Over-identification In Special Education

Special Education has been a shifting department for the past decade. There have been new laws in place, a changing DSM5, and new findings regarding disabilities. With many different changes that are constantly happening, there is an uncertain amount of identifications within special education. In this paper we are going to discuss the issue of overidentification in special education. Overidentification in special education is when there are a surplus of students being given IEPs, or too many students are being identified to receive outside services. Overidentification happens throughout many school districts, and throughout many psych units or hospitals. This is an issue currently because there are too many students with IEP services that are not being met due to a large amount of IEP's and services. There has been an increase of students qualifying for special education, and there has been an increase in disabilities over the past decade (cite). That being said, there has been more of a demand given on special education teachers and related service teachers to provide for all of these students. The question that comes to the surface is, are we identifying the students with the appropriate diagnosis, or should they have a diagnosis?

Identification Process

A student may be referred for an initial evaluation to determine eligibility by a parent, teacher, or state educational agency. The school's multidisciplinary team will review screenings, responses to interventions, and student's performance to review progress and recommend an evaluation. A multidisciplinary team comprising of a special education teacher, general education teacher, school psychologist, and a school administrator are responsible for deciding which evaluation to use and administer to determine eligibility. A written consent from the parents is required before a district may begin testing. If and when the evaluation results show that a student has a disability under IDEA and requires special education services, individual academic and functional needs will be addressed in an Individual Education Plan. Child find is another process by which a school districts are responsible to screen, identify and evaluate, if necessary, students with potential disabilities to determine their need for special education (Yell, 2019).

Categories of Disabilities

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, there are thirteen categories by which a student may be found eligible to receive special education or related services. The categories include Autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairments, other health impairment, emotional disturbance, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairments (Yell, 2019). In the state of Connecticut, student's aged 3-6 may be found eligible under developmental delay if a student show delays in one or more of the following areas including social/emotional, cognitive, communication, adaptive, or physical development. Only students with disabilities included under IDEA and which have a significant impact on their education, can receive special education and related services. In 2017-2018, about 34% of students receiving special education services were identified as having specific learning disabilities, 19% speech or language impairments, 14% other health impairments, and 5-10% were identified with autism, developmental delays, intellectual disabilities, and emotional

disturbances (The Condition of Special Education, 2018).

Variables of Over-Identification

The variables for overidentification change across school districts. The variables that have come up in research and discussion is gender, race, and socioeconomic status.

Gender

Sullivan and Bal (2013) used a sample of 1800 students across thirty nine districts and assessed students' risk of being identified. They found that males were more likely to be identified than females. Anderson (1997) researched gender bias and special education referrals. "The US Department of Education reported 72% of learning disabled population as male, 28% female" (Anderson, 1997, p. 151-152).

Socioeconomic Status

When studying poverty level, Sullivan and Bal also found that students who received free and reduced lunch were more likely to be identified than peers who did not receive free and reduced lunch (Sullivan & Bal, 2013).

Race

Through their descriptive analysis, the study showed that African American students were more likely to be identified for special education. Language barriers is a contribution to over-identification when focusing on students of various races and cultures. Some students are identified for a disability when Early Language Learner is still an option for the students, which would not classify as an eligibility for special education.

Minorities in Special Education

As mentioned in the variables category, minorities are a concerning variable when looking at overidentification. Races impacted by the services of special education range from African American, Latino American, Native American, and more. Students of different races are identified in special education, but there is a connection to language barriers (Chinn & Hughes, 1987). Some students are being identified for special education, but ELL support is sometimes the appropriate track for these students before being eligible for special education services. Researchers have studied socio-economic status along with race, but there has been more tangible proof that it is the reason for identification in special education.

Potential Reasons for Misidentification

There are many factors which contribute to the misidentification of students who receive special education. Either in isolation or combined, potential factors which may contribute are poverty levels and student demographics, quality of schools and educators, and the ability to implement interventions with fidelity prior to a students referral to special education.

Poverty and Student Demographics

A child's access to education at an early age provides fundamental skills needed for success later in their educational career. Early childhood educational programs including Head Start are federally funded to support children from families with incomes below the poverty rate access quality education. If a young child misses or does not reach early developmental milestones, he or she might be misidentified due to a lack of exposure. In the state of Connecticut, a child is legally required to attend school by age 5.

Quality of Schools and Educators

Schools are the principal institution responsible for educating all students and ensuring their success. Funding plays a major role in the amount of qualified staffing and supports and the conditions in which educators must navigate to provide equal educational opportunities for all children. Larger districts with a wide range of general education and special education supports face larger student to teacher ratios and political demands. Title I assessment reports show high poverty schools also have a high rate of inexperienced and uncertified teachers (Artiles, 2002). Overburdened teachers may have the misleading belief that a student will make more progress if identified under special education.

Response to Intervention

Prior to a student's referral to special education, interventions in general education are used to provide support to a student in areas of learning where he or she is not making grade level progress. Interventions are research based and used to interpret data relative to a student's progress, and requires trained and qualified staff to deliver such instruction. When interventions are not completed with fidelity or interpreted correctly, students are referred to special education. In 2004, Congress noted concerns regarding the increasing number of students who receive special education and how it may be avoided if instructional support and interventions had been provided sooner. Since the push for stronger evidence-based practices, the number of students identified as having a specific learning disability, the largest population served by special education, has declined by 12.4% since 2001 (Brue, 2011).

Parent Input

As a part of the Planning and Placement Team, parental input is a deciding factor on a student's eligibility in special education. Some parents refuse special education services, and some parents fight for the services. There is a questioning factor if the special education services are needed, or of the best interest of the student. Special education includes one to one support, small groups, and accommodations that some parents see fit for their child, so the pressure from parents to identify a child in an educational setting is a factor in overidentification.

Conclusion

The evolution of rights for people with disabilities continues to grow since the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. According to the State Department of Education, in Connecticut, students with IEP's account for 15% of the student population (Werth, 2019). With diverse school districts across

the country, practices in education vary even within states, making identification of students who require special education unique and isolated based on gender, race, and socioeconomic status. Diagnosing a student is not an exact science, there are guidelines and evaluation results, with a wide range of expertise among personnel to determine eligibility. It is impossible to eliminate human error and create an unbiased educational system. It is important to keep in mind as educators,