The Views of the Teachers on Pre-Referral Process for Students at Risk

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1. Introduction

Evaluations and interventions carried out before a formal application for special education services in order to determine the eligibility to them is termed as pre-referral process (Salvia, Ysseldyke, and Bolt, 2009; Heward, 2006). Pre-referral process normally begins when the teacher notices that the student falls notably behind expected benchmarks in coursework (Hammond and Ingalls, 1999; Mastropieri and Scruggs, 2000; Turnbull, Shank, Smith, Leal and Turnbull, 2002; Smith, Polloway, Patton and Dowdy, 2004; Good, 2004). Through the process, the class teacher, school counselor, psychological consultant and any other professionals in school collect information about student and set up an intervention program for the purpose of reducing difficulties of the student and providing compliance to classroom activities (Ministry of Education, 2006; Gürsel and Vuran, 2010).

Primary objective of the pre-referral process is to get the student together with their peers in the general educational environment and to ensure compiling necessary arrangements for increasing success (Good, 2004). It is known that many students can overcome their behavioral problems and learning difficulties through simple adaptations in the curriculum or other interventions in classroom (McLoughlin and Lewis, 2005). These interventions also increase the ability to use appropriate ways of intervening and helps to prevent and to remove abusive labeling of the students (Fuchs, Fuchs, Bahr, Fernstrom and Stecker, 1990; Curry, 2007). Kargın (2006) gathers educational adaptations under five headings, as, organizing the classroom, forming student groups, selection of teaching materials, adaptation of teaching methods and other variables that are expected to affect learning process.

The criticism is directed to the class teachers as they are starting referral process without adequate study and written report to evaluate the children who, they thought, have different traits than their peers and who do not meet the regular class environment expectations (Strickland and Turnbull, 1990; KC, 2006). There are numerous researches in the literature examining pre-referral intervention (Meyers, Valentino, Meyers, Boretti and Brent, 1996; Hammond and Ingalls, 1999; Seibert, 2000; Weishaar, Weishaar and Budt, 2002; Lane, Mahdavi and Borthwick Duffy, 2003; Solonski-Fowler and Truscott, 2004; Truscott, Cohen, Palmeri, Sams, Sanborn and Frank, 2005; Laverty, 2007; Young and Gaughan, 2010). These researches provide information on issues such as, the goals of the pre-referral intervention teams, the effectiveness of intervention models and intervention model development, the contributions of interventions to the reduction of the number referring to the special education, the views of the educators on pre-referral process, identification of difficulties in maintaining the applications, ensuring sustainability of the intervention and the cooperation levels, and the reasons for applying intervention teams in pre-referral process. However, the number of the researches on pre-referral intervention process in Turkey is extremely limited.

2. Purpose

The purpose of this research is to determine the views of the class teachers on pre-referral process of the children at risk.

3. Method

3.1. Research Model

This is a qualitative research of which the data is collected using semi-structured interview technique.

3.2. Study Sample

Participants have been selected as purposive sampling by snowball sampling method. 7 males and 23 females, 30 in total, class teachers from 16 primary schools was participated in the study. Participants were aged between 26 and 53 (M = 40.66; SD = 7.66) with 4 to 33 years of professional experience (M = 18.26; SD = 8.13). A total of 26 (87%) class teachers including 19 undergraduates and 7 associate degree graduates and teachers from different branches such as biology, tourism, etc. participated the research. All participants agreed to take part in the research. Permission was obtained from all the participants after they were informed on maintaining the confidentiality of the names and data.

3.3. Data Collection

In this study, Interview Guide is used for determining the participants' views on students at risk in pre-referral process. With the "Interview Guide", besides questions for personal information of the participants, there are 15 open-ended questions prepared through the literature. Voice recordings of all the interviews are obtained based on the permission of the participants. Interviews had taken in the range of 20 to 52 minutes (average 29 minutes).

3.4 Data Analysis

The data have been analyzed through descriptive analysis. In the process of data analysis, first the voice recordings were transcribed faithfully. The transcriptions were transferred to the interview form prepared on the computer. In addition to the transcription, there are descriptive index, interviewer's comment and general comment sections in the form, by the way Bogdan and Biklen (2007) depicted. After the data was read repeatedly, an "Interview Codebook" was prepared in which there are possible responds categories under each question item. All responds of the participants were read and coded. After coding process is completed, all the codes were compared and the data with the same content were united under single title. Reliability among evaluators was calculated by the number of total consensus divided by the total consensus + total difference of opinion. Reliability among evaluators is determined as 87.8% on average (% 80-100).

4. Results

The results are separated under the two themes of "the initial identification phase studies" and "educational adaptations made for the students at risk". The things expressed under these themes are also separated to sub-themes and the frequencies of every sub-theme is given in parenthesis. Expression examples from sub-themes is not given in this article. It is possible to reach the examples of the views of the participants from the original thesis.

4.1. The Initial Identification Phase Studies

Issues that discerned the students from her peers (91). The participants list the factors that are efficient in discerning a student as different from the others in the class; academic inadequacies (17), socialization and adaptation difficulties (17), learning and perception delays (13), behavioral problems (11), attendance problems (9), mobility and attention problems (8), self-expression difficulties (6), anomalies in pupil reactions (5), physical differences (3), inabilities in doing homework (2).

Sharing the student status with others (86). When they first notice out such a student, participants mostly inform school counselor (28). In addition, they also inform family (26), other teachers (14), school administration (10), branch teachers (4), former teachers (3), and teachers council (1).

Works for identifying the student (64). Participant's activities for identifying the student are; meeting with the family (18), determining the level of knowledge and skills of the student (15), observation (12), comparison with peers (6), contact with the school counselor (5), one-to-one communication with the student (5), meeting with former teachers (1).

Determination of the student's knowledge level (38). The participants list their practices for determination of the knowledge level of the student; according to her grade levels and gains (11), by tests (11), verbally by question-answer method (6), by observation (4), by comparing with other students (3), according to homework (2), class participation (1).

4.2. Educational Adaptations Towards Students at Risk

Arrangements made in teaching methods (77). Participants list the methods they use to teach any topic to the student as; visualization (19), dramatization (16), using friends (13), making her repeat the homework (8), teaching by doing and living (5), simplifying (4), considering her learning style (4), using schemas (3), narration (3), question (2).

Arrangements made when the student fall behind the schedule (54). When the student fall behind the schedule, participants; make additional studies (20), choose programs appropriate to the level of the student (10), cooperate with the family (7), assign homework (6) make plan and program (5), make the student repeat practices (3), get help from friends (3).

Arrangement of tools and materials (54). The participants prefer the course tools such as; visual materials and technological tools (17) concrete materials (11), materials according to the student's level (8), materials available in daily life (6), materials of the student's interest area (5), materials that will not cause harms (4), attention-grabbing materials (3).

Arrangements made in the classroom setting (49). Participants arrange the classroom setting for the student as; changing the student's seat (23), determining who will sit next to the student (15), giving classroom responsibilities (5), informing the other students (3), arranging how to use the tools (2), doing no arrangement in classroom (1).

Arrangements made to provide acceptance of the student (46). The participants list practices to ensure the friends of the student to accept her as; making explanations to other students (16), including group activities-games (10), bringing her to the fore where she is expected to be successful (7), making her participate the class (4), giving responsibility (4), as

a teacher, behaving as a role model for other students (3), doing conversation with the student (2).

Arrangements made when faced with behaviors that disrupts the class order (46). The ways that the participants prefer when the student disrupts the class order are that; warning the student (18), meeting her with the school counselor (4), rewarding (4), giving responsibility (4), meeting with the family (3) changing her seat (3), ignoring (3), making her do additional in-class study (3) teaching anger control (2), applying regular punishment like other students (2).

Homework arrangements (35). Participants state that they pay attention to assign homework appropriate to the student's level (21). In addition, they prefer to; collaborate with the family (7), assign engaging homework (3), give regular homework like other students (2) and do not give homework (2).

Determination of academic progress (43). The participants list doings for determining the academic progress of the student as; observation (12), oral examination (8), evaluation by test (8), evaluation according to the plan and program (8), evaluation according to the gains (4), using evaluation forms (3).

Determination of social progress (35). For determining the social progress of the student, the participants prefer to; make observations (19) peer relationships and participation to social activities (14), obtain information from the family.

Arrangements about examples of the student's works (40). Participants state that they; file and keep the examples of the student's work (19), share them with other teachers (8), not to keep them (6), exhibit them (5), register them in the computer (2). A teacher stated that she is sending them to the family.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The class teachers who participated this study stated that they initially identify the students at risk firstly through their academic inadequacies and their having difficulties in socializing and compliance issues; which are in coherence with the findings of similar researches conducted by Saldana (2009) and Lane, Mahdavi, Borthwick Duffy (2004). Almost all the teachers stated that they firstly inform the school counselor when they identify the student at risk. This finding coincides with the finding of a former research conducted by Sütçü (2007). Informing family comes in second place. Many researches show that the teachers inform the parents (Lewis and Doorlag, 1999; Duhaney and Salend, 2001; Özgüven, 2002; Lane, Mahdavi and Borthwick Duffy, 2003; Good, 2004; Önder, 2007; Şahin, Işıtan and Gündüz, 2011). Then the school administration, the other teachers and the branch teachers comes. Türkoğlu (2007) study reaches similar findings. Lewis and Doorlag (1999) highlight the necessity of making conversations with other professionals about the student's educational problems.

Teachers first meet the family in order to identify the student at risk in the class. Then, determination of the level of knowledge and skills and observation appear in list. Some researchers also have pointed out to the importance of doing observation and conversations for identifying the children at risk (Üre, 2004). To determine the knowledge levels of the students, teachers make evaluations according to the grade levels and the gains. Some teachers make tests and some make observation in order to determinate the knowledge level of the student.

According to Taylor (2009) in order to determine the levels due to the applied program, one should make evaluation through comparison of the existing level and program-based skills of the student.

According to the research findings, most of the teachers prefer to use visualized education. In addition, more than half of the teachers stated that they are using dramatization techniques in teaching. This finding is consistent with the views of Kırkkılıç, Kılıç and Topal (2005) that in the lessons where dramatization method is applied, students are more open to learn because they are more active in class. In addition, educating through peer relations that the teachers stated as they use seems important and consistent with some of the other research findings (Yıkmış and Vural, 2008; Güven and Aydın, 2007).

More than half of the teachers stated that they use visual materials and technological tools and they choose the materials which are engaging ones according to the interest area of the students. This finding of our research shows consistency with the findings of the research conducted by Yıkmış and Vural (2008).

Teachers prefer mostly to rearrange the seats of the students in the classroom. According to the researchers, changing the seat of a student may create significant alteration of the behaviors of some students in activities. Also the seating plan may increase the attention of the students, facilitate understanding instructions and ease providing individual support when necessary (Yönter, 2009; Batu and Kırcaali İftar, 2007; Strickland and Turnbull, 1990). From the perspective of the findings; albeit the arrangements related to the student seating is important for productivity of education, concentrating mostly on the seat placement in terms of class setting arrangements is insufficient.

Most of the teachers participated the interviews stated that they inform other students about the issues such as the status, behaviors, learning characteristics of the student at risk, they prefer talking with them and want help from them in order to ensure the acceptance of the student. This is also in coherence with the literature (Kargın; 2004). Some of the teachers stated that they try to include in group events and games in order to ensure the acceptance of them. In consistency with the literature, the teachers stated that they give opportunities to show themselves in the areas that they are capable of participate and have skills (Sucuoğlu, Ünsal, Özokçu, 2004; Baykoç Dönmez, 2011). Some teachers stated that they become role model for other students to ensure the acceptance of the student at risk. This finding also parallel with the Sucuoğlu, Ünsal, Özokçu (2004) and Özyürek (2006) researches saying that to exhibit a positive role model is an effective strategy for increasing interactions between special children and their peers.

More than half of the teachers who participated the research stated that they prefer to warn the student who have disruptive behaviors against the class order. Some teachers stated that the school counselor make conversation with the student against her disruptive behaviors. According to Çolak (2007) survey, when she faces with any problem related to special student, class teacher establishes cooperation with the counselor. This finding pictures that teachers seeking for support. Some teachers state that they ignore the disruptive behaviors of the students. This statement of teachers is parallel with the views that ignoring is functional for deflation of the unwanted behavior, (Başar, 1999).

Most of the teachers stated that they make arrangements in homework according to the level of the students, that is, they assign homework below the existing class level and have simpler

gains. They stated, in cooperation with the family, that they make arrangements on homework. Polloway, Epstein, Bursuck, Jayanthi and Cumbland (1994) stated in their research that, the cooperation between teachers and parents is important with regard to homework, and it is highly effective in primary school children.

Teachers prefer mostly observation to identify a student's academic progress. Teachers also use oral exams and tests in order to evaluate student, evaluate according to the program, and evaluate according to gains and evaluation forms. Many researchers have similar advices, too (Taylor, 2009; Ergül, 2009; Mastropieri and Scruugs, 2000; Rosenberg, O'Shea and O'Shea, 1998). Although some teachers stated that they make evaluations according to the evaluation forms and the goals in the plan they prepare properly to student performance, it is considered that the teachers don't work systematically while evaluating the students. According to the findings of a study on the implementation of pre-referral intervention teams as a school-based consultation approach, it is determined that teachers have inadequacies in, -especially- collecting data systematically, in works as class teachers and participating the process (Meyers, Valentino, Meyers, Boretti posed and Brent, 1996).

Teachers are using mostly the observation technique in order to determine the social progress of the students. In addition, they also try to determine the social progress through students' participation in social activities and friend relationships based on the information they receive from the parents. Observing the child in classroom setting and in the other environments is also recommended by professionals since it provides a rich source of information. In this regard, it can be said that the teachers are following a right way by making observations (Gürsel and Vuran, 2010; Bigge, Stump, Spagna and Silberman, 1999).

Most of the teachers keep and file the instances of the works of the students. Some teachers stated that they share them with other teachers, and some said that they exhibit while some others don't keep. The data collected in this process depending on the strategies to be used is important even it doesn't make any change in the student's performance. Because this data will help the special education teams when they need to make a decision on issues such as determination of eligibility to special education, intervention methods and placement options (McLoughlin and Lewis, 2005; Strickland and Turnbull, 1990). It is a negativity that some teachers do not keep the examples of student works. In addition, while trying to perform various educational interventions, it is expected from the teachers to document the change occurred in learning and behaviors of the student as a result of these interventions as a result of these interventions (Young and Gaughan, 2010; Üre, 2004; Wood, 2002; Tekin and Kırcaali İftar, 2001).

The first of the reasons to refer Counseling and Research Center (RAM) for students at risk is academic failure. Then they indicate the reasons such as student's behavior problems, teacher's feeling inadequate, wanting to determine the reasons of student's inadequacy, getting assessment of the experts, student's weak social relationships and wanting student to enjoy the legal rights set out in the special education service. It indicates a remarkable finding that some teachers are not in favor of referring RAM for students to review. Teachers stated that they don't want to refer because RAM evaluations did not solve their problems and the student was labeled. According to Batu, Kırcaali and İftar (2007) on the subject, the child and the family are faced many difficulties in the case of a needed student labeled due to applications conducted in our country. From this perspective it can be said that the teachers are not wrong in their concern.

As a result, in accordance with the findings of the opinions of the teachers, they are doing a lot of works needed for the students at risk as expressed in literature. The negative issues, such as not keeping the worksheet examples of the students, is considered as resulting from deficiency in knowledge. Therefore, informing teachers about the pre-referral process seems very important. This is possible primarily by taking additional lessons in the preschool and primary school teacher education levels. In addition, it is also true for the school counselor education. On the other hand, the need of special education experts to involve in the school system also is an important issue.

Determination of teacher opinions on the class teacher's works in pre-referral process keeps a light to the issue at a certain amount. However, a further evaluation of teachers' stated pre-referral practices (observation, classroom arrangements, program adaptations, evaluations etc.) as how right they are, how often they occur, and how they function, may be recommended to the specialists.

6. References

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