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An Analysis upon Limitations to Low Achievers' Achievement in the Elementary Classroom As Observed By Teachers

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Abstract – The purpose of this study was to explore the limitations to success that children who have low achievement encounter in the elementary classroom as perceived by elementary school teachers. Educational system barriers include a lack of appropriate teacher training, a fast paced curriculum, the use of high stakes tests, inadequate school staffing and a lack of policy maker understanding of the academic needs of children with low achievement. In addition, participants indicated that children with low achievement tend to have low self-esteem, a need for extra educational time and attention and a need for specific learning strategies such as hands-on and experiential learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Children who are low achievers generally have a below average (100) IQ and struggle in the classroom to keep up with general academic requirements. Low achievers typically do not qualify for special education services because they do not meet the 70 or below IQ requirement for mentally retarded or the IQ/achievement discrepancy for learning disabled classification. Researchers point out that based on a normal distribution, 50% of children function in the below average intellectual range (99 and below IQ) (Gresham et al., 1996), and that 14% of those children function in the borderline intellectual range (70-85 IQ). Children whose IQ falls in the borderline range comprise a larger population of children than those with learning disabilities, mental retardation and autism combined (Shaw, 1999). This indicates a large number of children of below average intelligence who are not typically classified as educable mentally handicapped.

Low Achieving children account for a large number of school drop outs, unwed teen mothers, illicit drug users, functionally illiterate persons, incarcerated persons, unemployed, underemployed, violent offenders, alcohol abusers, school failures, low scorers on group tests and gang and hate group members (Shaw, 1999). Despite these ramifications of poor school performance, research on academically struggling children has typically focused on specific minority groups or special education classifications, rather than all children who have difficulty in the classroom. Low achievers as a group have been described primarily as children who do not perform well in the classroom. There is a lack of research investigating the characteristics of children who are low achievers other than poor academic performance.

Research has shown that teacher perceptions of self-efficacy (an individual's own belief that he or she is able to successfully carry out certain behaviors that will result in a desired outcome, positively correlate with their students' achievement (Allinder, 1995). Unfortunately, no research could be found that asked teachers to explain, from their own perspective, the classroom needs of children who are low achievers and teachers' feelings regarding their ability to meet those needs. What we do know about the interaction between teachers and children who are low achievers in the classroom is that these children are often called on less frequently, seated further from the teacher, given less feedback, given fewer work standards, praised less frequently and have less academic learning time. The reason for these behaviors has not been investigated and may conceivably be rooted in teacher perceptions of these children's needs and teachers' beliefs regarding their ability to meet those needs. In either case, it is vital to first investigate what teachers perceive as being the barriers to the academic success of children who are low achievers before efforts can be undertaken to address how teachers can successfully cope with those barriers in the classroom.

Teachers are central to the education process and its measured success. An examination of teacher perceptions regarding the barriers faced in educating students who struggle most in the classroom and perceived teacher self-efficacy in dealing with those barriers is integral to the development of successful

teacher training programs and techniques that effectively address the needs of children who are low achievers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Children who are low achievers tend to hover on the borderline of being eligible for two special education classifications: learning disabled (LD) and educable mentally handicapped (EMH). Both of these classifications are somewhat controversial regarding the appropriateness and accuracy of classification guidelines. Because the guidelines for eligibility differ from state to state, children who are low achievers can sometimes qualify for one of these programs depending on the stringency of the eligibility guidelines (Kidder-Ashley, Deni & Anderton, 2000). Often, the difference between eligible and ineligible may be a difference of one or two points on a psychometric test. Consequently, it seems reasonable to conclude that low achieving children and children who qualify for special education programs may have similar needs and difficulties and could benefit from similar services.

The proportion of students nationwide that is currently being served by federally supported programs for persons with disabilities in the category of LD is 6.05% or 2,834,000 children. This number has been steadily increasing over the past 25 years and represents the largest proportion of students served in any one disability category (National Center for Educational Statistics Condition of Education, 2000, table 52, p. 68).

These two studies exemplify the fundamental problems that are encountered when attempting to differentiate LD from non-LD students. The first is how the disability criteria are going to be operationalized. In this case, the federal guideline terminology severe discrepancy leaves one to question exactly how severe is severe.

Much of the literature on children who are low achievers focuses on defining what children who are low achievers are not. As outlined above, most reports focus on whether or not children who are low achievers are learning disabled or educable mentally handicapped. They infrequently look at the characteristics and needs of children who are low achievers other than the fact that they are kids who do not learn well. It appears that the only consensus among most researchers is that children who are low achievers do not perform adequately on achievement measures. This is exemplified in the subject selection of many research projects that rely on teacher referral for poor academics or low standardized achievement test performance as criteria for their subject pool. Despite research efforts that either support or dispel notions of children who are low achievers being differentiated from other disability groups, the fundamental problem that these children continue to fail if not labeled is usually ignored. It would perhaps be helpful to determine if these children possess their own unique characteristics and needs rather than attempting to make them conform to the criteria of some other disability group. Supporters of inclusion, who tend to downplay group expectations and lean more toward individual student needs, assert that labeling does not solve the problem of academic failure and that all people are learning disabled in some way. They support the notion that most children can be educated in the mainstream classroom by teachers trained in the nuances of different learning styles and abilities. Unfortunately, there is little empirically based data to help guide teachers regarding how to address individual needs of children who are low achievers. Most information that is available on how to teach children who are low achievers is in the form of secondary research sources such as teachers' guides or books. Actual research that focuses on children who are low achievers has traditionally been embedded in reports regarding disadvantaged children or minority children. Usually these studies focus on children who are low achievers within a particular social or cultural sub-context. In contrast, one is hard pressed to find articles entitled "What is a low achiever?" or "Low achievers as differentiated from other disabilities." What the sources that are available tend to agree on about children who are low achievers is that a) they do not fit into the curriculum pace that the majority of learners do, b) the repeated failure they face can be damaging to their self-esteem, c) they may be less motivated to learn due to chronic failing experiences, d) they need more drill and repetition, and, e) they may have little or negative social interactions with peers due to being viewed as failures.

METHODOLOGY

Participants - The strategy of intensity sampling was implemented when choosing participants. This entailed choosing cases to study that exemplified the phenomenon under study to a high degree, but not the most extreme. School sites used as participant pools were chosen based on several factors that suggested that these sites might be information rich sources.

Interview participant selection was initiated by asking school administrators and guidance counselors at the three elementary schools to recommend teachers they felt would be rich sources of information on the topic of teaching children who are low achievers.

In addition to teacher participants, three students who were low achievers were selected for observation. These observations served as a means to triangulate data and increase the credibility of the research findings. Three teacher participants were asked to select one child from their classroom who they viewed as being a "typical" student who is a low achiever and whose parent they knew and believed would be willing to allow their child to be observed.

Materials - An interview guide of questions was used by the researcher (see Appendix A). Because a semi-

structured interview format was used, this guide served as an outline to assure consistent topic inquiry from participant to participant. By nature of the qualitative interview process, participant responses lead to further, spontaneous questions of inquiry or clarification that were not specified on the guide. A tape recorder was used to record the entire interview process.

Methods - A grounded research approach to qualitative analysis was utilized in this study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Qualitative research methodologies are recognized in the field of disability research as being an important tool in understanding the complexities of human experiences from the perspectives of those who are living them (O'Day & Kileen, 2002). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant in a private setting. Interviews took place on the school campus at the interviewee's time and place of convenience. Length of the interview varied from teacher to teacher, but on average lasted one to two hours. Prior to the interview, teachers were told that the purpose of the project was to obtain their views and thoughts on working with children who have academic difficulties but do not qualify for specialized educational programming.

ANALYSIS

In the analysis of data for this study, each interview was read line-by-line and tentative nodes (discrete categories) of data content were developed. Field notes were also reviewed and nodes for information the researcher noted as being possibly recurrent were developed. Observational data transcripts were analyzed in the same manner as interview transcripts. As each interview was read, data was assessed and placed into existing categories, if appropriate, or new nodes were developed for data that did not fit existing nodes. For example, in the initial data analysis of the first interview, the participant described characteristics she felt were descriptive of many children who are low achievers. To categorize this data, the nodes "Poor Families," "Feeling 'Dumb'" and "Giving Up" were established. Statements that reflected these concepts were coded under their respective nodes. In the second interview analyzed there were data that "fit" and were coded under the above nodes, but there were also additional conceptual categories of characteristics of children who are low achievers noted such as "preference for hands on learning" and "limited vocabulary." These new nodes were established and the first interview was once again re-read to determine if there were data that fit these new conceptual categories. The process of establishing data under existing nodes, establishing new nodes and reviewing previously coded interviews for newly developed nodes continued until all interviews had been coded. Once this phase had been completed, the nodes were analyzed and grouped together for similar content. Using the Characteristics of Children Who Are Low Achievers example, nodes such as "preference for hands on learning," "need for 'real life' examples" and "auditory preferred to written instruction" were grouped under the more general node of "Learning Styles of Children Who Are Low Achievers." Nodes such as "Giving Up" and "Feeling 'Dumb'" were grouped under "Emotional Responses to Failure of Children Who Are Low Achievers." The data within each conceptual category were reviewed for appropriateness of fit within the new content grouping. Any data that was contrary to the information in nodes were placed in a separate node and reexamined to determine if there were discernable reasons as to why the information may be different from that found in other interviews. Some of the similar content groups were "Stressful Homes," "Low Self Esteem," "Life Experiences of Children Who Are Low Achievers" and "Teacher Educational Preparation for Children Who Are Low Achievers."

RESULTS

The difficulties faced by children who are low achievers in the classroom seem to be the result of several factors interacting, rather than clearly defined "barriers" that can be easily isolated and addressed. Factors contributing to poor student performance appeared to develop out of primarily two realms: the home and the educational system. These two realms appear to negatively impact the educational needs of children who are low achievers for increased self-esteem, more time in learning and special learning techniques. It is important to note that none of the factors impacting children who are low achievers in the home and educational system in and of themselves seemed to be the "cause" of student difficulties. Rather, it appears that a culmination of circumstances result in the classroom difficulties experienced by children who are low achievers.

CONCLUSION

Family factors that have been linked to student success include good home-school communication assistance with homework and high parental expectations for their child's achievement. Being that parents are apparently vital to the educational success of their children, it may be necessary to further explore the parental accountability concerns expressed by this study's participants. If the reflections of this study's participants are accurate, it seems that these teachers ask and encourage parents to participate, but often that participation does not occur and the responsibility falls back onto the school to meet both school and home academic needs of children who are low achievers. It appears that the teachers in this study were understanding of parents who are unable to help their children because of their own lack of educational or financial resources.

However, teachers were frustrated with parents who they perceived as failing to support their child's education in ways unrelated to education level and income.

A consideration for similar parental research may be the investigation of the views and expectations of the education system as seen by the parents of children who are low achievers. What are these parents' expectations for their children and how is the educational system faring in meeting those expectations? Do parents feel, as did some participants, that children who are low achievers may benefit more from a vocationally directed rather than academically directed curriculum? Is there a difference between teacher and parent perspectives on the role of the family in education? Essentially, reasons for lack of parental involvement in education needs to be investigated from a multidimensional perspective considering parental values of education, expectations of the educational system, ability and willingness to participate in the educational process and barriers parents encounter in providing assistance to their children.

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