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Contributing Factors in Special Education Referrals

for Emotional or Behavioral Problems

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Abstract

Special education referral decisions for emotional or behavioral problems were investigated. A survey distributed to regular education elementary school teachers examined differences in referral decisions for internalized and externalized behavior patterns. The survey also looked at teacher gender and years of teaching experience as variables affecting referral decisions. Results were inconclusive but suggested that teachers may be as likely to refer for internalized behavior problems as they are for externalized behavior problems. No clear link was shown between teacher gender and the likelihood of referring students for emotional or behavioral difficulties. Teachers of both genders appeared equally likely to refer students for most behaviors; however, females may be more likely to refer for certain externalized behaviors. The influence of years of teaching experience was also unclear, but teachers' likelihood of referring students for various internalized and externalized behaviors did not appear to be impacted by this variable in a majority of cases.

Contributing Factors in Special Education Referrals for Emotional or Behavioral Problems

Within the field of education, there has been much debate about special education programming. The identification of increasingly large numbers of students with emotional or behavioral disorders has been criticized (e.g., Caseau, Luckasson & Kroth, 1994; McIntyre & Tong, 1998). Many students, the majority of them male, are referred for special education for behavioral disturbances. Some critics believe that male students are being overidentified due to inherent tendencies to display behavior that may be seen as disruptive. Female students, on the other hand, are less likely to act out, but often exhibit internalized difficulties that are not always apparent to teachers. In addition to behavioral differences, some question whether disparity in teacher tolerance is a factor in referral decisions.

There have been several theories proposed as to why males have consistently outnumbered females more than three to one in the special education category of emotional or behavioral disorders. Caseau, Luckasson, & Kroth (1994) list a number of possibilities. They suggest that schools may be worried about discrimination charges if they were to overidentify females. Another possibility is parents' reluctance to place their daughters in classrooms for emotionally or behaviorally disturbed children, filled with boys who are acting out. The abundance of female teachers in general education who lack tolerance for misbehavior may also contribute to the gender discrepancy. Shinn, Tindal & Spira (1987) propose that because the special education system cannot realistically serve every student in need, it is designed primarily to serve those who are the most disruptive to school order.

Much of the research on the disproportionate numbers in special education focuses on behaviors. Some people believe that biological factors form the basis for the discrepancy. Others

feel it is due to differences in behavior, as males have a greater tendency to act out in school. Recently, more research has focused on possible biases in teacher perceptions. Behavior may result from biological factors and in turn affect bias. We will discuss the relevant literature on classroom behavior and teacher referrals in an attempt to clarify why so many students are identified as behaviorally disordered.

Brain researchers and psychologists have discovered the “boy brain - the kinetic, disorganized, maddening and sometimes brilliant behaviors” (Tyre, 2006, p. 48) that are not learned, but hard-wired. Boys’ behaviors become more apparent in elementary school where an emphasis is placed on language and sitting still. According to Thompson, girls’ behavior becomes the standard; thus, boys are treated like defective girls (as cited in Tyre). Adolescents are known for a lack of impulse control, and brain research indicates that boys have an especially hard time keeping their thoughts and feelings to themselves (Walsh, 2004).

The way students behave, as well as the way teachers perceive this behavior, can have a direct effect on special education referrals. It is well known that males and females think, communicate and behave differently. Girls are more likely to cooperate, hold in their emotions and comply with authority. Boys, on the other hand, are more likely to compete, question authority, display aggression and have a difficult temperament (Furlong, Morrison & Jimerson, 2004). In the classroom, female teachers may perceive this as disrespectful and inappropriate (McIntyre & Tong, 1998). This lower tolerance for male behavior is commonly thought to lead to more boys being referred for special education.

Within special education, the category of emotional disturbance is the most disproportionate, with males comprising 76.4% of all identified students. Many researchers theorize that boys are often mistakenly labeled emotionally and/or behaviorally disordered when they are not.

McIntyre and Tong (1998) believe many special education referrals occur because of cross-gender misunderstandings; that is, female teachers do not relate to the male style of communication and consider it unacceptable, leading to the belief that the student needs special education. They go on to state that this overidentification of males is harmful not only to boys, but to girls as well. Researchers commonly believe that many emotionally disturbed female students are not receiving services because their problems go unnoticed in classrooms where boys' behavior tends to monopolize the teachers' attention (McIntyre & Tong, 1998; Rousso & Wehmeyer, 2001; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001). Murray and Myers (1998) add that students with the most disruptive behaviors also tend to exhibit worse cognitive, academic, and social functioning than do children with more internalized problems. This lends further support to the idea that students who act out are referred sooner while those with internalized problems may be overlooked.

Teachers clearly have varying standards regarding tolerance for problem behavior. Kaufman (2001) and Walker & Severson (1992) have suggested that in school settings, teachers typically under-refer students with internalizing behavior problems, compared to students with externalizing behavior patterns. Gresham and Kern (2004) describe externalizing behaviors as overt and obvious to others, whereas internalizing behaviors are subtle and often go unnoticed by others. It is the externalizing behaviors such as noncompliance, aggression, and disruption that are the least tolerated behaviors among teachers. Students' internalizing behaviors such as social withdrawal, anxiety, and depression do not challenge teachers' authority and ability to effectively manage their classroom like the externalized behaviors do.

Many studies (e.g., Stuart, 1994; Hill, Baldo & D'Amato, 1999; Chang & Sue, 2003) have investigated whether low teacher tolerance leads to hasty or inaccurate special education

referrals. Ritter (1989) studied behavioral ratings of regular classroom and special education teachers to compare the level of agreement in teacher perceptions. The teachers rated students identified as seriously emotionally disturbed on problem behavior. The results showed that the teachers agreed upon ratings for internalizing behavior, but the regular education teachers rated externalizing behaviors as more problematic. In addition, special educators did not differ in their ratings of boys' versus girls' problem behavior, but regular classroom teachers rated the boys' behavior as more troublesome. Ritter also found a significant relationship between teacher gender and ratings of problem behavior. The trend was for female teachers to rate problem behavior more negatively than male teachers. This suggests that female teachers are more sensitive to externalizing behaviors and less tolerant of difficult to manage students.

Other studies have also found differences in teacher tolerance between male and female teachers. McIntyre (1988) asked 64 teachers to consider students with problem behavior for special education referral. The results showed that female teachers made the decision to refer twice the expected frequency while male teachers referred only half as frequently as expected. The author points out that these patterns may lead to false negative errors when male teachers are not referring students who have learning disabilities that coexist with the problem behavior. False positives may also occur when female teachers refer students who may display some problem behavior but do not actually have learning disabilities.

McIntyre (1990) later reanalyzed his data, categorizing student behavior by severity. Interestingly, he found that even though the students of male teachers displayed higher levels of problem behavior, male teachers made fewer referrals than did female teachers. The author attributes this to female teachers lacking confidence with students who show high levels of

aggression, whereas male teachers are motivated to uphold the expectancy that they can handle difficult students and are therefore hesitant to make referrals.

Yoon (2004) explored teacher characteristics such as empathy, self-efficacy and perceived seriousness that influence teacher responses to bullying. The results indicated that these variables are important factors in predicting the likelihood of teacher intervention in response to bullying behavior. Teachers were more likely to intervene if they exhibited empathy and self-efficacy.

Although some research has been conducted on teacher variables and their possible effect on referrals, questions remain regarding how this impacts the students identified with an emotional or behavioral disorder. Teacher gender as it relates to tolerance for behaviors should be further explored. In addition, little has been said about years of teaching experience and its effect on behavioral referrals.

Purpose

The purpose of our study was to examine differences in teacher referrals for special education. Our research focused on students with emotional and/or behavioral difficulties. Specifically, we looked at whether certain externalized behavior patterns were more likely to elicit a special education referral while more internalized behavior was overlooked. We examined the likelihood of teachers referring students for specific behaviors. In addition, we examined teacher gender and years of experience as variables in behavioral referrals. The following specific research questions were addressed:

- 1) Are teachers more likely to refer students for special education due to externalizing behavior problems as opposed to internalizing behavior problems?
- 2) Does this differ by teacher gender?

3) Does teaching experience affect referral decisions for internalizing and externalizing behavior problems?

Hypotheses: Teachers will report a greater likelihood of referring for externalizing behavior problems versus internalizing behavior problems. We believe referral decisions will differ by teacher gender, with male teachers less likely to refer disruptive students for special education. Referral decisions for internalizing behavioral difficulties will not differ by teacher gender. The differences in likelihood of referral for both types of problem behavior will not differ significantly among teachers with varying levels of experience.

Method

Participants

A survey was completed by 52 regular education teachers at the elementary school level (grades K - 5) in a large Midwestern suburban school district. The teachers' mean for years of experience was 18.87. Nine teachers (17.3%) had 1-9 years of experience, 15 teachers (28.8%) had 10-19 years of experience, 22 teachers (42.3%) had 20-29 years of experience, and 6 teachers (11.5%) had 30 or more years of experience. Forty-eight of the 52 survey respondents (92.3%) were female, and 4 respondents (7.7%) were male.

Materials

Teachers completed a one-page survey that served as the basis of this study. It included three questions related to demographics (gender, grade(s) currently teaching, and years of experience). One item questioned whether or not the teacher had made any special education referrals of students for emotional or behavioral difficulties within the past year. The remaining twelve items related to the likelihood of referring students for special education for various internalizing or externalizing behavior problems. The teachers were given twelve specific behavior patterns and

asked how likely they would be to refer a student exhibiting that pattern. These twelve behavior patterns were listed in random order, but the two categories were not differentiated on the survey. Respondents were asked to rate the twelve items on a 5-point Likert-type scale (Would not refer, Unlikely to refer, May or may not refer, Likely to refer, or Would definitely refer). See Appendix A for the cover letter used. See Appendix B for the entire survey.

Procedure

The surveys were distributed to a random sample of thirty teachers at each of five elementary schools. Completing the survey was voluntary. Of the 150 surveys distributed, 53 were returned, which is a 35.3 % return rate. One survey was discarded due to the teacher's comments that suggested a misunderstanding of the survey's intent. Although teachers provided an exact number for years of experience, the researchers chose to categorize that variable into the following four categories: 1-9 years, 10-19 years, 20-29 years, or 30 or more years. The data from the surveys was analyzed using SPSS for Windows.

Results

Before addressing our hypotheses, a chi-square test was first conducted to identify any differences between male and female respondents on amount of teaching experience. The results were not significant [$X^2(3, N = 52) = 1.513, p > .05$]. This suggests that the male and female teachers in the sample can be considered equivalent in terms of teaching experience; however, this conclusion should be interpreted with caution due to the small number of male teachers in the sample. It should also be noted that the mean for years of teaching experience was 18.87, indicating that the sample was a very experienced group.

Research Question #1: Are Teachers More Likely to Refer for Externalized Behaviors?

When completing the survey, teachers were asked to rate on a 5-point scale (1 being least likely, 5 being most likely) their likelihood of referring students for twelve specific emotional or behavioral concerns, six of which are considered to be internalized behavior and six of which are externalized behaviors. “Internalized total” and “externalized total” variables were then created by adding up each subject’s six ratings for the internalized behaviors and six ratings for the externalized behaviors. A paired samples t-test was performed on these two “total” variables to determine if significant differences exist between the teachers’ likelihood of referring students for externalized behavior problems versus internalized behavior problems. The results indicated that the mean score for externalized behavior referrals ($M = 20.44$) was not significantly greater ($p > .05$) than the mean score for internalized behavior referrals ($M = 20.12$). This indicated that the teachers were equally as likely to refer students for externalized behavior problems as they were for internalized problems. A strong and significant correlation ($r = .664, p < .001$) did exist between these two variables, however, suggesting that teachers who are more likely than others to refer students for externalized behavior problems are also more likely than other teachers to refer for internalized behavior problems.

Research Question #2: Does this Differ by Teacher Gender?

To address the second hypothesis, analysis on survey question #1 (“Did you refer any students for emotional and/or behavioral difficulties in the past year?”) was conducted to determine if a relationship existed between gender and likelihood of making referrals. The Pearson chi-square test for gender was marginally significant [$X^2(1, N = 52) = 3.437, p = .064$], suggesting that female teachers may have been more likely than males to have referred a student for emotional or behavioral issues in the past year. Again, this conclusion should be interpreted with caution due to the small number of males in the sample.

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to determine whether teacher gender impacted the likelihood of referring students for internalized or externalized behaviors. Using the total teacher ratings for all six internalized variables and all six externalized behaviors, results were statistically significant for externalized behavior totals ($p < .05$). This suggests that female teachers are significantly more likely overall to refer students for externalized behavior concerns.

A series of t-tests were also conducted using the twelve specific behavior problems, six internalizing and six externalizing. Only one internalized behavior pattern, “oftentimes appears depressed,” was found to have a statistically significant difference based on gender, with female teachers reporting that they would be more likely to refer ($t = 2.024, p < .05$). Of the six externalized behavior problems, only “regularly defies teacher” was found to have a statistically significant difference, with females once again more likely to refer ($t = 2.127, p < .05$). Both “refuses to stay in seat” ($t = 1.877, p = .066$) and “easily distracted” ($t = 1.947, p = .057$) were marginally significant. This is somewhat contradictory with our other data as it suggests that male and female teachers are equally likely to refer students for most problem behaviors; however, female teachers may be more likely to refer for defiance and signs of depression.

Research Question #3: Does Teaching Experience Affect Referral Decisions?

Further analysis on survey question #1 was conducted to address the third research question. A chi-square test examined the relationship between years of teaching experience and the likelihood of making referrals for emotional or behavioral problems. The results were not significant [$\chi^2 (3, N = 52) = 2.714, p > .05$], indicating that years of experience had little effect on the likelihood of referring students for emotional or behavioral problems.

To further address the final research question, several analysis of variance (ANOVA) analyses were conducted to ascertain whether the teachers’ years of experience affects their

likelihood of referring students for specific problem behaviors. In nine of the twelve cases, the results at the individual item level ($p > .05$ in all nine instances) indicated that the amount of teaching experience does not impact the likelihood of making a referral for any of the specific behaviors in question. In contrast, two behavior patterns were statistically significant. “Talks out or interrupts” [$F(3, 48) = 3.099, p = .035$] and “displays verbal aggression” [$F(3, 48) = 3.384, p = .026$] were both found to have statistically significant differences based upon years of experience. “Excessive or unreasonable shyness” was marginally significant [$F(3, 48) = 2.431, p = .077$]. Post-hoc analyses conducted on these significant ANOVAs revealed one statistically significant pairwise difference for the “talks out or interrupts” variable ($p < .05$). Using the Bonferroni test, teachers with 1-9 years of experience were significantly more likely to refer students exhibiting that behavior pattern than were teachers with 30 or more years of experience.

Additional ANOVAs were performed on the total teacher ratings for the six internalized and the six externalized behavior problems, again using years of experience as the independent variable. For the internalized total, $F(3, 48) = 1.700, p > .05$, which failed to reveal significant differences among teachers with varying amounts of experience. Furthermore, post-hoc analyses on the internalized behavior totals indicated no significant differences among the many pairwise comparisons. In contrast, the externalized total was significant [$F(3, 48) = 2.910, p < .05$]. Post-hoc analyses indicated one marginally significant difference between teachers with 20-29 years of experience and teachers with 30 or more years of experience. This suggests that the teachers with 20-29 years of experience may be more likely to refer students for externalized behavior problems.

Discussion

The results of the analyses suggest that teachers may be equally likely to refer students for special education for internalized behavior problems as they are for externalized behavior problems. However, the results may have been impacted by the fact that having suicidal tendencies was listed as one of the six internalized behavior patterns. The mean likelihood of teachers referring for this behavior ($M = 4.73$) was much higher than the means of the other five internalized behaviors. This in turn raised the mean score for internalized behavior referrals such that it was closer than expected to the mean score for externalized behavior referrals. In addition, any conclusions reached regarding the differences between internalized and externalized behavior referrals should be interpreted with caution as the results were based on hypothetical scenarios rather than actual teacher referrals.

No clear link was shown between teacher gender and the likelihood of referring students for special education due to emotional or behavioral difficulties. Based solely on whether or not teachers have made an actual special education referral for emotional or behavioral difficulties within the past year, females appear to be somewhat more likely to refer students. When looking at teachers' reported likelihood of referring students for specific behaviors, teachers of both genders appear equally likely to refer students for most problem behaviors. When considering total teacher ratings for internalized and externalized behaviors, however, female teachers were significantly more likely than male teachers to refer students for externalized behavior concerns. There were no differences for internalized behavior concerns. When examining these results, it is important to consider differences that may exist between teachers' responses to hypothetical scenarios and the actual referrals they make. Teachers may be more likely to report that they would refer students for certain internalizing behaviors, such as anxiety and depression, because it is considered the prudent thing to do. In actual practice, however, they may be less likely to

refer these students if the internalizing behaviors are not readily apparent. It may be informative to conduct a study using actual referral numbers and contrasting them with responses to hypothetical scenarios.

The influence of years of teaching experience was also unclear. While the analysis of whether or not teachers have made special education referrals for emotional or behavioral problems in the past year suggested that years of experience has little effect on referrals, other analyses were somewhat inconsistent. Teachers' likelihood of referring students for various internalized and externalized behaviors did not appear to be impacted by years of experience in a majority of cases. One significant difference was noted between teachers with 1-9 years of experience and teachers with 30 or more years of experience, with the less experienced teachers being more likely to refer students for frequently talking out or interrupting. One possible explanation for this difference may be that younger teachers may display a lack of confidence in their ability to handle disruptive behaviors; thus, they may be more likely to initiate a special education referral in situations where more experienced teachers would be more tolerant.

Limitations of this study include the small sample size, the lack of male respondents, and the fact that only one Midwestern school district was represented. The study could be more beneficial if replicated with a larger sample size that includes more male teachers. Elementary schools were sampled in this study as the majority of special education referrals take place in the primary grades; however, future research could include secondary schools where there are more male teachers employed. In addition, it would be interesting to distribute the survey to more school districts located in various geographical regions to better understand the impact of school size and diversity of student population on referrals for emotional or behavioral problems.

In regard to special education, studies focusing on referral decisions have important implications for the identification of students. Due to the large number of students receiving services under the category of emotional or behavioral disorder, and the belief that many of them are misidentified, the teacher variables related to referral decisions need to be considered. In order to eliminate some of the subjectivity of referral decisions, teachers should be made aware of these trends and encouraged to consider their own biases before referring students to special education.

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Appendix A

Survey Cover Letter

January 31, 2005

Dear Teacher:

We are school psychology graduate students from the University of Wisconsin-River Falls and we are conducting research on special education referrals. This research will examine contributing factors in special education referrals for emotional or behavioral problems. We would greatly appreciate you taking a few minutes to fill out this survey. Your participation in this survey is entirely voluntary. Your results will be kept confidential and used only for research purposes. Please do not write your name on the survey. Feel free to write in the margins if you feel you need room to express or explain an answer. Please respond to every item to the best of your knowledge.

Please return your completed survey to Ann DeMarco, in care of Dr. Brenda Cumming, through inter-district mail at Apple Valley High School. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Ann at (651) 698-2977 or Sonja at (763) 670-0728. Thank you for your cooperation.

If you have any concerns as a participant in this study, please contact:

William E. Campbell, Director, Grants and Research
104 North Hall, River Falls, WI 54022
(715) 425-3195

Sincerely,

Sonja Deretich, M.S.E. & Ann Marie DeMarco, M.Ed., M.S.E.
Graduate Students
Department of School Psychology
University of Wisconsin-River Falls

This research project has been approved by the UW-River Falls Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, protocol # H04-18.

Appendix B
Teacher Survey

Gender: Male _____ Female _____ Grade(s) Currently Teaching _____

Years of Teaching Experience: _____

Have you made any special education referrals of students for emotional or behavioral difficulties within the past year?

Yes _____ No _____

How likely would you be to refer a student for special education for each of the following behaviors? Use the following scale:

- 1=Would not refer
- 2=Unlikely to refer
- 3=May or may not refer
- 4=Likely to refer
- 5=Would definitely refer

_____ Consistently refuses to stay in seat when expected to do so

_____ Mood often seems to indicate suicidal tendencies or a desire to hurt self

_____ Often talks out of turn during class or interrupts others

_____ Frequently exhibits poor concentration or is easily distracted

_____ Generally appears to have low self-esteem

_____ Repeatedly displays verbal aggression (e.g., yelling, swearing, threats)

_____ Mood frequently seems to indicate excessive unhappiness

_____ Displays physical aggression (e.g., hitting, throwing things, kicking)

_____ Recurrently exhibits excessive anxiety, fear or worry

_____ Regularly defies teacher or other authority figures

_____ Often times appears depressed (e.g., low energy, tearfulness, lack of interest)

_____ Excessive or unreasonable shyness in social situations