

An Assessment of Teacher Perceptions and Attitudes
Regarding Students In Their Classroom
With A Sibling With
Special Needs

by

Krista McCoy

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Denise Brouillard

The Graduate School
University of Wisconsin-Stout

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**The Graduate School
University of Wisconsin-Stout
Menomonie, WI**

Author: McCoy, Krista L.

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ABSTRACT

Having a child with special needs poses many challenges for families. Not only are parents affected, but often times the sibling of the special needs child endures social, psychological, and emotional issues that are not addressed. The purpose of this study was to investigate and determine teacher perceptions and attitudes regarding students in their classroom with a special needs sibling. A 10-question survey was distributed to 32 teachers in a South Washington County elementary school. Questions targeted topics related to types of information teachers wanted or needed when helping the siblings of special needs children, how much teachers knew about the feelings and attitudes of their students who have a special needs sibling, if teachers felt prepared to deal with these student's feelings, and if the teachers were willing to be trained to learn strategies that would help students cope with feelings and attitudes regarding their sibling with special needs. The results suggested that teachers were aware of the students in their classroom

who had a sibling with special needs, but did not feel these students had any issues that needed to be addressed. Results also indicated that teachers were willing to be trained in strategies on how to help these students, and wanted extra support from counselors or social workers to work with the students individually. Recommendations are provided for further research and student planning.

The Graduate School
University of Wisconsin-Stout
Menomonie, WI

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Chapter I: Introduction

Living with a special needs child can be difficult and challenging, yet also rewarding and beneficial. Since IDEA and its predecessors, schools and agencies have guaranteed programs and services for parents of special needs students to help with financial burdens, emotional care, physical well-being, and to educate them about their child's disability. We are now beginning to understand that brothers and sisters of children with special needs also have concerns and feelings that need to be addressed.

A review of literature (Meyer, 1993) shows that siblings of special needs children often have feelings of loss and isolation due to parent's time and attention consumed by the sibling's illness or disability. Meyer also found that siblings of special needs children have a life-long need for information pertaining to their brother or sister's disability or illness. Increased care-giving demands are many times required of these brothers or sisters. This may cause the siblings to participate less in their own activities (Meyer, 1993) and find it hard to find time to complete homework (Contact a Family, 2003). Other sibling experiences include over-identification (do I have the same condition as my sibling?); a perceived pressure to achieve, specifically in academics or sports; feelings of guilt (did I cause the disability or why was I spared of the disability?); feelings of resentment (why does my sibling get all of the attention from everyone?); and concerns about their, and their brother or sister's, future (Meyer, 1993).

Not all of the feelings that siblings of special needs children have are negative. Many positive opportunities occur when growing up in a unique family. Meyer (1993) acknowledged that the siblings have an insight on human condition; maturity from being successful in coping with a siblings' condition; pride in their brother or sister's abilities

or accomplishments; loyalty towards their families; and appreciation for their own good health.

The feelings and emotions that these siblings experience are valid and should be of concern for teachers, counselors, and parents in order to recognize and assist youngsters. Many of these siblings have a difficult time expressing their negative emotions. Because their brother or sister has a disability, they feel they should be thankful for being healthy and “normal”. We, as educators, have a duty to connect with these children, letting them know that we understand they have frustrations and questions. It is assumed that many teachers are not aware of the negative emotions these children are feeling. These feelings could be the cause of many behaviors, such as low grades, acting out, feelings of isolation, ridicule from others, etc. (Sibs, 2004)

Teachers or counselors can educate students about children with disabilities, what it means to have a disability, focus on the “abilities” of these children, and stress the importance of acceptance and tolerance. Counselors can also provide individual or group counseling with siblings. This may help the child express feelings, positive and negative, in a safe, supportive, and confidential environment. Outside resources are also available for families with special needs. Sibshops are workshops for siblings of children with special needs. These workshops provide support groups (in person and online) for siblings.

This study will focus on the teacher’s point of view. The study will not only bring awareness to the teachers regarding issues of siblings, but it will also seek to discover what teachers need and want to help with this problem. Many teachers may have never thought about the siblings of special needs children and how their brother or sister’s

disability has affected them. This study will examine how, or if, to help these students. Many teachers may feel they are uneducated in this subject. The study sought to discover what teachers know, where they learned their information, and if they felt prepared to work with the students in their classroom. Another question to be answered will be if the teachers are willing to learn more about helping these students and if a resource guide would be beneficial for them.

Children should always know that their feelings and thoughts are important and should never be minimized. Educators should recognize that these feelings are crucial elements in helping siblings of special needs children develop a sense of self-worth and becoming a well-adjusted person. No child should ever be forgotten (Sibling Support Project, 2005).

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of the study was to describe how elementary school teachers assess their preparedness to help siblings of special needs students cope with positive and negative emotions related to having a sibling with a disability. Data was collected through a survey during the spring of 2008 at an elementary school in South Washington County, MN.

Research Questions

This study will focus on the following questions:

1. What types of information do teachers want or need when helping the siblings of special needs children?
2. Do teachers believe there is a problem/issue with students who have a sibling with special needs?

3. What are the issues that teachers' think/believe these students encounter at home and at school?
4. Do teachers feel prepared to deal with these student's feelings?
5. Are the teachers interested in being trained to learn strategies that will help students cope with feelings and attitudes regarding their sibling with special needs?

Definition of Terms

There are special education abbreviations that need to be defined for clarity of understanding. These are:

DCD – Developmental / Cognitive Disability

ASD – Autism Spectrum Disorder

LD – Learning Disability

EBD – Emotional / Behavior Disability

NB – Neurological / Biological Disorder

IEP – Individualized Education Plan

IFSP – Individualized Family Service Plan

Assumptions and Limitations of the study

It is assumed that classroom teachers are aware of the students in their classroom who have a sibling with special needs (especially DCD or ASD). Also assumed is that all participants will answer candidly. The data collected was relevant specifically to this particular school and cannot be generalized to other settings.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter will identify and explore three important issues for teachers when working with children who have a sibling with special needs. The three issues include how children are affected by having a brother or sister with special needs, what teachers should know about supporting the sibling, and strategies teachers can use when supporting the sibling.

How Children are Affected by Having a Sibling with Special Needs

For many families, learning that their child has a disability has a profound effect and poses many challenges. A variety of time and emotional demands are put on a family with a special needs child (Carlson, 2004). There are many factors, which affect the sibling relationships in such a family. Children must suddenly adjust to a brother or sister who may require a large portion of family time, attention, money, and psychological support (News Digest, 1988). McHale and Gamble (1987) stated that in sibling relationships, when one has a disability, the feelings that exist tend to be more positive than negative in their tone. These children with a disabled sibling also tend to have more positive and less negative behavioral interactions than those children who do not have a disabled sibling. Some of the positive aspects that these children exhibit include higher levels of empathy, increased tolerance, increased sense of maturity and responsibility, and pride in their sibling's accomplishments (Powell & Ogle, 1985).

Living with a brother or sister with a disability can be rewarding, confusing, instructive, and stressful. Feelings of love, empathy, pride, guilt, anger, and support are some of the reactions siblings have toward their brother or sister with a disability. These

reactions have an impact on the child's levels of stress and coping ability (Powell & Ogle, 1985). Children's reaction toward their disabled sibling varies and changes with age and developmental level. The younger the child, the harder it is for him/her to interpret events realistically or understand the situation completely. Most often, elementary school children begin to feel embarrassed or ashamed as they start to recognize differences in their sibling. These siblings also begin to feel protective and supportive when conflicts with peers arise. For many siblings, anxiety-producing feelings often are not expressed in day-to-day family interactions, and are shared even less in school (Children with Disabilities, 1994).

Parents also add to the array of feelings sibling have. Parents often expect their non-disabled child to accept things as they are. This expectation often leads to internalized feelings of anxiety and jealousy, which they are hesitant to voice. These feelings of unhappiness are many times unrecognized by parents. There may be a difference between the non-disabled sibling's actions and knowledge, of which parents and professionals should be aware (Children with Disabilities, 1994).

Powell & Ogle (1985) also state that non-disabled siblings may feel obligated to compensate for their brother or sister with a disability and their limitations. They feel they need to exceed in academics, athletics, and socialization. These siblings make great contributions in care. They take on more responsibility at home, assisting their family with household chores, baby-sitting, helping with personal or medical care, and listening to their parents' concerns (Sibs, 2003).

When looking at the long-term effects on children being unable to discuss a special-need situation, it may cause several problems. As they grow up, these siblings

may deny their feelings and emotions (Carlson, 2004). When not allowed to demonstrate grief, anger, or jealousy, these children may have difficulty in their relationships with others, be vulnerable to depression, and may express their anger by hurting themselves through anorexia, bulimia, or suicide (Carlson, 2004).

Mayer (1993) described other concerns that siblings may have. These concerns include over-identification, a perceived pressure to achieve, feelings of guilt, feelings of resentment, and concerns about their siblings' future. Meyer (1993) also stated that although these children have a variety of negative feelings, they also have many positive experiences. These include insight on human condition, maturity from successfully coping with their family situation, pride in their family, loyalty, and appreciation. In the article, *Children with Disabilities* (1994), it states that children with a special needs sibling appear to have more positive behavioral interactions than those who do not have a special needs sibling (*Children with Disabilities*, 1994). These positive interactions include empathy, increased tolerance for differences, increased sense of maturity and responsibility, and pride in sibling's accomplishments.

What Professionals and Parents Should Know about Supporting the Sibling

Professionals can play a huge role in making a positive difference in the lives of children who have a brother or sister with special needs (Sibs, 2003). Siblings often get less parental attention and opportunities for social activities because of family circumstances. Lack of sleep and worry often affects the child's schoolwork. Supporting these siblings in childhood may prevent future physical and mental health problems.

Siblings of special needs children want and need information. Information puts fears into perspective (*Children with Disabilities*, 1994). They need age appropriate

information about their brother or sister's condition or disability (Sibs, 2003). Siblings of special needs children may need information throughout their lives in a method and style that is suitable for their maturity level (Children with Disabilities, 1994). Professionals and parents have an obligation to provide helpful information to the siblings. Siblings who are not given accurate information about their sibling's health issues may overly identify with the sibling. Without sufficient information, siblings may believe they share or will contract the disability (Carlson, 2004).

Space to do their own thing, and the right to their own lives, are two requests from many siblings of special needs. They want their own personal and private space to do homework, hobbies, or chat with friends. They also want time alone with parents, or time to have friends over when their brother or sister is not home. This provides the children with a sense of "normality".

Siblings are also very worried about the future of their brother or sister with special needs. They want to know who is going to care for their brother or sister in his/her adult years. Siblings often feel it will be their duty to care for siblings, however, parents and professionals should develop a list of ideas and options. Siblings need to be able to know there are other options, they have a right to their own lives, and are free to pursue their own dreams. It should be the sibling's choice as to how much support they will provide in the future (Sibs, 2004).

Teachers should take the sibling's home life into consideration in the classroom. Learning often has a negative affect when the student has had disturbed sleep, is embarrassed, or is worried. Teachers should talk to the student; let them know that they understand the child's difficulties.

In a recent study (Contact a Family, 2003), 29 siblings between the ages of eight and 16 were interviewed regarding their experiences with a sibling with a disability. All expressed feelings of love and affection toward their brother or sister, but experienced a variety of difficulties. These difficulties included being teased or bullied at school, feelings of jealousy of the amount of attention their sibling received, resentment because family outings were limited, feeling tired at school because of disturbed sleep, finding it hard to complete homework, and being embarrassed by their sibling's behavior in public. Parents and educators should be reminded that the siblings might be afraid to ask questions or report problems they are having. They may not want to upset anyone or they may be ashamed of their own feelings of anger, jealousy, or resentment (Carlson, 2004).

Schubert (n.d.) also informs parents and educators to look for warning signs of depression and anxiety that the sibling may exhibit. Warning signs for depression may include:

- change in sleeping habits
- change in eating habits
- sense of helplessness or hopelessness
- continued sense of irritability
- mentions hurting self
- difficulty making decisions or concentrating
- lack of pleasure in activities
- social withdrawal
- low self-esteem

Warning signs for anxiety may include:

- excessive worry
- increased energy level without a purpose
- tearful at slightest frustration
- difficulty separating from parents
- sleeping problems or change in sleeping habits
- changes in eating habits
- school phobia
- worry about health or well-being of family members
- somatic symptoms
- perfectionism

Strategies Professionals and Parents Can Use when Supporting Siblings

There are many strategies and support programs that are available for parents, teachers, and professionals when working with siblings of special needs children. A variety of programs exist for individual support, group support, classroom guidance, online resources, outside agencies, workshops, and family support.

Individual counseling is one of the ways to reach out to special needs siblings. These children need someone to talk to and be able to express feelings, positive and negative, without the fear of being judged or feeling guilty. The children need someone to tell them that they understand that things at home can be difficult. Siblings want to express their point of view, which can many times be different from his or her parent's ideas (Contact a Family, 2003). Counseling can provide information, advice, or a safe place to vent (Carlson, 2004).

Group counseling is another way to help in the school setting. As a counselor or teacher, one can set up a group of students who all share the similar experience of growing up with a brother or sister with special needs. This gives the students mutual support and allows for information sharing. Siblings want a time and place to discuss the joys and concerns common to all of them. Support groups can help decrease feelings of isolation and provide an opportunity for ongoing support (Meyer, 1993).

The classroom provides an excellent opportunity to help a sibling of special needs children and also teach the other classmates about special needs. Teachers can create an opportunity to talk about disabilities. This can be an open discussion acknowledging the ups and downs of having a brother or sister with special needs, and it can also acknowledge the perceptions of other people. Siblings have a tremendous amount to share and teach those who wish to listen and help them (Children with Disabilities, 1994). They can guide the actions of professionals so that their sibling needs can best be met (Powell & Ogle, 1985). Since most siblings attend the same school, siblings can also be involved in their brother's or sister's classroom if they choose. Fiction and non-fiction books on sibling issues would be an excellent resource for all students in a classroom library.

Teachers can help, when siblings express feelings of anger, jealousy, or resentment, by just listening respectfully and giving praise. The teacher should be alert for opportunities to acknowledge the positive behavior (Brodkin, 2006).

Sibling rivalry is apparent in most families, even in families that have a child with a disability. Faber and Mazlish (2002) suggest using some of these strategies when working with siblings:

- focus and encourage the abilities rather than disabilities in all children
- recognize all of the children's feelings about their siblings with special needs.

(When children know they can communicate all of their emotions, the emotions are less likely to turn into misbehavior or physical complaints.)

- resist the urge to compare children.
- resist the inclination to place children in roles.
- focus on individual needs and show children they are uniquely loved.

Parents and teachers should treat all children fairly and value them as individuals, praise as well as discipline, and give each child special time (Children with Disabilities, 1994).

Teachers can provide valuable guidance to overwhelmed parents. Educators can suggest resources that provide respite care so that the healthy siblings are not overburdened and have a chance to be kids (Carlson, 2004).

There are a variety of outside resources that are available to families with a special needs child. Siblings should also have access to all of these outside resources. If one is not already arranged, a professional or parent can organize a local sibling group. This group may involve recreational activities. The group may also have a session where they are able to ask questions to a panel of experts – such as doctors or therapists (Sibs, 2004).

Other outside resources would include online sibling groups and online chat rooms for siblings. Workshops for siblings and families are offered in many counties. These workshops may include sibling issues, coping with bereavement, dealing with bullying, managing challenging behaviors, and listening to children (Sibs, 2004). Family

counseling is also a very important resource that families with special needs children should access.

Chapter III: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter will include information about how the sample was selected, a description of the sample, and the instruments that were used. This chapter will include how data was collected, data analysis, and methodological limitations of this study.

Subject Selection and Description

The subjects that participated in the study were general education teachers, grades K-6, in one elementary school of a large school district located in Eastern Minnesota. There were 32 full-time teachers who received the survey. Both male and female teachers were included in the sample. The Institutional Review Board, of the University of Wisconsin-Stout, granted approval for this study and approval from the principal at the school was obtained prior to the survey being distributed.

Instrumentation

A survey instrument was constructed for this study in the winter of 2008. This survey included seven yes/no questions and three short answer questions regarding the teachers' experiences with siblings of special needs students in their classrooms. Questions targeted topics related to types of information teachers want or need when helping the siblings of special needs children, how much teachers know about the feelings and attitudes of their students who have a special needs sibling, if teachers felt prepared to deal with these student's feelings, and if the teachers are willing to be trained to learn strategies that would help students cope with feelings and attitudes regarding their sibling with special needs. Space was also provided for additional comments.

Data Collection

Permission to send out questionnaires to teachers was sought from the elementary principal during the winter of 2008. Once permission was granted, the surveys were distributed to each teacher in their staff mailboxes. When surveys were completed, teachers returned them in an envelope to the researcher's staff mailbox. The teachers had two weeks to return the completed surveys. Surveys were collected until March 28th of 2008.

Data Analysis

The results of each question were tabulated and the final percentages are reported using tables to describe the results. Also reported was additional information that was recorded in the comments section. To compare differences in teacher responses, cross tabulating was performed. Differences in perceptions, feelings, and preparedness were identified.

Limitations

Because this instrument was constructed specifically for the purpose of this study, validity or reliability data are not available for this instrument. The survey sample was derived from a primarily Caucasian, working and middle-class suburb in an Upper Midwestern state, and therefore results cannot be generalized beyond the district from which data was collected.

Chapter IV: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to learn about teacher perceptions regarding students in their classroom who have a sibling with special needs. The questions that are addressed for this research are:

- What types of information do teachers want or need when helping the siblings of special needs children?
- Do teachers feel there is a problem/issue with students who have a sibling with special needs?
- What are the issues that teachers' feel these students encounter at home and at school?
- Do teachers feel prepared to deal with these student's feelings?
- Are teachers interested in being trained to learn about strategies that will help students cope with feelings and attitudes about their sibling with special needs?

This chapter will include the results of the survey, item analysis, and demographic information. The sample for this study included the teaching staff at an elementary school in South Washington County. All general education teachers, K-6 and specialists, were invited to participate in the survey. This sample consisted of 21 respondents for a response rate of 66%. The results for each demographic item are shown in the following tables.

Demographic Information

Table 1: Gender of Respondents

	Frequency	Percent
Female	16	76.2
Male	5	23.8

The results in Table 1 show that more females responded to the survey than males.

Table 2: Education Level of Respondents

	Frequency	Percent
Bachelor's Degree	8	38.1
Master's Degree	12	57.1
Specialist's Degree	1	4.8

The results in Table 2 show that over half of the respondents have their Master's Degree or higher.

Table 3: Respondents' Years of Experience

Years of Experience	Frequency	Percent
2-6 years	5	23.8
7-10 years	4	19
11-20 years	5	23.8
>20 years	7	33.3

The results in Table 3 show that there was an even mix of beginner and veteran teachers who responded to the survey.

Table 4: Respondents Current Level of Teaching

Teaching Level	Frequency	Percent
K-2	4	19
3-4	4	19
5-6	9	42.9
K-6 Specialists	4	19

The results in Table 4 show that the upper grades (5-6) were the most highly represented.

Item Analysis

Two people, the researcher and a UW-Stout employee from the Budget, Planning, and Analysis Department, coded and analyzed each item separately. The items analyzed had a high level of inter-rater agreement. The survey questions were analyzed and divided into themes and definitions by comparing the responses against one another and categorizing them by compatibility.

Research Question #1:

What types of information do teachers want or need when helping the siblings of special needs students?

Seventeen respondents offered comments on this question. Of these respondents, nine wanted general information on the issues or concerns of these students. Examples of responses include:

- “Knowledge (via survey or interview) of what the siblings do face so we can be more aware”
- “What responsibilities are expected of them by family, are they resentful or handling it?”
- “Information from parents on needs we can address at school”

Ten respondents desired strategies, either general teaching strategies or emotional/supportive strategies, to help students. Comments included:

- “Classroom activities...help other students understand the family dynamics”
- “How to handle social issues as they come up. How to handle peer reactions to their siblings needs/ disabilities”
- “The training strategies sound helpful”

Four respondents wanted resources to aid in teaching and support, such as access to a school social worker or support group referrals. Response examples included:

- “Books to read aloud about families and children with disabilities”
- “Support groups”
- “Have someone come and talk to the classrooms”

Research Question #2:

Do teachers feel there is a problem or issue with students who have a sibling with special needs?

This question was split up between 3 of the survey questions:

Table 5: *Q1: Are you aware of students (past or present) in your classroom who have a sibling with special needs?*

	Frequency	Percent
No	2	9.5
Yes	19	90.5

Of the 21 respondents, 90.5% said they were aware of having such a student in their class.

Table 6: *Q2: Has a student (past or present) who has a sibling with special needs approached you with a problem or issue that they were dealing with which related to their brother or sister?*

	Frequency	Percent
No	14	66.7
Yes	7	33.3

Out of all that answered this question, 33% had students approach them with a problem.

Out of the 19 who answered “yes” to Q1, seven (36.8%) said yes to Q2.

Table 7: Q3: *Is the issue of helping siblings of special needs children with their feelings and thoughts a concern in your building?*

	Frequency	Percent
No	14	77.8
Yes	4	22.2

Of the 18 teachers that responded to this question, 22% said “yes” it is a concern in their building.

Research Question #3:

What are the issues that teacher's feel these students encounter at home and at school?

Q4: What issues do you believe siblings of special needs children deal with on a day-to-day basis AT HOME?

The 21 respondents reported a total of 35 comments. Each respondent had at least one comment to contribute. Of the 35 comments, five responded that they felt the siblings had increased responsibility and nine believed that the siblings took on a role of caretaker. Twenty-one of the responses pertained to emotional issues that the siblings may have. Fourteen of the responses identified that the siblings may feel isolated, not feel as if they are getting enough attention, and have feelings of non-importance in the family. Themes included feelings of being overwhelmed, embarrassed, angry, and frustrated.

Q5: What issues do you believe siblings of special needs children deal with on a day-to-day basis AT SCHOOL?

Twenty-one teachers responded with 34 total comments. The respondents felt that emotional issues were the predominant problem. Eleven comments focused on the feelings regarding how the siblings felt about themselves. These included feelings of:

- lack of support
- worry
- embarrassment
- resentment

Five comments focused on the feelings regarding the disabled sibling. These included feelings of:

- protectiveness

- responsibility
- worry

Eleven of the responses included issues with peers. The respondents felt as if the sibling faces teasing, ongoing questions regarding their brother or sister, and the need for acceptance. One respondent commented that “they (sibling) may feel embarrassed at times, and angry, from comments from peers directed toward their sibling with special needs”.

Of the 34 comments, two of the responses indicated/suggested that the sibling of special needs children do not have any issues or problems at school.

Research Question #4:

Do teachers feel prepared to deal with these student's feelings?

The survey first asked teachers if a student with a special needs sibling (past or present) has ever approached them with a problem or issue that related to their brother or sister. Of the 21 respondents, seven said that they have been approached. Of the seven who identified that they had been approached by a student, when asked if they felt prepared to help with the student's needs, five (71%) said yes, they felt prepared. Teachers were also asked if they felt prepared to deal with these students' feelings if a situation arose in the future. Twelve (57%) said yes, they would feel prepared. When asked if the teachers felt that they had support in the building to help them when working with siblings of special needs children, 76% of the respondents felt that they had support.

Research Question #5:

Are the teachers interested in being trained to learn about strategies that will help students cope with feelings and attitudes regarding their sibling with special needs?

Table 8: *Are Teachers Willing To Be Trained?*

	Frequency	Percent
No	4	19
Yes	17	81

The results in table 8 indicated that 81% of the teachers surveyed said that they are willing to participate in training.

Chapter V: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine teacher perceptions and attitudes regarding students in their classroom with a sibling with special needs. This chapter will discuss the results of the study, offer recommendations for helping teachers work with the siblings of special needs students, and give examples of suggested interventions that would be helpful to the students with special needs siblings.

Limitations

Because this instrument was constructed specifically for the purpose of this study, validity or reliability data is not available for this instrument. The survey sample was derived from a primarily Caucasian, working and middle-class suburb in an Upper Midwestern state, and therefore results cannot be generalized beyond the district from which data was collected.

Conclusions

Teacher's responses to the survey clearly identified how the teachers perceived students in their classroom who had a sibling with special needs, and also gave specific feedback on what types of information or training they need to help these students. A majority of the teachers (90%) were aware of students in their classrooms who had a sibling with special needs (ASD, DCD, N/B, or EBD). Of the 90%, only 33% have had the student approach them with a problem or issue which the sibling may have had with their special needs brother or sister. This raises the following questions:

- Do the students not have any problems or issues?
- Do the students not feel comfortable asking the teacher for help or advice?
- Is their a safe place for these students in the school to address their feelings or

concerns openly?

Teachers were also asked if they felt that the issues of helping siblings of special needs children with their feelings or thoughts was a concern in their building. Sixty-six percent of the respondents felt that this was not an issue. This supports the above statistic of 33% of the teachers being approached with a problem or concern. It appears that students are not candid with teachers about their feelings, and in turn the teachers are not aware that these students are internalizing their thoughts, frustrations, fears, or see it as a problem. Often, these siblings are embarrassed or afraid to discuss their feelings. As a professional, being aware of these feelings by creating opportunities and sibling support groups will help decrease these negative feelings (Meyer, 1993).

Even though the respondents did not see the issue at hand as a problem in their school, 76% responded that they would be willing to participate in training about strategies to help students cope with feelings and attitudes regarding their sibling with special needs. This shows that many teachers are willing to work on their skills to help these students. Along with being trained to support these students, the majority of the respondents (76%) felt that their building has the extra support to help them when working with siblings of special needs children. This is promising, as it suggests that ongoing education and support in this area may sensitize teachers to the subtle issues these siblings may have.

The respondents had many personal thoughts regarding three survey questions:

- What issues do you believe siblings of special needs children deal with on a day-to-day basis at home?

- What issues do you believe siblings of special needs children deal with on a day-to-day basis at school?
- What types of information would you want or need to help siblings of special needs children?

A great number of respondents felt that the siblings had increased responsibility and took on the role of a caretaker at home. Others stated that the siblings might often feel isolated, overwhelmed, embarrassed, angry, or frustrated. Some examples of statements are as follows:

- “Having extra responsibilities to help take on emotional role to help cope with sibling”
- “Need to take care of sibling”
- “Caretaker, too much responsibility, isolated, overwhelmed”
- “More attention focused on the sibling with special needs and may feel that they are not as important”
- “They become caregivers and their needs are put on the back burner”
- “They may feel overshadowed by that sibling”
- “Struggle for attention”

In school, a majority of the respondents focused on the emotional issues of the student. Some of the feelings that the teachers felt the students dealt with include worry, embarrassment, resentment, and feeling protective of their siblings. Others stated that there would be more issues with peers. Examples of statements are:

- “It’s possible they may feel peers don’t accept their sibling for whatever reason”

- “Feelings of protectiveness and alternately resentment, wanting to fit in themselves, wanting their sibling to fit in, as well as anger at children who are cruel to special education students”
- “Embarrassed, frustration, protective, isolation”
- “Questions from other students, self-esteem issues”
- “Dealing with other students who don’t understand special needs students”
- “Teasing or cruelty”

Due to the overwhelming number of responses, it is assumed that the teachers are aware that these students are dealing with many profound issues both at home and at school. The researcher hopes that the survey may have enlightened some of the teacher’s perceptions, which in turn would make them more aware when working with the students with special needs’ siblings in their classrooms. Therefore, an unintended positive outcome of this study may have been that the survey itself was informative for teachers.

When asked what types of information teachers want or need when helping the siblings of special needs children, there were a variety of responses. Many of the respondents wanted general information on the issues or concerns of these students. They wanted knowledge (via survey or interview) of what the siblings do face, so the teachers can be more aware. Others wanted general teaching strategies (classroom activities), or emotional and supportive strategies (how to handle peer reactions to their sibling needs or disability). Access to social workers or support groups were also needs of the respondents. Russell, Russell, and Russell (2003) stated that counselors could be very helpful with feelings siblings have regarding friendships at school and how to handle situations with peers who do not understand the disability.

Recommendations for further research

The results of this study lead to the following recommendations:

1. A larger sample size, including an entire school district to participate in the survey, could be valuable. This would allow pupil services personnel to identify themes and concerns at all K-12 levels. The larger sample would allow schools within the district to work together and create a scope and sequence for their education plan.
2. A confidential survey could be utilized to identify students at the beginning of each school year who have a sibling with special needs. These identified students would then be asked more specific questions regarding their thoughts, feelings, and what types of support they would want or need from their teacher, counselor, or social worker.
3. Students and parents should have access to other support systems such as SibShops, books and literature, videos, and community services.

Suggested interventions

1. Support groups and individual counseling should be offered to the students through a counselor or social worker.
2. Teachers should be given an opportunity to be trained in strategies to help students with special need siblings cope with feelings and issues.
3. Teachers should be given curriculum aids to help teach all children about special needs.

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APPENDIX A

Cover Letter and Survey

This project has been reviewed by the UW-Stout IRB as required by the Code of Federal Regulations Title 45 Part 46

March 17, 2008

Dear Teachers,

I am conducting research to complete my graduate paper for my Guidance and Counseling licensure. I am writing to ask for your help in learning about teacher perceptions regarding students in their classroom who have a sibling with special needs.

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete a survey asking you to respond to a survey about your experiences as a teacher dealing with the feelings of students in your classroom who have a sibling with special needs and your preparedness for the situation. Additionally, you will be asked for feedback regarding issues you feel are important when working with these students and information you would like to help you understand the issue at hand. You may also choose to withdraw from participation at any time without any consequence to you.

RISKS:

The risks associated with this study are minimal, as all survey responses will be anonymous. Only group data will be reported and tabulated, and thus identification of individual responses will not be possible.

BENEFITS:

This survey will aid in the determination of the academic and support needs of students who have a sibling with special needs.

This study has been reviewed and approved by The University of Wisconsin-Stout's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has determined that this study meets the ethical obligations required by federal law and University policies. If you have questions or concerns regarding this study please contact the Investigator or Advisor. If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact the IRB Administrator.

Investigator: Krista McCoy
651-235-8645
krista.mccoy@gmail.com

IRB Administrator
Sue Foxwell, Director, Research Services
152 Vocational Rehabilitation Bldg.
UW-Stout
Menomonie, WI 54751
715-232-2477
foxwells@uwstout.edu

Advisor: Dr. Denise Brouillard
715-232-2599
brouillardd@uwstout.edu

Your participation in this survey is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from participation at any time. There are no identifiable risks involved for participation in this survey. All responses will remain anonymous and confidential. By returning this completed survey you are giving your informed consent to be part of this research study.

Please return the completed survey in the envelope provided to my mailbox by March 28, 2008. Thank you in advance for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Krista McCoy

Part 1:

Directions: Please indicate your answers by checking the appropriate blanks.

1. Gender:

Male
 Female

2. Education Level:

Bachelor's Degree
 Master's Degree
 Specialist's Degree
 Doctoral Degree
 Other (specify) _____

3. Years of experience in education:

0-1 year
 2-6 years
 7-10 years
 11-20 years
 More than 20 years

4. Grade level currently teaching:

K-2
 3-4
 5-6
 Other (specify) _____

Definition of Special Needs Disability Acronyms:

DCD : Developmental Cognitive Disability
ASD : Autism Spectrum Disorder
NB : Neurological Biological
EBD : Emotional Behavioral Disability

Part 2:

Directions: Please answer the questions 1 – 7 either Yes (Y) or No (N):

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| Y | N | 1. Are you aware of students (past or present) in your classroom who have a sibling with special needs (DCD, ASD, N/B, or EBD)? |
| Y | N | 2. Has a student (past or present) who has a sibling with special needs approached you with a problem or issue that they were dealing with which related to their brother or sister? |
| Y | N | 3. If yes, did you feel prepared enough to help with the student's needs? |
| Y | N | 4. Do you feel prepared to deal with these students' feelings if a situation arises in the future? |
| Y | N | 5. Would you be willing to participate in training about strategies to help students cope with feelings and attitudes regarding their sibling with special needs? |
| Y | N | 6. Is the issue of helping siblings of special needs children with their feelings and thoughts a concern in your building? |
| Y | N | 7. Do you feel that your building has the support to help you when working with siblings of special needs children? |

Please answer the question 8 – 10 regarding your personal thoughts:

8. What issues do you believe siblings of special needs children deal with on a day-to-day basis **at home**?

9. What issues do you believe siblings of special needs children deal with on a day-to-day basis **at school**?

10. What types of information would you want or need to help siblings of special needs children?