DOMINICAN
UNIVERSITY
of CALIFORNIA

Dominican Scholar

May 2023

Fostering Intrinsic Motivation Within Secondary Special Education with Attention Towards Teacher Presence and Positive Behavior Support

Desirae Barboza
Dominican University of California

Survey: Let us know how this paper benefits you.

This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the program chair, has been presented to and accepted by the Department of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education.

Desirae Barboza
Candidate

Jennifer Lucko, PhD
Program Chair

Matthew E. Davis, PhD
First Reader

Rosemarie Michaels, EdD
Second Reader

Fostering Intrinsic Motivation Within Secondary Special Education with Attention

Towards Teacher Presence and Positive Behavior Supports

by

Desirae Barboza

A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial

fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

2023

Abstract

This study sought to understand the conditions high school mild to moderate special education students need to sustain intrinsic motivation. Prior research suggests that overall academic intrinsic motivation is much lower in students with disabilities (Daniel and Cooc 2018). Teachers' expectations can have a strong association with student motivation in their learning and can lead to improved academic outcomes (Johnson, Wildy, & Shand, 2020). Currently, there is a lack of existing research that studies the conditions that cultivate intrinsic motivation among students with special needs. To research how high school mild to moderate special education students sustain intrinsic motivation, the researcher conducted a qualitative study with a constructivist worldview that included high school students with special needs, who worked on a unit focused on the Hero's Journey, identity, motivation and self-efficacy. The findings of this research suggest that when students feel at ease they have identified a greater willingness to engage with learning. The findings have highlighted that mild to moderate special education high school students are motivated to learn when they have an engaging environment, a relationship with their teachers, broader connections to life, and are engaged with what they consider meaningful content.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the many individuals who supported me throughout my master's journey. First and foremost, I would like to thank my dog, Peach, who was a constant companion laying at my side while I wrote my chapters. To my parents and sister, thank you for your endless encouragement and support throughout this process. I am beyond grateful for your love, care, and your willingness to help in any way possible, like the countless dinners, and looks of sympathy when needed. I am also grateful for my boyfriend, Caleb, who offered support, encouragement, and motivation during the challenging times. Who also forced me to take breaks even when I didn't want to. To Matt, my first reader, thank you for your time management, advice, and encouragement. To my second reader, Dr. Rosemarie Michaels, thank you for cheering me on every step of the way and providing meaningful and insightful feedback throughout the writing process.

A huge thank you to my friend and mentor, Jane Mays, whose guidance and celebration helped me to stay motivated. Finally, I am grateful to my students, who participated in my research. Your insights were invaluable in this process, and I am grateful for your willingness to share your experiences with me.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

As a mild to moderate special education teacher for the last three years, I have had the opportunity to work with a diverse range of students. I have struggled to understand how I can support students in moving beyond what I often experience as apathy toward school and not working to their full capabilities. This has been a recurring challenge I have discussed with my colleagues, and recognized as a common theme across our special education classrooms.

By getting to know my students and spending the last year with them, I have been able to see their true personalities shine through, which has given me hope and excitement that engaged learning is possible and impactful. I am aware that each student has unique strengths and abilities, and as a teacher, I hope to understand how I can support this uniqueness.

Statement of Purpose

There is a lack of research on how to effectively harness the intrinsic motivation of high school students with mild to moderate learning disabilities. Wilson and David (1994) found that overall academic intrinsic motivation was significantly lower in students with mild to moderate disabilities, indicating a need for further exploration on effective strategies for fostering motivation. Chu (2020) identified that when one applies the 5 essentials of positive psychology, positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment one can foster student engagement and classroom community. And, Johnson, Wildy, and Shand (2022) suggested that teacher presence can be an effective way to provide intrinsic motivation.

By fostering intrinsic motivation, educators can help to engage students in their learning. Educators can also support student ownership of their education, allowing students to pursue their own interests and passions. Special education students are already a marginalized community and the curriculum is not always set up to be inclusive. This study was designed to

identify and explore practices and pedagogy to create more equitable practices for students with learning disabilities.

Overview of the Research Design

The qualitative study utilized a constructivist worldview, and sought to answer the following two questions:

- What are the conditions for motivation among 11th and 12th grade high school students in special education who qualify under specific learning disability (SLD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and intellectual disability (ID)?

- How can educators, who work with mild to moderate special education students, support their students in creating a learning environment that supports intrinsic motivation for learning?

Participants were recruited from a mild to moderate special education 11th and 12th grade English classroom at a public high school in northern California. The study included eight students who participated in a unit on the Hero's Journey. The researcher was also the teacher in the classroom and worked at the site for five years, and with the participants for the entirety of the academic year.

Significance of the Findings for Educational Equity and Social Justice

Findings from the research study show that mild to moderate special education high school students are motivated to learn when students can cultivate rapport with their teachers and ease within the classroom. When students feel at ease in a learning environment and build rapport with their teachers, they are more likely to engage in their learning. Students also showed greater intrinsic motivations through building broader connections to life. These broader connections provide students with a sense of purpose. Students also experienced a greater sense

of intrinsic motivation through becoming peer teachers, by having the opportunity to recognize their own strengths and abilities. Overall, creating a supportive and inclusive learning atmosphere that prioritizes student centered approaches can have a significant impact on fostering intrinsic motivation among special education high school students. By developing these findings into the classroom to create a more equitable learning environment, all students can thrive.

Research Implications

The findings revealed that in order to foster intrinsic motivation among mild to moderate high school special education students, it is necessary to create a conducive learning environment that allows for positive relationships with their teachers through the establishment of rapport and ease, and engaging in relevant curriculum that connects to how "life matters". In schools, the administration can provide professional development opportunities that focus on improving skills in building relationships with students. Lastly, education policy needs to support collaboration and peer-to-peer learning in the classroom and update outdated classroom materials to improve the relevance of school to real-world connections.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review seeks to understand the importance of how special education students sustain intrinsic motivation through teacher presence and positive behavior support through positive psychology. This research project attempted to unveil how these qualities cultivate motivation among students in secondary special education. Prior research suggests that overall academic intrinsic motivation is much lower in students with disabilities (Wilson & David, 1994), and that teacher presence, and positive behavior support provides ways to foster intrinsic motivation in students with mild to moderate disabilities (Johnson, Wildy, & Shand, 2022; Wilson & David, 1994). This review explores the theoretical framework that illuminates the lack of intrinsic motivation within the special education population and explores how to foster intrinsic motivation through positive behavioral support and teacher presence.

Motivation

A student's sense and source of motivation impacts the quality and resilience of engagement in the classroom (Denton, 2022). Consequently, there is value in understanding the spectrum of motivation and how students are able to move even more deeply into their own intrinsic desire for learning. In this way, Denton (2022) identifies the pivotal role Edward Deci and Richard Ryan have played in developing self-determination theory, a classification system around motivation. Most broadly, they distinguish between intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation (Ryan et al., 2021).

According to this theory amotivation is a lack of motivation and exists on one end of the spectrum. Intrinsic motivation exists on the other end of the spectrum as an impulse for participation based in authentic joy and pleasure. Extrinsic motivation is in the middle of the spectrum and has four subcategories. These include, (1) external regulation, where one

participates due to a reward or a punishment from an external source, such as grade; (2)

introjection, where one participates for ego or self-esteem to impress others; (3) identification,

where one participates because they identify with the behavior as their own; and (4) integration,

where one participates due to an alignment of beliefs and values (Ryan et al., 2021).

Understanding motivation is crucial to this study, because special education students

face additional barriers to motivation compared to their typically-developing peers (Ryan et al.,

2021). By understanding the different types of motivation, teachers can alter their teaching

strategies to better meet the needs of their students and ultimately promote engagement and

participation in the learning process.

In order to foster intrinsic motivation in special education students, it is important to

understand the factors that may be contributing to amotivation. These factors can include low

confidence, negative self-perceptions, or a lack of understanding of the curriculum (Ryan et al.,

2021). It is important to address these barriers as it is an important step in promoting intrinsic

motivation. Amotivation is the absence of motivation to participate in a particular activity (Ryan

et al., 2021). It is where an individual does not feel compelled to pursue a goal or feels

disconnected from their interests. While understanding factors that contribute to amotivation are

helpful, this study will focus on ways to foster intrinsic motivation. On the other hand, extrinsic

motivation refers to engaging in an activity or behavior for external reasons such as a reward.

Rather than for the inherent interest or enjoyment of an activity itself. This can be helpful in

driving behavior and achieving certain short term goals. Intrinsic motivation, however, involves

finding personal meaning and value in an activity, which is more sustainable in the long run

(Ryan et al., 2021).

Intrinsic motivation

Motivation is a key factor in driving human behavior and understanding the different types of motivation is important for educators to unlock intrinsic motivation in their students. Intrinsic motivation "involves the doing of any activity that for its own sake or because the activity is interesting or enjoyable" (Ryan et al., 2021, p. 99).

Self-Determination. Enhanced self-determination may play a role in improving student outcomes, including academic achievement (Martin et al., 2003), employment status (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003), post secondary participation (Field, Sarver & Shaw, 2003, Carter et al., 2006), independence, and quality of life (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997, Carter et al., 2006).

However, there is little research on how special education students create and foster intrinsic motivation. Daniel and Cooc (2018) conducted a study to gain further insight on intrinsic motivation for students with disabilities to discover possible disparities, as there are many positive effects of intrinsic motivation for their typically developing peers. Additionally, the researchers measured whether academic intrinsic motivation varied in disability categories. The study found that teachers perceived students with Autism to have the lowest academic intrinsic motivation, while students identified with Emotional and Behavioral Disorder, Occupational Health Impairment, Traumatic Brain injury, and Intellectual Disabilities were perceived to have lower intrinsic motivation compared to students with visual impairments, hearing impairment, and speech impairments. The question that comes to mind is, how can teachers better support students who qualify for special education to be more meaningfully motivated students?

Techniques to Establish Intrinsic Motivation

There are models that support typical students in increasing intrinsic motivation, specifically Paciott's (2010) Caring Behavior Management (CMB). Paciott (2010) describes the effects that caring behavioral management has on student motivation through the use of positive reinforcement. This study focuses on Kounin's (1970) description of the ripple effect. Teachers use positive reinforcement to shape group and individual behavior, then, as more students model positive classroom behavior, this behavior begins to ripple through the classroom and gradually becomes the norm. Using positive reinforcement teachers create a community of students who respect classroom norms and take charge of their learning which in time leads to students' self-efficacy, the students' belief in their capacity to carry out behaviors necessary to produce specific performance goals that reflect a students confidence to control their own motivation and behavior. Caring behavior management allows students to develop autonomous motivation where the behavior is self-determined (Deci & Ryan, 2008). CMB mixes extrinsic motivation through tangible items and praise that ultimately leads to intrinsic motivation.

Additionally, Johnson, Wildy, and Shand (2022) sought to determine how teachers' expectations can have a strong association with student academic achievement at school (Jussim & Harber, 2005; Papageorge et al., 2020). The researchers explained how students' experiences of teacher care are interested in developing positive relationships and sustain positive expectation effects from students' points of view. Johnson, Wildy, and Shand (2022) found that the students felt more interested and motivated in their classes where the teacher had high expectations. This study was also conducted with general education students.

Butler and Nisan (1986) sought to determine the effectiveness differential between no feedback, task-related comments, and grades on intrinsic motivation and performance. The

researchers found that students who received individualized task-related feedback expressed more interest in the task than those who receive grades or zero feedback at all. Additionally, the quality of the task was higher after task-related feedback, and performance on the quantitative task was greater after task-related feedback. Butler and Mordecai (1986) found that grades, the usual feedback a student receives in school, encouraged more quantitative aspects of learning, fostered feelings of fear of failure, and lessened interest. However, no such negative results come from individualized task-related comments.

Growth Mindset

Dweck (1999) explored why some students enjoyed learning, even when work was challenging while other students were unwilling to attempt tasks that appeared to be challenging. She developed what is known as the theory of growth mindset which is a spectrum ranging from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset. Saunders (2013) found that students with a fixed mindset tend to ignore constructive criticism, feel threatened by the success of others, and blame outside factors for their failure. For example, if they failed a test, a student with a fixed mindset may blame the teachers for not teaching them the information outlined on the test.

On the contrary, students with a growth mindset believe their intelligence to be malleable. Even through failure, these students can learn and grow (Blackwell, Trzeniewski, & Dweck, 2007). Students with a growth mindset believe that the importance of effort and view failure as a motivator that drives them to continued learning (Blackwell, Trzeniewski, & Dweck, 2007). Understanding growth mindset is relevant to this study as students with a fixed mindset may be more likely to struggle with intrinsic motivation. These students may be unwilling to attempt challenging tasks. On the other hand, students with a growth mindset may believe in the importance of effort and view failure as a motivation that encourages them to continue learning.

By creating a growth mindset in mild to moderate special education students, educators may be able to drive the development of intrinsic motivation and a love of learning.

Self-Efficacy

Bandura (1986) defined self-efficacy as a belief in one's own ability to be successful in particular circumstances. A student's self-efficacy is dependent on how they view prospects and hindrances and how much they are willing to strive and persist until they are successful (Bandura, 1997). One's self-efficacy is built upon previous success, especially successes that challenged the individual. On the other hand, failures easily fracture one's sense of self-efficacy.

Hampton (1996) documented how special education students' low self-efficacy is a barrier to academic success, and that special education students who experienced repeated academic failures or difficulties were likely to have lower self-efficacy. Additionally, special education students with low self-efficacy may be less willing to attempt a challenging task and to sustain effort (Hampton, 1996). This may lead to a reinforced belief that special education students have poor perception about their academic abilities.

Rhew, Piro, Goolkasian, and Cosentino (2018) investigated whether a growth mindset intervention, Brainology, would enhance special education students 'self-efficacy and motivation in reading. The study found that the growth mindset intervention had no statistical significance on student self-efficacy. The results did suggest that a growth mindset intervention had a significant impact on student motivation. This study suggests that special education educators should focus on specific instruction around mindsets and motivation. Educators should consider weaving a growth mindset into everyday curriculum that emphasizes on persevering, utilizing constructive feedback to improve, and understanding the flexibility of intelligence.

Positive Psychology

According to Chu (2020), positive psychology is the study of well-being that includes five essential elements–positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA) that when applied to teaching strategies, can foster student engagement and classroom community.

The PERMA model is a well-being theory (Seligman, 2019), whereas growth mindset is the belief, which everyone holds regarding the nature of intelligence and abilities (Dweck, 2006). When the PEMA model and growth mindset are used hand in hand, it allows students to see challenges and mistakes as opportunities to grow and become more intelligent and resilient (Bruzell et al., 2016).

Chu (2020) provided examples of growth-oriented feedback – such as "I'm giving you these comments because I have very high expectations and I know that you can reach them" (p. 158). Comments such as these have shown to promote student engagement, instructor-student relationships, and academic performance (Yeager et al., 2014). Chu (2020) found that growth-oriented feedback was the most motivating feedback students have received.

Gratitude

Gratitude is a relevant concept to consider when studying ways to foster intrinsic motivation in mild to moderate special education students. Gratitude is defined as a positive emotion that people experience when an underserved situation or act of kindness occurs (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). Research has shown that gratitude interventions increase feelings of gratitude that lead to greater optimism, resilience, connectedness to others, and general well-being (Brunzell et al., 2016; Davis et al., 2016). These interventions include creating a gratitude list, as well as writing gratitude letters. The study found that applying these

positive psychology teaching strategies has the potential to enhance the learning outcomes in addition to student well-being. By incorporating gratitude interventions into special education classrooms, educators may be able to enhance the learning outcomes for these students while promoting the added benefit of their overall well-being. Thus, understanding the role of gratitude in fostering intrinsic motivation can be a valuable tool for improving academic and overall personal success of mild to moderate special education students.

Models that Foster Positive Support

Models that foster positive support include, Datu, Wong, and Rubin-Davies '(2020) study which sought to determine stronger evidence that supports the benefits of kindness, and how it influences academic, psychological, and social outcomes. Additionally, Datu et al., (2020) looked at how kindness can promote media literacy skills. This research aimed to complement the previous research done on the role of kindness in social emotional learning through looking at the effects of a kindness intervention on media literacy. Datu, et al. (2020) found that a kindness intervention can promote students' self-esteem, social self-efficacy, and all around positive effects.

Several studies show that the development of positive student-teacher relationships can be pivotal for student success at school (Cornelius-White, 2007; Johnson, Wildy, & Shand, 2022). Teacher care provides reciprocal relationships between people who are cared for and people who do the caring, including students and their teachers. Caring student-teacher relationships contribute to improved engagement and academic outcomes. Together, these studies suggest that positive support models, such as kindness interventions and caring student-teacher relationships, can have a significant positive impact on students 'academic outcomes.

Special Education

According to Bowman, Farrar, and Novak (2022), the development of effective special education interventions for high school students is critical in preparing students for success in post-high school transition. They believe successful inventions include promoting self-direction (Shogren et al., 2020), self-regulation (Webber et al., 1993), and self-awareness (Urdang, 2010).

Strategies in Special Education. There are strategies being used in Special Education that fosters intrinsic motivation. Bowman, Farrar, and Novak (2022) looked at one-on-one conversations with a special education teacher and a student as a means of support for students with mild to moderate learning disabilities. The goal of this study was to improve student self awareness and empower their learning. Throughout 6 semesters of the study, students responded to surveys about the interventions. 78% of students reported that the one-to-one sessions helped a 'significant amount' and that the experience was 'almost always 'positive (Bowman, Farrar, and Novak, 2022).

Research has shown that students with disabilities achieve greater academic success and increased autonomy when educators share high expectations for their achievement and couple those expectations with access to general education curriculum (Rubie-Davies et al., 2007; Turnbull et al., 2010). Travers (2015) found that in the conversations directed through research, students were encouraged to reflect on their progress towards high expectations and grade-level standards and set specific, challenging, and attainable goals which research suggests leads to increased academic and performance outcomes (Travers et al., 2015).

The research found that this intervention led to a statistically significant increase in average GPA in academic classes (Bowman, Farrar, and Novak, 2022). During these one-on-one interventions between student and teacher, the majority of students 'almost always 'experienced

positive feelings. Bowman, Farrar, and Novak (2022) suggest that educators can promote increased student independence, self-direction, and self-awareness in students with disabilities by focusing on efforts of how to have short conversations. Building in time for these target one-to-one conversations ensures that students with disabilities can access inclusive and challenging learning environments while building skills to be successful learners.

Carter, Lane, Pierson, and Glaeser (2006) sought to determine the amount of self-determination skills found in youth with the diagnosis of Emotional Disturbance (ED) and Learning Disabilities (LD). They also touched on the opportunities these students have in learning self-determination skills. This study revealed that the self determination capacity in high school aged students was far lower in students with ED than students with LD. Carter, Lane, Pierson, and Glaeser (2006) state the importance of additional curriculum and explicit instruction on the aspects of self determination, such as, goal setting, choice making, problem solving, and self-evaluation.

Butler and Nisan (1986) designed a study to identify the effects of different feedback conditions on intrinsic motivation. Their hypothesis was that subjects who receive individualized task-related feedback contingent on the performance of interesting tasks over two trials would subsequently express more interest in the tasks than subjects who received normative numerical grades or no feedback. The results of this study suggested that students who received written comments mostly tended to attribute success to internal, motivational factors such as effort and interest. The researchers found that grades, the information that is routinely given in schools, depress creativity, foster fear of failure, and undermine interest. The study found that no such negative results came from task-related individualized comments. Overall the researchers discovered that the student participants prefer constructive, specific written feedback.

For many students, adolescence launched a downward movement in achievement and motivation due to increased academic demands and expectations (Ryan, 2001). Rhew, Piro, Goolkasian, and Cosentino's (2018) found that students who are intrinsically motivated to learn focused on the task itself rather than just the end result, whereas, students who were extrinsically motivated were more concerned with the end result, such as: grades or prizes.

Motivation is a critical component of academic success in all students (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2008). Students who have learning disabilities or difficulties in school often maintained a devalued sense of self-confidence, which lead to a reduction in their motivation to participate in and follow through in academic challenges, creating a cycle of lower motivation and low achievement (Morgan, Fuchs, Compton, Cordray, Fuchs, 2008). Students with internal motivators developed a sense that they were able to succeed academically and perceived more control through the process (Rhew, Prio, Goolkasian, and Cosentino, 2018). The students who had intrinsic motivation tended to take responsibility for their achievements and failures. Special education students who struggle with academic success have an increased probability for reduced levels of intrinsic motivation.

Rhew, Piro, Goolkasian, and Cosentino (2018) suggests that educators should consider emphasizing a curriculum that incorporates a growth mindset model of instruction that focuses on persevering, utilizing constructive feedback to improve the flexibility of intelligence. Teacher feedback to students should focus on the process and the effort put forth in a task. Additionally, teachers and support staff should establish growth mindset attitudes within the classroom by providing opportunities for discussion and the sharing of the process and the difficulties they encounter in learning.

Teacher Presence

While intrinsic motivation can be fostered through positive behavioral supports, and specific strategies in the classroom, intrinsic motivation can be supported through teacher presences and the relationship between teachers and students. Roderers and Raider-Roth (2006) define presence as: "Presence from the teacher's point of view is the experience of bringing one's whole self to full attention so as to perceive what is happening in the moment" (p. 267). Presence is more than simply being in the here-and-now. It implies "a fundamental shift in the relationship between seer and seen" (Roderers and Raider-Roth, 2006, p. 298).

Meijer, Korthagen, and Vasalos (2008) conducted research through the lens of the U-theory, which aims to connect the personal and professional areas of teaching to arrive at a place of reflection (Scharmer, 2007; Senge et al., 2004), and the onion model which encourages one to get in touch with their inner strengths and the environment (Korthagen, 2004). The goal was to find a balance of "being yourself while teaching" (Meijer, Korthagen, Vasalos, 2008, p. 297), and connecting the personal and the professional in teaching. The researchers found that in being one's self there was a stronger connection between the personal and professional that created a shift in awareness where the teacher was less focused on the problems, and more focused on strengths. The participant in their study experienced "being-while-teaching" (Meijer, Korthagen, Vasalos, 2008, p. 306). This allowed the participant to use her core qualities in teaching much more effectively. Due to this deeper awareness the participant developed a professional behavior where she was able to manage her class in a way that matches who she is (Meijer, Korthagen, Vasalos, 2008).

By encouraging teachers to connect with their inner strengths and emotions, they can establish a more authentic and meaningful connection with their students. This can then lead to a more positive learning environment and ultimately better academic outcomes.

Strategies to Build Teacher Presence

Teacher expectations are associated with student academic achievement. Teacher expectations are defined as the judgments that teachers infer from their knowledge of students about if, when, and how much students achieve academically. Johnson, Wildly, and Shand (2022) outline strategies and techniques to identify how students experience their teachers ' expectations of them. One way teachers can communicate care is by showing interest and esteem in students when they devote time to relating with them. Another strategy occurs when teachers take time to talk and communicate with students through sitting down and trying to have a conversation with them. Teachers can show interest in students beyond their "student" personas.

Johnson et al. (2022) explains how students 'experiences of teacher care are interested in developing positive relationships and sustains positive expectation effects from students' points of view. Johnson et al. (2022) found that the students who experienced high levels of teacher care reported feeling more interested and motivated in their classes. This was particularly evident when teachers showed care by taking a genuine interest in their students 'lives and holding them in high esteem. The results of this study have important implications for educators as it highlights the importance of teacher care in promoting positive outcomes for students, not only in terms of academic achievement but also in cultivating positive relationships. When teachers show care, students feel valued and supported. This, in turn, can lead to increased engagement and motivation amongst students. Furthermore, the findings of this study suggested that teachers should hold high expectations for their students. When teachers hold their students in high

esteem, the students are more likely to meet and exceed their teachers 'expectations. Therefore, teacher care and high expectations should be viewed as complementary that can promote positive outcomes for students. Johnset et al. (2022) also highlighted the importance of teacher care in promoting positive relationships and academic outcomes for students. This suggests that when teachers show care and hold high expectations for their students, they can create a positive environment that fosters motivation and engagement. This underscores the importance of teacher-student relationships in the classroom and emphasizes the need for teachers to prioritize care for students and a critical aspect of their teaching.

Conclusion

While intrinsic motivations have been identified as important for learning (Wilson & David, 1994), there is an underdeveloped understanding of how to tap into the intrinsic motivation with students with special needs. It has also been identified how presence and positive behavior management can contribute to the efficacy of learning (Johson, Wildy, Shand 2020), but there is a gap in understanding how these qualities cultivate intrinsic motivation among students with special needs. This literature review reveals that there is little research regarding how special education students respond to positive psychology and teacher presence. By addressing these issues, educators can build more inclusive and equitable learning environments that ensure special education students are not excluded from opportunities to experience intrinsic motivation in their education. The purpose of this study is to illuminate how these qualities foster intrinsic motivation among students with special needs in secondary school settings.

Chapter 3: Methods

This study sought to understand what conditions high school mild to moderate special education students need to sustain intrinsic motivation. Currently, there is a lack of existing research that studies how presence in particular cultivates intrinsic motivation among students with special needs. Prior research suggests that overall academic intrinsic motivation is much lower in students with disabilities (Daniel & Cooc, 2018). There is also research done that shows teachers' expectations can have a strong association with student motivation in their learning, which led to improved academic outcomes (Johnson, Wildy, & Shand, 2020). Specifically, this study seeks to explore the theoretical framework that illuminates the lack of intrinsic motivation within the special education population and how teacher presence versus positive behavior management fosters intrinsic motivation.

Research Questions

This research sought to answer the following questions:

- First, what are the conditions for motivation among 11th and 12th grade high school students in special education who qualify under specific learning disability (SLD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and intellectual disability (ID)?

- Second, how can educators, who work with mild to moderate special education students, support their students in creating a learning environment that supports intrinsic motivation for learning?

Description and Rationale for Research Approach

To research what conditions, including, teacher presence and positive behavior supports, foster intrinsic motivation among high school special education students, the researcher conducted a qualitative study with a constructivist worldview. The goal of the researcher was to

rely as much as possible on the participants 'view of the situation being researched. (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A qualitative approach was suitable for this study because it focuses on open-ended questions without predetermined responses, interview and documentation data, and interpretations of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research employed a constructivist worldview, which focuses on the needs of groups and individuals in our society and relies on the participants 'views of the situation being studied (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), this approach aims to rely on the perspectives of the participants being studied. This research intended to foster student voice in the classroom and teaching process. A constructivist worldview values participants 'voices in the research process, thus allowing them to improve their own lives.

Research Design

This research was conducted at a high school in northern California, which will be referred to as Maplewood High School. This site was purposefully selected because the researcher has been working at the school for the last five years. Thus, the researcher had pre-existing relationships with the student participants as their primary classroom teacher. Eight students participated in the in class unit on The Hero's Journey, and all of those eight students participated in the focused group conversations. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for the school and participants.

Research Site and Entry into the Field

Maplewood High School is a historical high school, established in 1908, that serves about 1,158 students ranging from ninth to twelfth graders, including a Special Day Class, a Positive Engagement Program, which is a therapeutic classroom, and seven resource specialist programs (RSP) serving around 240 special education students. 38% of the students at Maplewood High

School are economically disadvantaged and 27% qualify for a free lunch program. Maplewood High School is placed in the top 30% of all schools in California for overall test scores. (U.S. News & World Report, 2023).

Participants and Sampling Procedure

Eleventh and twelfth grade students in the researcher's English classroom at Maplewood High School were recruited for participation in the study. Their ages ranged from sixteen to eighteen years old. All of the participants have a diagnosed learning disability and a current individual education plan (IEP). Students were solicited through direct invitation after a brief explanation the researcher gave about the study's purpose and methodology during regular class time. All students were provided with a consent form to be signed by their parents, that also included a line for student assent signatures.

These high school students were purposefully selected for this study since the researcher teaches in a specialized classroom setting and has observed the lack of motivation, disconnectedness, and low self esteem. The purpose of recruiting students was to engage them in discovering what inspires agency and their motivations at school. This type of sample was purposefully chosen because the participants were students who qualify for special education under the classification of SLD, ADHD, and ASD.

Methods

Students in the researchers' English class were introduced to a film unit on *The Hero's Journey* where they learned about the different types of motivation; intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. This led into the topic of motivation and what motivates the students. Students participated in daily open-ended writing prompts in class. The writing prompts consisted of a statement or a question that students responded to by writing at least three sentences (See

Appendix A for sample prompts).

For the summative project on this unit, the participants were tasked with creating their own Hero's Journey through a creative writing narratives essay. At the end of the unit, a conversation and debrief was held about how specific motivators will help them post high school. In addition, focused group conversations were held during class time. The focused group conversations occurred on campus at Maplewood High School in the researcher's classroom. During these focused conversations, the researcher facilitates group discussions among the participants to explore their thoughts and opinions of their own Hero's Journey. Notes were taken during the focused group conversations. Written information never included any names of identifying information (e.g., addresses, phone numbers, personal references). The conversation questions focused on eliciting views and opinions on how mentors and allies play an important role in student motivation and self esteem (See Appendix B for sample questions).

Data Analysis

Qualitative analysis methods were used to analyze the data. The researcher wrote analytic memos immediately after the focused group conversations to capture data about student conversations and connections. These memos "facilitate thinking about data, stimulating analytic insights" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 105). Qualitative data analysis methods were also used to analyze Hero's Journey essays and student writing prompts by scanning to identify themes, patterns, and trends.

Student writing prompts, analytic memos from class observations and student conversations, and essays were open coded by hand to organize, sort, and get an overall meaning of the data. The coding process allows the researcher to organize the data and label it into categories. Using the coding process the researcher generated categories and themes for analysis.

The researcher analyzed the data into three categories, expected codes, surprising codes, and unusual codes. This step helps to ensure the qualitative "findings" will represent diverse perspectives. (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The codes were reviewed to eliminate any redundancy. The researcher then used concept mapping for further explanation of the data by organizing the codes into categories to identify connections in the data. The codes were then grouped into themes that represent common ideas. The codes were then placed into a concept map that shows the flow of ideas into findings, and then became major thematic findings.

Validity

The researcher is the current classroom teacher of the student participants, and the researcher has been working at the school site for the last five years. With credentials in Special Education, the researcher has worked in this RSP position for three years with students who qualify for special education services. This may have influenced data collection because the researcher had a personal investment in wanting the Hero's Journey writing prompts and essay project to positively impact her students 'lives. Reactivity is also important to consider, because her role as their teacher is part of the world she studies in (Maxwell, 2013). To address these biases the researcher utilized several tools to elicit validity in the findings.

One of these strategies was to collect rich data. Rich data refers to qualitative data collected over a long period of time through focused group conversations, observations and open ended questions. Using rich data allowed the researcher to interpret the data in the context of her long-term relationship with the students and gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and perspectives (Maxwell, 2013). Another strategy was to look for discrepant evidence, which refers to data that contradicts the major themes of the study. By seeking out such data, the researcher was able to avoid ignoring important information that may have challenged her

findings (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher explored feedback from others to check for flaws in her analysis. This helped to ensure that the findings were not simply a reflection of the researcher's biases or preconceptions. Triangulation is collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings, using a variety of methods (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher used student writing prompts, a summative essay project, and focused group conversations to collect data. Additionally, the researcher collected data from students in differing grades, academic levels, and genders. This triangulation of data sources increased the validity of the study because the researcher analyzed data to look for themes that emerged from many sources. Lastly, the researcher used respondent validation to solicit feedback about her conclusions from the participants. This rules out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what the participants said in the writing prompts and essays (Maxwell, 2013).

Chapter 4: Findings

This research sought to answer the questions concerning the conditions for motivation among 11th and 12th grade high school students in special education who qualify under specific learning disability (SLD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and intellectual disability (ID). This study also aimed to understand how educators who work with special education students can support their students in cultivating a learning environment that supports intrinsic motivation for learning.

There were three themes that emerged during the research process and data analysis. First students reported how much they value having rapport and ease with their instructor as being foundational for their own sense of intrinsic motivation. Secondly, students voiced that factors beyond school also motivate them within, when they can understand the larger world within the classroom. This was relayed through one student noting that "Life Motivates Me". Finally, students wrote how much they feel motivated by and learn from getting to teach and support others, or, in other words, to feel their own strength of knowledge.

Cultivate Rapport and Ease for Intrinsic Motivation

The participants were instructed to write freely about an environment where they learn best. They were asked to explain what their classmates were doing, and what their teacher was doing. They wrote about the noise level, the atmosphere, the lesson, and lastly the assigned work. The researcher posed these questions to gain a sense of the ideal classroom environment where these students felt at ease and ready to learn. It was found that when students feel at ease in their learning environment, they are more likely to engage in their learning with enthusiasm and curiosity.

Environment

During the journal entries, most students identified the importance of a quiet classroom. An eleventh grader named Sergio, who qualifies for special education under a specific learning disability due to difficulties with processing speed, was in agreement with his peers about the importance of a quiet classroom. He noted how he prefers a quiet room that's private and with as few people as possible. Sergio often completes his work outside of the classroom and finds success working independently.

In addition to a quiet classroom environment, students also wrote about the importance of listening to music. A twelfth grade student named Nathaniel, who qualifies for special education services under a specific learning disability, wrote about the importance of listening to music while completing his work. Nathaniel has been in a specialized English class since his ninth grade year and is transiting out of high school on track to graduate with a diploma. Nathaniel has a twin brother named Duncan with whom he has been in the same special education Math and English class since freshman year. Nathaniel and Duncan sit next to one another and enjoy working on assignments together. Oftentimes during quiet worktime, Nathaniel gets easily distracted by those around him, specifically his twin, and when listening to music he has much greater focus. Through this observation, Nathaniel may rely on music to keep himself focused on the task at hand.

Lastly, students wrote about the physical environment of the classroom. An eleventh grade student, Blake discussed the importance of mobility around the classroom. He wrote, "You would move around the classroom and not be stuck at a desk." Blake is a student who takes hands-on electives such as Wood and is interested in taking an automotive class over the

summer. Blake frequently turns his body to talk with students behind him. Though Blake values movement in the classroom, he does a great job at staying seated and focused in class.

Building Relationships and Connection

Ruby is a twelfth grade student, who has teetered between graduation with a diploma and a certification of completion. Ruby requires a more supportive environment to access the general education curriculum. Throughout Ruby's high school years, she has been in a self contained classroom and has slowly transitioned into more general education classes each year. Ruby is now on track to graduate with a diploma and is making strides in passing all of her classes. When asked, "If you were a teacher, how would you help your students feel cared for and comfortable in your classroom," Ruby shared the importance of relationships and connections with teachers and students. She stated that teachers can build relationships with students by greeting them when they come into the classroom, acknowledging students if they have not been there for a while, and asking students how they are doing.

Ruby is in a general education Government Economics (Gov Econ) class where she has been struggling to pass the entire year. This Gov Econ class is a full general education class with thirty students. On the other hand, Ruby is also enrolled in a Special Education English class where the class size is smaller and she has more of an opportunity to build a relationship with the teacher. She has earned a consistent passing grade in English this year while being on the line of failing her Gov Econ class all year. This is an interesting finding, because it appeared that Ruby's need to build relationships with her teachers shows great benefits to her engagement in the classroom. This suggests that students learn better when they feel connected and supported by their teachers. When students believe that their teacher cares about them outside of their student personas, they are more likely to be engaged. Because this English class is a special education

class, building rapport and relationships with students allows the teacher to understand their needs, interests, and challenges. It also provides students with a safe place to advocate for their needs. Having this information enables teachers to provide support tailored to each student's unique needs, being academic, emotional, or social.

A part of building relationships and connections includes creating a caring environment. Ruby wrote about how she would feel welcomed and cared for when teachers bring students something special on their birthdays. This shows the significance of building a long term connection between teachers and students. She also wrote that students feel cared for by teachers through checking in with students once a week. Each day in English class, the students participate in daily check-ins to assess the climate of the classroom. Her engagement and excitement in English class is evident that she values the ten minutes of check-in time before we begin the lesson.

Tiana, an eleventh grade student, felt that cultivating rapport and ease consisted of meeting students 'needs and interests. She wrote, "teach what students want to learn and students would listen." Tiana is very passionate about Disneyland and will include Disneyland in whatever way she can on specific occasions. Incorporating Disneyland into work engages Tiana in her learning by making connections between her work and something for which she has passion. Tiana and Kayla, who identify as cousins, not by blood, but by being close family friends, were assigned a creative writing task of writing a fictional Hero's Journey essay. The story they came up with featured Walt Disney as the hero and Mickey Mouse as his mentor, who guides Disney through the journey of freeing Disneyland from the characters of Nickelodeon. In Tiana and Kayla's story, Walt Disney takes on his heroic role and embarks on a quest to save Disneyland. In the end, Nickelodeon and Disneyland learned to be good friends and "they lived

happily ever after!" Using characters from Disneyland created a fun and engaging narrative that showed the importance of perseverance, teamwork, and friendship.

Lastly, students wrote about the importance of teachers providing support and encouragement. Sam, an eleventh grade student, wrote that he feels cared for by receiving help from his teachers. Sam has a one-to-one aide who helps him access the curriculum, and with whom he works well. One of Sam's strengths is his ability to receive and ask for help. By asking for help, Sam demonstrates that he is invested in his learning and willing to take steps to improve his abilities. Additionally, by asking for help, he is able to overcome challenges and develop life long problem-solving skills. Asking for help leads him to build relationships with teachers and creates a supportive environment that fosters academic success and personal growth.

Sergio, who was previously identified as liking quieter classrooms, also identified how encouragement from teachers makes students feel better about themselves. Sergio is passionate about creating boomerangs and has done in depth research on how boomerangs perform, the physics behind them, and how to properly use them. As a welcome back to school present, he gifted each of his seven teachers a boomerang. He has a Project Make for an elective and since being in that class he has had the opportunity to work with a 3-D printer and a laser cutter. He was excited to share with his teachers how he had also crafted a draw and discard pile card holder to make for more effective card game playing, and one of them encouraged him to sell his inventions. This encouragement gave him more confidence in his ideas. Sergio wrote that he "... felt pleased and good for something good. Now [he] wants to make [his] discard card and draw pile more better." This idea can be translated even further to that when students feel encouraged by their teachers, they are more likely to feel motivated to learn and work harder to achieve their goals.

"Life Motivates Me"

Students also noted how having broader connections to life is important, as they provide students with a sense of purpose. In this sense it helps overcome challenges. These extra motivating factors can provide students with the drive and resilience they need to keep pushing through school.

Get Out There in the World

Sam wrote, "I think that life motivates me the most when I'm feeling down about school." Sam believes that life provides him with the most motivation when he is feeling discouraged about school. Despite the challenges he faces in school, Sam has a clear goal of designing animatronics after graduating from high school. Sam understands that graduation is a crucial step towards achieving this goal, and it provides him with a sense of direction and purpose. Sam is able to prioritize his actions and focus on the steps he needs to take to accomplish his long-term goal, even if they are difficult. Ultimately, Sam's animatronic career design plans lend themselves as a motivating factor that helps him persevere through school.

While on the other hand, Blake, who is on the football team, seeks more immediate gratification to help him stay motivated when school is challenging. Blake wrote, " When I don't want to go to school, I think about what I get to do after school. I get to be with my friends and lift weights. I look forward to the weekend and being with my friends." Blake is intrinsically passionate about football. He is driven to engage in this activity because it is inherently enjoyable and satisfying for him, and this intrinsic motivation encourages him to strive for success. Blake has been playing football since his freshman year, and he writes:

Ever since our football season was cut short during my freshman year, I have

been motivated to win. Each year, my drive to win has grown stronger. During

my sophomore year, I missed a few games due to covid, and I missed most of the games this year due to an injury. Although we lost in the second round of the playoffs this year, I am determined to win the championship next year. Everyone on the team shares my strong desire to win.

Despite facing extenuating circumstances that have prevented Blake from completing a full football season, he remains highly motivated to succeed on the field.

Extrinsic Motivation and Discrepant Evidence. In addition to the intrinsic motivators with regards to football, Blake did also briefly acknowledge an extrinsic motivator as well. While school is not directly related to football, students must maintain a 2.0 GPA to remain eligible to play. Blake's passion and focus on football have a positive influence on his motivation in the classroom intrinsically through his passion for connection and sport, but there are extrinsic minimums that he knows he has to maintain.

Some students did find extrinsic motivations helpful. For instance, Tiana discussed the idea of rewards after completing a school related task. She needed to complete her history homework, and once it was complete she would go on her phone. Having this reward may have provided extra motivation to complete the task and do it well. Tiana values this type of extrinsic reward.

Peer Teachers: Feeling Their Own Strengths

Most students wrote about their interests and things they wanted to learn about in relevance to the curriculum. Additionally, most students wrote about the ways information is given in a classroom setting and which outlets engage them the most. Ultimately, they all wanted to feel strong and capable with content and learning.

Student Interests and Relevance to the Curriculum

Blake, who enjoys hands-on elective classes and wants a career in the trades, such as automotive or welding discussed teaching useful skills. He writes, "If I were a teacher I want to make what I teach to be useful skills. I would make the curriculum things that people actually want to learn. There would be a little homework and lots of hands-on activities." As a student, Blake comes to class, completes assignments as directed and earns a passing grade. Blake's attitude towards school is to complete what is needed of him and leave the rest. Blake would value a curriculum that he could use beyond the classroom and would add real meaning to his life. Blake emphasizes the importance of teaching useful skills that students actually want to learn. He believes that education should be focused on preparing students for the workforce and helping them achieve their career goals. It also suggests that he may not be interested in academic subjects that have no direct application to his future plans, and for Blake, in particular, collaborations and teamwork are an important part of that.

Blake's attitude towards school is goal-oriented and focused on completing tasks efficiently. He seems to view education as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. This does not necessarily mean that he is not interested in learning, but rather that he values learning that is relevant to his goals and interests, and that is done in community.

Modes of Content Delivery: Peer Learning

Kayla, an eleventh grade student, shared that she learns best when information is presented to her visually, for instance, in a slideshow. As a student with an intellectual disability, Kayla has difficulty with abstract concepts and critical thinking, so direct instruction through a slideshow with concrete examples is helpful for her learning. When the information is accessible to her, she feels intrinsically motivated. However, it wasn't just the visuals that Kayla felt were

important. Both Kayla and her "cousin" Tiana wrote that they enjoy working in groups. Working in a group allows them to collaborate and learn from one another. These students are able to share their knowledge and skills with their peers, which helps create a stronger sense of community within the classroom. When completing assignments Kayla and Tiana will informally group together. This allows them to pool their knowledge which is helpful in tackling challenging assignments. It was apparent that working in a group or a partnership can provide a deeper understanding of concepts being learned because peers can explain ideas and concepts to one another in their own words. When working together, Kayla and Tiana hold each other accountable and stay focused.

Blake also highlighted the significance of peer support in the learning process. In his ideal learning environment, he and his classmates would all be working on the same task and offer assistance to one another. Blake shared a story about his freshman year when he was moved up to the varsity football team. He shared there was a senior on the team who helped him and gave him the encouragement he needed to play with the team. This senior helped Blake improve his skills and built up his confidence.

Blake believes in the importance of peer support and the power of collaboration and teamwork in achieving shared goals. Blake's experience on the varsity football team illustrates how this type of support can have a positive impact on one's confidence. Furthermore, Blake's story underscores the importance of role models in education.

Sergio, a student who thrives in the maker space and who is always coming up with new inventions, wrote about the importance of experimenting and learning information himself. Sergio's passion for experimenting and learning on his own reflects his curiosity and desire for knowledge. The process of experimentation plays a critical role in the learning process, allowing

him to gain a deeper understanding of ideas. However, as mentioned before Sergio is passionate about boomerangs and enjoys teaching those around him about boomerangs. He and his art teacher worked together to build a unit on aboriginal art designs on boomerangs. He taught the class all about the history of boomerangs and the aboriginal artistic culture. His creativity began with a passion for boomerang physics and led him to learn about the origins, sparking his creativity and curiosity, and found a partnership in learning with both his art teacher and the other students with whom he has been able to share from his strengths.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to investigate the factors that contributed to motivation among 11th and 12th grade high school students in special education. Additionally, this study sought to identify ways in which teachers can assist special education students in creating a learning environment that fosters intrinsic motivation. Specifically, this research sought to answer the following two questions:

- First, what are the conditions for motivation among 11th and 12th grade high school students in special education who qualify under specific learning disability (SLD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and intellectual disability (ID)?

- Second, how can educators, who work with mild to moderate special education students, support their students in creating a learning environment that supports intrinsic motivation for learning?

The research demonstrated that one of the essential elements that students need is an engaging environment. When students have an engaging environment, they are more willing to participate. Sergio reflected on the importance of a quiet environment and that has shown to be true from his actions of wanting to work individually outside of the classroom and producing quality work.

Nathaniel's need to listen to music is evident in his ability to concentrate. Students need a variety of environmental factors to contribute to a successful learning environment. As part of the environment, the research also supported that when students build a relationship with their teachers they have a more engaging experience in the classroom. Providing support and encouragement is essential as it makes students feel cared for and helps them build confidence

Furthermore, students found intrinsic motivation in the joy and pleasure of how life motivates them through personal interests. For example, Blake values time with friends after school, while other students like Sam value that school will help in finding success in a career that he's excited about, later in life.

Lastly, peer teaching methods are essential in fostering student motivation. Group work, hands-on activities, and allowing students to teach each other, are ways that can make learning more interesting and engaging for high school students. Teachers can make their curriculum more relevant to students by teaching them useful, real world skills.

Special Education students often face additional barriers to academic achievement. To address these issues educators can help to engage students in their learning, support student ownership of their education, allow students to pursue their own interests and passions, and value the unique strengths and abilities of each student. It is critical to provide special education students with the necessary support to ensure they have an equal opportunity to succeed.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Through this research it has become evident that in order to foster intrinsic motivation among special education high school students need an environment that cultivates rapport and ease, relationships with their teachers, and engaging content. Overall, creating a supportive and inclusive learning atmosphere that prioritizes student centered approaches can have a significant impact on fostering intrinsic motivation among special education high school students.

The following sections will first discuss how the findings of fostering intrinsic motivation in high school mild to moderate special education connects to already established literature. This established literature supports the idea that in order to feel motivated in the classroom students in general education classrooms need to establish rapport with the teachers, feel engaged in their learning, and have a sense of community within the classroom. This discussion also reveals how the findings from this study differ from the established literature in promoting motivation within special education classrooms. The discussion will then dive into the implications for literature by looking at practice and policy. Lastly, it will explore the limitations of the study and establish ideas for future research.

The findings in this research highlight the crucial role of teacher-student relationships in promoting intrinsic motivation among high school special education students. This is consistent with previous literature in that, according to (Johnson et al. 2022), students who experience high levels of teacher care reported feeling more interested and motivated in their classes. Chu (2020) also explained that by applying positive psychology through the PERMA model (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment) one can foster student engagement and classroom community. Similarly, the students who participated in the study detailed in the previous chapters of this research explained the need for engaging and meaningful

material in the classroom in order to foster intrinsic motivation. Specifically, students value a curriculum that could be used outside of the classroom and would add real meaning into their lives. Many students favor group work and learning from their peers as a way of accessing information as a way of experimenting on their own. Sharing their knowledge and skills with their peers helps to create a stronger sense of community within the classroom. By applying the PERMA model, educators can promote students in engagement and build a strong classroom community.

Implications for the Literature

It has been acknowledged that intrinsic motivations are important for learning (Wilson & David, 1994), but there has been an underdeveloped understanding of how to tap into the intrinsic motivation with mild to moderate special education high school students. This research shed some light on this specific topic, and three themes materialized. While research has already been established that to increase motivation with general education students there must be high levels of teacher care Johnson et al, (2022), this thesis advances those findings into work with students who have mild to moderate needs. Research has additionally established that when there is positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment in a classroom one can foster student engagement and classroom community (Chu, 2020). However, a new insight is that for high school mild to moderate special education students to foster intrinsic motivation, they want to understand the sense of meaning as it connects to their larger lives.

According to Ryan (2001), many students experienced a downward movement in achievement and motivation due to increased academic demands and expectations. Students who are intrinsically motivated to learn are focused on the task itself rather than just the end result. This study differs from the literature in the sense that students were motivated by their life. This

type of student is able to prioritize actions and focus on the steps needed to accomplish personal and life goals. In addition, students with mild to moderate needs were much more motivated, in general, when working collaboratively, than they were by grades or other academic demands.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Through the findings of this research, there are implications for practice and policy on fostering intrinsic motivation as a whole, but specifically for mild to moderate high school special education students. Special education students are already a marginalized community and the curriculum is not always set up to be inclusive. It is within the realm of possibility that educators can enact meaningful changes within their classrooms and greater school community by examining their methodology and curriculum. By proactively seeking opportunities to improve their teaching practices, and listening to their students, educators can inspire change that create dynamic and inspiring learning environments for their students.

Classrooms

This study was conducted in a mild to moderate special education classroom with a modified curriculum that focuses on the essential state standards that align with general education classes. The teacher can continue to prioritize student teacher relationships by demonstrating care and interest in student lives through daily check-in questions, and one to one conversations. The teacher can explore other ways to build connections and rapport with students and how to incorporate that into bigger less engaging general education environments.

In the classroom, it is essential to give students a voice in what they are learning for their learning to be impactful and carry through their everyday lives. In order to do this, teachers need to honor student interests, their goals, and their challenges to co-create a curriculum that fosters intrinsic motivation and meaningful school to real world connections. In addition, it is crucial to

allow students to learn in ways that work best for their brains and create a learning environment for all learners. Lastly, it is crucial for teachers to recognize that their role extends beyond teaching content; they are also responsible for educating and supporting the whole student who has their own unique needs, perspectives, and challenges.

Parents can advocate for their student's education by asking teachers to prioritize student-teacher relationships and finding ways to build connections and rapport with their child. Additionally parents can encourage their child to share their interests, goals, and challenges with their teachers so that the curriculum can be co-created to foster motivation and meaningful real world connections. Parents can also work with teachers to ensure that their child is learning in the way that works best for them.

Principals can take several steps to support teachers in creating effective learning environments such as providing professional development opportunities that focus on improving skills in building connections and rapport with students. Principals may also foster collaboration among teachers, parents and other education staff to build an inclusive learning environment, such as more formal common planning time.

Schools

Schools can empower students by giving them a voice in their education. This may include involving them in co-creating the curriculum and providing opportunities for them to share their interests and goals. Schools can foster an environment that encourages teachers to question their students and involve them in building classroom procedures that are tailored to their needs. Schools can provide speakers and activities for students to practice and learn self-advocacy skills to advocate for their specific needs in a classroom and greater school community.

Educational Policy

It is important to consider educational policy changes that support collaboration and peer-to-peer learning in the classroom. In cases where the physical layout of the classroom presents challenges for group work, policy changes would focus on alternative classroom arrangements that promote collaboration and create space for group activities. In addition, updating outdated classroom materials through targeted policies could help to improve the relevance of learning materials and create more meaningful connections between classroom learning and real-world contexts. By prioritizing policies that support collaborative learning and updated classroom materials, policy makers can help to create more impactful education experiences for all students, specifically special education students.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

In reflecting on this study, it is clear that there were limitations to this research.These include the small sample size of students who participated in the study, the limited scope of special education class, and the demographics. Duration of time and geographic location were also limitations to consider within the study.

Limitations of the Study

The first limitation of this study was the limited sample size of students who participated in the research. Eight students participated in the study out of a class of twenty-two. The sample size did not include parents, teachers or other educational professionals. This limitation can be addressed by conducting a large-scale study that includes a more diverse sample to improve the validity of the findings. A further limitation was the limited scope of the study, this study was held in one Special Education English class, and in just two months. Students in other mild to moderate special education classrooms, or who learn in special day classrooms, may have

responded differently to the research. Additionally, there were limitations of demographics, which include, the age of student, their grade, the racial diversity, and their language. The students range from 16 to 18 years old, which did not allow for younger or older student points of view.

Future Research

At this time there is little research regarding fostering intrinsic motivation in special education mild to moderate classrooms so future research is needed. A long-term study looking at a variety of schools with varying student abilities would be beneficial in understanding how students identify and sustain intrinsic motivation in the classroom. This research could extend over the course of a full academic year, as well as being conducted longitudinally across years, to see how students develop and change in terms of their intrinsic motivations. The sample size for this study was a small number of students ranging from one specialized English class. Expanding the research to a larger scale and more diverse sample size would produce more accurate data. This study also took place in one specific geographical area with students around the same age range, it would be more conclusive to provide a sample size from a variety of areas and other age ranges such as middle school or elementary school. This study used student writing prompts, analytic memos, and focused group conversations to gather data. Perhaps exploring other data collection methods such as observation, where the researcher could observe students in the classroom to gather data on their behavior, engagement, and motivational tendencies. Another data collection method of Likert scaling, surveys, or questionnaires could be used, where students or teachers may be asked to provide information about their attitudes, beliefs, and experiences related to intrinsic motivation in the classroom. Lastly, this study only looked at

students with mild to moderate disabilities, it would be beneficial to include students with moderate to severe disabilities as well as general education students.

Conclusion

This research highlights the importance of creating an environment that fosters intrinsic motivation which prioritizes a student-centered approach among high school special education students. There are implications for both practice and policy on building ways to foster intrinsic motivation in the classroom, with educators enacting meaningful changes by analyzing and modifying their teaching styles and curriculum. The findings suggest that by creating a dynamic and inspiring learning environment, students will be more engaged and active learners. The gap in literature brought forward the question of ways to tap into student intrinsic motivation and the focus of this study was to shed light on how to create a classroom that promotes intrinsically motivated students that see the relevance and importance of education.

References

Blackwell, L., Trzesniewski, K., Dweck C. (2007). Implicit theories of intelligence predict

achievement across an adolescent transition: A longitudinal study and an intervention.

Society for Research in Child Development, 76(1), 246-

263.https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2007.00995.x

Bowman, P., Farrar, E., & Novak, K. (2022). 1:1 Conversations: The impact of frequent, targeted

one to one conversations on special education learning support. *Support For Learning,*

37(3), 464-479. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9604.12421

Brunzell, T., Stokes, H. & Waters, L. (2016). Trauma-Informed Positive Education: Using

Positive Psychology to Strengthen Vulnerable Students. Contemporary School

Psychology 20, 63–83. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40688-015-0070-x

Butler, R., & Mordecai, N. (1986). Effects of no feedback, task-related comments, and grades on

intrinsic motivation and performance. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 78*(3), 210-

216. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.78.3.210

Carter, E., Lane, K., Pierson, M., & Glaeser, B. (2006). Self-determination skills and

opportunities of transition-age youth with emotional disturbance and learning disabilities.

Council for Exceptional Children, 72(3), 333–346.

https://doi.org/10.1177/001440290607200305

Chu, T. (2020). Applying positive psychology to foster student engagement and classroom

community amid the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. *American Psychological*

Association, 8(2), 154-16. https://doi.org/10.1037/stl0000238

Creswell, John W., and J. David Creswell. *Research Design. Qualitative, Quantitative, and*

Mixed Methods Approaches. Fifth ed., SAGE Publications, 2017.

Daniel, J., & Cooc, N. (2018). Teachers 'perceptions of academic intrinsic motivation for students with disabilities. *The Journal of Special Education, 52*(2), 101-112. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466918765276

Datu, J., Wong, G., & Rubie-Davies, C. (2020). Can kindness promote media literacy skills, self-esteem, and social self-efficacy among selected female secondary school students? An intervention study. *Computers & Education, 161*, 1-9. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2020.104062

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human need and the self-determination of behavior. Psychological Inquiry, 11(4), 227-268.

Denton, Nikole. (2022). Finding motivation and connectedness for learning with special education students qualifying under emotional disturbance [Master's Thesis, Dominican University of California]. https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2022.EDU.11

Johnson, O., Wildy, H., & Shand, J. (2022). 'That teacher really likes me '- Student-teacher interactions that initiate teacher expectation effects by developing caring relationships. *Learning and Instruction, 80*, 1-8. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2022.101580

Martin, J. E., Mithaug, D. E., Cox, P., Peterson, L. Y., Van Dycke, J. L., & Cash, M. E. (2003). Increasing self-determination: Teaching students to plan, work, evaluate, and adjust. *Exceptional Children, 69,* 431–447. https://doi.org/10.1177/001440290306900403

Meijer, C., Korthagen, F., & Vassalos, A. (2008). Supporting presence in teacher education: The connection between the personal and professional aspect of teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 25*(2), 297-308. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2008.09.013

Morgan, P. L., Fuchs, D., Compton, D. L., Cordray, D. S., & Fuchs, L. S. (2008). Does early

    reading failure decrease children's reading motivation? Journal of Learning Disabilities,

    41(5), 387–404. doi:10.1177/ 0022219408321112

Paciotti, K. D. (2010). Caring behavior management: The spirit makes the difference. *Delta*

    Kappa Gamma Bulletin, 76(4), 12-17.

Rhew, E., Piro, P., Goolkasian, P., & Cosentino, P. (2018). The effects of a growth mindset on

    self-efficacy and motivation. *Cogent Education, 5*(1), 1-16.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2018.1492337

Rodgers, C., Raider-Roth, M. (2006). Presence in teaching. *Teachers and Teaching: theory and*

    practice, 12(3), 265-287. https://doi.org/10.1080/13450600500467548

Rubie-Davies, C., Hattie, J., Townsend, M, Hamilton. (2007). Aiming high: teachers and their

    students. Nova Science, 4, 65-91.

Ryan, R. M., Deci, E. L., Vansteenkiste, M., & Soenens, B. (2021). Building a science of

    motivated persons: Self-determination theory's empirical approach to human experience

    and the regulation of behavior. American Psychological Association, 7(2), 97-110.

    https://doi.org/10.1037/mot0000194

U.S. News and World Report. (2023). Best high schools: Rankings.

    https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools

Wehmeyer, M. L., & Palmer, S. B. (2003). Adult out- comes for students with cognitive

    disabilities three years after high school: The impact of self-determina- tion. *Education*

    and Training in Developmental Disabili- ties, 38, 131–144.

    http://www.jstor.org/stable/23879591

Yeager, D.S., Hanselman, P., Walton, G.M. *et al.* (2019). A national experiment reveals where a

    a growth mindset improves achievement. *Nature 573,* 364–369.

    https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-019-1466-y

Appendix A: Student Writing Prompts

1. Tell me a story about a time when you felt motivated. This can be school related or non school related. What was going on? What did you do? Who was there? Did you complete your task?

2. Tell me a story about a time you felt encouraged and supported by your teacher or mentor on your hero's journey. How did they encourage you? How did it make you feel? How did it affect your motivation?

3. Write about an environment where you learn best. What are your classmates doing? Your teacher? Think about the noise level, the atmosphere, the lesson, the assigned work?

4. If you were a teacher or a mentor on a hero's journey, what would you do to help your students / hero feel motivated and excited about their own learning / journey? How would you help students / the hero feel cared for and comfortable in your classroom or on their journey?

5. Describe a moment when you faced a setback on your hero's journey. How did you bounce back from this experience and stay motivated to continue on your path? What lessons did you learn from this setback?

Appendix B: Focused Group Conversation Questions

1. Describe what motivation means to you.

2. Who are the people in your life who motivate you?

3. Describe how motivation plays a role in your hero's journey.

4. What drives your hero to continue on their journey, despite the challenges they may face?

5. What techniques or strategies does your hero use to create motivation in their life?

6. How do the teachers or mentors in your hero's life support them on their journey?

7. Do these teachers or mentors have an impact on how your hero feels about themselves and their abilities?

8. What actions do these teachers and mentors take to make your hero feel cared for and supported? How do they show your hero that they believe in them and are invested in their success?

Appendix C IRB Approval Letter

DOMINICAN
UNIVERSITY
of CALIFORNIA

Feb 3, 2023

Desirae
Barboza 50
Acacia Ave.
San Rafael, CA 94901

Dear Desirae,

On behalf of the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants, I am pleased to approve your proposal entitled *Fostering Intrinsic Motivation Within Secondary Special Education with attention towards teacher presence and positive behavior supports* (IRBPHP Initial IRB Application #[11077]) .

In your final report or paper please indicate that your project was approved by the IRBPHP and indicate the identification number.

I wish you well in your very interesting research effort.

Sincerely,

Michaela George, Ph.D.
Chair, IRBPHP

Cc: Matthew E Davis