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Helping Teachers Teach: Exploring Student Needs in Elementary Classrooms

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Abstract

Unmet student needs negatively affect the ability of teachers to create a successful learning environment for all students. Some of these needs include students not being at the academic levels they should be and special education students not getting individualized attention. As a future educator, I sought to discover what could be done to help teachers address these needs in order to create a better classroom environment. Two teachers from the same elementary school were interviewed about student needs, how student needs impact their teaching ability, and what is being done to assist these needs. Preliminary data analyses indicate that more participation is needed from within both the school and the outside community in classrooms and additional attention given to special education students. Thus, it has been learned that schools benefit most from further assistance, participation, and collaboration by teachers, parents, and other involved community members.

Helping Teachers Teach: Exploring Student Needs in Elementary Classrooms

Setting the Stage

Third grader Juan¹ was transferred to the classroom of thirty-year veteran teacher Robert Smith this past year. Juan comes from a Hispanic household in which he is the oldest of four siblings. Additionally, he has a history of abuse. Juan's step-father was recently reported to Child Protective Services (CPS) due to an incident where he cracked Juan's ribs. However, he was allowed to come back to the house shortly after going through anger management. Juan also suffers from a severe astigmatism and requires specialized glasses in order to be able to concentrate on the classroom board and his textbooks.

Knowing all this, Mr. Smith began noticing a few weeks into school that Juan was not wearing his glasses anymore. Upon approaching Juan, Mr. Smith learned that the glasses were broken and his step-father planned on replacing them. One week went by; the glasses were still not replaced. Two weeks went by; the glasses were still not replaced. Eventually, at the request of the teacher, Juan was brought to a Student Study Team meeting, a program in which faculty, community members, and parents decide what can be done in regular education to help children. The parents never showed up for this meeting.

Over the course of the school year, letters were repeatedly sent home regarding the glasses and were ignored. Finally, in May the school contacted CPS to inform them of the situation and that the family was refusing to get Juan the glasses he needed to focus in class. The school soon after learned that Juan had been withdrawn from the school and transferred to another nearby school district.

¹ All proper names are pseudonyms

It is a situation such as this that can leave teachers unable to do their job. Because Juan was unable to ever get the replacement glasses he needed to concentrate in class, his reading never improved, thus leaving him further behind in his studies as he advanced to the next grade. In elementary classrooms today, these types of discrepancies between student needs and how teachers are able to provide for and accommodate these needs are commonly seen. There are not enough resources available for student intervention and this causes teachers to be unable to create the best educational environment possible. Additionally, if teachers do not have access to resources to help students in their classrooms with needs, the students will continue to suffer and not receive the attention needed to fix their situation. While there are certain resources available to schools, such as after-hours homework assistance or school psychologists, they usually come at a steep price paid out of pocket and teachers may not be aware of such resources that exist.

What is the Problem and Why it is an Issue

Teachers already have the tough job of creating a learning environment for a large group of children; however this task is worsened when there are student needs that are going unfulfilled in the classroom, such as lack of assistance for children with emotional or behavioral problems. In elementary classrooms today, there is a disconnect between student needs and how teachers are able to provide for and accommodate these needs. This causes teachers to be unable to create the best educational environment possible, along with other added stressors. Thus this project investigates the specific student needs teachers are finding in their classrooms, the resources teachers have available to help alleviate such needs, and what can be done in fixing their current situations. Based on the available data and relevant research material, teachers without the resources to address student needs face the following challenges: inability to create an

environment for academic success, not identifying a student with unmet needs, and having an increased level of stress.

Inability to Create an Environment for Academic Success

Many students, when having a social, emotional, physical, or academic need that has not been fulfilled, will more than likely disrupt the class in one way or another. As a result of this behavior, teachers often find themselves spending more time with a student who is misbehaving, which takes away from time teachers could be spending with the class as a whole. According to Ducharme and Shecter (2011):

A number of survey studies indicate that teachers feel inadequately trained to manage such difficulties [student problem behaviors], a circumstance that contributes to a high level of teacher stress and burnout. Moreover, high teacher stress can lead to use of harsher discipline strategies and less time spent engaging students in a positive manner.
(p. 2)

As a result, teachers often resort to disciplinary methods that are not conducive to dealing with a student's problem, such as sending a student out of the classroom, to the principal's office, or home. Additionally, a teacher cannot make modifications to their lesson plans that would be beneficial to a student with needs if they are unaware of a problem. For example, a study by Nancy Ratcliff, Gilbert Hunt, Cathy Jones, Richard Costner and Emma Savage-Davis found that teachers deemed as needing improvement by their superiors had the following qualities in common:

Numerous instances of misbehavior were observed in the classrooms of teachers identified as needing improvement. For example, children were constantly sharpening pencils, talking with friends, pointlessly roaming the classroom, playing with rulers,

crayons, and other materials, and arguing with the teacher. Thus, the researchers frequently observed a cycle dreaded by all teachers and characterized by 1) student misbehavior, 2) teacher's attempt to control misbehavior, 3) student persistence in continued misbehavior, 4) teacher retreating in frustration, and 5) an increase in student misbehavior. (Ratcliff et al., 2010, p. 310)

Therefore, if a teacher is unaware of how to handle a student's specific needs, they will resort to harsh disciplinary methods or teach in a way that is not conducive to their learning.

Not Identifying a Student with Unmet Needs

The inability of teachers to successfully identify a student with unmet social, behavioral, emotional, academic, or physical needs creates problems for both the teacher and student. If a teacher is not aware or informed of an existing or developing condition with a student, as stated earlier, they cannot successfully accommodate to that student's needs. Bride McBeth brings up the idea that in order to help a student academically, a teacher needs to have an instructional method that accommodates a student's needs, not the other way around. McBeth (2004) states the following:

Differentiated instruction (i.e., the process of addressing different student needs in a classroom) is vital to effecting positive change in student performance, because the one-strategy-fits-all approach doesn't work in a real classroom. It's now necessary to construct lesson plans to address individual needs. (p. 39)

Additionally, if a teacher is not versed in special education nor have resources to spot a student with said needs, they will not be able to get the resources available to address them. However, this inability to identify a student with unmet needs also affects the student indefinitely as they cannot be expected to learn in an environment where their needs are not being fulfilled.

According to Cohen (2001), “Between 15 and 22% of our nation’s youth experience social, emotional, and other problems that necessitate mental health treatment, but approximately 80% of them are not receiving needed services” (p. 5). Therefore, there is no way for a teacher to get the assistance necessary for said student needs if the teacher is unaware of the problem at hand.

Increased Level of Stress

As a teacher, there is already an enormous amount of stress involved with day-to-day tasks. Elementary teachers have to face the everyday challenges of new federal regulations, such as the No Child Left Behind Act and standardized tests, and creating lesson plans for each subject. However, this stress becomes multiplied when teachers are unable to provide for students in the classroom that have needs that are not being met. Sue Rieg, Kelli Paquette, and Yijie Chen (2007) found the following in their study of the causes of stress amongst elementary teachers: “The fourth domain (stress domain related to student teaching) involves student learning which includes identifying and adapting to student diversity, multiple learning styles, and mastery and application of the content knowledge” (p. 215). Therefore, elementary teachers are already stressed in adapting to each student’s individual learning style and trying to figure out a problem that is unknown adds onto that stress. Additionally, if the teacher does not have the resources or knowledge available to address these needs, how are they expected to appropriately handle a seemingly disruptive student? According to Farber (2010), “Teachers are expected to meet the instructional needs of every child; advocate for special services; make sure that children are fed clothed, emotionally balanced, healthy, and not bullying others or being abused; and communicate frequently with parents...” (p. 44). With all these expectations added on top of an already heavy work load, it becomes increasingly difficult for teachers to identify

the specific needs of an individual student without resources readily available to assist in the process.

Literature Review

What has been done previously to assist elementary teachers in addressing student needs?

In researching the problem of unmet student needs in elementary classrooms affecting teachers, there have been multiple methods attempted to help alleviate these needs. While many require extra funding or bringing outside sources in, there have been a few studied methods that do not necessarily require bringing in outside resources. Amongst these methods, two have been performed the most: collaboration amongst students and teachers and forming assistance teams for special education students.

Collaboration Among Teachers, Parents, and Students.

One of the methods used recently in classrooms to address student needs affecting teachers is in the use of collaboration amongst students, parents, and teachers. According to the articles “Extending Inclusive Opportunities” by Michael Giangreco and “Beyond the Bake Sale: A Community-Based Relational Approach to Parent Engagement in Schools” by Mark Warren, Hong Soo, Carolyn Rubin and Phitsamay Uy, teachers can find solutions for students who have needs that are not being met in establishing relationships between those closest to the student and also, by relying on students in the classroom to aid in the development of other students. In his study on teacher Ms. Santos and her ability to successfully address student needs in her classroom, Giangreco found that part of her success is due to relationships formed. According to Giangreco (2007), “...she drew on the power of relationship...in building a collaborative team of special educators, parents, and others” (p. 36). Additionally, Warren et al., (2009) found that, “If educators collaborate with community partners and develop parent leadership, they can form

initiatives that meet the interests, values, and capacities of any particular school community” (p. 2209). Therefore, teachers that are successful in meeting the needs of their students are those that involve parents and community members in the classroom.

Additionally, research shows that teachers are successful in addressing a student needs when they allow other classmates to play a role in that student’s learning process. According to Giangreco (2007), Ms. Santos “...expected students to help one another learn and be responsible for helping the classroom run smoothly” (p. 36). This allows all of the students in a class to hold each other accountable for learning. The research of Warren et al. also found that when families in the community are more connected, that can benefit students in the classroom as they will know more about the background of their classmates. According to Warren et al., (2006), “When community-based organizations are authentically rooted in community life, they can bring to schools a better understanding of the culture and assets of families...” (p. 2209). Therefore, students can help each other in the classroom once they trust and understand each other.

Assistance Teams for Special Education Students.

Another concern in discussing teachers being able to properly address student needs is the issue of special education. Across the country, multiple forms of teacher assistance teams have been implemented in elementary schools in order to address the issue of students who have disabilities that hinder their performance in regular education classrooms. These assistance teams usually include special education persons, school administration, and school psychologists. In particular, the articles “Effectiveness of special education personnel in the intervention assistance team model” by Matthew Burns and “Characteristics of Effective Rural Elementary Schools for Students with Disabilities” by Katherine Nagle, Glenda Hernandez, Sandra Embler, Margaret McLaughlin, and Frances Doh discuss two of the primary benefits of these assistance teams.

One, special education students have a better chance of success in regular education classrooms when assisted by assistance teams and two, the teams allow the teacher to create a better learning environment for all students.

Through research, it has been shown the students who have all types of disabilities have a better chance of success in a regular education classroom when supported by assistance teams. Burns discusses in his study the success that teachers can have when supported by special education persons in the classroom:

The results suggest that students who attended schools with special education personnel serving on their intervention assistance teams had a significantly less chance of being retained or of being referred for special education testing than did students who attended a similar school that did not include special educators on its intervention team. (1999, p. 354)

Additionally, the research done by Nagle et al. also suggests that schools that have high-performing special education students are those in which regular education and special education teachers work together. In studying such schools, Nagle et al. found that they had reported the following:

...high levels of collaboration between regular education and special education teachers as they tried to meet the needs of students in the school...In many of the elementary schools we visited it was clear that the school staff and administration worked well together and that teachers felt like part of a team” (p. 6).

Therefore, students with disabilities who have assistance from outside teams perform better overall than those students who have support from teachers alone.

Additionally, assistance teams allow for the teacher to create a better learning environment for all students in a classroom. Burns found that, "...intervention assistance teams create a more balanced responsibility between special and regular education and improve teacher skills in meeting the unique needs of all students" (as cited in McCarney, Wunderlich, and Bauer, 1993, p. 1). Evidence found by Nagle et. al corroborates this, as their research found that when assistance teams are involved in the classroom, teachers have more of an opportunity to focus on their class as a whole. Nagle et al. (2006) found that because of the collaboration amongst staff, "...grade level teachers shared planning periods and had team meetings once a week. In addition, the principal in one school created Vertical Teaming Articulation, which enabled one teacher from each grade to meet weekly to coordinate what students needed to know across the grades" (p. 6). Therefore, assistance teams allow for more people involved in the lives of students with disabilities so that teachers can focus on their overall class.

Methodology

Context

Located in Agrocitcity of the California Central Coast, Kennedy Elementary School is in an area that is dominated primarily by the production of agriculture, as there are various fruit fields on almost every side of the school. Agrocitcity also has higher rates of violent crime than that of the United States averages. For example, based on murders, rapes, robberies, assaults, burglaries, thefts, auto thefts, and arson on a scale per 100,000 persons, in 2010 Agrocitcity had 418 versus the U.S. average of 266 (Onboard Informatics, 2011, p.1). In addition, the city as a whole has a family income that is nine thousand dollars less than the state average. (Onboard Informatics, 2011, p.1). This last factor is reflected at Kennedy, as about 70% of students attending are eligible for discounted/free lunches. In general, Kennedy does not have high standardized test

scores which further lowers the amount of funds the school has to work with. Overall, Kennedy Elementary can be described as an under-funded school amongst a low-income area which causes the additional struggle of getting any extra beneficial programs for children.

Participants and Participant Selection

For this project, the participants were both elementary teachers from Kennedy Elementary School. The first teacher interviewed was Robert Smith, a Caucasian male in his early sixties who has been in the teaching field for about thirty years with a background in special education. More recently, he has been teaching third grade for the past five years. However, teaching was not his first profession, as he was involved in business and government programs before entering his current field. Smith was chosen to be a participant because the researcher had a previous relationship with him, as he was the researcher's supervisor during service learning, and it was in his classroom that the researcher first witnessed how student needs are having detrimental effects on teachers. Also chosen to be interviewed was 2nd grade teacher Chanel Johnson, a Caucasian female in her early forties. She has been teaching at Kennedy for the past few years and is passionate regarding English Language Learners (ELLs). Chanel Johnson was referred to the researcher from Smith who spoke highly of her teaching abilities and the passion she has for her students.

Researcher

The researcher first learned about this issue of student needs affecting teachers first-hand while being a service learner at Kennedy Elementary School while under the supervision of Robert Smith. During a year-long service, the researcher observed many instances where elementary school teachers could use more assistance. Specifically, there were difficulties with children who had emotional and behavioral problems who were not getting assistance and a

general lack of support for other various classroom and student needs. Upon speaking with the teacher, the researcher learned that there were many students who also had difficulties at home that were impairing their abilities to perform their best in class and leaving the teacher with a difficult educational environment. As a result of this experience and drawing from educational coursework at California State University-Monterey Bay, the researcher is qualified and dedicated to researching how these situations can change in order to better our elementary school classrooms.

Semi-Structured Interview

1. What student needs do you see in your classroom that are not being met? What student needs do you feel ill-prepared to handle?
2. What is being done to help you better respond to those needs? Are you doing anything to get better prepared? How effective do you think these efforts are?
3. What do you think should be done to help teachers better respond to student needs? And what could be done to better prepare teachers to respond to student needs?
4. Can you tell me a story about a time when you had to deal with a challenging student and you did not know what to do?
5. Is there anything else that you would like to say about teachers' abilities to respond to needs in classrooms and/or better prepare them to be able to respond as necessary in their classrooms?

Procedure

The interview process for Smith was set up as a result of contacting Smith individually via telephone and setting up a time and location that would suit for our interview. The researcher was able to contact him through calling the receptionist at Kennedy Elementary, who then

transferred the researcher to his classroom. There was a discussion of what would be the best times to meet up, which ended up being a Tuesday afternoon. The researcher and Smith met up the following week of contact at a small, quiet coffee shop near Smith's home. The researcher told him beforehand approximately how many questions that were prepared and briefly discussed what the focus of the research is on.

Upon meeting up, the researcher and Smith got refreshments, caught up on personal matters for a bit, and then spent the next hour discussing the prepared questions. The researcher recorded his answers on a laptop and wrote word-for-word as best possible his responses to each answer. While some of Smith's answers went off topic of the questions, the researcher periodically brought him back to the original question. However, if he began speaking on an area of focus the researcher had not thought of before, the researcher allowed him to continue speaking on that matter.

The interview process for Johnson began with Smith giving the researcher her extension number at Kennedy. The researcher proceeded to call her two weeks later and set up an interview via telephone for during Johnson's lunch break at the school. The following Monday, October 17, 2011, the researcher called Johnson and they discussed the same questions as given to Smith. Again, the researcher recorded her answers on a laptop and wrote word-for-word as best possible her responses to each answer. The interview lasted a total of 45-minutes and the researcher was able to collect a large amount of information covering each question in its entirety.

Once both interviews were completed, the researcher went over the answers again in order to clean up grammatical errors, misspellings, and ensure that what the researcher wrote in fact matched what Smith and Johnson had said. In doing this, the researcher was able to better understand exactly what was said and how it was applicable to her research and focus.

Results

From the two interviews conducted with elementary teachers at Kennedy elementary, there were emergent themes in regards to student needs, what might be done to help these needs, and challenges that might stand in the way of change. The two primary student needs discussed were students needing remedial attention and increased assistance with special education students and/or students who are at risk for special education. While both participants expressed programs Kennedy has been doing to assist student in these needs, Robert Smith and Chanel Johnson both identified funding and a lack of special education trained teachers as problems hindering these needs being met.

Remedial Attention

As previously stated, both Smith and Johnson identified increased remedial attention as a student need in their classrooms. Upon being asked what student needs he sees in his classroom, Smith discussed a student who transferred into his 3rd grade classroom at a reading level of a beginning 1st grader. While he had ideas of how to help this student, such as intensive reading groups, Smith stated that there were no resources to make this happen. Johnson also described her similar experience with students needing academic remedial help in the following statement: “Because of the bigger class sizes, the lower performing students do not get the one-on-time they need. Those kids are the ones that struggle because they need more attention to talk them through problems” (Johnson, Personal communication, October 2011).

Additionally, a story discussed in Jeanne Ormrod and Dinah McGuire’s “Case Studies: Applying Educational Psychology” brought up the story of Tyler, a third grader who, because of his dyslexia, has had to repeat first and second grade curriculums. He began spending much time in a resource classroom in order to help with his needs; however this ended up causing him to

pick up disruptive behaviors from special education students. Therefore, the teacher, parents, resource teacher, and principal worked together to decide that he could still go to the resource teacher for half an hour a day but be in his regular education classroom for the rest of the time (Ormord & McGuire, 2007, p. 49). Therefore it can be seen from these testimonies that a student needing remedial attention is a primary issue that needs to be addressed in a thoughtful way in order to create a better learning environment.

Proposed Solutions

There were also discussions that touched on potential solutions and actions that can be taken to alleviate this particular student need. In terms of offering remedial academic help, Smith discussed a few programs that Kennedy Elementary has offered in the past but due to funding, have been reduced or cut. For example, in order to assist children with their academics, Kennedy previously has offered Saturday morning school for homework help. Johnson also discussed a program called Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR) that can be incorporated into every classroom for every subject. According to Johnson:

The GRR is a step-by-step instructional program that uses techniques to get kids to work on their own eventually. Kids are divided into 3-4 groups during a certain subject and you introduce certain steps pertaining to that particular topic. It is a how to guide for whatever skill you are working on in a certain day and they learn cause and effect. (Personal communication, October 2011)

Smith and Johnson described these methods to be successful in assisting students who need further academic assistance and direction.

Increased Assistance for Special Education Students

Along the same lines, Smith and Johnson identified students with and/or at risk for needing a special education curriculum are not getting all the assistance needed. In the following excerpt from our conversation, Smith describes how some of the problems surfacing from special education students in regular education classrooms:

Because I have background in special education (Smith has a Masters in Special Education), I feel I am more prepared to handle some of these issues than other teachers. But because the bar for students to be in special education is being raised, there are more and more kids who ten years ago would have been in a special education class that fits their needs. I can recognize a lot of issues but again, it is down to the point where I do not have the resources to tackle these problems that these kids have that need other people to step in. We do not have the extra people. (Smith, Personal communication, September 2011)

Johnson also describes a similar experience in which she has autistic children in her classroom that she does not know how to help in a way that benefits them. Johnson commented on the resource teacher at Kennedy Elementary and her efforts to help these special education students:

Our resource teacher would pull (special education) students from the class for a certain time and support them. It became too hard for her to work around four different teachers' schedules. Last year, she took a teacher in each grade level and would take those children who were learning disabled in her class. She will come in, speak with them, and give them assistance for half an hour. (Johnson, personal communication, October 2011)

Research shows that this is a similar problem in other elementary school across the country. Another story featured in Jeanne Ormrod and Dinah McGuire's "Case Studies: Applying Educational Psychology" highlighted an instance where a young third grade boy had neurofibromatosis, which caused physical deformities and caused his movement to be awkward. Because of his condition, he felt set apart from his classmates and acted out in inappropriate ways in order to get his classmates' and teacher's attention. While the teacher tried multiple methods in order to help this student, including meeting with his mother and the school psychologist, the teacher could not successfully address the problem (Ormrod & McGuire, 2007 p. 43). From the evidence, it can be derived that there needs to be better methods for teachers to successful address students who have a variety of disabilities and special needs, whether cognitively or socially.

Proposed Solutions

For assisting students who may need to be in special education classrooms, Smith and Johnson primarily suggested further teacher training in special education and changing current teaching practices for their students. Upon being asked what should be done to help and better prepare teachers to respond to student needs, Smith stated, "Schools of education should teach classes on special education needs students...teachers should be trained in special education... Schools should make efforts to buy special education teachers" (Personal communication, September 2011). Smith also works on a Student Study Team (SST) where teachers, parents, and involved persons in the student's life come together and discuss the academic options and possible special education referral for potential special education students.

Additionally, as Johnson addressed previously, Kennedy does have resources teachers however they are only available to classrooms on an extremely limited basis. Therefore Johnson

proposes that teachers need to be more willing to adapt to the needs of their classroom and change their teaching style if needed. She states, “Teachers need to be more willing to try new things and self-reflect... Teachers who are willing to try new things and move with the times are going to be more successful” (Johnson, Personal communication, October 2011).

Factors Hindering Success

Overall, the problems that were reported from both sides reflect that lack of funding and teachers not experienced working with special education students are problems hindering successfully solving student needs at Kennedy. Maxine Agazie acknowledges the funding from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has on schools such as Kennedy in her article “Makeover needed for No Child Left Behind: Congress should allocate necessary funding to carry out mandate”. Agazie (2007) states, “If NCLB is here to stay, Congress should allocate the funding needed to carry out its mandates. Flexibility also should be built into the system of accountability, which would allow poor urban and rural schools to meet the unique needs of their students” (p. 39). This research corroborates the responses of Smith and Johnson when addressed on the issues hindering success in addressing student needs in Kennedy. As previously stated, Smith addressed that with his background in special education, he sees many issues arising in his students that cannot be properly dealt with because of a lack of funds. In discussing the efforts of extracurricular programs at Kennedy, Smith states, “At Kennedy, Susan Fischer (principal) scrapes every last penny she can get to help remediation. Saturday classes come out of our school budget and this year, we cannot afford Saturday morning school” (Personal communication, September 2011). In regards to funding, Johnson also brought up the fact that there are not enough teachers in the classroom for one-on-one attention needed to address every student’s needs. Upon being asked what student needs in her classroom are not being met, she

replied, “Having extra adult bodies/teachers in the classroom that are properly trained...Because of the bigger class sizes, a lot of the lower performing students do not get the one-on-one time they need” (Personal communication, October 2011).

In terms of teachers trained in special education, Smith and Johnson both touched on the fact that many teachers at Kennedy are either not trained in areas of special education or not willing to be trained on the issues. According to Leila Christenbury (2010), who discussed in her article “The Flexible Teacher” what makes an effective teacher, “...effective teachers must adjust curriculum, methods, and pacing to meet the needs of the students. Effective teachers put a priority on student needs...” (p. 48). As stated earlier, Smith has a Master’s degree in special education and he constantly stressed throughout the interview the importance for other teachers and future teachers to become educated in special education. Along the same lines, Johnson also consistently mentioned that teachers need to be willing to adjust to the needs of their students and try new methods. In her interview, she stated, “Teachers need to have the attitude that ‘Oh that did not work/did not fit my style, but I know it is a good teaching practice so I am going to try it anyway.’ The mentality of a successful teacher is, ‘If the kids need it, I am going to go get it.’” (Johnson, personal communication, October 2011).

Overall, throughout the interview with Smith and Johnson there was insight gained into the two primary student needs: remedial academic help and special education assistance. The data found that while there efforts are being made by Kennedy to support in-school and after school programs for such students, including the GRR program, Saturday school, Student Study Teams, and having resource teachers available. However, due to a general lack of resources/funding and teachers not being willing to adapt to student needs, the process of finding successful methods for addressing these student needs has been hindered.

Description and Justification of Action

After reviewing the research, there was a clear need for a program at Kennedy Elementary that would not take money out of the school funding, but still enable more bodies involved in classrooms. Upon reviewing the possibilities, there was contact made with the Service Learning Coordinator at CSU Monterey Bay to discuss opening another service learning section for students. Because Kennedy has had to cut Saturday school programs due to funding, the idea is that service learners could come in on Saturdays to assist students with their academics and also give specialized attention to special education students that may not be given during regular school hours. While Kennedy is already a service learning partner with the college, to continue it still requires the following: approval from the Service Learning Coordinator, collaboration with another college service learning class willing to go on Saturdays, and approval from Kennedy of college students being on their campus during non-school hours.

This program would be ideal for both teachers and students. Teachers benefit from this as the interviewees stated that there are more bodies needed in classrooms to help with both remedial and special education students. This program would allow a free service where college level persons can assist their students who need extra help without interfering during regular school hours. Additionally, students will benefit from this as well by receiving help with their needs. Students who are behind academically will be able to come and receive one-on-one attention with their specific academic difficulties with college level students who can help them. Special education students also benefit as they will have individualized attention with students who are learning about their particular difficulties in college classes (Liberal Studies students).

Overall this action should be taken seriously as it would be a realistic way for Kennedy to help their teachers handle student needs. While the school used to have a Saturday academic program with professionals, there is not the funding anymore to facilitate this type of program. CSU Monterey Bay service learning students would offer their time free of charge and have the college level education that can benefit students with their studies. Additionally, this helps teachers in the long run as it allows special attention given to students who need extra time to help learn a topic in class or special education students who just need one-on-one instruction.

Action Documentation

In order to begin this process, the researcher first made contact with Service Learning Coordinator Annie Robinson at CSU Monterey Bay. In this e-mail, the researcher stated that she would like to open a service learning section at Kennedy Elementary School on Saturdays and the steps that needed to be taken in order to do so. The following picture shows a copy of our initial communication:

The screenshot shows an email interface with the following details:

- Subject:** Regarding Possible Service Learning Site
- Priority:** x
- Sender:** Andrea Samuelson
- Recipient:** A [redacted] @csumb.edu
- Date:** Nov 11
- Message Content:**

This is Andrea Samuelson, a Liberal Studies major who is in Capstone right now. My professor told me I could speak to you about exploring the possibility of a new service learning area. I have been working with [redacted] Elementary School for my Capstone and I have found that they have had to cut Saturday school programs for academic help because of funding. I was wondering if there was any possibility of offering a Saturday time for service learners at [redacted]. This site is already a service learning site, so the only change would be offering Saturday as an option for service learners. If this is an option, I would really appreciate any information on how to go forward with this. Thank you for your time.
- Date:** Nov 14
- Sender:** A [redacted]
- Recipient:** to me
- Message Content:**

Hi Andrea: I am happy to hear you are working with [redacted] Elementary School; its an awesome school and I love their Principal.

Let me see if I understand correctly, you would like for me to change the information on the [redacted] Elementary School profile on MySLP indicating that there is an opportunity to do service learning there on Saturdays? If that is the case, the school is the one that needs to request that change and I can do it in a second.

Following this e-mail discussion with Robinson, the researcher called Kennedy Elementary in order to speak with their principal, Cary Blake, to go over the possibility of Kennedy offering another service learning section on Saturdays. The researcher left multiple messages that did not receive a follow-up call and therefore, decided to go to the school in-person. On November 18, 2011 the researcher went to Kennedy in Agrocity, CA and was able to speak with the principal right away. Upon bringing up the idea with Blake, she was favorable to the idea and agreed to e-mail Robinson with her approval.

Since this initial meeting with Blake, Robinson has followed-up with the researcher to inform that Blake has not sent her approval via e-mail. The researcher has since made multiple attempts to contact Blake to learn why the process has been delayed however, has not been able to speak with Blake directly. As of December 14, Robinson discussed with the researcher the option of giving Robinson Blake's contact information in order for them to communicate directly.

Critical Reflection

Action Taken

I noticed both strengths and weaknesses upon reflecting on the action taken. In terms of strengths, the action of offering a free service in which college-educated students get more involved with elementary students solves the major problem the interviewees addressed: needing more bodies in the classroom. This also assists with the two major student needs identified, children needing remedial attention and special education students needing more individualized attention, as these CSU Monterey Bay students will be coming at a time where getting help with academics is the primary concern (Saturday school). However, there are some weaknesses with this action. One of the primary flaws I see with this action is that there is not a guaranteed

amount of CSU Monterey Bay students that will always be at Kennedy on Saturdays. Because service learning is a volunteer service, there is no way of telling whether students will show up and on which Saturdays. Additionally, there is currently not a set way to advertise for this new section of service learning that will be opening. Therefore, it will be difficult in the beginning to get CSU Monterey Bay students to even learn about this opportunity at Kennedy.

Looking back, I would have done a few things differently. For one, I would have started communicating with the service learning coordinator and principal at Kennedy earlier. The majority of the issues that arose in terms of the action project were because of complications in communicating with one or both parties. Additionally, I would have explored financial options for printing advertising for this action sooner. I applied for a Capstone Grant in order to print flyers advertising this new service learning section but was denied. This means that this new opening of service learning will have to be spread primarily by word-of-mouth.

The next steps for this project are to get service learning coordinator Robinson and Principal Blake in communication with one another as to finalize this service learning opening at Kennedy. Once it is finalized, then hopefully there can be an e-mail sent out amongst CSU Monterey Bay students enrolled in a service learning class letting them know about this new Saturday section available at Kennedy. Once students are aware of this new section for Spring 2012, the program can be implemented and begin helping students with their needs.

Lessons Learned

Throughout the course of this project, I learned a lot about myself, working toward change, and teaching and learning. This project has been important in increasing my confidence, assertiveness, and communication skills as an individual. During this action project, I successfully communicated with multiple professionals in education which boosted my self-

esteem and increased my professional network. I also learned that working towards change requires one to be passionate and persistent. Throughout this project, I ran into several roadblocks in terms of people not responding back to me. However, in continuing to pursue the contact, I was able to communicate with the person I needed to. Additionally, I learned a great deal about what is currently going on in the teaching field. This has been extremely important in my growth as a person and teacher as I have a more realistic understanding of what to expect in a real classroom. It has helped me acknowledge some of the difficulties I will encounter as a teacher and learn all the tasks, duties, and roles that are required of teachers.

Liberal Studies Synthesis and Integration

Overall, I feel that the Liberal Studies department and the courses I have taken in this program successfully prepared me for this Action Project. In the Liberal Studies Mission Statement, it states that some of the goals of their program are to “to provide instruction for in content areas that prepare students for life-long learning...to lead the collaboration with the other departments, programs and institutions on and off-campus...and to develop action-oriented students” (Sevey, 2010, p.1). Through my time in this program, I feel that I have met their goals and my Action Project demonstrates this as I have collaborated with multiple institutions on and off- campus and become action-oriented. Furthermore, I have become a life-long student who will continue to learn even after graduation.

Additionally, I felt better prepared to take on this Action Project as result of the knowledge I gained through the Major Learning Outcomes (MLOs) 1, 4, and 14. In LS 300, which satisfies MLO 1, Foundations and Perspectives in the Major, I learned the foundations of education in American society and how to critical think through the major issues facing the American education system. This was useful to me when analyzing what the major student needs

were at Kennedy elementary and how they are affecting teachers. Through HCOM 312, which satisfied MLO 4, Advanced English Communication, I learned how to successfully communicate with others who may have different assumptions and values coming into a conversation. This proved beneficial when communicating with teachers and the principal at Kennedy who were all at different stages of life than myself. Finally, the classes LS 380 and 383, which satisfied MLO 14, Advanced Inquiry into Education, taught me how the typical classroom in America came to be and how it might look differently. This helped me look at different ways teachers might work and the possible solutions that can cater to student needs. Overall, these MLOs helped me successfully develop both myself and my Action Project to their fullest potential.

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