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Children's Experience Of Learning:

A Naturalistic Inquiry Into the Mainstream Education of Special Needs Students in New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

Current trends in New Zealand schools for the teaching of students with special abilities, learning difficulties, or metacognitive deficits are to retain these 'special needs' students within mainstream classrooms, although schools often supplement regular courses with 'pullout' programmes where necessary. However, mainstream inclusion for 'special needs' students has been criticised on the basis that the structure and organisation of New Zealand schools does not support individual interventions or the planning of flexible programmes. This study contextualises this criticism by providing a qualitative record of the learning experiences of a group of children classed as 'special needs' students. It may stimulate readers to understand the wide range of needs in New Zealand schools.

The research sample was composed of 'special needs' children within Auckland schools, as classified by their teachers and parents; it included 'booster class' students who were not achieving to the levels expected for their chronological ages, as well as 'gifted' children from 'extension classes'

who had demonstrated advanced academic performance or had the ability to perform. Cognitive research suggests that these special learning needs are not simply innate within each child, but are characterised by either unusually high or low levels of cognitive and metacognitive strategy use, involving a mixture of learned behaviours, beliefs and skills. Research has shown these to be closely related to the learning environment and social context of the classroom. This study aims to discover how a range of 'special needs' students perceive contextual classroom influences that may help or hinder their ability to focus on learning.

The data is also analysed in light of goal orientation or motivational theory about the self-perceptions, social goals and constructs that motivate students to engage in classroom tasks and activities. Children develop metacognitive or 'executive decision-making' processes that inform their judgements about where and how to strategically apply effort and skills. The different levels of metacognitive function displayed by sampled 'special needs' students reflect the dynamic interaction between a child's growing knowledge and abilities, and the social context of their learning environment. Self-perception of ability, the confidence to effectively accomplish goals, and attributive beliefs about the causes of success and failure can either motivate interest and effort in academic activities, encouraging further metacognitive development, or conversely reduce motivation and lead to self-defeating behaviours and beliefs, such as task avoidance. Therefore, emotional reactions to the learning environment, such as unhappiness, anxiety, boredom or frustration, can either boost or retard academic learning and performance.

The findings of this naturalistic inquiry indicate that children are able to recognise a range of influences on their ability or motivation to engage in school learning activities; their accounts often correspond with issues identified in other educational research, typically in empirical cognitive and

developmental studies. The children raise negative factors such as inappropriate levels of language difficulty, degree of challenge in set tasks, anti-social classroom interactions, and problems with noise, interruptions and availability of teacher guidance. However 'special needs' learners also reported that co-operative social interactions, and peer and teacher encouragement assisted their motivation and learning.

Therefore it seems that growth of motivation and metacognition in 'special needs' students learning in mainstream classrooms may be achieved by ensuring that language and learning material is both readily accessible and matched to individual learning needs. Moreover since social interaction is shown to be beneficial to achievement in learning, the promotion of classroom climates that foster co-operation and relationship-building goals, in contrast to instrumental dominance objectives, thereby supports adjustment to the school environment and productive involvement in learning tasks. Negotiated interventions based on an understanding of children's fundamental perceptions and goals, within ongoing, mutually communicative social relationships and enriched learning environments, may assist children to improve their motivation, metacognitive abilities and performance.

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