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Courtney Musselman
California State University, Monterey Bay

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Slipping Through the Cracks: A look Into Special Education Referrals

Courtney Musselman

California State University Monterey Bay

Abstract

Special Education is offered in many schools today and more and more students are being

referred to this type of education. For this capstone project three local special education teachers

were interviewed about the referral process and what could be done to improve it. This is an

important issue because many students are slipping through the cracks when it comes to be

identified and others are being overly identified. The referral process is important because it

provides students with an equal opportunity for education. Findings from the interviews and

information from a relevant literature review were used to develop an action to be applied before

referring students to special education to ensure they are receiving a proper education.

 Keywords: Special Education, identification, disability,

Slipping Through the Cracks: A look Into Special Education Referrals

Juan[1], a 7-year-old boy, is currently enrolled in Ms. Alvarez' second-grade class at Oakfield Elementary School. Juan is new to the class because of his late enrollment. Juan's family moves frequently due to his parent's careers. Most of the Chavez family members speak Spanish and broken English. Juan's parents often have a hard time getting Juan to go to school because he says he does not like it. He has always struggled in school and finds it hard to make friends since he is always moving to different places. Considering his age, Juan speaks English as well as his older siblings. However, he has a poor vocabulary. Ms. Alvarez begins to notice that he is not performing very well in class or on his assignments.

Ms. Alvarez begins to work with Juan on his assignments and suspects some learning problems. At first, she believes that Juan's problems are simply due to his lack of English proficiency. However, when Ms. Alvarez begins to ask Juan questions in Spanish, a language she is not fluent in, she starts to see that Juan lacks an understanding of basic educational skills. Ms. Alvarez also believes he is not learning at the rate of his peers because he is moving frequently from school to school. After observing Juan, Ms. Alvarez decides to speak to the school psychologist, Jack Freeman, to request a formal evaluation of Juan. After their conversation, Mr. Freeman suspects that Juan has a cognitive delay and wants him to be evaluated after Juan's mother is informed about their suspicions. Mr. Freeman calls Mrs. Chavez and requests permission to evaluate her son. Juan was then assessed in English, which doesn't accurately measure his learning abilities since Spanish is his native language. After reviewing Juan's assessments, Mr. Freeman finds that Juan performed poorly on the tests and scored below average. Mr. Freeman sends a formal letter to Mrs. Chavez, which includes the results of Juan's

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[1] Pseudonyms have been used for the names of people, places, and organizations

assessments with a large number of assessment terms. Mrs. Chavez was unsure of what she was reading but decided to agree with the teacher and psychologist that her son would benefit in special education. Mr. Freeman and Ms. Alvarez were both relieved that Juan was placed into special education because Ms. Alvarez was not exactly sure how to teach Juan anymore because of his broken English.

This story of Juan is something I have witnessed in a school while doing service learning. Juan was a student I had the pleasure of helping with math and English. He had a clear language deficit when it came to reading and spelling, but he never showed a sign of mental impairment. He is currently enrolled in a special education class where even his teacher believes that he was wrongfully placed. Juan was inappropriately placed into special education because he is an English language learner, not because he has a learning or emotional disability. He was inappropriately tested in English, which altered his assessment scores. If Juan was assessed in Spanish, he may have had different test scores since Spanish is his native language. His teacher assumed he had a learning disability because of his lack of English and his frequent moving between schools. There are many other students like Juan who get disproportionately placed into special education because teachers and psychologists misinterpret their language deficit as a learning disability. They are then placed into special education, with the belief that it is the best educational opportunity for the student even though that may not be the case. Parents are also not properly informed, Juan's mother being an example of this, nor are they aware of their rights as a parent in regards to their children being referred to special education.

Literature Synthesis and Integration

Every student deserves the right to receive the best education possible. Parents and children with disabilities, ages three through twenty-one, have distinct educational rights that are

served under the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (California Department of

Education, 2012). The purpose of IDEA is to guarantee that all children with disabilities have

free, appropriate education that is best suited to meet their unique needs.

It is extremely important that children get diagnosed early on in their development for their

suited education to benefit them (California Department of Education, 2012). There is a lot of

pressure on parents and educators to watch these children and pick up on cues that may hint that

a child has a disability. I have personally witnessed students in general education classrooms that

have yet to be identified with a disability, but it was clearly evident that there was something

wrong with how they were progressing. For example, one student was in a third general

education classroom yet he was reading and writing at a first grade level.

With that being said, it made me begin to think about how students are referred and placed into

special education classrooms. Who determines if a child needs special education? What qualifies

them to say so, and are they following protocol? Are teachers and schools doing everything they

can to help students? Are students being inappropriately placed? Are they even being identified

at all? These are the questions that were flowing through my head as I began to research the

referral process for special education. As a future educator, it is important for me to understand

why there are fluctuations in the referral process and what can be done to stop this. This should

be an important issue to all because children are the faces of our future.

What is the problem, and why is it an issue?

                    Most parents want their children to succeed academically to the best of their

ability. When a child enters school, everyone's expectations are high and extremely positive

because they just entered a stage in their life that will set them up for their future. Unfortunately,

for some, academic success does not come easy. Some students may not be learning at the same

rate as their peers and may even be isolating themselves to the point where their academic

success is being affected. What if these students start falling through the cracks and no one

notices? Are teachers trained to properly identify these types of students?

We need to understand how students are being assessed, referred, and placed in

special education to ensure they are being appropriately identified and placed to meet their

learning needs. We need to also understand how some of these students are going unnoticed

throughout this process. It is important for students to be identified as early as possible in order

for them to receive the best education. A child's early years of schooling strongly anticipate their

academic success later in life (Hibel, Farkas & Morgan, 2010).

This is an important matter that we all should be concerned about because education

pertains to everyone. Whether you have or will have children, have family members with

children, or work in education; everyone should be aware of the referral process and why some

students are being inappropriately placed or not being referred at all. The following three claims

are reasons why the referral process may be flawed in under and over representing students in

special education and how to change these issues.

Minority students are disproportionately placed in Special Education.

Minority students are continuing to be referred to special education more often than their white

peers (Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006). As read in Hibel, Farkas, and Morgan (2010) study,

"Oswald, Coutinho, Best, and Singh (1999) reported that African American children were about

2.4 times more likely to be identified as mentally retarded (MR) and about 1.5 times more likely

to be identified as emotionally disturbed (ED) than their non-African American peers" (p. 3).

About 60-80 percent of students that are identified as disabled were from ethnic minority

households or classify as low socioeconomic status (SES) (Hibel, Farkas & Morgan, 2010).

Minority students are referred to special education more often if they are progressing slowly in academics, are absent from school frequently, or if they are living in poverty (Talbott, Fleming, Karabatsos, & Dobria, 2011). Students engaging in activities that are appropriate within their culture could have their behavior misinterpreted by an educator, further referring them to special education (Gardner, Lopes Rizzi, & Council, 2014). Furthermore, there is a significant issue regarding the rising percentage of English language learners (ELLs) being categorized into special education (Fernandez & Inserra, 2013). These students are more probable to perform low on state states and dropout of school (Fernandez & Inserra, 2013). With all these implications, students are being over identified in special education because of their race, culture, or language barrier.

Teachers lack experience, knowledge, and are biased during the referral process. From the moment the students step into the classroom, the teacher is assessing them and how they are performing (Dunn, 2006). When teachers provide instruction and lead the class, they start to notice certain students who are having trouble. This is how they refer students to special education (Dunn, 2006). Many schools have a response to intervention, or RTI, system set in place. It is a multilevel system of intervention designed to address different learning needs, reduce disability identification, and provide evidence for the appropriate identification of learning disabilities (Mastropieri, 2018). It's intended to help teachers identify students as well as provide appropriate services to students as soon as they are needed and prior to a formal referral to special education (Mastropieri, 2018). It is believed that teachers are not prepared to work with certain types of students. As cited in Fernandez and Inserra (2013), "Teachers admitted that they were not prepared to work with this population of students, nor had they acquired any effective strategies for meeting the needs of ELLs" (p.13). Language barriers are

sometimes overlooked as possible learning difficulties because not all teachers are being trained

to assess second language learners (Schon, Shaftel & Markham, 2008). Teachers are often not

trained to identify students and are even not aware of programs that could help them identify

students. Most teachers admitted that they're not aware of what is expected of them as a

classroom teacher and that they have never been trained on RTI procedures even though there is

a plan in place at their school that they are aware of (Fernandez & Inserra, 2013). On top of that,

teachers can be biased in referring children to special education (Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006).

They can be biased by referring students based on their gender, culture, or actions. With that

being said, Teachers have often argued that many minority students are being referred and placed

in special education to diminish teacher's problems in dealing with culturally diverse children

(Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006). Disproportionate representation is more likely to occur when

relying on teacher's judgement (Hibel, Farkas, & Morgan 2010). A Teacher's level of tolerance

may also be related to the number of students they refer (Del Carmen Tejeda-Delgado, 2009).

Boys are more likely to be identified than girls. There is a report that indicates that boys who

are receiving special education services outnumber girls 2 to 1 (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001).

Learning and emotional disabilities were the categories that were most disproportionate, with

males comprising 73.4% and 76.4% of each (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001). Boys typically

seem to be identified more often than girls because boys tend to have more behavioral issues

while girls tend to be born with fewer birth defects, are quieter and more obedient (Wehmeyer &

Schwartz, 2001). As stated in Callahan (1994), "Eme (1979) has found that in the first grade

boys are referred for help 11 times as often as girls for social and emotional immaturity" (p.230).

Female students are being underrepresented in special education and it raises concern that girls

who would benefit from special education are not being identified and are denied a successful

educational experience (Coutinho & Oswald, 2005).

What should be done to help these issues?

Schooling plays a vital role in an individual's life because it sets them up for the

future as working patrons that benefit society as a whole. Schools push students to their fullest

potential by providing them with many beneficial skills that are learned throughout their

education. In order to have a better special education system, action needs to be taken in order to

address the previously stated claims that are flawing the system. So, what can be done to address

these claims?

Parents are accurately informed and represented throughout the process.

Students with disabilities have an individualized education plan (IEP) that serves to monitor a

student's educational needs, goals, objectives, placement, and more (Fish, 2006). Parents and

educational staff go over a student's IEP in a meeting to address the student's needs. Parents can

sometimes feel overwhelmed of all the information and even a little intimidated to be walking

into a room full of professionals telling them what is best for their child. Parents can seek

advocates to attend these meetings with them and support them to ensure the parents' concerns

are being appropriately addressed since many advocates know the laws and regulations

surrounding special education better than most educators (Heitin, 2013). As read in Fish (2006),

"Participants emphasized that if school districts were more honest, friendly, and less deceitful,

their IEP meetings would be a more positive experience for both parents and educators" (p. 63).

Parents represent an important role in their child's education. Students whose IEP meetings

consisted of positive, contributing interactions amongst their educator and parents were seen to

be more successful as a result. (Fish, 2006).

Teachers need more professional development. It is a common misconception that once you reach a limit in your career, there is nothing more to learn. As a teacher, you become a lifelong learner because there is always something new that needs to be learned and taught. The years you are in your profession, the more experience gained and the more you see policies and laws change. It is important that educators keep up with children and new policies and findings to better understand their behaviors and how to better teach them. Teachers should be provided with plenty of opportunities to learn about fair education by using in-service training (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001). Teachers can benefit from information about different characteristics of boys and girls to help their recognition of defiant behavior versus disabilities (Callahan, 1994). Learning this information could lead to an increase in uniformity in special education placement procedures (Callahan, 1994). It is necessary for more attention to be focused on providing teachers and other professionals more information regarding issues of gender and ethnic equity (Callahan, 1994). This type of teaching can help educators acquire teaching techniques and better identify their students that could possibly have a disability.

Single gender classrooms. The reasoning behind single-gender education is based on the impression that there are biological differences between men and women and that these certain behaviors might be visible in classroom behaviors and have implications for pedagogical practices (Piechura-Couture, Heins, & Tichenor, 2013). Single-gender programs take differences between males and females into account when planning educational experiences for girls and boys to make the schooling experience more effective (Piechura-Couture, Heins, & Tichenor, 2013). If teachers want to positively impact academic and behavioral outcomes, they must cautiously shape their instruction to meet the needs of their students (Piechura-Couture, Heins, & Tichenor, 2013). This type of education provides both boys and girls full and

nondiscriminatory identification under IDEA and denotes the absence of gender differences for participation and outcomes (Coutinho & Oswald, 2005). There is affirmation that single-gender classrooms are an option that should be investigated and tested to diminish the overrepresentation of minorities and males in special education classrooms (Piechura-Couture, Heins, & Tichenor, 2013).

All students deserve the right to a quality, effective education that best suits their needs. When looking at the issues and what can be done to fix them, education can make a remarkable turnaround in the way students are referred and placed into special education. Having parents involved, providing educators with quality training, and testing out single-gender classrooms are just the three steps that schools can implement in order for their students to become successful individuals with bright futures.

Method

The main issue addressed in the research was the misidentification of students within the special education system. Students are often under referred, over-referred, or even placed into special education on biases. The main reason of the research was to find ways to address the problem on why these discrepancies occur in schools. Three special education teachers were interviewed to address the problem and discuss potential solutions. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature, the information was used to formulate an action that responds to the focus issue in a way that inspires, informs, or involves a particular audience.

Context

Research took place in SeaCliff and Grovington, California. Both cities lie on the bay and have incredible views of the ocean. Three different schools were surveyed for this research project. The first school, in Grovington, is Butterfly Elementary. This school first opened up in 1959 and

serves grades K-5. The majority ethnicities are White, with a student population of 59% and

Hispanic/Latino with 21% (Ed-Data, 2017c). There are a total of 474 students enrolled. 62

students are English Learners, and 34% of those students are Spanish speakers (Ed-Data, 2017c).

Each classroom is well supplied with computers, desks, and plenty of resources. The second

school in SeaCliff, is Lighthouse Elementary. The doors first opened in 1980 and currently serve

grades K-5. There are currently 459 students enrolled with 87% of students being

Hispanic/Latino by (Ed-Data, 2017a). Among those students, 325 are English Learners with 68%

of those students being Spanish Speakers (Ed-Data, 2017a). Each classroom is set up in different

ways, with the students either in groups or pairs. In two classrooms, the students have access to

laptop computers. In one classroom, there are two desktop computers that are used by one

student at a time. The last school is Jackson Elementary, also located in SeaCliff. This school

opened in 1980 and currently serves 453 students in grades K-5 (Ed-Data, 2017b). Of the student

population, 81% are Hispanic/Latino with 322 students being English Learners, and of that

number 65% are Spanish speakers (Ed-Data, 2017b). The classrooms are beautifully decorated

and most classrooms have in-room laptops. Each school was chosen due to the resource

classroom teachers being willing to participate in the research.

Participants and Participant Selection

I chose to interview three special education teachers who work in the resource rooms at three

different elementary schools. Each of these participants has experience with the special

education referral process, thus making them perfect candidates to participate in my research.

The first participant, Wanda G., has been a teacher for over the span of 15 years and has been the

resource teacher at Jackson Elementary for 7 years. She currently teaches grades first through

fifth. The second participant, Martha Q., has been a teacher for 14 years and has been teaching

special education for 7 years. She currently teaches grades first through fifth. The last participant, Samantha M., has been a teacher for 11 years and has been teaching special education for 6 years. She currently teaches grades first through fifth.

Researcher

I am a Liberal Studies major at CSUMB with a future career as an educator, aspiring to get my teaching credential in special education. I have worked in classrooms for four years of my college experience, specifically in special education or resource classrooms. Through experiences, I have personally witnessed how students were wrongfully referred and placed into special education. The concern for the referral process is personally meaningful to me because I have a passion for education, specifically special education. I believe every student deserves the right to a fair and appropriate education and seeing flaws in the system makes me want to create change for the future of students. I have had enough experience in special education classrooms to carry out this project, as I have made many great connections with amazing educators that were excited and eager to partake in my research. I am a driven individual that enjoys making a positive impact on others and throughout this research, I hope to make an impact on someone who can learn and grow from learning about the referral process and ways to improve it. Through my experiences and education, I believe they will impact my perspective because it will produce quality research with personal examples.

Semi-Structured Interview and Survey Questions

1. First, can you tell me about your educational background and teaching experience?

2. How many years have you been teaching special education?

3. So here at this school, how does the referral process work?

4. What's your role in it when a teacher comes to you or who comes to you first to say I have a child I think needs to be referred, what sort of steps do you take?

5. Do you, as the special education teacher, do any testing?

6. Do you think common core has had an effect on students being referred and placed into special education?

7. Do you see any biases with ELL's being referred to special education?

8. Do you think classroom teachers are properly prepared and trained to identify students with having a learning disability?

9. Have you ever seen any misplacement?

10. What do you see as the problem with students falling through the cracks when it comes to being identified as needing special education services or What are you concerned about when it comes to certain students not being identified as needing special education services?

11. What is currently being done to make sure that students do not fall through the cracks when it comes to being identified as needing special education services? By whom - and what do you think of these efforts? Why?

12. What do you think should be done to make sure that students do not fall through the cracks when it comes to being identified as needing special education services? What about students who are being overrepresented?

13. What do you think are the obstacles to making sure that students do not fall through the cracks when it comes to being identified as needing special education services?

14. Is there anything else that you would like to say about students who fall through the cracks when it comes to being identified as needing special education services and/or the improving our ability to identify students who might benefit from special education services?

Procedure

I first used email to contact each teacher and asked if they would be willing to participate in an interview about the referral process. I have previously worked with each teacher in service learning courses over the period of my college career. The participants were told that the information they provided would be used for data collection purposes and all personal information would remain confidential. They agreed and were willing to have their interviews tape-recorded along with signing a consent form. Each interview took place at the school site, in each of their classrooms. Each interview lasted between 25 and 30 minutes with 14 questions being asked. The interview questions were based around their experiences in the special education referral process and how they think the referral process should be altered in order to better fit students' needs.

Data Analysis

All data was collected, analyzed, and sorted out after each interview. All unnecessary parts were discarded and all necessary information was transcribed from the digital audio recordings that were taken during each interview. I had to eliminate thoughts that were not relevant to the research and focused on information that was relevant and vital information for the research. Then, I looked for any and all emergent themes and whether they confirmed or contradicted my research findings.

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Results

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After collecting all of the data, it was time to analyze and interpret the emergent themes. Each interview was listened to carefully and thoroughly and the main points, themes, and claims were noted and then compared to each other. For this Capstone Project, three special education teachers were interviewed to identify ways to better the education system by eliminating or at

least reducing misplaced and misidentified students placed into special education. This is

important because students are not receiving the proper education because they are slipping

through the cracks and being forgotten or are wrongly placed into special education.

Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature three action themes emerged;

smaller class sizes, Pre-Intervention programs, and teacher collaboration. The chart below shows

a visual representation of all three action themes with the percentages of how many of the three

interviewees agreed that the action could diminish the problems of students being over or

underrepresented in special education.

Chart 1

Action Themes

Smaller Class Sizes
25.0%

Pre-Intervention
37.5%

Teacher Collaboration
37.5%
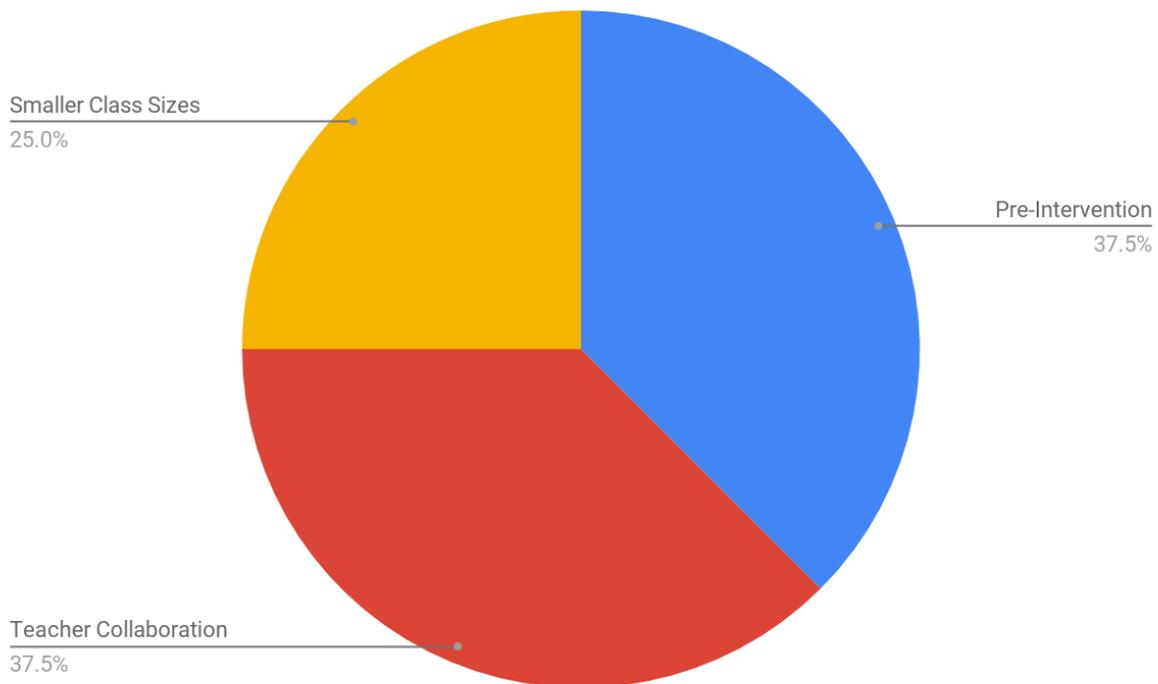
Evidence-based decision making required evaluating each potential action option by the

following criteria: time, teacher satisfaction, and sustainability (see table 1). Based on the

evaluation of each Action Option an action will be recommended and justified.

Table 1

Evaluation of Action Options

	Time	Teacher Satisfaction	Sustainability
Pre-Intervention Programs	High	High	Medium
Teacher Collaboration	High	High	Low
Smaller Class Sizes	Low	High	Medium

Pre-Intervention Programs

In order to ensure students are being appropriately placed into special education there needs to be certain pre-intervention programs, programs to help the identification of students with special needs, set in place. By implementing these programs, students will be assessed before they are referred to special education. Student's scores will help identify if the student needs special education or not, helping the overrepresentation problem. In one interview, Wanda (Personal communication, October 19, 2017) explained how her school uses the Pre-Referral Intervention Manual, or PRIM. The PRIM helps teachers identify students' actions and what to do to help that student instead of sending them for a referral. For example, if a student is not responding appropriately to environmental cues, the teacher will go to that section of the manual and will find a suggestive solution for this problem. This program is intended for teachers to do everything they can for their students before referring them to special education. Other programs like RTI procedures are set in place for teachers to use as an evaluation process. It is a multi-tiered system of intervention designed for teachers to address different learning needs, reduce disability identification, and provide evidence for the appropriate identification of learning

disabilities (Mastropieri, 2018). This system provides appropriate services to students as soon as

they are needed and prior to a formal referral to special education (Mastropieri, 2018). The time

required to implement these programs would be fairly high, as each program would take

considerable time with the teacher assessing the students and making the required changes to

their education. However, by taking the extra time, teacher satisfaction would be flourishing

because he or she would have the skills, knowledge, and programs to properly assess their

students and thus can create a better learning environment for all. To uphold these programs and

make them sustainable would be the difficult part. It would require work and time from teachers

and administration. Teachers and administration would need to be held to certain standards and

watched to make sure they are implementing these programs. If they were held to a standard to

carry out these programs, then sustainability would be profound. When programs like PRIM and

RTI are implemented in schools referrals for special education are not so extensive and

unnecessary, making it harder for students to slip through the cracks or become overrepresented.

Teacher Collaboration

Teamwork is the ability to work together towards a common goal or vision. If schools

function on the basis of teamwork, everything would go smoothly. When teachers, principals,

students, parents, school specialists, and community agencies are all working together the

outcomes are endless. When teachers collaborate together, they are able to communicate with

one another about students and how they are progressing in school. Collaboration- involving

effective communication, cooperation, shared problem solving, and finding solutions- is the

process for ensuring that all students receive the free, appropriate education mandated by IDEA

(Mastropieri, 2018). By everyone collaborating with one another, relationships will form. For

example, a general education teacher and special education teacher may develop a collaborative

consultation relationship for shared decision making, planning, and co-teaching to ensure their students are receiving a proper education that best suits their needs (Mastropieri, 2018). This way, teachers are working together towards one common goal. In her interview, Samantha (Personal communication, October 26, 2017) talks about how in order to have successful schools it takes a village mentality. If everyone supported one another, every student would have a place to go and a place where they need to be. With this, we do not see overpopulated special needs programs or students who slip through the cracks. Teachers will know what to do and will never be uncertain on how to help students. Teacher collaboration would require a vast amount of time since they are needed to work with multiple people, create multiple goals, and discuss action plans. They would need the extra time to collaborate with one another to make sure they are all on the same page. However, working together would greatly increase teacher satisfaction. Teachers would be able to work more efficiently, would never miss any opportunities, and would know exactly how each of their students is doing. When everyone is collaborating and working as a team, everything will go smoothly and there will be no confusion. The sustainability for this action would be considerably low unfortunately. It would be low because every single person would have to be willing to collaborate with one another, every day. For some, it may be hard to always meet with other teachers and if there is a conflict that may cause other issues as well. If it were possible to make sure every person would be on board to collaborate, then sustainability would be incredibly high. Everything considered, the referral process would be a lot smoother if teachers collaborated with one another because no students would be missed and they also would not be referred for the wrong reasons.

Smaller Class Sizes

When teachers have 30 plus students in a single classroom, not only is classroom management hard but also identifying a student with a disability is close to impossible. In her interview, Martha (Personal communication, October 25, 2017) stated that having smaller schools with smaller classes make it harder for students to slip through the cracks. She said that small class size is huge as teachers will be able to distinguish between needing special education or not (Martha, personal communication, October 19, 2017). For example, a teacher who has 20 students in a classroom can easily assess each of his or her students to make sure they understand the content and are learning at the appropriate level and speed. A teacher who has 35 students does not have enough time or patience to make sure each student is learning at the appropriate time and speed because they are trying to manage the classroom as well. The more students a teacher has, the harder it is for them to identify learning disabilities, making it easy for students to slip through the cracks. The time to allocate small classroom sizes would be considerably low, as classroom sizes are picked before the school year begins. Teachers typically know their classroom size before school. Teacher Satisfaction would be outstandingly high because teachers would be able to better manage their classrooms, assess all their students, and effectively teach every student to the best of their ability. Upholding smaller class sizes would be seemingly difficult, as money would play a big deal in this. Districts would need to either expand their schools or hire more teachers to reduce classroom size. If funding allowed it, sustainability would be much greater.

Conclusion

After collecting all the data from interviews and sources, it was clear that there were three predominant themes. These themes can stand alone as a contributing factor to improve the referral process, when they are combined it creates a clear image of what needs to be done in

order to make sure students are being properly identified and referred to special education.

Teacher satisfaction is something that is greatly represented in these three options, making all

three of them desirable to be implemented. This section will justify the action I recommended to

improve the special education referral process. I will also discuss some of the concessions,

limitations, and possible negative outcomes of my recommendation.

Recommendation. After analyzing the three options, I strongly recommend that the best

solution is teacher collaboration. I am confident that this will work because when everyone

works together, no students will slip through the cracks and the end results would be outstanding.

Although it requires a considerable amount of time and has an average sustainability, I believe it

will be the most effective and teachers will be incredibly satisfied with the results. If we want all

students to have access to appropriate education that best suits their needs, everyone needs to be

on the same page with goals, solutions, and future plans. Collaboration to decide how to best

meet students' needs can occur among teachers and other school specialists during informal

meetings, co-teaching, and formal meetings of professionals to recommend interventions or

recommend appropriate special education services (Mastropieri, 2018). Without collaboration,

the wrong decisions are being made and important steps are being missed. With collaboration,

teachers are able to learn from one another and are able to help students become successful

individuals.

   Concessions. The other two options, pre-intervention programs and smaller class sizes,

are also great options because they are increasing teacher knowledge and awareness. These two

aspects are important for the referral process because teachers need to be aware of all of their

students and need to be equipped with the type of knowledge that will allow them to refer

students when they need extra help. When teachers are not aware of all of their students or do not

have enough knowledge about referring them, we begin to see students slipping through the

cracks and being thrown into special education when they do not need to be. When teachers take

advantage of school programs like PRIM or RTI procedures, they are able to understand student

behaviors and can make changes in their classroom before referring students. Smaller class sizes

would also make it easier for the teacher to assess their students and make sure that none of them

are slipping through the cracks. Also, they are able to watch their students more closely and

develop strong relationships amongst them and their parents.

Limitations. Increasing teacher collaboration may have some limitations. These results are

based off of three special education teachers from three different schools and only two of them

suggested this type of action. It may be possible that many teachers are not willing to take the

extra time to collaborate with others. It is important that everyone is present and active in order

for this action to work. Everyone would have to work together to put effort, time, and thought in

order to achieve desirable results. There would need to be a system set in place to make sure

everyone is working together and to make sure that everyone is doing his or her part. Another

limitation would be the cooperation of parents. In order for successful collaboration, parents

would need to be involved in decisions and suggestions that involve their child. If parents were

not willing to collaborate with teachers, specialists, or administration then it would be difficult to

discuss a certain student and decide on goals for them to be successful.

Potential negative outcomes. The most substantial negative outcome that can come from this

action plan is when there is a disagreement. This disagreement can be from a teacher, specialist,

administration, or parent. If one person does not agree, collaboration can be difficult since the

end goal is to collaborate and come together to form certain goals and ideas to help students.

This could hinder students in their success at school because they may not be given certain tests

or goals if one does not agree. For example, if a parent does not agree with the teacher that the

child should go to a special day class for math then that child is potentially missing out on

substantial help in their education. Although, this potential negative outcome isn't desirable it

would most likely be worst-case scenario because everyone should be on the same page with

wanting a student to receive the best education they can.

Conclusion. Despite the limitations and potential negative outcomes, I still feel strongly about

implementing more teacher collaboration in schools to improve the special education referral

process. Sometimes, it can be something as simple as mentioning to the parent that the student

needs to take extra time at home to practice vocabulary. Having more teacher collaboration will

ensure that students are not being forgotten and that everyone is on the same path to reach the

same goals for each individual student. Collaboration will help create closer relationships among

fellow colleagues, students, and parents. Overall, in order to improve the referral process for

special education, there needs to be strong relationships and communication in order to

collaborate with one another.

<div align="center">

Action Documentation and Reflection

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The main focus of this capstone was to address the issue of why some students are being

over or under represented in special education. In order to collect information on this issue, three

special education teachers were interviewed on what they believe should be done to improve the

referral process for special education. After thoroughly analyzing the literature and responses of

the interviewees, three action options emerged. The first action was to implement preliminary

programs, programs that would help teachers identify students' behaviors and how to address

them before referring them to special education. The second option was to improve teacher

collaboration, by having all teachers, staff, and parents' work together. Lastly, the third action

option was to reduce classroom sizes. Out of the three actions that emerged, the action to

improve teacher collaboration was implemented. This action was ultimately chosen because on

the belief that when everyone is working together towards one common goal, no student will slip

through the cracks or be forgotten. In a perfect world, every teacher, staff member, and parent

would work together to ensure that every student is receiving a proper, successful education.

Teachers are, without question, the heartbeat of a successful school. When working

together, teachers can create the best learning environment for every single student. The action

was implemented at Butterfly Elementary School. In order to improve teacher collaboration, a

workshop was created for the principal to orchestrate with his staff to inform them on effective

collaboration tips and the effects that can be caused from teacher collaboration. The workshop is

a total of 100 minutes long with a 10-minute break. An outline of how the workshop is run can

be found in figure 1. It is designed for everyone to come together in the beginning of the school

year to discuss how collaboration will go for the entire school year. The workshop will start with

a warm-up activity, asking everyone to write down good and bad characteristics of collaboration

and then sharing some of the answers out loud. Following the activity, everyone would commit

to participating. After everyone commits, shared visions and goals need to be developed amongst

everyone so each person knows what they are working towards. Next, the workshop will provide

information on how to develop a sense of community and build relationships with one another. It

is important relationships are formed; collaboration will be a lot smoother and more effective.

Flyers (see figure 2) will be distributed throughout the workshop, which contains organizational

models that promote teacher collaboration. The workshop will go over each point made in the

flyer. Lastly, the workshop will discuss different ways that everyone can be held accountable,

and everyone will come to an agreement on how they want to do that. Each school would need

to devise a method on how everyone will be held accountable. The documentation of

collaboration is necessary as it provides a collection of evidentiary artifacts of the

implementation of this action plan. Finally, since participation in this workshop is crucial, the

workshop would be mandatory for every staff member to attend. In conclusion, the action to

improve teacher collaboration was implemented by creating a workshop on collaboration. The

principal of Butterfly Elementary was emailed the necessary documents and workshop

presentation slides. This workshop will inform teachers about the effects of collaborating with

one another and will create an outstanding educational experience for all students.

Figure 1

Teacher Collaboration Workshop Outline

Teacher Collaboration Workshop Outline

Warm-up activity (10 minutes):
On a piece of paper, have everyone write good and bad characteristics of good and bad collaboration. What makes a good and bad collaborator? Share out responses amongst the group.

Individual Commitment (5 minutes):
Explain what is being asked of them; explain the time and dedication it will take. Have everyone commit to collaborating together. Explain it will be beneficial for the success of all students.

Develop/Create shared visions and goals (20 minutes)
What does everyone want out of the collaboration?

Develop a sense of community/ Build Relationships (20 minutes)
Build group norms and relationships. Make everyone feel safe and comfortable.

-Break (10 minutes)-

Pass out fliers and discuss collaboration tips and ideas (25 minutes)

Accountability (10 minutes):
Discuss ways on how to hold each other accountable for collaborating.

Figure 2

Organizational models that promote teacher collaboration

Common Planning Time	Professional Learning Communities	Critical Friends Groups
• Interdisciplinary teams— teachers share same students • Coordinate team policies and procedures • Discuss students • Meet with parents • Plan team activities, thematic or cross-curricular units • Examine student work • Participate in professional development	• Disciplinary teams • Ongoing process of collective inquiry and action research • Collective analysis of student assessment data in relation to specific learning targets • Use of data to inform and assess effectiveness of instruction	• Group gathers voluntarily to improve practice through collaborative learning • Uses coaches and specific protocols used to guide sessions • Identify school-specific student learning goals, reflect on practices for achieving the goals, collaboratively examine student work

Critical Reflection

Doing this project has made me realize that once you find an issue you are passionate about, the opportunities for change are endless. I have learned more about myself and about my love for education from doing this research project than I initially thought I would. Through every road block I have stumbled upon while doing this project, I only became more dedicated and driven to finding a solution to the problem. I learned more about myself as a writer, and have gained knowledge on how to become a better one. I have also learned that research is extremely

important when your end goal is to reach a desired action in order to form a solution for the

problem. I found the start of this project to be difficult because I wanted to find an issue that

meant something to me and one that I was passionate about. When researching possible ideas, I

could not stop thinking about how students are not being properly referred or referred at all to

special education. I always wanted to teach special education and learning about this issue was

something that hit home for me and made my desire to find an action to help the problem more

profound. I discovered my true love for education while doing this project by learning about

different ways to help students receive a proper education and making sure no students are

slipping through the cracks. Working on a problem toward change was a rewarding experience

and being able to interview other teachers and inspiring them to think of ways to work toward

that change was rewarding all in itself. I will, without a doubt, take what I have learned

throughout this research and implement it in my teaching philosophy as a future educator.

The themes of the Liberal Studies department and the required coursework I took to get

where I am today have significantly impacted my professional development. I have been

provided tools, knowledge, and skills that have developed me to become an excellent educator. I

have taken courses that have tested my knowledge on the responsibilities of a California public

educator as well as provided me with creative and innovative ways to implement educational

practices. I have gained an abundance of knowledge about diversity and multiculturalism in

education. I was taught skills on how to incorporate all students' cultures and social identities

into the classroom in order to make it a safe, comfortable environment for everyone. Social

Justice played a huge role in my education, as I took many courses that challenged my thinking

on social justice issues and ways to address them in the classroom. I was taught about innovative

ways of teaching using various types of technology, as well as learning new ways to use technology to my advantage as a future educator.

In order to become the professional that I envision to be, I believe that I need to step into the field and get my feet wet. I believe that in order to become the educator that I want to be, I need to dive in and make some mistakes to learn how to become the best that I can be. I know that I will be successful due to the education that I have received and the classes that have taught me important skills to implement in my own classroom. I have been given advice that in order to be successful as a teacher, you have to jump into the classroom and implement different ways of teaching and even though I will fail at some things, I will learn from them and become a great educator who can learn from mistakes and create better plans for her students. I have no fear that I will not become the professional that I intend to be because I have gained enough knowledge, skills, and confidence to make sure I do just that.

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