

EXPLORING THE K-5 SPECIAL EDUCATION REFERRAL PROCESS IN ONE
MIDWEST SUBURBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

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JAKE W. BOSWELL

Dr. Carole A. Edmonds, Dissertation Supervisor

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

EXPLORING THE K-5 SPECIAL EDUCATION REFERRAL PROCESS IN ONE
MIDWEST SUBURBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

presented by Jake W. Boswell

a candidate for the degree of doctor of education

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, is worthy of acceptance.

Dr. Carole A. Edmonds

Dr. Timothy Wall

Dr. Regina Knott

Dr. Dana Melton

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to hard working teachers whom are required to make very difficult decisions on a day-to-day basis. You are asked to do so much with so little and I am impressed everyday I walk into a school. I know that every teacher has it in their hearts to support students in every way possible. I hope that I am able to continue serving in a role that allows me to continue supporting you.

This dissertation is also dedicated to the students, many of you are asked to perform in ways that you find difficult. I can only encourage you to develop grit and never quit. Learn as much as you possibly can and work hard to prove you have it in you to achieve. I too was a struggling student; however, I found it in me to develop a love for learning. I hope you find that teacher who inspires you to be more than you ever thought possible.

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SECTION ONE:

INTRODUCTION TO THE DISSERTATION-IN-PRACTICE

Malik is a second grade student in Ms. Brook's class. He is from an economically disadvantaged family consisting of his mother and older sister. Malik is a hard worker; however, despite his efforts, he struggles with reading for understanding. Ms. Brooks has consulted her building's child study team (CST), which consists of her Assistant Principal, the Special Education Process Coordinator, and general education teachers. The team reviews data from his district and state testing, which suggests that he may be working at his ability level, therefore not a student suspected of having a disability. The team suggests accommodations or modifications that would be appropriate for the general education setting. Six weeks have passed since that time, and Malik has made little improvement in the general education curriculum. Ms. Brooks is frustrated and, despite the data, she demands that the team consider a special education referral. Should the CST commit to an evaluation to determine special education eligibility?

Background of the Study

Dunn (2006) conducted a study regarding special education referrals and suggested that teacher referrals were based on their observations and inferences (subjective measures), rather than academic data (objective measures). The study identified five characteristics that determined a student's likelihood of being referred for a special education evaluation: a) inability to apply presented information, b) needing assistance/requiring repetition of directions or instructions, c) inattention, d) inability to complete tasks in the allotted time, and e) "look" or atypical behavior. Dunn brought attention to the problem of subjectivity in referrals; however, it had been identified before

in 1982. Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Richey, and Graden (1982) published a journal article that found, despite the data collected, teams ultimately decided student eligibility on their own terms despite data suggesting eligibility or ineligibility. Based on the research presented above, spanning 24 years, subjectivity is still a problem in the referral and eligibility determination process.

Special education for all students with disabilities as a concept is roughly 40 years old and has undergone several revisions and amendments passed by Congress (Office of Special Education Rehabilitative Services, 2007). While the concept of educating students with disabilities is much older, the first laws enacted in the United States were targeted specifically at students with hearing impairments (Teacher's of the Deaf Act of 1961). In 1975, the United States developed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHACA) which provided a basis for the implementation of special education services in public schools (Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975). While establishing a foundation for special education services, EHACA was limited due to constraints on age and services provided. The law established the mandate that all children deserve a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) and parents have rights when concerning the education of their child with a disability (Office of Special Education Rehabilitative Services, 2007).

In 1983, EHACA was evaluated and amended to address the limitations of the 1975 law, stating that early intervention is paramount and that services will be offered from birth to adulthood, age 21 (Education for the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1983). EHACA initially provisioned educational intervention for children with disabilities at age three. By 1986, Congress had determined special programming for

early intervention was necessary, as was support and training for parents. As a result, Congress further amended EHACA and emphasis was placed on those children from birth to age two (Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1986). As the climate of public education became more inclusive, EHACA was evaluated again in 1990. Congress determined the law would be known as the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), and the new emphasis for services would be geared toward students transitioning from high school to adult life (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990).

The pivotal moment in modern special education legislation and implementation occurred in 1997. In the 1997 amendments to IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997) Congress focused in on the inclusion of students in the general education classroom. The amendments mandated general education teachers participate in the development of goals and behavior reinforcement measures. Additionally, it provisioned manifestation determinations after 10 days of suspension to ensure a student's adverse behavior was not due to uncontrollable circumstances related to their disability.

The modern version of IDEA was created when it was reauthorized in 2004 (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004). The previous version was amended to align more closely with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001, also known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). NCLB was the brainchild of President George W. Bush's administration. The administration worked closely with Congress to increase the rigor in schools with regard to reading and mathematic proficiency. IDEAs alignment with NCLB mandated special

education teachers to be “highly qualified,” requiring certification in the areas taught, such as elementary education, kindergarten through sixth grade, or secondary social studies certification, ninth through twelfth grade (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). NCLB, however was replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, which carries the same requirement for “highly qualified” teachers (Civic Impulse, 2017).

Though it has changed many times, IDEA remains the governing policy for all things related to special education. It provides guidelines and definitions for all of what special educators do. Within IDEA is a provision for the responsibility of the school to evaluate students suspected of having a disability. This provision, called Child Find, requires that teachers and administrators work with special education personnel to evaluate and determine eligibility for special education (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004). General education teachers are working with their students daily and are the first to report any suspicions to their administrators. It is the phenomenon of teacher referrals for special education this researcher would like to explore.

Statement of the Problem

In 1979, Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975). With its implementation, a system was born for the identification of students with disabilities as well as procedural safeguards put in place to insure a parent’s right to due process of law. This act established a team decision-making process used today. While the law governing this process changed several times through the 1980s and 90s, it continued to govern special education. IDEA changed again in 2004 and was reauthorized as the governing document and while many things were updated and amended, the process related to eligibility

continued as it had in the past. Since its inception, IDEA has required that teams make eligibility determinations based on their respective state plan for compliance with the federal law (Missouri Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2013).

Despite these federal and state regulations, multidisciplinary teams still rely on anecdotal data to make referrals and eligibility determinations (Dunn, 2006; Mamlin & Harris, 1998; Ysseldyke et al., 1982). Ysseldyke et al. (1982) maintain that even after the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 passed, teams continued to deem assessment data unrelated and make decisions based upon subjective means. Dunn (2006), as stated before, mentions teachers use observable data to make determinations as opposed to numerical assessment data. This is similarly noted by Mamlin and Harris (1998), stating that students are referred due to their home situation, a need for substantial changes, and documentation and future needs. Ultimately, as time has progressed, researchers are finding that teachers continue to use anecdotal data to refer and find students eligible for special education services while ignoring the government's requirement for quantifiable data (Dunn, 2006; Mamlin & Harris, 1998; Ysseldyke et al., 1982).

IDEA further defines the need for the use of "scientifically based research" in the field of special education (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004). The authors of this legislation go so far as to say that the methods employed must be aligned with academic research as stated in peer reviewed educational and psychological journals or expert panels having extensively reviewed said methods. Research studies conducted since the early 1980s demonstrate special education teams ignoring the call for

scientifically based data collection, by accepting anecdotal data for referrals to special education (Dunn, 2006; Mamlin & Harris, 1998; Ysseldyke et al., 1982).

Ysseldyke et al., (1982) found by reviewing video recordings of special education eligibility meetings that 83% of data presented was extraneous and not grounded by the collected evaluation data. Even though the data was not related, the authors found that the quantity of information presented at the meeting impacted the likelihood of the student being found eligible for special education services. A mandate for data founded in scientifically based research did not occur until 2004 (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004).

Problem of Practice

Dunn (2006), Mamlin and Harris (1998), and Ysseldyke et al. (1982), demonstrate how subjectivity has impacted the identification process for special education services over time. The laws that govern these processes require empirical data to support identification of a disability and implementation of special education services thereafter. Furthermore, subjectivity in the referral process creates situations in which there is disproportionality in referrals and positive eligibility determinations. Several studies have illuminated situations where groups of students are singled out and found eligible for their inability to assimilate to school or community culture. Despite their differences, the authors of these studies all conclude that schools must make a better effort to understand their students' unique cultural perspectives (Deninger, 2008; Klingner & Harry, 2006; Parette, 2005; Poon-McBrayer & García, 1994; Skiba et al., 2008; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001).

What is more, the complexity of referrals to special education continues to compound with the addition of variables. Two of three studies focused on the self-efficacy of teachers found a strong relationship between referrals to special education programs and knowledge of course content and behavioral management strategies (Meijer & Foster, 1988; Soodak & Podell, 1993). The third of these studies assessed the same variables and did not find a significant relationship between them (Tejeda-Delgado, 2009). Even though the impact of teacher self-efficacy is still in question, there is some evidence to suggest that the self-efficacy of teachers does play a role in the referral process. Subjectivity can take many forms as shown through the studies reviewed, and evidence supports subjectivity leading to negative ramifications especially in the case of specific gender groups and minorities (Deninger, 2008; Klingner & Harry, 2006; Parette, 2005; Poon-McBrayer & García, 1994; Skiba et al., 2008; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001). While IDEA (2004) demand schools use quantitative data to inform special education processes, studies support that subjectivity continues to play a role in the referral process (Dunn, 2006; Ysseldyke et al., 1982).

Metro View Public School District has implemented many procedures to ensure the referral process is as seamless as possible. Despite these procedures, special education process coordinators report that teachers and administrators make referrals based upon their feelings and observations (E. Lovett, personal communication, March 31, 2016). This study is designed to explore Metro View's referral process for special education evaluations. This researcher hopes to better understand the process so as to provide recommendations for professional development in an effort to adequately support teachers and minimize subjectivity in the referral process.

Existing Gap in Literature

Although Dunn (2006), Mamlin and Harris (1998), and Ysseldyke et al. (1982) have studied and presented their findings on subjectivity in the special education referral process, teachers' basis for submitting referrals requires further research. Two of the most recent studies exploring teachers' basis for referrals for special education recommend larger sample sizes and broader scope in order to replicate their study on teacher reasons for referrals (Dunn, 2006; Mamlin & Harris, 1998). In addition, the last research conducted regarding teachers' reasons for and implications of special education referral was relatively old, dating back to 2006. Furthermore, these studies showed subjectivity in the referral process within individual buildings. Larger sample sizes could help to assess subjectivity within the special education referral process from a broader perspective.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the K-5 special education referral process in one Midwest suburban school district. By identifying the student characteristics (learning and behavioral) teachers use to refer their students for special education services, this researcher hopes to provide feedback to the special education director and leadership team that may lead to targeted training suggestions for the participating schools. As stated in the problem of practice, studies conducted by Dunn (2006), Mamlin & Harris (1998), and Ysseldyke et al. (1982) have shown that teachers are prone to injecting subjectivity into referrals for special education services. The implications of the practice of subjectivity may indicate that there are gaps between what teachers are presented in professional development and how they practice. Additionally, there are legal ramifications as parents have rights regarding the process of referral and evaluation

for special education. When those rights are violated, the parents can file due process, which can result in negative legal ramifications for school districts found at fault (Missouri Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2009).

Research Questions

In an effort to provide the information mentioned above to the school district, the researcher will guide this study using the following overarching research question:

What prompts elementary teachers to refer a student for evaluation to determine eligibility for special education services?

Additionally, this researcher is utilizing a sub-question to further guide this study. The question is as follows:

What specific student characteristics (academic and behavioral) prompt your referral?

Conceptual Framework

Creswell (2009) described researchers utilizing philosophical worldviews to frame their studies so as to guide the design of their research. Creswell (2009) points out that researchers do not often explicitly state the worldview as a conceptual framework. In spite of this, he recommends making readers aware of their use. This study will be written from the perspective of the social constructivist worldview. Researchers who subscribe to this worldview intend to understand the world around them by conducting inquiry focused on the interpretations of the perceptions held by people within the research space. Researchers focus their lens on interactions with people in hope to better understand the processes and phenomena derived from the culture established by the

studied population (Creswell, 2009). While the researcher has adopted the social constructivist worldview, this study is built upon the concept of educational change.

Educational Change

Exploring the K-5 special education referral process requires the examination of change in education. Fullan (2007) describes change in education as a multidimensional process that occurs within practice. According to Fullan, educational change requires practitioners to use novel resources, methods of instruction, and beliefs. This study focuses on change, based on the nature of special education law and practices. As noted previously, special education legislation has changed over the 40 years it has been in place. Each law seeking to improve upon the next (Office of Special Education Rehabilitative Services, 2007).

From the ever-changing nature of education, the concept of educational change was born (Waks, 2007). Waks explains as leaders implemented policy within organizations, the practitioners' prevailing feelings were of inaction and disappointment. Researchers noticed struggles within organizations related to change and began to study effective methods of implementing change from within (Waks, 2007).

Waks (2007) acknowledged that change within education began to be studied in the 1990s as a result of observations made by practitioners. One of these observers, Cuban (1990), saw reform as an ebb and flow tightly linked to policies created by external stakeholders within the community such as law makers. Cuban attempted to explain a phenomenon that exists where new reforms often closely resemble the reforms of the past. However, the fates of the reforms are dependent upon the implementation at the classroom level. Cuban (1990) argues classroom instructors are autonomous and

detached enough from administration and district policy makers that real change is unrealized and reforms die only to be reborn later as new policies are created.

Fullan and Langworthy (2014) recognize this phenomenon and propose teacher's pedagogy must evolve to allow change to take hold. The researchers found three required components for change that include: teachers collaborate with staff and students, develop deep learning tasks, and embrace modern tools to enrich the learning environment. Ultimately, educators are asked to embrace change through full immersion (Fullan and Langworthy, 2014).

Educational change as a concept emerged from leaders observing reoccurring reforms and experiencing frustration in failing to fully implement the change required by external forces. Reform and progress are realized through full emersion into the process of change by amending pedagogy and embracing innovation (Cuban, 1990; Fullan, 2007; Fullan & Langworthy, 2014; Waks, 2007). With the constant changes related to special education regarding law and case law, educational change is a fitting framework to support this study.

Educational Change Related to Special Education

Fullan (2007), recognizes that the three required pieces of change do not take into consideration who defines the new practices or resources ultimately affecting the outcome of implementation in large numbers. For instance, state agencies monitor compliance in the area of special education rather than the local school board (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2016). As a result, the pressure is put on the district special education director and the special education teachers to ensure compliance with state and district policies (E. Lovett, personal communication, March

31, 2016). Fullan (2007) goes on to explain that educational change is impacted by the fidelity of practitioners' implementation and the ever-changing topics in education. The later is a particular challenge for special education initiatives in that case law drives reform and the evolution of board policies, which in turn effects the process for regular education teachers to implement the change at their level (E. Lovett, personal communication, March 31, 2016). Despite the nature of special education being ever changing; Fullan, would argue change is necessary and worthwhile to pursue in the educational environment.

Conceptual Underpinnings

Special Education

Special education was first conceptualized on a national level in 1973 as the result of two landmark Supreme Court cases ruled on in 1972. The two cases, *Mills v. Board of Education District of Columbia*, 1972 and *Pennsylvania Association For Retarded Children (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, 1972 were integral in the writing and implementation of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This act protected individuals with disabilities from discrimination to include in public education (Yell, Rogers, & Rogers, 1998).

Essentially the formation of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 provided a launch pad for the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EAHCA). This legislation is the beginning of modern special education in public education. Yell, et al. (1998) explains that the implementation EAHCA is the first time the United States provisioned for the compulsory education of children with disabilities.

The legislation of mid 1970s ultimately became the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) which is currently the governing laws regarding special education (Office of Special Education Rehabilitative Services, 2007; Yell et al., 1998). From IDEA, Missouri enacted IDEA on a state level providing oversight through the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Office of Special Education, 2014).

Metro View Public School District has enacted a series of administrative procedures to govern the district's method of implementing IDEA. These board procedures help provide guidance for the director of special education and her staff for the implementation of special education services and evaluations (E. Lovett, personal communication, March 31, 2016).

Professional Development

Life long learners are something that teachers often express interest in creating, which is most likely due to their requirement to continually learn about their craft. Geringer (2003) asserts that teachers instructional practices get better the more they improve their productivity. Furthermore, Geringer states teachers require training to be productive and engaging in the classroom.

While it is assumed that teachers are trained in universities and hold certification in their craft, district specific training is often provided through professional development. Professional development is often thought of as a formal aspect of the profession of teaching, conducted in large auditoriums with out of district presenters. Borko (2004) observes professional development as something quite different, something that occurs within the teachers' environment formally and informally. Furthermore,

Borko postulates the more specific the topic of professional development help teachers gain a more fundamental understanding of the concept's implementation.

The powerful nature of professional development is widely regarded as a truth, teachers who are prepared and trained are better over all at their ability implement effective strategies to meet their students' academic needs (Geringer, 2003). This fact drives the mandate from the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 to provide professional development to all teachers. While this mandate was initially created by NCLB, it also carried over into the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2105 (Civil Impact, 2017). As a result Missouri DESE requires all teachers to engage in 15 hours annually until they reach 10 years of teaching and a graduate degree or national certification (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2016). Teachers engage in professional development, however it is their responsibility to implement the newly acquired skills. When training is not utilized it can result in a knowing doing gap.

Knowing Doing Gap

Established by Pfeffer and Sutton (2000), the knowing doing gap explains the phenomenon of why individuals fail to implement knowledge in the workplace. While this concept is written with regards to corporations, the idea translates to any field that must evolve to meet the needs of a changing base of clientele. Education certainly falls within this category as each student is unique and has ever changing needs. The gist of Pfeffer and Sutton's (2000) concept is that employees often know best practices, however they fail to implement them for a variety of reasons. Furthermore, the authors emphatically state that the knowing doing gap is more detrimental to progress, than is that of a knowledge gap attributed to ignorance.

Taking into account the conceptual framework and using focus groups, interviews, and analysis of artifacts and documents, this researcher aims to better understand what prompts elementary teachers to make referrals for special education evaluations. Despite policy written by both the federal and state governments, as well as the school district, teachers make decisions regarding special education referrals based upon subjective observations (Dunn, 2006; Mamlin & Harris, 1998). As stated in the background to the study, the federal policy has shifted many times throughout the 40 years that special education laws have been in place. As those laws change, so do the policies of school districts, which ultimately affect teachers. Looking through the lens of educational change and supporting the study with the underpinnings of special education, professional development, and the knowing doing gap concept this researcher hopes to better understand what prompts elementary teachers in a midwestern metropolitan school district to make referrals for special education.

Design of the Study

Based upon this particular study and the research question contained herein, this researcher will be conducting a qualitative study. Merriam (2009) suggests qualitative studies are appropriate when the researcher seeks to understand motive and how to improve a practice. Merriam (2009) explains qualitative research assumes one of six forms: a basic qualitative study, phenomenology, ethnography, narrative analysis, a grounded study, or critical research. For the purposes of this study, this researcher will collect information and attempt to determine themes from the data collected. A qualitative study is appropriate for this study due to the nature of the referral process and the stakeholders involved. Furthermore, Creswell (2009) concurs with Merriam (2009) in

the use of qualitative research when a researcher's inquiry leads them to develop an understanding of a social problem. As stated in the problem statement, subjective referrals lead to the over identification of students for special education services, which is directly contrary to IDEA's mandate of a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (IDEA).

Setting

This study will be conducted across three elementary schools in a midwestern metropolitan school district. Previous studies conducted by Dunn (2006) and Mamlin and Harris (1998) both focused on an individual elementary building in one district. Their recommendations for further research indicated that a larger sample size is required. Merriam (2009) cites that a sample size should be large enough to meet the criterion of saturation. Looking toward this goal, this researcher has decided to sample from three various sized elementary buildings within the Metro View School District.

Participants

In an effort to collect the most meaningful data, this researcher is implementing purposeful sampling, as described by Merriam (2009). Ultimately, elementary schools are often where students begin learning the fundamentals of reading and arithmetic. During this process teachers recognize difficulties and barriers. This type of information is presented in meetings resulting in referrals for special education services. Creswell (2009) describes purposeful sampling as allowing the researcher to select a subject group that will provide the best information to address the research question. The focus groups will be comprised of elementary school general education teachers with varying years of experience teaching from three buildings within the Metro View School District.

Interviews will be conducted with the district director of special education, a special education process coordinator, three building administrators. Interviews may be conducted with other teachers or administrators if deemed necessary to gather additional data.

Data Collection Tools

Focus groups will also be utilized in an effort to gain a better understanding of general education teachers' perceptions and understanding of the referral process. Krueger and Casey (2009) explain that focus groups are appropriate tools for data collection when researchers are looking to gain insight regarding perceptions. The authors caution that focus groups have downfalls and can result in skewed data due to social pressure, fear of repercussion, and participants' lack of ability to be honest in their reflection. Again, sampling will be selected randomly, yet organized by grade level implementing a double-layer design consisting of each building as a layer. Focus groups will have six members representing all grades, kindergarten through fifth grade. Krueger and Casey (2009) recommend focus groups for research topics to be between five and eight individuals. This researcher will ask for volunteers to represent their respective grade level. Focus group data will be collected utilizing an audio recording device and a service for transcription. After data from the focus group has been transcribed, the data will be analyzed. The data will be coded following Creswell's (2009) process for data analysis developing themes and description to interpret.

Lastly, educational artifacts and special education policy will be analyzed. The artifacts will be used to determine the process and procedure currently in place to refer a student for special education. This process will provide contextual information regarding

the trends of the district and their referrals of students. This data can be used as Merriam (2009) states to inspire other lines of questioning within the interviews and focus groups.

Data Analysis

Validity is key in any research study, Creswell (2009) suggests using multiple validity measures to ensure a study is sound. This researcher will be coding transcripts; therefore, an individual will need to be utilized to check the coding for errors. An agreement will be employed to ensure at least 80% accuracy. Additionally, the themes uncovered in the coding will have to be validated. Creswell (2009) recommends the use of triangulation in an effort to confirm themes in fact exist. To complete this task the emergent themes will be, compared to the previous studies noted earlier, examined through the lens of existing literature, and through comparing participant responses establishing the sampling saturation noted in Merriam (2009). In a final effort to ensure valid results, this researcher will clarify any bias he brings to the study as recommended by Creswell (2009) and in accordance with an Institutional Review Board and the American Educational Research Association.

Limitations, Assumptions, and Design Controls

This study is limited in scope to one Midwestern suburban school district. Due to the fact of geographic location and demographics, Metro View School District is not demographically representative of the surrounding metropolitan area. Additionally, Metro View has 11 elementary schools, however three have been selected for this study to keep sample sizes manageable.

It is assumed that Metro View is interested in knowing the perceptions of teachers with regard to the referral process for special education. Furthermore, the researcher

expects that teachers will be willing to provide honest and substantive answers to questions asked during the data collection portion of this study.

The study's design is modeled after Creswell's (2009) recommendations of having multiple methods of validity in place to ensure a sound study is conducted. Controls that exist include: purposeful sampling, cross-checked coding methods, triangulation of data, and acknowledging bias.

Definition of Key Terms

Academic Behaviors. Behaviors both academic and social

Student Characteristics. Characteristics both learning and behavioral

Child Study Team (CST). Team that teachers collaborate with to help develop interventions and or request a referral for special education evaluation.

Professional Development. In-service or outside workshops/presentations designed to promote teacher learning.

Referral for Special Education Evaluation. A process where teachers present information and data about a student that may have a suspected disability impeding their learning.

Regular/General Education Classroom. A classroom that is designed for all students to engage in learning.

Special Education Classroom. A classroom designed to meet the specific needs of a student identified under IDEA as having a disability that limits their ability to access the general education classroom.

Significance of the Study

Elementary educators are the first line of defense in our education system with regards to early intervention for struggling students. Their participation in the referral process is integral, however IDEA is specific in the sense that specific criteria is cause for referral. If teachers are allowing subjectivity to enter into their referral process, the results could be dire, especially to the school district as a whole. By conducting this research and gaining an understanding of what prompts elementary teachers to refer students for special education evaluations, this researcher may reveal gaps in professional development with regard to identified characteristics that lead to referrals for special education evaluations.

This researcher intends to gain a better understanding of what underlying themes emerge from a sample of elementary school participants to inform the director of special education on how best to advise district and building level administrators with regards to individualized and targeted training on the referral process. Finally, the aim of this study is to better support the district and elementary level administrators in implementing training to support data driven referrals.

Summary

The research study is intended to gain insight into elementary teachers' perspectives of what makes students viable candidates for referral to receive a special education evaluation. Previous studies indicate that teachers' subjectivity drives the process of referral for special education services; however, the researchers of those studies admit their sample sizes were small, and further research is recommended with a larger sampling.

Dunn (2006), Mamlin and Harris (1998), and Ysseldyke et al. (1982) all support that there are flaws in the special education referral system, subjectivity is a key factor of the referral process, the over identification of students from marginalized populations, and the effects teacher efficacy has on the likelihood of referrals for special education services. Based upon the studies cited herein, spanning several decades, the referral process for special education is flawed.

This research study attempts to understand elementary school teachers' perceptions of the referral process and what prompts them to make referrals for special education evaluations. As a result this study adopts a social constructivist worldview, utilizes change theory as a conceptual framework and three conceptual underpinnings: special education, professional development, and the knowing doing gap. Using this framework as a lens, this researcher hopes to better understand what prompts K-5 teachers to refer students for special education evaluations, and the specific characteristics of students that they refer. To meet this goal a qualitative study will be conducted to mine data through conducting interviews, focus groups, and analyzing archival documents. Findings will then be validated by use of cross checking coding, triangulation, and the admission of researcher bias. Ultimately a refined referral process could help protect the district from unwanted legal intervention, as well as provide teachers with guidelines to confidently refer students struggling in their classroom.

SECTION TWO:

PRACTITIONER SETTING FOR THE STUDY

“Through our collective best, we do whatever it takes to inspire and equip every learner to find their voice and realize their unlimited potential” (Metro View Public Schools, 2014). In an effort to realize this mission, Metro View Public Schools implemented a strategic plan in 2014 to set goals that would be achieved by 2019. Within this framework, Metro View first commits to vertically aligning curriculum, which includes two goals. One goal for developing a digital curriculum to ensure students are college and career ready. The second goal implements professional learning communities (PLC) focused on using student data to drive achievement. As a step to implement the latter, the district is creating a district intervention plan to provide additional instruction to struggling students. As of March 2017, the district had not fully implemented a district wide intervention program. However, the district has diagnostic and growth monitoring measures in place (Metro View Public Schools, 2014). This chapter seeks to examine Metro View Public School’s history, vision, and leadership as it relates to the special education evaluation referral process.

History of the Organization

Metro View Public School District occupies 85 square miles north of the Missouri River near Kansas City, Missouri. The school district serves over 12,300 students as of December 2016 (Metro View Public Schools, 2016). The district supports one early childhood center, 11 elementary schools, four middle schools, two high schools, and an alternative school. Twice CNN and Money magazine, in 2007 and 2009, named Metro View, Missouri one of best places to live based on Metro View’s schools, economic

development, safety, and sense of community. Additionally, Metro View Public School District was recognized as a high performing school district for all 12 years that Missouri awarded the Distinction in Performance Award (Metro View Public Schools, 2016). During those twelve years, Metro View Public Schools became the second fastest growing school district in the state.

Rapid growth as well as decreased state funding shaped instructional delivery methods shifting from teacher to student contact to computer based educational tools as evident by Metro View's strategic plan (Metro View Public Schools, 2016). The shift has created an environment where more data is compiled. This data is discussed in professional learning communities and during the special education evaluation referral process. Additionally, Metro View's focus remains on future focused instructional delivery methods and open source curriculum to provide instruction (Metro View Public Schools, 2016).

According to an assistant principal, Sean Miller (pseudonym), Metro View Public Schools adopted the use of i-Ready reading and math diagnostic tests, as well as the Lexia: Core 5 reading program at the beginning of the 2015-2016 school year. Placement and growth monitoring data generated by these two programs are to be an accurate measure of a student's current placement as well as their progress over time (S. Miller, personal communication, February 29, 2016). Mr. Miller indicated this data was to be used to drive PLC discussion regarding ability grouping of students to provide intervention. Furthermore the data acquired through Metro View's intervention program is to be used as a part of the special education evaluation referral paper work (S. Miller, personal communication, February 29, 2016).

Special Services Department

Since 1997, Metro View Public School District's special education department has seen five directors including the current leader. According to one process coordinator, Mrs. Lovett (pseudonym), who was hired in the fall of 1997 as a special education teacher, the director managed every special education teacher in the district. Mrs. Sampson (pseudonym), the director of special education during the 2001-2002 school year recognized managing several buildings and grade levels was not an easy task and created three process coordinator positions which Mrs. Lovett was hired into. Mrs. Lovett states that each of the process coordinators were in charge of the various categories of education: early childhood, elementary, and secondary. As the district grew, Mrs. Lovett explained more process coordinators were added to manage building special education teachers and ensure compliance. As of today Metro View Public School's special education department is structured with a director to lead, eight process coordinators to manage roughly three buildings each, and two administrative assistants (E. Lovett, personal communication, March 31, 2016).

Organizational Analysis

Mintzberg (1979/2005) describes organizations as complex entities that have developed a need for structure, including managerial positions to direct workflow and the standardization of processes within the organization. Mintzberg categorizes complex organizations in five parts: Strategic Apex, Middle Line, Operating Core, Technostructure and Support Staff. Metro View School District fits within the mold created by Mintzberg.

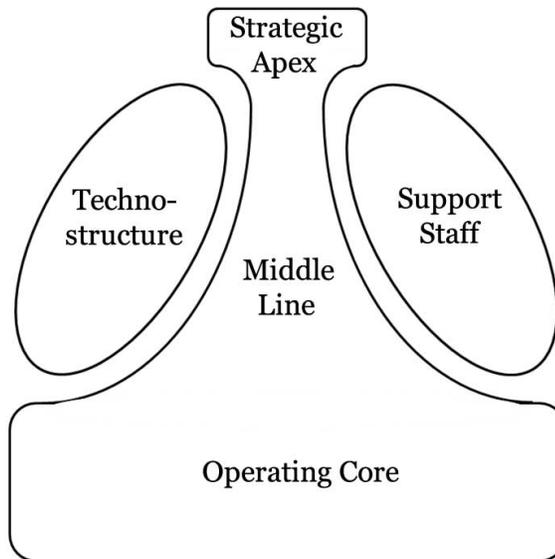


Figure 1. Mintzberg's (1979/2005) organizational model.

School Board

Metro View Public School's Board of Education is made up of seven elected positions. Each member serves a three-year term that is staggered so that two board members are elected annually. The Superintendent of Metro View Public Schools directly reports to the board of seven (Metro View Public Schools, 2016). The board of education, along with the cabinet, comprises the strategic apex.

The Cabinet

Metro View Public Schools has a cabinet of four positions: Assistant Superintendent for Academics, Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources, Chief Financial Officer, Chief Operations Officer. The cabinet oversees the various departments that guide the teaching and assessment of Metro View students. Housed within the departments are the directors who make up the middle line managers who carry out the vision of the Assistant Superintendents.

Directors

Directors make up what Mintzberg (1979/2005) describes as the middle line. These directors have direct authority over their staff within district office and in the individual schools. Metro View's directors oversee everything from attendance and data management, to assessment (state and district), curriculum, and special education. To a large extent the directors set the day-to-day priorities within a Metro View school building (Metro View Public Schools, 2016).

Support Staff and Technostructure

While the directors make up most of middle line, they oversee many of the areas that are more appropriately settled within the support staff and technostructure as described by Mintzberg (1970/2005). Support staff for Metro View Public Schools includes building and ground crews, technology support, nutrition services, and transportation. While the directors in control of these various departments fit within the middle line, the work they conduct and the employees they control fit within the support staff organizational structure (Metro View Public Schools, 2016).

Mintzberg (1979/2005) describes the technostructure as departments that affect the work of others by standardizing processes. Metro View Public schools standardize their processes through curriculum councils, special education process coordinators, assessment coordination, and various other methods. District policies are orchestrated through direction from the middle line, but are made by operators located in the technostructure (Metro View Public Schools, 2016).

Elementary School Structure

Metro View Elementary Schools are all similarly structured. Each elementary, regardless of size has a principal and assistant principal; however, some assistant principals are part-time or serve multiple buildings. Principals support and coordinate all activities within their buildings. Each elementary school serves kindergarten through fifth grade students and each student attends for a full school day. Special education resource teachers serve special education students in every elementary building. Related service providers, including speech language pathologists and occupational therapists, are also available to special education students as needed. These positions make up the middle line and operating core of elementary school structure.

Furthermore, each building has support staff and technostructure that provide process and services that help those in the operating core the ability to instruct the students in an efficient and safe manner. Support staff maintains the building and surrounding area, records, and the health of the students. The technostructure includes staff that implement the policies and standardization provided orchestrated by the directors in the middle line. Special education process coordinators, the school psychologists that work with them, and instructional coaches are the individuals that make up the technostructure in Metro View elementary schools. The researched schools, River Elementary, Founders Elementary, and Pathfinder Elementary all fit within the organizational structure described above (S. Miller, personal communication, February 29, 2016).

Leadership Analysis

Northouse (2013) defines leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 5). Currently, Metro View Public School’s Special Services Department falls under the Assistant Superintendent of Academic Services. Special Education falls under the purview of the executive director of Special Programs which includes: nursing; before and after school programs; gifted education; and special education. Each of the listed areas also has a director that reports to the executive director. In the case of the special education department, Dr. Kim Moon (pseudonym) is responsible for overseeing the daily operations (Metro View Public School District, 2016). Dr. Moon directly works with the individuals in the special education department. She has created an environment promoting collaboration at every opportunity, from compliance to special program placement. She effectively utilizes specialists, such as board certified behavior analysts or case managers to help determine courses of action. This is as Mintzberg (1983/2005) explains, utilizing bases of power to influence and lead.

Leadership and Influence

Just as Mintzberg (1983/2005) depicts power being exercised within organizations by using skill and niche understanding to further ideas. Similarly, Dr. Moon extends her influence throughout the district by utilizing the special education process coordinators to ensure the vision of the special education department is realized in every building throughout the district. Dr. Moon has standardized the special education process at a district level and allows process coordinators to disseminate information and

monitor compliance at the building level (Kim Moon, personal communication, March 28, 2016).

Leadership and Collaboration

Collaboration is a large part of what takes to lead. Northouse (2005) explains that leadership occurs in groups and that the leader must be able to collaborate with the group to achieve buy-in and success in whatever the endeavor. Dr. Moon works closely with the process coordinators, and special education teachers to develop a vision for the department that is inclusive of other's thoughts and values experiences. In addition to process coordinators, Dr. Moon collaborates by providing local educational agency (LEA) training for principals (Kim Moon, personal communication, March 28, 2016). Three principals will participate in this study: Mr. Miller (pseudonym) Assistant Principal at River Elementary, Mr. Wong (pseudonym) Principal of Founders Elementary, and Dr. Handly (pseudonym) Principal at Pathfinder Elementary.

Leadership and Goals

Leaders set visions for their organizations, which ultimately drive the work that occurs within. With a vision comes a plan or process to help the vision become a reality. Dr. Moon works to make this the same. Northouse (2005) describes collaborative leaders as transformational. Northouse (2005), specifically states that transformational leaders connect with their followers in an honest effort to ensure buy in and productivity. Utilizing Northouse's definition of transformational leadership, Dr. Moon's work with every level of special education staff to ensure services are provided in the best manner can be seen as transformational leadership. Dr. Moon sets goals based upon the state

department of elementary and secondary education's compliance standards and guidelines (Kim Moon, personal communication, March 28, 2016).

Implications for Research in the Practitioner Setting

Special education is provided in all public education settings per federal laws (IDEA, 2004). By examining elementary teachers reasons for referring students for special education evaluations, this researcher intends to inform leadership at a district level in an effort to provide tools for further training and professional development. This additional support can help the technostucture from Mintzberg's (1979/2005) model standardize the process surrounding the special education referral process. Having standardization may provide a method to structure a more objective process for special education referrals. Providing district wide professional development and implementing supports to educational programing may provide that structure leading to better eligibility determinations and drive a need for greater regular education supports.

Gathering data from practitioners will provide this study the information to make a recommendation to Metro View School District. Additionally, analyzing the current processes and training will provide a greater understanding of what teachers know regarding referring students for a special education evaluation versus how they make their determination for referring a student.

Summary

Metro View Public School District has a rich history and strong leadership working diligently to provide services to their students. Their complex organization involves the entire community, which is diverse and is much like those other communities throughout the state. The needs of Metro View students are not different

from other communities; however, it is important to understand why some students prompt their teacher to make a referral for special education evaluation. Without this understanding, Metro View may not be able to support their teachers or students appropriately with regards to the special education referral process. This study seeks to inform Metro View and determine the need for targeted professional development in the area of special education referrals.

SECTION THREE:

SCHOLARLY REVIEW FOR THE STUDY

During the 2015-2016 school year, 402 Metro View students were referred for special education services by their parents and classroom teachers (Metro View School District, 2016). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) does not specifically outline criteria for a parental referral, but the law does explain the obligations teachers have in referring children they suspect may have a disability (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004). In the realm of education there continues to be a trend of disproportionate referrals of minority students and students perceived to be of low socioeconomic class. This study hopes to capture the perspectives of elementary school teachers and their personal criteria for referrals. Parent referrals are intentionally excluded from this study. The researcher hopes to better understand elementary teachers' knowledge of the referral process as their district has outlined.

This scholarly review will focus on three aspects of the educational environment with the intention of creating a context for this study. First, an overview of the conceptual framework that supports this study will be examined and justified. Second, conceptual underpinnings will be presented in the following order: the history of special education in the United States, professional development for teachers, and the knowing-doing gap. Lastly, existing literature on the topics of disproportionality with regard to over referral of marginalized groups and teacher referrals will be analyzed. By conducting this review, this researcher aims to justify the importance of this study within the context of the literature reviewed.

Conceptual Framework

According to Creswell (2009), research is designed with a certain method in mind: qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods. Creswell expands on this idea saying that research is designed around these methods and consists of a framework that supports the study. Merriam (2009) agrees with that notion, stating that frameworks provide structure for a study and is often in agreement with existing literature being reviewed. The Conceptual Framework for this study is educational change.

Fullan (2007) takes Pfeffer and Sutton's work and applies the concept to education in an effort to develop the concept of educational change. Fullan (2007) has written numerous articles and books regarding change and change leadership within education. This study ultimately will encompass the idea of change within special education. Fullan (2007) states "real change, desired or not, represents a serious personal and collective experience characterized by ambivalence and uncertainty; and if change works out, it can result in a sense of mastery, accomplishment, and professional growth" (p. 18). Fullan continues to explain that change happens when meaning and action are implemented together.

Meaning is to be discovered by practitioners through their own learning and growth. However, Fullan believes based on his research that teachers professional development does not provide enough information to support buy-in and in turn provides very little reason for teachers to find meaning in proposed changes. To help reengage teachers in finding the meaning necessary to make change, Fullan proposes a new outlook on instructional practices.

Fullan and Langworthy (2014) expand on the ideas set in Fullan's (2007) *The New Meaning of Educational Change*. Fullan and Langworthy outline the change pedagogy by breaking the idea down into three parts: Learning Partnerships, Deep Learning Tasks, and Digital Tools and Resources. The new pedagogy demands teachers adopt pedagogical capacity in an effort to journey through a student's education along side them as opposed to delivering all content (Fullan and Langworthy, 2014).

Ultimately the new pedagogy is Fullan's (2007) answer to providing teacher's meaning for change. Fullan's research has narrowed the requirements down to a single word: motivation. Fullan's research acknowledged that the real question is what provides the motivation for the masses that leaders in education want to change? Fullan sought to answer this question, which is where meaning enters into his research. The research showed that change planning is important and must be streamlined into an easy to understand and meaningful package, and there must be collaboration surrounding the intended outcome. The latter is achieved by the quality planning of the former (Fullan, 2007).

Using this conceptual framework as a lens, this study seeks to understand the process for elementary teachers referring students for special education evaluations. Mainly because the process for referring students has undergone changes throughout history and this researcher assumes teachers know the process of referring students. This study will explore why some teachers fail to implement the many parts. Guiding this study as stated are three conceptual underpinnings: special education, professional development, and the knowing doing gap.

Conceptual Underpinnings

History of Special Education

Yell, et al. (1998) note that all states have had laws in place providing public education since 1918. Despite this fact, the authors explain that children with disabilities were excluded from this compulsory education. Yell, et al. (1998) describe early court cases upholding the exclusion of children from the education system citing judges who believed there was no benefit to the student. The authors state that by the early 1960s there were laws in place in most states to care for the education of students with disabilities, though the laws were not consistent.

By the 1970s parents and advocacy groups had started to lead campaigns to end the exclusion that had been the long-standing rule. The year 1972 was pivotal for these groups as two landmark cases were decided in favor of students with disabilities ultimately leading to federal legislation (Mills v. Board of Education District of Columbia, 1972; Pennsylvania Association For Retarded Children (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 1972)

Landmark Court Cases Tied to Special Education

PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1972) established a case for special education citing that students affected by disabilities benefit from educational programs. Furthermore, the lawyers arguing the case maintained that school is more than just an academic experience, that states are obligated to provide public education to all children regardless of any condition, and that early intervention was paramount to a student with disabilities development. This case provided the basis for functional curriculum (life

skills) being taught in schools, as well as participation in educational programs with same aged peers (Yell, et al., 1998).

Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia (1972) was filed by parents of children representing several different disabilities, which certified them as a class of students. The plaintiffs argued that their children were denied rights under the 14th Amendment of the United States Constitution. They also argued that when denied enrollment there had not been any due process of law or safeguards for the plaintiffs' rights. The decision of this case in favor of the plaintiffs single handedly created procedural safeguards and the protection of rights that were implemented in future legislation (Yell, et al., 1998).

Federal Legislation Governing Special Education

After federal courts decided that children with disabilities were to be educated in the public setting just as their peers had been for the last 55 years, Congress had no choice but to enact legislation. In 1973 Congress passed legislation that would add people with disabilities to the list of protected statuses. The Rehabilitation Act provisioned a segment of the law, Section 504, to protect the civil rights of those individuals with disabilities. This section protects individuals with disabilities from discrimination in any setting they find themselves in, whether educational or vocational (Rehabilitation Act of 1973). Two years later, Congress found the need to pass additional legislation that was more educationally focused.

Born from a need, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) was passed in 1975. This act created the modern system of providing special education. The lawmakers' goals regarding this act were to individualize instruction to each student.

This act mandated free and appropriate public education for all students, EAHCA also funded special education programs in each state (Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975). Yell, et al. (1998) explain the implementation of the law occurred in all states with the exception of New Mexico which did not submit a plan for implementation and in turn did not receive funds. The authors go on to tell the story of subsequent lawsuits filed by advocacy groups, resulting in New Mexico being found at fault and the federal government requiring the state to comply.

Over time, flaws were identified in the law and many amendments were made. EAHCA initially was written to provide services for children from age three to 21. This provision was the first step in providing compulsory education to children with disabilities. EAHCA was later revised in 1983, 1986, and 1990 (Education for the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1983; Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1986; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990). With those changes, the definition of special education changed. The new amendments mandated that services be provided to children with disabilities from birth, and that transition would be the focus of secondary education to ensure those children with disabilities would be prepared for life after high school. The last amendment to EAHCA in 1990 changed the name of law to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990). This change signified a shift to person first language and the modernization of the law. IDEA was amended in 1997, and greater emphasis was placed on transition services, mediation in lieu of due process, inclusion in state and district assessments, and behavior intervention plans (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997). In 2004, IDEA was reauthorized and aligned with a presidential initiative known

as No Child Left Behind (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004; No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). The legislation mandates special education teachers be highly qualified, requiring them to not only be certified in special education but in the grade level and subject they teach as well (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004; No Child Left Behind Act of 2001; Office of Special Education Rehabilitative Services, 2007; Yell et al., 1998).

Professional Development

Little (2006) explains that professional development exists to provide teachers with new methods of instruction to help achieve goals within a school. Most of what is known about professional development is data gathered from formal offerings rather than internal in-services provided by a school district (Borko, 2004; Little, 2006). Both Borko and Little acknowledge that research on professional development is rather limited especially since most studies focus on mathematics and science curricula.

Prior to 1950, teachers were often individuals with an elementary education. These teachers were trained in institutes consisting of presentations on motivation and specific subject matters (Neil, 1986). Neil continues to explain that by the 1920s, Normal schools were established to train teachers. In addition to formally established teacher programs, teacher in-services were provided to existing teachers to shore up any knowledge gaps left unaddressed by the Normal school programs (Neil, 1986).

Grant, Young, and Montbriand (2001) explain that by the 1970s teacher in-service or professional development was based on the behaviorist principals of B. F. Skinner and taught teachers to compartmentalize learning into smaller parts to allow for immediate feedback. Consequently, the implementation of this new style of instruction and delivery

method corresponded with the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Grant, et., al, 2001).

In the modern era, law mandates professional development for all teachers. The Success Act of 2015 requires high quality professional development opportunities are provided for all teachers much like its predecessor, NCLB (Civic Impulse, 2017; No Child Left Behind Act, 2001). Through this mandate, researchers have begun to find a common theme suggesting collaboration is the pathway to true teacher learning and student progress (Borko, 2004; Geringer, 2003; Little, 2006).

Little (2006) identifies four goals for high quality teacher learning, they are as follows: a) professional development supports innovative teaching and student learning processes, b) professional development supports building curricular knowledge and tracing how students engage with the curriculum, c) professional development helps improve the collaboration of teaching and learning among curricular teams, and d) professional development motivates teachers to continue in their profession and provides valuable insight or tools to practitioners at all career stages.

Little's goals support Hawley's and Valli's (2001) assertion that professional development happens at a building level through collaboration with teachers in all stages of development and output. Furthermore, this collaborative method of professional development allows teaching professionals to grow and affect change in the 21st century educational environment (Geringer, 2003).

Knowing-Doing Gap

Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) authored *The Knowing-Doing Gap: How Smart Companies Turn Knowledge into Action*, coining the idea of the knowing-doing gap.

They define this term in the context of corporations; however, the concept applies to all professions where change is driven through continuing education and research. Due to these qualities the knowing-doing gap naturally fits into the realm of education. The knowing-doing gap can be best described as having knowledge of something that needs to be implemented and failing to execute the action plan.

Pfeffer and Sutton explain that while education and training models are developed by organizations to improve process, these programs rarely increase productivity and innovation. Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) go on to establish that knowledge in and of itself does not equal action. Additionally, they champion action over planning due to their findings.

Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) discuss five barriers to bridging the knowing doing gap. They are as follows:

1. Knowledge of a process or problem does not equal action. Practitioners and managers talk about a problem but rarely do thoughts translate into a solution.
2. Memory is relied on as opposed to thinking about a problem or process resulting in perpetuating the status quo.
3. Negative thoughts amongst team members results in a barrier to taking risks and learning from mistakes.
4. Complex processes that have many parts or are subjective in nature are at risk of poor follow through due to a lack of attention to detail.
5. Professional teams impede progress by competing in their environment as opposed to collaborating.

Recognizing this idea and these barriers have roots in education as well as the corporate environment, Kennedy (2011) describes the knowing-doing gap in education as “the gap between our intended outcomes and actual actions associated with student achievement” (p. 7). Furthermore, Kennedy explains that professional development intended to change the educational environment is no simple task. For true change to occur, Kennedy states all levels of practitioners must be vigilant in the process.

Similar to Kennedy’s and Pfeffer and Sutton’s work, Anghern (2004) acknowledges that the knowing doing gap involves individuals working as teams to develop and implementing plans for closing the knowing doing gap. Anghern specifically references individuals working in “silos” only able to act on a fraction of their knowledge in the structure of their companies.

The research reviewed regarding the knowing-doing gap acknowledges the same thing throughout, collaboration. Anghern (2004) presents that the knowing-doing gap can be addressed when basic needs of practitioners are met. This is reflective of Pfeffer and Sutton’s (2000) ideas that feelings of angst toward team members and competition within the team keep people from working collaboratively to address the knowing-doing gap. Additionally, the break down of knowing and doing can be traced back to those collaborative groups within a professional learning community where free thought and collaborative professional development can create highly effective educational environments (Borko, 2004; Pfeffer and Sutton, 2000).

Literature Related to the Study

Subjectivity of Referrals for Special Education

Subjectivity in the referral process is no surprise, as teachers are obligated, by federal law, to refer students they suspect to have a disability. While IDEA (2004) calls for the use of scientific inquiry to identify these select students, teachers often rely on intuition and observation, as the articles reviewed below will demonstrate.

Ysseldyke et al. (1982) found that despite EAHCA's (1975) efforts to create a system for referrals and determining eligibility, teams found students eligible based upon subjective criteria, even when objective test results that counteracted the outcome were present. According to their study, teams met to consider data and eligibility; however, much of that data was overlooked and teachers' anecdotal observations were given considerable weight in the decision making process.

While this study is over 30 years old, Ysseldyke and Algonzzine conducted many studies throughout the 1980s and 1990s, even penning a textbook together regarding special education. These authors are well known in the special education world for their contributions. Their study shed light on the problem of subjectivity in the referral process and is cited by authors writing on this topic.

This study was conducted by collecting observational data using video recordings of team meetings where children had been evaluated for special education services. They used two observers for the purpose of validity and reliability. This study is deemed reliable based upon an interrater agreement that resulted in 95%; the recommended agreement is to be at least 80% (Creswell, 2009). Ysseldyke and Algonzzine were the first researchers to conduct research on this topic shedding light on a troublesome

practice. The study serves as a base for all other studies that have come after regarding the subjectivity of special education referrals.

Like Ysseldyke and Algonzzine before them, Mamlin and Harris (1998) found themselves faced with the rapid growth of special education which resulted in their study of referrals in elementary schools. They were taken back by the number of referrals that ended in the placement of students in special education. They focused their study on teachers' reasons for referral and evaluation. Similar to Ysseldyke and Algonzzine, the authors conducted a qualitative study. However, Mamlin and Harris (1998) conducted interviews, observations, and a document review to answer their research questions.

The authors ultimately found that while programs in the schools were contributing to the progress of struggling students, referrals were still being made based upon anecdote rather than fact. This revelation led them to recommend further research into the subjectivity of teacher referrals for special education. In their recommendations, they describe the need for a larger sample size. While the authors identify their sample size as small and as a limitation, it is important to note that the data was significant, as Merriam (2009) states that a sample size must be large enough to result in a saturation of data.

While the previous studies identified in this review were conducted in the United States, a researcher in Canada identified subjectivity in special education referrals as a possible problem as well. As a special educator himself, Dunn (2006) recognized problems with the referrals process while working in a Canadian elementary school. His study hoped to understand teachers' reasons for referrals to special education. Similar to the previous studies, Dunn (2006) adopts the social constructivist worldview as a lens to view the phenomenon of the referral process.

To collect his data, he interviewed 13 teachers in a single school. The teachers interviewed were teaching in a building consisting of kindergarten through sixth grade students. In the end, his results were similar to the studies conducted previously. He found teachers use their subjective observations to make referrals for special education. Additionally, he found that there were common characteristics of students that teachers deemed needing referrals. He, too, offered suggestions for future research, which included an increased sample size (Dunn, 2006).

Disproportionality of Special Education

Subjectivity continues to exist even when variables of studies change. The articles reviewed below make a strong case attesting to the fact that certain populations of students are more likely to be referred for special education services (Klingner & Harry, 2006; Parette, 2005; Poon-McBrayer & García, 1994; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001).

While conducting this review, a common theme within articles was found. Disproportionate numbers of students representing multiple cultural subgroups are being referred for special education programs. Poon-McBrayer and García (1994) and Parette (2005) highlight occurrences of students from different cultures and their journey toward eligibility for special education. Poon-McBrayer and Garcia (1994) focus specifically on Asian American students, which is unique as are often underrepresented in special education, which is acknowledged in their study. More importantly their study sheds light on a greater issue: English language learners (ELL). Poon-McBrayer and Garcia make a statement that children who are multilingual are often perceived as having learning or behavioral concerns because of linguistic barriers. Similarly, Parette's (2005) research focused on ELL students who attended charter schools. He explains that the schools lack

of understanding of their culture contributed to the academic woes of the students. In turn, the teachers referred ELL students for special education services without fully meeting their cultural and linguistic needs (Parette, 2005).

Similar to Parette (2005), Poon-McBayer and Garcia's (1994) findings suggest that the participating school district requires a streamlined process of identifying students who need English language services, and those who require special education. Both studies allude to the fact that these students were not able to access the curriculum as their peers due to a barrier of communication, not due to a disability. They note that students with a language barrier can also have a disability protected by IDEA and Section 504, the participating school district did not have procedures or curriculum in place to accurately differentiate between the two learning problems. Ultimately both studies regard culture and school districts lack of programming to address student needs within this context. These studies link the districts' lack of understanding to higher rates of special education referral (Parette, 2005; Poon-McBrayer & García, 1994).

In addition to the previous two studies, Klingner and Harry (2006) studied English language learners (ELL) and special education referrals. Their ethnographic research was conducted over three years, 12 schools, and 19 student cases. Their sampling was determined by an analysis of the district chosen in order to gain a diverse representation of ELLs. The research team attended both the child study team meetings as well as the placement conferences determining special education eligibility. In this three year study, the authors found that very little emphasis was placed on meeting these children where they were as ELLs.

Klinger and Harry (2006) found that emphasis was misplaced on the referral process rather than strategies designed to help the ELL. A significant caveat to this particular study is that the researchers had a strong bias and preconceived notion of how referrals for ELLs were conducted in the district sampled. This is mainly due to the roles held in the district before the study was conducted.

Disproportionate populations in special education are not limited to culture alone; gender also contributes to the skewed populations found by researchers. Wehmeyer and Schwartz (2001) conducted their mixed methods study regarding gender and special education. They conducted a Pearson's chi-square test where $n=488$ to test whether there was a correlation between gender and frequency of placement in special education. Ultimately they found a significant relationship ($p=.032$). The researchers also found that the correlation was heavily skewed toward males, so much so that their findings suggest that females are under identified due to gender bias.

Furthermore, this study encompassed a records review consisting of 695 files. Wehmeyer and Schwartz (2001) identified that males made up 66% of the total sample of students with severe learning disabilities or an intellectual disability. As a part of the file review, the authors examined the referral form, which consisted of a narrative portion as well as a Likert scale. Of the referral forms reviewed, teachers cited behavior problems as the most common reason for referrals for males, where academic struggle was noted for females. However, when providing answers on the less subjective Likert scale, teachers' answers were no different between genders (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001).

The empirical data collected in this research is important to this study as the data justifies the problem of subjectivity in school referrals. The sheer number of files

reviewed in this study's document analysis provides the data saturation that Merriam (2009) set as the criterion for sample size. This information helps solidify the significance of this study.

Teacher Efficacy and Referrals for Special Education Services

Three studies found during this review of literature highlight teacher self-efficacy and the referral process for special education. Each study utilized quantitative measures to test their hypotheses, and the exact same measurement instruments. Of the three, two found positive correlations between teachers' self-efficacy and the likelihood of referral due to behavioral and academic concerns (Meijer & Foster, 1988; Soodak & Podell, 1993). The outlier was a study conducted by Tejeda-Delgado (2009) which did not find any positive correlation between any of the five hypotheses she explored, despite using the same measurement instruments.

Meijer and Foster (1988) conducted their study on teacher efficacy and special education referrals in Dutch elementary schools. They were able to survey 230 teachers across the Netherlands to collect quantitative data related to the teachers' efficacy and their likelihood of referring children for special education services due to behavior or academic concerns. The researchers utilized a MANCOVA design which ultimately resulted in statistical significance based on student problem type: learning, behavioral, or both. Teacher self-efficacy was found to be a significantly linked to both the problem ratings and referral chances.

While this study was conducted in a different country, Meijer and Foster highlight the universal problem that exists with regards to the complicated nature of the referral process. The study supports subjectivity in the special education referral process. The

addition of the teachers' feelings regarding their ability to teach difficult students only adds a layer of complexity to the problem.

Building on the work of Meier and Foster (1998), Soodak and Podell (1993) conducted quantitative research to test their hypotheses in the New York City metropolitan area. The researchers also investigated teachers' efficacy regarding student problem types and the effects on the rate of referrals to special education. Surveying 192 teachers provided the researchers with a substantial amount of data to analyze using multivariate and regression models. The team found that teachers confident in their abilities were apt to accept the challenge of keeping a child with learning or behavioral concerns in their classroom, while those less confident in dealing with student challenges referred more students for special education services (Soodak & Podell, 1993).

Conversely, Tejeda-Delgado (2009) conducted a similar study to those mentioned above, while taking into account more variables such as efficacy, tolerance, gender, and experience. The author combined the methods of the previous two studies along with updated rating scales to come up with a new comparison study. The author's motivation for this study is to determine how the stated variables effect the teachers' decision to refer students to special education. In the study, the researcher tested five hypotheses to determine the variables had a correlation with an increase in special education referrals (Tejeda-Delgado, 2009).

Receiving data from 167 participants, Tejeda-Delgado (2009) utilized an ANOVA statistical model to determine the significance of each variable. For each variable tested the ANOVA resulted in a $p > .05$, which statistically is insignificant. Tejeda-Delgado

(2009) espoused results that directly contradicted the findings of the foundational studies utilized as a basis for the research.

Tejeda-Delgado (2009) combined the studies and use of data collection instruments resulting in a comprehensive comparative study. The author makes the claim that disproving the previous studies might signify a paradigm shift in a positive direction for teachers' and special education referrals (Tejeda-Delgado, 2009).

Summary

Change is at the forefront of the issue of special education referrals for special education evaluation. The studies presented in this review of literature support that teachers make referrals based on their subjective understanding of a student, however there are processes that are in place require more of teachers, in the way of data. Using the lens of educational change as defined by Fullan (2007) and the conceptual underpinnings of special education, professional development, and the knowing-doing gap, this researcher will attempt to find themes within the context interviews and focus groups to identify courses of action to present to Metro View Public School District.

SECTION FOUR:

CONTRIBUTION TO PRACTICE

Plan for Dissemination of Practitioner Contribution

Who: Attendees of the Missouri Counsel of Administrators in Special Education (MOCASE) 2017 Fall Conference (superintendents, directors of special education, special education process coordinators, and special education teachers)

When: 2017 Fall Conference, proposal submitted by Spring of 2017

How: Through a presentation at the MOCASE Fall Conference. The presentation will be an executive summary poster.

Type of Document

Document type will be a executive summary poster presentation that will be presented at the 2017 MOCASE Fall Conference. The executive summary will inform the audience of what prompts elementary school teachers to refer a student for a special education evaluation. Upon request the full report can be made available.

Rationale for this Contribution Type

MOCASE is the premier association for special education administrators.

Outline of Proposed Contents

Abstract

Objectives

Materials & Methods

 Research Design

 Participants

 Setting

 Focus Groups

 Interviews

 Artifacts

Results

Conclusions

Implications For Practice and Future Research

Acknowledgements

References

Practitioner Document

EXPLORING THE K-5 SPECIAL EDUCATION REFERRAL PROCESS IN ONE MIDWEST SUBURBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

Executive Summary for Poster Presentation

Missouri Counsel of Administrators in Special Education (MOCASE)

Fall Conference 2017

Lake Ozark, Missouri

September 2017

By Jake W. Boswell, Ed.D.

Abstract

Studies have shown referrals for special education evaluations and the evaluation process itself is marred by teacher subjectivity and a lack of quantitative data (Dunn, 2006; Mamlin & Harris, 1998; and Ysseldyke et al., 1982). Consequently, this behavior leads to over identification of students from minority cultures due to their struggle to assimilate into the school environment (Deninger, 2008; Klingner & Harry, 2006; Parette, 2005; Poon-McBrayer & García, 1994; Skiba et al., 2008; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001). This study seeks to better understand the special education referral process in one Midwestern school district. Specifically, this qualitative study employed focus groups, interviews, and artifact collection to engage K-5 regular education teachers in conversations about common behaviors that prompt a referral for special education evaluation. The research was conducted in three elementary schools in a metropolitan school district.

Objectives

- Explore the referral process and engage K-5 regular education elementary teachers and administrators in conversation related to that process and what drives teacher referrals for special education evaluation.
- Examine the perceptions of regular education elementary teachers and their reasons for referring students for special education evaluation.
- Contribute to the current literature to help support regular education elementary teachers in the referral process.

Research Questions

The overarching research question guiding this study is:

What prompts regular education elementary teachers to refer a student for evaluation to determine eligibility for special education services?

The secondary research question follows:

What specific student characteristics (academic and behavioral) prompt your referral?

Theoretical Framework: Change Theory

Conceptual Underpinnings

Special Education

Professional Development

The Knowing-Doing
Gap

Design of the Study

Research Design

The goal of this qualitative case study (Creswell, 2012) was to understand the perceptions of K-5 teachers with regard to special education evaluation referrals. In this pursuit the researcher adopted the perspective of a social constructionist (Creswell, 2009). This researcher aimed to better understand teachers' perceptions of the special education referral process by specifically targeting what prompts elementary teachers to refer a student for special education evaluation and the characteristics (academic and behavioral) those students exhibit prior to being referred. Qualitative studies are appropriate when a researcher seeks to understand motive and improve practice (Merriam, 2009).

Focus groups, interviews, and artifact collection were the primary sources of data driving this research (Merriam, 2009). Focus group participants were purposely sampled to represent the varied demographics of teachers to include gender and years of

experience teaching (Merriam, 2009). Each teacher represented his or her grade level (K-5); each member was unique to one grade. Interviews were conducted with administrators of each building, as well as a process coordinator for special education, and the Director of Special Education. These interviews were used as supplemental information to provide data related to current practices and process.

Focus groups and interviews were conducted at each site in their administrative conference rooms. Informed consent was provided to participants to allow for audio recording equipment. Transcriptions of the audio recordings were verbatim and provided by an internet based company (www.rev.com). The third party transcription service was independent and blind to the purpose of the research. The individuals interviewed crosschecked the extrapolated data for errors. Coding was implemented to further define themes, which were checked to ensure at least and 80% accuracy was obtained as recommended by Creswell (2009).

Participants

Focus group participants were 18 teachers from three different elementary schools (Founders, Pathfinder, and River). Each teacher represented an individual grade level and was selected based on individual demographics to include various years of teaching, and length of time serving in the Metro View Public School District. A number was assigned to each participant to protect his or her identity. Additionally, interviews were conducted with a building level administrator from each elementary school, an elementary special education process coordinator, and the Director of Special Education. All participants were given informed consent forms to provide information about their rights in this study.

Setting

Metro View Public School District located in a Midwestern metropolitan area, serves as the setting of this study. Metro View Public Schools is a large district serving approximately 12,000 students. Research was conducted in three of the 11 elementary buildings located in the school district. Purposeful sampling was used to collect data (Merriam, 2009). Each school was selected intentionally due to varied populations, and demographics. Within each building, teachers were queried based on their grade level expertise.

Focus Groups

The researcher provided questions for groups of six teachers. Each teacher represented one grade level from kindergarten to fifth grade. Focus group sessions were conducted before school was in session for the day. The duration of focus groups were between 10 – 15 minutes long and were audio recorded. Data saturation was achieved when similar themes were emerging among teachers in all buildings researched.

Interviews

Key administrative personnel were interviewed as a part of this study. A total of five interviews were conducted to collect data related to current referral practices and training for teachers. Interviews were audio recorded and ranged between five and 10 minutes long.

Artifacts

Artifacts related to the special education referral process were analyzed including the referral process flowchart and referral form used by Metro View Public School District. These artifacts were chosen because it was assumed by this researcher that most

teachers had interacted with these two items during their interactions in the referral process.

Results

Focus groups were conducted with kindergarten through fifth grade teachers in three different elementary buildings, totaling 18 total teachers. The participating teachers had taught as few as three years or in the most veteran teacher's case, 30 years. The most any one teacher had taught for the Metro View School District was 27 years. Additional interviews were conducted with building administration from the three buildings. Furthermore, the Director of Special Education and an elementary Special Education Process Coordinator were interviewed to better understand the district's support and role in the special education referral process. Moreover, artifacts from the referral process were used to help inform this study. From the focus groups, interviews, and artifact collection the following three themes emerged which explain elementary teachers' understanding of the special education referral process: Lack of Progress, Building Level Support, and Lack of District Support.

The themes presented emerged as teachers from different focus groups were closely aligned. This was especially true in the theme, lack of progress. All 18 teachers responded with something related to students not progressing in the curriculum. Additionally the theme, lack of district support, was another point referenced by all focus group participants. Data saturation was achieved when 18 to 16 participants were responding to questions in similar ways. The themes and categories included are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Themes Regarding the K-5 Elementary Referral Process

Theme	Response frequency	Categories included
Lack of progress	18	Intellectual interactions Look for gaps Feel like they're behind Not seeing progress Interventions not working Wait to fail Red flags No growth
Building level support	16	Administrative guidance Special education presentation Teacher Assistance Team (TAT) Child Study Team (CST)
Lack of district support	18	No formal training Cannot think of time None Haven't had any

Conclusions

This study was designed to explore the K-5 special education referral process in one Midwest suburban school district. Additionally, the researcher delved deeper into supports and training provided to the teachers in the three buildings studied. Ultimately, this researcher aimed to expand on the studies conducted by Dunn (2006), Mamlin and Harris (1998), and Ysseldyke et al. (1982) to determine if subjectivity still presented itself within the referral process, and to determine the reason that may be happening. By asking what prompts K-5 teachers to refer a student for special education this researcher hoped to better understand the Metro View Public School District referral process, and its teachers' perceptions of that system.

The overarching reason that Metro View teachers refer students for special education evaluations appears to be gaps in learning or a lack of progression in the

curriculum. Two of the three buildings studied indicated a strong use of data and intervention, where the other building took a vague approach, simply stating that students are brought to Child Study Team (CST) to start the process of referral.

Given the differences in the three buildings' approach to special education referrals and the process coordinator's statement that "In my three elementary buildings it's [the referral process] done three completely different ways" it is recommended the district work on developing a method of standardization to add consistency across all elementary buildings.

Furthermore, it is abundantly clear that teachers perceive the district as not providing any professional development or support with regard to special education referrals. District guided professional development could help to provide a standard process for referrals. Additionally, professional development and a standard teacher assistant team process could help teachers better understand how to implement interventions and determine what data to collect to facilitate special education evaluation referrals. Providing parameters could help to create another layer of standardization ensuring that a student moving from one building to the next is getting the same level of intervention or consideration from the Teacher Assistance Team.

The proposed professional development could be delivered via face-to-face presentation in a small group form factor, or to a mass audience through a webinar format that could be referred to as needed. This added level of support might help teachers understand better what the law and their district require.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

This researcher intended to create a study that would be informative to Metro View Public Schools regarding their special education referral process. As the school district reflects on their special education referral process, this study could serve as a reminder that teachers perceive a lack of support at the district level. Data collected during this study affirm, that Metro View Public Schools need to consider the following:

- Professional development district wide in the area of special education referrals
- Create a webinar related to the referral process for periodic reference
- Make referral paperwork and flowchart easily accessible
- Empower process coordinators to facilitate yearly in-service
- Encourage process coordinators to meet with teachers with questions regarding the referral process

Future research could benefit from a whole district study. This would allow for greater data saturation. Additionally, this researcher failed to specifically ask about behavior influencing a referral for special education. This error may have resulted in participants not providing data to explain in greater detail what prompts their referrals.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Dr. Carole Edmonds, my advisor, and my committee, Dr. Wall, Dr. Knott, and Dr. Melton. Your time, feedback, and support have been greatly appreciated. Dr. Edmonds, thank you especially for your countless hours of support, revisions, and “pep talks” to keep me on the path to finishing my dissertation. I am deeply honored to be counted among you all as a doctor of education.

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Contact Information

Jake W. Boswell, Ed. D., is a special education process coordinator in the Metro View Public School District.

The following poster, split into two parts, is a visual representation of the information provided in this document.

EXPLORING THE K-5 SPECIAL ED ONE MIDWEST SUBUR

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Metro View S

ABSTRACT

Studies have shown referrals for special education evaluations and the evaluation process itself is marred by teacher subjectivity and a lack of quantitative data (Dunn, 2006; Mamlin & Harris, 1998; and Ysseldyke et al., 1982). Consequently, this behavior leads to over identification of students from minority cultures due to their struggle to assimilate into the school environment (Deninger, 2008; Klingner & Harry, 2006; Parette, 2005; Poon-McBrayer & Garcia, 1994; Skiba et al., 2008; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001). This study seeks to better understand the special education referral process in one Midwestern school district. Specifically, this qualitative study employed focus groups, interviews, and artifact collection to engage K-5 regular education teachers in conversations about common behaviors that prompt a referral for special education evaluation. The research was conducted in three elementary schools in a metropolitan school district.

OBJECTIVES

- **Legislative mandates guide the special education process at every juncture. The referral process is the first step and most important to focus on to drive decision making in the future of the assessed student.**
- **One Midwestern school district utilize multiple methods of data collection and referral processes.**
- **Explore the referral process and engage k-5 regular education elementary teachers and administrators in conversation related to that process and what drives teacher referrals for special education evaluation**
- **Examine the perceptions of regular education elementary teachers and their reasons for referring students for special education evaluation.**
- **Contribute to the current literature to help support regular education elementary teachers in the referral process**

The overarching research question guiding this study is:

What prompts regular education elementary teachers to refer a student for evaluation to determine eligibility for special education services?

The secondary research question follows:

What specific student characteristics (academic and behavioral) prompt your referral?

MATERIALS & METHODS

Research Design

The goal of this qualitative case study (Creswell, 2012) was to understand the perceptions of K-5 teachers with regard to special education evaluation referrals. In this pursuit the researcher adopts the perspective of a social constructionist (Creswell, 2009). Specifically targeting what prompts elementary teachers to refer a student for special education evaluation and the characteristics (academic and behavioral) those students exhibit prior to being referred. Qualitative studies are appropriate when a researcher seeks to understand motive and improve practice (Merriam, 2009).

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RESULTS

Focus groups were conducted with kindergarten through fifth grade teachers in three different elementary buildings, totaling 18 total teachers. The participating teachers had taught as few as three years or in the most veteran teacher's case, 30 years. The most any one teacher had taught for the Metro View School District was 27 years. Additional interviews were conducted with building administration from the three buildings. Furthermore, the director of special education and an elementary special education process coordinator were interviewed to better understand the district's support and role in the special education referral process. Moreover, artifacts from the referral process were used to help inform this study. From the focus groups, interviews, and artifact collection the following three themes emerged: Lack of Progress, Building Level Support, and Lack of District Support. The themes and categories included are presented in Table 1 below.

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CONCLUSIONS

This study was designed to explore the K-5 special education referral process in one Midwest suburban school district. Additionally, the researcher delved deeper into supports and training provided to the teachers in the three buildings studied. Ultimately, this researcher aimed to expand on the studies conducted by Dunn (2006), Mamlin and Harris (1998), and Ysseldyke et al. (1982) to determine if subjectivity still presented itself within the referral process, and to determine the reason that may be happening. By asking, what prompts K-5 teachers to refer a student for special education this researcher hoped to better understand the Metro View School District referral process, and its teachers' perceptions of that system.

The overarching reason that Metro View teachers refer students for special education evaluations appears to be gaps in learning or a lack of progression in the curriculum. Two of the three buildings studied indicated a strong use of data and intervention, where the other building took a vague approach, simply stating that students are brought to CST to start the process of referral.

Given the differences in the three buildings' approach to special education referrals and the process coordinator's statement that "In my three elementary buildings it's [the referral process] done three completely different ways" it is recommended the district work on developing a method of standardization to add consistency across all elementary buildings.

Furthermore, it is abundantly clear that teachers perceive the district as not providing any professional development or support with regard to special education referrals. District guided professional development could help to provide a standard process for referrals. Additionally, professional development and a standard teacher assistant team process could help teachers better understand how to implement interventions and determine what data to collect to facilitate special education evaluation referrals. Providing parameters could help to create another layer of standardization ensuring that a student moving from one building to the next is getting the same level of intervention or consideration from the Teacher Assistance Team.

The proposed professional development could be delivered via face-to-face presentation in a small group form factor, or to a mass audience through a webinar format that could be referred to as needed. This added level of support might help teachers understand better what the law and their district require.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Data collected during this study affirm, that Metro View Public Schools need to consider the following:

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SECTION FIVE:
CONTRIBUTION TO SCHOLARSHIP

Target Journal

The target journal for publication is the International Journal of Special Education.

Rationale for this Target

The International Journal of Special Education is an important contributor of best practices and sets the course for the future of special education scholarship and practice. Additionally, its articles are provided free of charge which allows greater access to practitioners around the world.

Outline for Proposed Contents

Title Page
Abstract (approximately 100 words)
Introduction
Background to the Study
Statement of the Problem
Purpose
Methods
 Research Design
 Participants
 Focus Groups
 Interviews
 Artifacts
Results
 Lack of Progress
 Building Level Support
 Lack of District Support
Discussion
 Limitations
 Implications for Practice and Future Research
References

Plan for Submission

Who: Jake W Boswell, Ed.D.
When: Upon defense of this dissertation
How: Via the online submission guidelines

Submission-Ready Journal Article

Title Page

EXPLORING THE K-5 SPECIAL EDUCATION REFERRAL PROCESS IN ONE
MIDWEST SUBURBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

Jake W. Boswell, Ed.D.

Metro View Public Schools

EXPLORING THE K-5 SPECIAL EDUCATION REFERRAL PROCESS IN ONE MIDWEST SUBURBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

Abstract

Studies have shown referrals for special education evaluations and the evaluation process itself is marred by teacher subjectivity and a lack of quantitative data (Dunn, 2006; Mamlin & Harris, 1998; and Ysseldyke et al., 1982). Consequently, this behavior leads to over-identification of students from minority cultures due to their struggle to assimilate into the school environment (Deninger, 2008; Klingner & Harry, 2006; Parette, 2005; Poon-McBrayer & García, 1994; Skiba et al., 2008; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001). This study seeks to better understand the special education referral process in one Midwestern school district. Specifically, this qualitative study employed focus groups, interviews, and artifact collection to engage K-5 regular education teachers in conversations about common academic behaviors that prompt a referral for special education evaluation. The research was conducted in three elementary schools in a metropolitan school district.

Introduction

Malik is a second grade student in Ms. Brook's class. He is from an economically disadvantaged family consisting of his mother and older sister. Malik is a hard worker; however, despite his efforts, he struggles with reading for understanding. Ms. Brooks has consulted her building's child study team (CST), which consists of her Assistant Principal, the Special Education Process Coordinator, and general education teachers. The team reviews data from his district and state testing, which suggests that he may be working at his ability level, therefore not a student suspected of having a disability. The

team suggests accommodations or modifications that would be appropriate for the general education setting. Six weeks have passed since that time, and Malik has made little improvement in the general education curriculum. Ms. Brooks is frustrated and, despite the data, she demands that the team consider a special education referral. Should the CST commit to an evaluation to determine special education eligibility?

Background of the Study

Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Richey, and Graden (1982) and Dunn (2006) identified a tendency for teachers to refer students for special education evaluation due to subjective data rather than their academic performance data. Dunn (2006) specifically identified teacher reasons for referral based on the following student behavior: the inability to apply knowledge, the need for repeated directions, general inattention, time management, and atypical behavior. Special education was first conceptualized through congressional action in 1961 when the Teacher's of the Deaf Act of 1961 was passed. This law paved the way for a broader law governing all disabilities in 1975 with the implementation of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EAHCA). Ultimately, EAHCA was revised in 1983 and 1990, which marked the beginning of the modern law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 (IDEA). In 2004 IDEA was reauthorized and remains the law governing special education in the United States (Office of Special Education Rehabilitative Services, 2007). Within these laws common terms in education were born such as free and appropriate public education (FAPE), least restrictive environment (LRE), and Child Find (Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004). Of these terms Child Find is important to the referral process, as it requires teachers and administrators to work

with special education personnel to evaluate and determine special education eligibility for students known to be below their same aged peers. IDEA specifically states that the use of “scientifically based research” is required when making determinations of special education programming and evaluation (Individuals with Disabilities Act of 2004). This study focuses on teachers and their use and understanding of the referral process as it relates to Child Find and the referral of their students.

Statement of the Problem

After the implementation of EAHCA in 1975 a new subset of public education was born. With special education’s inception a host of rights to both students and parents was developed to ensure due process of law. Eligibility for special education is based upon specific guidelines passed down from the federal government to state and local agencies to implement (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2013). As stated before, IDEA requires the use of “scientifically based research” to guide evaluations and programming for special education; however, Dunn (2006), Mamlin and Harris (1998), and Ysseldyke et al. (1982) maintain that even after congress passed EAHCA and IDEA teams continued to dismiss assessment data and determine eligibility based upon subjective viewpoints and assertions. These studies conducted by the above mentioned researchers point to subjective data carrying tremendous weight in a process that IDEA (2004) mandates data be collected through scientifically based means.

Dunn (2006), Mamlin & Harris (1998), and Ysseldyke et al. (1982), demonstrate how subjectivity has impacted the identification process for special education services over time. The laws that govern these processes require empirical data to support identification of a disability and implementation of special education services thereafter

(Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). Furthermore, subjectivity in the referral process creates situations in which there is disproportionality in referrals and positive eligibility determinations. Several studies have identified groups of students that are singled out and found eligible for their inability to assimilate to school or community due to their race, gender, or culture (Deninger, 2008; Klingner & Harry, 2006; Parette, 2005; Poon-McBrayer & García, 1994; Skiba et al., 2008; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001). Despite their differences, the authors of these studies all conclude that schools must make a better effort to understand their students' unique cultural perspectives (Deninger, 2008; Klingner & Harry, 2006; Parette, 2005; Poon-McBrayer & García, 1994; Skiba et al., 2008; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001).

Purpose

This study is designed to identify the characteristics (learning and behavioral) teachers use to refer their students for special education services. This researcher has collected data to provide feedback to administrators of a local school district to guide teacher training and professional development. The identified problem of subjectivity in the referral process (Dunn, 2006; Mamlin & Harris, 1998; and Ysseldyke et al., 1982) may indicate a gap between teacher professional development and their practice. Additionally, special education is a process driven area of education strictly guided by law. When practitioners do not follow the guidelines, parents have the right to file formal complaints and invoke their due process rights (Missouri Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2009).

Methods

Research Design

This qualitative study seeks to understand the perceptions of K-5 teachers with regard to special education evaluation referrals. In this pursuit the researcher adopts the perspective of a social constructionist (Creswell, 2009). Specifically targeting what prompts elementary teachers to refer a student for special education evaluation and the characteristics (academic and behavioral) those students exhibit prior to being referred. Qualitative studies are appropriate when a researcher seeks to understand motive and improve practice (Merriam, 2009).

Metro View Public School District located in a Midwestern metropolitan area serves as the setting of this study. Research was conducted in three of the 11 elementary buildings located in the school district. Purposeful sampling was used to collect data (Merriam, 2009). Each school was selected intentionally due to varied populations, and demographics. Within each building teachers were queried based on their grade level expertise.

Focus groups, interviews, and artifact collection are the primary sources of data driving this research (Merriam, 2009). Focus groups participants were purposely sampled to represent the varied demographics of teacher to include gender, and years taught (Merriam, 2009). Each teacher represented his or her grade level K-5; each member was unique to one grade. Interviews were conducted with administrators of each building, as well as a Process Coordinator for Special Education, and the Director of Special Education. These interviews were used as supplemental information to provide data related to current practices and process.

Focus groups and interviews were conducted at each site in their administrative conference rooms (Kruger & Casey, 2009). Informed consent was provided to participants to allow for audio recording equipment. Transcriptions of the audio recordings were verbatim and provided by an Internet based company (www.rev.com). The third party transcription service was independent and blind to the purpose of the research. The extrapolated data was cross-checked for errors by the individuals interviewed. Open and Axial coding was implemented to further define themes, which were checked to ensure at least an 80% accuracy was obtained as recommended by Creswell (2009).

Participants

Focus group participants were 18 teachers from three different elementary schools (Founder's, Pathfinder, and River). Each teacher represented an individual grade level and was selected based on his or her individual demographics to include various genders, years of teaching, and length of time serving in the Metro View Public School District. A number was assigned to each participant to protect his or her identity. Additionally, interviews were conducted with a building level administrator from each elementary school, an Elementary Special Education Process Coordinator, and the Director of Special Education. All participants were given informed consent forms to provide information about their rights in this study.

Focus Groups

The researcher provided questions for groups of six teachers. Each teacher represented one grade level from kindergarten to fifth grade. Focus group sessions were

conducted before school was in session. The duration of focus groups were between 10 – 15 minutes long and were audio recorded.

Interviews

Key administrative personnel were interviewed as a part of this study. A total of five interviews were conducted to collect data related to current referral practices and training for teachers. Interviews were audio recorded and ranged between five and 10 minutes long.

Artifacts

Artifacts related to the special education referral process were analyzed including the referral process flowchart and referral form used by Metro View School District. These artifacts were chosen because it was assumed by this researcher that most teachers had interacted with these two items during their interactions in the referral process.

Results

Focus groups were conducted with kindergarten through fifth grade teachers in three different elementary buildings, totaling 18 total teachers. The participating teachers had taught as few as three years or, in the most veteran teacher's case, 30 years. The most any one teacher had taught for the Metro View Public School District was 27 years. Additional interviews were conducted with building administration from the three buildings. Furthermore, the Director of Special Education and an elementary Special Education Process Coordinator were interviewed to better understand the district's support and role in the special education referral process. From the focus groups, interviews, and artifact collection the following three themes emerged: lack of progress;

building level support; and lack of district support. The themes and categories included are presented in Table 1 below.

Table.

Themes Regarding the K-5 Elementary Referral Process

Theme	Response frequency	Categories included
Lack of progress	18	Intellectual interactions Look for gaps Feel like they're behind Not seeing progress Interventions not working Wait to fail Red flags No growth
Building level support	16	Administrative guidance Special education presentation Teacher Assistance Team (TAT) Child Study Team (CST)
Lack of district support	18	No formal training Cannot think of time None Haven't had any

Lack of Progress

During the focus groups the researcher asked specifically what prompts you to make a referral for special education evaluation? The participants all answered in some form related to a lack of student progress. While answers did vary to a certain extent, each participant described students' academic struggles. Participant three at Founders Elementary explained "I can tell by how they are interacting with me intellectually, like through our problem solving of mathematics and reading and how they're kind of taking in that information and retaining it." Another participant at Trailblazer Elementary stated, "If they've been presented with a lot of different strategies, and progress isn't being made,

that's kind of my red flag.” Many of the participants also just echoed the sentiments of the teacher seated next to them giving affirming head nods and “mm-hmm” sounds.

Participant five at Founder’s Elementary made a point to say “...if we don’t give that solid foundation as they leave us, then we’re not meeting the needs of the child for them to be successful in the next [grade] level.” A noteworthy piece of information, not one participant from any building provided behavior as a reason for referral. All participants simply explained the lack of progress or gaps in learning.

Building Level Support

Focus groups were engaged in a conversation of their understanding of the referral process and the types of professional development offered related to the referral process. During these conversations many of the teachers offered explanations of their process, which differed slightly across buildings. Each building’s teachers explained a process that included either at Teacher Assistance Team (TAT) or Child Study Team (CST). Pathfinder and Founders Elementary Schools refer to their team as TAT.

Additionally, teachers from these buildings had detailed accounts of collecting data, as well as implementing interventions prior to referring a student for special education evaluation. River Elementary describes their team as a CST where teachers present the students’ case to their building administration. River Elementary teachers did not mention the use of data when referring students. Participant One stated “my understanding is we bring them up to Child Study Team and then we go from there.” The other participants simply agreed; however, River Elementary participant two stated, “parent referrals are ideal.” This topic of parent referral was not mentioned in the other two buildings.

The participants were fairly positive in their building's support of the referral process. A participant indicated that professional development happens informally through the TAT process, indicating that each time a student case is presented she learned something new about the referral process. Participant Three at Founder's elementary offered a similar sentiment in saying, "Yeah, I, I don't feel like I've experienced any [professional development], and I feel like it's, it's more of you learn as you go." Participant Four at River Elementary echoed, "...we've talked about it [referral process] in team meetings or faculty meetings, but other than that, nothing." In the three buildings the same experience was had through informal training or presentation on the process, but not directed by the district.

An interview was conducted with a Special Education Process Coordinator for elementary buildings. When asked about providing training to staff, she said that she had in the past, but not in recent years. She indicated that she served on her building Teacher Assistance Teams to offer support at a building level.

Lack of District Support

As a result of the perceived building level support the teacher participants did not see the district as supportive. 17 participants indicated that the district had not conducted any professional development for them regarding the referral process. One of the participants at Founder's Elementary indicated the following "Um, I, I mean this is my fourth year in Liberty, and I have had maybe one [presentation], um, out of the four years, so, yeah, not a lot of training." While it could be assumed this participant meant she had been trained, she still indicates it was not substantial.

During an interview, the Director of Special Education was asked if she had engaged in planning or providing professional development regarding the referral process. She did indicate that professional development is provided to new teachers coming into the district. Her description is as follows:

I go in and I do some professional development with regular education staff, all new staff that are coming to the district. I talk with them. One of the handouts they're given, or some of the handouts they're given, are how to make, uh, you know agency referral and the whole process is outlined there.

Based on this information it is presumable that professional development has been offered to some of the newer staff that was not available at the time the participants entered service at Metro View Public School District. This can be assumed as the current Director of Special Education has served in that capacity for five years according to her interview. Furthermore, the Director of Special Education mentioned a flow chart provided to new teachers (Figure 1) for special education referrals. Presumably veteran teachers have not seen or used this flow chart as a reference since it was not made available to them in professional development.

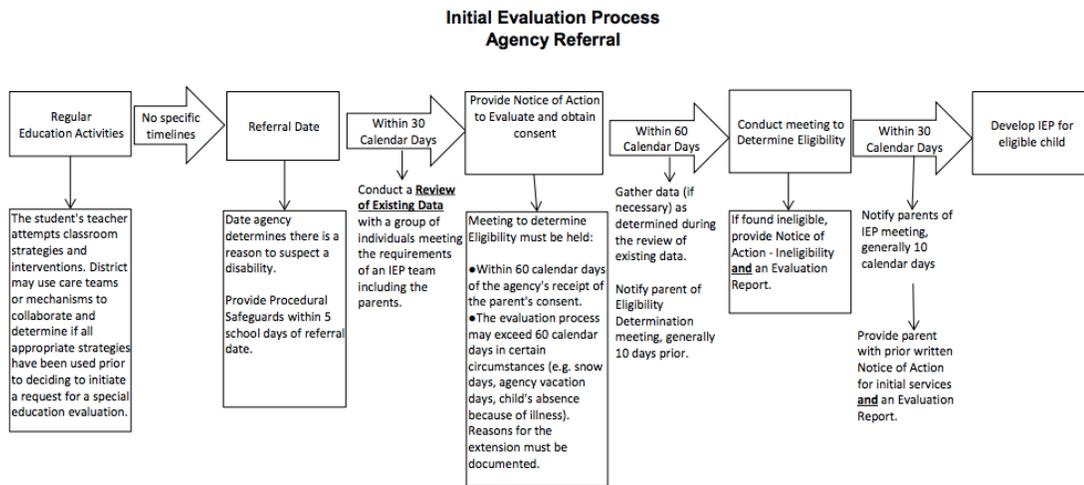


Figure. Missouri DESE (2014) Agency Referral Flow Chart

Discussion

This study was designed to explore the K-5 special education referral process in one Midwest suburban school district. Additionally, the researcher delved deeper into supports and training provided to the teachers in the three buildings studied. Ultimately, this researcher aimed to expand on the studies conducted by Dunn (2006), Mamlin and Harris (1998), and Ysseldyke et al. (1982) to determine if subjectivity still presented itself within the referral process, and to determine the reason that may be happening. By asking, what prompts K-5 teachers to refer a student for special education this researcher hoped to better understand the Metro View Public School District referral process, and its teachers' perceptions of that system.

The overarching reason that Metro View teachers refer students for special education evaluations appears to be gaps in learning or a lack of progression in the curriculum. Two of the three buildings studied indicated a strong use of data and

intervention, where the other building took a vague approach, simply stating that students are brought to CST to start the process of referral.

Given the differences in the three buildings' approach to special education referrals and the process coordinator's statement that "In my three elementary buildings it's [the referral process] done three completely different ways" it is recommended the district work on developing a method of standardization to add consistency across all elementary buildings.

Furthermore, it is abundantly clear that teachers perceive the district as not providing any professional development or support with regard to special education referrals. District guided professional development could help to provide a standard process for referrals. Additionally, professional development and a standard teacher assistant team process could help teachers better understand how to implement interventions and determine what data to collect to facilitate special education evaluation referrals. Providing parameters could help to create another layer of standardization ensuring that a student moving from one building to the next is getting the same level of intervention or consideration from the Teacher Assistance Team.

The proposed professional development could be delivered via face-to-face presentation in a small group form factor, or to a mass audience through a webinar format that could be referred to as needed. This added level of support might help teachers understand better what the law and their district require.

Limitations

By nature of this study being qualitative, participants are limited to their perceptions of the referral process. Participants' responses could have been clouded or

less than genuine, negatively impacting the validity and reliability of their responses. Additionally, the participants limited this study by their demographics. There were 18 participants and only one was male. All participants were Caucasian, which limited the study's diversity. One of the 18 participants had previous special education experience, however she indicated that it was not much help in better understanding the referral process. Researcher bias must be addressed, as the researcher is an employee of the Metro View Public School District. The researcher is currently serving as a Special Education Process Coordinator. This bias could have influenced how data was interpreted and used to present recommendations.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

This researcher intended to create a study that would be informative to all districts with a special education referral process in place. As school districts reflect on their process, this study could serve as a guide or reminder that teachers can perceive a lack of support at the district level. Data collected during this study affirm, that Metro View Public Schools need to consider the following:

- Professional development district wide in the area of special education referrals
- Create a webinar related to the referral process for periodic reference
- Make referral paperwork and flowchart easily accessible
- Empower process coordinators to facilitate yearly in-service
- Encourage process coordinators to meet with teachers with questions regarding the referral process

Future research could benefit from a whole district study. This would allow for greater data saturation. Additionally, this researcher failed to specifically ask about behavior influencing a referral for special education. The question used was too broad and did not specify behavior or academics as a reason for referral. This error may have resulted in participants not providing data to explain in greater detail what prompts their referrals.

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SECTION SIX:
SCHOLARLY PRACTITIONER REFLECTION

Introduction

Many of my life experiences have provided a basis for my growth as a leader. Being a Boy Scout, Warrant Officer in the Missouri Army National Guard, high school Special Education Department Chair, and Special Education Process Coordinator have all shaped my perception and practice of leadership. As a young man, I was the Senior Patrol Leader of Boy Scout Troop 11 in Jefferson City, MO for three years. While in this elected position, I was the youth leader of the entire troop, only second to the adult leadership. In this position I learned the importance of delegation as many of my powers were delegated from the adult leadership. Serving as a Soldier and officer in the Missouri Army National Guard, I learned what it means to be a leader and the importance of being a role model, keeper of knowledge, with an emphasis on being action oriented. As an appointed high school Department Chair, I learned how to negotiate, advocate, and survive in adversarial situations. My role as a Special Education Process Coordinator has emphasized the need for me to be a team builder and draw on my other knowledge of leadership, which is constantly evolving as I engage in learning. These experiences have helped me progress in my profession as well as provide me the opportunity to seek improvement. It should be noted, as a young Boy Scout I had no idea just how complicated the art of leadership could become. Nonetheless, my membership to that organization and subsequent roles I assumed led me to the pursuit of an Educational Doctorate in Educational Leadership through the University of Missouri Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis (ELPA) Department.

Dissertation Influenced Practice as an Educational Leader

As an educator and leader of other educators, I feel that I am a part of a community that learns together, whether through professional development arranged by the school district, or by attending professional conferences. Every school that I have worked has teams that learn together while taking on a mission to teach every child that attends their schools. The teachers in these schools lead their students to learning by carefully preparing engaging lessons. The teacher leaders I have worked with lead their teams by carefully setting goals that align with the district and building administration's vision. Based on these observations, the teams that meet their goals are cohesive and efficient. Through the use of servant leadership (Northouse, 2013), I facilitate to the best of my abilities and work to create these types of teams.

As a precursor to my work as a doctoral candidate, I completed a survey created by Gallup, Inc. called StrengthsFinder. Throughout the process, I was required to answer a series of questions with two possible statements that best defined my character. In the end, I received a list of my signature themes: developer, ideation, empathy, communication, and includer (Gallup Inc., Personal Communication, May 22, 2013). The first and most prevalent trait revealed through the survey was developer. According to Rath and Conchie (2008), the developer trait is synonymous with a leader who works to foster the potential in others. In his book on leadership theories, Northouse (2013) describes servant leaders as developers also.

Northouse (2013) wrote about 10 identified characteristics of servant leaders that emerged from research associated with this type of leadership. They are as follows: Listening, Empathy, Healing, Awareness, Persuasion, Conceptualization, Foresight,

Stewardship, Commitment to the Growth of People, and Building Community. These characteristics mirror those identified in Goleman's (2011) essay *What Makes a Leader*. Goleman's (2011) main point was leaders need more than just technical know-how; they require what the author defines as emotional intelligence. These skills focus on human aspects within working teams. Of my five leadership traits identified by StrengthsFinder, four of them fit within the concept of emotional intelligence.

These traits, especially the developer trait, lead to my dissertation topic. Ultimately, this dissertation is designed not only in partial completion of an Educational Doctorate, but also to identify if perceived problems exist within the special education referral process and help support teachers while they engage in it. Furthermore, if I am successful in supporting regular education teachers, I can better attend to my duties as a Special Education Process Coordinator as the number of referrals and students identified with a disability directly affect the special education staff I serve.

A large portion of my duties as a special education process coordinator, consist of working with special education teams at the elementary level. I provide learning opportunities and guide the teams through their students' cases, from evaluation to service implementation. Working with 11 teachers across three teams can be a challenge when trying to meet their varied needs; however, it is necessary (Goleman, 2011; Kotter, 2011; Maslow, 2005; Norhouse, 2013; Schultz, 2010).

Dissertation Influenced Practice as a Scholar

Personally, my dissertation has influenced me more as a scholar than leader. In part because of all of the previous training and experiences I have had. The dissertation

process along with all the requirements for obtaining an Educational Doctorate has challenged me as a learner and scholar.

Reflecting upon my experiences and being assigned the reading *Adult Learning: Linking Theory and Practice*, I immediately connected with the idea of contextual learning. Merriam and Bierema (2014) first mention this method of learning in their chapter on traditional learning theories. From my study of Creswell (2009) in the 2013 Fall semester, I knew that I identified as a social constructivist. However, when I first came across the idea of contextual learning, I hadn't exactly put the two together.

As a child I was not always the most studious; however, I always was always quite curious. I would pour over books about history, people, and the world. While I certainly had a curious nature about me, I did not start applying it to my life until I was a junior in high school. Even then, I had not realized my potential as a student and would continue to struggle in school. Attending college was even a struggle at first, however once I transferred schools and found my rhythm I began to flourish. I began asking questions until full understanding was achieved. At times this was much to the chagrin of my fellow classmates, but I felt fulfilled. These experiences defined me as a life long learner.

My questions became more and more refined as I developed my skill in asking the right questions. Creswell (2009) explains that the constructivist asks questions to seek understanding from their surroundings. Researchers ask detailed, open questions and listen to the responses carefully to fully understand the context. As I became more attuned to the academic environment, my questioning became fuel for my learning.

In addition to my inquiry, I began to carefully observe the world around me. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011) ask researchers to paint a descriptive picture with their observational notes. While in college, and now in meetings, I employ this method of note taking. My effort in creating the most accurate picture of what occurs helps me not only remember events better when asked to recall the information; it helps me connect to those around me. These types of notes help me get recognize underlying themes which can provide valuable information. At one point Emerson, et al. (2011) described these types of notes as poetic in a sense. This is particularly true. When I studied history at Lincoln University, I would read fiction and poetry of a period to gain a better understanding of the people who experienced the events I studied. In the same sense a leader should study the people around him in an effort to best understand their motivations and place within the organization.

Contextual learning, as Merriam and Bierema (2014) describe it, “[is where] the context itself shapes the learning” (p. 118). This concept focuses on learning within an experience rather than just reflecting upon it. Based upon my experiences as a student and learner, I certainly identify with this type of learning the most. Most everything I have learned or will learn will be acquired through experience. While there are times this process is hard, these experiences make me a learner and leader.

Conclusion

As I reflect on this four-year experience, the learning in the classroom, through group projects, and my individual work, I realize every day since that first summer has been touched by this program either directly through work or indirectly in my thoughts. This opportunity has been incredible and has irrevocably changed my way of thinking.

The journey associated with pursuing a doctorate and ultimately writing a dissertation is one of self-discovery. People tend to understand themselves as learners, thinkers, and in their own leadership roles, but honestly most people have no scholarly evidence to point to when making these claims. The funny thing about a dissertation is that it challenges the writer to describe and justify methods on an extremely micro level. What is more, that description and justification is designed to help effect change at a macro level. Ultimately, that is just what a doctorate provides its earner, tools to identify specific context in order to obtain a clear understanding of the world around them.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW & FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Interview Questions:

What is your role in the district?

How long have you been with the district?

What role do you play in the delivery and development of professional development in the district?

In what way would you describe the special education referral process?

Have you engaged in providing or planning for professional development related to special education referrals?

Focus group Questions:

What grade do you teach?

How long have you been teaching?

How many of those years have you taught with the school district?

Over the course of your career, approximately how many referrals have you made for special education evaluation?

This school year how many referrals have you made or anticipate making for a special education evaluation?

What is your understanding of the process for referral for special education evaluation?

What prompts you to refer one of your students for a special education evaluation?

What type of professional development have you had regarding referrals for a special education evaluation?

APPENDIX B. INFORMED CONSENT

Purpose of Study:

I will research what prompts K-5 teachers to refer a student for special education evaluation.

Principal investigator:

Jake Boswell

Institute:

Northwest Missouri State University
University of Missouri Columbia

Introduction:

You are invited to participate in an interview or focus group to better the understanding what prompts K-5 teachers to make referrals to special education.

Background information:

This is research for a dissertation within the Educational Doctorate Program through the University of Missouri- Columbia and Northwest Missouri State University.

Procedures:

Interviews: In this study I will ask few questions about each participant's

This interview should take no more than 20 minutes.

Focus Groups: Participants will be asked to spend about 30 minutes of time with the researcher discussing the referral process and

The interviews and focus group will be audio recorded for ease of transcription for the researcher's purpose only.

Possible risks or benefits:

There is no risk involved in this study except your valuable time. This research has the potential of having an impact on other schools and districts implementing a referral process for special education evaluation.

Right of refusal to participate and withdrawal:

You are free to choose to participate in the study. You may also withdraw any time from the study. You may also refuse to answer some or all the questions if you do not feel comfortable with the questions.

Confidentiality:

Any information you provide will remain confidential. Nobody except the principal investigators will have an access to it. Your name and identity will also not be disclosed at any time.

Available Sources of Information:

If you have any further questions you may contact Dr. Carole Edmonds (cake@nwmissouri.edu), the researcher's advisor.

VITA

Jake W. Boswell was born July 1, 1982 in Alton, Illinois, and graduated from Jefferson City High School in 2000. He joined the Missouri National Guard prior to graduation in April of 2000. He enlisted as a private first class paralegal specialist. While serving he earned a Bachelor of Arts in History from Lincoln University. During his junior year he was deployed to Iraq and served for 15 months on active duty. Upon completing his bachelor degree, Mr. Boswell moved to Kansas City, Missouri to attend the University of Missouri, Kansas City where he completed requirements for a Master of Arts in Curriculum and Instruction. During his second year of his Masters program he was called again to serve in Iraq for another 12 months.

After completing his Master's degree, Jake went to teach social studies at KVC Academy, a day school for students in residential psychiatric treatment. After two years of teaching at KVC, he was hired as a special education teacher at Liberty High School, Liberty Public Schools. While teaching at Liberty High School, he taught history for students with disabilities and served as Special Education Department Chair for two years until Fall of 2014.

Mr. Boswell is currently a Special Education Process Coordinator for three elementary schools in Liberty, Missouri. He still serves in the Missouri National Guard and is currently a Chief Warrant Officer serving as the Legal Administrator for the Office of the State Judge Advocate.