

# The Process of Teacher Referrals for Speech-Language Services

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### **Purpose**

- ❖ To collect data regarding the process of teacher referrals to school-based speech-language pathologists.
- ❖ Teachers at various grade levels (preschool through high school) and in various regions (urban/suburban) were surveyed to collect information regarding their experience for referring students with potential speech and language disorders.
- ❖ Surveying teachers at all grade levels will allow for the observation of similarities and differences, in addition to any trends in referral procedures.
- ❖ Overall, to strengthen the relationship between teachers and school-based speech-language pathologists. It is imperative that teachers be considered an important part of the referral process, as they spend the majority of the day with students. These professionals may be the first to note that a child may be portraying a particular behavior, as the speech-language pathologist does not possess enough time to evaluate all students on a regular basis. Ultimately, this would provide children with the highest quality of services available.

### **Review of the Literature: Common Trends**

- ❖ There are either a variety of disorders that teachers are not "catching" or are under-referring for various disorders that involve deficits in areas such as voice and articulation
- ❖ Teachers may not even be aware that various actions, such as socially withdrawn behaviors, may be of clinical concern
- ❖ Some of the studies were conducted in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, when speech services were not even a prominent element of the school setting
- ❖ *Up-to-date research in the area of teacher referrals needs to be conducted*

### **Method**

- ❖ Data collection instruments (teacher and administrator surveys) and cover letters for participants were developed
  - Questions (twenty-two for teachers and eight for administrators) were formulated, encompassing an open and close-ended format.
- ❖ Permission for research execution was then granted from the Institutional Review Board of Saint Xavier University, Chicago
- ❖ Schools were randomly identified via the internet
- ❖ Permission from school administrators for participation in the study was sought
- ❖ After permission was granted from a school and the permission slip was returned, the requested number of teacher packets and a school administrator packet was mailed.
- ❖ Teacher packets=a survey, a pre-stamped enveloped return envelope, and a cover letter
- ❖ Administrator packet=a survey, pre-stamped return envelope, and letter that extended gratitude for participation in the study. Participants were requested to return the completed survey by a specified deadline (~ 2-3 weeks).

## Results

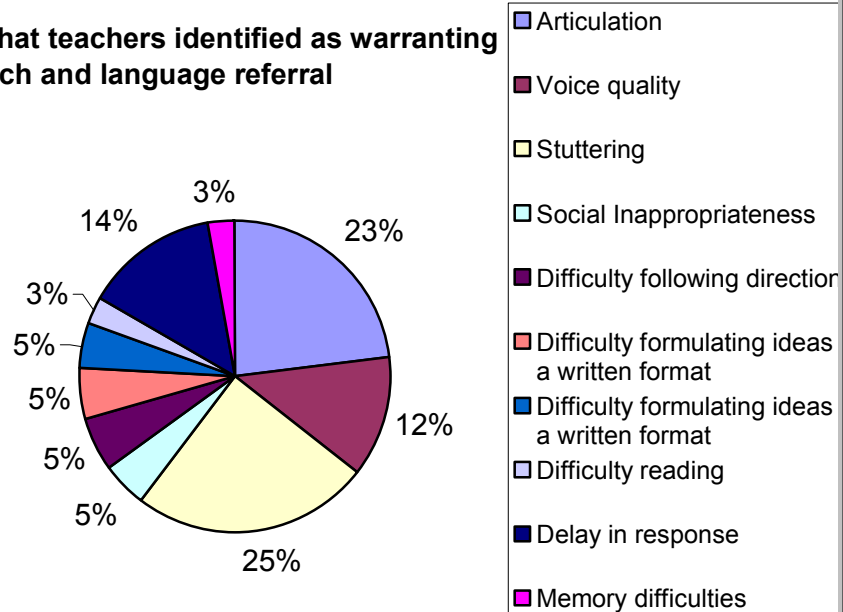
- ❖ Permission letters were sent to 42 suburban and urban schools.
  - 6 schools gave consent to participation, 4 answered "no," and 32 of the schools did not reply
  - 250 teacher and 6 administrator surveys were distributed
  - 52 teacher surveys were returned (21% return rate) and 3 administrator surveys were returned (50% return rate)
- ❖ The majority of respondents taught in middle and high schools
  - No preschool respondents participated in the study.
  - There were a variety of reported subjects taught by the survey respondents
- ❖ 69% of respondents indicated that they had earned a Master's level degree; one respondent earned a Doctorate-level degree.

### Sample data:

Urban setting: 5 (have referred), 3 (have not referred)

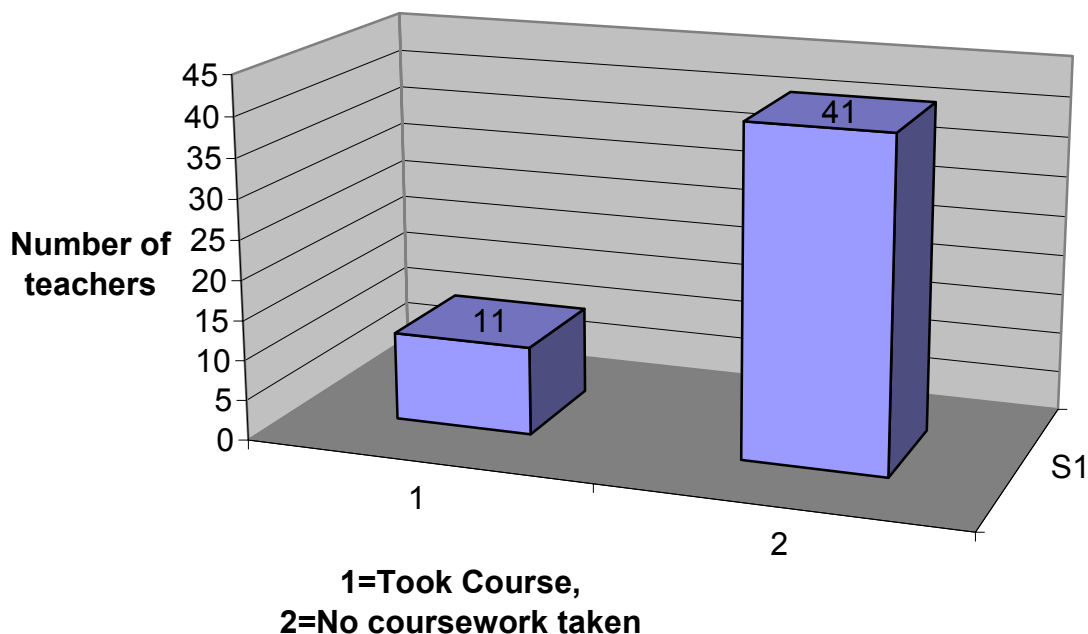
Suburban setting: 26 (have referred), 18 (have not referred)

**Areas of concern that teachers identified as warranting a speech and language referral**



- ❖ The majority of respondents indicated that they referred about one child per year.
- ❖ Some provided a range of 0-1 or 0-2.
- ❖ Highest reported number of students referred per year=3 (7<sup>th</sup> grade teacher)
- ❖ The majority of respondents stated that there was a referral program in place.
- ❖ However, some stated that they were "unsure" or that there was nothing formal on paper.
- ❖ Overall, there was an inability to clearly explain his/her school's referral process and the timelines involved.

## Relevant coursework and workshop experience



- ❖ This study uncovered several important issues that affected the process of teacher referral for speech and/or language services. These included: (1) teacher knowledge (teachers need to know what to refer for), (2) teacher self-efficacy (teachers need to know their concerns are taken seriously and that they are making a difference), (3) the process itself (it needs to be clearly outlined who to go to, when, what paperwork needs to be completed, and what timeline to expect), (4) general education versus special education issues (teachers need to be aware of initial referral versus testing to continue eligibility for special education services), (5) perceptions of what is required of the general education teacher in the process (the teacher needs to be aware that he/she will need to collect and present documentation of student needs and (6) perceived "cut-off" ages for eligibility for special education services (a student at any age or grade may be identified).

### **Administrator Survey**

- ❖ Administrators in K-5 positions felt that their number of referrals decreased; one indicated that their number of E.I. referrals increased; one junior high level administrator felt that the number of referrals remained constant
- ❖ Reported % of referrals that ultimately lead to an evaluation and services:
  - middle school administrator: 50%
  - elementary administrator: indicated that these numbers were 90%
  - A Pre-K to 5<sup>th</sup> grade administrator reported percentages of 100% for EI, 95-100% for preschool, and 95-100% for K-5<sup>th</sup> grade.
- ❖ One elementary school administrator reported that the primary teachers were more aware of referrals and that they usually made them for articulation disorders. The upper elementary teachers, however, were reported to make more language referrals.

## **Sample Participant Responses**

- "...referral by teacher or parent?" (suburban, 5 yrs)
- "I have not used it, so I can't describe it." (suburban, 9 yrs)"I'm not sure. Since I have never referred a student, I would have to investigate the procedure." (suburban, 4 yrs)
- "Great program-I am not sure to describe it." (urban, 21 yrs)
- "Nothing formal on paper" (Suburban, 7 yrs exp.)
- "Unknown. We do have a speech pathologist." (urban, 3 yrs) (when questioned about the referral process)
- "?" (Urban, 3 yrs exp.) (when questioned about the referral process)
- "Don't know." (Suburban 3 yrs exp.) (when questioned about the referral process)
- "Mostly if a child is hard to understand. I never thought much about the other categories above."
- "Usually misarticulated speech."
- "For poor speech and for poor sentence formation."
- "Kindergarteners are still learning. I would wait for most problems until the end of the year. They need time to mature. If they have trouble saying words/Yes!"

## **Discussion/Implications**

- ❖ Inability to clearly explain his/her school's referral process and the timelines involved (length of time to evaluation, start of services)
- ❖ Confusion with reasons for which a student would be referred (suspected lack of knowledge re: language, pragmatic issues)
- ❖ There appears to be confusion with the questions being asked (S/L service issues)
  - Inconsistency of answers (providing responses to questions that are in reference to referrals when teacher had indicated that they NEVER had referred)
  - Referral versus re-evaluation confusion
  - When to refer (critical age: Kindergarten teacher waiting until the end of the school year)
- ❖ Without a thorough grasp on the process of a speech and language referral and why one would be warranted, it is likely that teaching professionals are not fully aware of a speech-language pathologist's role, and that many students who may need to be referred for services have not been.
- ❖ There is a definite need for speech-language pathologists to present yearly workshops for teachers.
  - **Specific content:** information on specific speech and/or language disorders and how it impacts a student's education and overall ability to participate in the educational setting.
- ❖ Future research in the area would benefit from:
  - larger teacher and administrator sample sizes, more "urban" participants to allow for the identification of trends and similarities.
- ❖ Future research should include follow-up phone interviews or surveys dispersed via email, with the expectation of receiving a higher participation rate.

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