The 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 for the teacher 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 made everything permeate 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 very unsuccessful instances.

2/8/07

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

2/20/07

John – Difficult day for John. During DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) time, he came in late, chose only 1 book instead of 2, and was upset when 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? 3 day weekend? Will offer more structure tomorrow to see what happens.

In all three of these days, students began the day as unsuccessful within the framework of our class. This set of journal entries highlights four different categories of “unsuccess” that could occur in the very early part of our school day. The first is a district mandated, quarterly assessment, the next is tardies/absences, followed by incomplete homework and trouble/altercations on the playground before school.

On mornings such as the ones documented above, a mood seems to settle in over our classroom. Class participation drops. It can be like pulling teeth trying to get a class discussion started. Some students begin to have that glazed over look. The children begin snipping at each other. When it is time to work independently, some students plod along, not accomplishing much; others break down saying the work is too hard, while some stare out the window. The quality and quantity of the work we do is affected.

Contrast that to what I termed a “good day” in my journal. On these days, every student has something to share with the class. There is so much to contribute to class discussion, we have to work on not interrupting each other. Everyone is animated, enjoying each others' company. The children get right to work when it is independent work time. They are proud of their work and the quality and quantity of it increases.

Yet, these two different outcomes come from a very consistent morning routine in our classroom. Every morning we follow the same format. 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 1- 2 books and settle in on the rug for DEAR time (Drop Everything and Read). During DEAR time, students read or look at the pictures in the books they chose. If quiet, they can read with a friend. Also, they can 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 at the rug. It contains the date, who is 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 students. After about 30 minutes of DEAR time, we move on to the Greeting. The Greeting is any one of a set of activities where by the end, each student has been greeted by name and has greeted someone by name. We next sit down for the Morning Message. We take turns reading the message, talking about what it says. Students are given the opportunity to come up and circle different words in the message, look for different types of sounds or words in the message and correct mistakes in the message. Last we read it together. At the conclusion of the Morning Message, students are given the chance to ask questions about our day. Typically these questions clarify our plan for the day for students who are unsure.

This start of the day routine was very consistent, yet tracking in my journal, I could see that the moods of our day were not. Using my journal and anecdotal notes, it appeared the difference in the days seemed to be the level of success the students feel at the start of the day. Our classroom routine is riddled with opportunities for students to be successful. They can follow our routine successfully; each student is given multiple opportunities to feel success with the Morning Message. The difference appeared to be the instances where our day began with students seeming to feel unsuccessful.

Taking a closer look at the categories of unsuccessfulness from my journal, I saw that the early moments of unsuccess seemed to supersede the high success activities I had in place each morning. If these feelings of failure early in the day were railroading our classroom atmosphere for the morning, I began to wonder what I could do to get us back on track. I began to see how I could take these moments where students felt they had failed, and help my students recover from them, moving on to the rest of our morning.

The first category, the district mandated assessment, proved to be a tricky one from which to recover. This assessment is given at grade level. This means it is two to three grade levels above the reading and math levels of my students. A learning disability is not considered a profound enough disability to qualify for the alternative assessment, so we must take this one. My students are asked to try to do their best for this untimed assessment. Our district states students typically finish in 45 minutes; I usually end the assessment, without everyone finishing, after 80 minutes. For my students who cannot read the test, I told them to look through and circle words they now, then try to read and answer the question. I have seen students work on reading the first paragraph of a five paragraph story for 30 minutes, and not be done. The math section is read to them, but no additional explanation may be given. By the end of the assessment, students are frustrated and not feeling successful.

The best recovery for these mornings (one per quarter) turned out to be a snack. Snack in the morning was a rare occurrence in our classroom. It was enough out of the normal routine to "reset" students and counteract the effects of the assessment. If we had our snack, then read the Morning Message, students would get right down to work.

Absences and tardies could not be reset by a snack. Feeling unsure about what is happening in the classroom because you haven't been there is not a good way to start the day. Unfortunately, this was common for John. John's consistent tardies to school seemed to have an overwhelming effect on his ability to do his best work during the day, affecting even his ability to work independently. Despite many conferences with his mother and notes home, John

continued to arrive late throughout the year. I tried different ways of welcoming John into the classroom to try to build his successes from the moment he walked in the door. However, the failing to arrive to school on time seemed to carry over to his whole day. One day, something worked. On the days John was late, I had him sit right by me while I checked his homework. I complimented him on his work well done, then sent him to read. Recognizing his success with his homework seemed to boost John over his feelings of being late and got him started for a good school day.

Trouble on the playground before school, such as arguments, pushing and kicking, was another way some of my students, primarily JJ, would begin his day unsuccessfully. This also proved difficult to remedy. He was disappointed in his behavior and had a difficult time letting that go to begin our day. We tried leaving it at the door, we tried writing about it and letting it be. After each of these tactics, it still affected our morning. What did finally work is spending a longer period of time with the Morning Message. Giving JJ more opportunities to be successful with the message, seemed to negate his negative start to the day. While attitudes during DEAR time remained tricky, the Morning Message could turn things around. If JJ were 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 was an event that might affect two to three students at a time on some mornings. As homework was checked as the students read during DEAR time, they found out early if their homework was complete. The consequence for incomplete homework was standing on the wall at recess. This entailed standing, watching recess, not talking to anyone. As I checked homework, I called students over who's homework was incomplete and said "Your math/reading is not done. You will need to stand on the wall at recess." This interaction and consequence seemed to invoke the feelings in the student that led to the "bad day". I attributed this to feelings of being unsuccessful. I wanted my students to be successful, but we needed a consequence for incomplete homework. To try to fix the feelings of failure that seemed to result from this issue, I instituted the following policy. If a student did not finish their homework, I called them over from their books and let them know their homework was not done and they would need to stand on the wall at recess. I next gave them a choice of either going back to their reading or finishing their homework at their desk. Everyone chose completing their homework then. They still had to stand on 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 a decrease in my journal and notes as to problems resulting from incomplete homework.

While I cannot say for certain that giving students more opportunities to be successful changed their outlook for the morning, the changes I made to counteract the assessment, tardies/absences, playground issues and incomplete homework, did appear to change our day back into one that received a "good day" label in my journal.

I also noted in my journal how a great day in the class seemed to lead to students tackling challenges independently. For example, JJ was a third grader in my class who began with me in first grade, after only spotty preschool attendance and multiple foster homes, physical and emotional abuse. He could not write or copy his name. JJ's severe learning disability is characterized by severe deficits in working and short term memory. 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 nothing - maybe put down a letter or two - but not letters that were actually in the word. In January, we went on a field trip to see the play of a book we read together. Everyone

had a great time. When we got back, no one could stop talking about the play. I decided we would write about it. JJ sounded out a word in his writing. It was the first time he had written a sentence 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. This was done completely independently and this was the first time JJ attempted something this challenging for him. I suspect it can be directly attributed to the positive atmosphere in our classroom after the trip.

Throughout my observations of my class, I found situations when high success in our classroom environment was followed by better work and focus, and how low levels of success were followed by distraction, frustration and lower quality work. It seemed as if giving students more opportunities to be successful helped to counteract any negativity that came from the rough starts to the day. I suspect activities with which students feel successful lead them to try classroom strategies and habits independently.

### *Classroom Habits*

This school year we began using the Writer’s Workshop model for teaching writing, specifically Lucy Calkins’ Units of Study for Primary Writing: A Yearlong Curriculum. The workshop model begins with review from last time, a minilesson where the goals for the day are introduced, group/guided practice with the skill, independent writing (with conferencing from the teacher) and then sharing writing at the end. This model is easily individualized for everyone. The review in the beginning allows students to all begin on the same page and not feel behind. The minilesson gives the one skill we are focusing on and the guided practice gives struggling students a chance to practice as a group before they try on their own. The scaffolding provided with this model gives students support with new skills before they try them on their own. I noted in my journal -

2/20/07

Minilesson 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 high success 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.

This guided practice seemed to encourage students to use these habits and skills independently. This may have come from the success they felt from practicing the skills first as a group in the minilesson.

When I looked through my observations and journal, I saw a change in over time in John, a second grade student in my class. John began in my class for the last month of first grade for half days, beginning full days in September for second grade. He was unsuccessful in first grade and kindergarten, facing retention in first grade until he was identified with a severe learning disability. He entered my classroom being able to write only his name and “dog” independently. He could read 5 sight words. John would ask to go to the bathroom or get water every time we began working independently.

He would ask many questions about unrelated topics – doing all he could to avoid working. His first writing of the year is pictured here:



John wrote his name (blurred out) and two initials to stand for his brothers. The sounds he chose to stand for his brother's names are incorrect. Over time, his habits changed.

12/13/07

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.

12/19/07 –

John – Uses where "Christmas begins" is written on our calendar to write "Christmas begins" – sits and says words

1/9/07

John – Used the word wall to write a few sight words, stuck to typical topic  
\*\*no stretching out of words

1/30/07

John – I worked with John to choose a work to publish – only 3 of 9 are finished – This needs to be a goal for next quarter

2/22/07

John – write 1 sentence using stretching words!

From September until February, John goes from a student who writes one inaccurate letter, then erases, writes one letter, then erases, to a student who is able to write one sentence sounding out words. He adapted our classroom strategy/habit of stretching out words to spell them. I suspect this growth comes from the feelings of success he experienced over the course of the year.

Detrell is another student who came to me for the last month of first grade, and began full days in our classroom this 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 to read on his own. He was receiving more and more discipline reports from the Assistant Principal for acting out in the classroom. When he began this fall, he did not read books independently. He would browse the pictures, but not attempt to read the words. As the year progressed, he began reading books on his own during DEAR time. It took until March for his confidence and skills to grow enough to try this, but it did.

Date	Book Attempted
Fall 2006	Looked at pictures in books, would retell familiar stories like <i>Old Woman Who Swallowed a Fly</i> . Did not attempt to read words in books.
3/6/2007	Attempts to read <i>The Butter Battle Book</i> . Decodes when possible, retells the story at other points.
3/14/07	Reads <i>Go, Dog, Go</i> independently and successfully. Rereads on subsequent days.
3/15/07	Attempts <i>Green Eggs and Ham</i> . Remarks to self "Dang...I can read this". Reads most of it, then abandons when gets tough.
3/16/07	Attempts <i>Three Little Wolves</i> . When that is too difficult goes back to <i>Green Eggs and Ham</i> and reads on own.
June 2007	Successfully reads <i>Little Bear</i> books independently.

Decoding books independently is a classroom habit and skill that relates to classroom success. My students will try something if they think they can do it. I believe that the high success activities of my classroom encouraged my students to think of themselves as learners. I believe as Detrell experienced more success in the classroom, he felt more confident to try reading more challenging books on his own. The same may be true for John who also tackled harder work – harder words to spell and harder books to read.

### *Student Achievement*




My journal and anecdotal notes show student growth throughout the year. I noted examples of students using more developed skills and strategies and of tackling more challenging work. John and Detrell, my two second graders, began this school year with so many poor work habits (leaving the room, sitting under the table). John's writing consisted of labeling pictures with one letter - usually an incorrect one. Detrell used initial consonants for names and words. To look at their growth in achievement from Fall 2006 to March 2007, I took three representative samples of their writing from the fall and three samples from March. The writing samples were assessed for:

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's Work




John's writing in the fall was characterized by using his name, "dog", "me" and "my". These sight words were used inaccurately. He showed no real evidence of a story – instead describing a similar situation every day.

Fall 2006

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

The spring writing samples, however, show more of a story structure. More sight words are used and more words are written.

Spring 2007

		
<p>"I dinlike De Sod I Dinsos De so mz bing"</p> <p><i>I didn't like the show I didn't show The show was boring</i></p>	<p>"I Went to the uenis I won a lot of teit I pot my in the mhei. A Rse I tlct it the ckain I got a toe bait bell I Lot"</p> <p><i>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></p>	<p>"I Se De Sor4sdegb Sebob herbrinhe sno Serbeb packts friend"</p> <p><i>I see the show 4 spongebob Spongebob runs in the house Spongebob Patrick's friend</i></p>

### Analysis of John's Work




	September 2006	March 2007
Mean Number of Words Written	3.34	18
Accuracy of Consonant Sounds Correct in Non-Sight Words	44%	61.8%
Number of Different Sight Words (total)	3	12
Mean Number of Sight Words Spelled Accurately	50%	92.3 %
Mean Number of Sight Words Used (per writing sample)	1.3	8.67

Overall, John showed growth in all areas of his writing measured here. His writing became longer. His spelling more accurate. He used a larger variety of sight words and spelled them more accurately.

### Detrell's Work

Much like John's early writing, Detrell's writing is characterized by names and only a few sight words. He writes about various events, but never more than one sentence.

#### Fall 2006


		
<p>"DHNDJNPCTaZoe SCEMBCC.</p> <p><i>Detrell and DJ and PH and cat and Zoe SkeeBall.</i></p>	<p>"Detrellnmom wat to Gat the mal"</p> <p><i>Detrell and mom went to get the mail</i></p>	<p>"Detrell n DJnBSD Playwdyy</p> <p><i>Detrell and DJ play with their yoyos.</i></p>

In the spring, Detrell's writing is loner, with more of a story. His spelling is much more accurately – typically representing initial and final consonant sounds.

Spring 2007

Went to get me sum  
woetr I luk of  
the winbow I saw  
a gicit The BFG gavr  
he put Detrell in the tisho  
the BFG iuk ham in  
his kav


February 22nd  
Feb  
February  
The tom I went to  
my DJ hmoie it was  
new 2 cats  
That 2 cat a wass



February 22nd  
Feb 22nd  
That 2 cat a wass  
Ku too me 1 cat is  
a boy 1 cat is  
a girl

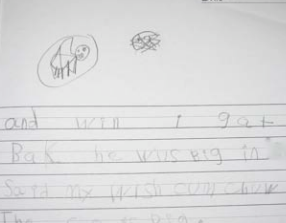


Date 22  
I wocup but the  
cat was on me  
hed wiew that cat on  
my hed



Date 22  
I went to the cat  
was big big of miman  
And wen I gat  
Bak he was big in

Date 22  
and wen I gat  
Bak he was big in  
Said my wish cum chu  
The ca is big



“went to get me sum  
woetr I luk of the winbow I  
saw a Gicit The BFG gavr  
Detrell  
he put Detrell in the tisho  
the BFG iuk ham in his kav”

*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 tom I went to  
my DJ hmoie it was  
new 2 cats  
that 2 cat a wass  
sit on me.  
And That 2 cat wass  
Ku too me 1 cat is  
A boy 1 cat is  
A girl.

*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 wocup but the  
cat was on me  
hed wiew 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 chu  
The ca is Big.”

*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.*

### Analysis of Detrell's Work

	September 2006	March 2007
Mean Number of Words Written	8.67	42
Accuracy of Consonant Sounds Correct in Non-Sight Words	73%	89%
Number of Different Sight Words (total)	3	19
Mean Number of Sight Words Spelled Accurately	40%	87 %
Mean Number of Sight Words Used (per writing sample)	3.33	18.2

Detrell demonstrated growth in all areas of writing measured here. The number of words written increased by close to 80%. He began using a wider variety of sight words and spelled them more accurately.

Over the course of the school year, John went from writing about 3 words per writing time to writing over 18. Detrell went from writing a little more than 8 words to over 40. Aside from the increased in volume, each also increased in the accuracy of their spelling and the number of sight words used. I can speculate these changes may have been due to in part to their exposure to the high success activities that are the basis of my classroom. In my review of literature, I was struck by the interplay of self-concept, motivation and achievement. I suspect that as John and Detrell experienced success in our classroom, their self-concept and motivation began to change. I believe this made them more comfortable to work – leading to higher achievement. The intensive remedial services increased their achievement, which seemed to raise their self-concept. The two appear to be linked.

#### *Student Motivation*

After being placed in my self-contained class, Detrell went from a student who sat under his desk when it was time to read, to a boy who searched out more challenging books to read independently. John went from writing one letter to writing two to three sentences. As I read over my journal and notes, other students also seemed to show a change in motivation.

Jason was a fourth grade student who spent one period a day in the regular education fourth grade class for language arts. 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 doing this time. However, he was quite unsuccessful working in this environment. The classroom teacher reported that he would sit and do nothing, even though he had been given work to do at his level. While he had been given work at his level, Jason chose not to complete it. This seemed to have a similar effect as when he did not complete his homework, which was often. Jason could not continue to attend the regular education classroom and not complete work, so that teacher and I decided to keep him from going. His time would be better spent in the self-contained classroom. Jason was disappointed by the change in his schedule.

I wanted to find a way to motivate Jason to complete his homework and to work independently in the fourth grade classroom. He always wanted to write stories about a space alien named Zim. This became the focus of his time in the general education class. I gave him a blank composition book for him to write and draw his stories. On the days Jason came to school with his homework completed, he would be allowed to go to the fourth grade class to work on his story. Once this was implemented, I saw a change in Jason and his work habits.

1/23/07

Jason – Right now we pulled Jason from the 4<sup>th</sup> 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 (general education teacher) 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.

2/28/07

Jason – The difference in Jason when he has done his homework v. 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.

Jason has enjoyed writing his Zim story (the alien 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.

Jason began turning in his complete homework. I surmise it was so he could work on his story. I believe this allowed him to feel successful in the beginning of the day because he arrived with his homework completed. This seemed to help his performance in the morning. I suspect Jason's time writing the story made him feel successful. I believe this is what caused the positive change in his work habits.

In January, our class began a new reading program, the Wilson Reading System. This is a systematic, scientifically proven method of reading instruction, focusing on decoding and spelling. Detrell and JJ flourished 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 had some free time to talk with each other. I believe this change in motivation was due to the success JJ was beginning to feel with reading. Detrell and JJ began to ask for more sounds to learn. They snuck word cards for sounds we had not learned, so they could have extra practice. I feel this increase in motivation was due to their success in reading.

### *Student Attitudes*

The most common question I hear from teachers and parents about my small, self-contained, special education class is if the students feel differently or badly about being in a small class. Much of the push for inclusion seems to stem from concerns that self-esteem is negatively impacted by being in a self-contained class. I have not seen this in 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. The literature review I did for this project consisted of many articles finding self-contained classrooms helping to build student esteem. I decided to survey my students, once in January and once in March, to see their feelings on the self-contained, smaller class.

## Survey Results

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?*

January 2007	March 2007
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>#1</b> “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”</li> <li>• “You can put a lot of stuff in it, it looks big”</li> <li>• “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”</li> <li>• “We can get more work done”</li> <li>• “It’s not a lot of kids – it’s not every loud in here”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “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.”</li> <li>• “It’s easy to listen”</li> <li>• “It isn’t that small actually. When there are a lot of kids, usually there are a lot of problems.”</li> <li>• “Get more work done”</li> <li>• “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”</li> </ul>

Comment #1 (in January above) seems to speak directly to Morovitz and Motta’s (1992) findings. This student appears to be implying there is less pressure in the self-contained class, perhaps due to the social comparison theory about the change in reference groups when students move from the regular education classroom to the special education classroom. Overwhelmingly, students commented on the quietness and calmness of the self-contained class. They also commented on getting more work done – that it was easier to learn and listen. These comments were from students who did not seem to see themselves as learners at the beginning of the year. It appears these same students did not see the self-contained class as a bad thing, and they recognized it’s affect on their learning. From their responses, it seems they have begun to think about themselves as learners – they are thinking of what helps their work.

Detrell’s responses to one question appear to show the changes in his thinking over the course of the year, When asked, “*How good are you at reading? Writing? Math?*”, Detrell responded as follows:

January 2007	March 2007
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reading – 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.</li> <li>• Writing – Not really that good</li> <li>• Math – I good at math</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes. Because it is easy to spell words</li> <li>• Reading – Yes , I keep tapping it out.</li> <li>• Writing – almost. Everytime I go home, my brother has me do my abcs to see what letters I know. My mom is so proud.</li> <li>• Math – Yes. I good at math. (asked for more information) Because I remember in 1<sup>st</sup> grade I did math and now I know how to do it this year.</li> </ul>

In March, Detrell gave more detailed information on how he knows he improved, what strategies he used (tapping is a strategy we use) and what he did to improve. It seems that as he has become more successful in our classroom, he understood what he was doing, showing a growth in metacognition. I surmise this leap in thinking was possible because Detrell's successes caused him to begin to think of himself as a learner. He could now think about his learning.

### **Findings/Conclusions**

My review of literature revealed the cyclical nature of motivation, achievement and self-concept (Chapman et al. 2002). These three are so intertwined, that one affects the next. I began this project searching for an explanation for the changes I see in my students once they enter my class, especially since fellow educators tend to shy away from self-contained classrooms. My belief is that as students experience success, this impacts self-concept and motivation, which leads to more advances in achievement. As I observed and studied my classroom over the year, I was struck by the amount of circumstantial evidence I found supporting my belief.

My classroom environment appeared to be impacted by the success of the students. Beginning the day with activities that were successful for everyone, like our Morning Message activities, seemed to set everyone off on the right start for a better day. Time and time again in my journal and observations, I found that times when students seemed the least motivated and enthusiastic corresponded to days when the start of our day could be seen as unsuccessful – due to assessments, tardies/absences, trouble on the playground or incomplete homework. When students were given the opportunity to be more successful at the start of the day, it seemed to counteract the effects of what had happened earlier. I speculate that success early in the day affects motivation and achievement throughout the day.

As students spent more time in my classroom, I observed changes in work habits and strategies they used. Students who would not attempt to sound out words in their writing, started to. John went from labeling pictures to writing full sentences. Detrell went from hiding when it was time to read to reading independently. They began to incorporate what we learned and practiced into their daily classroom routine. I surmise that their increased success in classroom activities changed their self-concept to that of someone who is successful, leading them to attempt and succeed at these tasks.

The changes in Detrell and John's writing appear to show the interplay between achievement, motivation and self-concept. In this smaller, remedial setting, students are receiving more intensive services. This leads to an increase in achievement. This affects self-concept and motivation – allowing students to then grow more in achievement. Additionally, the success in other classroom activities may open students up to be more open to learning because they are feeling like a success. I believe my observations support these ideas.

Motivation in my students appeared to increase due to their success. As the students experienced success, they seemed to become more motivated. As they became more motivated, they experienced more success. My observations changed from students who were hesitant to try to read new words, to students who wanted to read more and more new words. Students, who before wrote nothing, eagerly attacked writing stories. These observations imply the link between success, self-concept and motivation is strong.

Survey responses appeared to point towards students thinking of themselves as learners (their self-concept) through responses of how the self-contained class affected their work and their reflections on their work.

I set out to look for possible explanations for the change I saw in my students when they entered my classroom. These students commonly went from students who did not see themselves as learners to students who tackle classwork and look to learn more. They embrace reading and writing activities. My review of literature revealed the cyclical nature of motivation, self-concept and achievement. My observations through my journal, student work, observations and student survey appear to support this cycle. The amount of circumstantial evidence provided here cannot be ignored. My hope is that this research continues using formal measures of self-concept, self-esteem, motivation and achievement.

These students came to me from the regular education classroom. They all had experienced being left behind in their class as others moved ahead. My classroom was different for them. It gave them the chance to be like the students in the regular education. It gave them the chance to follow what was going on and not be left behind. Social comparison theory states that students compare themselves to the students around them when considering their self-esteem. Being in a small special education class, the students stop comparing themselves to the students in the regular education (Morovitz & Motta, 1992). This increases their self – esteem and this, in turn, increases their achievement and motivation (Boersma et al., 1979; Chapman et al., 2000; Elbaum & Vaughn, 2003; Gottfried, 1990).

The cyclical nature of success with achievement, motivation, and self-esteem has been documented in literature and in my classroom. Taking these into account and reassessing the role self-contained special education classrooms in our education system, we can reach the students who come to us saying, “I don’t read, I’ll go play”.

### **Policy Recommendations**

1. Curriculum in self-contained classrooms should be examined to ensure it allows for individual levels of the students. Additionally, it needs to maintain the rigor of the regular education classroom.
2. Assumptions that self-contained special education classrooms are detrimental to a student’s self-concept should be examined on a case by case basis.
3. Early elementary students with severe learning disabilities would benefit from extremely intensive services to build both achievement and self-concept. Carefully examine the Response to Intervention system being used in schools that pushes identification of a learning disability to when a student is older.
4. Low-achieving, struggling, and learning disabled students in the regular education classroom should be given ample opportunities for success – especially before tackling more challenging work.
5. The motivation/self-concept of students should be considered when deciding special education placement.
6. Smaller class size in both special education and regular education classrooms would allow teachers to better differentiate instruction for their students.
7. District mandated assessments should be examined for their effectiveness in measuring progress in special education students.
8. Informal measures of achievement need to be allowed to measure the progress of special education students.
9. Full Federal funding of IDEA would allow states and districts the funds they need to best support special education students.

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**Appendix****Behaviors Checklist/Notes**

Activity \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5	Student 6	Student 7
Time on Task							
<i>Engagement with Task</i> (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)



## Survey – Spring 2007

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What is your favorite part about our class?
2. What is your favorite learning activity 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)