

BARRIERS TO LOW ACHIEVERS' SUCCESS IN THE ELEMENTARY  
CLASSROOM AS PERCEIVED BY TEACHERS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

By

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By

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The purpose of this study was to explore the barriers to success that children who have low achievement encounter in the elementary classroom as perceived by elementary school teachers. A qualitative research design was used. Ten elementary teachers were interviewed and three children with low achievement were observed. Interviews were formatted to evoke teacher responses addressing the presence and description of barriers to success experienced by low achieving children in the classroom, common characteristics of low achievers, teacher perceptions of self-efficacy in teaching children with low achievement and teacher viewpoints on the impact that federal and state educational policies have on teaching practices and personal feelings. Results of this study indicate that barriers to success for children with low achievement exist in both the home and the educational system. Home barriers include a lack of parental involvement in education, parents sending negative messages regarding education and a lack of parental ability to assist children with homework. 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. Implications for future research are discussed and include a need to investigate the adequacy of higher education teacher training programs in preparing teachers for the “realities” of day to day teaching, increased parental and policy maker accountability for the success of children with low achievement, educational alternatives for children who are low achievers, alternative classroom structures and teaching models and methods to increase teacher participation in the process of educational policy development.

## CHAPTER 1 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 (Gresham, MacMillan & Bocian, 1996; Kavale, Fuchs & Scruggs, 1994; Epps Yssledyke & McGue, 1984). 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 (Gresham, MacMillan & Bocian, 1996; Kavale, Fuchs & Scruggs, 1994; Epps, Yssledyke & McGue, 1984). 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) (Shaw, 1999). 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 (Schroth, 1976; Mickelson, 1990; Murphy, 1986; Daniel, 1964; Spilerman, 1971). Low achievers as a group have been described primarily as children who do not perform well in the classroom (Griffen, 1978; Hargis, 1997; Lehr, 1988). There is a lack of research investigating the characteristics of children who are low achievers other than poor academic performance (Shaw 1999).

This study will investigate the barriers children who are low achievers face in the classroom as perceived by the teachers charged with educating these struggling learners. Understanding teacher perspective of this phenomenon is crucial. Because these children typically do not qualify for special education services, regular education teachers are held primarily responsible for their education. How children who are low achievers are taught and the environment in which the teaching takes place is guided by the classroom teacher.

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 (Bandura, 1977a, 1977b), positively correlate with their students' achievement (Allinder, 1995; Ashton & Webb, 1986). 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 (Kerman, 1979;

Good, 1981; Evertson, 1982; Murphy, Hallinger & Lotto, 1986; Wehlage, Rutter & Turnbaugh, 1987). 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.

Another important issue related to teacher perceptions that has not been investigated is the impact of current educational mandates that directly relate to low achieving children. The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) passed by the U.S. federal government has mandated sweeping educational reform. As part of this reform, school accountability for student achievement is currently expected to be measured on a yearly basis, through the use of standardized testing. States will be expected to establish measurable educational goals for students and schools will be expected to publicly disclose the progress and achievement levels of their students (National Education Association [NEA], 2003). The NEA describes these new federal mandates as affecting teachers in that they will

...be given short time lines and few resources—to again shift the emphasis of what students will learn and when. Among issues that teachers and schools must face:

- Have federal and state policymakers made it clear what expectations are—in terms that can be translated to curriculum, books, materials and classroom practices?
- Have federal or state or local policymakers provided the resources—time and money—to adjust to the new expectations?
- Are there sufficient resources—in terms of qualified teachers, appropriate class size and material—to help all students meet the new standards? (National Education Association [NEA], 2003)

These new requirements increase the importance of attending to the needs of children who are low achievers because now teachers and schools will be held accountable for these students meeting specified educational goals and making adequate yearly progress. By definition, children who are low achievers are just that--students who are slower to make academic achievement. They are the students who likely have a great amount of difficulty meeting educational standards. It is especially important to assess teacher perceptions of these students' needs because the academic progress of these children will be carefully monitored. Difficulties teachers encounter when teaching these students may have more significance because schools that do not report adequate student progress are required to be subject to federal and state "consequences" (NEA, 2003). The new, stricter accountability requirements could possibly affect how prepared teachers feel they are to meet the needs of children who are low achievers, resulting in a decreased sense of self-efficacy. This is especially problematic given the earlier discussed link between student success and teacher sense of self-efficacy.

In summary, the need for research on children who are low achievers is critical because of the large number of children that are affected, the societal repercussions that result from poor education, the financial investment in social programs that these children often access once they are adults and the increased political focus on educational accountability and raising educational standards. It is critical to gain a clearer understanding of the barriers that impact these children's education so that successful school-based interventions can be implemented, thereby avoiding the long-term cycle of personal, social and financial difficulties for both the individual child and society at large.

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.

This study will investigate the following research question: What are the barriers to academic success for children who are low achievers in the elementary classroom as perceived by teachers?

## CHAPTER 2 DEFINITIONS

Terms used in this dissertation are defined below.

Dropout Prevention (DP)--A term used by participants to describe classrooms comprised of students who are perceived to be at risk for drop out such as children who are low achievers and retained students. Students are purposefully selected by school staff and administrators to be placed in DP classrooms.

Educable Mentally Handicapped (EMH)-- A disability classification that generally includes individuals whose IQ is in the 55 – 70 range and who have academic performance commensurate with their IQ (American Association of Mental Retardation, 2003).

Exceptional Student Education (ESE)-- Programs that provide educational services to students who qualify for special needs assistance in the classroom.

Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT)-- A test required in the state of Florida to monitor educational progress and used to make student progression decisions in some grades.

Individual Education Plan (IEP)-- A formal educational plan developed for students participating in special education that outlines the interventions and accommodations to be implemented for the student as well as educational goals.

Intelligence Quotient (IQ)-- As measured by standardized testing instruments, this measure is most often used in the educational system to predict academic potential.

Learning Disabled (LD)--A disability classification. The Federal Guidelines for LD generally stipulate that children can be classified as LD if they show achievement levels below that of their peer group *and* have a severe discrepancy between their intellectual level and achievement level (US Office of Education, 1977).

Low Achieving-- Typically defined as students who have an IQ of 75-89, perform below grade level academically and who do not meet the 70 or below IQ requirement for mentally handicapped or the IQ/achievement discrepancy requirement for learning disabled classification (Gresham, MacMillan & Bocian, 1996; Kavale, Fuchs & Scruggs, 1994; Epps, Yssledyke & McGue, 1984).

Mild Mental Retardation (MMR)-- Alternate terminology for EMH.

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 (Bandura, 1977a, 1977b).

## CHAPTER 3 LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Children Who Are Low Achievers and Special Education Eligibility**

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 (Epps, Ysseldyke & McGue, 1984; MacMillan, Gresham, Siperstein, Bocian, 1996; Mercer, Hughes & Mercer, 1985). 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 (Epps, Ysseldyke, Algozzine, 1985). 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.

A limited amount of research has been conducted on children who are low achievers and their status in relationship to the special education classifications. In addition, the conclusions reached in the available research are variable and sometimes contradictory. There is a plethora of information regarding abilities, characteristics and various statistics on individuals who are EMH and LD but little about how children who are low achievers, who do not quite fit the respective profiles, fare in the education system.

### **Children Who Are Low Achievers Compared to Students Classified as LD**

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).

The federal guidelines for LD generally stipulate that children can be classified as LD if they show achievement levels below that of their peer group *and* have a severe discrepancy between their intellectual level and achievement level (US Department of Education, 1977). Several researchers have criticized the ways in which these guidelines have been interpreted and operationalized, and even dispute definitions of the term *learning disabled* (Gresham, Macmillan & Bocian, 1996; Epps, Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1985; Macmillan, Siperstein & Bocian 1996, Belmont & Belmont, 1980). Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Shinn and McGue (1982) published a highly controversial research study examining the similarities and differences between students who are LD and low achieving. They expressed concern that the classification of students as LD is, in practice, based primarily on academic underachievement and largely ignores the federal requirement of significant discrepancies between IQ and achievement. Both the Ysseldyke et al. study as well as a response to that study will be described in some detail to elucidate some of the controversies that surround this research topic.

In selecting group participants, Ysseldyke et al. (1982) defined the low achieving group (LA) as having achievement scores at or below the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills; the LD group had already been identified by their schools as learning disabled with no further explanation provided as to how schools came to that

classification decision. The groups were not matched for demographic variables. For the purposes of their study, the researchers opted to define the federal guideline term “severe discrepancy” in three ways: 1) a discrepancy of 1 standard deviation between IQ and achievement scores, 2) a discrepancy of 1.5 standard deviations between IQ and achievement or 3) a 2 standard deviation discrepancy between IQ and achievement. These definitions are important because the interpretation of the term “severe discrepancy” is at the heart of much of the controversy surrounding classification. Ysseldyke et al. also compared the discrepancy between the average achievement of the child’s age group and the child’s actual achievement scores-- ignoring IQ.

Results of this study showed that when LD and LA groups were compared using measures of discrepancy between intelligence and achievement, no significant differences were identified. However, statistical analysis of individual scores showed that the LD group tended to score significantly lower than the LA group on ten Woodcock Johnson Tests of Achievement subtests. It was also found that LD groups scored significantly poorer on PIAT (Peabody Individual Achievement Test) subtests and were rated by teachers as having more behavioral problems than the LA group. Despite these findings, Ysseldyke et. al (1982) concluded that LD and LA groups were more alike than different. When looking at misclassification of students based on ability/achievement and achievement/average achievement, the researchers found that anywhere from 50% - 57% of children were misclassified. This was found to be a problem with both incorrectly identifying students as LD when they were not and not identifying students as LD when they actually were. The researchers point out that, depending on which side of the argument one is on, it could be correctly asserted that there are many students being

*under-identified* that should receive services, or that there are too many students being *incorrectly identified* and receiving services when they should not. As stated by the Ysseldyke group (1982), there is “little wonder that considerable confusion exists regarding identification of LD students. One need only to pick one’s argument, and then use a cutoff score that will produce data to support it” (p. 83).

The generalizability of this study may be a point of weakness due to the lack of racial or ethnic information on the subjects and the high average achievement scores obtained by both of the groups on the PIAT total test score. The LD group had a mean score of 100.61 while the non-LD group had a mean score of 91.90. Even if one assesses the groups’ performance on the individual achievement tests, scores ranged from 95 to 104 for the LD group and 88-96 for the non-LD group. The fairly high scores on academic measures for both groups (in the average range) are unusual when looking at children who by definition should display low academic achievement.

The article considered the primary criticism to Ysseldyke et al. (1982) was authored by Kavale, Fuchs and Scruggs (1994). They argue that the Ysseldyke et al. article is misinterpreted and that the conclusion that LD and low achievement cannot be clearly distinguished is erroneous. Kavale et al. outline several areas of that research that they believe are misleading and erroneous. The first of these areas is the assertion by Ysseldyke et al. that LD and LA groups had a 97% overlap on 49 psychometric measures. The Kavale group does not doubt the veracity of this finding, but suggests that the 1 and 1 ½ standard deviations of discrepancy used by the Ysseldyke group are too lenient and not stringent enough to detect a difference in performance (the study by Ysseldyke et al. found no subjects that were 2 standard deviations below the mean).

They feel that the standard deviations used are so narrow that there should be no surprise that there is significant overlap between the two groups. The Kavale group also asserts that when scores were calculated for overlap, only one group's variability was considered while the other group's scores were forced into that distribution. They suggest that if the LA group was selected as the comparison group *and* it contained both the highest and lowest scores for the entire sample, then the LD group, having no outlying scores, would look like it had 100% overlap. Using the data from the Ysseldyke et al. study and using effect size (ES) statistics, Kavale et al. reanalyzed the data presented in the study. They felt that this type of statistical analysis yielded much more discriminate data between the two groups. ES levels showed that when looking at 44 of the measures, 63% of the LD group could be differentiated from LA. Using ES in examining individual Woodcock-Johnson performance, it was shown that on average 68% of the LD group was distinguishable from the LA group. When looking at only the achievement subtests on the Woodcock-Johnson, this number jumped to 78% of the LD subjects being distinguishable from the LA group. On the PIAT, Kavale found that ES yielded an 87% differentiation rate between the two groups. On all of the above re-analyses, the LD subjects performed significantly lower than the LA subjects.

Another criticism by Kavale et al. (1994) of the Ysseldyke et al. (1982) study is the use of discrepancy as the sole determinant of LD. Kavale et al. maintains that while low achievement is integral to LD classification, "it should not be synonymous with LD" (p. 72). Some consider the use of discrepancy as the sole determinate of LD inappropriate and feel that diagnosis should extend beyond achievement discrepancy to more functional measures such as behavior rating scales, parent-teacher reports, social skills rating

systems and measures of processing deficits (Gresham, McMillan & Bocian, 1996; Kavale & Forness 2000; Shaywitz, Fletcher, Holohan & Shaywitz, 1992). Conversely, other researchers view the discrepancy model as the most reliable measure to distinguish LD from problems stemming from lack of motivation, interest or poor ability (Siegel, 1999).

Kavale et al. (1994) also point to policy issues as the key to why the study by the Ysseldyke (1982) group is both so misinterpreted and, at the same time, frequently cited to support positions of LD not being a distinguishable classification of disability. They contend that proponents of the recent movement toward inclusion and unified schools need data to support their position. To say that there are no real differences between LD and low achievement implies that there is little basis for providing special programming for LD. Indeed, there are researchers that believe that special classes for some disabilities should be disbanded and that all children should be educated by learning specialists who are schooled in addressing the various types of learning problems (NASP, 2002; Peetsma, 2001; Smith & Dowdy, 1998). Kavale et al. contend that research conclusions such as the Ysseldyke group's lend support to this theory and therefore become politically popular while the soundness of the conclusions is questioned very little. In reference to the purpose of research on LD, Kavale et al. state in their rebuttal, "The goal should be a complete description of LD that moves away from mindless statistical manipulations using a single problematic notion (i.e., discrepancy) that presumably 'defines' LD" (p. 72).

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. This is evident in the Ysseldyke et al. (1982) investigation of three separate criteria as well as their choice to pick the *least stringent* criteria on which to base their conclusions. A study by Kidder-Ashley et al. (2000) examined the special education eligibility process for a learning disability (LD) in 40 states. The results illuminate how extensive the problem with consistency has become. These researchers reported evidence that

- 4 states ignored the federal definition requirement of a neurological basis and the psychological process component of LD
- To determine academic discrepancies, 38 states used discrepancy based models: 14 did not specify a formula, 3 states used expectancy formula (achievement less than or equal to 50% of expected achievement), 5 states used regression formulas and one state used the difference between highest and lowest academic achievement areas.
- 16 states used a standard deviation formula to determine IQ/achievement discrepancy. Of these states, 5 required a 1.0 standard deviation; 5 required 1.5 deviation and 6 had some other standard score requirement.
- 72% of the states did not consider a child LD if the learning problem was based on poor prior educational experiences, while the remaining states did not consider this factor.
- 2 states required that there be variability in different achievement areas (ex: high math/low reading); 29 states required deficits to be in one or more area with no comparison between areas; and 7 states made no mention of variability between achievement areas.

When these same researchers randomly selected six eligibility models and applied them to 15 hypothetical cases, there was eligibility agreement on only 4 of the cases (all for non-placement in LD). Clearly, lack of uniformity and consistency is a problem between individual state education models of disability eligibility.

The second problem with research directed at disability classification in the school system, and commented on by Kavale et al. (1994), is the political climate. Research

findings can impact how educational services are delivered to students who qualify for special education. Findings that reflect little differentiation between children having difficulty in school support the position of those in favor of inclusive classrooms where all children are taught together. Conversely, those who favor pullout programs and separate special education classrooms would benefit from findings that indicate clear and significant differences between groups of struggling schoolchildren. Kavale et al. point out that research sponsored by strong supporters of either opinion is suspect because of the likelihood of biased results or interpretation.

The third difficulty encountered in determining LD classification is determining which factors to consider in subject selection. This difficulty is addressed less often but is still of importance to researchers regarding disability group differentiation because there is evidence that socioeconomic and racial factors negatively affect achievement in school (Spilerman, 1971; Murphy, 1986; Murguia & Telles, 1996). In the IDEA Amendments of 1997, it was reported that while African American students comprised about 16% of the school population, they represented 21% of the students enrolled in special education. Research on the discrepancies between average white and black scores has also shown that there is a cultural bias inherently present in many popular measures of IQ (Rushton & Skuy, 2000; Fagan & Holland, 2002). Issues such as these bring into question the validity of standardized tests in measuring learning ability or achievement. Questions arise as to whether the results reflect pure learning constructs or are instead influenced by cultural or racial differences.

Another aspect of the LD controversy is reflected in research examining the achievement levels of students who are identified as below grade level in early

elementary years. Belmont and Belmont (1980) reviewed literature that, in addition to their own research, supports a view that there is a difference between children who are “temporarily failing” and those who will have more chronic failure (Belmont & Belmont, 1978; Gottesman, Belmont & Kaminer, 1975; Belmont and Birch, 1974). They describe these temporary failures as children who display poor reading skills during early elementary years, but who, without intervention, will be within the normal range (albeit low normal) of achievement in late elementary and early middle school years. They feel that “learning disabled” is a classification that should be examined as a developmental, long-term condition and that a “snapshot” of a child at any particular time could very well lead to misdiagnosis as learning disabled. They contend that fluctuations in ability level are normal among all children, but that children who are functioning at the low end of normal ability level are more likely to be “failing” at different times. In other words, having a normal developmental lag period with a 100 IQ might mean achieving at only the 80% level. Having a lag period in development with an 80 IQ may mean achieving at the 60% level. Belmont and Belmont assert that the diagnosis of a learning disability should be based on children’s performance over a relatively long period of time to see if their performance is just a normal part of development or if it improves over time. While in theory this appears sound, it does not address the consequences for children who are indeed LD and cannot get help or interventions until 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade when they have “proven” their inability to cope with regular instruction in the classroom. It is interesting to note that in their article, Belmont and Belmont list as one of their concerns situations in which there may be “serious negative educational, social, and emotional consequences to designating a child as learning disabled which outweigh the gains accruing from such

labeling.” They do not appear to have considered the consequences of being a child whose early educational experiences consist of a requirement to fail year after year until they have been a “successful failure” long enough to be classified as LD under the above recommendations. The implications of long-term failure will be discussed later, but it is a point worth considering when using long-term failure as primary criteria for differentiating LD and LA.

### **Children Who Are Low Achievers Compared to Children Classified as MMR**

Mental retardation is defined by the American Association of Mental Retardation (2003) as “a disability characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills.” The 1992 educational eligibility criteria for intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior are consistent with the American Association of Mental Retardation 1992 classification guidelines for mental retardation (Luckasson et. al, 1992). These guidelines include, as part of the criteria for mild mental handicap, an intelligence level of 70 or below (which is 2 standard deviations below the mean of 100). Shaw (1999) reviewed the changes that have taken place in the definition of MMR. He points out that

From 1959 to 1953, the American Association on Mental Deficiency (AAMD; now the American Association of Mental Retardation) considered all persons with intelligence test scores between 70 and 85 to have *Borderline Mental Retardation*. In 1973, AAMD changed the upper intelligence test score limits for mental retardation to two standard deviations below the mean. In effect, every person with intelligence test scores between 70 and 85, over 75% of the population previously diagnosed with Mental Retardation, was suddenly no longer considered handicapped. Two years later, P.L. 94-142 was passed into law. . . and also codified mental retardation as two standard deviations below the mean on a measure of intelligence. There was also a general impression that, with P. L. 94-142 (Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975), the needs of all handicapped children would be met by the public schools. Slow learners were left on the outside of this new force in service delivery. (p. 2)

In essence, students who were considered MMR by previous standards and could receive special education services in the schools for the diagnosis, now receive no special services yet continue to have the same deficits previously considered mentally handicapped. Forness, Keogh, Macmillan, Kavale & Gresham (1998), conclude “Many children with low IQ who were previously served in special education are now either the unrecognized problem of general education or are misclassified in other special education categories” (p. 2). The shift in classification guidelines for MMR has left many children with borderline intellectual functioning (now considered children who are low achievers) without services and support in the education system.

### **Alternatives To Current Special Education Assessment**

It is clear from the available data that discriminating children who are low achievers from LD and MMR using cognitive and achievement measurements is currently not a clear process, if indeed it can be accomplished at all with any type of consensus among educators and researchers. An alternative frequently found in literature for how the current system could be revamped, involves measuring both strengths and weakness on curriculum based skills, as opposed to norm referenced testing focused on deficits (Burns, 2002; Reid, Epstein, Pastor & Rysa, 2000; Ryba, 1998; Barnett, Bell, Gilkey, Lentz, Francis, Graden, Stone, Smith, & Mcmann, 1999). Reid, et al. (2000), suggest that the current focus on deficits actually limits the range and type of information collected and may unfairly emphasize a child’s dysfunctional areas. The lack of a strength balance to identified deficits can also serve to limit educators’ knowledge of how a child performs best.

Burns (2002) and Barnett et al. (1999) suggest a model referred to as intervention-based assessment. Its focus is on assessing children in a natural setting in order to design

interventions and monitor their success. There is also a strong component of parental input built into this model that is missing from most current eligibility determinations. Increasing the child's input into the decision making process has also been suggested (Howe, 2001). This would provide educators with the child's experience of his or her academic and school related difficulties and shift focus back onto the individual who has to live with the problems--namely the child.

Ryba (1998) reviews several strategies and components that are involved in what he terms "dynamic assessment and program planning." The contention is that children benefit from assessment when it is done using "meaningful and challenging tasks that are closely related to ones that the student would be expected to perform in the real world" (Hacker & Hatheway, 1991). Ryba (1998) lists three characteristics common to all dynamic assessments: (1) pre-test/intervention/post-test; (2) active participant role of the student and the assessor; and, (3) an analysis of the teaching and learning processes in relation to educational outcomes (p. 9).

Common to all of these alternative models is the idea that assessment measures should reflect both strengths and weaknesses and be intervention focused as opposed to deficit focused. The alternative models above are also broader in scope than the standardized assessments of ability and achievement currently used across the nation to determine which children receive academic help. Another model that provides a framework for person-centered, consistent assessment is the Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health developed by the World Health Organization (World Health Organization ICF Introduction, 2001). Although this model is primarily focused on health issues, it provides a theoretical viewpoint that could potentially be adopted

within the educational system. A more comprehensive discussion of this health model and its potential implications for use in the educational system is provided below.

### **The World Health Organization Model of Disability**

The World Health Organization (WHO) model of disability is called the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF Introduction, 2001), known as the ICF. The ICF is designed to focus not on disability or outcomes of disability, but rather on how health related issues and health interact with an individual's total environment and functioning (ICF Introduction, 2001). This model has been accepted by 191 countries and is considered the standard for describing health and related issues (WHO press release, 2001).

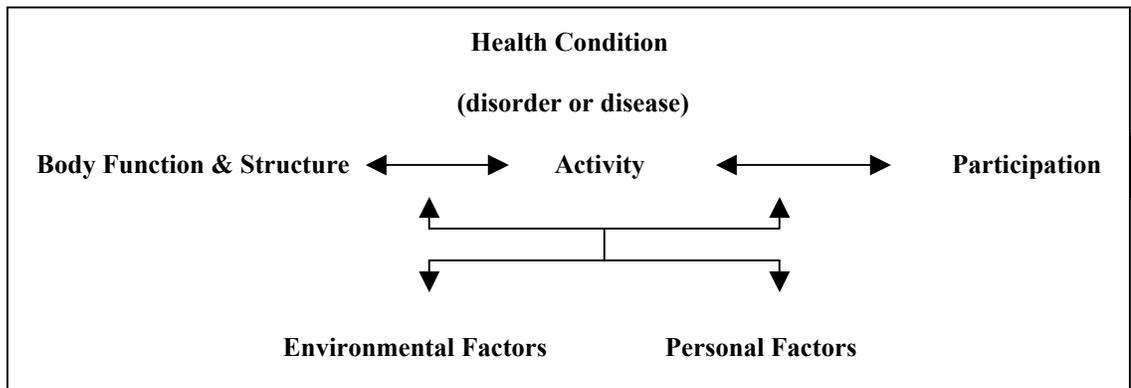
In the ICF introduction on the WHO website, a rationale is provided as to why the model was developed and how it is structured. The ICF is a model developed primarily for two reasons. The first is to provide healthcare workers worldwide with a common way to describe health related issues. This provides a means of information exchange and sharing that is based on common foundations and descriptions. Each component and subset is coded with a number or letter so that every health care provider is able to assess precisely what is being described. For example, 3(d335)(3) would mean that in the area of Communication, specifically the production of non-verbal communication, the person has a severe level (50-90% of the time) of difficulty (ICF, 2001). If a uniform system of terminology such as this was established within the U.S. educational system, the difficulties currently encountered with inconsistency of terminology and disability descriptions from state to state may well be alleviated.

The second goal of the WHO was to develop a model of health classification that does not focus on disability, but rather on how to describe each individual's unique

experience with health related issues. A 2001 WHO press release on the model explains that the ICF “shifts focus to ‘life’, i.e., how people live with their health conditions and how these can be improved to achieve a productive, fulfilling life. It has implications for medical practice; for law and social policy to improve access and treatment; and for the protection of the rights of individuals and groups”(World Health Organization press release, 2001).

The ICF is a multi-layer model that stresses interaction between various domains as well as how each of the domains affects the others. It is a dynamic rather than static model of functioning in that intervention or change at any one of the levels has the ability to change or impact other levels. It is not designed for “disabled” people, but rather is referred to as having a “universal application” because it describes all health related states. (BickenBach, Chatterji, Badley & Ustun, 1999).

The structure of the ICF model is best conceptualized through the chart provided by the World Health Organization:



Source WHO (2001) International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health. Geneva:WHO

Figure 3-1. The model for International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health.

In this model, health conditions are viewed in their relation to three components: Body Function and Structure, Activity and Participation, and Environment.

Body Function and Structure encompasses aspects such as physiological changes in body functions as well as anatomical changes in body structures (ICF, 2001). For example, this may include structural changes in the liver, spinal cord or stomach and/or functional changes in movement and mobility such as movement patterns associated with walking and running or functions associated with ingestion such as chewing and swallowing (ICF, 2001). When there is significant loss in body structure or function, it is called Impairment (ICF Introduction, 2001).

The second component, Activity & Participation, addresses the individual's functioning from his or her own perspective as well as a societal perspective. It is what the person actually *does* in his or her environment. This may include activities such as self-care, communication or learning and applying knowledge. Difficulties in performing these tasks are called Activity Limitations or Participation Restrictions (ICF Introduction, 2001). While separated into two distinct categories on the ICF chart, the WHO has acknowledged that the separation of Activities and Participation is sometimes difficult to accomplish. To simplify this, the World Health Organization has compiled the information in these two areas into one list in the ICF (World Health Organization, October 2001).

The third component of the ICF is Environment. It examines environmental aspects involved in living such as physical, social and attitudinal issues. It addresses individual aspects as well as services and systems in the environment. This may include attitudes of authority figures such as teachers or employers toward the individual, support and relationships or products and technology.

Personal Factors is a category that is not officially included in the ICF, but noted due to its ability to impact the above three components. Types of considerations included here could be an individual's race, ethnicity, upbringing, lifestyle, socio-economic status or fitness.

Finally, the ICF model incorporates a listing of qualifiers that describe the level of difficulty one may have in any particular area. These include levels of difficulty on a graduated scale. These qualifiers rate the level of difficulty in comparison to an average functioning person. The extent of the difficulty can be described as: None, Mild, Moderate, Severe or Complete (ICF, 2001). Corresponding percentages for each level are included for greater uniformity of description and understanding among health care providers.

#### **A Comparison of Two Disability Classification Systems: United States Educational System vs. ICF**

The ICF and Department of Education models of disability are similar in that they are both developed from a health perspective. Neither is designed to address issues that are not health related in some manner. They both also contain provisions for examining multiple components of functioning such as physical, emotional, social and environmental. The models diverge at this point in that using the ICF model, individuals with a health condition are assessed in all areas of functioning, whereas the educational system does not require children who are being considered for special education placement to be assessed in all functional areas. At this point, it is pertinent to discuss the differences in the models' treatment of impact levels and the terminology used to describe abilities. For the ICF, impact levels would be the qualifiers (range of "No difficulty" – "Complete difficulty"). In the state education models there are different

measures of impact depending on the disability and the measures used for assessment. This alone is a notable difference between the two models in that the ICF uses a consistent continuum of qualifiers, whereas the educational system focuses on pre-set levels of difficulty to be reached before services are provided. An example is found in the Florida Statutes and State Board of Education Rules (2001), a published guide of statutes pertaining to eligibility in special education programs in Florida. For the SLD program, the statute lists among its requirements that there be “evidence of a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes required for learning”(6A-6.03018(2)(b) and “evidence of academic achievement which is significantly below the student’s level of intellectual functioning” (6A-03018(2)(c). Further age requirements for this program stipulate that for children under age 7 a “significant discrepancy” exists between IQ and achievement; for children age 7-10 a “discrepancy of one standard deviation or more” between IQ and achievement is required; and for children age 11 and up a “discrepancy of 1 ½ standard deviations is required.” Academically, three different levels of impact are required depending on the age of the child being considered. Conversely, the impact of processing deficits is very loosely defined as simply needing to show “evidence” of a deficit. As reviewed earlier, each state is free to determine its own definitions for statute terms such as “evidence of” and what types of assessment tools must be used to show evidence of discrepancies. Other terms in state and federal legislation regarding special programming for disabilities that are open to interpretation include “sub average,” “below the mean” and “significant” (Kavale & Forness, 2000). Researchers point out that the current models of disability determination in various school systems not only pose inconsistencies from state to state, but from county to

county within states (Gresham, Macmillan & Bocian, 1996; Epps, Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1985). Essentially, this uniformity problem exists on a national level (Gresham, Macmillan & Bocian, 1996). If a model such as the ICF were to be used on a national level in educational systems, it could provide uniform terminology and measurements to be used by all counties and states to convey the needs and difficulties of struggling children.

Another difference between the educational perspective of disability and the ICF is the approach each takes in describing individuals. The ICF starts with the individual and expands out to include how that individual experiences a multitude of life areas. The purpose is to describe the many facets of life that are touched by the health condition. It allows deficits and strengths to be documented. The state school systems focus regarding health conditions is on whether or not the condition meets the criteria for classifying the person in a specific, pre-determined disability group. It is placement driven with deficits as the focus (Barnett, et al., 1999; Ryba, 1998). The state models start with the individual, expand somewhat to investigate the educational impact of the health condition and then constrict again to determine if the findings are sufficient to be categorized under a specific disability. The focus is not to describe the individual experience, but rather to ascertain whether or not the individual's performance meets specific levels of dysfunction (Ryba, 1998). If the education system were to develop a model similar to the ICF, it may lead to more effective interventions for academically struggling children. This could occur in two ways. First, a greater emphasis would be placed on a child's areas of strength, which in turn would allow educators to develop interventions for deficits that build on the child's strengths. For example, a child who has a strength in

solving word problems, but a deficit in numerical calculation problems could learn how to conceptualize numbers through the use of words. The second way a model similar to the ICF could improve upon the current educational model of disability is that the focus on having to meet pre-specified levels of dysfunction in order to get special services would be replaced by individual assessments of any child who is having difficulty functioning in regular classrooms and individually tailored interventions designed to promote success. Currently, children who do not meet policy driven guidelines for special education eligibility receive little to no help or protection in the classroom for their deficits. A model such as the ICF would provide recognition of, and possibly interventions for, various levels of difficulties other than just the most severe.

The scope of the models is also different. Building on the earlier example, the State of Florida eligibility criteria have only one category, mental handicap, which requires the schools to complete a social developmental history and adaptive behavior instrument for eligibility. Conversely, the ICF model gathers information on social and adaptive functioning for all individuals with health related issues. In the ICF model, these areas of functioning are assessed under the category of Activity and Participation. As suggested by the ICF model, there is a factor of inter-relatedness between the various areas of an individual's functioning. This phenomenon of various life areas impacting each other is not addressed in the current educational system model of disability. The following example of how ignoring this phenomenon could impact a child's success in the classroom is offered. Consider that a second grade child is receiving failing grades in the classroom. The teacher also notes that the child seems unusually withdrawn and inattentive. Testing by the school psychologist reveals no significant deficits in the

child's academic abilities on measures of standardized testing. Under the current model of disability, the child would receive no special education services. Now, consider this same child being evaluated based on a multi-dimensional model such as the ICF. In addition to academic ability testing, an interview with the parent is conducted to gather information on the child's social developmental history. This interview reveals that the child has a chronic allergy problem that she takes medication for in the morning. The parent is encouraged to seek the advice of her doctor to ascertain if the medication could be causing tiredness and inattentiveness in the classroom. The parent follows through with the medical consultation and discovers that the medication indeed could be causing problems during the day. The doctor changes the medication dosage and the child's grades subsequently improve. Had the school not sought out the child's medical history, the medication problem may not have been discovered and the child may have continued to struggle in the classroom. In essence, a multi-dimensional model could enhance children's classroom success because it would recognize that deficits in one area of life functioning could be the result of problems or circumstances in an entirely different area of functioning.

Finally, the two models differ in their ability to gather and express information about an individual in a manner that is universal to all care providers. The ICF model offers standard language and consistent means of measurement based on how an individual is experiencing his or her world. One of the ICF goals is to be a universal tool for understanding and comparison of individuals (ICF Introduction, 2001). Conversely, the educational model offers general guidelines that can be implemented using various instruments, measurements and interpretations. As discussed earlier, the lack of

consistency and comparability between state models of special education classifications has been a source of many debates and criticisms (Kidder et al., 2000; Hagan-Burke & Jefferson, 2002; Epps, Ysseldyke, & Algozzine, 1985; Gresham, MacMillan & Bocian, 1996; Gresham, Macmillan & Bocian, 1998; Warner, Dede, Garvan, & Conway, 2002; Kavale & Forness, 2000).

In summary, there is sufficient evidence to indicate that the current system of classification and remediation used to address educational difficulty is not effective on many levels. As a result, it has been suggested that addressing the needs of children with learning difficulties may be better accomplished by providing assistance to *all* children who struggle and that taking a more preventative stance, rather than the current more expensive remedial approach, may be the best system of delivery (Gresham, MacMillan, Bocian, 1996; Lyon, Fletcher, Shaywitz, Shaywitz, Torgesen, Wood, Schulte and Olson retrieved 12/20/02). Models of assessment and assistance, such as those outlined above, are possible alternatives to the current system that is criticized for its lack of scope and poor outcomes. For these systems to be effective, it is important to investigate more thoroughly the experiences and needs of academically struggling children. A multidimensional approach to how children who are low achievers experience the school environment is a key component to understanding how effective interventions can be implemented. Key information can be obtained from teachers who work with struggling children every day and are charged with the task of finding ways to help these children succeed in school.

### **Social Emotional Indicators in Children Who Are Low Achievers**

Going a step beyond achievement and intellectual abilities, some researchers have investigated how LD, MMR and low achievement groups compare on functional

measures of behavior. Merrell & Mertz (1992) demonstrated that it is virtually impossible to distinguish among these three groups on measures that assess how children get along with peers, exhibit pro-social behavior and demonstrate social conformity in the classroom. All three groups were significantly lower in these measures than their academically average performing peers in the classroom. Similarly, Gresham, MacMillan & Bocian (1996) found that on measures of social skills, conduct problems, hyperactivity and inattention, LD, MMR and SL groups were very similar when compared to one another. These three groups were significantly lower in the skill areas of cooperation, assertion and self-control when compared to national normative data. They also displayed elevated scores on measures of externalizing behavior, hyperactivity and inattention.

### **Characteristics of Children Who Are Low Achievers**

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 (Gresham, MacMillan & Bocian, 1996; Gresham, MacMillan & Bocian, 1998; Ysseldyke et al., 1982; MacMillan, Gresham, Siperstein & Bocian, 1996, Epps, Ysseldyke & McGue, 1984). 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 (Shaw, 2/22/02). 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 (Spilerman, 1971; Murphy 1986; Murguia & Telles, 1996). 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 (Haigh, 1977; Raymond, 2000; Lehr, 1988; Griffen, 1978; Hargis, 1997). Actual research that focuses on children who are low achievers has traditionally been embedded in reports regarding disadvantaged children or minority children (Schroth, 1976; Mickelson, 1990; Murphy, 1986; Daniel, 1964; Spilerman, 1971). 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 (Griffen, 1978; Hargis, 1997; Lehr, 1988). In her book, At Risk: Low Achieving Students in the Classroom, Lehr (1988), compiles the following list of possible common characteristics of children who are low achievers (however, no empirical data sources are noted):

- Academic difficulties
- Lack of structure
- Inattentiveness
- Distractibility
- Short attention span
- Low self esteem
- Health problems
- Excessive absenteeism
- Dependence
- Discipline problem
- Narrow range of interest
- Lack of social skills
- Inability to face pressure
- Fear of failure
- Lack of motivation

The literature is clear in describing how children who are low achievers are addressed in the classroom as opposed to their higher achieving peers. Low achieving children are 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 (Kerman, 1979; Wehlage, Rutter & Turnbaugh, 1987; Evertson, 1982; Good, 1981; Murphy, Hallinger & Lotto, 1986).

The lack of published research on sets of characteristics common to children who are low achievers leaves one to wonder why these children's needs are largely ignored. It also lends to the question of why there is little interest in defining the group, as a whole,

as an academic subset rather than in addressing them solely within the context of environmental or racial factors.

### **Short and Long-term Outcomes for Students At Risk**

One could not engage in a dialogue about the consequences of being a student with low achievement without mentioning grade retention. If retention is a looming inevitability for children who cannot keep up and fail in the general curriculum, then the next question to investigate is whether or not retention is a beneficial solution. Many years of research have found that the resounding answer to this question is “No” (Owings & Magliaro, 1998; Jimmerson, 2002; Potter, 1996; Smink, nd).

Academically, retained children may show improvement in the initial stages of the retained year, but those gains decline within 2-3 years of retention when retained children fall back to achieving less than or equal to similar children not retained (Dawson, 1998; Otto, 1951; Butler, 1990; Snyder, 1992). Retained students also score significantly lower on assessments of academic achievement, language arts, reading, math, and social studies when compared to similar students who were promoted (Holmes & Matthew’s as cited in Jimmerson, 2001).

Emotionally, retention is shown to be associated with increased behavioral problems, poor attitude towards school, attendance problems, low self esteem, low social skills and poor social adjustment (Owings, 1998; Jimmerson, 2001; Karweit & Wasik, 1992; Snyder, 1992; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jackson, 1975; Potter, 1996). An interesting study by Byrnes & Yamamoto (2001) looked specifically at children’s views of retention. When interviewing 71 retained elementary students the following responses were reported. When asked how they felt or would feel about being retained, 84% shared feelings such as “sad, “bad” or “upset” and 3% used the word “embarrassed.” When

asked how their parents felt about the retention, 46% said mad, 28% said sad and 8% indicated their parents would not care or react at all. When asked why they thought they had been retained, 25% said not getting good grades and 14% indicated behavior problems (i.e., talk too much, got into fights or played too much)

In response to asking the children if their teachers ever talk about keeping children in the same grade, 70% of the children responded “yes.” Examples of what teachers would say included: “If you don’t want to do it, we won’t force you. You will be here next year too,” “All of you kids who didn’t hand in your papers stand up. These will be the ones that are here next year,” and “If you don’t follow directions, you are going to flunk.” In this research, it appears that retained children not only harbor negative attitudes towards themselves about being retained, but that their perception of parents and teacher response is also negatively focused on them.

Additional research on the effects of retention by Bossing and Brien (1979) found that the threat of non-promotion is not a motivating force for students, retention does not promote more homogeneous classrooms and that conduct and socioeconomic status affected school based decisions for retention for many students. Jimmerson (2001) conducted a meta-analysis of grade retention research and found that 80% of the studies comparing retained students with matched promoted groups concluded that grade retention was not an effective intervention for academic achievement and socio-emotional adjustment.

### **Legislation and Education**

An important issue impacting students and teachers is the recent political focus on changing how the U.S. educational system accounts for its productivity. The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) passed by the U.S. federal government has mandated sweeping

educational reform. As part of this reform, school accountability for student achievement is now expected to be measured on a yearly basis, through the use of standardized testing; states will be expected to establish measurable educational goals for students; and schools will be expected to publicly disclose the progress and achievement levels of their students (National Education Association [NEA], 2003).

A recent analysis of high stakes standardized testing throughout the nation found Florida's system to be both the most aggressive and most academically generalized for students (Green, 2003). This report investigated the question of whether or not the results of high stakes testing really indicated student gains in general learning, or whether students were simply learning skills pertinent to the one high stakes test their state chose to implement for accountability (i.e., "teaching to the test"). Results showed that, in general, the skill mastery measured on high stakes tests correlated with skills measured on other standardized tests of student achievement. However, measuring student gains across time had a much weaker correlation. Of particular interest in this report is the researchers' finding that Florida had the highest correlation (.96) between students' scores on the state's high stakes test (the FCAT) and the states low stakes test (Stanford-9). Florida also had the highest correlation (.71) between these two tests when student's learning gains across time were measured. The authors conclude that, in Florida, the concern that teachers may be, "teaching to the test," rather than teaching generally applicable academic skills does not appear to be founded. They also point out that Florida's unique incorporation of value added measurements (individual student gains from year to year), gives important information about student learning that removes the influences of factors outside the school system such as family income and community

factors. They suggest that, “future research is needed to identify ways in which other school systems might modify their practices to produce results more like those in Florida.” (p. 17)

The above findings of the Manhattan Institute study clearly suggest that Florida is not only achieving success with its implementation of high stakes testing, but that Florida should be a model for other states to emulate when developing accountability practices. It is therefore pertinent to investigate the policies and practices implemented in the state of Florida. In Florida, federal legislation such as P.L. 107-110, called *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* and the Bush/Brogan A+ Plan for Education have had a huge impact on policy and procedure in education. The two guiding principles in these legislative initiatives are:

1. Each student should gain a year’s worth of knowledge in a year’s time in a Florida public school
2. No student will be left behind.  
([www.myflorida.com/myflorida/government/governorinitiatives/aplusplan/index.html](http://www.myflorida.com/myflorida/government/governorinitiatives/aplusplan/index.html))

These federal and state acts take away much of the schools’ autonomy in decisions of achievement standards and retention (Seligman, 2000). In Florida, the practice of social promotion [promoting a child to the next grade based on factors other than grades, i.e., due to previous retentions a child is much older than his same grade peers] has been an option to retention for students who are not performing at grade level. This practice reduced the numbers of retained students by promoting based on a perceived social benefit that outweighs the academic failure. The state’s new A+ Plan “ends the practice of social promotion” (Bush Brogan A+ Plan for Education, 2002).

The governor of Florida issued the following statement on his A+ Plan and how it relates to the practice of social promotion

The core belief behind our A+ Plan is that no child will be left behind. The policy of social promotion (being promoted without demonstration of grade level academic achievement) be eliminated in Florida's public schools. Students will be required to meet standards in order to be promoted to the next grade... With this combination of increased funding and powerful accountability reforms, we can give every Florida child the life-long benefits of a world-class education (Bush Brogan A+ Plan for Education,).

Under this plan the state relies on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) to determine levels of achievement. This is a criterion-referenced test "developed by Florida educators specifically to measure student growth against the Sunshine State Standards." (Bush/Brogan, 2002) (The Sunshine State Standards is the curriculum guide used by teachers in the state of Florida.) Children who do not meet specific levels of performance "must receive remediation or be retained within an intensive program that is different from the previous year's program (Bush/Brogan A+ Plan for Education, 2002). Also included in the states reform policies are measures that "grade" schools based on the results of the FCAT. Students at schools that repeatedly receive failing grades can obtain state funded vouchers to attend other private or public schools. Teacher performance assessments are also partly based on their students' scores on the FCAT.

In response to the new emphasis on accountability in education, reflected in federal and state government legislation, Seligman (2000) clearly articulates at least one opposing viewpoint in the following statement

The argument behind the accountability mantra marches forward more or less as follows: (a) Every child is capable of learning a lot (b) Low achievement must therefore be the fault of the schools. (c) Teachers and principals must therefore be held accountable, losing out on pay raises when their students fail the tests certifying academic achievement. (d) We should not allow the promotion of kids who haven't yet learned what they're supposed to. (e) And, finally, if we take this high academic road, we shall be rewarded in the end by huge gains in academic achievement (p238).

Seligman (2000) responds to the accountability expectations with the statement

Statement (a) is a great applause line but regrettably not true: Students differ enormously in learning ability, and a significant minority of them never learn to read well or to handle long division, and are totally defeated by algebra, physics and high school generally. (p. 238)

In summary, there appear to be very differing opinions on the effectiveness of education legislation regarding the issue of accountability. Educational legislation focuses on factors external to the child such as providing educational support programs for children, mandating specific goals that children must attain before moving on to the next grade and holding schools and teachers responsible for students who do not attain specified goals. Highly critical viewpoints of accountability legislation, such as Seligman's, are centered on the premise that some children lack the internal capabilities to meet accountability standards regardless of the supports they are provided in the classroom. An interesting observation regarding these two points of view is that neither appears to disagree with the premise of having student goals in the education system. Where they differ is on how failure to meet achievement goals is addressed (consequences) and on how much student achievement depends on the educational system versus the individual student's innate abilities. Legislative initiatives are seemingly focused on the best interests of the majority of children, whereas viewpoints such as Seligman's are more concerned with the impact legislative policies will have on a relative minority of children.

The impact that accountability policies may have on teachers, and subsequently their students, is another issue to consider. In light of the teacher self-efficacy research outlined previously, it appears important to investigate how teachers' feelings of self-efficacy are impacted by legislative pressures to bring low achieving children up to expected academic standards. Since self-efficacy and student achievement has been

shown to be positively correlated, a decline in teacher self-efficacy could potentially have a negative impact on children who are low achievers. Because these higher accountability policies are relatively new, their impact on teachers' sense of self-efficacy has not been investigated. Teachers' beliefs as to whether or not they are able to meet new accountability requirements with their most challenging students could be an important component of those students' academic success.

### **Low Achievement, Retention, and Dropping Out of School**

As previously discussed, children who are low achievers are at risk for retention. Retention is the number one predictor of school dropout (Rumberger, 1995). The most common characteristic of children who drop out of school is poor academic success/achievement (Eckstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; McDill, Natriello & Pallas, 1986; Scanlon & Mellard, 2002). Because the risk of drop out is high for children who are low achievers, it is important to investigate the possible outcomes faced by students who choose to drop out.

According to the Bureau of Census, in 2000 10.9% of high school students dropped out of school. This number represents the children who actually formally dropped out. The children who simply stopped attending school are not included in the statistical data and therefore the number of dropouts could be higher.

The 2001 Condition of Education compiled by the U.S. Department of Education indicates that 44% of high school students who dropped out in 2000 were not competitively employed. LD students had a 33% graduation rate in 1999 and a three-year follow up of LD students in 1990 showed that 63% were competitively employed with an average annual salary of \$6,932. Only 34% of LD students lived independently. MR students had a 26% graduation rate, and a 1990 three-year follow up indicated that 40%

were competitively employed with an average annual salary of \$3,078. Fifteen percent of MR students were living independently (NCES, 2000).

The Condition of Education 2002 indicates that children who dropped out of high school earned 27-30% less than peers who obtained a diploma or GED (Indicator 16). This report goes on to state that high school dropouts are more likely to receive public assistance than high school graduates who did not go to college (Indicator 19). When employed, female dropouts are less likely to experience job satisfaction (Kaplan & Damphousse, 1994). Kaplan and Damphousse (1994) also investigated mental health consequences of not graduating high school and found that it increases the risk of psychological dysfunction such as self-esteem.

A number of health related characteristics are also associated with high school dropouts. There is a high incidence of substance abuse among dropouts as well as an increased incidence of smoking and unprotected sex ("Health Risk," 1994). Women who drop out have a lower likelihood of getting mammograms, are more likely to smoke during pregnancy and have a higher infant mortality rate (Kimsey, 1995). Dropouts are also less likely to have health insurance (McManus, 1989). Kimsey (1995), in a letter presenting excerpts from a report from the National Center for Disease Control, reports a high death rate for high school dropouts.

Stephens and Repa (1992) found that a large number of prison inmates are also high school dropouts. They postulate that the idle time and unemployment after drop out may play a "crucial role" (p 5) in distinguishing between dropouts who commit crimes and those who do not.

As outlined above, dropping out of school is associated with a multitude of personal and societal problems. Because low achievement is the most common characteristic among dropouts, it may be that children who are low achievers are at increased risk for these problems.

### **Characteristics of Children Who Drop Out**

Dropouts are disproportionately from a low SES (Eckstrom et al., 1986; MacMillan, 1991; National Center for Educational Statistics, table 310, 2002). Dropouts have a higher incidence of behavioral problems such as cutting class, being suspended, or having a behavioral disability (Eckstrom, 1986, Scanlon & Mellard, 2002). They also are more likely to come from a home environment that has little educational support (Okey, 1995, Eckstrom, 1986). Research by Eckstrom in 1986 concluded that, “Problem behavior and grades appear to be determined in part by home educational support system. Mothers’ educational aspiration for student, number of study aids in home, parental involvement in extracurricular choice and provision of opportunities for non-school learning all affect school academic performance” (p. 371). Another characteristic strongly associated with dropping out is being a member of a racial or ethnic minority (Eckstrom, 1986; Scanlon & Mellard, 2002; Jeffries, 2002; Tan, 2001; Wayman, 2002). Hispanic children who are born outside of the United States have the highest dropout rate at 44% (Condition of Education 2002, Indicator 23)

Children who drop out have common emotional indicators. Studies show that these children tend to have less interest in school, do not view themselves as important or popular in the school setting, and have a more externalized locus of control in comparison to children who choose to stay in school (Eckstrom, 1986; Scanlon & Mellard, 2002;).

Research findings regarding other factors that are catalysts for drop out include behavioral difficulties and student perceptions that school personnel do not care (Scanlon & Mellard, 2002; Eckstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Fine, 1986; MacMillan, 1991; Tan, 2001; Chinien & France, 2001; Wayman, 2002).

### **Approaches to Educating Children With Low Achievement**

As cited in Jimmerson's meta-analysis (2001), techniques that appear to be the most effective intervention strategies when educating students with learning difficulties include:

- Mnemonic strategies (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1989)
- Enhancing reading comprehension (Talbot, Lloyd & Tankersley, 1994)
- Behavior modification (Skiba & Casey, 1985)
- Direct instruction (White, 1988)
- Cognitive behavior modification (Robinson, Smith, Miller & Brownell, 1999)
- Formative evaluation (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1986)
- Early intervention (Castro & Mastropieri, 1986)

Techniques that may help prevent retention have been suggested by Glaser (1990) and include modeling or relating school work directly to student interests or needs, obtaining superior work quality from students by postponing grading until students revise and correct inadequate work, allowing group work on assignments and tests, allowing time frames that match the student's ability rather than strict time frames in which all students should master a topic and focusing on quality rather than quantity of work samples. Weber and Sechler (1987) assert that the following characteristics are found in successful drop out prevention programs: classrooms with low student to teacher ratio, holistic and multifaceted approaches to education, teacher willingness to establish relationships with students that are more demanding than average, motivational strategies

related to the real world and instruction with some degree of individualized teaching and learning.

### **Self-Efficacy and Academic Success**

Self-efficacy is a concept that some researchers believe will affect both teacher success in implementing strategies as well as student success in mastering learning (Schunk, 1985, Carns & Carns, 1991; Bandura, 2001). Self-efficacy is an individual's own belief that he or she is able to successfully carry out certain behaviors that will result in a desired outcome (Bandura, 1977a, 1977b). Frequently cited in this area of study, is social learning theorist Albert Bandura's theory of perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977a). Not only does Bandura assert that self-efficacy affects the final outcome of behaviors, but also that self-efficacy determines the amount of time and energy that is exerted on a task once it is undertaken. In a research study on student perceptions of self-efficacy and how they affect achievement performance, Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Pastorelli (1996) found that:

- Parent's sense of academic efficacy and aspirations for their children were linked to their children's scholastic achievement
- Children's beliefs in their efficacy to regulate their own learning and academic attainment in turn, contributed to scholastic achievement
- Familial socioeconomic status was linked to children's academic achievement indirectly through its effects on parental aspirations and children's pro-socialness
- Children's feelings of self-efficacy promoted pro-social behavior and reduced vulnerability to feelings of futility and depression. (p.1206)

Schunk (1985) also found that raising self-efficacy in itself is an effective goal for teachers when trying to improve student's academic performance.

Self-efficacy can also impact teacher success in implementing classroom strategies and working with particular groups of students (Schunk, 1985). Teacher efficacy can

explain differences in teaching effectiveness (Berman & McLaughlin, 1977) and predict teaching behavior in the classroom (Hastings & Brown, 2002). A teacher's sense of self-efficacy has also been shown to positively correlate with student success (Allinder, 1995; Ashton & Webb, 1986).

Educators with high teaching self-efficacy are more likely to try out new, more difficult techniques and share more control with their students (Czerniak & Schriver-Waldon, 1991; Dutton, 1990; Hani, Czerniek & Lumpe, 1996; Riggs & Enochs, 1990, Ross, 1992). Ross (1998) also contends that teachers with high teaching self-efficacy try harder with students, use techniques that increase student autonomy and attend more to low achieving students needs. Teachers with low teaching self-efficacy have been found to be less persistent in teaching children who are low achievers because they feel that no amount of schooling or teacher skills will affect achievement in low achieving students (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Gibson & Dembo, 1984)

Because teachers' perceptions of their efficacy has been shown to affect student achievement outcomes, a vital component in examining the needs of children who are low achievers is to assess how teachers feel about their abilities to teach children who struggle academically.

### **Summary**

The need for further study of children who are low achievers is reflected in literature findings that highlight the following pertinent issues:

- Questionable practices concerning the current methods of determining special educational placement for struggling school children
- The lack of educational support for low achieving children despite their academic and socio-emotional similarity to children placed in special education programs.

- The possible negative impacts low achievement has on children while in school and throughout adult life.
- The resulting negative impact on society when low achieving children receive poor educational experiences or drop out of school.
- The overall lack of research on this very large (and largely overlooked) group of children in our public education system.
- The current political trend to improve the educational experiences of all children that focuses on meeting educational standards that children who are low achievers, by definition, have particular difficulty achieving.

Based on the theory that teacher self-efficacy beliefs are an important factor in the academic achievement of children who are low achievers, it is vital to ascertain what teachers perceive to be the barriers that prevent children who are low achievers from succeeding. Teachers not only are directly charged with educating all children, but they are the mediators by which legislative mandates, intervention techniques and educational curriculums will be implemented. Teacher perceptions and beliefs regarding how children who are low achievers experience the classroom and the ability of these children to learn affect the daily educational experiences of this group of students. The barriers that teachers perceive to be hindering the academic success of children who are low achievers need to be investigated in order to develop interventions and programs that teachers believe will assist them in addressing these children's needs.

## CHAPTER 4 MATERIALS AND METHODS

### **Participants**

Ten public elementary school teachers and three students who were low achievers from a rural Central Florida county participated in the study. The ten teachers were interviewed and the three students who were low achievers were observed in the classroom setting. Participants were chosen using a purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 1990). As described by Patton (1990), purposeful sampling is a concept that involves the selection of, “information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study.” (p. 169). Ten participants were chosen in order to gain perspective from two teachers at each grade level 1<sup>st</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup>.

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 (Patton 1990). School sites used as participant pools were chosen based on several factors that suggested that these sites might be information rich sources. The three elementary schools selected had large numbers of minority and low socio-economic status students. Minority status and low SES have been shown to be strongly associated with low achievement (Mickelson, 1990; Murphy, 1986; Daniel, 1964; Biddle, 1997; Crooks, 1995). It was felt that teachers at these schools may have had experiences teaching a substantial number of students who belong to at least one of these groups and consequently would have had experience teaching many students who were low achievers.

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. They were asked to recommend individuals they considered to be excellent teachers as well as good communicators. The recommended teachers were then approached to determine if they were willing to participate in this study. It was explained to potential participants that approximately one hour of interview time would be involved. Pseudonyms were given to each participant to protect their identity. Interview participants also consented to reading their transcribed interviews for accuracy. Though not required for participation, teachers were asked if they would participate in the review of data analysis drafts to strengthen the credibility of the research findings.

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.

An IRB approved permission form was signed by all teachers and also sent home to each child’s parent to obtain permission for observation. An overview of the teacher interview participants is provided below.

Name	Grade Taught At Time of Interview	Degree/State Obtained	Total Number of Years Teaching
Elizabeth	1 <sup>st</sup>	Bachelors/Florida	21
Marion	1 <sup>st</sup>	Bachelors/Florida	27
Lindy	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Bachelors/Florida	20
Maryellen	Resource: K-5 (previous teaching at 2nd grade level)	Bachelors/Illinois Masters/Florida	12
Susan	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Bachelors/Florida	2
Kaye	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Bachelors/Florida	23
K.C.	4 <sup>th</sup>	Bachelors/Florida Masters/Florida	26
Fay	4 <sup>th</sup>	Masters/Florida	10
Maggie	5 <sup>th</sup>	Bachelors/West Va. Masters/Florida	20
Jay	5 <sup>th</sup>	Bachelors/Vermont Masters/ Vermont	27
			Mean =18.8

Figure 4-1 Overview of teacher interview participants

### 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.

### **Design and Procedure**

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). Due to the lack of information found in current literature on the general subject of children who are low achievers as well as the absence of any literature regarding teacher perspectives of these students, a qualitative research design was utilized in this study to bring to light issues teachers view as pertinent to the success of children who are low achievers in the classroom and present them for future inquiries.

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.

Qualitative interviews are a means of accessing what the perspectives are of those being interviewed. Those spoken perspectives become the living data that the researcher analyzes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The quality of the data is rooted in the interviewer's accurate interpretation and understanding of the interviewee's words. It was necessary for the interviewer to frequently ask for clarification or expansion of the interviewee's responses in order to gain an accurate understanding. As a result, every interview followed its own unique path to understanding. These ongoing response inquiries were

made to reduce the confounding effects that personal biases and perspectives held by the interviewer could have on data collection (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Low achieving student observations were conducted in the classroom setting for approximately one hour. Teachers were asked to suggest a time for observation that was convenient to them and the least disruptive to their classroom atmosphere. Teachers were also asked to choose a time or activity they felt would best represent the observed child's typical functioning in the classroom. This researcher spent approximately 15 to 20 minutes in the classroom prior to the formal observation time in order for the children to become familiar with my presence. This was done due to this researcher's prior experience observing in the elementary classroom when children have been noted to initially be very curious about a new person in their environment. If children became curious and asked "why" I was there, they were told that I was there to observe the teacher. On previous occasions, this researcher has found that this reasoning generally serves to assuage children's curiosity and/or suspicions. During the one-hour formal evaluation, every attempt was made to observe the participant student without letting him or her know that they were specifically being targeted for observation. Brief notations regarding observer thoughts or observations were taken during the observation when needed. Full-length observational data was written immediately upon conclusion of each observation.

### **Analysis**

Tape-recorded interviews were transcribed by the investigator. Following transcription, participants were given a copy of their interview to review for accuracy. Hand written observational notes were typed into the NVivo software program for qualitative data analysis. The NVivo software program, developed for qualitative data

analysis, was used to compile and code the data. This program allows for large amounts of data contained in transcribed documents to be reduced to smaller subsets of themes, categories, and codes. It allows for flexibility in re-coding and re-conceptualization of constructs as they arise in the analysis of data. It also allows for easy comparison between data sets within and between transcribed documents.

Data analysis entailed microanalysis of the interview transcripts and observation notes. As described by Strauss and Corbin (1998), microanalysis involves

The detailed line-by-line analysis necessary at the beginning of a study to generate initial categories (with their properties and dimensions) and to suggest relationships among categories; a combination of open and axial coding. (p. 57)

Interview data was analyzed using the constant comparative method of qualitative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This method is concerned with “generating and plausibly suggesting (but not provisionally testing) many categories, properties, and hypotheses about general problems” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 104).

Using this constant comparative method, data was continually analyzed and reanalyzed for emerging conceptual categories, sub-components of categories, and interrelationships of categories and concepts. A brief outline is provided below, but a description of this method is more fully detailed in Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1998).

The first step of the constant comparative method is the breakdown of text into discrete areas of similar data concepts. These similar content areas are then grouped into categories. With each interview analysis, data is analyzed as to its fit into existing categories and also for the existence of new categories. If new categories are formed, previous interviews are reanalyzed for data fitting the new conceptual category. Second, categories are analyzed for various properties that are comprised within them. Data is

reanalyzed for comparison of the incident to the properties within the category. This allows for the deeper inspection of motives or perspectives that give rise to the general categories.

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.”

Once information was grouped under similar content categories, it was re-examined for broader thematic content. As data emerged from the content categories, it was determined that two themes, home-based barriers and educational system barriers, encompassed all of the data collected from participants. The similar content groups were then re-grouped together under the appropriate thematic area. The data within each similar content area was then reanalyzed for fit within the theme. There were some instances, such as with the similar content node of “Feelings of Children Who Are Low Achievers,” when data within the node covered both home and school related feelings. In this instance, all of the data related to the feelings of children who are low achievers about their home was moved to a separate node titled “Feelings-Home” and moved under the theme of “Home Based Barriers.”

Throughout the analysis process, each piece of supporting data within the nodes is constantly reexamined for fit and appropriateness within the node and similar content area where it is placed. Even in the last thematic stages of analysis, new concepts emerged from the data, requiring the researcher to start back at the beginning process of a line-by-line inspection of each interview and working through the entire analysis process again.

As prescribed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) for this method of analysis, data was analyzed until saturation was reached. Saturation is the point at which data properties and categories have become rich with description and depth, and the addition of further data only serves to further illustrate what is already well established.

Final results of the research are presented within the framework of the two themes that emerged, with support for each theme represented by conceptual and discrete category data.

Two constructs of great importance in qualitative study are trustworthiness and credibility. The first construct, trustworthiness, is the extent to which the researcher's interpretations correctly reflect the phenomenon being studied. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) point out that *time* is an essential factor in developing trustworthy research results. The more time a researcher spends in the environment being studied, the more opportunities there are to observe a wide range of interactions and events. It gives a broader view of the participant's world and the events that shape his or her perceptions and feelings. Time spent with interview participants building relationships lends to more honest and comprehensive dialogue once the interview process has begun. Creating an interview atmosphere that is unrushed and relaxed allows participants to feel comfortable

expanding on thoughts or ideas and fosters confidence that the interviewer is interested in what they have to share. Likewise, investment of time in the interview process helps to ensure that the interviewer is not ignoring possible topics for exploration or clarification for the sake of time constraints. In this study, participants were given copies of the interview format at least one week prior to their scheduled interview. This allowed them to think about the topics and formulate some of their thoughts prior to the interview. As one participant expressed, “teachers don’t like to *take* pop quizzes!” Many of the teachers thanked the researcher for the topics ahead of time and shared that it helped them feel better prepared and therefore more comfortable about being recorded. Some teachers also expressed that having the questions ahead of time gave them the opportunity to, “think about things they have never really had to put into words before.” The fact that I had spoken with all of the participants previously in my role as a school psychologist, seemed to me to make the interview process more informal and comfortable. I was someone with whom they were familiar who had some idea of the day-to-day experiences they go through. To ensure enough time was spent with each participant, each one was asked to set the time and place of the interview themselves. There were a few occasions when the interview was rescheduled at the participant’s request due to unforeseen events occurring or, in one case, the participant just being too tired at the end of a difficult day. Several interviews took place in two sessions because of time pressures. If a participant had a great deal of insight to share or if the interview took a new path or direction, a second session was scheduled so that participants would not feel rushed to share their thoughts or reluctant to expound on topics that could provide valuable data.

The use of multiple data sources is another method of increasing the trustworthiness of research results. The utilization of more than one type of data collection is called “triangulation” (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 24). Triangulation methods were implemented in this research project by the collection of data through teacher interviews as well as observations of children who are low achievers in the classroom setting. As explained by Glesne and Peshkin (1992), the use of multiple data sources, “is not to negate the utility of, say, a study based solely on interviews, but rather to indicate that the more sources tapped for understanding, the more believable the findings” (p. 24).

The second construct of importance, credibility, is essentially the degree to which your research findings can be verified by some other means (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Steps to enhance credibility allow the researcher to avoid misconstrued research findings due to personal bias, assumptions, or simply misinterpreting data. To ensure credibility of this research project, the researcher employed the following methods suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985):

- Enlistment of an outside “auditor” to review field notes and subsequent analysis and interpretations.
- Sharing the interpretive process with interview participants

The outside auditors enlisted for this study were two of this researcher’s committee members, a graduate student peer and a teacher not involved in the study. Working drafts of the analysis were provided to these outside auditors to review and provide input regarding the development of codes, application of codes and interpretation of field notes.

Interview participants shared in the interpretive process on two levels. First, they reviewed their own interview transcripts for accuracy of content. Second, they were

asked to review a final working draft of the research. As outlined by Glesne and Peshkin (1992), this review of the drafts provides an opportunity for participants to “(1) verify that you have reflected the insider’s perspectives; (2) inform you of sections that, if published, could be problematic for either personal or political reasons; and (3) help you to develop new ideas and interpretations.” (p. 147)

A statement of researcher bias is also included (Appendix B) so that readers are aware of the experiences and beliefs held by this researcher that have the potential to affect how data is collected and interpreted. As outlined above, steps have been taken to eliminate as much researcher bias as possible in the collection and interpretation of data.

The following themes, categories and relationships which resulted from this research effort are presented as an emerging model for understanding the phenomenon of children who are low achievers in the elementary classroom from a teacher perspective.

## CHAPTER 5 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.

Among study participants, there was a general consensus that children who are low achievers would be able to perform better academically if environmental factors in their lives were more responsive to their needs. Having a low IQ was never identified as the single “reason” that children who are low achievers had difficulty, but rather as an individual factor that when acted upon by forces outside a child’s control resulted in poor academic performance.

Teachers believed that given the appropriate learning environment and family support, children who are low achievers could become higher academic achievers and in turn more productive adults. Unfortunately, the current outlook for their academic success appears less than optimistic. The two primary areas of difficulty, home support

and school climate, will be discussed to gain a better understanding of the factors these study participants felt must be addressed in order for children who are low achievers to experience success in the educational system.

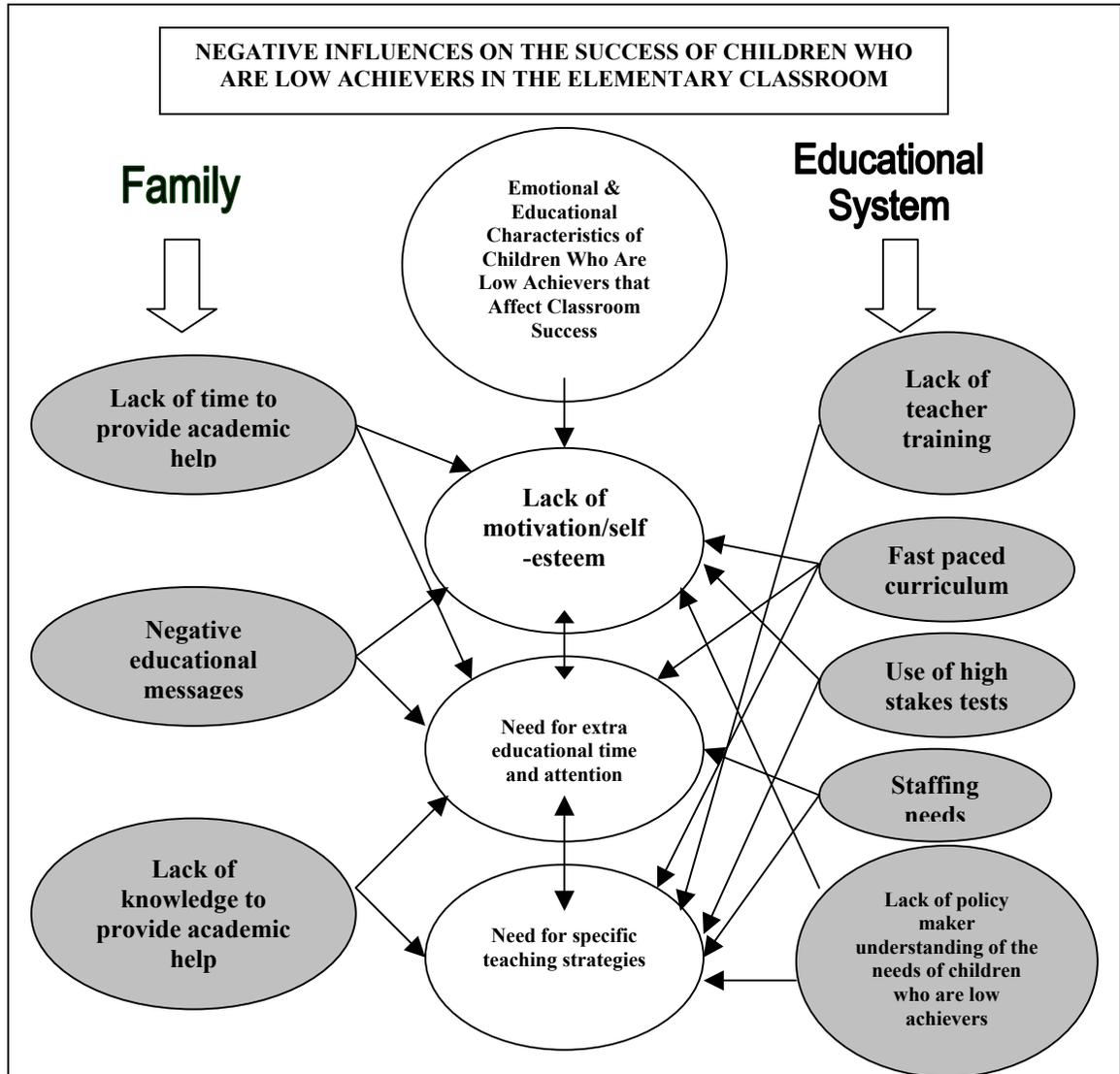


Figure 5-1. Negative influences on the success of children who are low achievers in the elementary classroom

### The Family

“I am born” From Charles Dickens *David Copperfield*, 1850

There appear to be factors working against children who are low achievers from the moment they come into the world. The home-life of children who are low achievers was

a persistent concern with all teachers. Surprisingly, teachers expressed that the intellectual level of children who are low achievers was second to their home-life situation in relationship to its impact on academic functioning. In interview after interview, teachers described the home environments of many low achieving children as being generally stressful, having few financial resources and poorly educated parents. As will be explained, where these children come from plays an important part in how they ultimately perform in the classroom. First, let us set the stage for how these children experience their worlds prior to attending school.

It seems that children who are low achievers are often not the first generation in their families to struggle academically. Many of the parents of children who are low achievers appear to have struggled in school when they were young, just as their children do now.

Maggie: Usually, just from my own personal experience, the families don't have the educational background either. Sometimes the parents are low achievers just like the students are low achievers.

Fay: Every year, because I teach GED on Thursdays, I have two or three parents per class, "I need to join your class because I never got my diploma."

The lack of a good parental educational background more often than not results in low paying jobs. Teachers described the families of children who are low achievers as frequently being, "low income," "not well to do," "low socioeconomic" and "not having resources." Low achieving parents were often characterized as having to work long hours and/or multiple jobs to make ends meet.

### **How Home-life Affects Education**

The common thread among all teacher descriptions of the homes of children who are low achievers is the presence of stress. It seems as though the stories of children who

are low achievers and their families consistently come back to “don’t have.” There is a cyclical pattern that emerges within these families. Parents work long hours because they “don’t have” the financial resources they need; because they work long hours they “don’t have” time or energy to help their children with homework; and when parents do find the time and muster the energy to spend, they sometimes “don’t have” the knowledge or patience to help with the homework. The result of all this is that the children “don’t have” the home support they need to reach their academic potential; when children perform poorly in school they often grow up to have low paying jobs or multiple jobs and the cycle continues. The implication of these “don’t have” on the education of children who are low achievers will be explored in the following section.

### **Lack of Money**

One result of parents working multiple jobs and spending long hours at work is that time and energy become precious commodities. In the process of providing their family with the basic necessities, parents often have to make other familial sacrifices. Support of their children’s education is perceived by teachers to be one of the sacrifices that these families often make.

One teacher spoke to the direct part finances play in the ability of parents to be involved in their child’s education in that some families simply cannot afford to participate. When every dollar these families make is dedicated to food, clothing and shelter, any outside expenses, no matter how small, become secondary in importance.

Fay: They [the parents] can’t come to school for too much extra because they don’t have a way to get here. You know, “my mom didn’t have gas money.” And I know the feeling, when you don’t have gas money, you don’t have gas money. It’s not like you have a \$100 savings...you don’t have anything!

## Lack of Time

A more indirect aspect of financial stress that appeared to affect parent involvement was *time*. Teachers expressed that *time* was a primary issue in parental support difficulties. Many parents were perceived as too busy with just meeting their child's basic needs to have time to assist their kids with schoolwork. Food, clothing and shelter take priority over education, and teachers do not find fault with that mindset per se. What seems to be difficult for teachers is that they are stuck between empathy for the family situation on one hand and the child's educational needs on the other. Parents not having the time to assist their children with schoolwork was consistently cited by teachers as being a problem. Homework assignments often are incomplete, incorrect or simply not done at all. Furthermore, the home review and reinforcement of concepts that these children require in order to be successful often does not occur.

K.C: Homework? I can't rely on it because I've got to have somebody to help them...unfortunately. And I'm not blaming the parent because I know some of these [kids] have single moms so they're working 8 hours a day. Some of them have 2 jobs. Some of them, they're tired, so when mom gets home we're going to eat dinner, take a bath and we're gonna go to bed.

Fay: A lot of them don't know [how to do homework]. I still think some of them don't care. And not that they don't care if their kid's not successful, it's not their priority to care...you know they need to feed this child, so who cares about the homework? They take care of six other kids, who cares about the homework? They have three jobs to work. They need to make sure the sitter is with this child, who cares about the homework?

In a specific example of parents not supporting their child's education, K.C. addressed both how it can affect the grades of a child who is a low achiever as well as how frustrating the situation can be for teachers.

We require a project each nine weeks. Well, when you might only have seven grades, one [low] grade may tear your average to shreds. Well, one of them was to build a volcano. They had every direction and it really didn't require a whole lot of supplies. Dirt, and empty soup can, baking soda and vinegar. But believe it or not,

I had about 5 kids that did not do it. I did everything but do it for them. You've got dirt and you could find a soup can...plus I had all that. But, I draw the line to a certain point. Like, meet me half way parents. Show your child that you care about their education too. This was a home project, a homework project. Plenty of time to do it. If they didn't turn it in that day, they had until the end of the nine weeks to finish it and it would still have counted. The parents sometimes say, "Oh well." And that could be an average kid, but sometimes it's lower achievers, which hurts their grade.

One frustration with home assignments noted by several teachers, was a lack of parental response to teacher requests for their help at home. Teachers attempt to communicate the importance of support at home through the use of daily agendas, notes home and calls to parents. Teachers frequently reported that when they tried to communicate to parents what needed to be done at home, parents often gave them "lip service" or said "the right things" when talking to them, but would not follow through.

Jaye: I see more so with this here in this environment lack of support at home. You know they promise, "Yes I will check their work at home, yes I will check their agenda" which is their homework assignments and "I'll make sure it gets done, that they have time to do it" and it doesn't get done... I mentioned the agenda, which is the notebook that the school system supplies, I check that daily. I mark things when they are done, I write things in there when they are not done. I correspond in those daily to parents and I let them know that I check them daily. There are some kids that you know they lost them [the agendas], the parents don't know, they haven't seen an agenda for months. I ask them to look at it once a week, that's all, just once a week look at it and go through it. And it doesn't get done. You know I will write notes in there that I want answers in that notebook and I don't hear from the parents. Till sometimes it's a phone call [because] they are having a problem. Oh yes, lots of promises when you call them, but nothing happens, you know? I get lip service. They say the right things, but they don't follow through on any of them.

### **Other Factors in the Home**

When parents *do* have or make time to help with schoolwork, there are other problems that arise. Some parents, because of their own educational struggles, are unable to understand the work enough to help.

Fay: A lot of these parents don't have an education base themselves. I don't think their educational experiences are the best or the most positive. A lot of them didn't

finish school... Some of them can't even do the homework I send home for the kids, so how can we expect their kids to do it?

K.C.: Again, strictly observation, a lot of times the parent can't do it because they didn't learn it either. So, their level of intelligence... it's embarrassing. They don't want their child knowing that they don't understand it either. I've had parent conferences with them, and they've been in tears because, "I can't help them because I don't know how to do it...I don't understand it."

Helping their children can also be difficult or frustrating for parents because of the high level of assistance that children who are low achievers require.

K.C.: ...the low achievers, they need constant approval, constant reassurance...the parents don't have the patience after 8 hours of work or more, particularly the mom. It's a time factor. The child's going slowly and they don't allow the child time to work. So it's like, "Just, here, let me do it for you and then you write the answer. I'll write it for you." Well, what are we telling the child? We're telling them they're a failure. "You can't do it, let me do it for you..."

In the same way stressed parents become frustrated with homework, there are other areas of home-life that are affected by stress. Two teachers specifically talked about how stressors in the home can at times result in a more generalized negative emotional climate. K.C. spoke of the arguing that can be a result of financial stressors whereas Jaye drew upon her own personal experiences of living in a high stress, low income family.

K.C.: I had mentioned background experiences, but I also think that the lower achievers come from homes that are not well to do. That's stereotyping, I know, but that's just observation....You've got parents that are arguing. What are they arguing about? They're arguing about money.

Jaye: I think there is anger at home, you know, lousy jobs, lousy life, lousy--You know some people use anger to deal with that. [reflecting on family stress later in interview] I probably had a better family situation but there were still a lot of problems there too. You know I can understand them coming to school tired cause Dad screamed at Mom all night, and that is tough.

### **Home Life Summary**

To summarize, two primary themes were noted. The first is that teachers view family support of education and involvement in education as vital components in the

educational experiences of children who are low achievers. Because of this belief, teachers consider the family issues discussed above to be key barriers to the academic success of children who are low achievers. In essence, when home support is not given, for whatever reason, the child's academic performance suffers. Though expressed in different ways, teachers explained how family support/involvement could make the difference between a child experiencing success versus failure in the classroom.

Susan: The ones who don't call, who don't care? You can see the difference in the children, how much they achieve compared to the ones where the parents *do* help them and they strive to succeed.

Elizabeth: ...our curriculum is geared for those low achievers, but it is demanding, it does push them. Those parents have got to be home to give them what we ask for--help, reinforce, go over the daily work. We send home with the children our homework paper every day. A short reminder to the parents to look over this, this is what you can do tonight...to hey, you need to start pitching in because this is not a one sided game, this takes a team effort here. What goes on here, we need to reinforce it at home and visa versa.

The second theme to be noted is that teachers appear to be trying to walk a tightrope between being advocates for the needs of the children who are low achievers and being sensitive to unfortunate family circumstances. Teachers see daily how detrimental the cycle of low achievement can be and want children who are low achievers to break out of that cycle. My interpretation of what teachers were saying in regard to their dilemma with children who are low achievers and family support is as follows: Teachers truly care about these children and they want them to succeed. The emotion in their faces and voices when talking about low achieving children and their families was that of concern for the child and understanding for the families that they see as doing the best they can to survive. If these teachers had one common trait, it would be that they are compassionate beings. They have a deep understanding of others suffering and feel a need to relieve it. At the same time there is an underlying current of frustration that is felt

because teachers view a good education as being the primary pathway for children who are low achievers to improve their quality of life. How do teachers approach parents who are barely making ends meet, overworked, under tremendous stress, tired, and emotionally on edge and tell them that they need to do more? How do teachers weigh the importance of a child's education against the need for that child to be provided the basic necessities of life? While teachers are compassionate about the family situation, they also are frustrated because they feel that unless the families of children who are low achievers take a more active role in the child's education, the child is destined to continue the cycle of low achievement with their own lives and children.

Kaye explained her belief that teachers need to have a holistic understanding of where these children come from when trying to address the struggles children who are low achieving experience in school.

I think the very first thing you have to think about is where do these kids come from when they come to us? For example, a child with parents who are both working, struggling, trying to make ends meet. They might not even talk to their children. They might come to school with like a 3,000 word vocabulary where most average children are at 20,000-word vocabulary. At the very beginning of school they are below the average.

[Kaye continues later to talk about stressors in the home]... Usually there's a very difficult time having them [parents] come into conferences. They are very busy. Some of them work more than one job. Or a family that has no job and they're really struggling to survive in this world. The children, even if they don't say it to their children, the children know they're having trouble. You find their newsletter and papers all in their desk you go, "Hasn't your mother asked for these?" and they say, "No, she wouldn't ask for those."

A statement made by Lindy addresses her belief that these children already have one "strike" against them in having lower IQ's and that the addition of family stressors only serves to compound that problem.

Lindy: I think another thing that really pops in my mind when I think about what makes the difference, or can make the difference either negatively or positively, is

their home environment... because they've already got a strike against them, in that they just simply were, you know... genes, the gene pool. They weren't born with that automatic, you know, hey, we're born to certain families with certain genes and it carries on. That is one thing that can already be a strike against them... and then if you are in a family situation where there is no one helping you...and that's not meaning that their mother or father doesn't want to help. They're working. They don't have time to sit down and do it and what is required with a lot of these children is that you take extra time. They need to go the extra mile. The extra step. And that's a big barrier, because in this world today, mamas and daddies have to work.

It seems that overall, teachers believe children who are low achievers can receive the academic assistance they need at home and be successful if parents make their child's education a priority. Parents need to demonstrate to their children who are low achievers that school is important by verbally sending supportive and encouraging messages as well as behaving in ways that "show" the child they are committed to their educational success.

### **Classroom Needs of the Child Who is a Low Achiever**

When teachers were asked to pinpoint what it is that children who are low achievers need in order to succeed in the classroom that is different from most other children, four primary academic "needs" were identified, (1) repetition/reinforcement of material, (2) explicit instruction, (3) individual attention and, (4) experiential learning techniques.

#### **Repetition and Reinforcement**

The most frequently cited classroom need of children who are low achievers was repetition/reinforcement of material. Teachers used words like "repetition," "reinforcement," "drill" and "practice" to describe how students who are low achieving need to "go over" or study new concepts more frequently than other students, in order to understand them. Maryellen gave an interesting description of the repetition process.

Often times it's a lot of repetition in various forms, so it's a variation on the same theme. In other words the teaching becomes a fugue. [The kids] hear the same thing over and over again...until they can really feel comfortable that they have mastered it

Fay described this "fugue" type teaching when she shared how she addresses the need for repetition while teaching spelling.

It's build a word and then they spell it and then they say it; then spell it and read it; then spell it and say it; then write it and spell it and say it; and then they spell it and say it three more times looking at the board, their paper and then nothing and then they say it. I call on one student to say it and then another one to use it in a sentence. It's just phonetic build up of the word. You break it down phonetically, you build it up phonetically. Show them pieces and parts and then they say it back and forth, do choral, they write it. And then I pick one person to spell the word. It's just a process like that. And then after we've done all 30 words we do a penmanship page where they write them out 5 times to practice and then they take their spelling test. It's still real fresh in their minds and they're making 100's. And they're like, "I never get 100 on my spelling test!"

Marion prepares her students for tests by doing practice tests and material review right up until the moment they start the "real" test.

We took an English [practice] test yesterday and today. Then they did one on their own. Well, what's a noun? Now we talked about that all year long. We talked about it as I as giving out this test. We talked about it, "Now remember what a noun is?" And I gave them the definition of a noun and of a verb to help them through it, but today's test was totally on their own.

### **Explicit Instruction**

The second "need" of children who are low achievers in the classroom is the need for explicit instruction. K.C. discussed this explicit instruction in terms of the difficulties children who are low achievers have in generalizing concepts that they learn to other situations.

K.C.: You've got to show them that 2 times 1 is 2 because, "see you only have one '2' so that's '2'." And even though they can go, two, four, six, eight, they can do the counting, the skip counting because they've learned that. They've had enough repetition from kindergarten, first and second. They can do that. But they don't get that when it comes to multiplication.

Interviewer: It doesn't carry over?

K.C.: They don't connect the two.

Interviewer: So once they get it, if you teach them 2 times 2 is 4 do they remember 2 times 2 is 4?

K.C.: If they practice it enough times and it's drilled into them enough times? Yes.

Interviewer: So not only do they need repetition, but they need explicit teaching of each skill? You don't expect them to just generalize it to the next area?

K.C.: Each skill. Exactly, exactly.

Children who are low achievers were also described as often needing explicit instructions or explanations for how to complete assignments. Lindy explained how she has to break down information when teaching reading comprehension skills.

For comprehension you have to stop and talk about it, every little bit, dissect it, every little bit, so that they can realize what it is exactly that's being asked of them.

### **Individual Attention**

The third need of children who are low achievers indicated by teachers was individual attention. All teachers discussed this need, either directly or indirectly, through reference to using "small group" and/or "one-on-one" instruction as a method of addressing the needs of children who are low achievers. This individualized time was described by one teacher as being time to address, "different standards that they're having problems with or different ideas that they're having problems with." Sometimes teachers just described *how* they interacted with children who are low achievers and those descriptions indicated that there were a lot of individualized interactions occurring with these children.

K.C.: Anyway, pre writing. We'll have discussion and I'll ask, "What do you have an interest in? What do you do after school? What are hobbies?" and of course sometimes I have to explain that. What a hobby is. And they give me a name. I get their background experience and then I put these down. And I'll ask, "Is there anything here that fits? That goes together?" Then one thing leads to another and

almost every time it's, "I could do this!" and I say, "You sure could!" Now sometimes they, for time...because time is a factor in school, they are allowed to dictate to me and I write. But I do not tell them a thing; I write exactly what they say.

### **Variety of Modalities**

The fourth academic need of children who are low achievers indicated by teachers was the use of a variety of teaching modalities. Possibly because many of these children were observed to have difficulty reading, written word was not mentioned at all as a useful mode of teaching children who are low achievers. Teachers expressed that these children tend to learn information more effectively when it is presented as a "hands on" or active learning experience. It seems the more senses that are involved and stimulated, the better chance these children have at understanding the information.

Maryellen: Our math is the Saxon math. It's all hands on, very teacher directed. Unless a child is totally not paying attention for one reason or the other, there's no reason why they shouldn't be successful with the math program.

Susan: The way I teach is I try to tap into all the different modalities and I think that's important. I think a lot of teachers teach the same way everyday and don't try to reach out to the kids-like the visual kids or the kids who have to learn it using their hands. I think it's important to tap into all [modalities], especially the multiple intelligences, and teach them that way.

Two teachers talked about drawing on their personal experiences in school to help them devise multi-modal ways to teach. Jaye, a fifth grade teacher, described the use of methods that may be more prominent in lower grades, but successful with her fifth graders none-the-less.

Jaye: I use hands on manipulatives, I do the same thing in different ways because they need that and I'm a huge believer in hands on manipulatives. I know there are a lot of teachers who feel that that is only for the little kids, but I'm a big believer in it through college. I'll never forget the first time someone used big ten blocks to show me the  $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$ . Why didn't they show that to me in high school? I would have gotten it a lot sooner. So I am a huge believer in manipulatives. I'm a huge believer in trying to show the kids or have them experience it or have the "little congress" to try to explain how this country is run.

Especially for these kids, because the abstract is much harder, they need more concrete examples, and that takes time and materials and patience.

The second teacher, Fay, uses a lot of “oral and visual” presentation of material. She implements choral reading techniques (when all children respond out loud in unison to questions or when they all read together) in the classroom so that children have experience physically saying words rather than just reading them silently. She also utilizes visual “cues” for her students such as allowing students to have math sheets, with concepts on one side and computation on the other, for reference if they forget a fact or a concept. Faye was “high energy” in the interview and that also seems to be indicative of her teaching style. She described how she teaches her students to plot a coordinate on a graph using a combination of visual, auditory and kinesthetic modalities.

You have to run before you can jump (mimics actions). And I’ll run across the room and jump in the air and they’re like, “OH!” It’s like, “You **run** across the bottom and then **jump!** You don’t jump *then* run.”

These participants believed that if the above classroom needs were sufficiently met and parent support was given at home, students who are low achievers would be able to attain higher achievement levels. In reflecting on participant beliefs that parents often give “lip service” to the things children who are low achievers need at home, I felt that observing children who are low achievers in the classroom would give indication of whether or not participants essentially gave the same “lip service” to the needs of these children in the classroom. The following section discusses the observed experiences of children who are low achievers in the classroom as compared to teacher reports and current literature findings.

### **A Comparison of Research Findings and Classroom Observations**

Although research concludes that children who are low achievers 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 (Kerman, 1979; Wehlage, Rutter & Turnbaugh, 1987; Evertson, 1982; Good, 1981; Murphy, Hallinger & Lotto, 1986), this was not found to be the case with these participants. Quite the opposite, in fact, was observed. Based on observations of children who are low achievers in the classroom, it was discovered that these students were seated closer to the teacher and received a great deal of attention; more attention at times than the average-achieving students. The only exceptions to this were observations completed in drop-out (DP) classrooms where the majority of the children were children who are low achievers and therefore no special seating arrangement was noted. After one observation, the teacher was asked if she used any special seating arrangements and she shared that she seated the children who have more off task behaviors closer to her desk for monitoring.

Teachers were observed to frequently pass by the desks of children who were low achievers to check progress and provide further instruction of materials when needed. It was noted during one observation that the child observed did not raise her hand to ask for assistance, but sat staring at her worksheet without working on it. The teacher honed in on this behavior and immediately went to the child to provide assistance. Teacher and child worked through the first two problems together and then the child completed the third problem on her own with the teacher watching her. Once the teacher departed, the child began to work on the remainder of the worksheet independently, although she did not finish the paper while most other children in the classroom did.

The repetition and drill participants discussed were also observed in all classroom observations. Teachers repeatedly went over the concept being taught and gave several examples of its use. After using repetition in general classroom instruction, one teacher called a small group of children (which included the child with low achievement being observed) to the back of the room for further practice on the lesson of reading words with two vowels side by side in a word.

The use of various teaching modalities was also observed in the classrooms. Teachers were very animated when presenting information to the class and they frequently moved about the room, used voice inflection, presented visual representations of the concepts being taught and solicited student involvement. Hands-on learning was used during one observation with students using sliding number lines to learn subtraction.

Using the techniques discussed by teachers and observed in the classroom, teachers generally believed that children who are low achievers were able to grasp most, if not all, of the materials being presented. It would seem reasonable to conclude at this point, that if teachers would just implement the above strategies then these children would have increased success in the classroom. However, teachers indicated that the implementation of these strategies in the classroom is hindered by time factors. Indeed, what these teachers seemed to describe as the biggest classroom barrier to academic success for children who are low achievers is the *time* that is required to teach these children. While teachers are aware of the techniques they must use with children who are low achievers, there appear to be time restrictions coming from various sources that limit their ability to provide the instruction children who are low achievers need. Over and over, time surfaced as an issue in these teachers' classrooms.

### Time in the Classroom

To understand the issues teachers face related to time, it is helpful to first have an understanding of the classroom climate that has resulted from legislation such as the “No Child Left Behind” act and the resulting high stakes testing in states such as Florida.

Teachers described the curriculum guidelines that are now in place to prepare children for Florida’s high stakes test, the FCAT, as very “structured” and rapidly paced. One teacher simply described the intensity as “push, push, push, push.” Teachers also indicated that they felt a great deal of pressure to get the entire curriculum taught.

Kaye: you feel like there has been so much push... all this curriculum that you *have* to finish, you *have* to do this, you *have* to do that. You just feel pushed that if you stop, even to take a breath sometimes, that you would be further behind than you have to be at that time.

The pressures of high stakes testing have created a situation in which teachers must teach a high stakes curriculum. In the county where these teachers work, teachers must sign a document certifying that they have taught each student the standardized curriculum for their grade. One teacher was willing to share the choice she was forced to make between conforming to her legal obligations and providing children who are low achievers with a curriculum that she felt more appropriately meet their needs and abilities.

I feel like I’ve gotten scooped up into the feeling that my job is to stand up there and disseminate this [information] and then have them work on the spiel and then test them. I feel a huge pressure to cover it all; I mean I had to sign a piece of paper that said I did. *That’s outrageous*. Because I, and I will keep doing it, that’s why legally I signed that piece of paper that said I did but I didn’t, because I’m going to take it at their [the students] pace, I’m never going to cover those books with these kids. I think it’s outrageous to expect that they will get through those books. I think there needs to be an IEP of sorts for these kids that, what is reasonable to expect. I don’t think [the curriculum] is reasonable at all because of the pace.

The irony of this situation is interesting. The State implements high curriculum standards in order to assure that children who are low achievers are provided an appropriate education. In turn, at least one teacher puts her job at risk by defying the State's curriculum in order to provide what she feels is an attainable and reasonable curriculum for children who are low achievers. As will be discussed later, there are several points of conflict between teachers and government policy pertaining to both the definition of student success and the methods of insuring student success.

In speaking to the particular barriers that children who are low achievers face, teachers talked of how the "push" to cover a great deal of curriculum results in a lack of time to spend on concepts children who are low achievers have difficulty with. As one teacher put it, "I only have 180 days to cram all this in." In addition to dealing with the sheer amount of material that is required to be covered, students who are low achievers need material repeated and reinforced more frequently than other students before they master it. In a fast paced curriculum there is precious little time to meet these needs. As a result, children who are low achievers may be forced to move on to "new" material before they master what too quickly has become "old" material.

Elizabeth: There's not enough time to give that individual help that I think gives them a boost.

Marion: [referring to the first grade curriculum pace] We don't have time now that we have English, we have social studies, we have science, and we have books for all of these things. Plus the reading, plus the, you just don't have time for everything.

Fay: It's hard. And I would say, to be honest, no I don't think all those kids keep up. I really don't. I think if they caught up we wouldn't have D's and F's. But that's just the reality of it and sometimes you just try to do the very best you can and you have to move on at some point. You have to move on.

There were also concerns related to the amount of time spent addressing the needs of children who are low achievers as compared to other children in the classroom. After all, teachers who have children at various academic levels in one class must address the educational needs of all children, not just those who struggle. Teachers seem to struggle with a conflict of conscience in relation to this issue. Some teachers expressed that they felt torn between wanting to give the children who are low achievers a lot of extra time and attention because they need the most help, but feeling at the same time that they were being unfair to the other students in the classroom who are also entitled to their time and attention. There were in all interviews, descriptions of a compromise between the two sets of needs. The tone of the teachers words were interpreted as one of “you do what you can” when it came to balancing their time and energies between the children who are low achievers and the rest of the classroom.

Marion: I mean time is hard here... it's sometimes very, very frustrating because you want to take your top kids that come in reading at a first grade level and you want to get them, because those are our attorneys, our doctors, and we need to keep them going as well as trying to get these lower kids and move them up as well, and it's hard when you have all these kids and all those different issues, you know, and you have 22 of them or 24 of them.

There are also times when the realities of teaching children at various ability levels result in difficult internal struggles for teachers.

Lindy: I sometimes feel like at the beginning of my teaching I concentrated a lot on these children. *A lot on these children.* I can't stop everything I'm doing, like my daughter for example, she is bright and she needs to be challenged and as a teacher I need to remember that and separate that personal heart/gut thing that says “I just need to do more” But you know what? Suzy over here she needs to go on. You kind of start thinking in your mind that every kid can be anything they want to be, yes. But realistically? Suzy here may be the next president of the United States. Is Johnny over here that has this lower IQ? Maybe. Odds are probably not. So that's a hard reality but you've got to think it or you're going to end up shooting for nothing but those [low achieving] kids. Because they are the ones your heart goes to. You've got to separate that personal stuff and say, “Every kid in this room is looking to me, every kid in this room. I'm expected to do this and they all need to

make progress.” I don’t want them going out of here with just what they came in with. You have to go on and for me personally, it’s lying down at night and thinking I’ve done everything I could possibly do. Was it enough? Did he meet the grade level expectation? Maybe not. But again, you can only do so much with what you have to work with, you know?

When reflecting on teaching a multi-level classroom, the bottom line for one teacher seemed to be that there were only so many hours in a school day and she could only “create” so much time for each new concept being taught. Eventually her professional responsibility to the majority of children outweighed her personal compassion for the children who are low achievers.

In a regular classroom you don’t have time to deal with the low child, because you’ve got all these other kids and I was as guilty as anybody else for [thinking], “They’re repeating, I’m not worrying about it, I’ve got to get these guys ready for [the next] grade.”

There are different methods teachers use to provide children who are low achievers with at least some of the extra time and assistance they need without compromising the quality of the education afforded to other children in the classroom. It seems these teachers have become very adept at “creating” time to review and reinforce what they teach as well as work one-on-one with children who are low achievers.

Elizabeth: This is my down time (the time during the interview); this is where if I have a child who needs help, I use my planning time. This is where I pull the kid aside, work with them, and send them on. If I maybe have five or ten minutes of down time between reading groups, boom, bring that kid back. . .let’s get working on this. It’s a lot of teacher innovation/intervention versus the possibility of the intervention being worked into our regular curriculum.

Susan: In the morning we’ll come in and do our new lesson for the day, whatever it might be. We’ll do our language arts lesson first thing in the morning and present it to the class as a whole. Pass out the work and explain each paper that goes along with whatever the skill is. Then while they’re doing their independent seatwork, call them back in groups of six. Usually a low, middle and a high group. I work with them on that skill and then on reading skills, while the rest of the class is doing their independent seatwork. When they’re done with independent seatwork, they’ll rotate to centers.

K.C.: How do you get shortcuts? Walking in line. You know, like when we go out to our specials like PE, we have to sit there and wait for the specials teacher to be ready for us. Well, it might be anywhere from three to five minutes, so I can rattle off quite a few multiplication problems. Like classification. We do this game called “give me five” and they’ve got 5 second to do it, just to get them thinking. Like, in 5 seconds give me 5 vegetables. And, it really makes them think. And you’ll get, strawberries, “no that’s not a vegetable,” “oh yeah that’s a fruit,” this type of review. So we do a lot of games like that during what I call transition times or dead times.

In addition to utilizing “in between time” during the school day, several teachers also provide extra help for children before and after school. This is not required by their job descriptions, but was viewed as necessary if they want to give struggling children the extra help they require.

Another way teachers provide children who are low achievers with extra help and review is to utilize resources such as assistants, peers and specialized programs available in the school.

Elizabeth: We have our Title One aides that will reinforce particular concepts that we are working on and I just pray that there is somebody at home that will help them.

Susan: [I’ll] have them partner up with children who achieve more and have them work together.

Kaye: I try to team them up with a child that can help them, a nurturing child who can help motivate them. In math we have M and M partners and they help each other with the multiplication facts...you try to team them up like that. Cooperative learning is really successful. When you have a high and then you pick one low and you need to put two in the middle in a group and they have to work as a team to successfully complete something. That really works.

Susan discussed some benefits of the various methods used to address the needs of children who are low achievers. She indicated that small group instruction is often less stressful and more productive for children who are low achievers because they are not dealing with the social embarrassment of the entire class knowing they do not understand the work. She explained that in small group, the children who are low achievers are

...not as threatened as everybody sitting there watching them and looking over them...I think the biggest fear with low achievers is that they are very, they're not self confident, they don't have any self-esteem. They're scared to take risks. If they're sitting out in the classroom by themselves with 20 other children, they're not going to ask questions. They're not gonna let you know that they don't know what they're doing. If you have them in a small group, they're gonna ask questions, they're seeking to find answers. They just want to absorb all of it. When you're back here in the group with them its so different than just teaching in front of the class.

Susan also has found that working with a peer buddy is beneficial for children who are low achievers because, “working with a peer seems to help them a lot and they look forward to that.” This peer support was seen in one observation of a child who was a low achiever when students in the class were paired with each other and asked to complete a word-finding assignment. The child with low achievement who was observed seemed to be comfortable with this arrangement in that he smiled frequently at his partner and actively participated in the activity. He and his partner were able to finish the assignment a little early so they talked quietly and good-naturedly teased with each other.

Finding time to present materials in a manner that children who are low achievers learn most effectively was also indicated to be a difficulty faced by some teachers. Consistently using hands on or active learning experiences can consume more time than is available in the current curriculum. Reflecting on her earlier teaching years when there was more time for engaging leaning activities, Marion shared, “I remember when we used to do all kinds of fun things with these kids and still had better test scores.” Another teacher discussed how the current curriculum standards affect teachers’ utilization of time and techniques in the classroom.

I think it’s really changing the way teachers teach. You know, there were times that I’d see something in my classroom that the children were very excited about. For example, I remember one time there was an article about toys in the newspaper and I was going to do just a very small little lesson on this one topic. Well the kids were so excited. I started pulling in all kinds of things about toys and about how to

write articles and how to write a newspaper. So I was being able to be more creative and take off in a direction that they were enthusiastic about. Now, it's like, "Oh my gosh, I've got all this stuff I have to complete before FCAT."

In summary, sufficient time is a commodity that seems to be very difficult to attain in today's classroom. Under the current curricular expectations, there is less time for reinforcement and repetition of material as well as limited time to present materials in the "hands on" manner that seems to be especially beneficial to children who are low achievers. It appears that under the best of circumstances, the academic needs of children who are low achievers are somewhat difficult to meet; when the pressures of a structured, fast paced curriculum are added to the equation, the expectation that teachers will bring the skills of children who are low achievers up to grade level becomes an even more daunting task.

### **The Self Esteem of Children Who Are Low Achievers**

"It's just, you know, who they are. You can tell, they have a low self esteem look about them and it's like the light is so dim." Elizabeth

In addition to the external forces within the classroom that serve as barriers to the success of children who are low achievers, there is also a common *internal* emotional characteristic of children who are low achievers that seems to be just as much a barrier, if not more, to their classroom success. Low self-esteem was discussed at length by most teachers as being an issue to contend with when working with children who are low achievers. Teachers unanimously agreed that children who are low achievers tend to have a low academic self-esteem and that it impacts their ability and willingness to participate in the learning process. When asked to imagine what they thought would be the most difficult thing to deal with being a child who is a low achiever, all but one teacher alluded to the social embarrassment of being a poor student.

Maryellen: If I were a child in a regular ed. classroom with difficulty keeping up with the other kids? It would be my peers that would be more difficult for me...I would not always want to be the last one done. I would not always want to be the one that had most everything wrong. I would not want to be the one that had to re-do everything four times in order to be successful. Just the fact that I knew I was always behind them [other students] academically. That would be the hardest thing. I would feel much better about it if there was somebody who would make sure that that wasn't always the case for me.

Maggie: Feeling a failure. Because it seems that it's always the same kids who are getting the low grades or not understanding. I think that even though sometimes the cool thing is to not be the nerdy type child, um, I think that it hurts. It's like, "Oh my gosh I failed again."

The one teacher who did not respond to this particular question with a self-esteem related answer indicated that difficulty reading would be the hardest part of being a child who is a low achiever. She did, however, speak to the issue of self-esteem later by recalling the effects that failure had on one child who was a low achiever in her classroom. The child had scored very low on the FCAT and made the statement, "You know, I just can't do anything, I'm not good at anything." She also commented on how continual failure in school, year after year, takes its toll on the perceptions of children who are low achievers. She observed that, "By the time they're in third grade they've got certain feelings about themselves whereas first graders, they still see hope in everything."

When teachers were asked to describe what they thought it would be like to be a child who is a low achiever from the *child's* perspective, they described the negative social stigma and feelings of failure that so often go along with low achievement. Teachers theorized that the cause of these negative self-images could be rooted in various sources. Sometimes the feelings of low self-esteem result from notions of how other children in the classroom perceive the child who is a low achiever. Lindy described it as the feeling of, "You know, what are the other children going to think? I don't know this answer. I don't read well. What are they going to think?" Expanding on Lindy's

description, Susan pointed out that children who are low achievers may view asking questions in the classroom as a “risk” for bringing attention to their inadequacies. The words she used to express the feelings these children experience indicate not only fear and embarrassment, but a sense of isolation as well.

They're scared to take risks. If they're sitting out in the classroom by themselves with 20 other children, they're not going to ask questions. They're not gonna let you know that they don't know what they're doing.

The words, “sitting out in the classroom by themselves with 20 other children” are telling in that these children may very well feel alone and different when sitting in a classroom surrounded by their peers. This description came to mind during one observation when the class was independently working on a math sheet. The child who was a low achiever observed started to work on his paper, but after two problems appeared to become “stuck.” He would often look around the room at other children or the teacher with a confused expression on his face and then look back at his paper. At one point he turned around in his seat in what looked like an attempt to get guidance by looking at the paper of the child seated behind him. While he did not raise his hand for help, he was able to finally catch the eye of the teacher who then went to assist him.

In addition to not understanding class work, teachers alluded to other reasons these children may feel isolated or different. K.C. observed that because these children are often retained due to poor grades, it is not unusual for children who are low achievers to be older than their classroom peers.

K.C.: Size, they definitely stick out. And then, of course, birthdays are celebrated. And the question comes up every year, “Wait a minute, I’m only 8, how can you be 9?” And then it dawns on them, “Oh, you should be in fourth grade.” And here they may have wanted to hide it. But as soon as their birthday comes up and you want to do something to acknowledge it, age comes up. I know it damages their self-esteem. I know it does to some degree. Some not a lot, others a great deal. I don’t know. I see more detriment than good.

Classroom social order also serves to alienate some children who are perceived by their peers as being in an undesirable category. Marion pointed out that the children themselves establish a classroom hierarchy and most kids can tell you, “the ones that are the smartest in the class and the ones that they call the bad kids,” and that this categorizing starts as early as first grade. When asked about whether or not the younger children who are low achievers realize they are performing lower than their peers, one teacher replied, “These kids may be slow but they’re not stupid. They know.”

One teacher described a type of isolation that occurs when children who are low achievers are physically separated from their peers. Some schools choose to place children who are low achievers in what is termed “dropout prevention” (or DP) classes, where children who are “at risk” of school difficulties are grouped into one classroom for a more focused, ability level curriculum. These classrooms are one method used by some schools to address the needs of the children who are low achievers. Fay teaches a DP classroom and notes that she as a teacher often feels “isolated” or “different” because sometimes the expectations for all the other classrooms did not seem to pertain to her students. She talked of how the DP students are “off” in a separate room and stated that, “I know the kids have to feel a little isolated because I do.”

In discussing self-esteem and isolation with the teachers, it once again became clear that these teachers have a great capacity for empathizing with students who are low achievers. On more than one occasion, teachers gave examples from their own adult lives of times they felt that same “dumb” feeling of being the only one who didn’t seem to understand something.

[Responses to the question, “What do you think would be the most difficult part of being a child who is a low achiever?”]

Fay: Knowing that I'm the dumb one in the class and everyone else is going to be way above me. I'm not going to raise my hand. I mean, I can relate that to a psychology classes where they're talking about something and I'm not quite getting it. I'm not raising my hand and looking like a fool in front of all these people.

K.C.: Seeing that every child around me is doing their work, they know what they're doing and I have no clue. I'll tell you a perfect example. I think of this every time I see one of these students. I took a physics class in college. I thought, "What in the world am I doing in here?" ...Everyone around me knew what this guy was talking about. I was clueless. Totally clueless. And I thought, "I'm going to remember this...the day that a student comes in and has a blank sheet of paper, I'm going to remember how I felt." It's like the fear factor. I'm going to get in trouble because she's going to come up and ask why I'm not doing this, and I don't even know the question to ask.

Another hindrance to increasing motivation and self-esteem discussed by teachers is what was termed the "messages" being given to children who are low achievers.

Teachers expressed concern that one of two "messages" can often times be conveyed to children who are low achievers. The first is that school is "not important" and the second is that the child is "not smart enough" to be able to do the work.

The first message, that school is not important, was mentioned when referring to parents who do not give children who are low achievers help at home. There was concern that when the parents of children who are low achievers are not involved with their children's schoolwork, it conveys to the child that school is unimportant. Marion explained how the parent's behaviors and actions regarding school is especially important to younger children because they are more impressionable than older children.

Marion: I really think at this age it has a lot to do with what the parents are doing. I give them motivation with what they're doing, but if mom and dad are helping them at home and doing the reading, handing the stuff in, and they're showing that school has a value and that this is an important thing to them, well therefore it's going to be important to the child as well. If they perceive that their parents see no value in it, they don't either. I can't say it's gonna stay that way once they hit the upper intermediate grades or high school or whatever, because by that time they have their own little minds.

Another concern with the messages children who are low achievers may get, is more the *lack* of encouragement or inspiration to achieve above and beyond their current life situation. This was especially worrisome because so many children who are low achievers seem to come from low income, high stress homes. It was noted that there are some instances when children who are low achievers and their parents do not appear to have the same goals for success that teachers do.

Maggie: I think [children who are low achievers] see that, my mom and dad are making it just fine so I don't have to worry; I'm going to make it just fine too. They don't reach for anything better or higher.

Elizabeth: And they [the parent] will sit here and tell me, "I never had these chances and I want my child to be the best and I want to push them to get them there," but that's a very, very, very, very small portion of the pie in here. That may be just two or three families.

Fay emphasized how important it was for her to try and help children who are low achievers break out of the stressful life cycle they are in. She spoke of the need to provide encouragement and motivation to children who are low achievers so that they keep trying in school and "strive" towards goals that are beyond what their parents may set for them. She encourages them to think for themselves and set their goals high.

Fay: I try and let these guys know, you know, "Do you like how your life is right now? Even I, everyone wants better than what they have. You always want more, always want better. I'm not saying anything bad about the way you live now, but don't you want better? Don't you want more than what you've got?" I try to tell them, they can take your car, they can take your house, they can take your kids, they can take your bed, but they're NOT going to take your education. *That's* what I try to tell these guys. Graduate high school? Yeah that's great and that's what I want, but you need to go on from there and work in college...I start in fourth grade telling them, "*Don't listen to your parents*. Anybody can go and do what they want. Where there's a will, there's a way no matter what."

Jaye, who was raised in a low income/high stress family, seemed to have an "insider's" view of the messages parents give children who are low achievers that can affect motivation and self-esteem. She finds that children who are low achievers often

have a “give up attitude” or seem to think “what’s the point?” of trying to do well in school. She gave several examples of messages being given to children who are low achievers that affect motivation and self esteem. The first message is one that she views as being sent when parents are uninvolved in their child’s school:

You know, there is always at least one child that I never even meet a parent, and that says tons to me. Does that impact what they are able to do in school? I would think that they are not getting the same message from home that kids that do achieve get, you know, the importance of it.

The second message is what could be called the “chip off the old block” message:

So often I’ll hear a parent say that, “Well *I* was like that in school, so it’s O.K.” So it’s reinforced...my Mom and my Dad didn’t do well, so it’s O.K. that I’m not.

The third message is what I’ll call the, “There’s other things more important” message:

Some will just come in and say “She didn’t do her homework last night because we went to the movies,” OK, HELLO! Who’s the parent here? It’s just not an interest. I don’t feel like education is anything special to them. It’s just “something.” It wasn’t something impressed upon [the parents] as children that school was important, that you need to do your best. They’re not getting the message. It would seem to me that it would be confusing to come to a school where people are saying it’s important, you know, you need to do this, and then to go home and have the parent that doesn’t instill that.

The final message Jaye talked about I will call the, “There is no hope for you to get ahead in life” message:

I had one boy last year whose father told him, “You know when you’re fifteen you’re going to quit and get a job anyway.” You know and that’s a self-fulfilling prophecy. I think a lot of these kids just don’t have a lot of hope. I’ve even had parents tell their kids, “You’re not going to college, we can’t afford it, you can’t go” and that’s all they’ve heard since 4th grade.

One teacher pointed out that parents are not the only sources of negative messages to children who are low achievers. She shared a story of a child who had all but given up in her class because of a previous teacher’s shocking negative comments to him.

Fay: It's horrible to say, but the very first year I taught, one of the kids came in and I couldn't get him. Couldn't reach him for anything. And he finally told me, "I know I'm in a dumb class because the teacher that I came from said I was too dumb to be in her class so they sent me to this other class." And he said she didn't put it nicely, she flat out told him he was too dumb to be in her class. And I'm like, "Oh my god!"

It appears that children who are low achievers may have a high incidence of discouraging and defeating experiences that can lower their self-esteem and motivational level. These experiences present themselves in various ways. Parents and/or teachers can directly or indirectly send negative messages to children who are low achievers about their potential; peers may behave towards children who are low achievers in a manner that results in alienation; the classroom curriculum and pace may be too difficult for children who are low achievers to keep up with and they therefore fall behind and fail or; the child who is a low achiever may simply be embarrassed or disappointed with his or her low academic standing when compared to his/her peers. Low self-esteem was not only described by teachers as being a *result* of the above situations, but it also is perceived to *cause* difficulties in the classroom as well. The following section will address the classroom difficulties that teachers believe result from, or are associated with, low self-esteem experienced by children who are low achievers.

### **How Low Self Esteem Affects the Classroom Performance of Children Who Are Low Achievers**

Following up on teacher beliefs that low self-esteem is a common emotional characteristic of children who are low achievers, teachers were asked how low self-esteem affected academic performance. Teachers viewed feelings of low self-esteem as affecting the classroom performance of children who are low achievers most frequently in the area of motivation. Their experience has been that children who are low achievers will be more apt to either give up quickly on, or not even try to do, class assignments.

The repeated failure in school that children who are low achievers experience seems to result in a learned helplessness where the children simply do not see the point of trying to learn when the outcome they have experienced most often in the past is failure. Fay believes the continual failure these children experience results in “attitude and motivation” problems that are far more detrimental to academic success than their actual ability levels. Once children who are low achievers reach the point of helplessness, they seem to get trapped in a cycle of failure that is difficult to break.

Elizabeth: I can't do this means I don't want to do it because I can't do it because I don't want to do I, that kind of vicious little cycle right there. A lot of the self-esteem issue is because they can't be successful. These children aren't foolish. They can look around and see what the other kids are doing or not doing and achieving and they want to be like that but they can't get there because there's been nobody there to give them a leg up.

Many teachers viewed poor attitude toward academics and low self-esteem as leading to serious problems if not addressed. Fay commented on the effect that the combination of family stressors and academic failure could have on children who are low achievers. She worried that kids who are low achievers are at risk of giving up if not encouraged, because they are, “thinking they can't do it, or thinking that their life is so rotten that they just won't ever get anywhere, or won't be anything.” Other teachers shared their concerns and observations about the continual failure and resulting low self-esteem children who are low achievers experience.

K.C.: I think first of all by the time they reach a certain age they're going to hate academics. Absolutely detest it. They know they're not good at it.

Lindy: Don't you think that some of these kids are thinking, “I hate to go to school and I can't wait till I can get out.”

Elizabeth: They don't want to come to school where they can't do anything.

Kaye: They do one or the other, they become extremely active and act out and become frustrated and very angry or they do not say anything, shut down and fade

away. And those I worry about, I worry about children that fade away. And sometimes when you have 28 or 29 in a classroom they can easily fade away unless you pinpoint them. Sometimes they fade into the woodwork. Those are the ones that I really worry about. The ones that fade away.

Jaye: You know when you keep getting beaten down physically, emotionally in a lot of different ways. You get angry. You know, some people use anger to deal with that. These kids know that they haven't done real well in school. A lot of them feel like that they are really dumb.

### **How Teachers Address Low Self Esteem in Children With Low Achievement**

Perhaps because low self-esteem is viewed as the core of many classroom struggles experienced by children with low achievement, these teachers believe that boosting the self-confidence and self-esteem of children who are low achievers is extremely important. They frequently talked about the need to create situations in the classroom where the children with low achievement could “experience success” in order to gain confidence. As Fay phrased it, “Part of their self esteem building is to see success and be successful at something.” It seems that once children view themselves as being competent and successful in one area or skill, it is more likely that they will be less afraid to try new skills. As the literature on self-concept suggests, children who *believe* they will be successful have an increased likelihood of achieving that success (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Conchetta, 1996). Marion described how using this philosophy helped to increase the academic abilities of one student with low achievement. Though the student struggled academically, he had an artistic talent that Marion focused in on to build his self-esteem.

...his artistic ability, we just kept going on and on about how good he was. He went from one of my lowest reading groups to one of my highest ones just by encouraging him. He is just phenomenal-the stuff this little guy can do. I think he found out that we were saying, “Well look how capable you are! How strong you are at this and how wonderful!” We were showing the kids, “Look what he can do.” I said, “You know what? You’re really doing good in this, let’s try reading this

book.” And once we did and started moving him up, hey, his confidence level just went [up] 100 fold, “Oh! I can do this stuff!”

Most other teachers appeared to operate from this philosophical standpoint as well and also used confidence boosting as a motivational technique. They described their efforts at emphasizing the strengths of children who are low achievers as finding where the child “shines” or discovering something the child is “good at” or “first in” in order to keep the child interested in school and wanting to learn. Maryellen strongly believes in finding the “good” in a child and tries hard to make that child feel special about his or her strengths. Because the academic abilities of children who are low achievers are often so poor, she frequently has to look to other qualities to find an area where the child is “first” in ability compared to his peers.

[Children who are low achievers] might not have strengths that are necessarily in reading and math but they might be somewhere else. They just might be first in good sense of humor...and you know that’s not always so bad.

Another way teachers address self-esteem and self-confidence building is by reducing embarrassing situations for children who are low achievers in the classroom. As Lindy explained, she tries to create a classroom environment that is first and foremost, “comfortable and safe.” In essence, teachers make the environment “safe” by creating situations where children who are low achievers can participate in learning without feeling “stupid” or “dumb.” Susan’s goal for her students is that they, “never feel like failures in here, ever.”

Two strategies discussed previously that are used for reducing embarrassment are choral responding or practice and small group instruction. The use of these strategies was believed to reduce embarrassment because children who are low achievers are “not as threatened as everybody sitting there watching them and looking over them.”

Another method described to reduce embarrassment was keeping as much control possible over kids teasing or making fun of other students. One teacher doesn't allow the word "stupid" to be said in her class. Another explained that while she tries to teach kids not to tease, the emotional gain they get from teasing is a strong force to contend with.

Jaye: Some kids, some kids have learned that that's not O.K. Other kids, you know how it is when you're picked on but then you get the chance, you're going to pick on somebody else because it makes you feel good. It's the same thing with the ridicule of kids who don't know the answer. It makes some kids feel better to ridicule them.

### **The Behavior of Children Who Are Low Achievers in the Classroom**

In addition to there being behaviors directly associated with the self-esteem of children with low achievement, general "behavior problems" were also frequently mentioned by participants as characteristic of many children who are low achievers.

Elizabeth described how she could sometimes just look at a child and tell that they are children who are low achievers by the way they behave.

If you were to sit here and watch them it would show with their behaviors and actions. Their off task behaviors, their daydreaming, they are every bit of what makes them, them.

K.C. also alluded to off task behavior when talking about how the two students with the lowest IQ's in her classroom scored the lowest on the FCAT. She stated, "I thought that was interesting that they both were Attention Deficit Disorder students."

Jaye specifically identified "anger" as a trait she often observes. She added that she believes some children displayed anger because it was an emotion they were frequently exposed to in the home.

Fay, who teaches a DP classroom, offered several reasons why children who are low achievers may have more behavioral problems than other students. She describes how low self esteem can result in "picking on each other"; how frustration can result in

avoidance behaviors and; how children who are low achievers become more competitive with each other when they are grouped in the same classroom because they are no longer competing against kids with abilities so much higher than their own.

Fay: They don't have the academics so they're not going to have the discipline. Or their discipline's bad so their academics are bad. It kind of goes hand in hand, picking on each other, it's like low self-esteem. So how do you build your self-esteem? You pick on somebody else, so a lot of that is picking on each other. A lot of them, especially knowing going into DP, that's the "dumb class." The stereotype is out there. But, just the frustration level of these kids. Like today I had one that didn't do a writing assignment. He says, "I can't do it, I can't do it!" He sat there and just caused all kinds of commotion and problems because he didn't want to do what was placed in front of him. His frustration level was, "I can't do this!" It's like, "I can't do this one so I'm just gonna cause trouble for everybody else." I have like 6 that do that constantly.

Interviewer: Do they do it because they're really frustrated or do they do it to avoid it or why?

Fay: I tend to think it's more avoidance than frustration, because they shouldn't be as frustrated as they were when they came in because of how intensive everything is throughout the year and how many chances I give them...I can't do a lot of cooperative grouping because I can't put them in groups because they've been such a negative force within all their other classes that when they get here they're their own little entities for a long time. They're all in rows; they're all single seated by themselves. Until we start growing as a group and I see that, these two I can put together...I've had them in groups of four but then it gets too crazy. I have a lot of leaders. I tell them, "You're *all* leaders in here." They all want to be top dog.

Marion, who teaches first grade, had a different perspective on why children who are low achievers appear to have behavioral problems. She views the behaviors of children who are low achievers as a normal age appropriate response to the pressures they are being put under academically.

We're expecting a lot of mature behavior out of babies. I mean these are just kids. And I just think a lot of the hyper [behavior], not being able to sit still, not to be able to concentrate, a lot of it is all the stuff we expect for them to do. You know, sometimes they are capable of some of the stuff, but we need to realize that they're still just kids and they need certain things done and I think the stress level that we're putting on some of these kids is just, phew!

Maryellen expressed similar sentiments in that she firmly believes many of the behaviors these children display are just “who they are” and that she has no intentions of “sucking that out of them.” From her perspective, behaviors are not dysfunctional in and of themselves, they become dysfunctional when they present themselves in certain situations and environments. She uses a lot of humor, behavioral modification, and what I term “real life” teaching to address behaviors that are not appropriate under certain circumstances.

Maryellen: That’s one thing that will drive me nutty at times, just the constant wiggle wiggle wiggle. Wiggle wiggle ... (laughs) and I understand it. But you know, you can actually tell them “I know this is really hard for you, so just for 10 minutes I’m gonna ask you to be really still and then you can just kind of get rid of it. I don’t care how you do it, you can then get rid of it.” Often times, when they can discipline themselves or when somebody’s imposing that discipline for a reasonable length of time and they know that they can pent it up for ten minutes and *then* they can crawl around on the chair and hang off the chair and everything else for five minutes, it works.

Interviewer: They’re able to do it? They’ve got that goal and they’re able to see an end to it?

Maryellen: Yep. Yep. Yep. And also when you realize that, OK, that’s just the way you are but remember that that’s not a barka lounge and I’m also worried about your safety. You know, (laugh). I tell one all the time “Honey you’re a smart boy, you really are a smart boy, but your never gonna be a CEO because you can’t sit in a chair. (laugh). Nobody’s gonna take whatever you say for real because you’ll be on your knees, you’ll have your legs over the arms of the chair, you’ll be falling off the back of it and you’ll have all these wonderful ideas but nobody will believe you!

Interviewer: (laughing)... You can’t be the CEO because you can’t sit still!

Maryellen: That’s right! You can have all the brains in the world. So you have to practice for at least a certain amount of time when someone is coming into your office, and this is your office, that you kind of have to sit there. When the doors close and your all by yourself you go ahead! Go for broke! (laughs). But remember you have to buy your own suits!

Interviewer: It’s saying, you know, its OK to be the way you are? A different perspective than, “I’ve gotta stop him from doing it, he needs to not do it anymore” Because that’s like saying who you are is a bad thing?

Maryellen: That's right. Because if I'm ever in a jam, I mean a really big jam, in a fire in a building or something like that. I want one of those kids who can't sit still and isn't gonna let it go coming in after me.

To summarize, there appeared to be an association between children who are low achievers and behavioral difficulties in the classroom. There were differing opinions however, as to why these behaviors are seen in children who are low achievers more often than other students. While no teacher pointed to a single determinant for behavioral problems, they did describe some combination of the following scenarios as the cause of most behavioral difficulties seen in children who are low achievers:

1. Behaviors that serve to function as a way to avoid difficult academic tasks
2. "Off task" behaviors that are a result of
  - a) attention disorders, or
  - b) avoidance such the children finding other things to do because they can't do the work
3. Not attempting to do work or a learned helplessness, that is a result of constant failure and low self esteem
4. Behaviors that are learned or acceptable in the home but considered inappropriate in school
5. Behaviors that are natural or age appropriate, but not conducive to a highly structured learning environment

### **Measuring the Classroom "Success" of Children Who are Low Achievers (Part I)**

It has been necessary to meticulously describe the familial characteristics, academic needs and affective characteristics of children who are low achievers in the preceding sections in order to "set the stage" for the conditions necessary for children who are low achievers to learn. As discussed, there exist circumstances within each of these realms that, either independently or in combination with each other, become barriers to the academic success of children who are low achievers. With this in mind, the participants

were asked whether or not children who are low achievers were able to achieve success in the classroom. While at the time it seemed like a straightforward enough question, it wasn't long before I realized I had committed a common fallacy of qualitative research: Assuming that what I asked is what they heard. While I assumed that "success" would be taken to mean achieving the state mandated goals for each grade level, I quickly learned that a teacher's perception of "success" could be very different. I will address these differences in defining success before moving on to how teachers responded to the question.

One of the most interesting discoveries I made while speaking to these teachers is that the term "success" was itself a somewhat nebulous term. Teachers spoke of two measures of success. The first is what I will term the "government imposed" measures of success. Under the "government imposed" measures, success is attained when students master 75% of their grade level expectancies and/or score at or above a minimum level set by the state on the FCAT (expectations are different for some grade levels).

The second measure of success is what I will term "teacher measured." This "teacher measured" success was judged on different factors or considerations that were unique to each child. It is important to note that teachers did not discount the need for the state measures, but rather seemed to believe there were other measures that could be considered when assessing a child's success. When talking about measuring success, many teachers felt that "progress" and effort were key factors. Essentially, if a child was perceived to be "doing their best" and making as much gain *as that child could*, then that child was considered successful.

Susan: I think it's definitely got to be measured on an individual basis. Especially for the low achiever. I think that to measure their success a lot of people ask you,

“How do you tell if they're being successful? They're getting F's but you're saying that they're being successful.” Well, being successful to me is to find out where they're at. You have to, it's all in the process. The process and the progress go hand in hand. If you see progress they're succeeding to me. Whether they're showing you on paper, whether they're making A's or D's or F's as long as they're making progress they're succeeding.

Fay, who teaches a DP class, gets frustrated when other people only consider whether or not her students met the state minimum score on the FCAT. She tells them, “Well look at how my kids increased over the time, the growth!” She also pointed out that the growth her students make from one year to the next is often times much larger than that of regular education students. While she knows that her students are expected to meet the minimum set expectancies in order to pass to the next grade, she chooses to emphasize the growth measure more to her class than the minimum expectancy measures.

I tell these guys all the time, “Your improvement better be the highest in fourth grade. Because they have the highest to go, you know? If they're starting so low, they can only go up. I tell them, “Your points better be higher than any other class.”

Another difficulty with the concept of success is the impact its measurement can have on the messages it's sending children and parents. It seems to these teachers that the current trend for educational accountability is sending out the message, “It's not how you play the game, it's whether you win or lose.” Teachers find themselves in situations with parents and children where they have to explain that the best that child can do is not good enough.

Elizabeth: These children who are struggling and working hard? You know these babies are giving you all they got. They're not over here with these high achievers who are gobbling up the academics, but they're *trying*. These parents have to be frustrated with the system. You need to praise your child for their hard work but then here comes the report card, and there's a D or an F. . . *but they are progressing*. They are not where they need to be, but they're making progress.

Another more holistic view of a child's success is based in assessing both the intellectual and social-emotional growth of the child.

Jaye: How do you measure success? If there is some growth, but I think it's unreasonable for most of these kids to expect a full year. I would say that looking over the year, as long as there is continued growth, and also social adjustment, emotional adjustment those types of things. I don't know how you measure those—a psychologist I'm not; I just can tell if a kid seems to feel better in their own skin. I think that should be the top priority with a lot of these kids.

Maryellen expressed a more philosophical, but similar holistic viewpoint. She believes that public education has evolved to the point of meeting more than just academic needs. Education, it seems, is not what it used to be. Whether it is appropriate or not, she sees teachers as having to spend precious time addressing issues that have not traditionally been a part of a teacher's job. She also feels there is a need to include these areas when measuring a child's school success. Her discussion, while lengthy, is insightful in its analogy between teachers of faith and teachers of education.

...there is that area that is strictly academic and that certainly is important and that's the premise of school throughout history, but not anymore. When you have kids that come to school that have never used cutlery to eat, they don't know you sit at a table. I mean all those kinds of things teachers are [now] having to teach kids in order to function in the school community. They have to take time to do that alongside of all the academics but that's not measured. What the teacher is actually doing in that classroom for that youngster to prepare them to live in the school society and then in the world is not measured at all. Not in any way, shape or form. I mean it's not even on a data collection sheet. Can the child tie their shoes? Does the child know what a fork is? Does the child even know what you call that piece of cutlery? And don't those needs, if your strictly following Maslow's Hierarchy of needs, don't those needs have to be met first? I mean, I would think so. I mean it's kind of like the missionary. The missionary goes to a foreign country and his main objective is to promote his belief, but he can't really do that until he meets those basic needs of people. They aren't gonna listen to him about anything if they're starving to death, if they're bleeding, if their emotional life is in upheaval because their family's been destroyed or maimed or they're scared to death... I mean, that's just a fact of life. People who have just been bombed, they don't want to know about St. Paul's missionary journey to Corinth. You know, the missionaries who have been most successful are the ones who don't do that first and foremost, but have integrated themselves into the community in which they live. We're almost like taking these kids in but we're not integrating them. We're

telling them “No, you don’t fit but unfortunately we’ve got to make you fit because our reputations are at stake here.” And you know, how fair is that really to the youngster or to the family from which they come?

Maryellen also described the non-academic skills teachers instill in children that she feels are at least equally, if not more important, if the child is to be successful in life.

Not just in academics but the affective areas that seems nobody wants to measure or give anybody credit for but actually are the characteristics of adulthood that get you through life. Can you show up on time? Can you be respectful? Can you make eye contact? Can you enunciate clearly? Can you make your wants and wishes known appropriately? That’s going to enable you to hold a job and keep a job, not whether you read at a certain level.

In closing out this section on the definitions of success, I must admit that I find it humorous that I initiated this topic with visions of state mandated numbers and, after ten interviews, ended it with visions of missionaries working in our public classrooms. Needless to say, in the following sections I took great care to discern between the ability of a child who is a low achiever to meet “government imposed” standards of success and an his or her ability to meet “teacher measured” standards of success. Because teachers seemed to indicate that the use of high stakes testing was not necessarily the best way to gauge the success of children who are low achievers, and in light of the prospect that other states are either using or considering using tests similar to the FCAT, I felt that further investigation of participant thoughts on high stakes tests was pertinent.

### **High Stakes Testing**

“If my students were judged on FCAT performance, I would definitely be in the sheet metal business.” Maryellen (who has previously taught regular elementary education but at the time of the interview was working as a resource room teacher)

As discussed in the literature review, educational accountability for student learning has become a primary focus in both the national and state departments of education. The expectation put forth by the U.S. Department of Education that all school

systems will develop a system for monitoring and assessing student learning has given rise to the development of high stakes tests. When speaking to participants about this topic, I found they had very strong opinions regarding Florida's use of the FCAT high stakes test to make educational decisions. Study participants had concerns regarding the emphasis placed on this high stakes test, the content of the test and the emotional impact of this test on children who are low achievers.

None of the teachers interviewed expressed disagreement with the increased accountability in education or with the use of standardized tests to gauge student learning. However, as discussed previously, an overwhelming one hundred percent of the teachers felt that the use of *only* one test to make major educational decisions was absolutely not an acceptable practice. From these teachers' points of view, there should be other factors considered when making major decisions regarding a child's education.

Jaye: I disagree with the emphasis that is put on this one test. To say that somebody is not going to pass because of one test I think is wrong. I think it should be taken in consideration with many other things. I can't believe they are going to retain kids for not passing it.

Fay: I don't like one test deciding their future.

The FCAT also appears to pose particular problems for children who are low achievers. Factors such as their learning styles, difficulties with abstract thinking and limited life experiences play a part in how well children who are low achievers perform on the test. In essence, there appears to be a belief that the format of the tests, the rules associated with administering the test and the limited life experiences of children who are low achievers can affect how accurately the child's academic abilities are assessed.

K.C.: [when asked to expand on how the test format challenges the child who is a low achiever]: The fact that they have to process it. I think the processing part of it; the fact that they have to read it and write it. I see adults that are like this too. "Just let me show you how it's done. I can show you how to do it." And they can

do it and do a perfect job. But if you ask them to write it down, write down the directions for me, they can't do it. But they can show you and it'd be perfect. I think we have students like that who are lower achievers. If I said, "can you perform this task?" Yes, particularly mathematics, if I orally read them a word problem and put it in their terms instead of using fictitious names, fictitious places. Which is another thing I've found that ties into it. What they come to me with background experiences. You might have something that talks about a blizzard, temperature wise. But, Floridians? Blizzard? It doesn't quite make it there. But if I'm talking to them about a heat wave...still using the concept of changing temperatures, they can get that. They can understand that. Particularly if I said, "you're in your house, the air conditioner was on and it was 72 degrees but when you went outside you had to take your jacket off because the temperature outside was 95 degrees," and then I said, "What was the difference of temperature?"

Interviewer: They could get it?

K.C.: They could do it in their head. But tell them to subtract? Make that into a subtraction problem and show me your work? They may have difficulties doing that. Plus, if it's one where they have to do regrouping, they get caught up in the math problem itself. But if you ask me, "Can that child subtract?" Yes, he can subtract. Can he perform subtraction problems, particularly word problems on a standardized test? I don't know.

Jaye: [When asked if children's knowledge is accurately assessed through the FCAT format] No. Thank you, good question. No, I don't think they are. I mean you watch them in here trying to do the scientific method and then give them a FCAT question on the scientific method; they are not going to do as well on the test. I can think of several occasions where I've seen that a test score did not indicate what they knew or what they have shown me at a different time.

When Fay, who teaches a DP classroom, was asked what she felt was the best way to assess what her student's have learned she simply stated, "talk to them."

Another problem associated with test format is a lack of flexibility. In the classroom, teachers often use various methods of testing a child's understanding of what he or she has learned. Conversely, the standardized test format provides one format that may or may not be conducive to how the child who is a low achiever best expresses what he or she knows. This lack of flexibility on the FCAT is not what is reflected in daily classroom practice.

Maggie: Most of the time I make my own test according to the way I taught- to help those kids better. [Later, talking about testing a child's knowledge of material by using different presentations of questions] That is real hard to monitor on some of the kids. Especially when it's the kids that, well, if I gave him *this* [test] then he would know the answer, but if I gave him *this* test then there's no way he would have known it. Every day we give these kids second chances and third chances. Can you do it this way or this way? Study again, let's review it. I think that pressure all around is going to affect the lower achievers worse and worse. I think all kids, not just the low achievers, they learn best according to the way they were taught. There's so much in our curriculum today that makes these kids have to think, to use that higher thinking.

Coming from a practical perspective, Jaye talked about how difficult it would be to standardize a format that would be more sensitive to gauging children who are low achievers knowledge of materials.

I would bet that there would be a big difference in test scores if maybe the test, if it was a reading test, if it was read to some kids or maybe done in smaller groups. Not that you would teach the skill to them [during the test] but they're so exacting that you can't say anything about the test. And again you're going to get into trouble with how much one teacher may say over another and I've been there too. Where standardization was given and it wasn't fair.

There were other variables cited by teachers that can affect the performance of children who are low achievers on standardized tests. While teachers were speaking in the context of children who are low achievers, I could not help but think that many of the examples could apply to any child in the classroom. Some teachers spoke of children who are low achievers who "don't test well." It seems that sometimes the reasons for not testing well are unknown, while in other instances reasons such as stress, slowness or lack of "seeing the importance" were given by teachers.

Susan: I take those tests with a grain of salt but I know they're very important to the State and to comparing them to the rest of the country and everything else but as a teacher I look at it like, I teach them what they need to know and they should do fine on the test but a lot of children just don't test well.

Kaye: Some children who are the test takers, they are able to take tests. There are a few that can't take tests. Well, for example I have two children in my class who made level one. One is going in the ESE program next year. The other little girl,

she's just a good C student. She's um, she works for her C, she struggles with reading, but she's not being unsuccessful. She makes like 70's and I'm not sure another year's going to help her in 3rd grade. She was absent the day of the reading test, so she was up at the front office taking the test with the guidance counselor and I walked by the window. There's a window. And, she's counting the ceiling tiles. You know she just doesn't see the importance of this test and she did very poorly on it.

Jaye: I could see they were just doing a pattern marking in the answers [when taking the FCAT]. And yet I had two that just wanted to do so well that didn't get half way through it. Going slow and trying to do well, didn't get halfway through it. And a lot of it could be the difference in the adult, you know, some teachers get so uptight themselves and that transfers to the kids. I'm very low key with them, yeah you need to get a good night's sleep, have breakfast, try to do your best. I try to keep an even keel about it. There are so many variables. They can dictate as many things as they want to get rid of the variables but there are still going to be variables.

One teacher made the point that unusual circumstances can affect test scores, particularly when on "the day" of the test, the child is focused more on pressing personal problems than on the test.

Fay: I've got one child whose dog died the night before the test started, his father ran him over by accident. That's not something you can come in and forget the next morning. I had another child last year, he only scored a level one. He's straight A's in my class and a level 3 on math. The whole week, the whole time during the test, his grandfather was dying and they were debating on going to see him or not. So, he could care less about this stupid test in front of him.

Marion reflected on a personal experience with her own daughter's performance on the Florida Writes test. This test is another high stakes standardized test given at certain grade levels and differs from the FCAT in that the children's writing samples are scored by individuals rather than by a computer. She seemed to be pointing out that the mindset of the individuals scoring the test could affect the outcome as much as the child's mindset while taking it.

Marion: I think that, well like my daughter tested gifted in the second grade. She has 132 IQ, she made a 3 (mid range score) on Florida Writes. There again, there's another situation where, you know, those tests are being graded by individuals and at the end of the day do you think that they are grading the same as when they

started out chipper and bright and early that morning? Or if they go to work and they had a fight with their husband before they started. There are a lot of things that play into it.

In addition to concerns about the test format, some teachers expressed unease regarding the types of skills being tested on the FCAT. When discussing the skills being taught and tested, it is necessary to explain how the Florida curriculum is tied to its high stakes test. The Sunshine State Standards are a state mandated curriculum that teachers contractually agree to teach upon signing their teaching contracts. It is extremely structured and delineates specific skills and expectancies that are to be taught at each grade level. This curriculum is designed to prepare students for the FCAT. Because of how closely the Sunshine State Standards and FCAT are aligned, teachers often speak interchangeably of content in the curriculum and content on the FCAT. For this reason, I chose to present information about specific skills children are expected to learn under the more general topic of high stakes testing.

Another concern commented on by two teachers was directed at the appropriateness of the curriculum content. K.C. has been teaching for twenty-six years, while Maggie has taught for twelve. Both feel that the level of skills being taught has become much higher over the years. There seemed to be some speculation as to whether or not the students are cognitively ready for the higher level of skills expected to be taught in today's classrooms.

K.C.: The only other thing that I see, and I say this because of how long I've been teaching. When I taught kindergarten, way back, the first day of kindergarten, "Today we're going to learn the color red and this is the number one and lets do a nursery rhyme. And we taught them how to tie shoes and we taught them how to skip and we taught them how to do a summersault. Oh my goodness, now let's teach them how to read in kindergarten, pattern words and all these other things.

Maggie: A lot of them aren't ready for that. They're just not ready. A lot of the things that I teach in 5th grade are what I taught in 8th just six years ago. It's like,

why are we shoving all this down their throats? Because their brains really aren't ready. And that's with a low achiever. If you look at the low achiever who's getting more too soon, in some cases too soon, I think that sets that back a little bit more.

Marion: When they talked about what the 3rd graders had to do for the FCAT reading, I sat there going, "**But these are 8 year olds!**" How many 8 year olds know to go back into the story and scope through it to find their answers, you know? I said, "These kids are 8!"

Lindy: we are a society that expects our children to grow up way too fast. I believe a lot of stuff we're doing, for example you see kids doing things in first grade that they used to do in second grade. I think we've asked them to do quite a bit for their very young ages.

There also seems to be a shroud of secrecy concerning the actual test contents that raised the curiosity of some teachers. Kaye questioned not only the reliability of the test, but also why the test was even developed in the first place.

Kaye: No one is allowed to look at this test to do a readability on it or to look at it to see if it's really a test that we would even want to even use. I question it because there are a lot of nationally normed tests that are proven. Why are you going to use this test? Why do we use this one that has been created by the government? And I think I question if it's reliable. And I can't look at it and I do not know if it's reliable or not.

K.C. notes that the many of the skills required for her grade curriculum are also included on the curriculums of lower and higher grades. She wonders sometimes exactly what it is that her students are expected to master as opposed to what they should just be exposed to.

K.C.: I had second grade before I moved up to third and it was really interesting. I thought, I really worked hard in second grade to get these kids to master, maybe this English skill. And here they are starting all over in 3rd teaching it. Why'd I work so hard? Maybe I was just supposed to introduce that and then they work a little bit more and truly mastery wasn't supposed to be until 5th. But we're grading them [in the classroom] on mastery of those skills.

Interviewer: And they're repetitive some of them?

K.C.: Oh my goodness yes. *Yes*. They introduce all the parts of speech in second grade and we test them. And then we have them all again in third grade and then

you have them again in fourth grade. But what should we really expect for mastery in each grade level? A complete sentence with maybe a period or a question?

Another concern expressed by many of these teachers was the emotional impact the use of a high stakes test has on their students. There was repeated reference to the “stress” experienced by students who are low achievers that these teachers perceive as resulting from the emphasis placed on high stakes tests. It seems that children who are low achievers are particularly stressed about the prospect of having to pass these tests in order to be promoted to the next grade.

Susan: I think they place too much emphasis on those tests anyway. A lot of children don't test well and a lot of children, especially the low achievers, get uptight about it and they know...I mean these kids know about FCAT and they're not even there yet. I mean they can tell you what the FCAT is, they can tell you they're going to be taking it next year, they can tell you...they're already nervous about it. I'm like, guys, don't worry about it. It's not a big deal. Do your best. Do what you do everyday in here and you'll be fine. I think there is way too much emphasis. These children have too many other problems to worry about than to worry about a test. I think that we should teach them the skills they need to know and don't even tell them what it is. Don't even tell them why it matters, why they need to know it. You know, don't even tell them they're taking it the day before. Give them the test and see how they do. Don't make them feel like they're so accountable because a lot of children can't help it. They can't help that they're not going to do well and they're going to worry about it. It's going to damage a lot of these children and that's unfortunate.

K.C.: These kids are stressed. And I'll tell you how much I knew they were stressed over it. When those scores came in and I had to hand them to them and they were sealed in an envelope? I said, boys and girls please do not open these; they are addressed to the parents. “Well, Ms. [teacher name], could you please just tell me if I passed,” they were all asking me that. “Am I going to go to 4th grade?”

Maggie: I've had a child coming in throwing up the day of FCAT because he was so nervous. I had another one who is just nervous about school altogether and now has physical problems. I just think that a lot of stress even on the kids who are going to do well anyway, no matter what, that it just makes it harder on the low achievers.

Jaye noted that teachers can get “uptight themselves” when FCAT testing approaches and that the stress sometimes “transfers” from the teacher to the students.

This belief seemed to be validated by Marion when she commented on stress and high stakes testing by saying, “ I think they do feel the stress that I feel, because I’m pulling my hair out going, “Guys, you’ve *got* to know this stuff!”

When children are unable to pass the FCAT, there is often, understandably, more negative emotions that are experienced. K.C. talked about how difficult it is for her as a teacher to explain to a child who is doing their personal best that their best just isn’t good enough because they didn’t pass the FCAT.

What breaks my heart is this one child who scored level one, will be retained, will not go to summer reading camp. He went from a first grade 1.5 reading level to a [second grade] 2.7, but he’s not at the third grade level. How do I tell him, “Man you tried really hard, but too bad. You made more than a years growth, but too bad you still didn’t make it.”

In sum, there appears to be a consensus that there is a need to use standardized testing to broadly assess and compare student’s learning. However, there seems to be a strong belief that the use of one test to make major educational decisions for individual children is not an appropriate practice. One concern expressed by participants is that the knowledge gained through the learning styles and teaching methods often used with children who are low achievers is not believed to be accurately assessed through the formats demanded by a standardized test. A second concern put forth by some teachers is the age appropriateness of the test content. Children who are low achievers were noted as having particular difficulty with the higher order, abstract-thinking skills that are required to master the current curriculum guidelines and pass the FCAT. A third concern expressed by teachers is the stress that is seen in children as a result of the FCAT. High stakes testing appears to have resulted in high stress for many children, but especially children who are low achievers, who seem to be well aware that their lower academic abilities will make passing this test more difficult for them.

As viewed by this researcher, there is an apparent teacher philosophy that education and learning is a multidimensional and holistic experience, rather than only the sum of factual knowledge and computational abilities. When determining a child's academic attainment, there seems to be a need to consider each child's individual circumstances, abilities, efforts and progress over a period of time as well have an understanding of each child's unique way of expressing their knowledge. The consideration of all of these factors along with a child's scores on standardized tests is what teachers appear to believe would be the most useful and fair method of making major educational decisions, rather than the current practice of comparing one test score to a state mandated level of proficiency. Next, participant thoughts on specific ways to measure success are presented.

### **Measuring the Classroom Success of Children Who Are Low Achievers (Part II)**

The previously discussed differences between teacher perceptions of success and government perceptions of success, led to continued struggles for teachers when they were asked to give their opinion of how major educational decisions, primarily retention, should be made in the education system. Teacher responses to this question included three considerations that should be made when deciding if a child has been "successful" enough in school to move on to the next grade, 1) scores on standardized assessments, 2) classroom work samples and 3) teacher opinion.

Teachers indicated that each of the above considerations had its place in the overall picture of a child's abilities, but they seemed to struggle when discussing how much weight each one should be given when making decisions about retention or promotion. Scores on standardized tests were viewed as a way to meet the need for some type of objective comparison of children who are low achievers to their peers. Unfortunately, for

reasons discussed earlier, these scores don't always reflect a child's actual abilities. The use of portfolios to gauge academic growth and ability of children who are low achievers, was discussed by some teachers as being a viable alternative or supplement to standardized testing.

Kaye: I've always truly believed that we should have a pre-test / post-test situation. I feel like that is important to see if there has been growth for children. However, I do not think you can have one test to say that this is *all* of the child's education. Portfolio's I think are much better.

Portfolios are comprised of student work samples that are generated in the classroom. These classroom work samples were believed by some participants to give more flexibility in the manner children could convey their knowledge. Children can show that they understand concepts by means other than selecting an answer in a multiple-choice format. While this allows for some flexibility, there are still restrictions as to what type of samples can be included in a portfolio.

K.C.: Now the portfolio, it's paper. We still have to show examples of paper. Show me the worksheet where they have read this thing and answered these questions. I can't say, well here's a report that they did, and they went on the Internet and researched it because that is what gets their interest. It still has to be in standardized format.

Based on teacher descriptions of many children who are low achievers having strengths in verbal and hands on learning, it seems reasonable to believe that a "paper" based portfolio may not be the best format for many children who are low achievers to express their knowledge. Having a child tell or show a teacher what they have learned would not fit the portfolio format that was described by K.C. Maggie alluded to how it is difficult sometimes to find a way to somewhat objectively show others that a child has learned a concept. She gave an example of assessing a child's ability to logically sequence steps to complete the end goal of making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

Maggie: I think they do better if they can tell you out loud. I think they could tell it more easily than write it, but I also think they have problems saying exactly what they want. If it's a step-by-step thing, like can you tell me how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, they might not start out with first you take the bread out of the cabinet and then you open up the bag, then you take the bread out. They would miss steps. They'd say, "OK, put peanut butter on the bread" before they'd say take the bread out.

Interviewer: If you gave them everything they needed they could make a PBJ?

Maggie: Oh, yeah! They could do it, but the expressing part they'd have trouble with.

The third consideration expressed by some teachers to be important when making retention decisions, appears to be what I will call the teacher's "professional opinion" about what is in the best interests of the child. One teacher described it as a "gut feeling" as to whether or not retention will be beneficial for a child. The teachers who mentioned this measure realize that their professional opinion is often difficult to back up with hard data, but they seem to acknowledge and trust it. Sometimes teachers just seem to "know" when a child should be promoted despite a failing grade. While Jaye firmly believes in the importance of her professional opinion, she knows that giving it defensible measures would be difficult. In the context of commenting on retention decisions, Jaye expressed

It amazes me that sometimes the teacher input is nothing. I'm thinking, I know these kids in my room better than, I spend more time with them than some of their own parents spend with them. So I feel like, yeah I am qualified to say what the child needs. But you know, so much of it is just a gut feeling and that's not good because you can't go rate that feeling.

Jaye explained how difficult it is to measure the progress of a child academically because she believes there are two measures that have to be considered, a) how a child compares to his/her peers, and, b) how much gain a child has shown personally.

The problems lies in, of course, that when you have standards that are set statewide or even locally, that this child has to perform certain things to move on. I think it is hard then to measure their success because we're not going to see a lot of it in probably in the grades, so I'm torn between that. It's kind of a double-sided thing.

It would be ideal to be able to take each child and measure their success in terms of how much they'd improved. However, we *do* have to have a standard set that at this grade level you should be doing these things. We can't let this child, just because they're improving, sit here in the third and fourth grade and still be doing first grade work simply because that's where they're at. So the success part of it is very difficult for me to put into words as far as measuring it. I think there is a measure that is going to stick and be state regulated and then there is going to be the success part where you just personally know that this child has improved.

The general consensus among these teachers was that major educational decisions, such as retention, needed to be based on more than standardized measurements of student's academic mastery. Participants indicated the use of measures that accommodate various learning styles was needed, as well as at least some deference to the professional opinion of the teacher.

### **Solutions**

Once the problems that face children who are low achievers in the classroom were identified, teachers were asked to give their opinions on what they thought would help children who are low achievers succeed in the classroom. Teacher responses were placed into five topical sections: Classroom Structure, Teacher Training, Parental Training, Educational Options, and Professional Assistance.

#### **Classroom Structure**

Participants suggested two types of classroom restructuring. The first was the use of a co-teaching method in the classroom and the second was implementing an alternative structure to the traditional grade level classrooms.

K.C. believes that simply having a teacher assistant or an "extra pair of hands" is a benefit to children who are low achievers because the teacher assistant could provide the one-on-one assistance time the teacher doesn't always have or perform the less skilled

day to day tasks, such as grading papers, which free up teacher time to work directly with students.

Kaye and Maryellen felt that having two certified teachers working in the same classroom would be helpful for students who are low achievers. The strength of this model seemed to be that the one-on-one time children who are low achievers require for repetition, practice and clarification of new concepts could be met by one teacher, while the second teacher would be free to attend to the needs of higher achieving children. Both teachers stressed that the key to the success for this type of model would be that the two teachers used the same types of strategies to teach. Maryellen expressed great confidence in this model and said that if it were used, “the needs of the slow learning youngster-not the impaired youngster, but the slow learner, could very definitely be met.” Kaye who has had previous personal experience working within this type of model gave confirmation of Maryellen’s belief. The class she co-taught consisted of 16 children who were low achievers and 8 high achievers. She shared the following about how the co-teaching was structured and it’s resulting success.

Kaye: It was a reading acceleration program. There were two teachers in the classroom and we took the little baby kindergarteners, the ones that were summer babies. They were struggling, but they had the potential to grow. [My co-teacher] and I team-taught. We would take the 16 and we divided it up into the two semesters. The first semester we had 8 children-I took four and she took four. And in the morning I would take them into a little room and we would do an intensive reading program. Very successful. But the parents had to be involved. They had to sign a paper saying their child was going to be in this and they were going to help their child that night, every day. We did a lesson plan everyday [based on] where the child was at, where they were going. Then we’d go back to the classroom and the teacher in there was doing the same type of strategies like I was doing in the one-on-one. And then we switched, and she would go and do four kids in the afternoon and I would be in the classroom. So the person knew who was coming and going and it was the same types of strategies happening. It was a very successful program. However, the funding was too expensive. It was only 16

children but the success of those children, they followed them all the way up to the middle school, and they were successful. You could not tell them apart.

One characteristic of this model was that there were children at different levels working within the same classroom, unlike the DP type classes where all children are on a lower level. On this point, it was interesting to learn teacher philosophies regarding the use of mixed level classrooms versus DP type classrooms. Teachers who worked in DP classrooms were supportive of the strategy and focused on the benefits of not having kids feel “stupid” or “isolated” in the classroom, as well as having to teach to only one level of ability as opposed to three. Mixed classroom teachers tended to feel that their classroom composition was more beneficial and cited how higher achieving students can be used to help children who are low achievers achieve in the classroom. Mentioned was the use of higher achievers to “model” good reading as well as provide peer support. One teacher who had taught both types of classes commented on her time spent in the DP classroom saying that, “actually I think that the low achievers had worse behaviors and it ended up being a behavior class, so that’s why I’m kind of against having them in one group. Others might see it as an opportunity to help them learn by having them all in a group at a time.”

Maggie was supportive of mixed level classrooms, but thought perhaps a “resource class” where children who are low achievers could, “just learn studying skills” would be beneficial. Another suggestion, given by Elizabeth, was a “transitional type classroom” between kindergarten and first grade where children who are low achievers could work on the skills they didn’t completely master before moving on to the first grade. She described this “hypothetical” classroom as follows.

If we could have that transitional classroom, that hypothetical transitional classroom, where the demands of the full blown curriculum could be scaled way

down to where this child could be moving successfully below grade level and have a below grade level report card and the parent knows from the get go--but that would be major bucks for the school system to come up with.

This type of transitional classroom idea was expanded on by K.C. who suggested doing away with the traditional grade level system. She suggests grouping kids into levels according to their actual abilities rather than assigning a grade to them.

K.C.: OK. For the low achieving students, I think ideally, and I don't think it will ever come to be, but if we truly had a system where we could pull them in and do an assessment-diagnose them. Truly understand how they need to learn and how they need to be taught and let them go. No first grade, second grade, third grade, instead it would be here's your skills you need to know before you hit middle school, and let's just teach these skills.

Jaye previously worked in a state where all children were successfully integrated into the general curriculum. Her classroom was comprised of all types of children ranging from gifted to severely autistic. She describes the schools as having, "no DP rooms, no Special Education rooms and no ESE rooms. The kids are all in the classroom." Under the system she described, children are given a number rating that indicates their level of need in the classroom. She gave the example that your "average" students may be rated a one, while a severely autistic student may be rated a five. She estimated that the average class size was 15 kids. If a teacher had a level five child in her class, the teacher time that child required was considered to be "worth" five students, therefore, she would only have 10 more "average" students placed in her class before it was considered full. Jaye believed that this system worked well for both for the students and the teachers.

Other teachers besides Jaye mentioned the need to implement a cap on class size if teachers are to meet the needs of children who are low achievers in the classroom without sacrificing time with higher ability level students. Kaye was teaching 28 students at the

time of the interview and strongly believed, “a lower class size is important.” She reflected on a year she taught 20 students and felt that it made a “big difference.” She felt that with a class as large as 28, “you can’t meet every child’s individual needs as quickly.” Elizabeth shared similar sentiments and noted that, “if we could just keep it at the perfect 14 or 15--WOW! That would be the more individualization that we could give them, hoping that the parents are doing that too.”

### **Teacher Training**

Of the 10 participants, only one felt that her educational training adequately prepared her to work with children who are low achievers. The remainder of the participants expressed the opinion that the classroom time they spent in college was not particularly helpful to them when it came to working with children who are low achievers. Many participants felt that better teacher training was needed to prepare teachers to work with children who are low achievers as well as prepare them for the realities of day-to-day teaching. Fay drew upon her personal experiences as a child, rather than her college education, to help her work with children who are low achievers. She talked about what it was like for her when she began teaching.

Fay: Academically, I was scared to death. I didn’t know what to expect, I didn’t know what I was supposed to teach in whatever grade I got. I didn’t know there was a curriculum guide and all that stuff. That didn’t come across to me in college. And all these fancy schmancy ways of doing things in cooperative groups and thematic and phonics was out when I was there. It was all whole language and that kind of stuff. I got into the DP class and thought, “Forget this garbage. None of it’s going to help me with this group of kids.” But knowing how hard some things were for me growing up, I could relate. And I knew that “this” helped me doing it this way so that’s how I’m going to do it. I think I learned more from personal experience than I did in college.

K.C. felt that her college training did not adequately prepare her to work with the parents of children. Based on earlier descriptions of how important it is to have parent

involvement and for teachers to be able to work with the parents, it seems reasonable to understand why teachers such as K.C. would like to have more training in this area.

K.C.: Number one thing I would do is prepare them [teachers] for parent conferences. Every year, dealing with parents becomes more and more difficult. I think our society has brought it on because in the media everyone is bashing teachers. I think being able to run a parent conference is major. I had no clue how to deal with parents. And that first time that that parent came and jumped on me I was in tears. I didn't know I was doing a disservice to her child. Here I thought I was bending over backwards. They thought completely different. We are not prepared for that at all. The hours you have to put in. I don't think beginning teachers really have an idea of how much preparation.

K.C. implied that another aspect of teaching she was not prepared for when she first entered the classroom was the time involved in developing lessons. She is sure to let beginning teachers who are interning with her know from the start that they will invest a lot of time outside the classroom for which there will often be little appreciation.

I've had a lot of interns and this is my analogy. Have you ever done the Thanksgiving dinner? And they laugh because they're not married and haven't had to do it. And I say trust me, you'll have to do it one of these years where you have to prepare this Thanksgiving feast. And you will work all morning long. They will come to the dinner, they will sit down, they will sit down and dinner is over in 20 minutes. Trust me. You're going to work hours on one center or one terrific lesson plan and it's going to be over in 15 minutes. And they may not even like it!

Susan felt that her internship training, rather than coursework, was extremely helpful to her as a beginning teacher. To her, what made the internship meaningful was being mentored by a teacher actively working with children who are low achievers every day. She seemed to feel the in-field experience of her mentor provided a valuable knowledge base that was lacking in her college instructors.

After I finished with my degree and did my internship here with (teacher name), boy did my world change when I walked in. I knew nothing about teaching. I thought I knew everything? I absolutely had no clue. I wasn't exposed to that type of setting. I wasn't in the classroom enough you know doing hands on with the children everyday. I wasn't taught by a professional. None of my teachers that taught me in college, they absolutely did not teach you anything you needed to

know about remediating low readers. I think training, it all stems back to training and teachers that aren't exposed to proper training, their kids seem to struggle

Lindy views children who are low achievers as children who need specialized techniques to learn most effectively and believes she is not adequately trained to effectively meet classroom needs of children who are low achievers. She does not believe that her college curriculum appropriately addressed the needs of these children and that perhaps more training in special education would be helpful to her to address the needs of children who are low achievers.

Lindy: I feel like that there ought to be training just like this ESE teacher's trained to teach children with learning disabilities, you know to help them...I'm not saying that a regular classroom teacher couldn't do it, but I think if, for example if I'm going to be working with those groups of kids, I need a little bit different guideline, a little bit different curriculum that I'm going to be using with them and maybe I do need a little bit more specialized training or a little bit more. I need to go talk out there among some teachers and say, "tell me some things that I can do that will work." To recognize that these students, to me, if you talk about a disability for example, this is a disability to me. Not a disability, well, in a sense, but we need to be recognizing this as a group to themselves. They don't fall in this category or that category so we've left them out in the cold basically. Why are we not recognizing that and why are we not training people just like we train people to teach the emotionally handicapped? Why are we not training teachers to teach these children who are in this gray area?

### **Parental Training**

It was not surprising that participants felt parental training of some type would be helpful to children who are low achievers. Teachers clearly indicated that the parents of children who are low achievers are seen as key influences in their child's educational success. As Kaye phrased it, the school system needs to "get the parents involved" if the needs of children who are low achievers are to be met.

Kaye: I think we need to get parents involved. So we need to do something with parent involvement even at the very early ages in Pre-K. Get the parents involved. This year one of my things I try to do in my classroom is make the parents more involved in their child's education with a reading program. It was successful. I try

to keep the parents informed by using newsletters. I've done little things when I've had the parents come in and help and I think it's been very successful this year.

Susan attempts to "get the parents more involved" by sometimes teaching the parent the skills *they* didn't learn when they were in school in order to now help their child at home. Susan shared a story of spending her personal, uncompensated time to tutor a parent.

Susan: A lot of time the parents don't have the resources to even understand the work themselves, so if they need understanding of certain stuff then I'll explain it to parents and sit down with them as well. I've had a couple of mornings where I've had to come in early and teach a father how to do certain skills so he could teach his daughter at home.

Marion took the parent involvement to a more organized level by suggesting to the principal at her school that they hold a parent training night at the beginning of the year to let parents know what's expected of them as well as give them suggestions for helping their children at home.

Marion: This is what I talked to [the principal] about. I said, I just think we need a night to explain to these parents what they're supposed to be doing with these kids. And if we could train them and get them figured out in first grade, then it will make it easier as the kids go on. Ways of doing spelling without having to go out and buy all the kits and all the stuff you have to do. When I taught kindergarten a lot of times I told parents, I said, "open up a newspaper, give your child a marker and say, find the "and's," color all the "and's" on this page." I said there are ways to do things without spending a whole lot of money and most of these parents don't have the money to go out, and how to make flash cards, and we came up with maybe even having a make and take type thing where they come and they make, show them how to make, give them the materials to make the flash cards and show them the vocabulary words and how to make the flash cards and go over it with them. How to study the spelling, how to have them read a story and ask questions later. Those kinds of things, so that they know that the backpack is one of the things at this level that should be checked every single night, you know? What do you check for? What do you look for? How to review, look through their papers and don't yell at them for that F, sit down with them and say let's go over and see what you did wrong so the next time you'll know it.

## Educational Options

Some participants described a need to offer children who are low achievers other “roads” or “avenues” to take in school that are less focused on the academics that are difficult for them and more focused on their “strengths” that could help them with future vocations. As K.C. expressed, “what are their strengths? Art, music, physical attributes-- there are so many avenues. Your academic, your writing skills...that’s not everything in the world.” There appeared to be an acknowledgement that some children are not going to go the “college route” and that the school system may need to provide a more appropriate education for these students whose future vocation, as described by one participant, may be more “hands on.”

Kaye: They say, well, these children have to be able to read. Well, yes, definitely. I mean, there’s not one teacher that would say send a child on if they can’t read. But you have to say, “where’s this child coming from and where are they going?” I think we need, maybe the middle school to start having vocational education because all kids are not going to college. So why do we expect them to do all these classes that are college bound classes where there are some successful jobs that these children could possibly do that are vocational. . .But you know, you have these children that can work well with their hands. They can do things like mechanics and hairdressers and stuff. We need to have two different roads for these children. I don’t think put them in in elementary school. You still want to give them all a chance, but there will be a time when we know that, no matter what this child does, this child’s not going on to college. So why not give them another opportunity?

Lindy: I’m a big believer in both vocational training for these children and not keep them into a regular classroom setting all throughout. I think they need to be taught a vocation. I think we need to start early on, because if we don’t their success rate is not very good because by then they have failed so much that they tend to get out of school, and I think if we offered them more options that they could have success in and that, you know would help them in the real world. I mean, let’s face it, everybody’s not going to go to college. So we need to be doing something about these children with these kinds of I.Q.’s that don’t qualify for special programs and are having a hard time in the regular classroom...Buddy, start worrying about these gray area kids. Let’s put some money into this. Let’s help these kids. If it’s nothing more than offer them a vocation. Even that at elementary, we could have a person who specializes, like I said make this into a whole group into itself. Maybe start offering these kids some little vocational things according to their age in

elementary and it would move right on up. Or maybe when they got to high school, if they already had an idea that, you know, “I did some of this stuff in elementary and I loved it I think I’m going to be good at this.” Don’t you think that some of these kids are thinking, “I hate to go to school and I can’t wait till I can get out.” Well what if they found something here and we gave them an opportunity and we could let them do it a little bit. It would give them a chance to have a variety of things and realize, you know “I never knew I’m good at this. I would have never thought I was because I can’t read and I’m not making good grades so I must not be good at a lot of stuff,” and all of a sudden there we have opened a door for them to say, “Yeah I’m going to stay in school because I’m going to keep going to get this training I need because I want to do this, this is what I want to do.”

### **Professional Assistance**

Several participants suggested a need to have children who are low achievers tested to determine their individual strengths and weakness. They described this testing as needing to take place “the minute they step foot through the door” and “right away” so valuable class-time is not spent on “trial and error” attempts by the teacher to ascertain the problem. A discussion with one participant revealed that simply knowing a child is having trouble reading doesn’t answer the question of *why* they are having difficulties. As one participant phrased it, “If I had a better diagnosis, then I’d have a better prescription.” In order to implement successful reading interventions, teachers need to know what it is specifically in the reading process with which the child is having trouble.

Kaye: I think you have to figure out first of all why they’re low achievers. I think the testing teacher, the coach, will be really a beneficial person in our school because you can find out “why” is this child low? Is it the phonics? Is it the fluency? Is it vocabulary? We need to find out exactly right away, so we can help that child right away... You’re not going to really be successful in a large group. Especially these children that need your individual attention. Which is what these low achievers need, your individual attention. We need funding throughout the school, and a person who just does testing.

Elizabeth: I don’t think they’re identified soon enough. I think that when there is a problem at that given point we need to look into it and not say it’ll really surface next year or it’ll really surface by third grade. I think that these kids...something needs to be done the minute they step foot through the door. I think that early intervention, we need to know that from the moment that child steps into that Pre-K

class, we need to begin to look at it then. Because the sooner we can fix something...or pinpoint something to go on then and work with it.

In addition to the above suggestions for professional help with diagnostic testing, there were suggestions for more qualified professionals to be involved teaching children who are low achievers. Two teachers shared that they saw a need for a more qualified professional to work with children who are low achievers.

K.C.: I'll tell you something else, there are times I feel like I don't have the background for it. There's some of this stuff that, I can't help them because I'm not educated in this field to truly help that child.

Lindy: Well, I think what doesn't work in a lot of cases is these children sitting in a regular classroom setting. And by that I mean we have programs it seems for all kinds of children. We have programs for the learning disability. They're going to be in a program, whether it be all day or part time or whatever, and they're going to get zeroed in on where their difficulty is. We've got children that are in the ESE programs, we've got speech for the speech kids, we've got Title I for the kids. My thing is, I think this should be another whole group that your child qualifies for and that there should be something, some programs made just for him. And I don't mean them going in a room and being taught all of them together in one room like I talked about earlier. I mean, for example, I have a child maybe that has a learning disability. He may go to the ESE resource teacher an hour a day or an hour two days a week. Well in my opinion, why are we not targeting these children [children who are low achievers]? We're not offering them anything. We're putting them in a classroom and we've got these expectations, and that's fine and good and I don't think we should lower it. However, we've got the L.D. kid in there also but he's getting this person who specializes in this stuff showing him some things that he can do and working with him. We don't have anything for these children.

In summary, it appears that all participants had ideas as to how the needs of children who are low achievers could be better addressed in the educational system. Most of these ideas, however, require funding to implement and it seemed that some teachers felt that financial investment would not be made. Statements such as "we need funding throughout the schools" and "we need to throw some money at these kids" indicated that there are feelings of frustration with the lack of funding made available to help children who are low achievers.

## **The System**

In talking to teachers about how children who are low achievers could achieve more in the classroom, I sensed an undercurrent of frustration, and at times open hostility, towards the educational system in general. I perceived that teachers felt children who are low achievers could obtain a useful and meaningful education if “the system” were more responsive to the needs of children who are low achievers. With this in mind, I re-read through the interviews and found that there were several references to systemic concerns that may hinder the success of children who are low achievers throughout the topics discussed.

As mentioned above, one of the systemic concerns discussed by participants was a lack of funding to invest in successful programs for children who are low achievers (such as the co-teaching program discussed by Kaye) or a lack of government ability, or perhaps willingness, to raise money for programs (as alluded to by Elizabeth when speaking of the cost of a transitional classroom).

Another systemic concern related to the success of children who are low achievers appears to be the lack of consistency in the educational system. One participant described educational practices as “going around in circles” in that she has seen certain practices come into popularity, “disappear” and then come back into fashion years later. Using a similar description, Lindy explained there are times when programs have been considered the “big thing” one year and then “thrown out” the next year for a newer, different program. She is concerned about the effect these “swings” in programs may have on students.

Lindy: Phonics is a good example. We went through a situation during the time I taught and I have a family member that actually did this, they threw out phonics way back. Then you had a group of kids coming through there that didn't know

how to read well, surely didn't know how to spell well and phonographics is a big thing now and that's wonderful, but it doesn't mean you throw phonics out. We have a real bad idea that if we get something that comes out that we have to use that and we throw away everything else and that's not the way it should be. I think they finally realized that and it swung right back to putting phonics in those classrooms. The sad thing is we have to go through those kinds of things or the system will. Then what happens to those children? They go on and we've done them an injustice.

Lindy suggested that consulting more with teachers could be beneficial to lawmakers and decision makers. In her opinion, if "teachers who have been in the classroom" were included in the law making they could provide valuable input on "what works, what doesn't, what they'd like to see happen and what things we can do differently." She seemed to feel that decisions affecting education were being made by people who didn't know what it's like to be in the classroom and that when poor decisions are made it is the children who suffer in the end.

Lindy: I think that as a teacher, I would like to be included in the law making. Included in the decision-making. A lot of these people tossing out these laws and these decisions have never been in a classroom and they don't even go out like you're doing and talk to teachers. I think that I would like to see more teachers involved, if you're going to make a decision that's going to impact this many children, across the board, across the whole state of Florida, then by George know what the heck it's about. Know the consequences of it. Don't wait until we see what's happening and go, "we made a big mistake, we need to fix this." What about those children? The mistake children? I just think that if I could say something, I mean I know there's not a fix-all or a quick fix but I think that maybe if there were some means of truly these decision makers getting more people involved. I don't mean your union rep and someone going up there and meeting with them, I'm talking about truly having a team or a committee. When you've got something you want to look at, get with them, toss it around with them. If you've got something that's coming find out from these teachers who have been in the classroom what works, what doesn't, what they'd like to see happen and what things can we do differently.

Jaye found it cumbersome and time consuming to deal with the paperwork, required by county policy, to get one of her students who was a low achiever tested for

assistance. She suggests eliminating the paperwork required of teachers so that they can get back to the business of educating children.

Jaye: You know it has taken all year to get him on an IEP and it's because of the paperwork, I'm sure it is. That is my gut feeling anyway, it's the paperwork. And this state I am so amazed that the amount of paperwork that they need here and I go back home to Vermont and my friend up there is a Speech Pathologist, I say, "do you think you have paperwork? You come to Florida and *see* the paperwork these people have to do!" Get rid of the paperwork and let us work with kids.

A more pervasive disenchantment with the politics of education was also perceived in several interviews. It seemed that teachers felt alienated from the decision making processes in education and sometimes disagreed with educational decisions they were expected to implement. Participants seemed to be very irritated with the educational policymakers' lack of understanding of the realities in day-to-day teaching.

Fay: I mean, I'm not going to get the parent support I want to have. I know these kids aren't going to have the home life they need to have. I know those other factors, so it's up to me. I feel like I'm the saving grace in this child's life. Bush doesn't see where they started, where they came. He doesn't see anything, any of those people. They see a blanket 4th grade must be at this level and 3rd grade at this level. That's absolutely ridiculous. Granted his kids go to public school, but where? Let's take (name of school in affluent district) and compare it to (her school). Stick your child in the poverty school equal to us and see what happens.

Marion: I understand the accountability. The powers above, with the State and stuff, most of these people have never been in a classroom. What they remember is when they were in a classroom as a child and most of them were the Leave-it-to-Beaver stage age level. And so they remember sitting properly with your hands on your desk and yes ma'am and all this stuff and it's just not like that anymore.

K.C. seemed to feel that the policy makers would be more compassionate towards children who are low achievers if they had to deal with them "face-to face." She asserts that policy makers reduce a "real person" to "a number" that makes it easier for them to avoid the realities of facing the children who are deemed "failures" as well as those children's parents.

The hardest thing is that we [the teachers] are working day to day and we know that that child is a real person with a heart. They [the policy makers] don't see that. It's a student number with an IQ and test scores of "this," and he's a failure. There's a whole lot of difference if it's their child. Maybe if you gave them the test scores and then you put a little picture of the child...so they had to look at that face, that little child and say, OK now, that's who you're talking about. You're not just looking at a piece of paper with some scores on it.

There also appeared to be feelings of resentment toward bad publicity in education that is unjustly directed at teachers. One participant sarcastically referred to "our good governor" as being among those "blasting" teachers.

Lindy: You can only do so much with what you have to work with, you know? If we look at that a little bit more, because we do get blasted a lot that these kids aren't doing well. We hear that a lot. Our good governor thinks that. Well, what if it were something else and it weren't academically. If it was a child that had polio and walks with a limp and he was a runner. Yeah, he may run very well, but is he probably going to run as well as somebody without that problem? Probably not. Same thing academically. Think about that. I mean, no, it's not going to happen. You do what you can with what you have to work with.

One participant seemed to feel that the current policy makers were not operating with the best interests of children and education in mind, but rather with a hidden agenda aimed at "pushing the blame" of a foundering system onto teachers, segregating children and unethically making money.

I think we should make them aware. We have to be together. I think teachers on the whole are very good people. We're decent, hard workers, we really care about what we're doing, but we're sometimes unaware of what's being done to us in Tallahassee. There are people up there who are out to get us. There out to get education. They do not want us to be successful and they want to make money off of it. They want to do vouchers; they want to separate. I think they're racists. You know, they're doing it secretly and they would never say that, but I truly believe...

Regarding the educational system, what teachers seemed to want to convey is that their input is crucial to the development of effective programs and policies for education. It does not seem, however, that these teachers feel their input is sought or valued outside of their immediate schools. Teachers did generally feel they were "supported" by their

school-based administration and that the policies developed by their respective schools were responsive to the needs of the students and teachers. Participants shared that their schools “really tried” and “were good at” meeting the needs of children who are low achievers.

### **Summary of Factors Affecting the Academic Success of Children Who Are Low Achievers**

Study participants indicate there are several factors, found in both the home and the educational system, which negatively impact the educational experiences of children who are low achievers. In addition, students who are low achievers are viewed as having emotional issues that can also interfere with academic success. It appears that all of these factors can interact with each other to ultimately create environmental and personal barriers that impede the academic success of children who are low achievers.

#### **The Home Environment**

In the home, there was a consensus among teachers that homework completion, parental involvement and parental support are key factors for the academic success of children who are low achievers. Low achievers need the support of parents *telling* them school is important as well as *behaving* in ways that convey school is important, such as helping with homework and interacting with teachers. These two factors are perceived to be vital for educational success because of motivational issues with children who are low achievers as well as a lack of time in school to provide children who are low achievers with the practice and repetition they require to master concepts. Participants noted two categories of concern in the home environment. The first is the inability of parents, who were often themselves children who are low achievers in school, to help their children complete homework. The second is a perceived lack of priority placed on school by

parents. Low achievers may not get the assistance they require at home due to what many participants perceived as being a lack of time and energy in the lives of stressed out parents. There was also concern that some parents of children who are low achievers do not recognize school success as a way for their children to break out of the stressful life cycle into which they have been born.

### **The School Environment**

The school environment also appears to have its own obstacles to maximizing academic success for children who are low achievers. Participants described children who are low achievers as having four main instructional needs in the classroom: repetition/reinforcement of material, explicit instruction, individual attention and experiential learning opportunities. Also described were emotional needs such as feelings of success and self-efficacy. Factors believed to impede teacher ability to meet these needs include a) a lack of time to provide needed assistance, b) a fast paced, high level curriculum, c) teachers receiving inadequate training in methods to meet the needs of children who are low achievers, d) the use of assessment tools that may not accurately reflect the knowledge of children who are low achievers, and e) a systemic focus on “success” as being judged in comparison to other students rather than individual student growth.

Suggestions for addressing these problems, as noted by participants, included classroom restructuring (co-teaching, ability level placement or pull out programs), better teacher training (methods to teach children who are low achievers as well as how to deal with more “real life” teaching situations), professional assistance to teachers (teacher aides or diagnostic testing professionals) and educational options (vocational training or alternative curriculums).

In general, the needed changes noted by teachers focused on either providing the time and manpower to meet the needs of children who are low achievers or making the educational expectations for these students more realistic and beneficial to them.

### **Emotions of Children Who Are Low Achievers**

Another theme that developed out of the interviews is the emotional impact chronic low achievement may have on this group of children. The constant failure these children encounter is perceived to lower their self-esteem, which in turn can result in a lack of motivation and an increase in behavioral problems. One perceived result of this constant failure is a learned helplessness, when children who are low achievers seem to “give up” before even attempting new learning. Research indicates that these types of behaviors are based on an individual’s belief that no amount of effort will end in success and often are associated with feelings of shame and self-doubt (Seligman, 1975). Further research on this concept indicates that students who chronically perform poorly in academics are at risk to exhibit self-defeating attitudes and behaviors that result in failure (Chan, 1994; Swartz, Purdy & Fulligim, 1983). As supported by self-efficacy and learned helplessness research, these participants expressed that getting children who are low achievers to *believe* they will succeed and providing them with successful mastery experiences makes a positive difference in their actual academic success (Seligman, 1975; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Conetta (1996). The impact that more stringent and fast paced curriculums may have on children who are low achievers could be a concern due to the potentially heightened risk of failure and resulting feelings of helplessness. It seems reasonable to wonder if the push for more educated children may result in an increased dropout rate for children who are low achievers who feel helpless and defeated by their educational experience.

The impact that teachers' sense of self-efficacy had on the achievement of children who are low achievers was difficult to determine because of the difference between what participants viewed as "success" and what the education system viewed as "success." Participants seemed to feel that, within the parameters of having to work around and against negative home and school factors outside their control, they did a good job of educating children who are low achievers. These teachers judged their personal success more on the individual gains of each child rather than each child who was a low achiever meeting standards set by the educational system. This differing perspective of success was exemplified by one teacher reflecting on how she deals with children who are low achievers who have tried their best, but failed the FCAT.

I just said to them it doesn't matter. Isn't that sad? But that's how most people look at it. I look at the growth. Did it get better than last year? Most of mine did, so that makes me feel better, that there was growth.

### **The System**

Another theme, more reflective of participant views of the educational system in general, was a sense of disconnection between teachers and "the system." Participants alluded to feeling alienated from county, state and federal decision-making processes in the sense that their input on educational decisions is usually not sought and at times felt to be disrespected by the policy makers. Participants did, however, believe that they were supported and valued by their individual school administrations.

Another form of disconnection described was related to the "realities" of teaching in a classroom vs. the expectations set by policy makers. Participants seemingly wanted to say to policy makers, "you can't make useful and feasible decisions unless you spend time in the classroom." At best, there was a strong suggestion that policy makers try to make positive decisions but have little idea of the implications that some of their policies

have in the “real world.” In a sense, some policies “look good on paper” but do not work out as well in practice. At worst, there were feelings of distrust towards policy makers and a sense of doubt as to whether or not they truly had the best interests of children at heart. It seems educational policy making is feared by some to have become less for the benefit of children and more for the benefit of political posturing and gain. Participants seemed to feel that the result of this is that children who are low achievers often suffer both academically and emotionally.

### **Low Achievement from the ICF Perspective**

The scope of the World Health Organization’s ICF model of disability appears to encompass the barriers expressed by teachers that hinder the success of children who are low achievers in the classroom. Using this model, there appears to be strong evidence that most of the difficulties children who are low achievers experience in the classroom appear to fall into the one of the model’s major constructs. Difficulties noted by teachers related to Body Function, such as abstract thinking difficulties and limited mental flexibility, seem to fit under model’s sub-heading of Higher-level cognitive functions. Environmental issues related to the services in the educational system as well as “the system” itself were noted as barriers to the success of children who are low achievers. Examples of this include barriers noted by teachers such as “red-tape” and excess paperwork encountered when trying to access help for children who are low achievers; accountability policies and standards set by the state and federal government as well as high stakes testing required by state policy. Personal Factors of children who are low achievers such as their home life (i.e. low socioeconomic status, lack of parental education), difficulties related to age when they are retained, and coping style difficulties such as behavior problems and poor self esteem were identified as hindrances to the

academic success of these children. It also appears that several sub-categories encompassed by the ICF construct of Activity and Participation apply to children who are low achievers. Examples of this include difficulties learning to read with fluency and comprehension of the material and more generally having difficulty with mastering overall course material and subjects as needed to advance with their peers to other stages of education (i.e., retention).

## CHAPTER 6 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

“The problems that exist in the world today cannot be solved by the level of thinking that created them” Albert Einstein

Prior to beginning the interviews for this study, the general lack of information available on children who are low achievers seemed surprising. Once these teachers shared their opinions and perception of children who are low achievers with me, the lack of research seemed not only surprising, but also somewhat alarming especially in light of a) the pressure the educational system is currently under to increase the achievement levels of children who are low achievers, b) the apparent abundance of difficulties faced by children who are low achievers as clearly described by these teachers and c) the potential impact that children who are low achievers have on society as a whole in regard to future productivity and societal contributions. Through the words of these teachers it may be surmised that the academic needs of children who are low achievers are many, yet the realistic means of meeting these needs are few.

Before launching into the possibilities for future studies, a review of the credibility and limitations of this study is warranted. As was discussed previously, issues of credibility were addressed through the enlistment of outside auditors to review the data and analysis as well as a shared interpretive process with teacher interview participants. Outside auditors included two of my committee members, one student peer and a teacher not involved in the study. The insights and suggestions given by all of the auditors were extremely helpful because they were able to bring both professional expertise and

personal insight to the analysis of the data. Not only did they assess the data from the viewpoint of professor, student or teaching professional, they were each able to see possible interpretations and commonalities from their roles as parents or simply taxpayers who support public education. They offered viable alternatives to some of my own data analysis as well as suggestions for categories that I may have overlooked had they not brought them to my attention. Upon each auditor's final review of the data analysis, they expressed that they felt the data had been thoroughly and accurately assessed and that all of their suggestions had been adequately addressed in the final analysis.

Teacher participants were all given copies of a working draft as well as the final paper and asked to share impressions, suggestions or concerns about the analysis as well as any concerns regarding the protection of their identities. None of the participants indicated problems regarding the confidentiality of their identity. Participant responses to the data analysis were all positive and enthusiastic. No participant indicated that information had been misinterpreted or misrepresented. All participants shared with me that they were appreciative of the opportunity to share their views and that they believed the subject matter was both timely and important in the field of education. Participants indicated that the data accurately represented the views shared during the interviews.

One limitation of this study may be the selection of participants from a very small and rural community. Many of the teachers live in the area and that could affect their personal commitment to the children that they teach. In essence, there is the possibility that familiarity with the students' families outside of school environment increases the strong personal commitment these teachers appeared to feel towards their students.

Another limitation of the study is the lack of ethnic diversity in the population of both students and teachers. All teachers were white females. There are a significant number of Hispanic children who attend these schools, but few other minorities.

While I believe this study achieved the goal of obtaining a great depth of information about the views of these interview participants regarding the children they work with who are low achievers, it is not a sufficient basis upon which to make generalized assumptions about all children who are low achievers. As will be outlined in the following passages, there is a great deal of further research needed to more clearly define the difficulties these children encounter and address their educational needs.

The following passages suggest some of the implications for future research generated by this study and are divided into the topical areas of Families of Children Who Are Low Achievers and The Educational System.

### **Families of Children Who Are Low Achievers**

Because study participants indicated a strong belief that family involvement was an important factor in the academic success of low achieving children, a further review of the literature on this topic was conducted. It was found that research has indeed indicated that parental involvement is important to the academic success of struggling children (Gettinger & Guetschow, 1998; Anderson, 2000; Jones & White, 2000; Edwards & Warin, 1999). Family factors that have been linked to student success include good home-school communication (Bowen, 1999; Taylor, Pearson, Clark & Walpole, 2000; Helling, 1996, Baker, 1997) assistance with homework (Epstein, Polloway, Buck, Bursuck, & Wissinger, 1997; Cooper, Lindsay, Nye & Greathouse, 1998) and high parental expectations for their child's achievement (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Concetta, 1996).

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. Examples of this included a lack of communication with the teacher through phone calls or notes in the agenda, failing to encourage homework completion and generally appearing to make little effort to instill in their children that school is important. One suggestion for future research may be parental inquiry as to whether or not the increase in public school accountability is also increasing teacher expectations of parent involvement. It appears that teachers are under a great deal of pressure to "find a way" to increase the success of children who are low achievers with a limited amount of time and resources. It is possible that teachers are now applying more pressure than ever on parents to actively be involved in the educational process. If this is so, parental perceptions of their responsibility to respond to the greater demands at home as well as their abilities to meet those expectations could impact how much home support is actually given. Addressing topics such as these with the parents of children who are low achievers may illuminate areas of consensus and disagreement between teachers and the parents of children who are low achievers as well

as give teachers a more accurate perception of the home-lives of children who are low achievers. While teachers can make experiential and educated guesses as to “why” many parents of children who are low achievers don’t participate in their child’s education, those guesses need to be either substantiated, clarified or dispelled by parents before meaningful progress can be made towards increasing parental involvement. Just as children who are low achievers are perceived by teachers to have certain needs that must be met to excel academically, it is conceivable that the parents of these children also have their own set of needs they feel must be met before they can help their child academically. While the implementation of mandated accountability measures for parents would most likely be unrealistic and unenforceable, the investigation of the perspectives of parents who do not seem to be invested in their child’s education could provide information about possible solutions to this problem.

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.

Because teachers perceived that family stressors have a strong impact on parental involvement, future research endeavors may want to investigate the impact that assistance programs for these stressors have on parental educational involvement. Teachers discussed programs such as free and reduced lunch and after school homework assistance that are currently in place to assist children who are low achievers and their families. It may be helpful to investigate these and other measures of support that are currently available to children who are low achievers and their families and the direct impact of those supports on either increasing the achievement of children who are low achievers or increasing parental ability to provide essential academic assistance at home. For instance, it was indicated by this study's participants that many parents of children who are low achievers aren't involved in education ultimately because of the family stress created by their "don't have" status. The perceived lack of parental time, money and educational knowledge base noted by teachers raises questions as to the efficacy or use of programs currently in place to address these problems. After school homework programs, parental education programs and student mentor programs are in place to assist in the educational "don't have" of parents. Government financial assistance programs such as Medicaid and free and reduced lunch/breakfast programs should be of assistance in easing the financial "don't have" that may be found in the homes of some children who are low achievers. Title One programs are in place in schools to provide at-risk, students who are low achievers with extra help in reading during the school day which should seemingly compensate for both time and educational "don't have" of parents. The school system in which this study's participants work also provides the services of school social workers, free of charge, to assist needy families in accessing community resources. There appear

to be many programs and supports available for the families of disadvantaged children who are low achievers, yet teachers in this study seemed to indicate that many of these children continue to fail and want for parents who are willing and/or able to help them academically at home. Further investigation of parental knowledge and access of support programs, as well as whether or not these supports ease the familial stressors indicated by teachers, could lead to more insightful understanding of why these programs are apparently not translating into increased academic success for children who are low achievers.

The third consideration for addressing the lack of family support sometimes seen with children who are low achievers, is for the educational system to essentially capitulate to the idea that parents will not be formally held responsible for assisting their children and mandate that educators find ways to meet student needs within the school rather than relying on or expecting parental help. Required after school programs to assist with homework as well as an increase in school personnel to assist struggling learners may be needed, but would require additional manpower and funding-commodities that appear to already be at a premium. For instance, after school homework programs would require hiring enough staff to give children who are low achievers the individualized attention they require as well as provide transportation home for the children whose parents do not drive, do not have gas money or are working. One alternative to after school tutoring that could be investigated is the implementation of a study period or class built into the daily school schedule. This may allow children who are low achievers to receive the extra time and assistance they need each day without the added expense of later bus transportation that an after school program would involve.

Another alternative to research may be the viability of schools providing computers and software to children who are low achievers to take home to assist with studying. This may provide children who are low achievers with the practice and repetition of concepts they seem to require as well as allow children who are low achievers to work on educational material without the need for parental involvement. While there are options to investigate that may help children who are low achievers get the educational assistance they need outside of school, there most likely will always be some children whose education will continue to be negatively impacted by family stressors and negative messages from parents.

## **The Educational System**

### **Teacher Training**

Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught. Oscar Wilde

One recurrent theme noted in this study was the lack of teacher preparedness to work with children who are low achievers. These teachers indicated that their college training did very little, if anything, to prepare them for working with children who are low achievers. Along with teachers and parents, it may be time for higher education to become more accountable to the public for the quality of its teacher training. Teacher education programs may need to reconsider how effectively they prepare teachers for the “realities” of day-to-day teaching and perhaps utilize more educators that are actively working in the classroom setting. It seems that the onset of accountability has changed the classroom climate and that teaching, in a phrase, “isn’t what it used to be.” While it appears that teachers are quite versed in educational theory, that theory is apparently not translating into specific classroom techniques that are effective for children who are low

achievers. In addition, colleges and universities may need to investigate whether the teaching strategies they are imparting are feasible to implement under the constraints of a fast paced, challenging curriculum driven by accountability rather than idealism. This may entail further inquiry with practicing teachers as to their perceptions of how well they felt they were prepared to enter the classroom, possible training opportunities that were not offered in college that they feel would have been beneficial and their opinions of how useful specific courses that were required in training actually have been to them in the classroom.

While better-trained teachers may help to increase the academic performance of children who are low achievers, there also appears to be a need to reconsider the viability of the general expectations set for the school system. Teachers in this study indicated that there are many things they have to deal with in the classroom that take away time from direct instruction. It may be helpful to investigate how much time teachers spend on high stakes curriculum instruction versus non-instructional activities such as student behavioral management, outside programs (such as character education required in the state of Florida), school assemblies or mandatory testing sessions implemented at the local or state level to assess student abilities. Without research on the time expenditures of teachers in the classroom, it is difficult to ascertain if the curriculum expectations they are asked to meet are feasible. Even under ideal circumstances there seems to be a question of whether the standards that have been set are realistic for *all* children. Is the educational system, as one teacher noted, developing a production line mentality where “educated children” will be mass-produced? The benefits of accountability may need to be re-examined from the perspectives of both the children who are low achievers who do

not “make the grade” and their parents, to give a humanistic perspective as to whether or not the means used to achieve accountability goals justify the negative emotional ends many of these children seem to experience.

### **Towards a More Unified Educational System**

All of us who are concerned for peace and triumph of reason and justice must be keenly aware how small an influence reason and honest good will exert upon events in the political field. Albert Einstein

On a broader level, the education system may need to address the apparent problems within itself such as feelings of disconnection and adversarial stances on the part of teachers towards policy makers. Policy makers appeared to be viewed by these participants as “not getting it” when it comes to actualizing enacted policies with students who were low achieving. Research on methods to bridge the perceived gap in education between reality and politics may be needed before the quality of education can be effectively improved. Increasing teacher participation in policy making may be one way to invoke feelings of involvement and therefore investment in the successful implementation of policies. Perhaps instituting policy workshops both locally and statewide may provide a forum for teachers, parents and policy makers to come together and share in the development of educational policy. This may be an idea that could be implemented fairly quickly and inexpensively to begin the process of bringing together the key players in education. Bringing policy makers into the classroom to experience the “realities” of teaching may also be helpful both in raising their personal awareness level of the classroom environment as well as establishing some “common ground” experiences with teachers. Along these same lines, there was concern that policy makers are out of touch with the fact that children who are low achievers and their families are “real people” and instead view them as “statistics.” As suggested by one participant,

there may be need to increase policy maker accountability by giving them the face-to-face experience of explaining to children who are low achievers and their families why the child's best efforts are not good enough. It is possible that if policy makers were expected to personally speak to children who are low achievers and their families about failing test scores, report cards indicating retention or the stress many of these children experience in school, they would have a different perspective on the impact of their accountability policies. These types of face-to-face interactions in the classroom and with parents would need to be approached as true learning experiences for policy makers rather than media events contrived for publicity. As noted by two participants, there was little respect for recent appearances by the governor at local "upscale" schools to "shake hands" and "smile for the camera" in what was construed by one teacher as a staged event to "look like he actually cared" about what was going on in education as a whole. It appears that policy makers' credibility may be enhanced if they "got into the trenches" with teachers in less wealthy school districts and experienced, for a meaningful amount of time, the difficulties in teaching this population of students.

### **High Stakes Testing**

"What does education often do? It makes a straight-cut ditch of a free, meandering brook." Henry David Thoreau

Another apparent problem with educational accountability that affects children who are low achievers is the use of high stakes testing to measure student-learning outcomes. The fast paced and challenging curriculum associated with the FCAT seems to be too difficult for children who are low achievers to master in the limited time frames they are allotted in the classroom. This leaves many children who are low achievers unable to meet the state expectation of mastering 75% of their grade level curriculum or passing the

FCAT. Additionally it seems that standardized test formats in general may not provide the most accurate picture of what children who are low achievers have learned when they have mastered curriculum content. As suggested by study participants, states such as Florida may need to reconsider the emphasis placed on high stakes testing, and research instead more emphasis being placed on portfolios or curriculum based assessments developed by teachers based on how children were actually taught material in order to more accurately gauge student learning against the curricular content. The possibility of individual student's progress and learning gains being given more weight in retention decisions could also be investigated as an addition to criterion based comparisons.

It appears that the educational system has implemented some very high stakes outcomes for the students who do not meet the new standards, without giving due consideration to the methods by which these outcomes will be achieved or the emotional consequences for students who cannot achieve them. Perhaps the implementation of high stakes testing and curriculums should be placed on hold until there is a better plan for how the goals will be met by students and teachers. Additionally, a better understanding of the emotional and educational consequences of high stakes testing may need to be gained to determine if they have a detrimental rather than beneficial affect on the short and long term educational experiences of children who are low achievers. A comparison of drop out rates before and after the implementation of accountability policies would be one suggestion for examining the impact high stakes testing has on educational outcomes. Another consideration may be the study of absenteeism and emotional distress behaviors in elementary children who are low achievers, such as school phobia or anxiety, that could be a result of curriculum related stressors.

### **Changing the Format of Services**

“Things alter for the worse spontaneously, if they are not altered for the better designedly.” Sir Francis Bacon

One possible way to increase the academic success of children who are low achievers is to make the educational system’s design more responsive to the needs of these struggling students. One step towards accomplishing this could be providing children who are low achievers access to more frequent help from school personnel who have the time and training to meet their learning needs. It seems that the perceived needs of children who are low achievers such as repetition of materials, individual attention, and explicit instruction could be met by hiring paraprofessionals or enlisting volunteers who work under the guidance of teachers. Of course, the “realities” of pursuing this option would need to be investigated and concerns such as reliability, quality and teacher expenditure of time supervising them would need to be addressed. Team teaching, where two teachers work in one classroom, may also be a viable, albeit expensive, consideration.

Another possibility for meeting the needs of children who are low achievers is to disband the traditional grade level division of students and reorganize classrooms to accommodate where students actually “are” academically rather than where they “should be.” This could lessen the negative impact continual failure in traditional classrooms may have on the self-esteem and motivation of children who are low achievers by rewarding students for making learning gains at their own pace, rather than punishing them for failing to keep up with a pace imposed upon them. Previously conducted research on this alternative suggests that students who are grouped according to ability level rather than age do make more significant academic gains than students in age-

grouped setting (Nye, 1995; Pavan, 1992). Research also indicates that grouping students for non-graded instruction in particular skills can be more consistently effective than generally grouping students for all instruction (Gutierrez & Slavin, 1992; McGurk and Pimentle ,1992).

A more dramatic change in education that could be considered is the addition of an educational track focused more on vocational skills training than academics. The success of this type of vocational track in increasing student interest and attitude towards school is well documented in the literature for middle and high school students (Peck, Catello, 1990; Corbett, Sanders, Clark & Blank, 2002; Quinn, 1991 Deblois, 1989). However, there was little information found on the use of vocational training at the elementary level. What the literature did provide was related to the use of interest inventories at the elementary level to gear student's learning towards interests (Smith, 1974). Further research on the use of vocational training in the elementary school may be warranted to determine if student attitude toward and interest in school at the elementary level is affected as it is at the middle and high school level. If indeed elementary students who are low achievers tend to excel in activities that are hands on and experiential, building upon these strengths may be beneficial in several ways. First, children who are low achievers may have more positive attitudes about school because there would something in school they could "shine" at. These positive attitudes may translate into feelings of increased self-efficacy in other school subjects as well as decrease feelings of always being the "stupid" or "dumb" one in class. Second, and noted by a study participant, perhaps if there were skills being taught at school that children who are low achievers were not only good at, but saw as being potentially beneficial to them when they "grow

up,” there may be decrease the odds of their dropping out. Third, if students who are low achievers do not desire, or are not destined, to go on to higher education, society may benefit more from the contributions of these students if they have marketable skills to support themselves with when they graduate. The effects of vocationally oriented programs at the elementary level could be investigated through longitudinal studies of student attitudes towards school, dropout rates of participating students and vocational outcomes of the training. Results could be compared for students who begin vocational training at the elementary level versus middle or high school level to determine if earlier program involvement has any beneficial effects on overall educational experiences.

In summary, it appears that children who are low achievers are in need of an educational support system that is both aware of and responsive to their needs. The people who are the primary components of the success of children who are low achievers--teachers, parents and policy makers-- need to encourage further research and problem solving within their own areas as well as actively seek out methods to unify these currently separate components into a more amalgamated and “child friendly” system. Further investigation of the barriers within each component as well as how the apparent divisions between teachers, parents and “the system” can be overcome, may be vital in creating a harmonious system where the separate parts are truly working together towards the common goal of insuring no child is left behind.

APPENDIX A  
INTERVIEW GUIDELINE

1. In your opinion, how should “success” be measured for children who are low achievers in school?
2. Tell me your thoughts on the ability of children who are low achievers to meet currently expected educational goals.
3. Imagine that you are a slow learner in the classroom- what do you think you would find to be the most difficult?
4. What are your thoughts on how the educational system is doing when it comes to educating children who are low achievers?
5. If you could change any aspects of how the educational system deals with children who are low achievers, what would you do and why?
6. Do you feel that you are presently able to meet the needs of children who are low achievers in your classroom? (If so, how? If not, why?)
7. In what ways do children who are low achievers influence your perceptions of yourself as a teacher?
8. Are there any (other?) barriers that you can tell me about that prevent children who are low achievers from being successful in the classroom?
9. Tell me about your personal teaching philosophy.

## APPENDIX B RESEARCHER SUBJECTIVITY STATEMENT

As a practicing school psychologist, I find the subject of children who are described as “low achievers” comes up often in discussions with teachers and school administrators. I am often asked to assess these children to determine if they are eligible for special education services that will provide education options and accommodations not available in the regular education classroom. When a child does not qualify, as in the case of low achieving children, it often leads to teacher concerns about how to most effectively teach that child in the regular education classroom. I am faced weekly with frustrated teachers saying, “But he or she is going to fail” or “They just can’t keep up.” The frequency of these conversations has led to my professional and personal interest in researching the experiences of low achieving children who do not qualify for special education but still continue to struggle academically. In my search for answers or suggestions to give teachers, I have found very little information to lend help. I am not able to draw on personal experience with this phenomenon because when I was a student in the public school system, I was blessed with the ability to grasp and utilize concepts I was taught very quickly. I have never had to experience being “lost” or “failing” in an academic subject. I imagine that it would be very stressful to be a child who struggles academically. The majority of low achievers I work with are not lazy, nor are they indifferent to feelings of success. Many just seem to be frustrated kids who appear to have learned that their best effort is a failing effort when compared to their peers. As these kids grow older and experience continued failure, their names are often brought

back to my attention by teachers who describe them as “behavioral problems” in the classroom or as students who seem to have quit trying. Though I have made extensive research efforts, I have not been able to locate adequate information on how to realistically provide an appropriate education for these children. I often find myself feeling inadequately helpful as I struggle to provide answers to teachers, relief to parents and positive school experiences to these children.

As a professional, I know law and policy limit me in my options to help children who struggle to learn. As an advocate for children, I cannot in good conscience stop looking for solutions or help for children in need. Probably my love for my job is what drives me in this search for answers. To put it simply, it makes me feel good about myself when I am able to help kids feel better about school and excel. Working to help kids who are struggling academically provides me with a sense of accomplishment as well as a sense of satisfaction that I have been part of increasing a child’s chance of receiving a useful education. I have a soft heart for the “underdog” and my job allows me to work with kids everyday who are not in a winning academic position.

My experience working in the educational system has potential to bias my opinions of teacher classroom performance in that I establish relationships with teachers that are both personal and professional. I don’t purport to be able to magically separate personal feelings from professional opinion at all times. Not only do I feel it is impossible to separate the two, I believe it is to my professional benefit to take both into active consideration when working with teachers. There are individuals I personally find to be irritating or dull who are excellent classroom teachers. There are also wonderfully funny and engaging individuals whose company I look forward to, but whose classroom I

would not place my own children in. I make conscious efforts to evaluate the basis of my professional opinions of teachers or their methods, and to the best of my ability seek out personal influences that may cloud my judgment.

In general, I believe that most teachers I have encountered want their students to succeed and actively try to facilitate that goal to the best of their knowledge and ability. I believe that there is an unsubstantiated and unjust perception being circulated by the media that “a lot of teachers just don’t care.” I don’t find this to be true in my day-to-day encounters in the school system.

The reason for my choice of qualitative research methods to investigate the experiences of low achievers is based in my belief that human nature and interactions cannot be adequately conveyed through statistical representations. There are complexities in describing an “experience” that would be restricted by using quantitative methods. How events and situations are perceived will be different for each individual involved in the experience. I believe the use of a qualitative interview format allows for individuals to explain their own unique experience rather than trying to fit their perceptions into preconceived categories that may or may not be accurate or comprehensive.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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