

Why Am I in Special Education and What Can I
Do About it?:
Helping Students Develop Self-Determination

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A Case Study Published in

TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus

Volume 3, Issue 2, November 2006

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Abstract

This article focuses on teaching students specific disability related self-determination skills, rather than activities that can be used with non-specified populations. In this design, lesson plans are used and suggested as a systematic means of instruction for students with deficits in learning (i.e., learning disabilities, mild mental impairments) as best practice. Lesson content includes teaching students the specifics of their disability characteristics, exploring strengths and weaknesses, and self-advocacy techniques.

Keywords

self-determination, disabilities, disability, learning disability, social skills

SUGGESTED CITATION:

Campbell-Whatley, G. (2006). Why am I in special education and what can I do about it?: Helping students develop self-determination. *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus*, 3(2) Article 4. Retrieved [date] from <http://escholarship.bc.edu/education/teplus/vol3/iss2/art4>

Why Can't I Get My Lesson?

At the end of the school year, Malik, an African-American 6th grader, was sitting alone in the gym with his head in his hands. At the end of the period, his favorite teacher Mrs. Rembart noticed him sulking and came over and asked him what was the matter. Malik slowly responded, "I am worried about going to that special education class next year. I don't know why I have to go. My teacher thinks I'm dumb and lazy, she said so and my Mom thinks I don't try hard enough, so I got to go to this class." I don't know why I have to go. I don't know why I can't get my lesson." He sighed heavily and said, "I try as hard as I possibly can and no one seems to understand that. I don't understand it myself." Mrs. Rembart tried to encourage him, "You always do very well in class and you can run faster than any student in your class. You are the nicest student in all my P.E. classes. You always help me put away the equipment and you seem to be very organized. For the rest of the day, let's just try to concentrate on some of the things you do really well. I'll talk to your new special education teacher today and see what I can find out; maybe I can get her to explain the special education class to you in more detail. Would you like that?" He responded quickly with an upward curl of his lips.

Many students with a disability in learning have the same difficulty as Malik. They usually have limited awareness of the type of special education class they attend and tend to believe their academic failure is related to lack of motivation rather than a disability in learning. Many times general education teachers and parents view the student as unmotivated and attribute academic deficits to idle behavior rather than a "disability" in

learning (Campbell-Whatley, 1998; Campbell-Whatley, 2004; Lavoie, 1989). Lack of self-knowledge and the misinterpretation of teachers and parents creates a vacuum that stunts the ability of the student to problem solve, make choices, and increase self-esteem.

Empowering Learners

Self-determination is a combination of skills that facilitate self-regulated and goal directed behaviors. The skills interconnected to self-determination are multifaceted. To be determined is the ability to maneuver and process several interrelated dimensions of self: a) awareness (knowing), b) concept (perception), c) advocacy (support), d) realization (understanding), e) esteem (respect), f) acceptance (approval), g) empowerment (authority), h) reflection (image), i) control (management), and j) regulate (adjustment). In other words, students who are aware, have a good image, and approve of themselves are more likely to have positive perception of self, and will be able to manage and adjust to their environment. The self-determined student is able to set goals and exhibit self-control by responding to events in an independent, empowered, and self-realized manner (Wehmeyer, Argan, & Hughes, 2000). Students taught appropriate self-determination related strategies learn to serve as their own support system, while having greater control over their choices, behavior, and lives. Generally, students with higher self-determined behaviors achieve better in school, have more positive adult outcomes, and have stronger goal setting and self-assessment behaviors (Martin, Mithaug, Cox, Peterson, Van Dycke, & Cash, 2003). When students find that they are able to examine

and determine their life path by exploring their strengths and weaknesses, they feel empowered.

Not everyone has the ability to engage in self-examination skills of this sort on their own. Students with disabilities in learning have to work hard to develop competencies to self-examine. Many times they want to master these skills, but are unable to do so without the guidance of teachers. Essential to students is an understanding of their strengths and limitations, while having an awareness of their inner capabilities (Field, Martin, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998; Trainor, 2005; Whitney-Thomas & Moloney, 2001). Just as any other learner, students with disabilities in learning must act on their decisions and learn from the outcomes. How students respond to teaching and how they react to success and failure is determined by the attitudes and beliefs they have about themselves. Self-concept can be altered and a change in perspective affects the general attitude of a student. Interventions that have a positive effect on one's self concept include activities that encourage positive self-reflection (Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test, & Wood, 2001; Pocock, Lambros, Karvonen, Test, Algozzine, & Wood, 2002). The question becomes, how can students with disabilities in learning be taught to exhibit goal-directed and self-regulated behaviors while responding positively to the environment, if they have don't have a clear idea of what they can accomplish. Teaching self-determination systematically to learners supports the premise that these skills be pursued as tenaciously as any other credible skill taught to students with disabilities (Argan, Snow, & Swaner, 1999; Browder, Wood, Test, Algozzine, & Karvonen, 2001; Field, 1996; Field & Hoffman, 1994; Gerber, Ginsberg & Raiff, 1992; German, Martin, Marshall, & Sale, 2000; Trainor, 2005; Wall & Dattilo,

1995; Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, & Martin, 2000; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997; West, Barcus, Brooke, & Rayfield, 1995).

Lesson Plan Design

The lessons used in the present article provide teachers an easy to use lesson plan format as a means of teaching self-determination methodologies to students with disabilities in learning. The series of lessons addresses the advocacy needs of students by providing exercises in the specifics of their disability that assist them in coping with and understanding their characteristics. Once students get to know themselves, they will find it easier to come to terms with their strengths and weaknesses and will be better prepared to cope with the challenges at school, home, and other environments.

Often times, students will need to contend with individuals in their environment who do not understand what it means to have a disability in learning. Teachers, parents, students, employers, and others may be able to understand physical related disabilities, but may not be able to understand the needs of persons with a learning disability or mild mental impairments.

Typically, the teaching of self-advocacy and self-determination in lessons have been limited to secondary-aged students and adult individuals with disabilities as they prepare to transition into the world of work. Yet, instruction for the foundation of these skills should begin in earlier years and continue through the multiple stages of development. The progression should unfold as the student matures. Wehman and Kregel (2004) describe the level of skill that should be taught at each stage: (a) awareness skills in the elementary years, (b) exploration in the middle school years, (c) preparation in the

high school years, and (d) finally, placement in the post school years. The lessons in this article are geared toward students in the upper elementary, middle, or high school grades, specifically grades 5 through 9.

There are texts that help students understand their learning difficulties (Bowman-Kruhm & Wirths, 1999; Brown, 2000; Dunn & Dunn, 1993; Gehret, 1996; Fisher & Cummings, 1990; Paquette & Tuttle, 2003; Porterfield, 1999). Although these resources help students understand how they differ from others, they are not instructional text. Most students with learning difficulties need guidance, support, and encouragement to learn new concepts. A lesson plan format would better facilitate strategic instruction in the classroom and would convey new concepts. Because students with disabilities focus on day-to-day challenges that are often compounded by a disability, the lessons will teach them to advocate for themselves and explain their needs in a non-threatening manner in various settings.

The Model

The lessons were designed and taught using the TARGET acronym as a basic framework. Each individual lesson plan included the following:

- T - Target the Goals and Objectives of the Lesson
- A - Assess Students' Knowledge and Implementation Objectives
- R - Role Play Situations
- G - Generalize to Other School Situations
- E - Evaluate Student Attainment
- T - Test Transfer of Skills to Other Environments

- *Target the Goals and Objectives of the Lesson.* The goals and objectives of each lesson are defined and objectives are written in observable and measurable terms.
- *Assess Students' Knowledge and Implementation Objectives.* Students' background knowledge of the lesson concepts are determined using discussion and questioning techniques.
- *Role Play Situations.* Each lesson suggests several role play scenarios. Student generated situations are encouraged as they are more applicable to real life occurrences. Role plays are enacted in student pairs or groups and can involve teacher-to-student or student-to-student interactions. Role plays include inappropriate (negative) and appropriate (positive) reactions to problem situations. Analysis and feedback are provided for each role-play.
- *Generalize to Other Situations.* The student's ability to analyze and apply the skill across school situations such as the playground, in gym class, or math class, is assessed.
- *Evaluate Student Attainment.* Eighty percent skill level assessment is recommended, but varies according to student's ability.
- *Test Transfer of Knowledge.* Skill practice is suggested in various environments away from school such as the home, community, or work setting.

Lesson Design

The lessons were designed to address a number of disability related self-determination skills. Lesson activities: a) compared a disability in learning to a physical disability, b) explained eligibility procedures

for special education, c) explored student strengths and limitations, d) addressed techniques related to advocacy, problem solving, anger control, and social skills, and e) presented various academic and job related strategies. Although such lessons had two to five activities, only specific portions of the lessons are outlined, summarized, and explained here (Campbell-Whatley, 2004).

Lesson One: What Does it Mean to Have a Disability in Learning? Many students with disabilities do not understand that they "truly have a disability." Sometimes they believe that they may not be "trying hard enough" or that they are "just lazy." At the

completion of the lesson, students identified their exceptionality category and provided examples of non-physical related disabilities. Students were asked several key questions; "Do disabilities exist that may not be physically visible? Can you expect a person who has one leg to walk just as everyone else does (see text box below)?" The role play exercise asked students to read a passage after being blindfolded. After the student realized the absurdity of the request, the group discussed the modifications, strategies, and methodologies to compensate for a disability. Disability as an indicator for additional assistance rather than proof of failure was emphasized.

Lesson One: What Does it Mean to Have a Disability in Learning a Broken Leg?

Mary King is a special education teacher at Kirby Middle School. Helen Williams, an English teacher, is co-teaching with her. Jim, a very motivated student with learning disabilities, is failing the English class because of his reading and spelling skills. His work on the literature section of the class was fine because the stories were being read out loud in class. Mary helped Jim with the spelling words, but because of his reading level, he was still unable to spell them. Mary told Helen that she should allow Jim to pick the correct spelling word out of a choice of three, or perhaps match the word in a sentence. Helen believed his lessons should not be adapted. She said, "That will not work because those skills do not test spelling! He's no different than anyone else." Mary said, "Helen, I don't think spelling is a skill that Jim will ever be able to learn well. It is simply part of his disability. If he had a broken leg would you still expect him to walk without assistance? Would you expect him to read printed material if he were blind?" "Of course not," said Helen, "but this is not the same!" "Yes it is!" said Mary.

Campbell-Whatley, G.D. (2004). *Who I can be is up to me: Lessons in self-exploration and self-determination for students with disabilities in learning*. Research Press: Champaign, Illinois.

Lesson Two: Successful People with Disabilities in Learning. The class session began with an open discussion of the career life goals and successes of several famous personalities with disabilities including Stephen Hawking, (physicist), Stevie Wonder (singer), Jim Abbott (ball player), Tom Cruise (actor), Nelson Rockefeller (past Vice President of the United States), Thomas Edison (American inventor), and Bruce Jenner

(Olympic Gold Medal Winner). Students learned the definition of compensate and were asked various methods to counteract their disability. A school day in the life of one of the famous personalities was the imagined role play situation.

Lesson Three: Characteristics Related to a Disability in Learning. Categories of disabilities, their definition, and characteristics were presented to students. With

teacher assistance, students identified the particular characteristics related to their disability such as listening, paying attention, talking, working math problems, or reading (Figure 1). During role play activities, stu-

dents determined how their disability could affect them differently according to the school, home, community, or work environment.

Figure 1. *Lesson Three: Characteristics Related to a Disability in Learning: Problems With a Disability in Learning*

<p style="text-align: center;">Problems with Talking and Listening (Language Disorder)</p> <p>It was hard to understand what Barbara was saying. She had to explain herself over and over again. Sometimes the teacher had to explain over and over again because Barbara could not understand what the teacher was saying.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">School Work (Problems with School Work)</p> <p>Rashard never had any of his homework and he turned his papers in late all the time. He said he could not understand the math problems.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Paying Attention (Attention Disorder)</p> <p>Mark got in trouble all the time because he was looking out of the window when the teacher was talking.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Movement Problems (Motor Disability)</p> <p>Melissa got bad grades because the teacher could not understand her writing. She also had a lot of trouble spelling.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Making Friends (Social Skills Deficits)</p> <p>Philip said, "I try to make friends but it seems like I say the wrong things to people."</p>	

Lesson Four: Getting Into a Special Education Program. Students were taught the steps in eligibility procedures in simple terms (Figure 2). Vocabulary words such as achievement, intelligence quotient, and psychometrist were discussed. Role playing situations included a mock Individualized Education Plan (IEP) conference.

Lesson Five: Knowing My Strengths and Weaknesses. Students discussed their strengths and weaknesses related to academics and behavior in various environments. Demonstrations and discussions accentuated areas of strength in one environment that could be an area of weakness in another environment. For example, having a large surplus

of energy might cause a student to be distracted at school, but could assist with doing a boundless number of chores at home. A role play scenario involved a student who needed to use manipulatives to compensate for weaknesses in math, but the general education teacher refused the student the use of the modification.

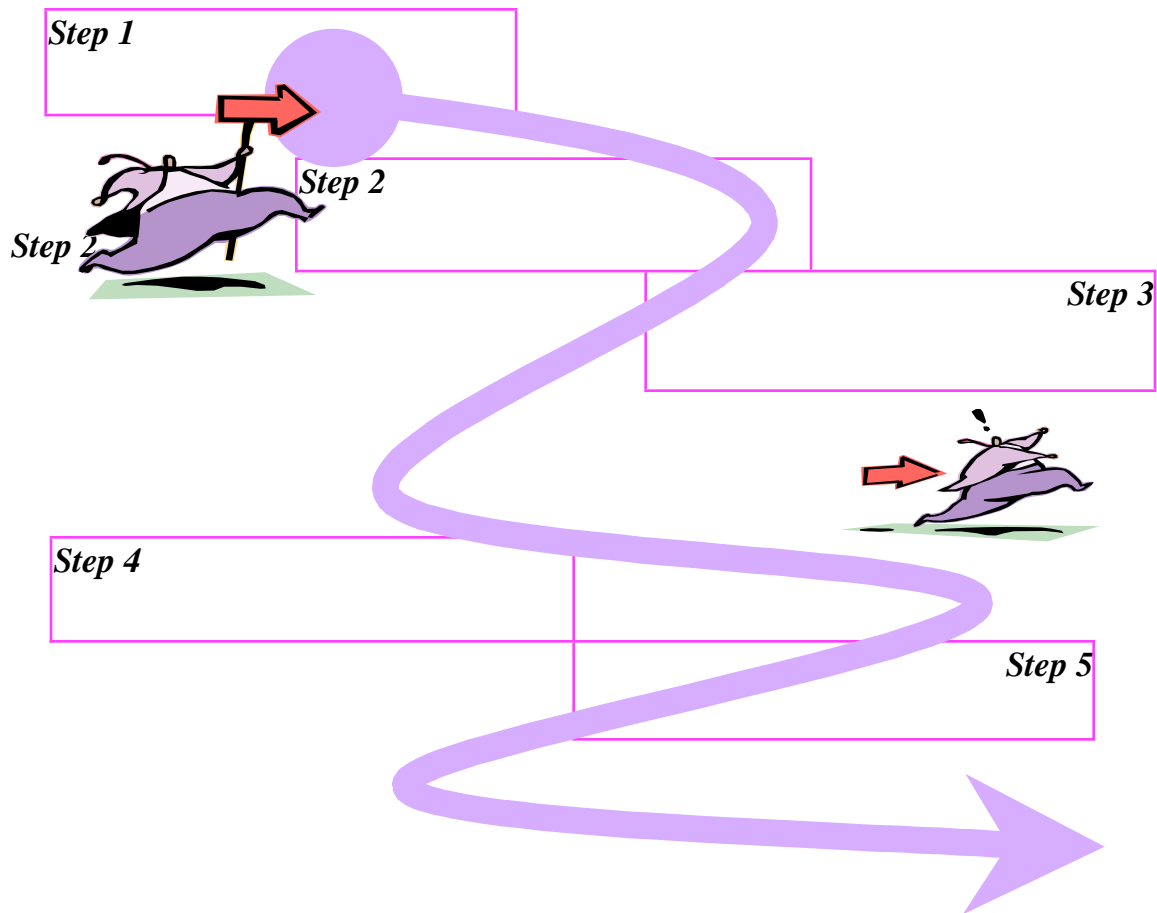
Lesson Six: Problem Scenarios and Self-Advocacy. Students learned appropriate advocacy and problem solving techniques by exploring choices/helplessness regarding their disability. Later discussions focused on strategies to produce positive outcomes to problems. Role plays concerned student situa-

Figure 2. Lesson 4: Getting Into a Special Education Program: Getting Into a Special Class

When Tanya was in the first grade, the teacher noticed that she had difficulty reading. After the teacher tried some special ways to teach Tanya, she asked that she be tested for special education. Tanya's parents had to sign a paper called a permission slip so that she could be tested. After Tanya was tested, a group of people, a team, looked at the test scores and decided that she needed to be in a special education class. Afterwards, when Tanya was placed into the special education class, the special education teacher wrote Tanya an Individualized Education Prescription (IEP). The IEP listed what Tanya will learn and how she will learn it.

A MAZE ING

Moving through the maze to a special class. List the steps.



Campbell-Whatley, G.D. (2004). *Who I can be is up to me: Lessons in self-exploration and self-determination for students with disabilities in learning*. Research Press: Champaign, Illinois.

tions using assertive rather than aggressive behaviors to solve problems (Figure 3).

Lesson Seven: Strategies for Handling Anger. When confronted with negative situations related to their disability, students learned basic techniques for handling anger. For example, students were asked to relate some recent situations where they responded in anger. Subsequently, they were asked to identify various physical signals as soon as

the feeling of anger occurred (i.e., seeing red, sweating, turning red). Strategies to diminish anger were identified and listed. Role play activities involved specific situations related to having a disability. For example, one situation involved a student with a disability that raised his hand to ask a question. Another student whispered in his ear, "Shut up dumb boy, everyone knows the answer to that."

Figure 3. Lesson 6: Problem Scenarios and Self-Advocacy



The general education English teacher is explaining the assignment. She then adds, "You special education students will have to do the assignment the same way. You're not getting out of this one." Should you as a student with a disability in learning confront the teacher about the comment? What should you do?

Logistics and Discussion

Only one lesson was the focus of a given week. Several student activity pages accompanied each lesson. Teacher expectations, application, and other delivery information were flexible. In separate settings across a large school system in the Midwest, four teachers administered the lessons to students three times a week, in 30 minute sessions, for seven weeks, depending on the age and ability level of the students.

Four teachers delivered instruction in small groups to thirteen students using the lessons. Two elementary cross-categorical teachers instructed six students in fifth grade

inclusionary settings. Both teachers taught three students each. One middle school cross-categorical teacher taught four sixth-graders. One secondary cross-categorical teacher instructed three students in the ninth grade. Nine students were labeled learning disabled and four mild mentally impaired as determined by state guidelines and were being serviced by licensed special education teachers.

During the lessons, students were encouraged and provided time and assistance with writing and spelling logistics to complete the activities. The lessons were graded immediately after the lesson. Throughout the lesson sessions during the week, teachers

wrote student comments. Teachers summarized student statements after each lesson. Some of the reactions to the sessions are listed here. The teachers reported that the students collectively performed between a range of 70% to 100% accuracy on the activities (i.e., there were no students who performed less than 70%). During *Lesson One: What Does it Mean to Have a Disability in Learning*, students expressed doubt that their parents or teachers would ever understand that they had a disability, but found it of value to learn more about themselves.

One high school student said, “My mother would never believe that I really have a real problem. She just thinks I am lazy and that is that, but I am glad to know that my problem is real and I can start to help and believe more in myself.”

Teachers reported that students expressed the most excitement during *Lesson Two: Successful People with Disabilities in Learning*. One elementary student said, “Do we have to stop talking about this? I can talk about this everyday.” Most students were able to identify their problem areas in *Lesson Three: Characteristics Related to a Disability in Learning*, but were not aware that it was the basis of their disability. One middle school student questioned, “Just because I can’t remember things, that means I have a disability?” Another said, “I never knew so many different, famous people had the same problems I did.”

Teachers reported that students thought the process to enter a special education class in *Lesson Four: Getting Into a Special Education Program* to be a lengthy process, but thought it helpful to understand the progression. One middle school student stated, “It’s too long and takes too many peo-

ple, but I am glad that I know what was happening to me.” Many students were surprised that what they could do well was of any value in school. One high school student expressed during *Lesson Five: Knowing My Strengths and Weaknesses*, “I thought things I did good at home didn’t matter if I couldn’t get the lesson in class.”

Students practiced techniques to explain their disability to teachers, parents, employers, etc. in *Lesson Six: Problem Scenarios and Self-Advocacy*. Many students demonstrated pride in explaining accomplishments, while they shared the characteristics of their disability and learned to ask for help.

One high school student said, “I always wanted to know what to say to a teacher who thought I was being lazy. If I could just tell her what I needed to do to get help. Well I was able to tell her and she did not call me lazy.”

Most students thought the problem scenarios to be of value in *Lesson Seven: Strategies for Handling Anger*. One middle school student stated, “You always need to be ready to fight when somebody calls you a name, but I am glad to know that I have another way I can handle problems if I want to.”

Caveats

The lessons can be taught or integrated into subjects such as Health, Public Speaking, Language Arts, Career Education or similar classes. Extended sessions and varied combinations of groups or pairs can provide reinforcement and increase skill attainment with lesson delivery. After formal sessions, it’s best practice for teachers to reinforce the material by reminding students to apply acquired skills in various situations.

For example, a student reports that one of his classmates says to him, "LD means little dummy." The teacher can gauge the student response to the situation and support and encourage appropriate responses and give suggestions for inappropriate ones. Teachers should have realistic expectations and remember that the rate of application and skill attainment is based on individual skill levels.

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