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ABSTRACT

An instructional approach that promotes an interactive or experiential model rather than a reductionist model in special education is discussed. The approach, called instructional conversations, encourages students to use meaningful language without focusing on the correctness of form. The teacher's role is one of facilitating genuine dialogue between the student and teacher, as well as student-to-student collaborative talk. The teacher presents provocative ideas or experiences, then questions, prods, coaxes, or keeps quiet, clarifying or instructing only when necessary. A study implemented instructional conversations in a special education class of 10 to 12 students (ages 6-10) with learning handicaps. Results indicated that instructional conversations provide a holistic context for learning, particularly when a theme is used to guide discussion, and they also promote oral participation and student-to-student interaction during reading lessons. Results also indicated that the special education teacher is required to make adaptations for learning handicapped students. The paper concludes that while instructional conversations do not replace teaching that emphasizes the acquisition of skills and knowledge, it does appear to provide additional avenues for learning within a meaningful context. (22 references) (JDD)

INSTRUCTIONAL CONVERSATIONS OUT OF THE MAINSTREAM:

Issues and Accommodations for Special Education Students

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Introduction

An increasing number of educators have been calling for a new kind of teaching, something that promotes interaction and carries instruction beyond the traditional approaches. Certainly educational reform is nothing new, but perhaps one of the reasons it continues to be necessary is the absence of a basis for understanding teaching and making the changes necessary for educational progress (Tharp & Gallimore, 1989). The goal of most instruction is to teach skills and impart knowledge. Historically, it has been assumed that a "transmission" or direct instruction model is the most efficient and effective way to teach. However, an approach characterized by teacher domination and student passivity has been criticized as being ineffective for developing higher level conceptual and linguistic skills.

Does that mean we abandon direct instruction as an instructional approach? On the contrary, research indicates that such an approach can be quite effective. However, it appears to be most effective for helping students acquire skills and knowledge that can be taught in a step-by-step manner (Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986), which is often limited to low level skills and learning bodies of information. Another instructional approach is necessary, one that involves the students in meaningful interaction and assists students to grasp complex concepts which cannot be taught in a well-structured, step-by-step fashion.

The past decade has brought increasing challenge to traditional instructional approaches in the field of special education as well. Special education methodology typically followed reductionistic assumptions wherein instructional tasks were broken down to their component parts. Reading instruction, for example, focused on acquisition of subskills thought necessary to the reading act without much consideration given to other aspects of reading such as comprehension. Critics suggest that reductionism takes the task too far out of context so that it becomes a meaningless, even trivial, exercise. Some educators feel this way: "Children are reduced to their disabilities: language is reduced to fragments; learning is reduced to the performance of subskills to be individually mastered in a sequential way. Also reduced, however, is the chance for these children to function in an environment where language and literacy are used in meaningful ways to communicate and learn" (Smith-Burke, Deegan & Jaggar, 1991).

The need for an alternative instructional approach has never been more pronounced than it is in the changing face of special education. The exploding population changes with respect to language minority students in American schools are being felt in special education programs as well. As a population, learning handicapped students are at risk for school failure and language minority special education students are at even greater risk. Minority children from low socioeconomic backgrounds who speak a language other than English have been characterized by persistent underachievement and high dropout rates. Their poor school achievement is assumed to be the result of specific skill deficits. The typical focus of instruction for this population involves skill-

building to the exclusion of other areas of instruction.

Some researchers in special education who are concerned about issues involving culturally and linguistically diverse populations have called for an instructional approach that gets away from a reductionistic model and promotes an interactive or experiential model (Cummins, 1984, 1989; Ortiz, 1986). Cummins (1989), for instance, advocates instruction that consists of genuine dialogue between the student and teacher, as well as student to student collaborative talk. The teacher's role is one of facilitator, encouraging students to use meaningful language without focusing on the correctness of form. Development of higher level cognitive skills, rather than factual recall, is the goal.

While there are many calls for alternative instruction, few programs are actually implementing the kind of instruction Cummins and others promote.

One response to the call for change is instructional conversations (IC).

What is an instructional conversation?

Borrowing from Tharp & Gallimore (1988, 1989), the term "instructional conversations" (or IC) is used to describe an approach to teaching that goes beyond imparting knowledge and teaching skills.

Goldenberg (1991) defines IC as having as instructional intent but appearing to be

spontaneous and natural language interactions. It has an idea or concept as its focus that remains discernible throughout. There is a high level of participation, regardless of students' language ability. Any and all contributions are accepted without attention given to the "correctness" of the language used. It is free from the didactic characteristics normally associated with formal teaching, in particular teacher domination and control. Teachers and students are responsive to what others say so that each statement made builds upon, challenges or extends a previous statement. Strategically the teacher presents provocative ideas or experiences, then questions, prods, coaxes -- or keeps quiet. He or she clarifies and instructs when necessary, but does so efficiently, without wasting time or words. The teacher is skilled at knowing when to bear down to draw out a student's ideas and when to ease up and allow for thought and reflection. Perhaps most important, he or she manages to keep everyone engaged in a substantive and extended interactive conversation, "weaving participants' comments into a larger tapestry of meaning" (p.3).

Such an approach to teaching has intuitive appeal yet may seem difficult to operationalize. In an effort to do so, Goldenberg and Gallimore (1990) have defined IC in terms of ten elements (See Table 1) which can be reliably coded (Rueda, Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1991)

Table 1: **Elements of Instructional Conversation**

Instructional Elements

1. **Thematic Focus.** The teacher selects a theme or idea to serve as a starting point to focus the discussion and has a general plan for how the theme will unfold, including how to "chunk" the text to permit optimal exploration of the theme.

2. **Activation and use of background and relevant schemata.** The teacher either "hooks into" or provides students with pertinent background knowledge and relevant schemata necessary for understanding a text. Background knowledge and schemata are then woven into the discussion that follows.

3. **Direct teaching.** When necessary, the teacher provides direct teaching of a skill or concept.

4. **Promotion of more complex language and expression.** The teacher elicits more extended student contributions by using a variety of elicitation techniques, for example, invitations to expand ("Tell me more about _____"), questions ("What do you mean by _____"), restatements ("In other words,_____"), and pauses.

5. **Promotion of bases for statements of positions.** The teacher promotes students' use of text, pictures, and reasoning to support an argument or position. Without overwhelming students, the teacher probes for the bases of students' statements: "How do you know?" "What makes you think that?" "Show us where it says _____."

Conversational Elements

6. **Few "known-answer" questions.** Much of the discussion centers on questions and answers for which there might be more than one correct answer.

7. **Responsivity to student contributions.** While having an initial plan and maintaining the focus and coherence of the discussion, the teacher is also responsive to students' statements and the opportunities they provide.

8. **Connected discourse.** The discussion is characterized by multiple, interactive, connected turns; succeeding utterances build upon and extend previous ones.

9. **A challenging, but non-threatening, atmosphere.** The teacher creates a "zone of proximal development" where a challenging atmosphere is balanced by a positive affective climate. The teacher is more collaborator than evaluator and creates an atmosphere that challenges students and allows them to negotiate and construct the meaning of the text.

10. **General participation, including self-selected turns.** The teacher encourages general participation among students. The teacher does not hold exclusive rights to determine who talks, and students are encouraged to volunteer or otherwise influence the selection of speaking turns.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to implement instructional conversations in a special education class and to explore the issues raised by using this instructional approach with special education students. Specifically, we were interested in these questions:

(1) Does the approach seem appropriate for special education?

(2) What are the salient aspects of IC in a special education setting?

(3) What kinds of learning ooportunities are created through IC?

(4) Are adaptations necessary when using IC with this population?

Previous IC projects involving culturally and linguistically diverse students were conducted in regular education classrooms (Goldenberg, 1991; Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1990; Saunders et al., in press). However, such a promising approach seemed all the more fitting for research with students who had already experienced school failure. After only a few years of experience in the educational system, special education students find themselves significantly behind their peers in most academic subjects, usually due to low reading levels and underdeveloped language skills.

Motivated by an interest in improving students' reading comprehension and conceptual understanding, the special education teacher in the study (second author) volunteered to participate in data collection activities. Activities included attending an on-site seminar which focused on issues of implementation of instructional conversations,

conducting an IC lesson at least once a week, which was observed or videotaped, and participating in interviews.

Method and Data Sources

Data were collected by naturalistic observation, videotape, teacher self-report, and interviews conducted over a year-and-a-half with a single teacher. Throughout the course of the study, there were 16 visits to the class for observation and 17 interviews were conducted with the teacher. Each visit lasted approximately 1 1/2 hours (8:30 - 10:00) for a total of approximately 26 contact hours. Some lessons were videotaped and exact transcriptions were acquired from videotape when necessary.

The study was conducted at an elementary school located in a Southern California school district whose low-income student population is approximately 90% language minority. Subjects ranged in age from 6 to 10 years old. They were in a self-contained special education class for the learning handicapped. Because of the nature of special education programs, students entered the program and were transferred out of the program throughout the school year. This resulted in varying student characteristics, reported as follows: The majority of the students were either learning disabled or mildly mentally retarded. Other disabilities represented included language delayed, hearing impaired, and multiply handicapped (including mental and physical handicaps). Of the 10 to 12 students enrolled in the program throughout the study, 8 to 9 were boys, and 2

to 3 were girls. The ethnic makeup of the class was 9 to 10 Hispanic students and 1 to 3 black students. All the Hispanic students were classified as limited English proficient (LEP) and received instruction in Spanish. Since the teacher was bilingual, she conducted some IC lessons in Spanish and others in English, as appropriate. The students were mainstreamed from one to three hours throughout the day to achieve the least restrictive environment mandated by federal and state legislation.

The data were compiled and analyzed for purposes of a case study which examined implementation of ICs in a special education classroom. Both authors reviewed the data and analyzed it for relevant themes that answered the questions we were exploring. The focus of the questions were continually shaped throughout the process of data analysis, with the emergence of the themes as a contributing factor in the shaping process (Spradley, 1980).

RESULTS

Several themes emerged from the data: 1) In contrast to the reductionistic approaches most prevalent in special education, ICs provide a holistic context for learning. In particular, selection and use of a theme to guide the discussion about a story led to a more cohesive focus during the lesson and seemed to facilitate children's attention to the story; 2) ICs promoted oral participation and student-to-student interaction during reading lessons. These experiences provided additional opportunities

for language development, particularly for language–delayed children; and 3) For an IC lesson to be successful, the special education teacher must make adaptations for learning handicapped students.

Holistic Presentation and Thematic Focus

Most remedial reading and special education programs follow reductionistic theories which promote breaking down learning tasks into their component parts. For instance, the focus of reading instruction would be mastery of letters, then sounds, then words and punctuation that comprise the pages of text. While there is a rational basis for reductionism and a task analysis approach in some learning situations, there is growing awareness that some learning opportunities are missed when such an approach is used extensively. Instruction becomes more meaningful when presented in context, which broadens the scope of learning (Sawyer, 1991).

Instructional conversations presented material in a holistic manner, providing a contextual foundation for learning. Language was expressed in a natural fashion within a meaningful context. The teacher endeavored to present the lesson in a systematic way, all the while remaining flexible, allowing for learning opportunities as they arose. A typical presentation of IC from the data followed this sequence:

* Introduce the theme or idea related to the text;

* Begin relating theme to students' background experiences;

* Show the text to be read and ask prediction questions;

* Read the text, chunking it into sections to provide opportunity for discussion;

* Relate theme and background knowledge to a text-based discussion.

For example (From observation, June 2, 1991):

Five English-speaking boys, ages 7 to 10, read a story about two friends, Thelma and Frances, who were not completely honest with each other. The theme centered on treatment of friends.

T: Before we read, let's talk about friends. Tell me something about friends. Do you play tricks on friends?
S: No.
T: Why?
Eric: Because he might not be your friend anymore.
Michael: It might hurt their feelings, then they don't be friends.

Several students give examples of when they have been tricked by friends. For instance, John begins telling a story about some friends that put handcuffs on him and left him without the key. He went home and his sister helped him get them off.

T: How did you feel?
John: Sad.
T: This book is about friends and you've been telling me a lot about friends and tricks. Let's read the story and tell me if you see tricks or if they're being good friends.

Throughout the story the teacher asked the students to point out when Thelma tricks Frances. It was clear that the students did not approve of the tricks, especially since they were reminded of how it feels to be tricked during the introduction. There was a clear link between their experiences and those of Frances, which seemed to make the story

particularly interesting to them. The field notes contained two separate notations indicating that the students were "all listening intently" to the story. Moreover, the students seemed to comprehend the story quite well. Their comments were on target and they readily recognized when Thelma tricked Francis, although this was not explicitly stated in the story. Their comments indicated that they were able to follow the story accurately. For example, John, who has difficulty focusing and staying on task, was able to contribute:

> T: Why do you think the friend will trick Francis?
> Eric: Because she's not really her friend.
> At this point John brought up the friends who had handcuffed him and how they weren't really good friends.

Throughout this process the teacher implemented as many elements as the situation necessitated -- utilizing elicitation, promoting bases for statements or direct teaching of a skill or concept within the context of the situation.

The holistic focus of ICs provided low functioning students with opportunities to participate in more meaningful academic activities that a more reductionistic approach might not afford. For example, the teacher reported the case of Juan, who after two years of a specific skill mastery reading program, had made little progress, was very unmotivated and seemed unable to grasp the targeted skill: sound-symbol relationship. Acquiring this skill was virtually the sum total of his reading program.

IC broadened the range of learning opportunities that Juan engaged in. In an

interview, the teacher's assessment of the affect of IC was that, "Juan confidently participated in thoughtful conversation. His contributions demonstrated comprehension of the story and an understanding of the underlying theme. In addition, the vocabulary he used during IC was above the level that he typically used during reductionistic lessons. One of the most important benefits, however, was that he did not stand out as the lowest functioning student, as happens when lessons focus on isolated skills or ability levels. He eagerly looked forward to IC lessons which showed a motivation previously not evidenced." Although Juan still needs to work on skills such as word recognition, it seems likely that he can at the same time benefit from extended opportunities for participation in meaningful activities.

Perhaps the most salient aspect of an IC -- and what contributed the most to its holistic quality -- was its thematic focus. The thematic approach used in IC differs from thematic approaches used in other educational contexts. In the most common current usage, "themes" tend to be of a general nature and may be used for the purpose of integrating curriculum. With younger readers, animals may be the theme of activities across the curriculum (Strickland & Morrow, 1990) while legal rights may be an appropriate theme for older students (Cooter & Griffith, 1989; Davis, 1990).

With IC, a theme is selected for each story introduced to the students, the purpose of which is to make a cognitive link between prior knowledge and what is being read.

Themes were selected for their relevance to the individual stories as well as their

relevance to the students' background, thus providing a link between their everyday experiences and the text. The teacher made reference to this relationship throughout each lesson. (Observation on 9-15-91):

> The theme was, Have you ever not wanted to do something that ended up making you happy? Renee wrote on chart paper, "Primero no queria...despues estaba feliz (At first I didn't want to...I ended up happy). Students gave examples of such a situation in their own lives. As she read the story, Renee stopped every couple of lines and asked questions such as, "Quiere ir?" (Does he want to go?) "Creen que vaya a estar feliz al fin del cuento?" (Do you think he'll be happy at the end of the story?) At the end of the story Renee asked what the boy didn't want to do at the beginning of the story. The she asked how was he happy at the end. She wrote the example on the chart and asked for other examples. A student gave an example of another situation pertaining to the theme.

Since the focus of special education and remedial instruction is typically on skill building (Allington, 1983), learning discreet skills such as sounding out words may be the student's only experience with "reading." Sawyer (1991) quotes the poignant comment of a six-year old: "I used to think reading was making sense of a story but now I know it is just letters" (From Michel, 1990, p.43). The thematic element of IC helps the students to realize that there is more to reading than just sounding out letters and words in order to complete the story. There is something to be gained from the story -- something to think about beyond the text. As the teacher put it: "Rather than simply trying to `get through' the story by sounding out the words, it teaches them that they have to **think** in order to understand the story. They have to use what they know and link it to a new idea to make sense of a story." This was perhaps the most salient aspect of IC: the theme

provided a vehicle for thinking about a story that seemed to go well beyond disconnected questions.

The teacher noted that "keying into themes" was one of the most useful elements of IC: "Having a central theme is critical because concentration is very difficult for LH students. A theme approach keeps them interested and motivated. It provides cohesiveness for LH students." A well-selected theme was the "glue" that kept the discussion of the story together and helped students understand that there is a beginning, middle and end to a story -- a relationship between the pages. The themes made questioning less random and much more engaging for the students.

The theme-based discussions appeared to facilitate student attention, which resulted in longer lessons (30 to 40 minutes). Some of the characteristics of learning handicapped (LH) students include attention deficit, distractibility and hyperactivity (Heward & Orlansky, 1992; Lerner, 1985). A common goal in special education instruction is to increase the students' time on task, since there is a strong correlation between time on task and achievement (Carroll, 1963; Good, 1983). IC seemed to provide a setting which promoted student attention to task. Observation and videotaped data revealed the students, seated around a horseshoe table, were leaning forward toward the teacher holding the text throughout the duration of the lesson. Students, for the most part, maintained eye contact with the teacher and made frequent contributions. Based on the characteristics of LH students, particularly young learners, it was notable

that the children were so thoroughly engaged throughout a relatively lengthy lesson.

Opportunities for Language Development

The literature suggests that language problems are a key to early reading problems (Mann, 1991). In fact, reading problems are experienced by speech and language disordered children at least six times more often than controls (Ingram et al., 1970; Mason, 1976). Although we did not collect data to permit a definitive test of this hypothesis, it seemed that instructional conversations encouraged opportunities for language development in several ways.

First, oral participation was emphasized, and students were encouraged to contribute their ideas through spontaneous, self-selected turn taking and student-to-student discussion. This contrasts with the typically teacher-dominated question and answer approach to discussions. The interaction of IC resembled a conversation where all participants were free to give opinions, ask questions or clarify a point as the opportunities arose.

According to the teacher, initially the students "were shocked to talk without raising their hands." For several years the school district had been utilizing a language development curriculum which relied heavily on scripted teacher presentation and directed

student response. The students, when introduced to IC, had to be taught to participate spontaneously. This included formulating their own thoughts and expressions rather than repeating the modeled vocabulary used. The self-selected oral participation promoted through IC appeared to allow for vocabulary development and language expression that would possibly have been limited using the traditional curriculum.

In an effort to get optimal participation from the students, the teacher employed a strategy which encouraged student contributions throughout the lesson. The story was introduced to the middle ability-level group the day before the IC lesson. Their familiarity with the story stimulated conversation since they had already thought about some aspects of the story and could more readily contribute to the discussion. An added benefit was that these higher functioning students modeled complete expression for the lower language-ability students within the heterogeneous group.

The IC format allowed for different perspectives, which seemed to make the discussion more accessible to students. Students were not expected to come up with the teacher's answer. Instead, they were given opportunities to express their own ideas. John was able to exchange ideas with Eric during a lesson (observation from June 2, 1991):

> Renee: What do you think's gonna happen?
> John: Maybe she's going to give the tea set to Frances.
> Renee: Hmmmmm
> Eric: No, she won't.
> Renee: OK Eric, talk to John.

Eric (to John): She won't give it to her.
Renee: Let's see.

A second way that opportunities for language development were encouraged was through the teacher's effort to intentionally remain quiet herself. This behavior is consistent with the literature on "wait time," which is defined as allowing children sufficient time to answer. The amount of wait time is culturally dictated (Cazden, 1988). The teacher reported actively trying to refrain from talking much herself in order to give the students an opportunity to express themselves. She was quoted as saying students were allowed "think time" so that ideas could be thought through. The teacher did not jump in and finish the student's answers for them, but allowed them time to formulate their thoughts (from interview on December 13, 1990):

> Renee intentionally remained quiet herself. She reported that she was actively trying to refrain from talking much herself on order to give the students opportunity to express themselves. Renee was observed sitting with her chin resting on her fists and replying "Hmmm" or simply nodding while students talked. On several occasions she had her fingers across her lips, indicating her concentration on not speaking. Renee excitedly reported that two students had talked together for the first time (student-student exchange). Later, in reference to her assessment of progress Renee commented that "they carry the ball now more than [with a] question-answer [format].

When a child made a contribution, and someone else commented, the first child was allowed to think more deeply about his answer. This process encouraged the students to clarify their thinking and express unique perspectives rather than simply give a pat answer. Without the threat that there was only one right answer, students were more willing to think through their ideas. Renee said, "Giving them time to think helped because they gave thoughtful responses and good language."

Third, the element, "responsivity to students' contributions," challenged the teacher be flexible and avoid having a single preconceived plan for exactly how the lesson would proceed. Being responsive to the students' ideas and comments lead the teacher to modify the lesson as the discussion evolved (From interview on February 21, 1991):

Following several lessons Renee reported that she had not planned to run the lesson the way it turned out but that she was following the students' lead. In one case:

> The students comment on nearly every page with remarks appropriate to the theme. Renee said [in interview afterward] that she had planned to chunk differently than the way she did, but the students "had so much" to contribute that she responded accordingly and let them comment.

In another case:

> ...the students responded with a range of feelings. Renee said [in interview afterward] she wasn't expecting such appropriate feelings [expressed by the students] and had to change her ending activity as a result.

By respecting the students' contributions and following their lead (when appropriate) students were more apt to give an opinion or defend their position. Researchers have often noted that questions seem to inhibit discussion (Cazden, 1988). With IC, a framework is created where questions appear not to have inhibiting effect. Renee commented, "Being receptive to the students' remarks brings out more language."

The element of IC which developed the students' ability to think through their answers and defend their positions was "promoting bases for statements or positions."

Given the skill-building orientation of most special education instruction, students would rarely be asked to provide a rationale for their answers. With IC, the teacher accepted speculative answers but also urged the students to provide bases for their answers.

Renee frequently modeled how to use the text to derive meaning from the pictures and words in the text. One lesson was about a girl who sells lemonade to make money to buy a toy. The pictures showed several friends coming by and placing money on the girl's plate. Renee emphasized the text (From videotape of lesson on October 29, 1991):

> T: Dice aqui en el libro que ella paga? (Does it say that she pays for the lemonade?)
> S: Si.
> T: Donde dice que ella paga? (Where does it say she pays?)
> S: No, no paga. (No, she doesn't pay).
> T: Dicen las palabras que hemos leido que ella paga? (Do the words we've read say she pays?)
> S: No.
> T: No dice, verdad? Pero Uds. creen que paga ella? (It doesn't say but do you believe she pays?
> S: No.
> S: Si.
> Juan: Si porque antes estaba dos monedas y ahora hay tres. (There were two coins before and there are three now).

The teacher also scaffolded the way one may defend a position by functioning as a facilitator. Scaffolding provided the students with a model of how they may defend their positions or ideas. At times the students were able to support their statements on their own initiative, without teacher prompt (From videotape of lesson on October 29, 1991):

> T: Esta bien vender algo para comprar jugetes o solo para comprar comida? (Is it alright to sell things in order to buy toys, or only to buy food?)
> Juan: Yo digo que si.(I say yes)

Jose: Yo digo que no. (I say no)
Liliana: Yo digo que esta bien con los jugetes porque ya tiene todo. (I say it's alright because she already had the others [toys].

Renee stopped frequently to ask questions, elicit impressions and encourage student talk. Such a format provided the students with ample opportunity to participate orally with apparently positive results (From observation and videotape of lesson on May 14, 1990):

> Although difficult to quantify, there appeared to be improvement in students' language and expression. Michael, for instance, is language delayed and seldom participated. Renee reported that he can now give an on-topic coherent idea. When asked what he thought Sammy the seal would do, he was observed giving the immediate reply, "I think he'll go home." Another time he was observed replying in unison with others.

Because of the low language skills of many of the students, grouping was very important to successful IC lessons. Too few students did not stimulate conversations and too many did not provide consistent opportunities for all students to participate.

Adaptations

While there are issues related to implementing a new instructional approach such as IC in any setting, the degree of impact differed in special education settings.

It seemed particularly important to select an appropriate theme for each story. While regular education students may be able to "fill in the blanks" if the theme were too

abstract, learning handicapped students tend not to respond well to abstractions. For example, in a story about a seal who escapes from the zoo only to find life on the outside was not what he expected. After several incidents, he decides that the zoo isn't so bad after all. The theme of the lesson was, "there's no place like home." It was too abstract a theme since students were expected to infer that the zoo was a seal's home. The students' ideas of homes did not seem to include zoos, so they didn't recognize that he was home at the zoo. In discussing homes, students had provided examples of situations in their own homes, but references to animal homes were not made. Perhaps their understandings could have been linked to the theme through careful teacher scaffolding, but this was not done.

The challenge of theme selection came in finding ideas that were interesting and relevant. On the one hand it must not be too abstract for the students to grasp nor inhibit them from making a connection between the text and theme; on the other hand it must not be too obvious or mundane.

In another lesson, the story was about farm animals and the theme selected was, "We all have unique strengths to offer." The rooster's vital role on the farm was the point that Renee wanted to clarify, but the kids thought that was obvious. Many of the students' families had owned roosters and the children, therefore, had experiences with roosters in their backgrounds. They didn't need Renee's planned comparisons to the function of the cow, the hen, etc. -- it was obvious.

A characteristic of LH students is that they respond to more concrete teaching because it is contextualized. IC provided the context to push the boundaries of strictly concrete teaching but the theme needed to be appropriate in its level of abstraction.

The way in which the theme was introduced changed over time, in response to the students' needs. Renee reported that initially she simply talked about the theme and related it to the story by posing a question such as "Have you ever told a lie?" Students would relate their experiences and then Renee would say something like, "Well, today we're going to read a story about a boy who lied." Then, realizing that the students would benefit from a visual clue ("Even though IC is verbal, the kids need the visual"), she began writing ideas on the board and talking about them. The conclusion of the lesson usually included reference to the ideas explored during the introduction to tie it all together.

Another area that was particularly important in a special education setting was the need to match the level of questioning to the students' conceptual level. Questions that were too high level or abstract could bring discussion to a halt as could trite or mundane questioning. Ineffective high level questioning included comments such as "If you were a dog and your owner was sick, why would you stay with him?" The students had no experience or context from which to respond. On the other hand, trite questions posed to the students sounded like, "Is it good to be mean?" and "Are you going to be nice or

mean?" These questions invited a chorus of "No" and "Nice" as students provided the answers they believed the teacher was looking for.

Behavior management also required adaptation. As an adaptation to one student's tendency to dominate the conversation, Renee introduced "talking chips," a cooperative learning structure in which every student has a different color token and everybody must put their chip out on the table (take a turn) before one may speak again. This was a very concrete method of teaching the students to take turns. Introducing this adaptation allowed for more equitable participation by the students and eliminated domination by any one student. After this skill was demonstrated consistently, the students were able to allow all members to speak without having to rely on the chips.

To help students stay on-task as Renee recorded input during the lesson. While writing on the board served as a way to help get schema up and running, it was discovered through videotaping that one of the students was using the time Renee turned around to write on the board as an opportunity to misbehave. As a result, Renee began using a large piece of paper placed on the table to write the students' ideas. In this case, she was always facing them and had constant contact with them. Finally, a small easel was used for recording information given by the students. This proved helpful for one group, but unnecessary for another group.

The amount of time the teacher dedicated to different segments of the lesson was

another aspect of IC that was adapted. It seemed that students' attention was lost toward the end of some especially lengthy lessons. While it initially seemed that the problem must be in the structure of the closing discussion, it became clear that too much time was being used in discussion before the story began (students were restless during both opening and closing segments). When the teacher shortened the introductory sections, students were better able to attend to the lesson through the final moments of discussion.

A variety of reading levels are usually represented in special education classes making reading aloud in a group problematic. During ICs, reading of the story was done by different group members, depending on reading levels and behavioral characteristics of the students involved. In one instance the teacher read the story to the group because a new third grader was a non-reader and Renee did not want him to be self-conscious about being a poorer reader than the others. By reading the story to the group, all of the students were able to understand the story, regardless of their decoding abilities. With another group she had the most skilled reader (who also demonstrated a constant need for attention) read the story. This positive use of his energy as well as his skills helped him to control his behavior in an appropriate way.

The learning handicapped students seemed to need more prompting and encouragement to feel confident enough to develop original ideas. Most LH students who are placed in Special Day Classes (self-contained) bring with them a history of failure. They do not attribute their successes to their own actions, while they may feel very

responsible for their failures. Learned helplessness is often evident in LH students, as they resist risk taking in order to avoid failure.

By using instructional conversations in a special education setting, this sense of failure and helplessness may be reduced. Students were encouraged to express original ideas and personal experiences, which validated them as individuals with something important to contribute. As the students' thoughts were carefully scaffolded by the teacher, they seemed to develop a sense of themselves as thinkers and learners, whose opinions and perspectives mattered.

Conclusion

Instructional conversations offer an approach that capitalizes on what the child brings to the learning situation rather than solely focusing on remediation of deficit areas. In this way, ICs provided expanded learning opportunities for special education students. These opportunities were related to the areas of language development (in the child's first or second language), reading comprehension and understanding of important concepts. An added benefit may be increased student motivation. Further investigation of the effect of IC on motivation would be warranted since there is a strong relationship between motivation and achievement.

The most salient aspects of IC appeared to be a holistic presentation of the lesson;

the use of a theme which linked the students' background knowledge to the text, creating a more cohesive focus throughout the lesson; and occasion for interaction which seemed to foster language development.

While IC does not replace teaching that emphasizes the acquisition of skills and knowledge, it does appear to provide additional avenues for learning within a meaningful context.

It is clear that IC is an appropriate approach for special education and may actually be preferable to more common reductionistic approaches in terms of the kinds of learning opportunities it provides. However, accommodations particular to learning handicapped students may be necessary when implementing IC in a special education setting.

Further experimental studies are needed to determine the effects of the learning opportunities on special education students' actual learning. One possibility would be to explore the effects of IC on academic language development, since academic language use is critical to school success.

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