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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a two-year initiative to change the social arrangements and interactions of special education students and teachers assigned to a predominantly Mexican-American, low-income seventh grade campus of 520 students. The project investigated how to improve the learning environments of students at risk of being placed in special education and what is needed to create more inclusive learning environments for special education students. The Miller Secondary School Model of Inclusion includes adults as co-teachers in the classroom and minimizes the need to pull students out of the classroom. It includes four major components: collaborative teaming, professional development for general education teachers, self-advocacy program for students, and close monitoring of students. Results found: (1) new confidence and expertise was gained by general education teachers through the staff development and the on-site assistance provided by the special education teachers; (2) general education teachers found special education consultants contributed greatly to enhancing classroom instruction; (3) the referral rate for special education testing and placement decreased 46 percent in one year; and (4) a random sample of students over the past three years indicated 80 percent had no change in their grades or had improved their grades. (CR)

Reconstructing Special Education Services in Middle School: Success for All

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Reconstructing Special Education Services in Middle School: Success for All

Children of color have faced a multitude of obstacles in obtaining access to learning opportunities and encounter a greater likelihood of being placed in special education programs (Dew, 1984). The increasing cultural and linguistic diversity found in classrooms throughout the nation illuminates the need to explore and document effective strategies campus faculties have adopted to reconstruct the delivery of instruction in ways that benefit all students and minimizes the misidentification of students as needing "special education" due to inadequate learning environments or inappropriate instructional methodology. Educational reform in the form of including special education students in more heterogeneous classroom settings is often stymied as students move into the secondary levels due to rigid course completion requirements and institutionalized tracking of students. When barriers such as tracking and more rigorous requirements are coupled with the increasing numbers of ethnolinguistically diverse students, the documentation of effective instructional initiatives at the middle school level becomes of paramount significance.

Over-representation of ethnolinguistically diverse students receiving special education services is well documented in the literature (Laosa, 1977; Ortiz & Maldonado-Colon, 1986; Plata & Santos, 1981). Possibly as a backlash to over-referral and placement of students from culturally and/or linguistically diverse backgrounds, the over-representation of students with disabilities in bilingual programs and in the general classrooms who *are not* receiving special education services also increases (Bergin, 1980). How does a secondary campus go about making systemic changes that transform it into a high performing campus while decreasing its number of students receiving special education services?

Research Questions

The faculty members of Miller Jr. High School recognized the importance of improving the learning environments in general education classrooms as a deterrent to academic failure for its predominantly Mexican-American students during the 1995-1996 school year. The purpose of this paper is to present the results of a two year initiative to change the social arrangement and interactions of special education students and teachers assigned to a predominantly Mexican-American, low-income seventh grade campus.

Three questions guided the practitioners throughout the process:

1. How do we improve the learning environments of students most often at risk of being placed in special education?;
2. What do we need to do in order to create more inclusive learning environments for students already receiving special education services?
3. After studying the issues, how will we know that our solutions achieved the intended outcomes?. What unintended outcomes emerged?

A systemwide change of this nature required a process that involved not just special education teachers but everyone assigned to that campus. The institutionalized practices that were changed and the new roles and models of interaction that replaced them emerged from the campus staff, guided by the leadership of the special education lead teachers and with the support of the campus administrator. The process employed by the teachers to arrive at the adopted practices was based on a practitioner-centered action research and participatory evaluation model.

Practitioner-Centered Action Research - A Form of Participatory Evaluation

Cousins and Earl (1995) describe the participatory research process as "a strategy or intervention that will produce adaptive knowledge to the extent that it monitors and provides an opportunity for the interpretation of program outcomes and generative knowledge such that interpretations lead to enlightenment or the development of new

insights into program operations or effects ore especially organizational processes and consequences. King (1995) also views participatory evaluation as "applied social research that involves trained evaluation personnel (or research specialists) and practice-based decision makers working in partnership. However, she further analyzes related forms of participatory evaluation approaches and compares them along five basic characteristics. Table I presents four approaches to participatory evaluation and research as conceptualized by Jean King (1995, p. 88).

Table I: Comparison of Approaches To Collaborative Evaluation/Research

Characteristic	Stakeholder	Traditional Action Research	Participatory Evaluation	Practitioner-Centered Action Research
Who's in charge of the study?	Evaluator as principal investigator	Research/evaluator with input from practitioner	Evaluator, with assistance of the practitioner/ student at first	Practitioners, with assistance of the research consultants
What practitioners are involved in the study?	Large numbers of stakeholders; anyone with a stake in the program	Small numbers of those who actively engage in the study; people who are interested or helpful	Small number of primary users	Action researchers; people who take ownership of the process
How do they participate?	Consultative role; they give information on context; provide information	Active role; asks questions, gives input, help analyze data	Active role; engage in "nuts and bolts" of process	Active role; control the research process
What time frame?	Length of study	Length of study	Length of study or on-going	On-going research cycle; organizational learning
What involvement in theory development?	(If any) Develop program theory	Create traditional social science theory	Develop program theory (theories -in-action, mental models	(If any) Develop practical theory or critical theory

Given the nature, intent, and the way we wanted to be involved, the practitioner-centered action research approach as described by King was adopted. Participatory research is a powerful learning system designed to foster locally applied research and thereby enhance social discourse about school based issues. The nature of the problematic issue (too many special education students needing services and other students at-risk of becoming misidentified as special education students) necessitated the selection of adopting a practitioner-centered action research process. As site-based practitioners, we engaged in the research process through which we formulated our own research questions, collected and analyzed data, reflected on the findings, and established an on-going collaboration to enhance the model. This cyclic process reinforces the dynamic nature of the relationship between the research process and reflective practice by those who are involved in the "daily nuts and bolts" of development and implementation.

Methodology

Outcomes of the initiative were examined using both quantitative and qualitative data collected from students and teachers. Student data included examination of changes in failure rates, attendance in the content mastery lab, students' participation rates in the state mandated tests, students' performance on district benchmark assessments and the state assessments, and dismissal rates and changes in special education services. In the fall of 1996, the faculty was surveyed regarding the benefits of the consultation model and their perceptions on modifications, inclusion, and collaborative teaming. Comparison data was re analyzed in the fall of 1997 to document changes so re-adjustments to the implemented model could be made based on what was identified as working and not working.

Description of the Site

Miller Junior High School is a seventh grade campus of 520 students in a Central Texas school district. The school's community is located in one of the fastest growing

corridors in Central Texas and situated between two major cities, San Antonio and Austin. The majority of the campus students come from ethnolinguistic backgrounds (62 percent Hispanic and 7 percent African American) and over half are identified as economically disadvantaged.

In the fall of 1995, the campus was opened to relief overcrowding conditions and was placed under the leadership of a veteran principal, Mrs. Ana Lopez. Faculty members were challenged by the large numbers of students needing special education services (15% of the student body were identified as special education students). Students were often pulled out of the classroom and sent to the content mastery room for "modifications" and "support". Students' absence from their content classroom often resulted in their lacking access to pertinent content and skill information. For example, the number of minutes spent in the content mastery lab for the fifth sixth week reporting period in the 1994-95 school year was a record 15,043 minutes. The time spent in the content mastery labs translated to time not spent in the classroom by the very students who had the most difficulty keeping up with content and concepts! The faculty made the decision to study how it could better meet the needs of students already placed in special education programs and how to improve the learning environments of students most often at risk of being placed in special education? Underlying teachers' frustrations were the limitations of a traditional "special education resource" model as it existed in their middle school campus. Teachers began to change their philosophical orientation from delivering special education services in a traditional "resource" model to that of a more inclusionary instructional setting when they began to study what was working and not working in their current system.

Teacher Researchers in Action

Who was involved or in charge of the project? Two campus teachers assigned to the special education program led the action research initiative on the campus. Grace Mueller, a veteran special education specialist for 14 years, was very interested in multiple

intelligence research and student exceptionality. Jay Whitley was also a veteran educator. His four years as a general education teacher provided him with a foundation of what skills students needed to be successful in the general content courses. The first year of the project, Mr. Whitley chose to co-teach with the special education teachers. He brought a strong background in curriculum modifications and interdisciplinary and multisensory learning experiences to the special education team. The two teachers requested approval of their administrator, Mrs. Ana Lopez, to submit a grant proposal to the local Education Service Center to participate in a collaborative effort focusing on inclusion of special education students. Mrs. Lopez approved the request after the campus improvement team reviewed the proposal.

"You can lead a person to evaluation, but you can't make him or her participate" could be paraphrased about any project implementation. In the case of the Miller project, there were teachers both in the general education program and in special education who desired to participate in seeking programmatic improvement. The two lead teachers and their administrator considered that the success of the process hinged on two things: illumination of the complexity of the problem and campus staff buy-in.

As part of the process, a survey on the perceptions of including students with disabilities in the general education classroom was distributed to the campus. The survey was developed by an educational consultant hired by the Education Service Center and coordinated at the campus level by a designated Inclusion Facilitator. Grace Mueller was selected to fill that role; however, she did not consider herself as "the researcher" or as the evaluator. She considered herself a practitioner seeking answers. A total of twenty-two campus staff members completed the survey (50%).

The inclusion project was initiated during the 1996-97 school year and program options were studied that year. The following year, Dr. Pedroza joined the district as Director of Special Populations. Her interest in action research and teachers as researchers brought a new dimension to the project. She made suggestions regarding what data to

consider collecting and monitoring, literature to read, and ways to organize the emerging results. However, the research process continued to belong to the teachers.

What practitioners were involved in the study? Although a distinguishing characteristic of practitioner-action research is the inclusion of action researchers, we were unable to make such a fine distinction between who was an action researcher and who was involved as a primary user. The two lead special education teachers and the program director certainly considered themselves involved and active participants in the research. However, there were other teachers who chose to participate because they viewed themselves as users of the emerging practices. Consultants from the Education Service Center were also actively involved and "engaged in the nuts and bolts" of the process. However, as actively engaged participants, we strongly felt the direction and purpose of the process remained within our control.

The Inclusion facilitators were involved in the collection and interpretation of the data results. Campus teachers were not relegated to passive roles; there were many teachers who were engaged in the discussion of "how to improve the learning environments of students most likely to be placed in special education". The initiative and research agenda stemmed from the interests of the special education teachers and their principal. My role as the director of special programs for the district was to provide the literature and description of participatory research as a framework to capture the process and outcomes of the project.

What was the time frame for the collaborative effort and its purpose? Unlike the stakeholder approach or the traditional action research model, the collaborative relationships between special educators assigned to the campus, between the district director and the campus, and the Education Service Center and the district has been well established and continued past the length of the study. There exists an on-going evaluative aspect to the new institutionalized model that includes the administrators on the campus, the special education teachers, the general education teachers, and external supports such as central

office and the regional educational consultants. The purpose of their ongoing involvement has been to continually evaluate and enhance the program options and instruction for all students on the campus.

The process was guided by the local education service center consultants. A survey was given to all faculty members to access their perceptions of inclusion education in the fall of 1996. Using the results of the survey, a needs assessment was developed. The faculty, again, was surveyed as to identify specific areas of professional development and strategies needed to teach diverse student groups. The needs were ranked by the faculty. Simultaneous to this process was the review of student data, including the time spent in the content mastery lab by students, special education performance on the state assessments, and the rate of new student referrals to special education services on the campus.

An action plan was developed by the campus Inclusion facilitators (the two special education lead teachers), the campus administrator, education service center consultant, and faculty team leaders. All campus faculty wishing to participate were involved in various venues of professional development, a major aspect of the plan. During the first year, major activities included 1) the completion of the teacher survey, 2) analysis of the student data across the campus, 3) articulation of the problem of academic failure and isolation of students receiving special education services on the campus and 4) staff development on inclusionary models and strategies.

Once the action plan was developed and initial professional development completed, strategies were then shared throughout the campus by peer coaching (special education teachers with general education teachers), model demonstrations, and "brown bag" seminars. Student receiving special education services were also undergoing a six week self-advocacy course to gain confidence and skills to articulate their needs when placed in the general education classes.

Consensus for participating in the initiative, for the adopted plan, and the resulting practices were gained via a strong communication structure. Informational sessions, work

groups, and didactic conversations were held with team leaders, campus improvement teams, department heads, and administrators. All aspects of the process, including establishing the purpose and deciding on desired outcomes, were discussed. The action plan for implementing an inclusion model at the middle school and the campus' vision for an inclusive school culture were incorporated into the campus improvement plan. The campus improvement plan was approved in the Spring of 1997 by the School Board of Trustees and continued to be implemented the following fall.

The Miller Secondary School Model of Inclusion

The Miller model includes adults as co-teachers in the classroom and minimizes the need to pull students out of the classroom. It reinforces the strategies researchers have advocated as essential to move students from being in at-risk situations to promising achievement. Although the campus continues to provide a continuum of services which include a resource room and content mastery lab, the focus is on the initial provision of the best learning opportunities in the general classroom. The model includes four major components: collaborative teaming, professional development for general education teachers, self-advocacy program for students, and close monitoring of students.

The pedagogical and philosophical shift was most notable in the new roles the special education teachers assumed in the school. Rather than having students pulled out of the classrooms, the two special education teachers assigned to the campus began to go into the general classrooms and act as consultants to the classroom teachers. The two special education program teachers were assigned to academic teams and forged a collaborative relationship with the content teachers in the teams. The inclusion of special education teachers as collaborative team members was critical to the success of the Miller consultation model and is supported in the research of schools that have successfully restructured to meet the needs of all students (Stainback and Stainback, 1990; Thousand and Villa, 1991). The role changes were also addressed in the campus improvement plan and the composition

of the site-based decision making team. The special education teachers participated in team meetings, staff training and parent education programs.

Summary of Findings

Three questions guided the action research project as pursued by the campus teachers Findings for each of the areas is briefly described in this section.

1. How do we improve the learning environments of students most often at risk of being placed in special education?

Decreasing the referral rate of students to special education, particularly those with ethnolinguistically diverse backgrounds was identified as a priority for the teachers on the campus. New confidence and expertise was gained by the Miller general education teachers through the formal staff development sessions and the on-site assistance provided by the special education lead teachers. The inclusion model developed by the campus stressed the availability of special education teachers in the general education classrooms. The result was that general education teachers found the expertise, suggestions, and planning time provided by the special education "consultants" contributed greatly to enhancing classroom instruction. Another schoolwide practice that was established was a pre-referral intervention process that included the school counselor and the school's associate psychologist. Evidence of the successful outcomes for students stemming from the new relationships between general education and special education teachers emerged in the first year of the study. The referral rate for special education testing and placement went from 15 students in the 1995-96 school year to 7 students in the following year (a decrease of 46% percent in one year!). The campus has continued to have the lowest referral rate in the district for the past two years and counters the statewide pattern of increased special education enrollment in seventh and eighth grade.

2. What do we need to do in order to create more inclusive learning environments for students already receiving special education services?

The pedagogical shift toward having special education students spend more time in the general education classroom raised several concerns for teachers. The first concern related to the quality of instruction for the non-special education students: would it affect their learning? In order to help teachers feel more comfortable having students with special needs in their classrooms, the special education "consultants", as they were now called, wrote a study skills curriculum. The study skills curriculum was taught to all students, not just the special needs students, during advisory period.

The consultant teachers also developed a handbook detailing an array of modifications that could be made by the classroom teachers to facilitate student learning. In addition, teachers assigned to the special education program began to be called "consultants" and not "the special education teachers". The change in name appropriately reflected their new roles. The consultant teachers spent 75 to 80% of their time in the general education classrooms. They not only worked with special education students, but taught lessons using multiple intelligence principles, higher level questioning, and multisensory learning experiences.

The result of increasing co-teaching opportunities, increasing collaborative planning between the special education consultants and general education teachers, and increasing parent contact was the reduction of the failure rate of special education students. In the past three years, the average failure rate decreased from 30% to 10%. However, it is important to note that this rate drops even lower during many of the six weeks.

Another, and perhaps even more powerful indicator is the performance of non-special education students. A random sample of students over the past three years has shown that 80% of the students had no change in their grades between the beginning of school or had improved their grades. In other words, the learning opportunities of non-special education students had not been adversly affected.

Results of the end of year survey indicated that 91% of the faculty felt it was appropriate to adjust teaching strategies or to modify instruction. The change in perception

regarding pacing and instructional modifications had a very positive outcome for special needs students. Students began to spend more time in the classroom and less time in the content mastery lab. The time spent in the content mastery lab was reduced from 15,043 minutes for the 1994-95 school year to 2,707 minutes in two years.

3. After studying the issues, how will we know that our solutions achieved the intended outcomes?. What unintended outcomes emerged?

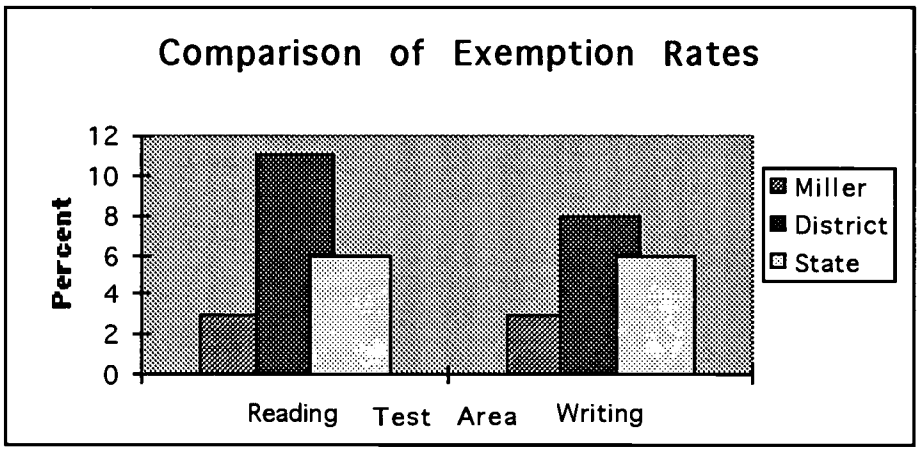
Evaluation of the practices was established throughout different time frames. For example, student failure rates were monitored every six weeks and the time special education students spent away from the general education classroom was monitored even more frequently (bi-weekly). If a student was thought to be using the content lab too often, a consultation meeting was set up with the student, the general education classroom teacher, and the special education consultant to discuss the situation. The self-advocacy skills of students became an important factor in these interactions.

Increased confidence of students receiving special education services and their increased use of self advocay skills was also noted. For example, the presence and their active involvement in the annual review meetings was higher for Miller than in other district campuses. As a result of the inclusion of a self-advocacy skill building program in the plan, 85% of the students with special needs attended and participated with a demonstrated knowledge of their rights and needs during their own annual review. These students were involved in developing their own Individualized Education Plan and felt empowered over their own educational outcomes.

An unintended result of the action researchers' work was the increase in the number of students participating in the state's high-stakes testing program. The increase in the testing program was attributed to the increase in the time students were spending in the general education content classrooms. For example, during the first year of the Inclusion project, 21 students receiving special education services took the Mathematics portion of the state test for the first time. Eight of the students met the state passing requirement of

70% mastery; the average test scores for the 21 students who took the test for the first time was 60% mastery. Chart I displays the difference in student participation between the state, district and the campus.

Chart I: Exemption Rates



Changes in the state's accountability system for school year 1998-99 will bring results of special education students taking the state test into the school rating formula. As other campuses and districts struggle with the new accountability change, Miller teachers are experiencing more confidence in the ability of all their students. The reason for teacher confidence is the increase in special education students participatation in the general education curriculum over the past three years.

Evidence of increased student achievement has also been seen by the teachers. For example, 73% of special education students who took the state test recorded gains on the Texas Learning Index. The gap between special education students' achievement and non-special education students has decreased on this campus and teachers attribute much of the positive changes to the Inclusion project.

A survey of teachers conducted annually by the lead special education consultants on the campus has found that teachers have continued to view the Miller model positively. At the end of the second year of the project, 85% of the faculty was in favor of the collaboration model between special education and general education teachers. The

majority of teachers (73%) also preferred the consultation service model to that of the traditional "pull-out" model. Eighty percent of the teachers favored the continuation of the efforts to implement inclusion and the teacher consultant model. An unintended but very positive outcome has been the increased demand on consultants' time. In additon, special education consultants have increased their participation in classroom activities and have become more knowledgeable of the curriculum and teacher expectations. Students, special education teachers, and general education practitioners have all gained from the implementation of the practices that continue to emerge from this action research project.

Discussion and Implications

The change from a exclusionary model to an inclusionary one has resulted in positive outcomes for both students and teachers. Under the old paradigm, teachers who taught special education were isolated and their expertise was shared with other special education teachers; students were also isolated and access to accelerated learning opportunities were often minimized. The collaborative teaming experienced at Miller Jr. High has enhanced all teachers' potential for survival and power in educating a diverse student body by creating opportunities for readily accessible expertise, resources, and assistance and professional growth by providing access to reciprocal peer coaching. Students in need of special education services and their teachers are no longer viewed as isolated ancillary members of the school but rather as legitimate members of the school.

The consultation model has evolved into an on-going professional development initiative on the campus. Co-teaching, peer coaching, informal and formal staff development on specific special needs (such as modifications, effective remediation techniques, attention deficit disorders, language acquisition, and intensifying literacy skill building) are methods used by the special education teachers to share their knowledge and expertise. Focus on effective elements of collaborative teaching, interpersonal skill

development, and intergroup relations have also been important to the successful implementation of the consultation model.

Results of the quantitative data analyzes revealed a decrease in the number of minutes students spent in the content mastery lab, a decrease in referrals to special education in the seventh grade, a decrease of the failure rate of students, and a decrease in the number of students being exempted from the state mandated assessments. Increases were found in the gains made by students on the Texas Learning Index, gains in student performance on local and state assessments by both students receiving special education services and other at-risk students, and an increase in teacher attitude toward inclusion and the consultation model.

Additionally, the initiative has begun to focus on moving from teacher-centered learning to that of student-centered empowerment. A spin-off initiative which began last year and will be further developed in the 1997-98 school year centers on the self-advocacy skills of students. The goal is to help students receiving special education services to advocate for themselves during their Admission, Review, and Dismissal meetings, to ascertain specific assistance using appropriate means, and to set personal and academic goals for themselves.

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