

Is Your Team as Good as Its “Hit Rate?”

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For over a decade, some of us have been engaged in various efforts to get school-based support teams to give up the traditional child study model in favor of a problem-solving approach. Use of a problem-solving process greatly increases the likelihood that real interventions will be employed, that decisions will be based on data, and that teachers will experience meaningful support. Child study teams have great difficulty committing the time and effort that is required to convert to the problem-solving model and we often hear “if it ain’t broke” justifications for staying with the familiar.

One of these justifications for continuing with the child study approach is presented in statements such as: “Since our school makes good referrals, the team must be doing a good job.” When the team members refer to “making good referrals” most often they are noting that a large proportion of students evaluated are found to be SLD eligible.

This notion that a high “hit-rate” equals an effective support team is of particular concern to us in that it presents a pitfall into which well-meaning school psychologists have been known to step. Accepting this assertion at face value, without questioning what a school’s team is actually accomplishing, can place the school psychologist in the position of supporting dysfunctional team operations. I have not found that schools that report a high number of referrals, along with a high “hit-rate” (i.e., “they’re all good ones”) are operating effective problem-solving teams. Most often, they are “effective” in processing referrals for testing.

In my experience, there are two instances where referral outcomes seem to be correlated with team performance. One is the case in which a school generates a below average number of referrals for evaluation and a high proportion of the students are found to have disabilities. Given this pattern, one often finds a team that is producing effective interventions to the degree that it filters out students who would have otherwise been referred for testing (“just to see if something might be wrong”).

A second referral/eligibility pattern often provides a strong signal that a school’s support team is not functioning well. That is, the combination of an above average number of referrals resulting in 40% or less of the cases meeting eligibility criteria.

Although it may be reinforcing for school staff members to tally the numbers of students that qualify for SLD, we know that “the emperor of SLD is less than fully clothed” when it comes to the purity of using the discrepancy model to decide who has a disability. Does this model find only disabled students or could some be “curriculum casualties?” Is it possible that some students, who meet the discrepancy criteria, could have made enough progress with effective interventions to avoid a disability label?

It is important that school psychologists not simply accept the idea that a “high hit-rate” is associated with an effective support team process. To do so, may enable teams to avoid examining whether they are providing as much support to their teachers and students as they might think. If you work in a school where you feel that the team is ready to do a self-assessment, please email me (lane.roosa@browardschools.com) and I will send you some questions that will allow the team to look beyond its “hit-rate” numbers, to more credible indicators of effectiveness.