

Webinar

January 21, 2021

Using File Reviews as a Vehicle for Qualitative Data Gathering

Mary Montle Bacon, Ph.D.

Images of a Culture

1055 Lakeview Drive

Hillsborough, CA 94010-7320

(650) 342-0621 (Home)

(650) 281-9445 (Cell)

(702) 446-5734

mbacon6538@aol.com

Overview: File Review Process

∞ Session Goals

Participants will:

- Have a general understanding of the value of file reviews as a vehicle for gathering qualitative data related to student pathways through the educational system.
- Hear the reactions of administrators who have experienced the file review process.
- Have the ability to familiarize others in their Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) with sufficient information to conduct their own file reviews with relevant groups.

∞ Limitations of This Session

- **Overview:** Available time will not permit an in-depth exploration of the process.
- **Audience:** Participants coming to the session represent a broad range of disciplines.
- **Case review:** Participants' inability to experience actual cases and discuss impressions.
- **Interaction:** Inability to participate in an interactive learning opportunity that mimics the one that participants would be implementing.

Qualitative data gathering and analysis in file reviews involve the identification, examination, and interpretation of patterns and themes evident in observed data and determine how these patterns and themes might help to explain the issues under consideration. Because the process involves multiple student files, it can provide a powerful way to do a comparative analysis of students to identify commonalities. Similar to other methods of qualitative analysis, file reviews provide an opportunity for a gathering of individuals to examine their thoughts, feelings, opinions and/or experiences in a manner that takes into account the specific groups, indicators or issues about which the district is concerned. This process also can play a crucial role in giving meaning to the available quantitative data and often may suggest missing quantitative data that should be gathered. Qualitative data can be more difficult to analyze than quantitative data because the data collected is not inherently objective and therefore can be open to multiple interpretations. However subjective it may be, it is nonetheless valuable in contributing to the examination of systems and their impact on service delivery for diverse clientele.

∞ Value of File Reviews

- The review of student files can yield valuable insights about students' journeys through the educational system and can assist staff in identifying any significant patterns that may be contributing to students' achievement, adjustment, disciplinary issues or the need for additional assessments or supports.
- For the individual student file, it can highlight the use, or lack of use, of appropriate prereferral interventions and suggest missing elements in service delivery that should have been considered.

- Rather than focus on individual dysfunction however, the goal of qualitative file reviews is to identify any systemic issues if any that should be addressed and pre-identification interventions that should have been available and considered for students such as the one(s) under consideration.
- It provides an opportunity to explore what might be recurring behaviors characteristic of a significant number of similar students that may contribute to their relatively poor adjustment and provide clues about how to best serve this population prior to considering more restrictive alternatives.

∞ Reviewers

Although file reviews may be completed by a single individual to get some general information about the characteristics of the designated subgroups, or a group of reviewers representing a specific discipline (e.g. psychologists), optimally a multidisciplinary team involving those that are usually part of a process for case consideration (Student Study Teams (SSTs), Community Action for Responsive Education (CARE) Teams, Individualized Education Program (IEP) Teams, etc.) should complete this process. The inclusion of participants who bring different perspectives is not only valuable but contributes to improving long-term relationships within the team as they consider future cases.

∞ Guiding Questions

File reviews may be open-ended or focused. When open-ended where no instructions are provided, participants' observations are more varied and are based upon the areas that are salient to them. This method is advantageous if you seek their unique, spontaneous responses. Focused file reviews, on the other hand are designed to shape the lens through which you want participants to review the files. These provide guiding questions at the outset such as the samples noted below. The guiding questions chosen should be those that can yield the information that is most relevant for a particular district while not restricting participants in their observations.

The File Review Process as Qualitative Data Gathering

∞ Steps: File Review Process

- Identify the indicator and ethnic group to focus on for the file review process.
- Invite a multidisciplinary group of participants who typically contribute to determining services needed and who can provide perspectives from a variety of disciplines.
- Assemble as much information about students as available to provide a more complete picture of the students reviewed.
- Ensure that each file is reviewed by a minimum of two participants.
- Share suggested guiding questions to shape the focus of the process while encouraging individuals to note their general impressions of any observed patterns.

- Emphasize the importance of identifying systemic issues that may impact the students' journeys through the system.
- Facilitate a follow-up discussion of the outcomes of the file review process with an end toward identifying any predictable patterns or possible root causes for student adjustment that emerge.

∞ Limitations of the File Review Process

- **Time-Consuming:** Sessions typically take at least half a day to yield satisfactory outcomes.
- **Missing Data:** Other sources of information are often unavailable (e.g. attendance data, discipline/counselors' folders, social worker notes, family responses to school contacts, etc.)
- **Comprehensiveness of Psych Reports:** Typically, the only file that may be available is the psych file and the reports may not incorporate all of the needed information.
- **Ineligible students:** Comparable files of students who were found to be ineligible for special education often are not available in the review process.
- **Multidisciplinary Team:** Often participants that represent multiple roles who can bring unique perspectives to the process are not available for the review session.
- **Subjectivity:** Outcomes are generally not quantifiable but can provide invaluable information about the root causes for the quantitative data gathered and suggest systemic issues that need addressing.

Sample Questions: Focused File Reviews

As indicated previously, qualitative file reviews may be open-ended or focused depending upon the needs of the group. Sample guiding questions such as those that follow are designed to direct participants' attention to specific areas to observe as they review files or to elicit responses to confirm or dismiss already suspected root causes for the issues under consideration. Planners are encouraged to select questions that fit the particular circumstances of group; the ones included here are merely samples and not meant to be exhaustive of each category.

∞ General

- What was the source of the referrals? Parents or guardians? Teachers? Agency staff?
- For initial assessments, at what age/grade level are most referrals for assessment made?
- What factors contributed to the referral?
- What are aspects of the system that would make this student difficult to serve in the general education program? Why?
- What discernable patterns were noted in the journeys of many of the students reviewed?

- Did reports reflect an understanding of the socio-cultural characteristics of students that might affect their performance/adjustment?
- What indications were there that there might be a cultural mismatch that affected students' adjustment?
- What were possible deficiencies or missing elements in the service delivery system that might have contributed to the students' referrals?

∞ Pre-assessment Interventions

- What indications were there that Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) or Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) strategies were implemented with fidelity?
- Were sufficient general education supports available/exhausted prior to referral for assessment?
- To what extent was there evidence of minor interventions or temporary fixes rather than attempts to identify systemic remedies in the institution?
- What additional resources in the school-community are missing that might be considered to address the disproportionate identification of the identified group(s)?
- Were Behavior Support Plans routinely implemented, monitored and adjusted as needed?
- Were reports explicit about whether culture, language, family circumstances or socioeconomic factors may be impacting the results of psychoeducational assessments?
- Were students with diagnosed disorders provided with Section 504 Plans?
- Did reports that reflect Section 504 Plans have annual meetings to track their progress, rate effectiveness and update accommodations?

∞ Assessment

- What evidence was there that assessors took into consideration the socio-cultural nature of the students under examination in their selection of tools or evaluation of data collected?
- Was there evidence of a standard template for choosing assessment instruments and/or for completing reports?
- Did the assessment strategies/instruments appear to be culturally relevant?
- Was there evidence that the assessors understood the cultures of the students being examined?
- To what extent were the characteristics of the family and community taken into consideration in the determination of eligibility?
- Was there evidence of meaningful interaction with the family as part of the assessment process?
- Did recommendations routinely include descriptions of the optimal characteristics of the instructional and school environments needed for students' success based upon their profiles?

- Was there evidence of collaboration among assessors in the determination of eligibility in complex cases?
- Did reports incorporate relevant assessment data from other assessors?
- Was there consideration of positive aspects of the students' behaviors, (e.g. the circumstances when they are successful), or comments from individuals with whom they had positive relationships?
- Did reports reflect an analysis of environmental and instructional factors that may positively or negatively influence student adjustment?
- How thorough were annual and triennial assessments and how often was possible exiting from special education considered?
- For second language learners, were there any indications that the assessors considered how/if their level of competence in English may be influencing their test performance?
- Were exclusionary factors considered and ruled out before determining eligibility?

∞ Discipline

- What were the typical behaviors that led to the referrals for discipline?
- What characteristics of the identified population did you note that may have contributed to their overrepresentation in the disciplinary system?
- What indications were there that there may have been substantial documented or undocumented exclusion from instruction because of behavior?
- What evidence did you note that there might not be fairness in the way in which discipline was imposed for the students reviewed?
- How important was the respect/disrespect phenomenon in the negative interactions with staff?
- How might the goal of the school to create a citizenry that will obey the rules of society contribute to the disproportionate overrepresentation of this group in the disciplinary system?
- What information might suggest culturally influenced perceptions of student behavior that may define natural group responses as deviant?

∞ Emotionally Disturbed

- What were any commonalities in or recurring characteristics of students that led to their initial referral and continuing placement for Other Health Impaired (OHI) or Emotionally Disturbed (ED)?
- What other factors did you observe that might have affected a number of student referrals for assessment as Emotionally Disturbed?
- What aspects of the students' behavior would lead staff to believe that these students are Emotionally Disturbed rather than responding to traumatic circumstances in their lives?
- Did most OHI and ED students come to the district with medical diagnoses or was this determination made by district staff?

- Was there clarity about the factors that determined whether students should qualify as OHI or ED?
- Were alternative labels to ED considered and were there explicit explanations of why they were ruled out?
- Are there provisions for systematic reviews of reports by more than one assessor prior to making final recommendations for identification of students as Emotionally Disturbed?

∞ Hispanic Specific Learning Disability (SLD)

- What are your thoughts about some of the possible root causes for the district's disproportionate overrepresentation for Hispanic students as SLD?
- How often did students qualify automatically based on reports from outside parties (doctors, agency staff, other school district assessors, etc.)?
- How thorough/comprehensive were annual/triennials and done with a focus on possibly exiting an inappropriately labeled student from special education?
- Are bilingual/bicultural assessors routinely assigned to determine eligibility for ELL students?
- Was there evidence that exclusionary factors were taken under consideration in the files reviewed, particularly related to issues that were characteristic of larger numbers of ELLs?
- How comfortable are you that instruments used for the assessment of intelligence for Hispanic students provide accurate information about their intellectual ability?
- What is your impression about how much the degree of linguistic competence in English affected the performance of Hispanic students on the assessment instruments used?
- How accurate were current assessments in determining EL students' actual receptive and expressive language skills?
- How effective were the district's ELL instructional strategies and how skilled were general education teachers in providing language acquisition instruction in addition to academic content?
- What pre-assessment interventions were routinely available for struggling second language students?