

## **The role of the educational diagnostician as perceived by South Texas administrators**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Educational diagnosticians in the state of Texas serve multiple roles across various districts (National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education [NCPSE], 2011). Due to the increased accountability requirements in the area of special education, much more time is required to complete the procedural requirements set forth by state and federal legal mandates (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2012). Although educational diagnosticians play a critical role in the determination of eligibility, planning, and implementation of special education supports, researchers have yet to determine how campus administrators perceive their own role in the campus environment.

Keywords: Special Education, Educational Diagnosticians, Administrators



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## INTRODUCTION

The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act in 2004 continued regulations that required the opportunity for a free and appropriate public education to be provided to all students with disabilities (Turnbull et al., 2007). These regulations were based upon six principles: zero reject policies, nondiscriminatory evaluations, the right to individualized and appropriate education, consideration of least restrictive environment, process of procedural due process, and updates to parent participation (Turnbull et al., 2007). According to the National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education (NCPSE), educational diagnosticians play critical roles in all of these aspects in order to ensure that local education agencies are complying with federal law as well as providing the most appropriate services for students with disabilities (2011). The IDEA reauthorization can be supported by various studies and information that indicate that students with disabilities do benefit academically and socially from appropriate programming. For example, Castagno (2001) found that students with intellectual disabilities participating in a basketball program alongside students without disabilities showed a significant statistical increase in not only basic basketball skills, but also in self-esteem, interest in making new friends, and overall self-confidence. This supports the idea that participation in grade and age appropriate activities to the maximum extent appropriate is beneficial to students with disabilities.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Roles of Educational Diagnosticians

Educational diagnosticians in Texas are obligated to follow standards as set forth by the Texas Legislative Code and regulated by the State Board for Education Certification office (TEA, 2012). Although the assignment of an educational diagnostician may differ from state to state, or even district to district (Zwebach & Mortenson, 2002), their main goal is to assess students to determine the need for special education services, assist teachers with providing appropriate instruction in the classroom, and ensure that rules and regulations as delegated in IDEA are in compliance (NCPSE, 2011). A survey taken among educational diagnosticians found that while the top two responsibilities reported by those holding this position were testing students and conducting Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) meetings, there was not a common consensus as to which one of these was most important (Rueter & Simpson, 2012). The same survey found that due to time constraints with these responsibilities, less time was made towards making evidence-based recommendations to assist teachers in the classroom. Additionally, educational diagnosticians make day to day decisions that may “significantly affect” (p.413) the educational experience of children with disabilities, including the determination of which assessments to use in the evaluation process will eventually lead to determination of eligibility (Harber, 2001).

It is essential that clinicians conducting these evaluations utilize the newest methods to complete evaluations that are comprehensive and thorough, as this is outlined by federal guidelines. Thus, keeping abreast of the latest theories and application of identification processes is recommended (Decker, Hale, & Flanagan, 2013; National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities [NJCLD], 2011). It has also been recommended by the NJCLD (2011) that educational diagnosticians utilize multi-disciplinary assessment teams in order to support clinical

assessment in the identification of students with learning disabilities. Although overall it has been found that general education teachers have a basic knowledge of specific learning disabilities (Khatib, 2007), Davidson and Nowickie (2012) found that general education teachers felt that obtaining and accessing information on students with specific learning disabilities was difficult. NCPSE (2011) indicates that an additional role of educational diagnosticians is to educate teachers on implications of disabilities as they pertain to the classroom, as well as assist in the development of appropriate programming to be implemented in the classroom to aid in the success of the student. Educational diagnosticians also attempt to alleviate this gap in information as identified by Davidson and Nowickie (2012).

### **The Admission, Review, and Dismissal Meeting Process**

Another result of IDEA is that, particularly in Texas, many schools are scrambling in order to meet the demands personnel-wise for providing appropriate services and tracking progress as set forth in the individualized education plan (Caranikas, Shapley, and Cordeau, 2006). One of those demands includes the need to hold an ARD meeting to determine certain educational programming that is appropriate for students with disabilities. As this process is essential in creating a collaborative environment from which all participants have input, the law has set forth certain requirements as far as who needs to be in attendance. Specified within this standard is offering parents full participation in the planning and development of their child's individualized education plan. Additionally, a general education teacher, a teacher certified in special education, an administrator, and any other IEP support or related service providers may need to be in attendance depending on the child's services and severity of disability (Snell & Brown, 2006). This can cause logistical issues throughout the school day in regards to planning and scheduling ARD meetings (Caranikas et al., 2006). This same report indicates that the position of educational diagnostician is one of seven in the state of Texas that had 100 or more estimated full-time equivalency vacancies, defining it as a "critical shortage" (p.22).

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Educational diagnosticians in the state of Texas serve multiple roles across various districts (National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education [NCPSE], 2011). Caranikas, Shapley, and Cordeau (2006) note that the position vacancy for educational diagnosticians in the state of Texas is at 6.2%, and is considered by the report to be a "critical shortage" (p. 12). Due to the increased accountability requirements in the area of special education, much more time is required to complete the procedural requirements set forth by state and federal legal mandates (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2012). Although educational diagnosticians play a critical role in the determination of eligibility, planning, and implementation of special education supports, researchers have yet to determine how campus administrators perceive their own role in the campus environment.

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This study seeks to determine the perceptions of campus administrators with regard to the role of the educational diagnostician on their respective campuses.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

The following question guided the study:

How do administrators perceive the role of educational diagnosticians on the campus level and in what ways are they utilized?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This was a case study using naturalistic inquiry methodology (Yin, 2003). With regard to naturalistic inquiry, Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe truth, as it applies to qualitative research purposes, as metaphysical, and unable to be “tested” against anything physical in order to determine validity. It is something we have to take as “face value” (p. 14). Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993) describe the process as follows: “The process of inquiry for the naturalistic researcher becomes one of developing and verifying shared constructions that will enable the meaningful expansion of knowledge” (p. 21).

### **Participant and Site Selection**

Three administrators in South Texas public schools were interviewed for this study. Purposeful sampling was used, as administrators that were chosen to participate were determined to have knowledge of the subject and interacted with educational diagnosticians on a regular basis (Erlandson, et al., 1993). A high school principal, a high school assistant principal, and an elementary assistant principal participated. The researcher met participants in each of their offices.

### **Data Collection**

A set of thirteen questions was asked of the participants. Among them included questions regarding experiences and self-descriptions. Each were asked about their experiences with special education processes and facilities, including relationships held with their campus diagnostician. Each interview was recorded utilizing a digital recorder and notes were taken for later reflection. Field notes were also taken during each of the interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

Data was transcribed verbatim from the recordings of the interviews. The application Dragon Dictation was utilized in this process. The transcription was printed out and coded by numbering subject topics (Saldana, 2009). The information was then organized into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to organize the various themes that emerged from the data, and highlighted to

distinguish between categories. Consideration of the field notes was also used in the data analysis to contextualize the results of the study.

### **Role of the Researcher**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain why humans as research instruments are preferred. Responsiveness, adaptability, holistic emphasis, knowledge base expansion, processual immediacy, opportunities for clarification and summarization, and the opportunity to explore atypical responses are listed as qualifications for the human to be the only research instrument. Additionally, utilizing humans as the research instrument contributes to the reliability and trustworthiness of the data (p. 194).

### **Trustworthiness of the Data**

Erlanson, et al. (1993) explains trustworthiness by stating “The implementation of the partnership builds authenticity into the research” (p. 160). Participants were interviewed in their offices to provide an atmosphere of comfort for them, contributing to the trustworthiness of the study. Additionally the transcribed interviews were sent to participants for member checking Lincoln and Guba (1985).

## **RESULTS**

### **Participants in the Study**

Three administrators in South Texas school districts participated in the study. Two assistant principals, one male and one female, and one principal, female, were interviewed. Participants were chosen based upon referral and position held on the campus. The experience of the participants in education ranged from fourteen to thirty years. All had experience in ARD participation and working with educational diagnosticians on their campuses.

### **Description of Participants**

#### **Monica**

Monica is a Caucasian female with fourteen years of experience in education, with seven years of them being in administration. She has worked at both elementary and middle school levels. Monica is currently an assistant principal at the elementary level. She explains that she believes in building good rapport and showing respect to others, and believes in celebrating achievements. She also states that she believes in “high involvement” in ARDs that she participates in to ensure that every child gets what they need. Additionally, she understands that participation in the meetings brings something new to the table and provides an opportunity to learn new things. She sits in and takes minutes at most ARD meeting that are held on her campus. Monica was interviewed in her office at a mutually agreed upon day and time.

#### **Amy**

Amy is a Caucasian female with over thirty years of experience in education and ARD participation. She describes herself as a teacher first, before a principal. She is currently a principal at the high school level. Amy reports that as principal, she sits in on ARDs “from time to time” but currently has a working relationship with her campus educational diagnostician in other capacities. Amy was interviewed in her office at mutually agreed upon day and time.

### **Matthew**

Matthew is a Caucasian male, currently an assistant principal at the high school level. Matthew also has experience in roles outside of education, in law enforcement and insurance. Prior to becoming an assistant principal, Matthew worked as a Career and Technology teacher, and also has middle school administrative experience. He has participated in ARD meetings in various capacities throughout his educational career, however has participated in an administrative capacity for the past four years. He currently presides over all ARD meetings held at his campus. Matthew was interviewed in his office at a mutually agreed upon date and time.

## **FINDINGS**

In pulling data and information from coding information, several themes emerged. Interviews with participants revealed common threads in regards to administrative perceptions of the roles of educational diagnosticians on their campuses. Emergent themes included the following: acknowledgement of heavy special education caseloads and lack of time to implement special education procedures and ARD meetings appropriately; utilization of educational diagnosticians as sources for new information and important knowledge of laws and regulations; awareness of the roles, relationships and communications and the importance of these things among personnel and parents; and a belief that having an educational diagnostician housed on a campus with one location assignment is a benefit to the implementation of various special education processes and can provide improved guidance. It is important to note that although these themes were recurring, they were also interrelated and often overlapped with each other.

### **Proximity to Campus, Benefitting Student Outcomes**

All administrators interviewed expressed the importance of having a diagnostician housed on their campus. Amy’s campus educational diagnostician is based on her campus, and she states “I don’t know what we would do if they weren’t housed here.” Monica and Matthew work with educational diagnosticians who are not housed on one campus but described why it would be beneficial if they were. Getting to know the students and their needs better and being available for recommendations or guidance were the two main reasons given as the benefits for having an educational diagnostician assigned to one campus and housed there.

Monica states that her educational diagnostician at times will not understand or see the “picture of what student lives are really like” because it may not be a side she sees since she is not readily available. Amy contributed to this sentiment, explaining that her campus educational diagnostician being housed on her campus allows her to “take a personal interest” in the students

of that campus. Matthew stated similar sentiments as Amy. He touched on the impact on student relationships with the following statement:

But I believe it would be more beneficial if they were here all day every day because then they're having other interaction with their students on a day to day basis instead of just when they come in to do testing or come in to do ARDs and things like that. They would be more available for those students to be around them.

When asked if an additional educational diagnostician would be needed, Monica responded, "Yes...to help take the load off ours who travels back and forth between campuses. It would give her time to focus and cut down on frustration and any possible mistakes." Amy elaborated on this point by offering the following example of collaboration that being housed on one campus allows for:

Oh, I don't know what we would do if she weren't housed here. I think she needs to be, because if we have a question, or if we have a student we feel like may need to be referred we will often go with her. She'll pull up all the records, we'll look at the history of the kid.

Matthew also believed that having an educational diagnostician "campus specific" may offer advice to administrators or work with students better when they are having difficulty. He stated, "when we run into a student in meltdown, or things like that...sometimes they can deal with the student better, or at least advise us."

### **Educational Diagnosticians as Sources of Information**

All three participants, in response to various questions asked by the examiner, agreed that their current educational diagnosticians were sources of valuable information regarding legal requirements and procedural recommendations. As Monica stated, in special education and ARD meetings in particular, "There's always something new to learn in ARDs and with this ever changing world there's always something new." She continued by stating that she "highly trusted" the educational diagnostician on her campus to be knowledgeable in current laws and to guide the committee during ARD meetings to "make sure we are doing everything correctly." Although her role differed from the other participants regarding ARD meeting participation, Amy reiterated this sentiment by stating during her interview that she relied heavily on her educational diagnostician and her knowledge, and that this was important especially with the constant changes in special education law and procedures. In addition, she believed that this knowledge was also important to share with teachers. Matthew, in his role of running ARDs, stated that his educational diagnostician was well informed and "very helpful," especially because he is not formally trained in the area of special education. He continued, "I'm like a sponge though, and I'm grabbing and absorbing all I can." He said that his educational diagnosticians help him greatly and that he appreciated that they "used common sense for trying to do the best" for his students, although he noted that previous educational diagnosticians he had worked with "haven't had any" [common sense]. He described his current educational diagnostician as "very informed, very helpful."

### **Heavy Caseloads and Time for Implementation of Special Education Procedures**

All three participants also appeared to acknowledge that their educational diagnosticians were handling heavy caseloads, often to the detriment of the students. Monica stated, “They are way too busy, and sometimes miss the picture of what students lives in the classroom are really like because that’s not a side they see.” Additionally, she expresses concern that the paperwork that comes with the procedural side of special education is so overwhelming that educational diagnosticians “don’t have time to get to the details of the students’ personal life,” and may rush through things like ARD meetings, missing student details or important information. When the examiner asked Monica if she would consider an additional assessment person as beneficial to her campus, she commented that it may help to cut down “any possible mistakes” in paperwork and meeting timelines. Matthew reports similar concerns by stating that the special education process is “so paper and time consuming” that many times he and his personnel, including his educational diagnostician, are “behind where we would like to be.” He elaborated by commenting on the “amount of paperwork required and the steps required” to get the various processes in special education underway.

When asked if she felt if educational diagnosticians could help in planning that could contribute to student success, she stated, “I’m sure they could if they had time. They are understaffed though and barely have time to meet all their testing deadlines and they are constantly working overtime.” She went on to reiterate that, “they are overworked for sure.” Amy reported that she felt as though the paperwork needed to prepare for ARDs was “overwhelming” for her educational diagnostician. Amy further stated that an additional educational diagnostician would be beneficial because the one she had “is overwhelmed.” She also commented that a clerical person to assist her educational diagnostician with “the massive amounts of documentation and paperwork” would probably benefit her educational diagnostician. She also expressed concern that in regards to special educational processes and needs, the amount of work needed was “only getting bigger and bigger” and that the issue was not “going anywhere” at the secondary level.

Matthew stated he is “in ARDs all the time.” He also indicated that the week of the interview was considered a week with few ARDs, in which he had four scheduled, and a typical week had ARDs scheduled “three or four days a week.” He exhibited frustration with the amount of ARDs required to be held, by scoffing when asked how often ARDs were held. He followed up by stating, “...we stay pretty busy doing ARDs,” but demonstrated an understanding that it was not the fault of the educational diagnosticians that he worked with rather than with the system in general. He stated, “...but it’s not my special ed people, it’s just the procedure...” and continued, “...it’s more disagreeing with the system than it is with anything else.” In addition, Matthew acknowledged that his diagnostician was also often held up in the numerous ARDs that were required to be held, making her not as accessible. Amy also shared this belief, exhibited by her comment that ARDs were reported as being held “too often,” which put increasing pressure on her educational diagnostician.

### **The Importance of Roles, Relationships, and Communications**

While all three participants described variance in the particular roles in which each held within the special education processes and ARD meetings, all were consistent in the belief that



relationships and communication were essential in completing special education procedures. Emphasis was placed on communication amongst personnel in the school setting as well as communication with parents to encourage participation.

Monica stated that the educational diagnostician on her campus was responsible for conducting all ARDs and completing all testing. She described her own role in the ARD meeting process as follows: "I am the administrator in charge and I take all minutes." Monica was asked about procedural difficulties with conducting ARDs, and described the difficulty in gathering personnel at mutually convenient times. Amy stated that her current role as principal does not require her to attend many ARDs, although as an assistant principal she was assigned students by alphabet in which she would have to attend those ARD meetings. Her assistant principals run the ARD meetings, and the educational diagnostician is required to take the minutes, although she noted that on different campuses within her district administrators were in charge of taking minutes. She emphasized the importance of her educational diagnostician's role in regards to communicating with general education teachers outside of ARDs, as well as special education teachers. She stated that her educational diagnostician also leads the Professional Learning Community meetings held once a week in which special education staff are a part of. She also described the difficulty that her educational diagnostician had in regards to scheduling the ARDs, because she had to review all required personnel's schedules to find a mutually agreeable time. When asked if Amy would consider hiring additional assessment staff to assist her educational diagnostician, she stated that it would be a great idea, however a "clerical person would be a help" as she had to do all copying, mailing and filing of paperwork on her own in addition to the scheduling. Matthew also shared with the examiner various procedural measures that he implemented in order to assist with the conducting of ARD meetings. He required that notices be sent certified mail ten days before they are to be held. He also stated that he runs all meetings and attempts to keep the focus on the tasks of that particular meeting and not letting conversation get off topic. In his current position, he was given the task of running all ARDs for his campus.

Monica stated her belief that introductions were important and encouraged making "...the parent to feel welcome and at ease." She did note that getting the parent to be in attendance was difficult. Matthew contributed to this topic, and shared that getting parents to participate was difficult and that "really and truly, the biggest hindrance, is the parents coming" in regards to setting up ARDs. He said that if his personnel were able to keep track, they may get permission for the meeting to be held without the parent but that "some of them [parents] don't care."

Monica stressed that a "good working relationship" was necessary between educational diagnosticians and campus administrators to work towards the best interest of the children, and that on her present campus she did have a "great working relationship" with her campus educational diagnostician. Michael emphasized profusely the importance of relationships amongst educational diagnosticians and administrators, especially because he specifically stated that he didn't "agree all the time with the findings." He also stated to the examiner that he had experience with educational diagnosticians who did not have a lot of "common sense," and that many times he experiences conflict between discipline issues and special education procedures. He explained that educational diagnosticians he had previously worked with were "...black and white oriented. My ones I work with here, yeah, we are law oriented, but we're going to put some common sense in there and do what we have to." He also stated that the current

relationship he had with his campus educational diagnostician allowed him to be honest about causes of student struggles. He explains:

If a kid comes in an ARD, to a failure ARD, and after we talk a few minutes it becomes real obvious that the reason they're failing is because they're lazy and don't want to do any work, I have a tendency to let them know that. And so I think then we have a tendency to try and work a plan that addresses that also. So I think that the right diagnosticians with the right focus can really help us come up with plans that can possibly help our kids succeed.

When asked if Monica knew the procedures used in other districts, she stated that she did not, and that even within her own campus the special education turnover rate was high and that "things are constantly changing." When asked if he was familiar with procedures in neighboring districts, Matthew described his experiences in previous position he had held at different districts. As a middle school assistant principal, his job was to read the statement of confidentiality and conduct and assurances and then he said "the rest of the time I just sat there." In another district where he was a principal at an intermediate school, he said the counselor sat in as the administrator and he only attended ARDs where decisions regarding money were being made. As he describes it, "...the only time we sat in is if we knew it was going to be a rough ARD, or somebody's going to want us to put out money for something, so we could be there to see if it needed to be done or fight it." Amy was not familiar with procedures done in other districts either, and that current procedures were done that way when she initially took the position. She also stated that students are invited to ARDs at her campus level to encourage them to be self-advocates.

## DISCUSSION

Several common themes were found in the responses from administrators regarding educational diagnosticians on their respective campuses, despite the varying roles and positions held by the participants. For example, despite that participants were assistant principals and principals coming from elementary levels to high school campuses, the data showed consistency in the concerns, expectations and perceptions held by them toward educational diagnosticians.

Administrators in South Texas schools expressed benefits to having educational diagnosticians housed on their campuses. While the benefits emphasized focused around student relationships and proximity for information and advisory reasons, additional concerns addressed were increased focus on campuses and reduction in mistakes.

All participants expressed the dependency on their educational diagnosticians for updated information regarding procedures, legalities, and recommendations for various student situations. Particularly, it was mentioned by all three participants that the current educational diagnosticians on their campuses were knowledgeable of legal matters and were dependable in regards to proper steps to take procedurally in various situations.

Administrators interviewed acknowledged heavy caseloads held by campus diagnosticians. Procedural obligations including paperwork, lack of personnel and the amount of ARDs needing to be held were sighted as reasons why time was a limitation. Hindrances noted by those interviewed included lack of participation in student planning to contribute to student success, being behind on timelines, and clerical tasks not being completed. While administrators had various solutions to how to offer their educational diagnosticians more time, it was clear that all three participants shared the opinion that they are overworked and overwhelmed.

Additionally, frustration was noted by the two high school administrators on the number of ARDs that are required to be held.

While each participant's roles and responsibilities in the special education processes that occur on their campuses varied, it is evident that all three administrators demonstrated knowledge of roles, responsibilities and the importance of communication on their campuses. All three reported overall good rapport with their current campus educational diagnosticians, although Monica and Matthew indicated that that positive working relationship and respect may not happen in other situations. All three administrators indicated that they were not familiar with alternate procedures that may occur in other districts, unless from personal experience. Amy and Matthew indicated specifically that the roles were defined when they began their position and they appeared to adjust to that role rather than try to alter it.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Results of the study indicate that educational diagnosticians should strive to remain updated on legal requirements, appropriate procedures and student recommendations, as it is evident that administrators rely heavily on their knowledge when dealing with special education matters. Based upon the Texas Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (2006), special education personnel mostly attend professional development in the areas of IEP development, implementation, and assessment, meeting continuing education requirements for maintaining certification, and evaluation and assessment for determining student eligibility. Results of this study indicate that campus administrators also highly depend on educational diagnosticians for legal and procedural guidance, and this needs to be taken into account when considering professional development opportunities.

Additionally, administrators perceive proximity as being beneficial to building student relationships. Further studies may need to be conducted in this area to determine the effectiveness of proximity of educational diagnosticians on student success.

It is important to note that administrators interviewed, although acknowledging that educational diagnosticians conduct testing with students, did not place emphasis on evaluation results and recommendations as part of the role and responsibilities of educational diagnosticians. A study done by Texas Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (2006) shows that educational diagnosticians attend professional development regarding assessment for identification of special education children more than any other area except for IEP development and continuing education hours. This appears to be a large and time-consuming responsibility of educational diagnosticians that appears to go unnoticed as per the results of this study. Following from this, additional research may need to be done in an attempt to determine an appropriate caseload for educational diagnosticians, particularly in regards to results of this study which indicated that administrators feel that educational diagnosticians make a critical contribution to student success.

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