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School Psychologists' Experience of Identifying Students With Specific Learning Disabilities In Urban Schools

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SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS' EXPERIENCE OF IDENTIFYING STUDENTS WITH

SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITIES IN URBAN SCHOOLS

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my students and their families. Thank you for putting your trust in me and inspiring me to learn and grow. And to my favorite little one, Keondrus. You show so much joy, curiosity, and passion for life, and all of our lives are better because you are in it. Thank you for reminding me how to be more like you.

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ABSTRACT

The largest group of students receiving special education services in the United States

qualify under the category of Specific Learning Disability (SLD) (Cottrell & Barrett,

2015). The most recent reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education

Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004) was the first time that federal special education

law substantially changed the way in which Multidisciplinary Teams (MDTs) could

identify students as having SLDs. Because of their specialized training, school

psychologists are considered to be the disability identification expert of the team (NASP,

2010a). This instrumental case study investigated school psychologists' experience of

identifying SLDs in urban schools and how they make sense of the process. This study

was conducted with school psychologists who have at least five years of experience and

currently work in an urban school in Cuyahoga County. School psychologists from all

ten school districts that are designated as urban by ODE were solicited for participation.

Seven school psychologists from six districts consented to participate in this study.

Participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire and two semi-structured

interviews, answering interview questions to address the following primary research

questions: (1) What resources and existing knowledge do school psychologists draw on in

the processes of SLD identification; and (2) What challenges occur for them in the SLD

identification process. Participants identified themes regarding resources and existing

knowledge that they use during the identification process as well as challenges related to

their training, professional development, team dynamics, school and community

resources, the legal definition of SLD, inconsistent application of policy, and SLD

guidance and policy during this study. These findings highlighted the need for changes

to university-level educator training programs, professional development, and community

outreach and inclusion, as well as the need to recommit to students' right to a Free

Appropriate Public Education.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

In 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), current federal special education law, was reauthorized. At that time, the definition of a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) remained similar to those defined by past federal special education law:

> A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. Specific learning disability does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage (p. 46651).

While the definition remained largely unchanged, significant changes were made in how to identify students with SLD. Prior to the reauthorization, there was only one method to

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identify SLD. Additional methods of identification were added to IDEA 2004 in an attempt to create a more accurate and fair SLD identification process for multidisciplinary teams (MDT) to follow.

Federal special education law is a major contributor to how MDTs make sense of SLD identification, but there are many other factors that contribute to how students are identified with SLD. This chapter will provide an overview of these factors by including details about the history of special education law, current special education law, professional association guidance, graduate training, and school psychologists' perceptions and beliefs in practice. Additionally, this chapter will provide an overview the social constructivist case study methodology that will be employed for this study.

Background of the Problem

The largest group of students who receive special education services in the United States qualify under the category of Specific Learning Disability (SLD) (Cottrell & Barrett, 2015). While accurate identification of all disability categories is important, the large number of students receiving services under this category make it especially important for professionals to accurately identify SLDs. There are many ethical and moral questions surrounding the accuracy of special education identification, especially in terms of educational and life outcomes for students; there are also numerous practical reasons that accurate identification is vital, not only for the students themselves, but also for the professionals working with them.

First, there is the possibility that students who do not truly have a SLD may qualify for special education services. In this case, they would receive accommodations and services that they do not actually require. This means that the school district would

be wasting resources that could better be utilized with students who truly demonstrate need. Additionally, these students' skills could potentially decline as they are provided unneeded supports that may not allow for expanding their skillset as much as if they were completing tasks more independently (Cottrell & Barrett, 2015).

Second, there is the possibility that students who do, in fact, meet the definition of a student with a SLD may not qualify for special education services. These students would not be provided the special education supports or accommodations that they need. As a result, they would likely not make appropriate gains and would fall further behind (Cottrell & Barrett, 2015).

Eligibility determination by the MDT is significantly impacted by legal guidance. Law makers have been crafting federal laws, starting in the mid-1960s, that have shaped the way students are provided special education services. While congress encouraged special education services be provided by schools through various forms of grant funding staring with Title VI of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESSA) and the Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA) that replaced ESSA in 1970, it was not until the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EAHCA) that specific eligibility criteria were provided to MDTs (Martin et al., 1996). EAHCA required that all children with disabilities be identified, diagnosed, and provided special education services within their least restrictive environment (LRE) at public expense (Fagan & Wise, 2007). EAHCA drastically changed the expectations of public schools to provide a Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE) to all students, regardless of disability type (Fagan & Wise, 2007). While previous laws aimed to help subsidize special education services, EAHCA unequivocally required school districts to provide special education

services to all students that required them. Prior to EAHCA, public education services for students with disabilities were minimal, if they existed at all. Decisions regarding service provision were left to individual school districts that could refuse enrollment to students they deemed "uneducable" (Martin et al., 1996). Even students who had fewer demanding needs were often not provided special education services. This meant that students with a SLD might have been allowed to matriculate in their public school, but likely attended regular education classes without any special education support (Martin et al., 1996).

EAHCA also explicitly defined various disability categories for practitioners for the first time. The SLD definition has changed little since that time, and students could be identified as having a SLD in a variety of categories including: basic reading skills, reading fluency, reading comprehension, written expression, mathematics calculation, mathematics problem solving, oral expression, and listening comprehension.

From the mid-seventies until the most recent reauthorization of IDEA 2004, SLDs were identified using the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model, which required a severe statistical discrepancy between cognitive ability and academic achievement (Cottrell & Barrett, 2015). Students were given individually-administered, norm-reference cognitive ability and academic achievement assessments. If there was a statistically significant difference between cognitive ability and academic skills on these assessments, students were identified as having a SLD.

Because of significant concerns that students of color and students of lower socioeconomic status were disproportionally qualifying for special education and because students of color were disproportionally under qualifying for gifted programs (National

Research Council, 2002; Finn et al., 2001; President's Commission on Excellence, 2002; Elkinsin et al., 2001; Bradley et al., 2002), IDEA 2004 no longer required the team to demonstrate significant discrepancy between students' cognitive ability and academic achievement in reading, writing, math, oral expression, or listening comprehension. Rather, IDEA 2004 now legally allows three ways in which teams can determine that a student qualifies for special education services under the category of SLD; identification can now be achieved through the use of the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model, Response to Intervention (RTI), or Patterns of Strengths and Weaknesses (PSW).

As previously stated, the ability-achievement discrepancy model was the original way in which students were assessed to determine if they qualified for special education services under SLD, and it continues to be one of the legally allowable models of identification. In this approach, practitioners determine if there is a significant discrepancy between scores obtained from individually-administered, standardized cognitive and academic achievement assessments. Based on subsequent results, if there was a statistically significant difference between cognitive and academic achievement scores, "a student is not working up to his or her potential as measured on the intelligence test, a learning disability is suspected" (Fagan & Wise, 2007, p. 143).

Due to some of the criticisms found with the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model, practitioners sought a different way to identify students with SLD that did not require a significant difference between IQ and academic achievement scores, and IDEA 2004 placed a strong emphasis on RTI as an alternative. RTI is meant to provide intervention at the earliest sign of academic need. This three-tiered model uses measurable data, closely related to the area in which the student is receiving intervention,

to inform decision-making (Hale, Kaufman, Naglieri, & Kavale, 2006). In Tier I, all students should be provided effective, differentiated instruction in their general education classroom, and their progress should be monitored to determine if they meet benchmarks several times a year. Those who do not respond to Tier I interventions should receive additional research-based interventions and have their progress monitored more frequently at the Tier II level. Those who continue to lack response to intervention move to Tier III where they should be provided more intensive individualized, research-based interventions that are implemented with high frequency and fidelity (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2010). If these students continue to lack adequate improvement, they would then qualify for special education services. With RTI, "the implicit assumption is that individual adaptations will benefit most children experiencing academic difficulty, and insufficient growth must indicate an inherent deficit or disability" (Hale et al., 2006, p. 755).

PSW does not require a severe discrepancy between cognitive ability and academic achievement, nor does it consider how a student responds to an intervention they are provided. While there may be some variation in how school teams may implement this approach, Shultz, Simpson, and Lynch (2012) indicate that the essential steps in PSW include identifying academic need, identifying cognitive weaknesses that are linked to that academic area, determine if there are other cognitive strengths, and analyze the pattern to determine if the student is a SLD.

Even though IDEA 2004 has specifically provided these three methods as ways to identify SLD, in practice we often see different interpretations of each method by each individual MDT. Additionally, teams often do not choose one identification method. For

example, students might go through the RTI process, and then when they do not make adequate progress, they may then be assessed using the discrepancy model or PSW, essentially requiring students to qualify for special education services through more than one method. Conversely, if an MDT uses more than one method, they may turn it into a hybrid approach where neither is fully implemented with fidelity. For example, educators may provide intervention and take some intervention data, and then complete standardized assessment, but not arrive at an educational diagnosis using one or the other. Because they use more than one method, the requirement for neither is actually met.

Each state must create their own state-level guidance to reflect federal special education law, so when IDEA 2004 included changes about SLD identification, every state needed to update their guidance to reflect the new iteration of the law (Ahearn, 2009). The Ohio Department of Education's main form of guidance for SLD identification is *The Ohio Operating Standards for the Education of Children with Disabilities* (Ohio Department of Education, 2014). The definition of SLD within this document matches the federal education provided in the introduction of this chapter. This document states that the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model does not need to be used to identify students as having SLD; it uses language that reflects the inclusion of RTI and PSW as acceptable identification methods in addition to the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model.

The Ohio Department of Education requires that the Evaluation Team Report (ETR) is used during all special education evaluations (Ohio Department of Education, 2012). It acts as a template, which is aligned to *The Ohio Operating Standards for the Education of Children with Disabilities,* to ensure that all required information is

completed during special education evaluations. MDTs complete this form every time a special education evaluation is completed.

MDTs, which are mandated by federal law and by the state of Ohio, are used to increase the reliability of identification and ensure that all stakeholders are given the opportunity to provide input. The MDTs include parents, students, teachers, and related service providers with different areas of expertise. The MDT comes together during the evaluation process to determine if a student qualifies for special education services. Although both federal and state guidance exist for MDTs to use during the SLD identification process, they are left without specific information about requirements, ultimately leaving decision-making to the discretion of the team (Cottrell & Barrett, 2015).

Within MDTs, school psychologists' input is given significant weight. They participate in graduate-level training to develop a unique skillset related to disability identification (NASP, 2014). Because of their extensive training, they are considered to be the disability identification expert of the team (NASP, 2010a). Approximately half of their professional time is spent in special education decision-making (Barrett et al., 2015).

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) represents school psychologists at the national level in the U.S. They provide school psychologists across the country with guidance on a variety of topics, training, and professional advocacy. Many school psychologists turn to this organization as a way to learn about best practices. In addition to special education law, this organization shapes graduate-level training programs, especially for those that are NASP-approved.

Both special education law and professional organizations influence the structure of graduate-level training programs. School psychology training programs focus on education and psychology to develop skills in psychological theory, educational strategies, and assessment. This training is important to their identification practices. Training consists of 60 or more semester credit hours, requiring three years of full-time study, which includes coursework and 1200 hours of practical experience (NASP, 2014). While school psychologists are considered experts due to their significant training in the field, they still may not have obtained all of the skills one would need to make an appropriate specific learning disability eligibility determination (Barrett et al., 2015).

For example, Barrett et al. (2015) analyzed 123 syllabi provided by 84 universities with school psychology training programs. They found that specific learning disability identification skills are most commonly taught in courses that teach how to administer and interpret cognitive and academic standardized assessments. In those types of classes, 36% of course goals were dedicated to training of the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model, and 11% were dedicated to training of the RTI model. This study indicated that school psychologists may be lacking training in skills related to different SLD identification.

Maki (2018) conducted a study in which 110 school psychologists participated. Thirty seven percent of the study participants indicated that they received graduate training in RTI for SLD identification; however, this preparation did not increase the likelihood of making consistent SLD identifications. The author concluded that RTI preparation lacked rigor and that professional development opportunities were not enough to build competency.

A study by Maki & Adams (2018) used a survey of 461 practicing school psychologists to learn about school psychologists' training and current SLD identification practices. The participants used the different SLD identification models at a similar rate: PSW (35.14%), RTI (34.49%), and Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model (30.37%). Most of the school psychologists reported graduate training in the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model (96.52%), while 46.64% reported training in RTI, and 28.85% reported training in PSW. Participants with fewer years of practice were more likely to report RTI and PSW training than those with more years of practice ($p<0.05$).

In order to apply PSW appropriately, school psychologists must have intensive training in cognitive abilities, relationships between cognitive and achievement, and advanced psychometrics and interpretation (McGill et al., 2015). According to Decker, Hale, and Flanigan (2013), many school psychology graduate training programs do not focus on evidence-based assessment practices, which can make school psychologists underprepared for SLD identification practices.

In addition to school psychology training, factors within practice may also impact the SLD identification process. For example, school psychologists' perspectives about SLD also impact identification. Cottrell and Barrett (2017) surveyed 471 school psychologists nationally. These researchers found school psychologists' beliefs about whether biology or environment was the underlying factor of SLD were correlated with what type of identification model was used. School psychologists' beliefs about SLD were also correlated with region of the country in which they practiced. This could be attributed to school psychology training within that region and state-level guidance.

Machek and Nelson (2010) measured perceptions related to RTI. The researchers surveyed 549 school psychologists about identifying SLD in reading. Approximately 86% indicated that they felt cognitive assessments should be used within the RTI model to rule out an intellectual disability as a cause for low reading skills. Approximately 48% of the participants indicated they find full-scale IQ scores to be helpful in understanding the nature of a student's disability, while 62.2% found index scores to be useful, and 59.8% found individual subtests useful. The majority of school psychologist in this study (60.7%) did not feel that the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model is useful in reading SLD identification, varying significantly from those who do (p<0.01).

Within that same study, Machek & Nelson (2010) also gained information about perceptions of school staff's ability to provide reading instruction with fidelity. Approximately 71.4% of school psychologists felt that special education teachers able to provide reading instruction with fidelity, while only 31% felt general education teachers to do so (39.3%). The participants shared information about additional barriers to RTI implementation. Lack of personnel (79.6%), financial resources (77.6%), or time needed to implement RTI effectively (84.4%) were all reported as barriers. Despite these difficulties, the participants generally reported positive perceptions about the use of RTI. The majority of participants indicated that RTI would help with earlier identification (82.1%) and would connect interventions to assessment results (90.2%). However, the participants were roughly split on whether they felt that RTI would minimize over-representation of minority students as having SLD.

Researchers also brought up concerns about SLD Identification consistency. Maki et al. (2016), conducted a study with 376 school psychologists to study SLD

identification consistency. These psychologists were randomly assigned to an ability-discrepancy, RTI, or PSW group. They reviewed identification criteria for whichever method they were assigned and then were asked to make SLD identification decisions based on provided student data. In this study, the overall identification consistency was somewhat low at 73.7% ($\kappa=0.45$) and there were no significant differences based on identification method; however, the authors reported significant differences in consistency depending on the conclusiveness of the student data ($p<0.01$). School psychologists were much less consistent in their identification of inconclusive student data (51.2%) than conclusively not SLD (88.1%) and conclusively SLD (81.0%).

School psychologists' confidence is another important aspect in the SLD identification process. Maki et al. (2018) conducted a study with 376 school psychologists regarding this factor. Many participants reported being at least somewhat confident in their SLD identification decisions (90.7%). Participants using the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model reported more confidence in their SLD identification than those using RTI ($p<0.05$). No significant difference in confidence was found between those using PSW and the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model. More experience and higher level of training did not impact confidence either. Those with inconclusive data was reported lower levels of confidence than when more conclusive student data was available. Interestingly, school psychologists who made consistent SLD identifications were not likely to report higher levels of confidence.

Challenges within the schools are also important to school psychologists' SLD identification. In addition to perceptions, consistency, and confidence of the various models for SLD identification, school psychologists also have perceptions related to the

specific context in which they practice. Graves et al. (2014) conducted a study with 97 school psychologists about challenges in the role of school psychologists in an urban district. The following themes were found: large caseload, lack of funding/resources, lack of support from administration, needs specific to urban populations, and the expansion of school psychologists' roles.

Statement of the Problem

IDEA 2004 attempted to address the serious concerns about SLD identification by allowing for, and encouraging, the use of RTI in eligibility determination. By providing quality intervention, it was believed that students who did not truly have a disability would make improvements and no longer require special education services, and, therefore, students of color and students from families with lower incomes would be provided what they needed and not be relegated to special education for the rest of their educational lives.

Despite the fact that law has changed significantly and now allows three methods with which students can be identified as having a SLD, specific SLD identification requirements were not enumerated. This means that MDTs are left to interpret the law and ultimately use their discretion as to whether they believe that a student meets the definition of having a SLD (Cottrell & Barrett, 2015). This can cause serious issues in terms of consistent practices across individual schools, let alone school districts. For example, if a student is attending one school, the team may determine that they meet the definition of SLD, while a different team at another school may not. Disabilities are not contextual, and variability in interpretation of the law between MDTs can lead to misidentification, whether that means overidentifying false positives or under identifying

students who truly meet the definition of a disability provided by IDEA 2004. Furthermore, in practice, various approaches are often used in combination. These hybrid approaches can either cause students to be required to qualify using more than one method, or can also indicate that neither approach chosen was utilized completely or with fidelity.

Additionally, how school psychologists are trained likely impacts their SLD identification practice. Even though they receive specific training that would lead to appropriate eligibility determinations such as psychometrics and interpreting data, school psychologists may still have not obtained all of the skills required to make an appropriate SLD determination, and unfortunately "training does not appear to have caught up with shifts of practice" (Barrett et al., 2015). Considering that the federal law and many state laws do not provide specific guidance regarding the identification of SLD, it is extremely important that professional training adequately address the skills needed to determine whether a student has a SLD using all legally permissible models. If not, the school psychologist, acting as the case manager during evaluations, may not implement IDEA 2004 in the manner that it is intended.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to learn about school psychologists' experiences of the SLD identification process in urban schools. In this study, school psychologists with at least 5 years of experience who currently work in urban public schools completed a brief demographic survey and participated in two semi-structured interviews. Questions in the semi-structured interviews elicited information about their experiences in identifying SLD; their interpretation of federal, state, and

school district level policy; their training and experience as school psychologists; what they feel most influences their SLD identification practice; and what support they feel would improve their identification process for SLD. This study aimed to better understand the experience of school psychologists, who are key members in identifying SLD, in order to recognize resources and knowledge that influence their practice, what may improve the SLD identification process, and what additional support might be help facilitate this process for school psychologists and their teams.

Significance of the Study

SLD is the largest category in which students who qualify for special education services are identified. According to the Ohio Department of Education, 95,052 (5.7%) of students in the 2016-2017 school year qualified for special education services under this category. School psychologists are considered to be the expert in identifying SLD because of their specialized training. Given their unique training in identification, it is surprising that more research has not been conducted to explore their experience of SLD identification. This study examined a variety of facets of urban school psychologists' experiences including their experience with legal guidance, graduate training, and continuing education. Additionally, it solicited information about additional support they would find helpful in the SLD identification process.

Results from this study may inform policy makers about strengths and weaknesses of current guidance, as well as what types of resources educators would find beneficial in the identification process. In addition, results may also provide valuable information to universities that train school psychologists. Trainers may gain a better understanding of the experience of school psychologists during the SLD identification

process as well as additional training they would like to receive. This may allow courses to be structured differently to address the areas that school psychologists feel are necessary in providing appropriate SLD identification. Administrators may also learn information that can be helpful at the school district level. They will gain knowledge about the school psychologists' experiences of the identification process and areas of difficulty that need to be addressed.

Overall, this means that results could provide information about what school psychologists need to improve their identification practices, potentially providing clarity to MDTs and increasing SLD identification accuracy. Having a better understanding of the SLD identification process may not only be beneficial to staff members, but also to parents, allowing them to participate in their child's special education evaluation in a more meaningful way. Increased understanding for all parties will help ensure that students are accurately identified, so that they are able to receive the services they need. Additionally, parents who understand the process, actively participate in their child's evaluation, and have confidence that the team has made the correct decision will likely be more satisfied with their child's education and be less likely to disagree with the findings of an evaluation.

Primary Research Questions

Through this instrumental case study, the following research questions will be answered:

1. What resources and existing knowledge do school psychologists draw on in the processes of SLD identification?

2. What challenges occur for them in the SLD identification process?

Research Design

This study used a qualitative social constructivist case study approach to learn about school psychologists' experiences of identify SLD in urban schools. Case study as a methodology allows researchers to explore a current phenomenon within the context it is occurring (Yin, 2014), yielding a detailed description and systematic analysis of the bounded system (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A social constructivist research paradigm informed the methodology of this study. There are several underlying beliefs that are unique to social constructivism. Of significant note, researchers using this paradigm believe that one "truth" does not exist; rather, there are multiple realities depending on the individuals' experiences (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, knowledge is considered to be co-constructed between the researcher and study participants (Creswell, 2013).

School psychologists who currently work in urban public schools in Cuyahoga County participated in this study. In order to ensure that each participant had gained sufficient experience and knowledge of SLD identification, each participant had at least 5 years of experience working as a school psychologist. Each school psychologist completed a brief survey to gain demographic information about them. Then they participated in two interviews, each lasting approximately an hour. The first semi-structured interview included 16 open-ended questions, and probing questions were asked throughout the interview to gather as much information as possible. The second interview served as a time to circle back to questions or topics that benefited from greater detail and to gain any additional information that the participant wished to share. It also served as a way to present emerging themes from the first interview to participants for their review and input.

For data analysis, the semi-structured interviews were transcribed and reviewed for accuracy. Once the data was in printed form, coding began. These codes were organized into categories and then synthesized into meaningful themes (Saldaña, 2016). Spillane's sense-making framework also provided theoretical structure, providing different areas of sense-making that were explored.

Theoretical Framework

Spillane's theory of sense-making acted as a theoretical framework for this study. Because of the way that policy is written, and because team are ultimately responsible for their own decision-making, they are left to make sense of the SLD identification process. Sense-making is a cognitive framework that involves three main elements: the individual who will be implementing policy, the situation in which the individual must make sense of the policy, and the policy itself (Spillane et al., 2002). All three of these areas impact how individuals make sense of policy.

In this study, school psychologists are considered the sense-makers. They process SLD identification through their own prior knowledge, practical experiences, beliefs, and attitudes. The situational context is another important aspect of sense-making. For school psychologists, things like their experience with special education, their district's organizational structure, professional relationships, and communities may all make up the situational context in which they must make sense of the SLD identification process. The final area that makes up sense-making is policy design. School psychologists rely heavily on policy put forth through IDEA 2004 and state-level guidance. Study of past special education law, how current policy has been written, and whether adequate

resources are provided to school psychologists and their teams are all important aspects of policy design.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope

Assumption

Within this study, it was assumed that all participants were highly qualified within the field of school psychology. Participants had at least five years of practice with the assumption that having at least five years in the field would help them gain experience and knowledge of the SLD identification progress.

Limitations

Limitations of this study might include researcher biases and perceptual misrepresentations. The methodology of this study attempts to address this concern. Peer debriefing with a school psychologist outside of the study occurred to bolster the interpretation of the data. Additionally, the methodologist of this study audited the data to check that the analysis was systematic and rigorous.

Scope

This current study focused on the experience of school psychologists in urban public schools in Northeastern Ohio. Based on typography descriptions provided by the ODE (Ohio Department of Education, 2013), those schools coded as 7 (Urban-High Student Poverty and Average Student Population) and 8 (Urban-Very High Student Poverty & Very Large Student Population) were included. Licensed school psychologists with at least five years of experience were included in this study if they are currently working in urban public schools in Cuyahoga County. School psychologists with varying years practicing in the field, race, and gender, as well as those working in different school

districts, were included to better encompass different experiences of the SLD

identification process. Participants were included until saturation of the data was

achieved.

Delimitations

This research deliberately limited the participants to school psychologists. While

the SLD identification process is complex and includes an MDT to make decisions,

school psychologists are uniquely positioned within the team as case managers. Because

of their specialized training and professional responsibilities, school psychologists are

considered experts of special education eligibility decision-making. Other MDT

members may be included in future research. Additionally, this research is intentionally

focusing on urban schools within Cuyahoga County as its bounded case.

Definition of Key Terms

The following definitions are commonly used in research and within the field of

special education. These are predominantly based on information from the *Ohio*

Operating Standards for the Education of Students with Disabilities (Ohio Department of

Education, 2014), as this study occurs in Ohio and it is the primary document that

provides guidance to special educators. Definitions may also be derived from the

literature, which will be reviewed in Chapter II.

Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model

One legally allowable model with which students can be identified with a SLD,

where there is a severe discrepancy between cognitive ability and academic achievement.

Academic Achievement

Scores yielded from individually administered, norm-referenced assessments that measure academic skills.

Differentiated instruction

Teachers make changes to instruction to meet students' individual needs.

Eligibility Determination

The meeting in which the Multidisciplinary Team decides whether or not the student meets the definition having a disability, based on definitions provided by the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 2004.

Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) Title IV

An amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 that was meant to subsidize programs for children with disabilities.

Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA)

The act that replaced ESEA in 1970 for federal grant funding for educational agencies that provided services to students with disabilities.

Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EAHCA)

Law that required that all children with disabilities must be identified, diagnoses, and provided educational services within their least restrictive environment at public expense.

Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

Educational right of all students in the United States that they be provided an education at public expense that appropriately meets their needs, regardless of disability status.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA)

Current federal special education law.

Intervention

Individualized instruction that is provided to a child who is performing below grade-level standards to resolve concerns.

Cognitive/IQ Score

Score yielded from individually-administered, norm-referenced cognitive assessments.

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Part of IDEA 2004 stating that each school district shall ensure that, to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities are educated with children who are nondisabled.

Multidisciplinary Team (MDT)

Parent and group of qualified professionals making special education eligibility decisions. This may include professionals such as the general education teacher, intervention specialist, school psychologist, district representative, and other individuals who provide related services such as speech, occupational therapy, etc.

Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS)

Prevention-based framework that included multiple tiers of support services to address academic, behavioral, and social/emotional needs of students.

Patterns of Strengths and Weaknesses (PSW)

One legally allowable method in which a student's scores from cognitive ability and academic achievement assessments are analyzed to determine if the patterns of their scores are indicative of having a Specific Learning Disability.

Response to Intervention (RTI)

One legally allowable method in which a student's response to scientific, research-based intervention is used to determine whether a child has a Specific Learning Disability.

Special Education Services

Individualized services provided to students who meet the definition of a student with a disability in one of the disability categories outlined in IDEA 2004.

Specific Learning Disability (SLD)

A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia, not including learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of intellectual disability, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

Summary

This chapter was meant to provide readers an understanding of SLD identification practices and factors that likely impact the SLD identification process. These factors

include past and current special education law, state-level guidance, professional association guidance, graduate training, continuing education, and school psychologists' perceptions in practice. This chapter also provided an overview of Spillane's sense-making framework and how the various factors related to SLD identification might fit into it. Overall, this information provides necessary background information about school psychologists' role as sense-makers and the context and policy they use throughout their students' SLD identification process.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore school psychologists' experiences of identifying students as having a SLD in urban schools. We can see that special education law has changed significantly over time. Even though the law now allows for the use of multiple identification methods as a way to identify students in a more equitable way, there are still issues with each method in identifying students with SLD. Further, school psychologists may make sense of IDEA 2004 differently based on their own prior experiences and knowledge as well as the context in which they live and work. Research still does not indicate a consistently reliable and valid way to identify students with SLD; therefore, there is a need to better understand the experiences of MDTs in their SLD identification process. This study focused on exploring what resources and existing knowledge school psychologists draw on in the SLD identification process and what challenges occur for them in that process.

<center>**Chapter II**</center>

<center>**LITERATURE REVIEW**</center>

Introduction

Students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) make up the largest group of students who receive special education services in the United States (Cottrell & Barrett, 2015). In Ohio, 95,052 students (5.7%) qualified for special education under the category of SLD in the 2016-2017 school year (Ohio Department of Education [ODE]). Students who qualify for special education services under this category have been evaluated by their school and have met the Ohio Department of Education's (ODE) definition of SLD, which is reflective of the definition provided by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004), the most recent iteration of Federal special education law, as:

> A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. Specific learning disability does not include learning problems that are primarily

<center>25</center>

the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of

emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage

(ODE, 2014).

The definition of SLD provided by IDEA 2004 was adopted by the ODE in its entirety.

Therefore, this definition is what is used by multidisciplinary teams (MDT) across Ohio

in their SLD identification process (ODE, 2014). MDTs are legally required during the

special education evaluation to determine whether students qualify for special education

services. Parents, students, teachers, and service providers with different areas of

expertise come together as a group to help bring data that will help the MDT make

eligibility determinations.

With SLD occurring so frequently in relation to other disabilities, MDTs often

consider whether students qualify for special education services under SLD and how to

address their unique needs. School psychologists act as case managers throughout the

evaluation process, and because of their specific skills set, they are an influential member

in the evaluation and identification of SLD (National Association of School

Psychologists [NASP], 2010a). Not only are they often considered experts in this area,

but approximately half of their professional time is spent in special education decision-

making (Barrett et al., 2015).

There are many factors that contribute to how MDTs make sense of the SLD

identification process. This chapter will provide greater detail about this history of

special education law, factors that led to changes to special education law, current legal

guidance, school psychologists' role in the SLD identification process, guidance provided

by professional associations, school psychologist graduate training, continuing education

opportunities, and school psychologists' perceptions that all may add layers to the sense-making process. This information is meant to provide background information about school psychologists' roles as sense-makers and the context and policy they use to inform their decision-making of SLD identification.

Federal Special Education Law

Law-makers have been crafting federal laws, starting in the mid-1960s, that have shaped the way students are provided special education services. Initially, Congress encouraged special education services be provided by schools through various forms of grant funding. This started when the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) was amended in 1966. While the original Act was meant to subsidize direct educational services to low-income families (ESEA, 1965), the amendment to Title IV of ESEA was specifically directed towards the "initiation, expansion, and improvement of programs and projects . . . for the education of handicapped children" (ESEA, 1966). This meant that local agencies were able to access grant funding for the educational services they provided to students with disabilities if they submitted an application that was approved by State educational agencies.

The Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA) replaced ESEA in 1970. This was also was a federal grant program for educational agencies that provided services to students with disabilities (EHA, 1970). It appears that lawmakers of both the ESEA and EHA hoped to affect change for students with disabilities by providing states with funding from the federal-level; however, neither included specific requirements on how funding must be used.

It was not until the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975

(EAHCA) that law moved beyond merely providing grant funding to encourage provision

of special education services. The EAHCA was signed into effect in 1975, reaching

complete implementation in 1977 (Swanson et al., 2013). EAHCA required that all

children with disabilities be identified, diagnosed, and provided special education

services within their least restrictive environment (LRE) at public expense (Fagan &

Wise, 2007).

This legislation explicitly indicated that there was a large number of children with

disabilities in the United States, and that their needs were not being adequately met. It

reported that of the eight million children with disabilities in the country at that time, over

half were not receiving an appropriate education that would ultimately allow for

opportunity as adults. At that time, one million students were entirely excluded from

public education, while many other students were in the public school setting without any

support. This meant that most students with disabilities who attended public schools

were denied successful educational experiences, and those who did not attend public

schools were forced to get services at their families' expense, which were often far from

home or cost prohibitive.

Despite historic issues with special education service provision, EAHCA stated

that there had been many developments in educator training, diagnosing, and service

provision. Therefore, local educational agencies were responsible for providing special

education services, and the federal government would provide funding to allow for equal

protections to students with disabilities. Given all of this information, this Act aimed to

ensure that all students with disabilities would have "a free appropriate public education

which emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs, to assure that the rights of handicapped children and their parents or guardians are protected, to assist States and localities to provide for the education or all handicapped children, and to assess and assure the effectiveness of efforts to educate handicapped children" (EAHCA, p. 775).

Enacting special education law at the federal level helped students with disabilities gain civil rights that were previously not afforded to them. Historically, the term "disability" has been viewed within a model "of disease, deficits, and pathology, and people with disabilities were perceived to be broken, atypical, aberrant or, in some way, outside the norm of human functioning" (Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2017, p. 112). Prior to EAHCA, public education services for students with disabilities were minimal, if they existed at all. Decisions regarding service provision were left to individual school districts that could refuse enrollment to students they deemed "uneducable" (Martin et al., 1996). Students who were refused enrollment were often cared for by their parents at home or were placed in institutions instead of attending public schools. Even those students who had less demanding needs often were not provided special education services. This meant that students with significant academic needs might be allowed to matriculate in their public school but likely attended regular education classes without any special education support (Martin et al., 1996).

EAHCA drastically changed the expectations of public schools to provide a Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE) to all students, regardless of disability type (Fagan & Wise, 2007). While previous laws aimed to help subsidize special education services,

EAHCA unequivocally required school districts to provide special education services to all students that needed them.

It was in 1977 when specific eligibility criteria were provided (Martin et al., 1996) and SLD was explicitly defined for practitioners. This definition has changed little since that time, and currently is defined by IDEA 2004, the most recent federal special education law. Students with SLDs may have a variety of academic needs, including having difficulty with a variety of reading, spelling, writing, and math skills that is not caused by another disability (IDEA 2004). This impacts their ability to obtain various academic skills at a similar rate or level as their same-age peers, which negatively impacts their education, and ultimately requires specially designed instruction (special education services) to meet their needs. From the mid-seventies until the most recent reauthorization of IDEA 2004, SLDs were identified using the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model, where there was a significant difference between cognitive ability and academic achievement scores (Cottrell & Barrett, 2015).

Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model

As previously stated, the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model was the original way in which students were assessed to determine if they qualified for special education services under SLD (Kavale & Flanagan, 2007). It continues to be one of the legally allowable models of identification. In this approach, practitioners determine if there is a statistically significant discrepancy between scores obtained from individually administered, standardized cognitive and academic achievement assessments measuring reading, writing, math, oral expression, or listening comprehension. Based on subsequent results, if there was a significant difference between cognitive and academic achievement

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scores, and "a student is not working up to his or her potential as measured on the intelligence test, a learning disability is suspected" (Fagan & Wise, 2007, p. 143).
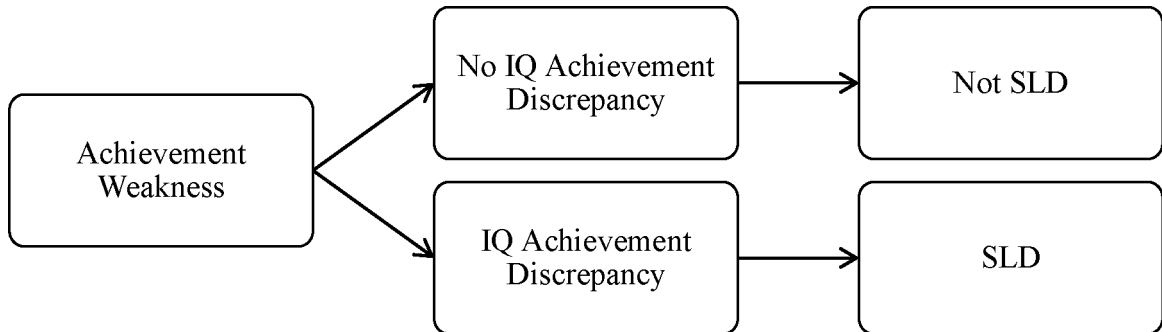
Figure 1. Illustration of IQ-Achievement Discrepancy. Reprinted from *The Identification of Specific Learning Disabilities: A Summary of Research on Best Practices* (p. 12), by J. M. Fletcher & J. Miciak, 2019, Houston, TX: The University of Texas System/Texas Education Agency. Copyright 2019 by Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International.

Rationale for Using the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model

When looking at the definition of SLDs, we see that it is "a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes." Those using this method assert that assessment is necessary to indicate if there is a significant deficit in at least one of these basic psychological processes (Hale et al., 2006). Additionally, it provides information about the student's cognitive profile that helps reveal how the student learns or why they may be struggling.

Original Criticisms of the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model

The reauthorization of IDEA 2004 was preceded by four influential special education reports by the National Research Council (2002), the Fordham Foundation and the Progressive Policy Institute (2001), the Learning Disabilities Summit by the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (2001), and the President's Commission on

Excellence in Special Education (2002). These four reports, which will be expounded upon below, were heavily considered prior to writing IDEA 2004.

The study conducted by the National Research Council (2002) used data from the U.S. Department of Education and examined the disproportionately high rates of Black and Hispanic students who qualified for different special education services, as well as these racial groups' underrepresentation in gifted programs. This study found that students of color, especially Black and Indian/Alaskan Native students, were disproportionally placed in some frequently occurring special education categories. Additionally, every racial minority group except Asian/Pacific Islanders qualified for gifted programs in disproportionally low numbers. As one measure, when looking at high achieving students, the authors used percentage of 4th grade students who obtained advanced scores in different areas on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. At that time, 12% Asian/Pacific Islander fourth grade student, 10% of White students, 2% of Hispanic and American Indian students, and 1% of Black students obtained advanced scores in Reading while 5% of Asian/Pacific Islanders, 3% of White, 1% of American Indian, and 0% of Black and Hispanic fourth grade students obtained advanced scores in Math.

The President's Commission on Excellence (2002) also found support that disproportionality in special education was apparent, especially for African American males. They also provided recommendations as they related to special education evaluations. Namely, researcher who were part of this commission found that the law should require that schools need to identify and intervene with students early with research-based intervention; make the identification process clearer for high-incidence

disability categories; incorporate RTI in the special education eligibility process; and

incorporate assessment that allows for appropriate accommodations and modifications for

students with disabilities.

The Fordham Foundation and the Progress Policy Institute issued a report (Finn,

Rotherham, & Hokansen, 2001) indicating that race influences special education rates far

more than any other variable, even when controlling for teacher salaries, teacher-to-

student ratio, spending per pupil in the district, and the percentage of students eligible for

a free or reduced lunch. The authors also suggested that enrollment in special education

might be determined not only by the race of individual students, but also by the racial

makeup of the student body. Students of color were enrolled in special education at a

higher rate in predominantly White districts than in more racially diverse districts. In

addition to the racial makeup of the student body, this study found that districts with

predominantly Black teachers "have lower special education rates for all students, but

particularly for African-American and Hispanic students" (p. 104). Authors emphasized

a need for change in SLD identification policy to improve early identification,

prevention, and intervention to help mitigate initial academic deficits with which students

may enter school.

Information commissioned by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)

presented at the Learning Disabilities Summit in 2001 indicated the need for improved

early identification and intervention. They also shared the difficulty of differentiating

between students with true specific learning disabilities and general low achievement

during the evaluation process. That is to say, MDTs had trouble determining if low

academic achievement, as measured during special education evaluations, was a result of

having a SLD or if students were underachieving due to learning issues primarily resulting from other factors, such as experience. They presented a need for an alternative to the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model and indicated the potential of responsiveness to treatment as a way to provide beneficial services to students as well as act as an identification approach (Elkinsin et. al, 2001; Bradley et al., 2002).

Disproportionality: Seeking Changes

The four special education reports by the National Research Council (2002), the Fordham Foundation and the Progressive Policy Institute (2001), the Learning Disabilities Summit by the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (2001), and the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002) were hugely influential on the reauthorization of IDEA 2004. These reports compelled changes to the law by indicating that the number of students who were qualifying for special education services under the category of SLD would be reduced if students were receiving appropriate instruction in the general education setting. Authors of these reports suggested that if appropriate instruction took place in the general education classroom, the disproportionate number of students of color in special education would decrease. These studies also reported that the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model, which had previously been used exclusively to identify SLD, lacked a research-based component to it. Authors of these studies asserted that the information obtained from using the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model did not actually inform how to provide better instruction to special education students (Fletcher, Coulter, Reschly, & Vaughn, 2004). Each of these four publications provided findings that informed changes to special education law.

IDEA 2004: Changes

After considering the information from these reports, amongst others, the U.S. Department of Education decided that the inclusion of RTI as an alternate identification method would provide MDTs an additional method to ensure more accurate SLD identification. The incorporation of RTI to IDEA 2004 intended to "reduce inappropriate referrals and identification, and to establish a preventative model for students to eliminate the 'wait to fail' model in place in many schools" and to "enhance instructional outcomes for these students" (Fletcher et al., 2004).

Therefore, while the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model is still legally permissible, IDEA 2004 no longer required the MDT to demonstrate significant discrepancy between students' cognitive ability and academic achievement in reading, writing, math, oral expression, or listening comprehension. Rather it indicates that the State:

(1) Must not require the use of a severe discrepancy between intellectual ability and achievement for determining whether a child has a specific learning disability, as defined in § 300.8(c)(10);

(2) Must permit the use of a process based on the child's response to scientific, research-based intervention; and

(3) May permit the use of other alternative research-based procedures for determining whether a child has a specific learning disability, as defined in § 300.8(c)(10) (IDEA 2004).

That is to say, MDTs are now able to determine that a student qualifies for special education services under the category of SLD through the use of the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model, RTI, or PSW.

Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model in Current Law

While IDEA 2004 made substantial changes related to SLD identification, it still includes the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model as one way in which MDTs can identify students with SLD. The current discrepancy model is the same that has been used since the original special education law was written. If using this model, MDTs use scores yielded from individually administered, norm-referenced cognitive and academic assessments to determine if a student qualifies for special education services under the category of SLD.

Criticisms of Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model

While data obtained using the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model can provide information about students' academic and cognitive function, researchers have also presented many criticisms. As we have seen from the major studies preceding the reauthorization of IDEA 2004, one of the major issues with this practice is over-identification for students of certain backgrounds (National Research Council, 2002; Finn et al., 2001; President's Commission on Excellence, 2002; Elkinsin, at al., 2001; Bradley et al., 2002). This, in part, may be due to culturally biased assessment tools.

In practice, school psychologists can be unclear about which IQ score is the best measurement of ability to be compared to academic achievement. For example, there are multiple intelligence assessments that are based on different theories of intelligence and all measure cognitive ability slightly differently. There are also many academic

assessments that all measure academic skills in varying ways. Additionally, multiple

scores are yielded within any given assessment, such as full-scale IQ scores, nonverbal

IQ scores, and ability indexes that are less sensitive to certain skills (ex. General Ability

Index on the WISC-5). It is left to the practitioner to determine which tools to use and

which scores from that assessment to use to represent their students' IQ in the Ability-

Achievement Discrepancy Model. (Hale et al., 2010).

In addition to questions about how to use the IQ score appropriately in the

Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model, those who are not proponents of this model

assert that the IQ score in itself often does not provide MDTs with helpful information; it

often does not provide us a greater understanding of the student themselves, nor does it

usually help plan educational instruction (Willis & Dumont, 2006).

When using the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model, it can also be difficult

to differentiate between students who truly have a SLD and those who are

underachieving for other reasons, such as lack of appropriate instruction or environmental

or economic disadvantage. With the assessment, the MDT can identify how the students

did during their assessment; however, that does not show how a student would do if

provided additional instruction in their area of need. (Hale et al., 2010).

In the schools, application of the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model is very

inconsistent across all levels; this occurs across individual schools, districts, and states.

Different MDTs make different decisions for their students, including which tests are

used, which scores are considered to be representative of IQ, and what a significant

discrepancy means. Not only is every district within the state doing things differently,

this can happen at a district level, where each school follows its own process. It can even

happen in a single school if different MDT members are involved with different students and no specific protocol is provided within the school. (Hale et al., 2010).

In all of these cases, if there are issues with measurement, it leads to poor decision-making for MDTs. This may lead to false negatives and false positives; students who truly have a learning disability may be excluded from special education services while students who do not have a true SLD may qualify for services. (Hale et al., 2010).

Finally, early intervention, which can be essential in addressing student need, is unlikely to be provided with this method; students are not likely to receive services until they demonstrate a significant discrepancy between their cognitive and academic skills (Hale et al., 2010).

Response to Intervention

Because of criticisms of the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model, practitioners sought a different way to identify students with SLD that did not require a significant difference (discrepancy) between IQ and academic achievement scores, and IDEA 2004 placed a strong emphasis on RTI as an alternative, which became an education initiative in many schools across the country (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2010).

RTI is part of what has become known as Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) (Duffy, 2018). MTSS, which is a prevention-based framework, integrates academic, behavioral, and social/emotional supports to address the needs of students in a systematic and wholistic manner (Eagle et al, 2015). It involves every educator gathering data and systematically using that data to provide scientifically based academic, behavioral, and/or social/emotional instruction to improve outcomes for every student (Duffy, 2018). Within the MTSS framework, RTI is primarily used to address academic

achievement. Its primary goal is to provide prevention and remediation services through effective instruction in the general education classroom and increasingly intensive intervention as necessary; its secondary goal is to collect data to be used in the SLD identification process (Fletcher and Vaughn, 2009). In order to implement RTI for SLD determination, schools must establish robust systems for prevention and intervention (Baker et al., 2010). RTI is meant to provide intervention at the earliest sign of academic need. This three-tiered model uses measurable data, closely related to the area in which the student is receiving intervention, to inform decision-making.

When following RTI in its intended form, all students are provided effective Tier I instruction in their general education classroom, and their progress is monitored to determine if they meet benchmarks several times a year. The assumption under this model is that the majority of students in a school would meet expected benchmarks if they receive appropriate general education instruction that supports their academic growth. Students who do not respond to Tier I interventions receive additional research-based interventions and have their progress monitored more frequently at the Tier II level. This is to provide additional support to address skill deficits in addition to general education instruction. Classroom teachers often provide Tier II interventions in small groups. This model assumes that the majority of students needing services beyond Tier I will make growth through Tier II services. Students who do not respond to the Tier II will move to Tier III where they are provided intensive individualized, evidence-based interventions that are being implemented with high frequency and fidelity. This means that the educators consider evidence-based intervention services that are even more concentrated on a student's needs. We often see students being provided Tier III services

either individually or in a small group setting with an intervention specialist. Tier III

services are often provided more frequently than Tier II. Fidelity of intervention

implementation is especially important at this level; the educator must ensure that they

are following the evidence-based intervention as intended (Brown-Chidsey & Steege,

2010). If the students receiving Tier III continue to lack adequate improvement, they

qualify for special education services. With RTI, "the implicit assumption is that

individual adaptations will benefit most children experiencing academic difficulty, and

insufficient growth must indicate an inherent deficit or disability" (Hale et al., 2006, p.

755). Below, Figure 2 provides an illustration of SLD identification using RTI.
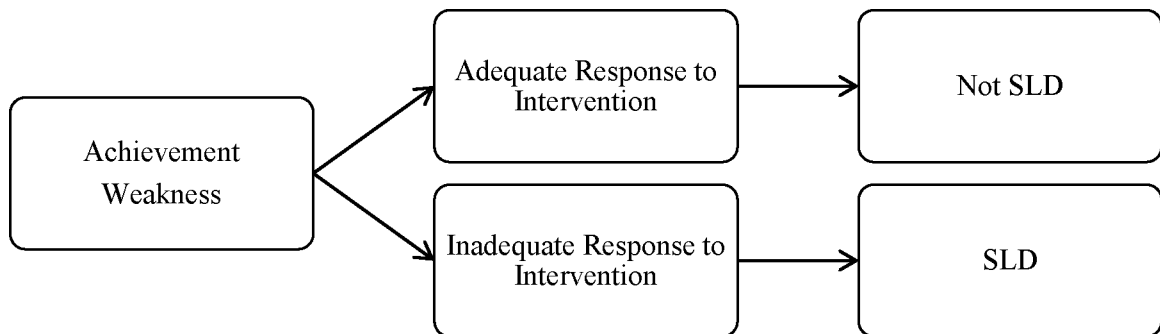
Figure 2. Illustration Response to Intervention. Reprinted from *The Identification of*

Specific Learning Disabilities: A Summary of Research on Best Practices (p. 20), by J.

M. Fletcher & J. Miciak, 2019, Houston, TX: The University of Texas System/Texas

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Rationale for Using RTI

RTI is intended to provide additional support to students at the earliest signs of

underachieving and uses measurable outcomes in order to make informed decisions.

When done well, RTI is able to reduce the number of inappropriate referrals for special

education evaluation, reduce the number of students that are being identified under SLD,

and establish preventative services so that students can have success in gaining academic, improving instructional outcomes for students (Fletcher et al., 2004). RTI moves from a classification approach provided by assessments to considering interventions that address children's academic difficulties, which focuses on treatment instead of deficits (Restori et al., 2009). Additionally, when quality RTI is put into place prior to a special education evaluation, educators can assume that students have been provided the best interventions possible to meet their needs. If they do not respond as anticipated, we can rule out lack of quality instruction being the issue.

Criticisms of RTI

While RTI was implemented in IDEA 2004 to address concerns raised by the use of the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model, numerous criticisms have also been raised. Hale et al. (2010) highlighted that there is no consensus about the RTI model structure, how to define what constitutes a research-based approach, how "responsiveness" should be defined, or teacher training requirements to ensure that interventions are implemented with fidelity.

Within the schools, there are also several factors that reduce the validity of RTI. Burns et al. (2008) reviewed relevant literature and posited several threats to RTI. First, treatment fidelity is not always achieved. Teachers and school psychologists need to be highly trained in RTI in general, but also need to implement intervention exactly as intended and measure progress using reliable tools. Next, educators need to be provided appropriate resources to implement RTI, which is not always observed in practice. Finally, the authors indicate that district policy regarding what "responsiveness" means can be a threat to the validity of RTI. If the requirements to qualify for special education

services are set too high, special education services may be denied to students who need them; if they are set too low, many students without disabilities may be identified as having a SLD.

Additionally, Reynolds & Shaywitz (2009) voiced concerns about how to maintain treatment fidelity and progress monitoring on a large scale. While students may reportedly receive academic interventions in school, most MDTs are not considering whether fidelity has been adhered to or if there may be issues with progress monitoring. Both aspects are very important in progress monitoring. If a student is not receiving intervention services as intended by researchers, they may not benefit from such services. Additionally, measurement needs to be done with a reliable tool by someone who is trained in using it. If not, accurate skill measurements may not be completed (Christ & Hintze, 2007).

Further, even assuming that RTI has been administered in a way that avoids the concerns listed above, Flanagan et al. (2006) assert that identifying students with SLD only using RTI data can still be problematic. Even if students have been provided with be best available intervention services, to qualify for special education services under SLD, they still do not respond as expected. These authors question how educators can come up with appropriate special education services if the students did not respond to their best efforts based on data-driven decision making. They assert that they would likely need an additional source of information to help intervention planning that could come in the form of an evaluation.

As a tool for SLD identification, the Hale et al. (2010) indicate that RTI is a model of "diagnosis by treatment failure" (p. 228). This has been shown to be an

inadequate model in the medical field. Further, it does not allow for differential

diagnosis. For example, many in the medical field would argue that they diagnose in

order to develop and provide appropriate treatment (Vanderheyden, 2011). Professionals

outside of the school setting who also diagnose SLD utilize assessment in their approach

in order to determine whether a client best meets the definition of SLD or another

diagnosis based on scores yielded from those evaluations. Unlike school they are do not

provide treatment and then diagnose based on whether they respond to it; rather, they

diagnose and then recommend treatment based on their diagnosis.

RTI also has created professional confusion for the legal community because

there has not been a clear consensus based on case law (Zirkel, 2011). Because of

challenges associated with interpretation of the law, there are likely going to continue to

be litigation brought against schools by parents (Zirkel, 2012). For example, school

districts are responsible for finding children with disabilities, identifying their disability,

and providing special education services should they qualify, known as Child Find.

Outcomes of litigation involving RTI and Child Find vary depending on many factors

(Zirkel, 2018). In order to avoid legal judgment, Zirkel (2018) recommends that districts

do not require completing RTI before agreeing to conduct an evaluation; avoiding a one-

size fits all RTI approach; developing policies and procedures that are backed with

appropriate training and resources; consider patent requests; and attempt not to change

the placement of a child receiving intervention by servicing them in a resource room

setting without explicit parent consent. All of these issues negatively impacted judicial

decisions for school districts if they did not follow them. In addition to the Ability-

Achievement Discrepancy model and RTI, schools may opt to use PSW to identify students with SLD.

Patterns of Strengths and Weaknesses (PSW)

Unlike the original Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model described above, PSW is a statistical model that does not require a severe discrepancy between cognitive ability and academic achievement. While there may be some variation in how MDTs may implement this approach, Shultz et al. (2012) indicate that it differs from the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model in that:

> …the essential steps in the process include (a) the identifying an academic need in one of the seven areas found in federal guidelines for SLD, (b) determining if there is an area or areas of cognitive weakness that have a research-based link to problems in the identified academic area, (c) establishing whether there are other cognitive areas which are average or above, and (d) analyzing these findings for a pattern that will rule out or confirm the presence of SLD" (p. 88).

Currently, practitioners generally use one of three PSW statistical models: Concordant/Discordant Model (C/DM), Cattell-Horn-Carroll Operational Model (CHC), and the Discrepancy/Consistency Model (D/CM) (Mickiak et al., 2013). These models somewhat vary from one another in terms of their theoretical orientation and statistical analysis (McGill & Busse, 2016), but all follow the basic core assumptions described above.
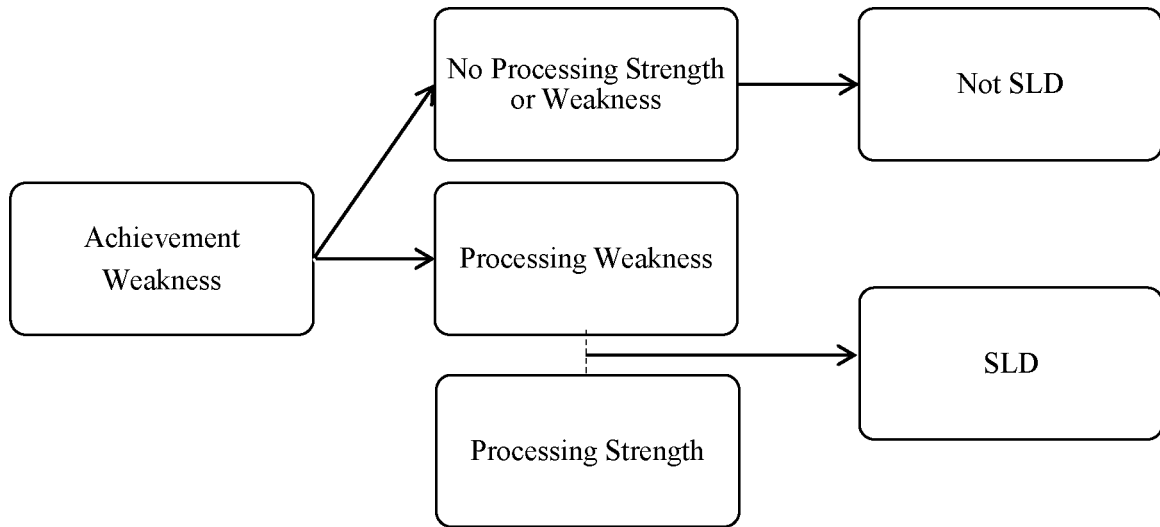
Figure 3. Illustration of Patterns of Strengths and Weaknesses. Reprinted from *The*

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Practices (p. 16), by J. M. Fletcher & J. Miciak, 2019, Houston, TX: The University of

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ND 4.0 International.

Rationale of Using PSW

Proponents of utilizing PSW to identify SLD state the benefit is having a

comprehensive assessment of student's academic achievement skills and cognitive

abilities. This type of assessment provides a thorough assessment of a variety of skills

that could be informational to educators. Additionally, PSW may help reduce

inappropriate over-testing of cognitive skills and under-testing of academic and other

areas as practitioners need to gather certain information to be able to complete a PSW

analysis. Recommendations can also be directly linked to deficits found during

assessment in hopes of better being able to address student need (Christo et al., 2016).

Criticisms of PSW

Some researchers have pointed out the difficulty operationalizing the definition of strengths and weaknesses within this model. Recently, Lyon & Weiser (2013) indicated that this leads to identifying different students depending on how the model is implemented.

Researchers have raised concerns about the reliability of PSW. Using different assessment batteries may lead to different identification outcomes. For example, Miciak et al. (2014) used the C/DM PSW method to compare SLD identification using two psychoeducational assessment batteries with second-grade students who had already been provided reading interventions. The research team reported that agreements between the two batteries for specific learning disability identification was low, with 65% agreement of negative and positive classifications.

Taylor et al. (2017) conducted two studies to investigate the reliability of C/DM using simulated data. In the first study, data was simulated for cognitive strengths, cognitive weaknesses, and two academic achievement tests. The first battery, including the cognitive data and the first academic test data, was compared with the second battery, including the cognitive data and second academic test data, to examine agreement. The ability to be flexible in assessment tools was found to negatively impact reliability. Positive agreement at the cut score of 85 for achievement deficits was .42 and was .45 at the cut score of 90. The second study investigated the how a reduction in reliability impacts SLD identification. Reduction in the reliability of the two simulated achievement assessments from excellent to adequate yielded positive agreement of 0.52-0.55.

PSW also does not always identify students at the same rate as other identification methods. For example, in their study of adolescent students that had not responded to intervention, Miciak et al. (2013) found that when using both the XBA, which utilizes the CHC method, and C/DM methods of PSW, altogether less than half of non-responders in RTI were identified as having a specific learning disability when using these methods.

Additionally, many practitioners likely consider all three approaches to be comparable PSW methods. However, there is variability in identification between each approach. These authors asserted that even when using equivalent cut scores, the XBA approach identified a lower percentage of participants than the C/DM approach, with the XBA method identify 17.3% of students as having a specific learning disability versus 29.4% using C/DM at the <85 cut score and 24.5% versus 47.5% using the <90 cut score (Miciak et al., 2013).

There is not only a question about whether certain methods of PSW identify lower than others, but whether PSW on a whole under-identifies students. For example, Stuebing et al. (2012) conducted a study using simulated data to determine the technical adequacy of C/DM, XBA, and D/CM models. Each method yielded low identification rates, ranging from 0.1% to 17.9%. Further, while the each PSW model we able to identify "Not SLD" well, positively predicting SLD was low. Only a small percentage of the population is identified as having SLD using this method.

Because PSW is usually conducted using complex statistical procedures, proprietary software programs are often used. Most common software does not provide all statistical information, such as base rates, which could be helpful in data interpretation. Additionally, scores, especially composite and subtest scores, are often

not stable over time. That is to say that while overall cognitive ability is generally consistent over time, scores measured by individual composites or subtests are more are more sensitive to changes in performance (McGill et al., 20015). PSW analysis often relies on these scores to decide about whether a student has SLD. In addition to federal special education law that provides information about the methods that can be used to identify students with SLD, each state also provides its school districts with special education guidance.

State-Level Legal Guidance

Since federal special education law originally came into effect, states have been required to reflect federal level guidance in their own state-level guidance. Therefore, when IDEA 2004 was reauthorized with its changes, states had to make changes to their special education guidance to adopt SLD identification criteria enumerated in the federal law (Ahearn, 2009, p. 120). Ahearn (2009) conducted an analysis approximately a year and a half after the newest regulations to when IDEA 2004 were enacted. At that time, all states were either in the process of making or had already made changes to align their state-level criteria with changes reflected in when the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Acts of 2004.

Prior to the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Acts of 2004, Reschly & Hosp (2004) researched state educational agencies' policies and practices. At that time, based on survey results, they found that state-level criteria were aligned with the Federal criteria; however, they discovered that these agencies were implementing the policy with significant variability. They found that 40% of States did not offer specific guidance to those working in schools about how to

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identify a severe discrepancy. That is to say, those states did not provide detailed information about how to apply the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model within their State. Even before IDEA 2004 included RTI as a legally permissible model to identify students with specific learning disabilities and only the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model was being used, the application of it was inconsistent across the country (Ofiesh, 2006).

After the reauthorization of IDEA 2004, Maki et al. (2015) conducted a study in which they reviewed SLD regulations being used in 2013 from every state in the US. They indicated that there was notable variability in state policies regarding SLD. Related to the definition of SLD, 90% of states used the federal definition provided in IDEA 2004. Every state also adopted the federal criteria in terms of what area they would qualify in under SLD (basic reading, reading fluency, reading comprehension, math calculation, math problem-solving, written expression, oral expression, and listening comprehension). The also all required that MDTs considered exclusionary criteria, but those varied somewhat by state.

While 96% of states described SLD as a psychological processing and language disorders and 98% described it as a neurological disorder, only four states required measurement of those processes. Thirty-four (67%) of states allow the ability-achievement discrepancy model to be used in SLD identification, 10 (20%) disallowed it, and seven (13%) did not indicate whether it could be used. Eight (16%) required the sole use of RTI, nine (17%) allowed for the combination of RTI and other methods, and 34 (67%) allowed for the use of RTI in identifying SLD. Fourteen states allowed for the use

of PSW in identifying SLD, 12 did not specify whether it could be used, and 25 did not allow the PSW approach (Maki et al., 2015).

Finally, related to eligibility decisions, 12% indicated that MDTs could uses their professional judgement during the SLD identification process, 8% allowed teams to override if a student does not meet criteria, and 88% of states did not provide specification about the use of professional judgment during the SLD identification process (Maki et al., 2015).

Specific to RTI, after the reauthorization of 2004, Boynton Hauerwas et al. (2013) conducted a study about the RTI process and how it is being used in specific learning disability identification by analyzing formal documents regarding specific learning disabilities or RTI from each state's Department of Education, as well as any additional documents that were specifically referenced in the states' regulation or guidance documents. After conducting their analyses, the data indicated that there was not guidance from any state that indicated who is responsible for collecting RTI data. While the majority of states did speak to the fact that more intense intervention required more frequent collection of progress monitoring, only several states provided guidance about how many data points are required to help make an eligibility determination. In general, most States did address fidelity, an important component of RTI where intervention providers carefully follow the protocol of the research-based intervention; however, most did not offer information about how to appropriately document it. According to Boynton Hauerwas et al. (2013), "Despite the availability of many resources about Response to Intervention implementation, there does not appear to be one clear national definition of

what specific RTI data at multidisciplinary teams must have in hand in order to make a determination of SLD" (p. 102).

Ohio State-Level Guidance

Currently, the ODE's main form of guidance for SLD identification is *The Ohio Operating Standards for the Education of Children with Disabilities* (ODE, 2014). It gives a definition of SLD that matches the federal definition, which was provided in the introduction of this chapter. It expressly states that the use of an Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model is not required, that the use of response to scientific, research-based intervention is allowable, and that MDTs are also allowed to utilize "other alternative research-based procedures for determining whether a child has a specific learning disability" (p. 111). These reflect the inclusion of RTI and PSW into special education law.

It also enumerates the requirements for MDTs to be able to identify a student as having a SLD. According to the ODE (2014), the MDT may determine that a student has a specific learning disability if: the student underachieves based on age or grade-level standards, does not adequately respond to research-based intervention, or demonstrates a pattern of strengths and weaknesses that is "determined by the group to be relevant to the identification of a specific learning disability" (p. 112). Further, it requires MDTs to indicate that underachievement is not due to lack of instruction by providing documentation showing: data that the student was provided appropriate instruction by a qualified educator in the regular education setting; and documentation of repeated achievement assessments at reasonable intervals. This required documentation helps

MDTs determine that the student has not lacked appropriate instruction and that academic progress has been monitored appropriately.

Directly related to RTI, the ODE (2014) requires the MDT to collect sufficient data that has been collected while the student receives targeted intervention, determine the lack of response, and provide evidence that research-based intervention has been provided and that the child would not likely make adequate growth in the general education setting. Such interventions must be research-based and provided with appropriate intensity, frequency, and fidelity. Additionally, the MDT must assess the student's progress throughout the intervention process.

In order to document a SLD, the MDT must expressly state if the student has a SLD, the basis for making that eligibility determination, educationally relevant behavioral observation, and educationally relevant medical information. They must also indicate the student does not achieve age- or grade-level standards and either does not make sufficient progress to meet standards or exhibits a pattern of strengths and weaknesses that is consistent with having a specific learning disability. Additionally, the MDT must determine that the student does not meet exclusionary criteria, such as a visual, hearing, or motor disability; intellectual disability; emotional disturbance; limited English proficiency; environmental or economic disadvantage; or cultural factors (ODE, 2014).

The ODE's Evaluation Team Report (ETR) (ODE, 2012) is required to be used during all special education evaluations. While *The Ohio Operating Standards for the Education of Children with Disabilities* (ODE, 2014) is the most used guidance documents for MDTs, the ETR is the most used document in practice; it provides a

template to ensure that the MDT completes all required information. It requires various sections, which are aligned to the operating standards, to be completed.

When MDTs determine that a student qualifies for special education under the category of SLD, they must complete Part 3 of the ETR. This section is exclusively completed for students with a SLD; students qualifying under any other category do not complete this section. Because it is specifically related to SLD, it is meant to guide MDTs to use data that aligns with SLD identification guidelines enumerated in *The Ohio Operating Standards for the Education of Children with Disabilities* (ODE, 2014).

The MDT is required to complete Section A of Part 3 of the ETR where they indicate the area(s) in which the student meets criteria for having a SLD. These areas include: Basic Reading Skill, Reading Fluency Skills, Reading Comprehension, Written Expression, Mathematics Calculation, Mathematics Problem Solving, Oral Expression, and Listening Comprehension. The MDT then must complete either Section B or Section C. Section B is where the MDT provides a summary of the data used to determine that the student qualifies for special education services under SLD based on scientific, research-based intervention; Section C is where the MDT provides a summary of the data used to determine that the student qualifies for special education services under SLD based using a pattern of strength and weaknesses. In Section D, the MDT must indicate that the SLD is not due to any of the exclusionary factors including: a vision, hearing, or motor disability; intellectual disability; emotional disturbance; limited English proficiency; environmental or economic disadvantage; or cultural factors. Documentation must be provided to show that the student's underachievement is not due to a lack of appropriate instruction in Section E. This is achieved by providing a

summary of data to demonstrate that they received appropriate instruction provided by qualified personnel in the general education setting as well as a summary of data from repeated assessment during instruction. In Section F, the MDT must provide a summary from an observation that occurs during instruction in the area in which the child is having difficulty. Finally, all educationally relevant medical findings must be reported in Section G. All of the sections of Part 3 are meant to guide the MDT in following policy for SLD identification. School psychologists and the rest of the MDT use this guidance in their roles identifying SLDs.

School Psychologists' Role in Specific Learning Disability Identification

MDTs, which are mandated by federal law and unique in that they are comprised of parents and professionals with different areas of expertise, are used to increase the reliability of identification and ensure that all stakeholders are given the opportunity to provide input. Parents, school psychologists, general education teachers, special education teachers, related service providers, and administrators are all generally a part of the decision-making process in determining which students qualify for special education services. Students should also be included as part of the MDT to the largest extent possible. Although both federal and state guidance exist for MDTs to use, they are left without specific requirements for data that ought to be used in the identification of specific learning disabilities; therefore, identification is ultimately left to the discretion of school district staff (Cottrell & Barrett, 2015).

While a collaborative team approach is used for special education eligibility determinations, school psychologists' decisions are given significant weight. They participate in graduate-level training to develop a unique skillset in a wide variety of

areas of areas such as: data collection and analysis; assessment; progress monitoring; school-wide practices to promote learning; resilience and risk factors; consultation and collaboration; academic/learning interventions; mental health interventions; behavioral interventions; instructional support; prevention and intervention services; child preparedness, response, and recovery; family-school-community collaboration; diversity in development and learning; research and program evaluation; and professional ethics, school law, and systems (NASP, 2014). Because of their specific training, they are considered to be the disability identification expert of the MDT (NASP, 2010a). School psychologists are a key member in the evaluation and identification of SLDs; it is one of their main responsibilities. Approximately half of their professional time is spent in special education decision-making (Barrett et al., 2015).

Professional Organization Guidance

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) is the national association that represents school psychologists in the U.S. They provide guidance on a variety of topics, training, and professional advocacy to school psychologists. Many school psychologists turn to this organization as a way to learn about best practices. As such, it has published a position statement on the identification of students with specific learning disabilities (NASP, 2011).

Within this document, the association explicitly indicates that schools should implement the RTI model in order to provide high quality instruction in the general education setting as well as a multitier system of research-based support before suspecting a SLD. This is done in hopes of improving student performance without the

need of special education services; however, if a student does not respond to intervention, this would be another point of data in the SLD identification process.

This position statement also addresses the evaluation process of students suspected of having a SLD. It states that the main objective of special education evaluations is to guide subsequent individual education plans by providing recommendations about the types of placements a student may require and what instructional strategies would best meet his/her needs. Evaluations must consider past and current data, and assessments should be chosen in a manner that is least likely to be racially or culturally discriminatory. NASP also reiterates the importance of considering lack of appropriate instruction, limited English proficiency, and cultural differences when making special education determination.

Specific to SLD, NASP indicates the importance of a comprehensive evaluation. This evaluation should include data to determine whether a student has responded to research-based intervention; historical and current measures of academic achievement, cognitive ability, social-emotional skills, and communication skills; observation; parent input; and teacher input. The MDT should interpret the assessment's findings to provide information about the child's needs and evidence-based instruction that is subsequently required.

School Psychology Training Programs

Undoubtedly, special education law and professional organizations influence how school psychology training programs structure their programs. School psychologists receive specific graduate-level training that would lead to appropriate special education eligibility determinations. This training, which focuses both on education and

psychology, is meant to develop the necessary skills in psychological theory, educational

strategies, and assessment to address the needs of their students, including identification

practices. School psychologists are required to at least complete specialist-level training,

which is constituted of 60 or more semester credit hours. It takes three years of full-time

study, including coursework and 1200 hours of practical experience, to complete these

requirements (NASP, 2014). Even though school psychologists undergo significant

training in their field, they may still have not obtained all of the skills one would need to

make an appropriate specific learning disability eligibility determination (Barrett et al.,

2015).

Barrett et al. (2015) analyzed 123 syllabi provided by 84 universities with school

psychology training programs. They found that SLD identification skills are most

commonly taught in courses that teach how to administer and interpret cognitive and

academic standardized assessments. In those types of classes, 36% of course goals were

dedicated to training of the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model, and 11% were

dedicated to training of the RTI model.

This study enumerates skills that school psychologists need, either when using the

Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model or RTI, that may be lacking. To implement the

Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model appropriately, school psychology trainees need

to learn how to interpret results from academic and cognitive assessments. They must

also learn how to appropriately choose these assessments to best meet the individual need

of the student. To implement RTI well, school psychology trainees must learn about

progress monitoring collection, how to appropriately compare student improvement both

individually and with a normative group, and how to provide research-based

interventions that align with the needs of the students (Barrett, et al., 2015). Even though

the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model was used prior to changes to federal law in

2004, school psychology trainees may still need additional support in Ability-

Achievement Discrepancy Model. When considering the RTI approach added to the law,

Barret et al. (2015) state, "Training does not appear to have caught up with shifts of

practice made allowable made over 10 years ago in IDEA (2004)."

Maki (2018) conducted a study in which 110 school psychologists reviewed their

state's SLD identification criteria and student evaluation data in order to make their own

eligibility determination. They then were asked to complete a questionnaire regarding

their training and experience with RTI. Thirty seven percent of the study participants

indicated that they received graduate training in RTI for SLD identification; however,

this preparation did not increase the likelihood of making consistent SLD identifications.

This led the author to conclude that "graduate preparation in RTI lacked the rigor and that

a limited number of intermittent professional development sessions is insufficient to build

competency in RTI" (Maki, 2018, p. 12).

A study by Maki & Adams (2018) used a survey of 461 practicing school

psychologists to learn about school psychologists' training and current SLD identification

practices. The participants used each identification model at a similar rate: PSW

(35.14%), RTI (34.49%), and Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model (30.37%). Most

of the school psychologists reported graduate training in the Ability-Achievement

Discrepancy Model (96.52%), while 46.64% reported training in RTI, and 28.85%

reported training in PSW. Statistically significant differences were found based on

number of years practicing; participants with fewer years of practice were more likely to report RTI and PSW training than those with more years of practice (p<0.05).

Nelson & Machek (2007) focused on reading in their study. While there are other academic skills, such as math and written expression, that are included in the definition of SLD, they chose to survey practicing school psychologists about reading evaluation and intervention since about half of students who qualify for special education services qualify in reading. At that time, 69% their sample of 496 school psychologists reported that they were required to take one or fewer courses dedicated to reading assessment and intervention. Seventy nine percent reported that they had taken course that partially covered reading assessment and/or intervention.

In order to apply PSW appropriately, school psychologists must have intensive training in "the theory of cognitive abilities, causal cognitive-achievement relationships, and advanced psychometrics and test interpretation" (McGill et al., 2015). According to Decker et al. (2013), many school psychology graduate training programs do not focus on evidence-based assessment practices. They assert that this is due to several factors such as over focusing on interpreting the full-scale IQ score, less intensive training in cognitive assessments due to a rise in RTI, and a lack of training in linking cognitive needs to intervention services. This lack of preparedness can potentially impact school psychologists' SLD identification practices.

Related to multicultural training, Newell & Looser (2017) conducted a study about school psychologists' training in multicultural assessment, consultation, and intervention. Within this study, 62% of school psychologists indicated that they had completed multicultural coursework. The majority indicated that they had received

"some training" in multicultural assessment. Fifty percent of urban school psychologists also indicated that they had some training in multicultural consultation. Approximately 48% of school psychologists in urban schools indicated that they had little to no training in providing school psychology services to linguistic minorities and 62% indicated that they had little to no training in providing services to students of color. Furthermore, 82% of school psychologists in urban areas indicated that they had little to no training in servicing low income students.

There are also concerns regarding supervision within school psychology training. When compared to other mental health fields such as clinical psychology, counseling, and social work, the field of school psychology has been weaker in the area of supervision (Harvey & Struzziero, 2008). While there is supervision provided by professors during practicum and internship, school psychologists in a study by Lindberg (2016) felt that more involvement between universities and school districts would increase support for school psychologists working in urban school districts, recommending that there should be greater collaboration between training programs and schools. In addition to training provided by school psychology graduate programs, factors impacting school psychologists within practice are also important in their decision-making process.

In Practice: Perceptions, Consistency, and Confidence in SLD Identification

School psychologists' perspections about SLD also impact identification. Cottrell & Barrett (2017) surveyed 471 school psychologists nationally about whether they perceived biology or environment to be the underlying cause of SLD. These researchers found school psychologists' beliefs about SLD were correlated with what type of

identification model was used. School psychologists' beliefs about SLD were correlated with region of the country in which they practiced, which could be attributed to school psychology training within that region and state-level guidance.

Perceptions related to RTI we measured by Machek & Nelson (2010). The researchers surveyed 549 school psychologists about their perceptions related to identifying SLD in reading. A large amount of school psychologists found using IQ assessment in identifying a SLD in reading for different reasons. For example, 86.1% indicated that they felt cognitive assessments should be used within the RTI model to rule out an intellectual disability as a cause for low reading skills. Approximately 48% of the participants indicated that full-scale IQ scores are helpful in understanding the nature of a student's disability, while 62.2% found index scores to be useful, and 59.8% found individual subtests useful. The majority of school psychologist in this study (60.7%) did not feel that the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model to be useful in identifying a SLD in reading, varying significantly from those who do (p<0.01).

Machek & Nelson (2010) found that school psychologists felt that special education teachers (71.4%) able to provide reading instruction with fidelity, which was significantly different than their perception of general education teachers to do so (39.3%). This varied depending on whether the participant worked in a school that was already implementing RTI. Those working in RTI schools indicated that special education teachers implemented reading instruction at a higher rate than those who worked in schools that were not implementing RTI (p<0.01). Many of the participants indicated that they did not feel they had enough personnel (79.6%), financial resources (77.6%), or time (84.4%) needed to implement RTI effectively. In general, the

participants perceived that using the RTI model would probably improve services for student with a SLD in reading compared to the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model. Notably, most indicated that it would help with earlier identification (82.1%) and would connect interventions to assessment results (90.2%). However, the participants were roughly split on whether they felt that RTI would minimize over-representation of minority students as having SLD.

In order to study SLD identification consistency, Maki et al. (2016), conducted a study with 376 school psychologists. These psychologists were randomly assigned to an ability-discrepancy, RTI, or PSW group. They were then provided identification criteria for whatever method they were assigned. They reviewed the criteria and then were asked to consider student data and make SLD identification decisions. In this study, the overall identification consistency was somewhat low at 73.7% ($\kappa=0.45$). No significant differences in identification consistency were found based on identification method. However, significant differences in consistency were found depending on the conclusiveness of the student data ($p<0.01$). School psychologists were much less consistent in their identification of inconclusive student data (51.2%) than conclusively not SLD (88.1%) and conclusively SLD (81.0%).

Regardless of school psychologists' training and experience, there is also a question of their confidence in SLD identification. Maki et al. (2018) conducted a study with 376 school psychologists. They reported that the majority of participants reported being at least somewhat confident in their SLD identification decisions (90.7%). Participants using RTI to identify SLD in students reported less confidence in their decision making compared to participants using the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy

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Model (p<0.05). No significant difference in confidence was found between those using

PSW and the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model. More experience and higher

level of training did not impact confidence. Additionally, participants who had students

with inconclusive data reported lower levels of confidence than when they had more

conclusive information. Interestingly, school psychologists who made consistent SLD

identifications were not likely to report higher levels of confidence.

In addition to perceptions, consistency, and confidence of the various models for

SLD identification, school psychologists also have provided information of their

perceptions related to the specific context in which they practice. Participants in a study

conducted by Graves (2014) were from the five most diverse urban districts in the

country: New York, Atlanta, Chicago, Washington D.C., and Philadelphia. Ninety-Seven

school psychologists participated in this study. As part of their study, they used open-

ended questions when inquiring about the greatest challenges as a school psychologist in

an urban district. The following themes were found: large caseload, lack of

funding/resources, lack of support from administration, needs specific to urban

populations, and the expansion of school psychologists' roles.

Additionally, school psychologists' peer support is important to their practice.

While most respondents in the study conducted Lindberg (2016) indicated that they had

enough support to conduct their job duties, they had a number of suggestions that would

help improve options for support, including greater opportunity for exchange of

information with peers, the opportunity to observe other school psychologists in practice,

receiving regular on-site supervision by other school psychologists, and more frequent

contact with their supervisor.

Implicit Bias in SLD Identification

While there are many factors that school psychologists think about within their practice, other unconscious factors may also play a part in how MDTs identify SLD. Implicit bias is "the bias in judgement and/or behavior that results from subtle cognitive processes (e.g., implicit attitudes and implicit stereotypes) that often operate at a level below conscious awareness and without intentional control" (National Center for State Courts, 2012, p. 1). It reveals itself as an automatic stereotypical response made about people based on the group in which they are perceived to be part, such as race, gender, nationality, etc. (NASP, 2017). Because of its less obvious manifestation, it may not be openly examined by individuals or organizations. Implicit bias of educators can negatively impact student decisions such as referrals to special education assessments (Van Nunspeet et al., 2015). For example, in a study by Fish (2017), when teachers were provided vignettes about fictional boys with the same academic difficulties, they tended to attribute academic difficulties to disabilities for students that were white more than for students of color.

All of the information provided above influences how school psychologists and the rest of the MDT will make sense of the SLD identification process. Below, we will explore Spillane's framework for sense making and how it applies to the current dissertation study.

Sense-Making Framework

Because of the way policy is written, and because of the fact that professional discretion is heavily relied upon, individuals on the MDTs are left to figure out how to make sense of the policy. Sense-making is a cognitive framework that focuses on "the

interpretive or sense-making dimension of the implementation process" (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 392). Sense-making involves three main elements: the individual who will be implementing policy, the situation in which the individual must make sense of the policy, and the policy itself (Spillane et al., 2002). All three elements can impact interpretation and subsequent implementation of policy. In regards to SLD identification, school psychologists can be considered sense-makers.

School Psychologists as Sense-Makers

While sense-making is not a linear process and can occur at many levels, in the process of identifying specific learning disabilities in public schools, the individual MDT members act as sense-makers. Because of their unique role, school psychologists are often most familiarized and well trained in interpreting special education law. The sense-making process relies on individuals' "experiences, knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes" (Spillane, 2004, p. 76). All of these elements get organized into schemas; that is, their prior knowledge and experiences get organized in a way that guides their understanding of policy. Because each educator has a variety of personal and professional knowledge and experiences, individuals can derive different meaning from the same policy.

Situational Context

Situational context is another important aspect of sense making. Social norms, organizational structures, informal communities, historical events, and values and emotions all lend to the situational context that affects sense making in implementing policy (Spillane, 2002). School psychologists may "encounter a complex web of organizational structures, professional affiliations, social networks, and traditions" (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 404) that are important in making sense of special education law.

While there are numerous situations that may impact school psychologists' sense-making process, the history of the district, leadership in the school, how MDTs are structured, whether there is school psychologist partnership within a district, and whether they have affiliations with professional associations can all play a part in how special education policy is interpreted and subsequently implemented.

Policy Design

Policymakers are tasked with creating a way to communicate and enforce policy. Often, policymakers feel they must provide abstract information that represents underlying principles rather than promoting specific, concrete practices. That is, instead of telling MDTs exact requirements, they describe the process and allow for professional discretion based on the MDTs' decisions. Sense-making can require the use of many resources such as "time, mental effort, advice from experts, and other resources you use in figuring out the significance of these ideas in order to develop a new way of thinking…" (Spillane, 2004, p. 93). Human resources, consisting of individual knowledge, expertise, and experiences, social resources, and time and materials are most crucial in aiding the sense-making process and can be addressed through policy design (Spillane, 2004). Below, Figure 1 provides a visual conceptualization of sense making of SLD identification.
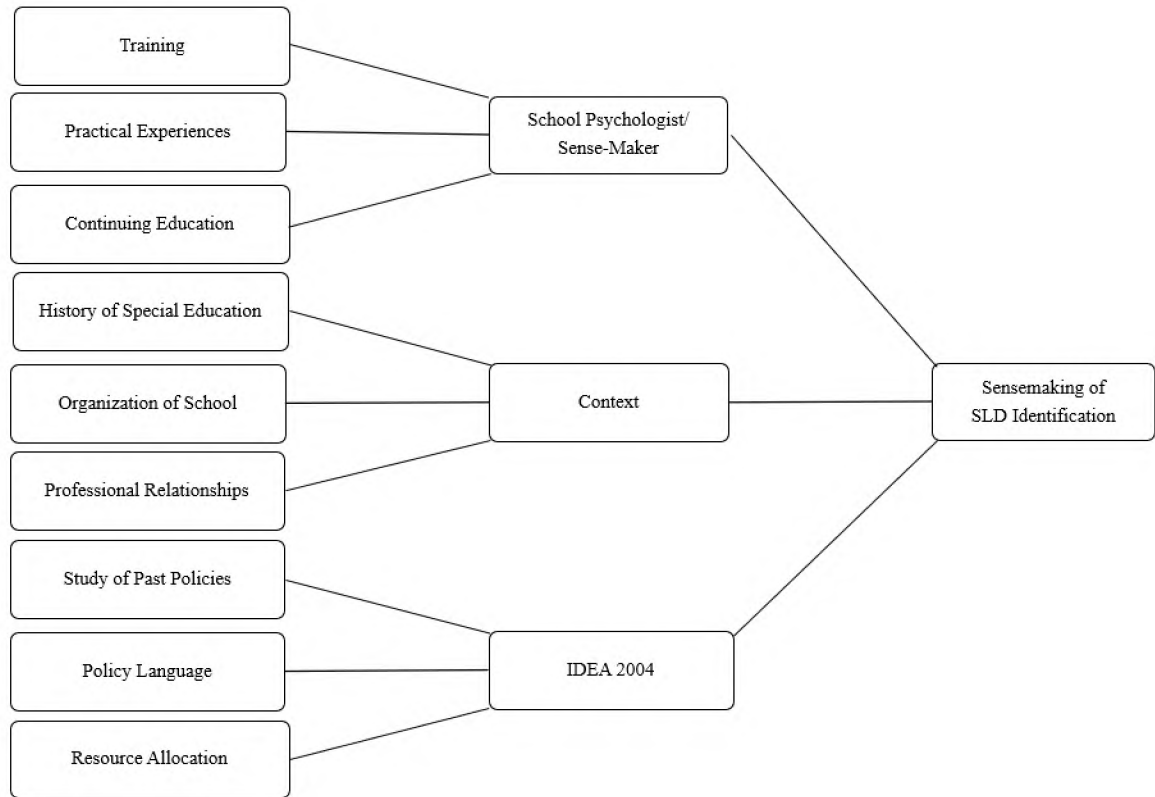
Figure 4. Conceptualization of Sense-Making of SLD Identification

Summary

This chapter was meant to review relevant literature to provide readers an understanding of past and current SLD identification practices. Additionally, factors that likely impact how school psychologists make sense of the SLD identification process were explored. Attention was given to special education law, school psychologists' experiences in the SLD identification process, professional association guidance, graduate training, continuing education, and perceptions of school psychologists in practice. These are all factors that can be examined through Spillane's sense-making framework. Overall, this information provides necessary background information about school psychologists' role as sense makers and the context and policy they use throughout their students' SLD identification process.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The largest group of students who receive special education services in the United States qualify under the category of Specific Learning Disability (SLD) (Cottrell & Barrett, 2015). According to the Ohio Department of Education, during the 2016-2017 school year, 95,052 students (5.7%) qualified for special education under the category of SLD. While accurate identification of all disability categories is essential, the large number of students receiving services under this category make it especially important for professionals to accurately identify SLDs.

Until the most recent reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, SLDs were identified using a discrepancy model between cognitive ability and academic achievement (Cottrell & Barrett, 2015). Because of significant concerns that non-white students and students of lower socioeconomic status disproportionally qualified for special education, IDEA 2004 no longer required the team to demonstrate significant discrepancy between students' cognitive ability and academic achievement. The latest iteration of this federal special education law now legally allows three ways in which teams can determine that a student qualifies for special education services under the category of SLD: the Ability-

Achievement Discrepancy Model, Response to Intervention (RTI), or Patterns of

Strengths and Weaknesses (PSW). Despite the fact that law has changed significantly,

allowing for a variety of ways in which students can be identified as having a SLD,

specific SLD identification requirements were not enumerated. This means that teams

are left to interpret the law and ultimately use their discretion as to whether they believe

that a student meets the definition of having a SLD (Cottrell & Barrett, 2015).

This chapter will describe the research methodology of this study. It will include

information about the purpose of the study and research questions it intends to address.

Additionally, it will provide a rationale for using a social constructivist case study

approach as well as how sense-making will be used as a theoretical framework to guide

data analysis. Specific methodological steps will also be provided regarding sampling,

data collection, and data analysis. Finally, this chapter will address positionality of the

researcher as well as potential ethical concerns.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore school psychologists'

experiences of identifying SLD in urban schools. Specifically, school psychologists who

work in urban public schools signed the consent form (See Appendix A) before

completing a brief survey (See Appendix B) to provide demographic information and

participating in two semi-structured interviews (See Appendix C). These semi-structured

interviews garnered information about their experiences in identifying SLD; their

interpretation of federal, state, and school district level identification guidance; their

background and training as school psychologists; what they feel most influences their

SLD identification practice; and what additional support they feel would improve their

identification process for SLD. This research was conducted in an effort to better understand the experience of school psychologists, who are key members in identifying SLD, in order to recognize various mechanisms that influence their practice, how those practices may be improved, and what additional support might be helpful in facilitating the identification process.

Primary Research Questions

In exploring school psychologists' experiences in identifying SLD in an urban school, an instrumental case study will be used to answer the following specific research questions:

1. What resources and existing knowledge do school psychologists draw on in the SLD identification process?

2. What challenges occur for them in the SLD identification process?

Justification of Qualitative Approach

It is appropriate to use a qualitative approach to explore this topic to "draw conclusions and make decisions that are framed in relationship to those individuals and contexts that a phenomenon impacts" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 4), in this case school psychologists' experiences in identifying SLD in urban schools. A qualitative approach allows for collecting data that will provide thick description of this phenomenon that allows for practitioners in education to apply this information to their own practice, helping to "bridge the gap between research and practice within a particular discipline" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 5). It also offers a way to co-construct meaning, using both the researcher's and participants' interpretations of the phenomenon, which is a unique characteristic of qualitative research that could not easily achieved any other way.

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Qualitative research provides a flexible research design that is especially beneficial with this interaction between researcher and participant; its flexible nature "best captures the evolving nature of qualitative inquiry" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 9). Given the complex nature of special education policy, its interpretation, and its implementation, as well as a variety of personal and professional experiences of school psychologists, this type of inquiry seems most reasonable in order to best understand school psychologists' experiences of identifying SLDs in urban schools.

Theoretical Framework: Sense-Making

Spillane's theory of sense-making acted as a conceptual framework for this study. This cognitive framework focuses on "the interpretive or sense-making dimension of the implementation process" (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002, p. 392). The theory of sense-making involves three main elements: the individual who will be implementing policy, the situation in which the individual must make sense of the policy, and the policy itself (Spillane et al., 2002). All three elements can aid or hinder interpretation and subsequent implementation of policy.

Sense-Maker

The sense-making process relies of the sense-maker's "experiences, knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes" (Spillane, 2004, p. 76). These elements get organized into schemas, which is the way our prior knowledge and experiences are organized that guide our understanding of new information. While these schemas are useful in helping us interpret novel stimuli quickly, they also impact the way we interpret information. Because individuals have different prior knowledge and experiences, new information gets passed through different schemas, which leads to different interpretation of the same

information. With this, we attend to information that tends to be familiar to us; less familiar ideas often get ignored. When we are exposed to new information, we either assimilate that information into an existing schema in order to explain the new experience, or we accommodate for the new information by changing existing schemas to allow for a better understanding of the novel information (Swartwood, 2013). However, "sense-making tends to be a conserving process" (Spillane, 2004, p. 78). This means that we tend to preserve our schemas rather than make accommodations for new information.

The way we interpret new information has real ramifications in making sense of new policy. For example, sense-makers tend to interpret new policy as being more similar to existing ideas than it actually is. Additionally, individuals tend to notice surface features more easily when trying to find commonalities between novel information and existing schemas. We believe that these surface features are the most relevant part of the policy even when deeper changes are more important (Spillane, 2004).

Situational Context

While sense-makers' prior knowledge and experiences influence how they may interpret policy, situational context is another important aspect of sense-making. Those tasked with interpreting policy "encounter a complex web of organizational structures, professional affiliations, social networks, and traditions" (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 404) that are important in the sense-making process. Social norms, organizational structures, informal communities, historical events, and values and emotions all lend to the situational context that affects sense-making in implementing policy (Spillane, 2002).

Policy Design

Policy makers are tasked with creating a way to communicate and enforce policy. The language that they use is important in influencing sense-maker's interpretation. Often, policymakers feel they must provide abstract information that represents underlying principles rather than promoting specific, concrete practices. This practice often leads to sense-makers focusing on superficial information and assimilating it into existing schemas rather than coming to a deeper understanding of policy. It is also imperative that policymakers provide support for those interpreting and implementing policy. Sense-making can require the use of many resources such as "time, mental effort, advice from experts, and other resources you use in figuring out the significance of these ideas in order to develop a new way of thinking..." (Spillane, 2004, p. 93). Human resources, consisting of individual knowledge, expertise, and experiences, social resources, and time and materials are most crucial in aiding the sense-making process (Spillane, 2004).

Research Paradigm: Social Constructivism

A social constructivism lens was used in this study. This paradigm allows "individuals [to] seek understanding of the world in which they live and work" (Creswell, 2013, p. 24). This paradigm aligns itself with the case study approach that will inform the methodology of this research study, as outlined below.

Ontological Beliefs

In social constructivism, researchers believe that there are multiple realities that depend upon individuals' experiences of the phenomenon as well as interactions within society (Creswell, 2013, p. 24). In this study, I attempted to derive meaning from the

school psychologists' unique experiences surrounding identifying students with a SLD. Additionally, sense-making was used as a conceptual framework to guide the study. This framework recognizes that individuals may interpret new information and policies in a variety of ways based on prior experiences and knowledge, connecting well with social constructivism's view of allowing for multiple realities.

Epistemological Beliefs

Knowledge is co-constructed between the researcher and the participants in social constructivism (Creswell, 2013, p. 25), and the research is shaped by individual experiences. In this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews and rely on the participants' perception of events surrounding the SLD identification process. We co-constructed meaning by applying our individual experiences as school psychologists.

Axiological Beliefs

In social constructivism, the researcher respects the participants' individual values and experiences and describes researcher positionality including their own personal experience and background with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013, p. 25). In this study, I sought and valued the input of the school psychologists as well as acknowledged my own experience as a school psychologist. This undoubtedly impacted the way I interpreted responses, but I remained cognizant of my subjectivity and respected the experiences of the participants as part of reality and co-constructed meaning with all parties. As I analyzed the data and find themes, I solicited participant input through a second interview. This was done to ensure that meaning was truly being constructed by the participants in addition to myself.

Methodological Beliefs

In social constructivism, researchers use more of a literary style when reporting information about their research study. Ideas that emerge through interviews are found using an inductive method, where researchers are "working back and forth between the themes and the database until they establish a comprehensive set of themes" (Creswell, 2013, p. 45). It may also involve collaborating with the participants interactively, so that they have a chance to impact the understanding of prominent ideas that come from their interviews. In this study, interviews were conducted with the school psychologists and then transcribed. I worked between these transcripts and emerging themes. As I began to analyze the data and formulate themes, another interview with the school psychologists took place so that they were able to provide input about the transcripts of their previous interview and emerging themes that came from them.

Methodology: Case Study

In exploring experience of school psychologists in identifying SLDs in an urban school, a case study was chosen for this study. This qualitative approach allows researchers to investigate "a real-life, contemporary bounded system (case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g. observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and [it] reports a case description and case themes" (Creswell, 2013, p. 97). That is to say, it is a method of inquiry that allows investigators to explore a current phenomenon within the actual context in which it is occurring (Yin, 2014, p. 16). This type of empirical inquiry yields detailed description and systematic analysis of the bounded system (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Specifically, an instrumental case study approach was utilized, "wherein the researcher seeks out cases to assist in an understanding of a particular issue exterior to a specific case" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 46). This approach has been chosen because, while research and participants will be co-constructing meaning of their experience in identifying students as having a SLD, obtained data will also allow for a greater understanding of the SLD identification process more globally.

Defining the Case

"Case studies are 'bounded systems'- that is, they have boundaries of time, place, and other delineations" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 44). Therefore, it is important to define the case to provide clear boundaries. In this study, the case was considered school psychologists working in public urban schools in Cuyahoga County. In order to ensure that each school psychologist had the opportunity to gain ample prior experiences and knowledge pertaining to SLD identification, sample criteria included participants have had at least 5 years of experience. This means that they have renewed their ODE license at least once prior to participating in this study. This study closely examined the experiences of these school psychologists in identifying students with SLDs in that setting using a social constructivist paradigm and being guided by Spillane's theory of sense-making.

Setting

The Ohio Department of Education (ODE) provides a classification of school districts by type based on demographic and geographic characteristics (Ohio Department of Education, 2013) (See Appendix D). This current study will focus on the experience of school psychologists in urban schools in Cuyahoga County. Based on typography

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descriptions provided by the ODE, those schools coded as 7 (Urban-High Student Poverty and Average Student Population) and 8 (Urban-Very High Student Poverty & Very Large Student Population) may be included. The classifications provided by ODE consider student characteristics rather than basing classification solely on the physical locations of the districts. Districts are defined as urban based on the number of students enrolled as well as level of student poverty. This means that some school districts may be classified as urban based on those characteristics, but might otherwise be considered inner-ring suburbs based on proximity to Cleveland. Appendix E provides specific information about the student make up of each urban school in Cuyahoga county that will be invited to participate in this study, including the number of students enrolled, district median income, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students, the percentage of students with disabilities who have qualified for special education services, and the percentage of students from minority racial groups.

Participants

This study utilized a criterion sampling approach, meaning that participants were selected based on "important, predetermined criterion" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 170). Because this study focused on the experience of school psychologists in public urban schools, criteria was set to ensure that only those licensed and working as school psychologists in public urban schools, as defined by the ODE, were included. Additionally, all of these school psychologists wad at least five years of experience, having renewed their ODE license at least once to be included in this study. This allowed for participants to gain experience as school psychologists identifying SLD. All school psychologists working in urban schools in Cuyahoga County were sent a recruitment

email (See Appendix F). This allowed all school psychologists working in urban schools in the county the opportunity to participate. All school psychologists who indicated that they were willing to participate were included in this study because their demographic information such as years practicing in the field, race, and gender as well as variation in district location ensured that there was representation across categories to better encompass different experience from which school psychologists may draw during the SLD identification process. Specific demographic information about participants is reported below.

Demographic Information

The following demographic information provides a better understanding of the school psychologists who participated in this study. Participants included 5 white (71.4%) and 2 black (28.6%) participants. Five participants (71.4%) were female and two (28.6%) were male. The average number of years practicing was 12.7 (range: 5-31 years). In terms of highest level of education, one (14.3%) had master's degree, five (71.4%) had a specialist level degree, and one (14.3%) had a doctorate degree. Four (57.1%) completed their school psychology practicum experience in an urban setting, three (42.9%) in a suburban setting, and none (0%) in a rural setting. For their school psychology internship, four (57.1%) completed it in an urban setting, four (57.1%) in a suburban setting, and none (0%) in a rural setting, with one participant interning in both a suburban and urban setting. Six school districts (of 10 possible urban school districts in Cuyahoga County) were current employers of the participants. Table 1, provides the demographic breakdown of participants in this study.

Table 1

Demographic Breakdown of Participants

Participant	Practicing	Education	Practicum	Internship
Participant 1	6	Specialist	Suburban	Suburban
Participant 2	8	Specialist	Suburban	Urban+Suburban
Participant 3	10	Specialist	Urban	Urban
Participant 4	31	Doctoral	Urban	Urban
Participant 5	22	Masters	Urban	Urban
Participant 6	5	Specialist	Urban	Suburban
Participant 7	7	Specialist	Suburban	Suburban

On average, the participants serve 1.7 schools (range: 1-2) and have a 1:971.4 school psychologist to student ratio (range: 600-2,200). Participants also provided information about their caseload, indicating that on average they will have 56.7 (range: 45-78) special education evaluations, 45.4 (range: 2-100) RTI cases, 42.3 (range: 10-100) consultation cases, and 5.6 (range: 0-20) Section 504 cases this school year. Participants reported that on average there are 18.6 (range: 4-82) school psychologists employed in in their districts. Table 2, below, provides the breakdown of participants'' current caseloads.

Table 2

Breakdown of Interview Participants' Caseloads

Participant	Schools	Ratio	Evals	RTI	Consult	504	Psychs
Participant 1	2	800	78	100	50	5	8
Particpant 2	2	600	50	60	-	0	4
Participant 3	2	700	60	30	40	20	14
Particpant 4	2	2,200	60	30	10	0	12
Participant 5	2	1,000	50	70	100	0	82
Particpant 6	1	900	45	2	50	10	6
Participant 7	1	600	54	26	4	4	4

In this current study, five (71.4%) participants indicated that they are active in the local regional school psychology association, four (57.1%) with the state school

psychology association, and three (42.9%) with the national school psychology

association. Two participants (28.6%) were also active in other professional associations,

including the American Psychological Association and the Ohio School Board

Association.

Table 3

Participants' Association Membership

Participant	CASP	OSPA	NASP	Other
Participant 1	Yes	Yes	No	No
Participant 2	No	No	No	No
Participant 3	Yes	Yes	No	No
Participant 4	No	No	Yes	No
Participant 5	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Participant 6	Yes	No	No	No
Participant 7	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

For this study, every school psychologist working in an urban school district in

Cuyahoga County was sent a recruitment email. Efforts were made to include

participants with diverse experience, but ultimately school psychologist included in this

study were those who consented to participate. The population of this sample is fairly

similar to the makeup of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP).

Every 5 years, NASP conducts a study to learn about the demographic make-up of their

membership body. In their most recent report, authors of *Results from the NASP 2015*

Membership Survey provided information about school psychologist's age, years of

experience, race, and gender, among other variables. In terms of race, the majority of

participants were white (88.2%). This was followed with 5.1% Black/African American,

2.9% Asian, and 3.8% Other. Six percent of participants were of Hispanic, Latino, or

Spanish origin. Females predominantly made up NASP's sample with 83.7% female,

16.2% male, and 0.1% "agender. The mean age of school psychologists was 42.4

(standard deviation= 12.0) with ages ranging from 24-78 (Walcott et al., 2018).

Researcher Role

In using a social constructivist paradigm and case study approach, the researcher's role is to co-construct meaning with the participants in order to better understand the experiences of school psychologists in identifying students with SLD in urban public schools. As such, I strove to understand the experiences of school psychologists in identifying students with SLD thoroughly through the information provided by the participants. In all qualitative research, but perhaps even more so when asking participants to actively construct meaning, reciprocity, trust, and rapport are essential in eliciting participation and information that accurately reflects the participants' experiences.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity is the "give and take" between the researcher and participants that occurs while they are communicating during the interview process as well as during data analysis and theory formation (Galletta, 2013 p. 77). During the semi-structured interview, reciprocity was achieved by asking for clarification from the participants to ensure that I fully understood the meaning of what the participants were sharing. "Probing for clarification is instrumental in adding meaning and depth to the data" (Galletta, 2013, p. 79). Beyond asking for clarification, I included the participants in deriving meaning of what they had shared as well as asked them to reflect on their experience to allow them a chance to explain their conceptualizations of the experience (Galletta, 2013). In this study, a semi-structured interview was used where participants were asked fairly open-ended questions to "draw the participant more fully into the topic

under study" (Galletta, 2013, p. 45). The participants were asked probing questions for clarification. Furthermore, they were involved in deriving meaning from what they have shared during the interview process as well as reflect through the use of a second interview, where they reviewed their transcripts and provide additional clarification and discussed prominent ideas that were expressed in their first interview.

Trust

It is also essential that the participants trust the researcher. In this study, this was achieved through transparency. To begin, I explained the rights (through informed consent) of the participants and their ability to request that the tape may be turned off or the ability to withdraw from the study at any time. During the interview process, I asked probing questions to ensure that I fully understood what the participant is trying to express. The participants and I co-constructed meaning from the data. Once I began to develop codes from their initial interview, the participants were presented those ideas and asked to provide additional input. Furthermore, participants were informed throughout the process of how data could be used.

Rapport

In order to build report with the participants, several techniques shared by Hays & Singh (2012) were used. The first goal was to make the semi-structured interview seem as little like an interview as possible. I familiarized myself with all questions and potential probing questions to make the interview seem as conversational as possible. Initial questions were more accessible in nature to give time for the participants to feel comfortable before asking more in-depth questions, and participants were given the opportunity to have the last word of the interview. Additionally, I took other important

rapport building measures into account like consciously choosing to dress in a manner that is appropriate to the setting, maintaining nonverbal behavior that demonstrated openness, and using a neutral tone of voice that does not express any judgement about what the participant was sharing.

Interview Questions

Initial questions were uncontroversial in nature. To start, the interviewer asked the participants about descriptions before moving to questions that elicit opinions. Probing questions were asked throughout the interview to gain as much information about the subject as possible. The researcher kept the questions as open ended as possible so that the participants had freedom to provide their own thoughts with minimal constraints; leading questions were also avoided. For example, initially, the researcher asked the participants to talk about their training and work experience before asking them to describe what the evaluation process for a student suspected of having a SLD. After participants described their experiences, they were asked questions that elicited their feelings about the processes that took place, what they found to be helpful or unhelpful in the identification process, and what recommendations they may have to facilitate the process.

Data Collection

The vast majority of data was collected through several semi-structured interviews, which were each approximately 60 minutes in length. These interviews occurred at a private location so that school psychologists could freely express themselves without feeling the need to edit their responses. Once the interviews were conducted and the data began to be analyzed, a follow-up interview took place where the

participants and interviewer reviewed the data and prominent ideas derived from the data. Participants were able provide any additional input or clarification at that time. Memoing was also be utilized by the researcher as a form of data collection after each interview. Memos allowed the researcher to take notes about observations made during the interview, follow-up questions, and ideas that begin to emerge about information that was shared during the interview.

An additional data source came from documents collected from a variety of artifacts that guide the SLD identification process distributed through the ODE, including the Evaluation Team Report (ETR) (See Appendix G), Ohio Operating Standard for the Education of Children with Disabilities, Special Education Model Policies and Procedures, and A Guide to Parent Rights in Special Education. Additionally, university training programs' plans of study were examined. This research also considered national- or state-level professional organization guidance on SLD identification that is provided to its members. Inclusion of these data sources provided additional information needed to understand the sense-makers' experience using Spillane's theory. Specifically, they offered additional information about school psychologists' experiences and knowledge, the situational context in which SLD identification is occurring, and policy design that drives school psychologists' professional practice.

Data Analysis

Audio recordings from the semi-structured interviews were transcribed and reviewed to ensure their accuracy. Listening to the audio recordings and reading the transcriptions allowed engagement in early data analysis (Galletta, 2013). After the data was in printed form, coding began, as was documentation to trace the coding process.

Initially, these codes were identified, and information was notated to indicate where it came from and what ideas were elicited from it. Throughout the coding process, the researcher memoed ideas about coding that arose (Hays & Sing, 2012, p. 49). Initially, each interview was individually coded. Some codes emerged in vivo, that is the exact language or phrasing from the participants, allowing the study to "remain most faithful to the lived experience of the study participants…" (Galletta, 2013, p. 122). As time went on in the analysis process, codes were related to other codes to form categories. After reflecting upon the data and recategorizing as appropriate, these categories were synthesized into more meaningful themes. Once themes were determined, they were organized into the sense-making framework to provide an organizational structure and add additional meaning to results. Themes reflected dimensions of sense-making, including school psychologists as sense-makers, the situational context, and the policy design.

Trustworthiness of Interpretation

As themes emerged, peer debriefing with a school psychologist outside of the study occurred for the purpose of ensuring a good fit between the data collected and the interpretation of these data. Additionally, the methodologist audited the data analysis as a check on the extent that the analysis was systematic and rigorous. Using in vivo coding, tracing codes, memoing, peer debriefing, and auditing all improved the trustworthiness of the research study. In all qualitative research, but especially when meaning is co-constructed, it is essential that the data is truly reflective of what the participants are trying to share.

Additionally, this study attempted to triangulate other sources of data. Triangulation "involves using multiple forms of evidence at various parts of qualitative inquiry to support and better describe finings" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 207). Triangulation was achieved by collecting data from documents that guide the SLD identification process that are provided by the ODE, school psychology university training program plans of study, and professional organization guidance of SLD identification. This was done to aid in the trustworthiness of the interpretation of the data.

Subjectivity

Trustworthiness and credibility were fostered by acknowledging subjectivity throughout the study, documented through reflexive writings and memoing. As meaning is co-constructed in this social constructivist case study, the participants' voices were respected and I strove to gain deep understanding in the meaning they provide to the research.

In terms of subjectivity, I am a school psychologist. I have experience working in the urban public school setting and currently work in private practice. This does provide additional knowledge of the SLD identification process in public schools, but it has also led me to form opinions about special education generally and SLD identification specifically. Additionally, I maintain a professional network of school psychologists who regularly share their experiences and views on this process as well. In the research setting, the participants viewed me as peer. Because I am a school psychologist, my positionality may be viewed as an "insider." During interviews, I was vigilant in asking for clarification of experiences, particularly when participants seem to believe that I

understood their meaning without specifically stating it. When I met with them for a second interview, I circled back to topics if I felt I need more detail after reading the transcript from the first interview. While all these experiences affect the lens through which I could potentially view data, reflexive writing and memoing were used to explore and manage subjectivity. Including participants in a second interview as a way to explore particularly prominent ideas expressed in the first interview also helped ensure that meaning was being co-constructed and not based solely upon my own interpretation of data. In addition, working closely with my methodologist and engaging in peer debriefing helped address any potential issues of subjectivity.

Peer Debriefing

A school psychologist outside of the research team, who is "within the community in which the phenomenon is investigated" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 211), was consulted. This peer debriefing acted as a check within the research study and provided feedback to the researcher regarding findings.

Auditor

In this study, the methodologist also acted as an auditor. She reviewed the data analysis to offer additional questions and determine the extent to which the analysis was systematic, comprehensive, and rigorous (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Thick Description

In writing up the findings, I used thick description to clearly describe the setting, including quotes from interviews, and triangulated data sources. This is a "detailed account of the research process and outcome" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 212), which can aid those reading it to ascertain if the research is transferable to their setting. The goal

was for the researcher to "provide enough detailed description of the research process, including the participants, setting, and time frame, so that readers/consumers can make decisions about the degree to which any findings are applicable to individuals or settings in which they work" (Creswell, 2012, p. 200).

Ethics

Because of my commitment to ethical standards, several procedures will be implemented to reduce risks to the participants and prevent harm. For example, I sought approval for my study through the Institutional Review Board. Participants' privacy was protected in several ways. First, participants signed an informed consent form so that they understood the purpose of the research and provided their agreement to participate. Informed consent forms were stored separate from data in a locked cabinet in a secure location. Any digital material was password protected. Participants' identifiable information was protected by removing it from transcripts, and names were not used. Finally, demographic information of either individuals or school districts that was deemed too easily identifiable were not reported.

Summary

This chapter has outlined the methodology for this study. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore school psychologists' experiences of identifying students as having a SLD in urban schools. As we have seen, there have been significant changes over time to special education law that continue to evolve to better meet the needs of students in a more equitable way. But even with allowing for the use of the discrepancy model, RTI, and PSW, there are still issues with each method in identifying students with SLD. Additionally, school psychologists as sense-makers may come to

different conclusions about how they interpret IDEA 2004 based on their own prior experiences and knowledge as well as the context in which they live and work. With all of the changes in policy, and subsequent training, variation in how methods are applied continue to be apparent. Because research still does not indicate a consistently reliable and valid way to identify students with SLD, it is important to understand school psychologists' experiences in the identification process. This study focused on exploring what resources and existing knowledge school psychologists draw on in the SLD identification process and what challenges occur for them in that process to gain more information about how to aid school staff in accurately identifying students with SLDs in an appropriate way that will best meet their needs.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore school psychologists'

experiences of identifying students as having a SLD in urban schools. Participants in this

study included 7 school psychologists with at least 5 years of experience from 6 urban

public school districts in Cuyahoga County. Participants completed a brief demographic

survey and two audio-recorded semi-structured interviews to share information about the

resources and existing knowledge school psychologists draw on in the SLD identification

process and challenges that occur for them during it. Once the data were collected, the

interviews were transcribed and systematically analyzed to form themes. This chapter

will provide information about themes developed from participant interviews.

Additionally, it will explain how the sense-making framework (Spillane et al., 2002) was

not only used as a theoretical guide, but also as an organizational tool to unify themes

found within the data.

Results from Interviews

Eighteen themes emerged from the interview data. The themes were labeled

incorporating the in-vivo technique when possible. This means that exact language or

phrasing from the participants was used, with clarifying text from the researcher, to

maintain the participants' voice and "remain most faithful to the lived experience of the

study participants" (Galletta, 2013). The following themes were found:

Table 4
Themes from Interview Data

Theme/Subtheme	Theme Names
1	Prepared for the Profession "But Not All the Stuff"
1.1	Need for More Special Education Law Training
1.2	Little Training Specific to SLD Identification
1.3	Lack of Attention to Cultural Competence
1.4	Practical Experience not Sufficient Exposure to Professional Demands
2	Professional Development: "Everything Sounds Good When You See It on Paper."
2.1	Issues with Current Professional Development Opportunities
2.2	What School Psychologists Consider Worthwhile in Professional Development
2.3	Paths School Psychologists took to Develop Themselves Professionally
3	Lack of Shared Understanding of the Process Among Teachers
3.1	Issues with General Understanding of Special Education
3.2	Lack of Specific Understanding of SLD
3.3	Not Understanding the Processes Related to SLD Identification
4	Need for Improving Teacher Understanding and Skills
4.1	Teacher Training Programs
4.2	Professional Development
4.3	School-Level Trainings
4.4	Individual Support
4.5	Need for a Shift in Teacher Mindset
5	Building and District Leadership
5.1	Lack of Strong School and District Leadership
5.2	How Leadership Facilitated or Hindered the Identification Process
5.3	District Leadership Turnover
5.4	Degree to which Leadership Understands the Process
5.5	Decision Making
6	Importance of Maintaining Quality School Psychologist Communities
6.1	Colleagues within District
6.2	Informal Professional Network
6.3	Structured Professional Groups
7	Responsibility of the SLD Identification Process on School Psychologist
8	Resources: "We Use What We Have"

Theme/Subtheme	Theme Names
8.1	Concerns Regarding General Education Curriculum
8.2	Need for RTI Resources
8.3	Practical Impacts on Educators
8.4	Need for Using Resources Wisely
8.5	Need for More Differentiated and Culturally Appropriate Assessments
9	Need for Greater Understanding of Experiences within the Urban Community
9.1	"Filter[ing] Through" Stresses Impacting Learning
9.2	Parent Experiences within their Community
9.3	Need for Community Outreach
10	Need for School Culture That Is Responsive to Community Needs
10.1	School Culture for Students
10.2	Considering Parents' Experiences While Cultivating a Positive School Culture
11	Ambiguity of Student Data
12	Motivation for Special Education Identification: "People are pushing to test, test, test"
12.1	"They Need Help"
12.2	"Concerns about [Filling] Staffing [Positions]"
12.3	General Education Teachers Want to "Get Them Out" of Their Classroom
13	Questioning the Utility of the ETR: "It doesn't really mean anything"
13.1	Concerns Regarding Assessment Scores: "People Aren't Numbers"
13.2	ETRs as a "Rubber Stamp"
13.3	Perceptions of Disability Categories: "Let's Call It What It Is"
13.4	ETRs That "Nobody Reads"
14	Definition of SLD
14.1	Needing "A More Operational" Definition
14.2	Inconsistency of Guidance
15	"Relativity" of Policy Application "Depending on the District"
16	"Absolutely Inconsistent" Application of Policy within Own District
17	Need for Clear "Guidance" surrounding SLD
18	Need for Advocacy to Influence Policy Changes

Sense-Making Framework as an Organizational Tool

As we have seen in previous chapters, Spillane's sense-making framework acted

as a theoretical guide for this study. Sense-making is a cognitive framework that

comprises three main elements that impact how individuals make sense of policy. These

include the individual sense-makers who will be implementing policy, the situation in which the individual must make sense of the policy, and the policy itself (Spillane et al., 2002). This framework also served as a way to organize themes. Themes one and two were organized under sense-maker; themes three through thirteen under context; and fourteen through eighteen under policy.

School Psychologists as Sense-Makers

In the context of this study, school psychologists are considered sense-makers. Their experiences, knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes (Spillane, 2004, p. 76) get organized into schemas. Things like training, practical experiences, and continuing education would add to school psychologists' schemas. The organization of various prior knowledge and experiences impacts the way school psychologists interpret information. Several themes found throughout the interviews related to the idea of school psychologists as sense-makers during the SLD identification process. Themes one and two focused on the participant's graduate training and professional development. These themes add to school psychologists' schemas through which they interpret the SLD identification process.

Theme One: Prepared for the Profession "But Not All of the Stuff"

"…I felt very prepared going in for some of the stuff. But not all of the stuff."

– Participant 2

As part of the interview process, participants were asked about their graduate-level training to learn more about how they might draw on those experiences as sense-makers during the SLD identification process. Several participants directly expressed that they did not feel prepared when they stepped into the field as professional school

psychologists. They also provided information about different areas of their training that are essential to the SLD identification process, including courses on special education law, SLD identification, cultural competence, and practical experiences. While talking about those topics, the participants shared about their experiences and certain areas in which they felt better prepared in than others.

Most participants shared that they did not have courses dedicated to special education law. They did have some exposure to it, but that it mostly took place within the context of other courses that covered information about the Evaluation Team Report (ETR) and its associated timelines. Participants also shared that they did not have a course focused on SLD identification, but there was some discussion surrounding it in other courses. Related to cultural competence, participants who were trained longer ago shared that they had not received adequate training in cultural competence as it related to school psychology. A course like that simply did not exist at that time. However, participants who were trained more recently also reported concerns about their training in cultural competence; some reported not having a course, despite their more recent training, and others reported having more general courses that were not necessarily specific to school psychology or education.

Need for More Special Education Law Training

Overall, most participants shared that they had been exposed to information about special education law. This often took place within the context of other courses. Participant 3 stated: "I remember, we had classes where we definitely talked about it and the paperwork and the timelines…but I don't think I had a specific course dedicated to

that." Participant 7 echoed the idea that while they had talked about different topics related to special education law, they did not have a course devoted to it:

> I feel like we didn't...[W]e took ethics, and I feel like within ethics...we looked into law. But I also remember taking another course...and I guess we took a closer look at ETRs, the ETR process...

Participant 6 shared concerns about the quality of their special education law courses, stating: "Yes, there was one. But it was an online course." When asked to describe what the course was like, participant 6 responded:

> I mean, not so great. It was essentially like reading on your own, and answer[ing] questions on...[a] message board online. So it was not very engaging at all, and...it was like a Special Ed 101 course for special ed teachers, I think. And they had us do that...[A]nd then, there was one that was particularly for school psychologists, now that I recall. And that was more of the paperwork side of it. Like PR01s, plannings, not even reports themselves, I don't think.

Not all participants reported having any coursework related to special education law. When asked whether they took a course that focused on special education law, Participant 5 simply responded: "No."

Little Training Specific to SLD Identification

Participants also were asked about coursework related more specifically to SLD identification. Most participants reported having no specific courses related to SLD identification. When asked whether they took a course focused on SLD identification, several participants indicated that they did not. Participant 2 responded "No" to this

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question. Participant 6 also indicated that they did not have a course that focused on SLD identification, stating: "No [laughs]. We barely even did reports."

The other participants indicated that while they did not have a course that primarily focused on SLD identification, they did discus SLD identification within some other courses. As noted by Participant 3, "[W]e talked about it in the testing parts but, we didn't have a specific class dedicated to that but, we talked about what it looks like, what you have to do, the process." Participant 5 shared that discussions about SLD took place within a course that covered the different disability categories:

> We didn't have one that specifically addressed SLD, it went through all the
> different categories, but I know we did spend two weeks on that talking about
> using the different testing and then looking at the discrepancy model. That was
> the big, big thing back then, the discrepancy model.

Participant 7 also indicated that they did not have a course dedicated to SLD identification, but some components related to SLD identification were discussed in other courses:

> I don't feel like there was a course specifically focused on that...[W]e had a few
> books where we teased out some disability categories. Emotional Disturbance is
> standing out to me [in] Child Psychopathology. But I would say like the RTI
> process, time was spent there, which is related is looking at the category of a
> SLD.

Participant 1 expressed that they primarily learned about the inconsistency of SLD identification in practice during their coursework:

There wasn't a course that was an SLD course, but we certainly talked about SLD and most of what was discussed in those courses was primarily, it's the "Wild West." I remember [Name of Professor] always using that term. It's the Wild West. Everyone's doing their own thing. There's a general idea of what you should be doing, but the actual implementation of that theory differed depending on the district.

Lack of Attention to Cultural Competence

Participants were also asked about their training related to cultural competence, both directly related to the SLD identification process and more generally within the field of education. Several of the participants who were trained longer ago indicated that they did not feel that they were trained very well in this area. When asked to talk about how their training program addressed cultural competence related to SLD identification, Participant 5 responded: "Oh, it didn't [laughs]...No, it didn't." Participant 4 elaborated more saying:

I don't think [it was covered] very well because at the time, being how many years ago it was, we were talking about the Wechsler I, we're talking about the Stanford-Binet, the original [laughs]. And they were just coming into this idea of, I mean, there were a lot of lawsuits at the time about kids going into, particularly cognitive disability programs, that were African American and had different cultural backgrounds. So all that was just starting...[A]ll those lawsuits were just like happening right there. So we were taught at the time to be really cautious when we were looking at different cultures and we were looking at particularly

African Americans because there was such a huge population in that part of the

state. But we weren't really given a lot more than that.

While Participant 3 was trained more recently, they also indicated that they did

not attend a multicultural course during graduate school, although there was some

discussion of it within other courses:

I know we had discussions about it…It would be little things here or there as far

as what you need to look for. What do you need to make sure that you're doing or

not doing and how it relates to how you're going about the process.

Other participants who completed their training more recently indicated that they

did not attend a course on cultural competence related to SLD identification, but did have

a course that was more generally related to cultural competence. Participant 1 shared:

Um, I don't know if we talked a whole lot about cultural competence and SLD

classification. I think that's an interesting question. Especially given the forms

we're required to use for classifying students in the State of Ohio specifically.

Participant 1 shared that cultural competence was a particularly important topic given that

the ETR form includes "cultural factors" as an exclusionary factor in Part 3. When asked

if they had course work more generally related to multicultural competence, Participant 1

responded:

We had a multicultural class, but it didn't really focus on school psychology

because it was a class with multiple disciplines. They were all like adjacent to

like school counseling or education in general, but they didn't really focus on SLD

in any respect.

Participant 6 also shared that their experience was similar in that they did have a

multicultural course, but it did not directly apply to special education decision-making:

>We did have one class on diversity, but I don't even recall how that connected to
>
>SLD, it was just diversity in general...[I]t was more about...privilege in general.
>
>And then, I recall going to a place that would make me uncomfortable and writing
>
>about it.

Participant 7 shared that while they did not have a course directly related to

culturally sensitive school psychology practices, that discussions in other courses did help

them gain an understanding that assessments may be culturally biased, but that this topic

was not directly taught within those courses:

>I would say that there was aligning of culture, like the importance of being
>
>intentional, with being culturally competent, but I don't necessarily feel like there
>
>was like direct instruction and time spent on what assessments to give. What are
>
>other ways to look at it. [L]ike I feel like I walked away with the understanding
>
>that there are certain IQ tests that are...culturally biased because of the, the
>
>vocabulary, the experiences that different demographics might not experience.
>
>But I don't feel like there was a course that was specifically driven.

Practical Experience not Sufficient Exposure to the Professional Demands

Practical experiences through graduate-level training programs are important in

allowing students to put theory to practice and learn from supervisors who are school

psychologists in the field. Feelings of preparedness reported by participants varied

depending on the perceived quality of the practical opportunities. Participant 7 shared

that they still look to their experiences as a practicum student as an exemplar to what she would like to do in her current district:

I will say, I did take away from that situation...[T]he district that I did practicum in, they had a really good RTI set up. And so they had a system in place. It was very, routine and well thought out...Everyone was assigned a task during meetings. They had forms that were ready to go, that made sense. And it was easy. They did follow-up meetings. They gathered data, they looked at the data, the parents were very involved. So like, even now when I think about assisting my district, I often look back to what did they do in that district that I felt that was most beneficial during that time, that had a good flow.

Not all participants reported such positive experiences. Participant 5 shared:

And I basically did not get that great of an internship experience. I was more like this is my caseload, these are my re-evaluations, and you go do them. And then my supervisor [laughs] would, I don't know where he would be, but then we would meet once a week and [what] we did basically was, he would go over my cases. So I don't feel like I got a variety of training.

Other participants shared that even though they did not have a negative experience per se, they did not feel entirely prepared for their professional role after graduate school. Participant 2 said: "So I felt very prepared going in for some of the stuff. But not all of the stuff. 'Cause they don't teach you how to prepare for the people interaction part of it that you normally do." Participant 2 later went on to say:

So professionally I think they prepare you as much as you can to do the paperwork part of it, but they don't really necessarily always prepare you for the

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factors and things that are going to come up when you get to test this kid and

write these reports and then you're looking at extensive background. So those are

things that I kind of had to learn along the way.

Participant 7 also indicated that while internship provided some positive experiences, it

did not prepare them for the caseload they experienced as a school psychologist:

I was exposed that way and I helped out...And so I think that helped me to be

more comfortable...supporting my district and helping out with groups or making

recommendations for kids in that way. But in terms of caseload, I don't think

[laughs] internship...I mean internship definitely gets you out there and in there to

understand how to support a family and support students and your team from

beginning to finish when it comes to the evaluation process. But [laughs] going

out into the field...I think my first year I did like 96 evaluations, and I thought I

was going to lose my mind. Internship, I assisted, whatever it was, it was under

30...So I didn't feel prepared for what happened to me, caseload wise, when I got

into the field.

Throughout this theme, participants expressed that they felt underprepared by

their graduate level training in areas important to the SLD identification process,

including courses on special education law, SLD identification, cultural competence, and

practical experiences. While they did have exposure to these topics, they did not feel that

prepared for "all of the stuff" that would be important to them once they joined the field

as school psychologists.

Theme Two: Professional Development: "Everything Sounds Good When You See It on Paper."

> "I would say, that everything sounds good when you see it on paper and then 15 minutes into it, you realize that this is not exactly what I thought. And they're going to talk about 90% of what's not interesting to me and 10% about what do I do about it." - Participant 3

Participants also shared about their experiences with professional development during their interviews, which provided insight into how their continuing education might influence their sense-making of the SLD identification process. They shared about professional development opportunities they have access to, what they would consider worth-while in professional development, and alternatives they have sought out to supplement traditional professional development activities.

Issues with Current Professional Development Opportunities

Participants shared their experiences and views on professional development opportunities. They attend presentations and webinars both to earn credit for license renewal and to gain new knowledge and skills within the field of school psychology. Overall, participants shared that while many presentations seem promising, they find it difficult to actually find ones that they feel are beneficial. For example, participants shared that they felt misled by the title and descriptions of presentations when presenters did not cover expected topics. They also reported that they would prefer presentations that have practical applications for them and their MDTs, which they do not feel currently is offered by presentations.

Participant 2 shared that they find descriptions of professional development interesting, but often feel like they were misled once they attend the presentations, stating, "…they kind of mislead you with the title, and then you're kind of like, this is not what this title was about." They reiterated this thought in their second interview, providing examples of some of their professional development experiences:

So if you went, and they were telling you these are all the things and mechanics that you're supposed to have in an ETR and you're like, "Oh, finally I'm going to go and I'm going to learn how to fill out this page"…And then you sit there and they're like, well, we're really not going to talk about the ETR. And they talk about it for 10 minutes and then they go off to something different [laughs]. Does it really do you any good?…So it doesn't really help… And then when you ask the question of like, "Well would this be correct?" And their response is "Well, we can't tell you that" [laughs]. Then it's kind of like, so what was the point of me coming to do this?

Participant 3 echoed this sentiment:

I would say that everything sounds good when you see it on paper and then 15 minutes into it, you realize that this is not exactly what I thought. And they're going to talk about 90% of what's not interesting to me and 10% about what do I do about it.

Participant 3 went on to provide greater detail in their second interview about their disappointment in professional development experiences:

I don't feel like I'm really getting a whole lot out of it…[T]hey talk about all this background, which a lot of times the psychs already had that background

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knowledge. And then we get to the last ten minutes where, and then they kind of

throw some stuff in that you might actually use. And it always seems to be the

same kind of thing. You know, everybody wants "what am I going to do about

it?" And that's what they spend the least time on...[T]hey're doing all the

introduction forever and then we never get to the part of well, what am I going to

do?

Participant 6 also provided several examples of presentations they have attended through

local and national professional organizations. They felt that one directly related to SLD

was interesting, but left her with more questions: "NASP, I saw a presentation, but that

was like five years ago. And who knows if that's still up to date. But even then, I felt

like I was more confused after than before that." Further, they provided some examples

of local presentations that did not meet their expectations based on the presentation's

description:

Special education in general, I would find the law presentations probably to be the

most helpful, except for that last one that we went to [laughs] where they didn't

even talk about special ed law...

Participants also shared about presentations provided within their districts.

Participant 5 shared that topics presented on at the district level were "of little to no

interest to school psychologists and intervention specialist." Participant 7 also shared

about professional development at the district-level, saying, "I don't think that, even as a

district, like when we have psych meetings, we don't really dig into... discussions of

SLD."

What School Psychologists Consider Worthwhile in Professional Development

Participants did have their own recommendations about what they would like to see presented related to SLD identification, despite concerns about past offerings. They often spoke about preferring presentations that are practical and directly related to tasks that MDTs are completing on a daily basis. Directly related to practicality, Participant 2 said:

> I feel like if you're not really telling me about a specific intervention or you're not providing me with specifics on how to make my practice better, then that's where the problem is. Like...More practical things...[I]f I'm gonna miss a day of work or three hours of work, I want to be able to take something back that I can share with people that they're going to be able to use

They went on to share that any recommendations provided at presentations should be realistically feasible to implement in a school setting. Participant 2 noted, "Definitely more practical interventions that teachers can use" and critiqued much PD as offering strategies that don't accommodate the demands of their role and are "not even doable with the amount of stuff that you want [educators] to do."

Related to the idea of practical presentations that are highly meaningful to the field, Participant 5 introduced the idea of "going back to basics" in training. For example, while they expressed disinterest in their district's current professional development offerings, they felt that if the district addressed the "foundations of special education" like the evaluation process, understanding disability categories, and proper data collection, then they would address a lot of the schools' needs, and the types of topics that they currently have would mot be necessary. Participant 6 echoed the

sentiment that focusing on special education basics in professional development opportunities would be helpful:

So going over the basics in special ed law and keeping up to date...Not the most interesting, but the most helpful, I feel. Um, and then that kind of like an a-ha moment where we're like, "Well, we're all doing different things so we should probably get on the same page" [laughs].

Participants provided information about specific topics that they felt would be beneficial to them. Directly related to school psychology, Participant 7 expressed the need to have more information about the different SLD identification models: "[T]he models, I think having more information on the models [to] kind of figure out what would work best for your specific district." Additionally, Participant 7 shared that they would be interested in attending professional development opportunities that specifically addressed academic interventions in reading, writing, and mathematics. They find that, while they would like additional training in each academic area, it is easier to find information about reading interventions than writing and math interventions. Participant 7 also indicated the need to get into the specific details about different areas of SLD:

Breaking it down on a more of a smaller scale, the different areas of reading, there are developmental progressions, where it would be appropriate to have a certain skill. And at certain ranges where it becomes more alarming. Different things like that.

Additionally, participants shared the need for legal updates and training. Participant 3 indicated that most legal updates they participate in were not focused on SLD identification, which they think could be helpful. Instead they felt that their districts

focused on highly specific cases that were currently problematic to the district and procedural practices, such as completing PR-01s (see Appendix H) which are used to summarize and document those cases. Those types of conversations reportedly happened more frequently than talks about SLD, even though it is a high incidence category.

It'd be helpful too, if from our district, if they did legal updates about [SLD] 'cause...what happens if it becomes litigious? Well, they don't really address the SLD part with us, 'cause all they talk about is PR-01s and how that affects, all these very, very detailed cases, which SLDs generally not. But I'm sure there's cases about that all the time that we don't talk about. So it'd be good if we got legal updates about that and this is how we want it done base on the court rulings lately.

While there is a need to professional development related to legal updates, the way legal updates currently take place can provoke anxiety. Some participants expressed that they were completing evaluations in a way that they felt was reflective of the law, but then they would attend a legal update and be told that many common practices were things that the presenter did not recommend. Participant 3 shared:

So the legal updates are terrifying because everything you're doing is wrong. But I think it'd be good to find out what are we supposed to write, what kind of things get people in trouble for, and what kinds of things should you not write...I don't think we get enough good examples.

They later went on to share:

The typical way for a legal update is to have the lawyer or you know, somebody who works in a law office up there and scare you to death about everything that

you're doing. I think having psychologists talk about things that got them in trouble or that worked, I think that'd be an interesting idea. Some kind of panel or something like that with just people who are just doing your job that this is what works, this is what doesn't. I think it's good for us to learn from each other. Um, I mean it'd be nice if there was some kind of monthly email or something about this, you know, January's what not to do kind of stuff. It's quick, it doesn't take a lot of time and it says exactly what we need to know. Um, I think that would be helpful to people too.

In addition to gaining skills and knowledge related to school psychology, Participant 7 shared that they felt that "having a training specific to urban populations" would also be beneficial as a practitioner. This may indicate that there is a need not only to gain training about assessment, intervention, and special education law, but also to learn about those topics from an urban lens to better serve the population with whom they work.

Beyond learning practical skills to apply within the urban education setting, Participant 1 felt that professional development that addressed system-level issues would have a positive impact on factors related to SLD identification:

> ...something I've been asking from OSPA a lot. They always give those forms, like what sorts of trainings would you like to see in the future? And I always fill it out with working on systems level change in districts. How to get administrators to change what they're doing based on what you know and see as being best for kids. So if we're going to help kids with SLD, again, I'm a big systems level guy, and I think a lot of what we're doing at systems level isn't

necessarily what's best for kids. So, yeah, I would love to see more training from

professional associations on how to do systems level change in your district.

They went on to share why that they felt learning about how to influence change at the

system level would be beneficial to improving services for students:

I think understanding more of what administrators are going through.

So...obviously I think everyone's well intended. I don't think there's any

malicious behavior or overly selfish behavior...going on at the administrators'

level. But my director...I don't know everything her job requires. And I don't

know everything a superintendent has to go through. Or a director of curriculum.

So I think if I understood their roles a lot better, I think I would be able

to...communicate from their perspective, and communicate things in a way that

says, "[Participant's Name] gets it. Here's what [they're] asking for. Here's why

[they're] asking for it." And I might be communicating things from a school

psychologist perspective, but maybe they don't care about that perspective.

Maybe they care about what they have to deal with.

Participant 7 also thought it was important to look at the school system, but focused on

members of the MDT. They expressed interest in professional development opportunities

that focus on "ways to train and incorporate your team."

Paths School Psychologists took to Develop Themselves Professionally

Partially because of their concerns with current professional development

presentations being offered, and partially because of their drive to learn more about areas

that impact themselves, their team, and their students, many participants shared about

seeking out alternative sources of information. This included attending webinars and self-study through reading books and other online materials.

Participants often sought training experiences outside of their professional organizations to supplement their understanding of SLD, both related to assessment and intervention. For example, Participant 5 shared that they travelled to a neighboring state to attend a conference presented by a well-known researcher of SLD related topics. When participants are unable to spend the time or money to travel to in-person conferences, they seek webinar professional development opportunities from organizations outside the field of school psychology. Participant 7 shared that this was one of the best ways to get helpful information to improve their practice. When asked about the most beneficial SLD professional development opportunities they have been involved in, Participant 7 said: "I would say webinars. And that's really it."

Participants also conducted self-study regarding SLD by reading books and online materials. Participant 6 shared that they often used the internet when they needed additional information or guidance about a particular question. Participant 5 shared that they often reviewed other districts' websites to find information about the SLD intervention and evaluation processes:

> I spend a lot of time looking at other school districts and what information they have for their learning disabilities. A lot of districts in Ohio will put things online, like [District in Ohio] has a whole area for learning disabilities and what they go about doing in their district, and how to set up interventions for different things. And then another, like [Other District in Ohio], they have all of their

information online and just looking at what other people are doing that really have a good grip on interventions and looking at the different areas of reading. Participant 5 also has go-to resources regarding interventions. They frequent websites that provide information on evidence-based interventions. They found the most helpful sites about interventions yielded from universities conducting research on RTI. Participant 5 said, "I mean just going on the Florida [Center for Reading Research], just all of the response to intervention sites have been so, so helpful."

Not only do participants frequent formal websites to gather information about SLD identification, but they also read blogs and social media groups for school psychologists. Participant 2 shared, "I read a lot of blogs and online social media groups to see what's going on or what people's opinions [are]." These informal sites provide to their understanding of the SLD identification process in ways that more formal sources might not. Information comes from other school psychologists who practice within their same field and conduct similar job responsibilities.

In addition to trying to improve their own understanding and practice related to SLD identification, some participants conduct their own research specifically in order to provide information to others. Participant 1 shared that they searched and vetted information and resources online as a way to pass resources to parents and teachers. Of this experience, they said, "I've worked hard to develop resources…in my district. But, you know, that's something that takes time. [I]t took a lot of time and work to develop these resource 'cause I had to, like, personally vet a lot of these resources."

Throughout Theme Two, participants also shared about their experiences with professional development, which provided insight into how their continuing education

might influence their sense-making of the SLD identification process. They shared about issues with professional development opportunities, recommendations to create worthwhile in professional development, and alternatives they have sought out to supplement traditional professional development activities to give information on how to not only make professional development descriptions "[sound] good when you see it on paper" but also make it helpful to participants in practice.

Themes One and Two focused on the participant's graduate training and professional development. These themes add to school psychologists' schemas through which they interpret the SLD identification process. The following section will present themes associate with the context of sense-making in Spillane's framework.

Context of Sense-Making

Another important aspect of sense-making is the situational context. This refers to the factors related to policy implementation including social norms, organizational structures, informal communities, historical events, and values (Spillane, 2002). Things like the history of special education, organization of the school, and professional relationships all add to the context in which school psychologists are making sense of the SLD identification process. Themes three though thirteen covered information about MDT members and their expectations, leadership, resources, and unique lived experiences within the urban environment. These themes help explain the context in which school psychologists make sense of identifying SLD as part of their MDTs.

Theme Three: Lack of Shared Understanding of the Process Among Teachers

"I don't feel like it's the teachers' fault...It just might be a matter of not understanding the process and what special education actually means when a

child is identified...So I think it's just the lack of information and teachers in general education need to be educated more in terms of what special education actually is." – Participant 6

Participants were troubled by the lack of a shared understanding of special education and the SLD identification process among teachers in their schools. Concerns included the need for a greater general understanding of the special education process and a greater understanding of the SLD identification process, as well as a shared understanding of processes that take place during SLD evaluations.

Issues with General Understanding of Special Education

Participants shared that they felt that many teachers on their MDTs did not have an understanding of special education in general. For example, Participant 5 said that a number of teachers shared with them that they had very little training on the special education evaluation process, sometimes even reporting that it took place in a single lesson. This was not only true for teachers who had been in the field for a long time, but also for more recent graduates. Participant 3 also provided a similar observation:

> I don't think most teachers have any idea about...special education, and the laws and what it really requires...[T]hey think well this kid is really different from everybody else, this is special ed. And there's a lot more to it than that as far as what the requirements are and what they have to meet and what the boxes we have to check and all that kind of stuff. And I don't, I don't think that most of them really get that.

Most participants spoke in an understanding tone, and seemed to appreciate that a lack of understanding about the special education process was likely due to a lack of exposure in their training. Participant 6 stated:

I don't feel like it's the teachers' fault...It just might be a matter of not understanding the process and what special education actually means when a child is identified...So I think it's just the lack of information and teachers in general education need to be educated more in terms of what special education actually is.

Lack of Specific Understanding of SLD

Similar to the lack of understanding of special education in general, participants also reported they felt that many teachers on their MDTs did not have an understanding of the SLD identification process more specifically. Participant 5 shared that they did not feel that teachers were trained on understanding what SLD is or how it is identified. Participants felt that a basic understanding of the process would be beneficial for teachers. Participant 6 indicated that it would be helpful to have "teachers actually learn what specific learning disability is." This thought was echoed by Participant 2 who felt it was important "to educate just general ed staff on what do learning disabilities truly mean. What does it truly look like?"

Not Understanding the Processes Related to SLD Identification

While participants shared that they did not feel as though teachers on their MDTs had enough understanding of the SLD identification process, they also noted particular areas of the SLD identification process in which there was misunderstanding. They indicated that they observe confusion related to both RTI and assessment practices.

Related to assessment, several participants reported that teachers ask them to test to determine whether a student has a SLD and to use that information as the sole basis of identification. Speaking to this point, Participant 6 stated: "A lot of teachers just think that, 'Oh, we've tried this and that, and now it's time to test him and the testing will show us if they need special ed.' Well, not really." Participant 4 shared this sentiment, providing an example of a recent interaction:

In fact, I had somebody asked me the other day, it was about a student that has missed like, I don't know, so much school, probably 50 days of school and he's a second grader. And I said, you know, "You really can't do that. I mean, I don't have any evidence that he's had intervention and proper instruction." And she said, "I don't get it, why can't you just test him and see if he's SLD,"…not having that understanding of that you have to be in school. And I was trying to explain it to her. She goes, "Well, he's either LD or he isn't, can't you just test them?"

Related to RTI, participants also indicated that their MDT members had misconceptions associated with intervention provision and progress monitoring. When talking about intervention provision, Participant 4 believed that many members "aren't trained the way they should." Participants reported that some of their teachers seem to lack an understanding of interventions. Participant 1 stated, "I think that when some teachers hear intervention, they think it's this huge, incomprehensible concept. When intervention, it really doesn't have to be that complicated." Participant 5 also brought up concerns about training in intervention provision:

A lot of my new teachers are just, and they'll come right out and say, "I don't

know how to. I don't know how to find the time. I don't know how to set up my

reading groups. I don't know how to make time to progress monitor."

Participants also reported concerns about understanding of progress monitoring.

Participant 5 shared that many teachers that they work do not understand that progress

monitoring is not itself intervention.

I think a lot of people think that their intervention is their AIMSweb progress

monitoring. So they think that [laughs], "Oh, I gave you these eight data points

for AIMSweb. That's my intervention"...I was just talking to my SST coordinator

about that today, that they come to the meeting with their benchmarking data and

want to tell you...'I did this intervention'...Progress monitoring is not

intervention.

Even when teachers are providing quality instruction to their students, there still

seems to be questions about what progress monitoring is and how to collect useful data.

Participant 5 said that they wished teachers understood progress monitoring better so that

they could collect data in such a way that it could be compared to other data points to

help determine whether a student had made growth. Participant 1 also shared concerns

about collecting data in a useful way:

I've done so many classroom observations, and I've seen teachers work in these

small groups with kids, and there's a lot of good instruction happening there. And

if they...knew to just, like, have paper off to the side and then record some data

about, like, okay, you're doing repeated readings on this kid. You don't even

know you're doing repeated readings. Just, like, tabulate how long it's taking,

how many words they're getting through. That sort of thing. I think we'd have a

lot more quality data to report on growth over time or lack of growth over time.

Participant 1 also observed this with the highest quality teachers in their building. They

reported:

I think they throw away a lot of stuff, and I wish they didn't. Even my best

teachers, I think, don't realize that some of the data they have is valuable data.

And I wish we had better intervention data in that respect.

Within Theme Three, participants shared their concerns about teachers not having

a shared understanding of special education and the SLD identification process. These

concerns included their teachers' understanding of the special education process, SLD

identification, and processes within SLD identification. While team members did not feel

that teachers were at fault for not being exposed to training that taught them the

knowledge and skills to address certain student needs, they felt that teachers "need to be

educated more in terms of what special education actually is" to help create a shared

understanding of the process within their MDTs.

Theme Four: Need for Improving Teacher Understanding and Skills

"Because...the biggest hurdle I've seen is that you're asking general education

teachers to do things that they aren't equipped to do." – Participant 2

Despite concerns regarding the understanding of the special education process,

SLD identification, and specific processes within SLD identification, participants shared

a number of ways they felt that teachers could learn the knowledge and skills needed to

meaningfully participate in their MDTs. They talked about strategies to address this

need, such as making changes to teacher training programs, participating in professional development, presentations provided by school districts, and individual support.

Teacher Training Programs

Changes in teacher training programs was one way in which some participants felt that teachers could gain understanding and skills related to special education and SLD identification. Participant 2 talked about why they felt learning about special education within the university setting was vital for teachers:

...I think it would be more helpful...in the college setting when people were getting degrees. I think every gen ed and teacher should have to take a class on special ed to say this is what this means. This is...how you really need to work with...students with learning disabilities. Because...the biggest hurdle I've seen is that you're asking general education teachers to do things that they aren't equipped to do.

They felt that making those changes would improve overall teacher training to get the team working from a common understanding of the process

I feel like just overall training would be a lot better so everyone is on the same page...[M]aybe make it where they have to take a course or two to learn about what's a learning disability. What's a disability in general, and this is what you really need to look for.

Participant 6 provided some detailed information about areas they would like to see included into teacher training programs. Specifically, they felt that learning about special education law would help them have the same knowledge as other MDT members, saying, "...[S]pecial education law, I think they should be just as informed as

everyone else in terms of that." They also felt that "learning the basics of RTI would be incredibly helpful," especially learning "how to do intervention in the classroom for kids who we deem to be Tier II."

Professional Development

Professional development was also offered as another way to help build the understanding of the process and skills needed to implement it. Participant 3 talked about the importance of regular professional development related to special education and how teachers have an ever growing need to understand special education, which they are increasingly involved in within their own classrooms. They said, "...I think that there should be some kind of professional development regularly. They need to know more about special ed especially, the more kids are being included in classrooms, the more they should know about it."

School-Level Trainings

Several participants felt that a school-level training could be helpful to share information about the SLD identification process to all MDT members. Participant 5 said:

> ...[J]ust taking that information and really presenting it to teachers and staff and principals...[R]eversals doesn't mean they're dyslexic.... [T]hat's not what it is. And this is what a reading disability is. This is what a math disability is. This is what written expression looks like...

Participant 4 agreed that presenting information about the evaluation process to school staff would increase the likelihood that MDT members would be operating from a universal basic understanding:

…[I]t might be a good idea to have like at the beginning of every year a reminder of what it means. I haven't done that in a while. I think it's just been discouraging because we've had a lot of changes in the district with riffs and stuff like that. So it seems like it's a new group every year…But that's all the more reason I should get them on the same page. So I think that that would really help.

Participant 7 also expressed that presenting information to the staff at the beginning of the school year, before any evaluations had been initiated, could be helpful:

I guess having discussions ahead of time, like beginning of school year. Like this is…the evaluation process, outside of the evaluation process. And so perhaps if we were like "This person is designated to do observations' or this is what would be useful to be in the teacher part one"…

Further, Participant 7 reported that taking the opportunity within those discussions to provided additional supports, like checklists or other informational documents, would benefit the MDT:

When it comes to assigning someone to kind of help out with observations or interviewing the parent, I definitely think having a checklist of some sort…I think resources might be the thing, so that everyone has what they need to feel comfortable to do their part.

Individual Support

Beyond presenting information, some participants suggested individually supporting teachers as a helpful strategy. Participant 5 shared that they find spending time with teachers working through the RTI process is valuable, stating, "[I]f I don't feel like I'm getting the [intervention] information, that I take the time and spend with them."

They reported that doing this kind of work prior to evaluation referrals can help the team decide whether it is appropriate to refer a student for a special education evaluation. They stated:

> I do a lot of work with the teachers on making sure they're getting good data before they're referring and looking at a learning disability, and then really looking at...is it that they can't learn or they need to do it differently? You know, what is this, what is that? What is it we're looking at that may look like a learning disability or maybe it might be something else.

Working one-on-one can also improve the bond between team members and allow the psychologist and teachers to relate on a more personal level. Participant 1 shared, "I believe in them. I know they can do it. It's not just like I'm frustrated, and I want you to do it 'cause I need that information...It's like, you can do this. And you're a good teacher..."

Need for a Shift in Teacher Mindset

Some participants also addressed the idea of mindset within their interviews. Participants reported that many teachers on their teams often either felt overwhelmed by all of the work they were already doing, did not have the understanding or skills of intervention implementation that was being asked of them, or had not seen much success with strategies that had been tried in the past. However, many felt that if training was improved for teachers, they would have the knowledge and skills to successfully implement interventions that lead to improved student outcome. Participants felt that if teachers saw the fruits of their effort, it would help shift their mindset about RTI and create more buy-in within the process.

Sometimes participants felt that teachers held a certain mindset because the ideas related to RTI that school psychologists were presenting "had no buy in from teachers" (Participant 4). Participant 7 attributed resistance to changing practices to being overwhelmed:

I think there's overwhelment. I think there's also this mindset of we've always done it this way, we're going to do it this way. So I think there's a lack of mindset. "I'm not thinking outside of the box and really being specific because it's just easier."

However, some participants did indicate that they thought that it was possible to shift the mindset of school staff. Participant 5 introduced the idea that when MDT members see success with interventions, they are more likely to shift their mindset about the RTI process, being more willing to try interventions and monitor student progress. This idea was also presented by Participant 7:

So what would shift mindset? Honestly, I think effective outcome, because, oftentimes, if you take it back to what I was saying with, um, like the fight for intervention specialists so [students] can get some more help. But if they can get that more, like additional help without being identified...I think if the systems were effective and impactful enough for you to see the successes...[i]t seems like that you would get more people to buy in to something that works. Like when you see it works, there's a shift in and of itself there.

Theme Five: Building and District Leadership

"[I]t's a very big difference if you have an administrator that has some special education background, so they get it. So they're not so quick to just say all of

these kids have...learning disabilities, compared to if they don't get it and they

don't get the process or respect the process... - Participant 2

Building and district leadership also played an integral part in participants'

experience of the SLD identification process. Unfortunately, many participants

expressed that they frequently did not experience strong school- or district-level

leadership. Similar to teachers, they felt that leadership often did not have a substantial

understanding of special education or the SLD identification process, and that often

decision making, whether due to external pressures or lack of understanding, negatively

impacted MDTs.

Lack of Strong School and District Leadership

Many participants indicated that they did not feel that they had much experience

working in school districts with strong leadership. When asked if they have worked with

strong leaders throughout their career, Participant 7 said, "I really can't say that I have

[laughs]." When talking further about observing leadership, they said:

> ...[B]ut that's also not to say that it's not [happening]. I may just not have been
>
> privy to see that in action. You know what I mean? But from where I stand right
>
> now, I cannot say that I've seen [strong leadership] [laughs].

Participant 4 also shared a lack of experience with strong leadership, saying,

"unfortunately the directors that had been attracted to [School District] have all had

like...Not all...Have had just character traits that were, that weren't positive character

traits." Later in the interview, they went on to share, "...director-wise [School District]'s

never been really great at...their top end in my opinion."

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How Leadership Facilitated or Hindered the Identification Process

Participants also provided information about leadership characteristics that they have experienced, both positive and negative. Personality traits was one portion of what participants shared as being important to leadership. Participant 1 talked about the positive traits of their current principal: "She's very relatable. She's likable. She's personable. She understands the population we serve. She goes out of her way above and beyond to help kids...She's not afraid of getting engaged in the community." However, this had not always been their experience outside of this principal. Participant 4 shared that they had experienced many difficult leaders, including an example of one in particular, "And then we've had those that had been just so tough and ridiculous, like...[Name of Administrator] just was miserable and mean and didn't really understand what we did."

Participant 2 talked about how important open communication between leadership and staff is to problem-solving. Those administrators who are receptive to having conversations about issues and are willing to trying new ideas to address them yielded more positive experiences for this participant than those who did not invite open discussions. Participant 2 said:

> ...[S]ome administrators just want you to go with the way of what they think is
> going to be the fastest solution to fix the problem in the short term and not the
> long term. So I think having healthy discussions where people, it's okay to
> disagree, but how are we going to fix this problem? So what I've learned is like
> you shouldn't really steer away from those conversations, because they're tough
> conversations to have, but you have to have them if you want to make

progress...And so I've had some very successful ones where we've come into a school where things were really low and we're on the upswing and things are going really positive with people having open communication to talk. And then I've been in situations where it's just like, just do your job. You're not here to do anything but test. And those have been the tougher situations that you kind of just have to work around. And then I've had experiences where you can see the mindset of someone changing over time because they didn't handle something correctly at the beginning, ...but now...they're realizing that their way was not the appropriate way to deal with those things.

In addition to hosting open conversations with their staff, Participant 1 noted the importance of leadership being able to take another's perspectives, which can help anticipate and meet their staff's needs, sharing, how many school psychologists share that their principals "only see things from an administrator's perspective." However, Participant 1's principal doesn't. "She sees it from everyone's perspective..." But being able to see issues from everyone's lens was only one step; it is also important to provide meaningful support to team members. Participant 4 shared:

The principals that have been the best are the ones that have treated psychologists as equal professionals, have really listened to their recommendations, not just lip service to it. And have worked...behind the scenes to make sure that it happens...So we've had like a few real gifts over the years that have gone, "Yeah, let's listen to these people. These people know what they're doing...[L]et's support them."

Support can be achieved through providing organization and structures for teams to use; however, this was often not reported by participants as an area of strength of their leadership. Participant 4 highlighted the importance of administrative experience to complete that task well: "...[T]he psychologists that have been directors, which you would think would be the best, right? Didn't necessarily have the administrative experiences that they should. I'm thinking of [Name of Administrator], she just didn't know what she was doing."

Beyond having administrative experience, participants also felt that administrators needed to create intentional systems that are consistently monitored and altered if needed. For example, Participant 7 shared:

I don't think [my principal] closely looks at things and if she put something in place, like two years ago, she's still leaning on...the emotion in that working, and not necessarily come into it...to look at it and reconsider or redistribute or adjust accordingly.

They went on to talk about the importance of monitoring systems that are in place and being aware of what is happening on the ground level.

I think knowing what's going on in your building is important. I think knowing what's going on in the classrooms, even having a system to be able to determine where your kids are falling specifically...[S]o like if I were to think about right now in the school year, there's nowhere that I can go to determine which kindergarteners have all their letters at this point in the school year, and which only have two. Like there's no way for me to do that. I think a leader, a really good leader, would have a system in place to where you can...be able to take a

look at what's going on in your building, and that there's conversations centered

around that data...Um, so that you're less reactive and trying to come up with

proactive...putting proactive interventions in place for the at-risk kids.

District Leadership Turnover

While school psychologists' reports of their experience of school and district

leadership throughout their careers provided valuable insight into the context in which

they are working, many shared issues with administration turnover, which can change

quickly change course for districts and individual schools. For example, Participant 1

shared that their "superintendents are like a revolving door. 'Cause there's a lot of

transiency when it comes to superintendents." Participant 4 also shared about concerns

about administrator turnover, sharing that programs were frequently changed when new

administrators arrived, saying, "...[B]ut then that kind of went by the wayside because

we got so much influx of people in, we had so many different directors..." They felt that

some of these programs were very beneficial to the students, but were not supported by

new leadership, stating:

> ...[W]e started something that I thought was useful, and then it went by the
>
> wayside...And whether by cost or what...[Name of Administrator] came in and
>
> abolished...So that idea, those stops and starts aren't good for people either.

Beyond changing systems and programming, Participant 2 noted that change in

leadership can also affect school culture:

> I think the culture is the most important thing, because you can have the same
>
> group of teachers, and administration can change and it can change the mindset of

the people that are there or have been there over a couple of administrations. So I

think definitely it starts with the administrator...

Degree to which Leadership Understands the Process

Many participants felt that leadership having an understanding of special

education best practices and the evaluation process, in addition to understanding and

supporting school psychologists roles, was instrumental in creating a positive experience

with their administrators. Participant 1 shared about their positive views about their

current principal's understanding of special education:

They get it. And, of course, what I mean by "they get it" is they understand

special education. They understand prevention. They understand intervention.

They understand the whole package...She's helped me with duties I didn't expect

her...And I can trust her to do that because she understands what I'm gonna say.

She understands a lot of what is required to help the child in that specific

situation. She knows we're not moving directly to special education.

However, this has not been their experience with past administration. When talking

about the evaluation process with other administrators, Participant 1 shared:

I think they were viewing it as a formality. The meeting is just, "Okay, we just

got to get through it." Where, there's changes in the kid that need to be focused

on. That we did new testing on the kid, here's what changed. I think the parent

would want to know what that is. So yeah, I've worked with principals before

who don't get it...It's more of a laissez faire approach...

Similarly, Participant 5 characterized positive experiences with leadership with

those who understand the process sharing that they have "had one good director who

understands special education and evaluations." However, they have also described those who do not have that understanding as negative experiences of leadership. They said, "Principals, I have not had good leadership from them. They don't understand the process, don't have an understanding of special education."

Some participants felt that this was directly related to administrators' backgrounds. Participant 2 said:

...[I]t's a very big difference if you have an administrator that has some special education background, so they get it. So they're not so quick to just say all of these kids have...learning disabilities, compared to if they don't get it and they don't get the process or respect the process...'cause I think a lot of times people don't understand the process so they don't respect it...

For those that don't have a background in special education, Participant 2 felt that they were responsible to help educate them about it:

A lot of your principals or administrators are not people who come from a similar field as you. So that's very important to just highlight the fact of you sometimes have to educate those individuals...[T]hat is very big...issue with the identification process as well... And the same thing goes with directors.... A lot of those people who are directors came from being like principals or were just general education teachers. So they're trying to tell you information that they don't necessarily have clear definitions on either.

Participant 2 felt that in addition to feeling the need to help educate administrators on special education, they also felt that they had to double check information that was given to them by their administrators. For example, they shared:

...I am going to go to a legal update [laughs] just to make sure what my director is telling me is correct. Because directors go to legal updates. But...if they're not in the profession, they may understand it a very different way than you do...

Beyond understanding the special education and evaluation processes, several participants stated that they wished their administrators had a greater understanding of school psychology, as a profession, and provided them more support. Participant 1 shared:

I wish my director understood more what a school psychologist does. Her background is as an intervention specialist and principal. And I respect her tremendously. I think she's good at what she does. I wish she had a better background in school psychology.

Participant 4 also discussed wanting leadership that understands the work they did and support it, saying, "I just can't really even think of anybody that truly understood what we did and worked for us kind of to promote that. So I don't think we've had any luck." Participant 5 also shared negative experiences about principals undermining work that school psychologists have done within teachers about instruction and intervention, and instead encouraging a test and place model.

Other participants talked about lack of consistency with the support they receive from administrators. Participant 6 shared that sometimes they experience positive leadership from their supervisor, but it is not consistent.

...[S]ometimes I think she understands the special education process and I'll explain to her the importance of interventions and having to show that child's not responding to an intervention before even thinking about special ed....

[S]ometimes I think she's on the same page as me, and other times she'll just tell me to test kids, so I don't even know.

Decision-Making

The decisions that district and building leadership make are exceptionally impactful to both students and staff. It greatly affects processes related to SLD identification. Participants shared the importance of leadership's understanding of student need, evidence-based instructional practices, and their own limitations in knowledge and skills. Additionally, participants shared about pressures that leadership faces in their decision-making. Participants also reported the importance of school leaders to take responsibility for processes that are put in place and to be the impetus for positive change for their buildings or districts.

One essential area of decision-making by leadership is understanding what students need so they are provided quality instruction, as well as understanding their own limitations and recognizing when they themselves need support. Participant 7 shared:

So the district that I'm in now, they do not use a particular prescribed program, curriculum. Our curriculum director is not a fan of package programming. And so she feels that she can do the research and utilize things that work. My concern with this particular approach is that it's almost like we're utilizing our kids to pilot whether this works or not, without being able to determine...like, I don't know. [T]he way that she put things together might not necessarily be the best for our kids.

Participant 7 went on to describe a specific example. When testing students in one of the five essential components to reading, they noticed that the students responded as though

they had never completed tasks like that before. Upon further consultation with kindergarten teachers in the building, they discovered that they did not cover that skill within the curriculum. Participant 7 then followed up with their district team, and upon reflection, they later added a program to address that skills. Participant 7 described the importance of that event by saying. "I guess I'm just saying...that she was just so certain that...she had everything that was needed, and that is such a huge piece that they need from day one..."

Participants did note that leadership was under pressure that impacted their decision making. For example, Participant 4 talked about budget constraints that might impact choices that administration makes. While school psychologists are trained in many areas of child development, they shared the following is occurring within their school district:

> ...[W]hat he's trying to do is, because we're more expensive, he's relegating us to test and place, tests and place. Because nobody else can do that, but a psychologist. But other people cheaper than us can do the other parts of it.

Participant 1 shared about pressures that administration experience from the state that appear to cause them to make decisions that they may not otherwise:

> I think state takeover...[is a] looming threat...It makes my administrators act differently because we're so concerned with using software or using diagnostic tools that don't benefit the kids, don't benefit intervention or screening data. But it's something the state wants to see reported on. Like, iReady. We got rid of AIMSweb, took on iReady. And...I finally got it out of my director of curriculum, the reason we took on iReady is because it gives the state information they want.

We can show greater gains using iReady, when, honestly, it's almost useless when it comes to evaluating kids...So I think the threat of state takeover is making the administrators act differently.

Participant 1 later went on to provided additional information about how pressure from the state impacts administrators' decision-making:

I think they're so worried about appeasing the state, so that everyone can keep their jobs, so that we don't take state takeover, that they're not always thinking about what's best for the kid.... I think it's always, "How do we make the state happy?"

Despite pressures that administrators are feeling, many participants felt that ultimately administrators needed to take greater responsibility and ownership for policies. Participant 6 shared that they felt that they were put in a position where they had to try to enforce policies, even though they are teachers' peers. They said, "It upsets me that I have to ask teachers to do that. I think administrators should be the ones to enforce these things, not school psychs, because...[teachers], they're not happy with that. [laughs]." Participant 3 also felt that policies needed to be implemented and supported from higher up:

...[A]t some point, it is a matter of district resources, but I think it's more about having the people...to set up a program and it being a district thing. A lot of the problem is that psychologists have tried to do plenty of things in [District], but you know, we're just a group of psychologists...It's gotta be the whole district, and it has to be a district initiative.

They went on to say that it's not only important for initiatives to take place at the district level, but for administrators to intentionally make decision and to stay the course if they want to effect change:

> I think you need full district support for that, starting from the big people in charge and then you have a process, you're going to roll it out. This is how it's going to be. This is how it's going to look. And then it's got to be shown to be, actually be something that's going to be there. It's going to stay there. And then the teachers see that it's working and there is a process to it and it's not just the thing we're going to try this year and then go to the next thing next year.

Theme Six: Importance of Maintaining Quality School Psychologist Communities

"I'll be like, 'You know, this is a tough case, can you help me out?'"

– Participant 6

During their interviews, participants highlighted the importance of maintaining high quality communities of school psychologists that consisted of experienced professionals trusted by the participants. This took many forms, such as consulting with colleagues within district, informal professional networks, and structured professional groups. Maintaining communities with other school psychologists was important so that they could gain new perspectives, ask for help when needed, and feel connected to others in similar situations.

Colleagues within District

One of the advantages of working within urban school districts is that they tend to be larger, allowing for there to be multiple psychologists within a district. This allows for participants to collaborate with other school psychologists on a regular basis.

Participant 6 shared that they found relying on other school psychologists within the district to be helpful. Participant 3 elaborated on this idea, saying:

> The advantage of working in a bigger district like [School District Name] is that we can all bounce things off each other…So we do that [in] our psych meetings. I text people if I have a question about something, so I think I have that advantage where, in a rural place where you're the only psych, you don't have that…

Informal Professional Network

Participants also shared that they maintain a network of trustworthy school psychologists with whom they have gone through training or worked. This is helpful, because they are able to include only those professionals they respect and feel are competent. Participant 4 shared that they have found "discussion with other people who [they] might respect" has helped them grow within their practice. Participant 6 agreed that the quality of the professional is important when they consider who to contact about concerns, saying that they reach out to "people I used to work with that I think are competent [laughs]. I'll email or call and I'll be like, 'You know, this is a tough case, can you help me out?'" Participant 4 took a similar approach and reached out to others to "pick their brains" and "bounce something off someone." Not only did they maintain professional connections with contemporary psychologists, but they also found it important to include school psychologists who had more experience, stating, "[I] also reach out to other people who were more advanced or in the field longer than me because this thing that you're gonna run into that you just haven't experienced before."

But Participant 4 shared that learning did not only happen from others who had been in the field for a long time. They reported that through supervising practicum and

intern students, they often learned news strategies that enhanced their knowledge of current best practices. Participant 4 shared the following example: "…[P]eople that I've supervised, they bring information...Because I say, 'Oh my gosh, you're doing it this way. And I never really thought to do it that way.' So new people in the field have been helpful that way."

Informal networks do not always take the shape of individuals the participant may know in-person. For example, Participant 2 said that they find participating in social media groups to help them communicate with school psychologists who may have different perspectives than those who have trained or worked with them, saying:

> I'm definitely in social media groups that have a lot of discussions, which I think is very good because you see from people that aren't really…likeminded...'Cause I think when you're working with a group of professionals…or you trained with, those people, they're a little bit more like minded.

Structured Professional Groups

While many of the participants felt like there was a need for better professional development through professional organizations and groups, many did feel that having structured professional groups that focused on learning and sharing in a meaningful way was helpful. For example, the Educational Service Center (ESC) recently started a school psychology network where school psychologists meet several times a year to network with others in their field. Participant 2 said, "I do think the ESC did do a good job in starting the school psychology network."

However, it would be helpful to find additional ways to inform school psychologists about these kind of professional networking opportunities. Participant 6

shared, "I think that the ESC has some kind of…meetings for psychs, but I haven't been able to attend, and I don't think many people know about it…I only heard because I know someone that went."

Additionally, it would be helpful for professional organizations to consider their culture and how that affects potential members. For example, making new members feel welcomed and valued for their input could encourage school psychologists to join professional groups that are already in existence. Participant 4 shared, of local professional groups, that they "have not taken advantage of them cause [they] didn't like the vibe." They went on to say, "I just have found them to be closed and exclusionary."

Structured professional groups often allow membership to communicate virtually, in addition to in-person. However, several participants felt that there was room to improve some of the virtual offerings. For example, Participant 3 shared their experience with the OSPA listserv:

> I think the listserv that the Ohio School Psychologist has, that's beneficial. A lot of times people talk about that 'cause they struggle with different kinds of nuances to it. So…you learn about things…So those help.

And while information that is shared by members on the listserv can be helpful, with the daily demands of the profession, it can be hard to keep up on reading everything that gets emailed, so it could be helpful to find alternative methods of professional networking. Participant 3 shared that while the listserv could be helpful, that they end up immediately deleting them without reading them unless he can initially tell that it is about a topic that they find interesting. They recommended having a more structured email, potentially by

related topics, so that they could be looking for those emails and make the time to read them. Participant 3 said:

> You know, people ask questions that I'm not interested in, then I just delete it immediately. So I don't know helpful that is…But if it was something where…you're looking for it, I think that'd be different. But when you don't really know what's in it and you're getting too many emails, they're all [deleted].

Participant 6 shared that finding a different interface to ask and answer questions would be helpful. They would like to use some kind of virtual interface that provides structure and organization, where people did not need to keep track of messages they sent to others in the field.

Participants found ma maintaining high quality communities of school psychologists, such as colleagues within their district, informal professional networks, and structured professional groups, to be a valuable resource. This is especially important when school psychologists' unique positions on the team leave them feeling that they have the majority of the responsibility during the SLD identification process.

Theme Seven: Responsibility of the SLD Identification Process on the School Psychologist

"And those are the times where I feel alone on the team." - Participant 4

Special education law requires that eligibility determinations be made by MDTs so that an interdisciplinary team is making decisions based on multiple sources of data. However, given their unique understanding and skillset of special education eligibility, school psychologists are often seen as an expert when acting as case manager for an

evaluation. Often, the participants reported that their team expected them to have the main responsibility for SLD identification.

Many participants felt that, based their experiences of how their MDTs functions, there was an expectation that school psychologists were primarily responsible for SLD identification. Participant 5 reported that the responsibility of completing the ETR and making decisions about eligibility falls on the school psychologists. Participant 4 shared that they felt similarly, saying, "I think we are definitely the leaders in making those decisions. People kind of rely on us to have the expertise." Participant 3 shared that even when other team members complete part of the ETR, it is at their direction as the school psychologist; overall, anything that they do not ask others to complete is done themselves. Participant 3 said, "Whatever I give someone to, they'll do it. Otherwise, I'm the responsible person."

Several participants provided additional examples of having the responsibility to complete Part 3 (Specific Learning Disability Documentation for Determination) of the ETR. Participant 3 indicated that they had the sole responsibility of completing the documentation required for that section, indicating that they complete it themselves. Participant 7 had similar experiences with completing that portion of the evaluation and stated, "[I]t's more of my responsibility."

A number of participants indicated that they felt that part of the reason they were left with most of the responsibility of completing the evaluation and making eligibility decisions was due to how the team was currently functioning within their skillset and understanding of the process. For example, when talking about completing the ETR,

Participant 6 said, "I don't think they would understand what that even means. So they kinda gloss over it."

Participant 5 indicated that a lack of team members' understanding leads to school psychologists completing tasks that others are not comfortable with. They went on to add that they felt like team members having a greater understanding of the identification process would foster greater team collaboration. Specifically, they indicated that the SLD identification process would be more equitable if other team members gained a better understanding of the special education process and identification categories.

Other participants echoed this sentiment. If all team members were more knowledgeable and felt confident in their skills, participants felt that those members would be able to be more meaningfully involved in the process. Several provided specific areas in which they felt team members could contribute to make it a team effort. For example, Participant 6 said:

> …[M]aybe if the teachers did the achievement testing and had a bigger part in the evaluation itself, they would feel more compelled to contribute to the decision-making because they would feel more responsible for it. Like, "I did this…and this is what I got." And I think that would facilitate more of a discussion instead of just having psychs do all the testing and all the write-ups.

Participant 7 has seen other districts where other team members complete the academic testing, and also felt that might be a way to foster greater involvement among team members, but did not feel that their team had the ability to do it currently. They shared, "I know in some districts the teacher or a special ed teacher will do the academic. We are not in that place. I do it…"

Additionally, Participant 7 felt that having other members complete observations of students could also be helpful; however, in their experience, they have found it being easier to take responsibility for that task because when observations have been assigned to other team members, they have had to teach their team members how to conduct observations and write them up. Participant 7 said:

[I]n terms of observations, I would say that could be open to anyone doing, but I generally do it. One, because I like to see the kid in the environment as I'm making recommendations. And then two, there's been instances where I've included the intervention specialist or the district rep to be the person designated to do that. And it ends up being me reminding them, reminding them, reminding them or them not knowing what to do or them not know how to write it up

Participants acknowledged that all team members had a lot of work outside of the evaluation. Participant 7 shared that they felt that involving teachers and intervention specialists would be beneficial not only to the SLD identification process itself, but also would provide intervention specialists with the information they need should the student qualify and require and IEP. However, they went on to say: "But right now it's just like everybody is spread so thin…it has not happened, and it's hard for me to ask them to do one more thing when I can do it and I already know that I'm going to end up having to help them through it [laughs].

Despite potential difficulties in obtaining greater team member involvement, participants welcomed a more meaningful team approach for SLD identification. Participant 6 shared that, currently, the SLD identification process as they experience is

not a team approach, but they try to remind their team that eligibility is not the school psychologist's decision. Participant 6 said:

> It's not really a team thing. It's like, "School psych, what do we do? What do you think? What do you think he is?" I'm like, "It's a team decision." And I try to emphasize that. I'm like, "We'll decide at the meeting. We'll decide at the meeting."

Participant 3 also shared that they remind their team that SLD identification is a team decision, saying:

> I tell people all the time it's a team decision. I would prefer that people kind of disagree with me sometimes. I think it's because I don't want to be the one making all those decisions. That's not how it's supposed to be.

Participant 3 went on to share that part of the reason they don't want to take responsibility for decision making, besides the fact that the law requires a team approach, is because school psychologists typically have less interaction with a student than anyone else on the team:

> [T]he way that I look at it, I don't think that I know the best about the kid. You know, everybody else spends a lot more time with that kid than I have. And so I really wish it would be more of a team decision where they would do that...And so I'll always sit down in a meeting and say, this is a team decision. It's not up to me.

Without meaningful collaboration, where all members are knowledgeable about special education and SLD identification, it is difficult to make a true team decision about eligibility determination. Often times MDTs defer to the decision of school

psychologists, but from time to time there might not be a general consensus. Participant 4 said, "And those are the times where I feel alone on the team."

Theme Eight: Resources: "We Use What We Have"

"In fact, we don't even really have good writing assessment tools for achievement tests. But we use what we have, right?" - Participant 1

Participants were very concerned about issues with resources. They used what was available to them during the decision-making process, but felt that resource issues not only impacted the SLD identification process, but also the education as a whole. They worried about the general education curriculums used in their schools, the lack of resources to appropriately implement RTI, the impact that fewer resources had on educators, and whether schools were being intentional in how they used their limited resources.

Concerns Regarding General Education Curriculum

Many participants shared concerns with instruction that their students are receiving through the general education curriculum, sharing that they did not feel that their Tier I instruction was adequate. Participant 5 said that they "definitely need a curriculum that is evidence-based." Participant 7 shared about the need for "research-based and appropriate" curriculum that is provided to all students. They emphasized the importance of "using a program that has been proven to work." However, based on their own experiences, they felt that was not happening within their schools. Participant 5 stated:

[T]hat 90 minute reading block is just not there. It looks like it is there on paper, but it really isn't...I think we really just need to firm up that Tier I. The Tier I is really not in place.

Specifically, participants brought up concerns about the consistency of what is being taught. Even within the same building, sometimes within the same grades, students may have vastly different experiences with the general education curriculum. For example, sometimes schools are not using a specific program for their curriculum. Participant 7 shared that in their previous urban district, they didn't use a package program so "it's really just kind of piecemeal. You get this sense that there are holes, and there's gaps in terms of things that are not being addressed." In their current district, the district provides classroom teachers pacing guides that serves as an outline of skills they should be working on. However, Participant 7 shared that

> ...[Administrators] have not given [teachers] something, so people are pulling from their own resources. So...class A might have a lot of depth and quality and class B is just strolling along...[S]o I still feel like there's potential for differences. But they all have to touch on certain things, so at some point, everybody's been exposed to it, but the quality of what they've been exposed to might look different because there's no consistent "do this," "say that."

Participant 5 also shared that they observed inconsistency in how Tier I instruction is being delivered at their school. For example, they said that teachers were trained on the school's program differently and "everyone has not been trained on how to use the different components of them." Additionally, their school often purchases materials that have to be shared by grade-level teachers. They went on to say that

teachers "…don't even have that access to it. I think there's one per each grade level, and one teacher may have it, or didn't even know it's there."

If they observed inconsistency with Tier I instruction within their school, Participant 5 observed even greater inconsistency across their district.

So where I'm working, the basic reading curriculum can be different in each building. And principals are allowed to pick which curriculum, like there's an approved list that you can pick which curriculum. And the idea is that you're implementing the basic reading curriculum say for...45 to 60 minutes, and then you're supposed to be supplementing that for another 15 to 20 minutes with some specifics from the curriculum that your class is lacking in. But what we're finding is we have a high rate of transient students moving from one building to another building. So they're getting one curriculum for two months, they're getting another curriculum for four weeks, and then they're back to the old building, and maybe to a third building…

Using different curriculums at different schools is especially problematic for transient students who move but stay within the district. Participant 5 went on to explain:

[S]witching within just in the district is a problem, because they're all approved curriculums, but they're all different. And there's different starting points with each one, and things of that nature are problematic...[I]t's just a whole plethora of issues with that.

In addition to issue with Tier I instruction, Participant 6 shared that there are frequent changes in curriculum at their district. The team has high hopes when something new gets implemented, but often times, their building does not observe the growth they had

hoped for. It becomes difficult to ascertain if that is because the program is not effective or whether it is because it was not implemented with fidelity. Participant 6 said, "Everything's, 'Oh, we have this new thing. It's going to be so great.' And then nothing happens, and the next year they change it because it wasn't working. Well you didn't do anything, you know?" These changes occur so frequently that it is difficult to know specifics about the curriculum or what is being done at any given time. They felt that following through and being purposeful with decision-making surrounding the curriculum would be advantageous. When talking about their current curriculum, Participant 6 said:

> I don't know what it is, and I feel like they change it every few years...I don't even know what they're doing...We have a curriculum director in our building, but I don't know what she does. I assume she gets direction from the board office. There's someone up there, but again, I don't know what she does either. It seems like they just throw out all these things at us and there's no follow through.

Issues with the general education curriculum impacts RTI, as it is the first tier within the system and where the majority of students should be serviced. Several participants voiced their concerns about this impact on the RTI system. Participant 5 questioned how the MDT could determine whether a student has had appropriate instruction with the general education setting, saying, "[I]f you don't have a great reading program...they're doing that 45 minute block of nonsense. Have they really had an opportunity to learn?" Participant 7 also felt that they could not focus on data related to progress in the curriculum because of their concerns about instruction.

And then I also, [laughs] given the information that I can get, I try to look at how

they're progressing...I try not to put too much weight on that because, honestly, I

feel like there's ways in which my district can stand to move forward and grow in

terms of Tier I instruction.

Participant 6 shared their frustration over the fact that the needs of most of their

students are not being met with Tier I instruction, which impacts the SLD identification

process, saying, "I have kids, a ton of kids, that can't read, and everyone's below grade

level and it's not just, you know, what, like, 5% of the kids. Everyone looks like they

have issues. It's very frustrating. Our lovely triangle is definitely upside-

down...[laughs]."

Generally, participants had concerns about the general education curriculum being

implemented in their school districts. It is important to meet the needs of students at the

Tier I level so that all students can gain the academic skills they need to experience

success at school. Additionally, in the absence strong Tier I instruction, participants and

their teams have difficulty indicating who needs supports through a structured tiered

system, which ultimately puts doubt on eligibility determination made as part of the SLD

identification process.

Need for RTI Resources

In addition to concerns about Tier I instruction, participants also highlighted a

need for resources related to RTI. They reported needing improved accessibility to

reliable progress monitoring tools to benchmark all students and measure the growth of

students receiving interventions progress at regular intervals. Participants also

emphasized the need of evidence-based interventions, differentiated to the need of their

students. Concerns about both reliable progress monitoring and appropriate intervention services lead to participants being uncomfortable about making SLD eligibility determinations using RTI data provided by MDTs.

Issues with Progress Monitoring Resources. As we saw in "Theme 3: Lack of Shared Understanding of the Process among Teachers," understanding of progress monitoring was a concern for participants. However, understanding is not the only concern that participants expressed about progress monitoring; they also reported progress monitoring resources as a barrier to the SLD identification process. For example, Participant 4 shared about a past experience where their district purchased progress monitoring probes, but not the data interpretation/storage component of the progress monitoring programs. Participant 4 said, "[W]e actually did whole building AIMSweb probes. Without using the website. So we were doing scoring all, everything, by hand, putting it into spreadsheets by hand." They went on to say that was problematic because, beyond being time consuming, "any data that's by hand never gets anywhere." Overtime, their district provided "less and less access" to that program, reducing grade levels that were using the program to kindergarten through second grades. The district then changed programs for several years to a program that was disliked by most of the educators in the building, so recently they changed to a new progress monitoring tool. Participant 4 explained what happened with the new program, sharing:

> They bought it last year, they trained all of us in it, and then they decided this year
> they're no longer gonna fund it. So they spent all this money bringing everybody
> in for Branching Minds. We had to use it, get used to using it, and then we come
> back this year and I'm like, "Why isn't anybody using Branching Minds?" And

then I hear from the new people in instruction, "It's probably not going to be there

by the end of the year."

When they did end the new program, the district decided to get AIMSweb Plus, the more

recent version to AIMSweb, "because we were like three versions old because we

wouldn't pay to convert to 2.0." However, Participant 4 soon came to realize that

because of the change in the system, they no longer had access to the data from the

previous version. Participant 4 said, "But then I'm like, 'Well what about my data on

kids that were in the previous system? Totally annihilated. We had no access to any data

in the previous AIMSweb." These switches not only caused a lot of the confusion for the

team, but also caused them to lose student data.

Lack of Intervention Options. Many participants shared how resources

impacted provision of intervention services. Within the general education setting,

Participant 5 talked about the need for not only having an evidence-based curriculum, but

also choosing one that had an "intervention component to it." They went on to explain

that they thought that it would help ensure that students would be getting quality

intervention, something that they do not see happening in their school now. Participant 5

said, "A lot of times we are breaking kids into small groups, but it's not really a reading

intervention. We're giving them, it's busy work…"

Even when participants thought that there was an effort being made to identify

students who needed additional help, they had concerns about services that were

available to the teachers. Participant 4 shared that when there were better progress

monitoring tools within their building "they didn't have the resources to do anything

about it anyways." Participant 3 had a similar experience. They shared that their

students' teams talked about issues that their students were experiencing in an effort to address them, but in the end:

> [W]e talk about it, but then we've only got very limited options depending on what first happens [to] be available...So...we're either going to identify him cause we don't know what else to do or are we going to have a tier three that we actually have somebody available for. So it comes down to that plan and resources.

Participant 6 also highlighted the lack of intervention options at their school, saying:

> [W]hen it comes to middle [school], like we have nothing, high school's nothing. Like, honestly, we don't even have interventions for math. I think maybe this year they have a math intervention class, but it's terrible. And before, I would have to tell people, "Oh, there's tutoring at the library." I'm like, "What?!" [laughs]. That's what I was told to do.

> Participant 4 felt that the reason that there were not as many options for

intervention was, in large part, due to the cost associated with training teachers to implement them with fidelity. They shared that it was important to find a way to fund those kinds of services, saying:

> [O]vercoming the idea of the expenses involved with those programs, that's a huge thing. There are not enough people trained. The programs are costly. So making it more accessible through grants or whatever it could be. I would love to see that happen.

They went on to share that appropriate intervention services had real-life implications for their students. Participant 4 stated, "I do think that we mislabel kids early because we don't have the programs for them to get them on par."

Participants noted that their teams recognize issues with intervention provision as well, but they do not feel that they had many choices in how to address student needs. For example, Participant 7 shared:

I notice things and I mentioned it, and like the Title teacher's like, "Yeah, I don't understand why we're doing this." Um, [laughs] so she sees it, but we continue to do it, but also, we don't have other options, like we don't have other resources.

Participant 6 shared that when their team feels like they have exhausted their resources, they come to the school psychologist to refer for an evaluation, even if they have not received appropriate intervention services to adequately address their needs. Participant 6 said that they often hear team members say, "We've tried everything," but they do not feel that is truly the case, saying, "but really they haven't tried anything 'cause we don't have interventions in place to actually teach the child who is struggling to read how to read."

Discomfort in Using RTI Data for SLD Identification. Many participants also talked about how issues with progress monitoring and intervention resources also impact their ability to use RTI data during the evaluation process to identify SLD. Many participants indicated that they do not feel comfortable completing the RTI section in Part 3 of the ETR. Participant 3 stated:

I started out filling out the RTI information because my district says they do RTI. But I don't do that anymore. I do the strengths and weaknesses part now...because I feel like that's really what we're doing.

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When talking about completing the RTI section, Participant 3 went on to say, "I don't feel comfortable filling out that section to say that that's been done." Participant 4 also shared that they complete the PSW of Part 3. Participant 4 said:

I would say our RTI model is not clear enough for me to feel good about endorsing it. Now in that section about strengths and weaknesses, I will refer to the fact that we have incorporated RTI, but I personally do not feel...comfortable endorsing that, so that is the way that I do it.

Participant 6 also completes the PSW section. When asked why, participant 6 said, "Because we don't do RTI...At least not in middle and high school. They think they do it in the lower grades, but they do not do true RTI..."

Participant 7 shared that they also felt uncomfortable using the RTI section of Part 3 independently, so they complete both the RTI and PSW sections on that document. Participant 7 stated, "...[W]hen it comes to...the sections where you have to include the RTI...I feel that it's weak. So I don't exclusively only do that, I always do that with the strengths and weaknesses one."

There were a number of reasons that participants did not feel comfortable in exclusively using RTI data. Participants took issue with benchmarking and progress monitoring practices, which created questions about how students were being identified to receive Tier II and Tier III services. Once identified, intervention is dependent upon what the team has available to offer; it is not usually based on individual student need, but rather based on what they have within the school and who is able to work with the student. Additionally, schools did not have a system in place to check the fidelity of intervention services.

When considering their discomfort in using RTI data to identify students, participants shared concerns about their school not having different evidence-based intervention options to address specific student needs. Participant 3 said:

> We don't really have levels where we're individualizing things to kids so it's, I don't feel like we can say that we really done an RTI process where...we've tried [the] scientific method, we've tried different things, see if they work and then tried something else.

Participant 3 went on to say, "...for the most part, every kid gets thrown in the same thing, regardless, and there's not a whole lot of options and there's not enough people to really do what we need to do." Participant 7 had a similar experience in terms of availability to individualized intervention strategies based on what a particular student may need. Participant 7 shared that the interventions their school provides may help one student with a certain need, but not another with a different need, stating:

> I think [our intervention services] are for...a very specific kind of kid, with the specific kind of problem. And so I think part of the issue that we don't have, a bunch of different options, and so it's like we're prescribing that...and it might not necessarily be...what that particular child needed. Like it works for some kids, but for a certain profile of a kid, it doesn't necessarily work as well. But they're not shifting. They're continuing with that particular intervention instead of making the adjustment.

Additionally, participants report that there are not fidelity checks to ensure that interventions are being provided to students in a way that upholds the integrity of the intervention. Participant 7 said, "I would say the integrity with which the interventions

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are being provided…definitely gives me pause." Participant 3 agreed, sharing, "…[W]e don't do any kind of checks to make sure things are being administered correctly." Participant 4 also shared concerns about intervention fidelity. They explained that they often had to defer to teacher report about intervention implementation, without truly knowing what kind of supports students are getting. Participant 4 said, "So if the teacher tells me…[then] there's a believability that is it done. That's really hard to accept, but I can't police them. So there's some acceptance." Participant 4 shared that, at times when reports seemed especially questionable, they might check in on the classroom to try to make a better determination regarding intervention services. Participant 4 provided the following example:

> Every once in a while, if it's a teacher I really don't trust…I'll say, "Hi, came in to see [a student]," or I'll make that part of my observation. So it's not like, "I'm there to see your fidelity." I'm just there to see how this kid responds. But few and far between, just given everything else that's going on.

In addition to questions regarding intervention services, obtaining appropriate progress monitoring data for SLD identification is perceived as a barrier. Participants see it as a labor-intensive task, and even with effort, it is still difficult to get meaningful data that can be used as part of decision-making. When asked about whether it was difficult to get appropriate progress monitoring data, Participant 4 said, "It's horrendous. It's like pulling weeds out of a garden." First, there was a question of benchmarking and whether it is appropriately taking place within the school. Participant 6 shared:

I'm not sure if they honestly look at all the kids and put them in tiers like they're

supposed to. You know...[laughs] Tier I, Tier II, Tier III. I'm not sure if they

benchmark the whole school. I mean I think that would appropriate.

Participant 4 also shared concerns about benchmarking practices that lead to how they

group students. Because, for the most part no structured scope or sequence is used when

providing interventions, there can be a lot of questions about what skills a student has or

has not been taught. Participant 4 said:

[T]hat bothers me 'cause I'm like, "Well what good is it to move somebody

[between intervention groups]? They're doing...stellar in this group, but then we

move them... But what did they miss in between?" And although, you know, I

try to bring that up at data discussions because there is no great scope and

sequence...I'm not sure...where the holes are. And we can't assume that...they

ever got it. So yeah, no, I don't know. That's a problem.

Related to benchmarking, Participant 7 talked about how teams focused on trying

to find the students with most significant needs, but that grouping was not based on data

obtained on different skills. Participant 7 shared the following on this topic:

I would say we're nowhere near seeing things work effectively, but I would even

say the way that we...monitor and track our kids and then what we do next.

There's really this sense of finding the lowest kids in each classroom and then

grouping them...based on "They need help," not "They need help with letters" or

"They need help with medial sounds"...

Even if individual students are identified to receive additional academic support,

the data may not be collected in a way where decisions can be made. Participant 7

shared, "We are not in the space where we're able to look at rate of improvement. So I do not include that information [in the ETR]."

Beyond concerns surrounding general education curriculum, participants highlighted the need for RTI sources throughout their interviews. They shared that their schools need improved accessibility to reliable progress monitoring tools to benchmark all students and measure the growth of students receiving interventions progress at regular intervals, as well as a variety of evidence-based intervention options that address specific skills within their students' areas of need. Due to concerns with the RTI process, participants felt uncomfortable making SLD identification decisions based on their team's RTI data. They also shared that limited resources impact their team members and influences how students are provided services.

Practical Impacts on Educators

Participants shared how reduction in resources impacts the team, and ultimately the services their students are provided. As funding is being cut, so are positions within the schools. For example, Participant 1 shared that they've lost tutoring positions within their schools due to budgetary issues. This leads to other team members trying to pick up the responsibility that used to be dispersed among those tutors, agreeing to work with students in addition to their normal workload. Participant 1 said:

> ...[W]e've lost tutors actually. So we've had to lower the amount of tutors available, which means there's a heavier load. Our teachers, some of our teachers are able and willing to provide interaction data during certain periods during the school day. Others are not.

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They went on to talk about how high the caseload currently is for intervention specialists, sharing that "our intervention specialists are sometimes taking on caseloads that are beyond the legal maximum." Participant 2 agreed that there is concern about what can actually be done well given everything that teachers have to do on any given day, saying, "So it's a lot different based on where you're at, how many kids you have, what you're able to do physically [laughs]...[W]hat you're feasibly able to do effectively..." Participant 3 stated that they also experience problems with not having enough trained professionals to provide instruction across the Tier levels. Participant 3 said:

When you were talking about the process from Tier I, Tier II, to Tier III, in my district we've just...run out of people and money and we're to the point where...Tier Three is hard to find people to do it.

Teachers feeling like they are at their limit may be part of the reason that participants observed difficulties with teacher buy-in and mindset surrounding intervention provision. Participant 6 shared:

I get a lot of pushback on "I need these interventions to show that the child's not responding." And they're like, "Well, who's supposed to do 'em? Because we have 40 kids in our class." And I really don't have the answer to that [laughs].

Resources also impact how much time educators have to address different needs. If they are at capacity because of high student-to-teacher ratios, they may not have the time to implement interventions, collect data, and make decision after a careful data analysis. Participant 5 shared that they needed "time to be able to get in there and monitor the interventions." Participant 7 also shared that they feel "like it's not enough time to get everything done" within a school day.

Unfortunately, many positions that are eliminated are those that require specialized knowledge in their field; but these very positions are ones that are coveted by the participants of this study. This was especially true of those who specialize in literacy. Not only are they able to see their own students, but they are able to pass their specialized knowledge onto other educators. For example, Participant 5 shared about how a teacher trained in structured literacy was able to provide assistance: "I have a Wilson trained teacher in my building and she really helped me kind of pinpoint some of the phonemic awareness problems that [the student] was having. She really broke that down." Participant 2 agreed that it was helpful when the reading specialist shared information and strategies with other teachers, saying: "I think one of the benefits of where I'm at is that we have like a reading intervention teacher who shares a lot with staff."

Having well-trained, knowledgeable educators is essential in meeting the needs of students. It is not enough to have a sufficient number of teachers or other service providers, they have to be able to provide quality services. Participant 1 said:

> Another person isn't just gonna fix everything. You need people to be providing more quality instruction, more quality services to the children. Okay, you've got another person. That means you have less kids in your caseload. What are you doing differently to benefit from that extra person in the classroom?

Need for Using Resources Wisely

In addition to having well trained staff members to provide evidence-based services to their students, participants agreed that they felt being intentional in how districts organized and used their resources were important. Just as Participant 1 (above) felt it was not only necessary to have more teachers, but to take advantage of

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implementing positive changes with a lower caseload, many participants shared that it was also important in being deliberate with resources to benefit teachers and students to the greatest extent possible.

Participant 1 shared that while it is always important for schools to be purposeful in their decision-making, urban schools with fewer resources have a smaller margin for error:

> It's more about sitting down and figuring out how you're going to make it work instead of just trying to throw things at the wall and see what sticks. And it's harder when you have less money and less resources. A place that puts a lot of money behind RTI, you have more room for error, and you can have more room to mess things up and still be okay. Where in a place like [School District] where they don't have any money and they don't have a whole lot of people, then you got to get it right, and you've got to know what you're doing and not just kind of stumble around in a dark room.

This type of purposefulness in decision-making is important to many different areas within a school. Districts often are left in less-than-ideal situations where there will be problems regardless of what is chosen; however, they have to do their best to allocate resources where they feel they will make the greatest impact. Participant 1 illustrates this with the following example:

> The problem is...we have less tutors, right? So what my principal and reading coach have decided to do with resources is front load the early grade levels and then let the fourth and fifth grade teachers kind of figure out intervention on their own. Which is unfair, but again, it's attacking the idea of early intervention,

which, I think if you've got limited resources, I think they made an intelligent decision with that.

Along with the idea of being intentional with resources, is also the idea of preparedness. Participant 7 shares that they would like to get to a point where their building has a library of resources, already prepared, that teachers can take and immediately implement with their students. Participant 7 shared the following resource that they would like to prepare for their teachers:

...I want to eventually get to the place to where we have kits already ready. And so you're just like, "You see this, this will work. Let's try this." And we give it to you...There's nothing that you have to search out, you don't have to laminate...You don't have to do all this groundwork before you can just do it. You're just ready to go...Preparedness would that be part of it.

While having appropriate curriculum and resources to address the needs of students was important to the participants, they also felt that being intentional and deliberate in how districts organized and used their resources were important so that maximum resources were going towards student services.

Need for More Differentiated and Culturally Appropriate Assessments

The issues that participants have raised about general education instruction and RTI can lead teams to feel that, absent reliable intervention and progress monitoring, they must lean on assessment during the SLD identification process. Participant 2 said:

...[I]t's just not a lot of opportunity and resources to be able to do interventions the way you would like to. So sometimes you just have to test because if you

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don't know and you don't have the resources to find out or distinguish [whether]

it's [a] disability or [whether the students] just haven't been exposed to it.

However, even with this perceived need of moving to assessment for SLD identification

purposes, participants had concerns about assessment resources made available in their

districts.

Two participants, Participant 2 and Participant 7, both felt like they had the ability

to purchase assessments they needed, which they felt was a benefit to their situation. For

example, Participant 2 shared:

> …[W]e are free to order a lot of different things. For me, I like to personally have
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> a wide array of things because one test isn't going to fit the mold for every single
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> kid. And we have different tests throughout the district…But I think it's better to
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> have an assortment, especially for kids in the urban setting because…things like
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> Wechsler, they're very just heavy language based and it doesn't really show what
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> these kids are capable of doing.

The ability to order assessment tools was not available to most participants,

though. Participant 5 shared the exact opposite experience, saying, "Like we don't…, and

I think in a lot of districts, not just ours, it's like there's these basic assessments and

everyone gets the same assessments. It doesn't matter what the referral question is."

Participant 1 also shared that they primarily gave the students the same test battery. They

shared, "Well there are certain go-to's we have in [School District]. Part of that is

determined based on the resources we have." Participant 4 agreed, stating, "Honestly,

I've looked a lot to what the district has. 'Cause we don't have a lot of variety and tests."

Even though participants reported using what they have, they do not always feel comfortable with the assessments at their disposal. For example, Participant 1 shared that they felt that their students exhibit executive functioning needs that could be better measured by an assessment tool that specifically measured that skill. When they asked their supervisor about the possibility of purchasing the assessment tool, the following occurred:

> I've been asking for that. I'm like, "Hey, it's a new test. Looks specifically at executive functioning." She says, "What does it do that the BASC isn't doing?" And, "We have all these social emotional rating scales, and now you want another one? And can the district afford that? I don't hear any of the other psychologists thinking that's as important." ...I think that would be useful. But again, because of the lack of resource, I haven't been able to secure that instrument.

Many participants also brought up concerns about not having access to less culturally biased assessment tools, especially cognitive measures. Participant 1 shared, "My director, every year is, is shy about buying more cognitive assessments 'cause she'll say like, 'Don't you already have an intelligence assessment?'" Participant 4 also stated, "I know that there are some more culturally diverse IQ tests out there, but I [have] no access." Participant 6 reported that they felt that their supervisor would not support purchasing more culturally appropriate assessments, saying:

> I don't think the district would be willing to pay for such assessments. [laughs] And they'd probably be like, "Well, you've been doing it with this stuff for this long, so you should probably just continue doing that." I don't think they'd really understand the reasoning behind getting different assessments.

This issue was so highly problematic for one of the participants, that they purchased, out of their own pocket, a number of assessments that they felt would better meet their students' needs. This included a more culturally sensitive cognitive measure as well as academic achievement assessments with narrow focus to help pinpoint which aspects of reading needed intervention support. When asked if they felt that their supervisor would consider purchasing more appropriate assessments for their district, Participant 7 said, "No, that's why I bought them [laughs]."

Within this theme, participants expressed concerns about the resources their schools have at their disposal. Participants felt that they and their team members tried their best to use what they had to provide services to students and conduct evaluations. However, they felt that issues with resources not only impacted the SLD identification process, but the educational system as a whole. Namely, participants worried about the general education curriculums used in their schools, the lack of resources to appropriately implement RTI, the impact that fewer resources had on educators, and whether schools were being intentional in how they used their limited resources.

Theme Nine: Need for Greater Understanding of Experiences within the Urban Community

"[S]chool districts are publicly funded, and they are part of the community. And I do think sometimes they act in isolation of the community." - Participant 1

Participants shared about stresses that their students need to "filter through" because of their experiences of living in under-resourced urban environments. Additionally, they found it important to understand parents' experiences within their

community. Many participants expressed the need for greater community outreach that was responsive to students and their families.

"Filter[ing] Through" Stresses Impacting Learning

During their interviews, participants noted several factors that impact both learning and SLD identification within their under-resourced urban communities. This included student transiency, attendance, exposure to skills, and trauma.

Participant 4 shared concerns about not knowing what instruction a student has received if they are transient. This was an issue for both students who moved in from another district as well as students who moved to different schools within their district. Participant 5 also shared these concerns and talked about how common move in referrals are. They said:

> ...I have started 25 new cases this year. Fifteen of them are...planning for SLD,
> and of those, half of the children have moved or were recently transferred in. So,
> yeah, it's a big "Okay, why are we going right to special education if we haven't
> really done some solid intervention?" We don't really know what they've gotten.

In addition to student transfers, many participants shared that "a lot of our kids struggle with attendance" (Participant 7). When talking about environmental concerns, Participant 6 shared that "attendance is a big one." Concerns about attendance has implications for the SLD identification process. When looking at student data to determine whether a student has responded to intervention, Participant 2 shared the following experience:

> ...[I]f you're looking at factors such as attendance and kids aren't coming to the
> school, well, you weren't at school to get the intervention that you needed to make

the progress. So is it that you really still don't know [the academic content]. Or you just didn't come to school?

Participant 6 shared that, despite the fact that there are serious concerns about attendance, some team members still want those students to be evaluated to determine if they qualify for special education services under SLD. When asked to initiate an assessment under these circumstances, they disagreed with their team members. Participant 6 said, "But that was more for a lack of attendance. Like, there was this [student] hat missed 85 days of school. And I'm like, 'No, this is not happening. It's lack of instruction.'"

Students' exposure to skills is another factor that impacts the SLD identification process for the participants. Participants reflected on exposure to language and exposure to academic instruction during their interviews. For example, Participant 2 said, "a lot of those kids haven't been exposed to some of the language, so it looks as if they don't know anything. But they might know more than what you think." Participant 7 shared that they often see students come in without requisite language and academic skills but often see them grow when given access to those skills within the classroom. Participant 7 said:

> We notice a lot of kids come in, not being exposed to quite a bit and then it's like, "Whoa." You always get the beginning of the year, "Oh, I've got a kid for you. Whoa, whoa, whoa." And then as they get in school and start to get their routines, the language, a lot more exposure to the material, you really...start to see a lot of them flourish.

Participant 5 also emphasized that students needed an opportunity to learn before even suspecting SLD as a possible cause for learning difficulties, saying:

So that's why I think it's so important to get this intervention data...to give them some of those opportunities to learn. And I think even if you just do some of the most basic interventions with them, you can see that...[i]t doesn't matter if you're economically disadvantaged...if you are given some intervention, some sound interventions and...getting that time to work on those interventions.

Lack of exposure to certain skills can make it difficult to parse out whether a student meets the definition of SLD. This is magnified when many of the students in your school are having a similar experience. Like we saw earlier with concerns about the general education curriculum, when the majority of students are not exposed to certain skills prior to starting school, it can cause the majority of students to look as though they are functioning at a Tier III level instead of Tier I, effectively turning the RTI triangle on its head. Participant 2 shared that the lack of academic exposure also makes it difficult to identify SLD, saying:

...[I]t's really hard to determine at times what's a learning disability and what's not a learning disability when most of your triangle are people who just haven't had exposure. So mostly everyone looks low, but they may not be low, truly low.

Finally, participants shared that many of their students have social/emotional needs related to their lived experiences that impact their learning. Participant 2 said:

I just have noticed that kids come in with a lot more trauma...[I]t may not be a learning disability, and they may not be low, but they come in a lot with a lot more baggage of things that you have to filter through before you get to the learning part.

Participant 3 also sees a lot of social/emotional needs that are going unmet for their students. They felt that their school needed to have more resources to proactively learn about their students' lives and stressors, whether through structured screenings or informal assessments provided by mental health providers because "most kids have something going on that you wouldn't think was going on."

Participants shared that their students often experience environmental factors unique to low-income urban environments that they need to "filter through" before they can attend to their learning. Particularly, they experience issues of transiency, low attendance, limited exposure to skills, and experiences of trauma at a higher rate than students with more resources. However, the participants felt that, in addition to student experiences within their community, parent experiences were also an important in understanding the experiences and needs of the community they serve.

Parent Experiences within Their Community

Students' parents also have their own experiences that can impact their children's learning. For example, Participant 7 shared that parents may not be as available as parents in suburban districts due to other demands on their time. Of parent participant, Participant 7 said:

> I think parent participation, whether it's due to some parents working multiple jobs, living in multigenerational homes. And so things are a little bit more chaotic. And so homework may not occur all the time or be a priority. Or even, um, trying to get parents in or getting them on the same page.

In addition to financial pressures, they may also encounter stress due to experiencing racism. Participant 1 stated that there is "a lot of racism that our families in our

community are dealing with." Because of these inequities, Participant 2 shared that generations of families that have lived in the area have had unsatisfactory school outcomes, saying, "...[T]hose parents have probably not have the best experiences from school...[I]t's like a cycle. They didn't have good experiences. Their parents didn't have good experience."

While educators tend to focus on their students, it is important to understand their families' experiences withing the community and schools. It is especially significant when considering it along with lack of supports within schools and community; it highlights the need for community outreach that is done in a meaningful and impactful way.

Need for Community Outreach

Precisely because of the inequities that students and their families experience, Participant 1 felt that "[w]e need to bridge the divide between parents and the education system that might've failed them when they were kids 'cause they may not trust what we're doing in school." One way to start bridging the divide is to provide community outreach as well as resources to students. Participant 1 said:

So now we're dealing with a bunch of impoverished people in [Name of Community] who don't necessarily believe in the system because it failed them. So you want kids to come to school, you want kids to be properly represented within the district that they're supposed to be going to school in, we need to do more community outreach and we need systems in place to provide resources for kids.

They go on to say that schools can do a better job of initiating community outreach. Participant 1 said, "I think providing more community resources...[S]chool districts are publicly funded, and they are part of the community. And I do think sometimes they act in isolation of the community." Further, acts of community outreach could help improve opportunities for students who otherwise may not have access to them. They felt that reaching out to the community could help address some of the negative factors that parents and students experience. Participant 1 said:

> And I think that would, make things more equitable across districts too because we talk about how family life is not always the greatest, and parents don't always have the resources. Well, school districts can take it upon themselves to do more in the community, I think.

> Participant 6 also shared that their district could be doing much more for their community. They felt the focus should be resources for early intervention so that students would be able to have access to pre-academic skills that are important as they move into kindergarten. They recommended developing early intervention programs and partnering with other organizations within the community to let parents know about programming. Participant 6 shared that there are many organizations that work with young children. Organizations such as libraries, pediatrician offices, and Help Me Grow could act as a referral source. Programming would act as a way to give access to important language and academic skills needed to succeed in school.

It's not that there is no community outreach happening in any of the districts, but rather that participants felt districts could be doing much more to address their families' needs. Instead of districts "act[ing] in isolation," programming could build on existing

programs and partnerships that the schools already have to achieve results.
Understanding the experiences and stresses that their families experience and recognizing
a need for community outreach can help create a school culture that is responsive to its
community.

Theme Ten: Need for School Culture That is Responsive to Their Community

"It's like, well, when you believe in your kids, the kids believe they can do more
…" – Participant 1

Because of the unique set of historical and structural forces that students and
families often encounter in under-resourced urban setting, many participants felt that
schools need to create a school culture that is responsive to the needs of the community.
This not only means making a welcoming environment that is supportive and conducive
to student learning for all, but also creating an environment where parents feel understood
and supported so they can better support their child.

School Culture for Students

Participants narrated ways in which their schools need to improve school culture
for the sake of their students. Participant 2 shared that while there are teachers who
promote a positive school experience, there are others who do not, which has a
detrimental impact on students, especially students who are having difficulty mastering
their coursework. Participant 2 provided the following example:

…I think some teachers are very positive and they give those kids encouragement,
compared to some teachers they just kinda write kids off as like, you're just not
going to make it. And so even their tone and how they talk to those kids who
were lower and…instilling confidence in them to say like, "You can do it…[Y]ou

are not your environment and you can make it, you can do this." And then you have some of those teachers who, even for the younger kids and the smaller kid, you've already wrote them off as like you're not gonna make it. You're never going to be anything.

Participant 2 went on to say that not only do teachers directly impact students when they are insensitive to their needs, but they also create an environment where other students feel like they can look down on their classmates.

> ...[T]hese are ways that you don't think you're impacting these kids by yelling at them or embarrassing them. But if you instill in them that they're going to be nothing, you treat them like nothing, then how you treat them is how the students around them are going to treat them as well. So just be more cognizant of how you treat the kids around other kids because they're going to start to stand out because you make them stand out.

When school culture that is not responsive to students' needs is allowed to continue, it can create other issues that did not previously exist. What started as learning issues can change into behavior issues within the classroom to deflect attention from learning challenges. This is especially true when teachers interact with the student in a negative manner. Participant 2 continues that it is necessary to provide responsive school culture to meet learning needs in a supportive way so that learning and behavior issues are not compounded by the school environment, saying:

> ...[W]e have to really be better of not making these kids who have learning problems that may evolve into behavior problems, stop making them stand out as much...[B]ecause maybe their environment of being in that particular class isn't

the best place for them to grow and flourish. Could they grow and flourish in another class with...a teacher with a different personality?

The notion of "grow and flourish" was also evident in Participant 1's narrative. Here, the focus was on the role of teachers in creating a classroom setting that challenges and supports learning. In this way, Participant 1 shared about the importance of believing in students' ability to do difficult things:

I think probably rigor is a big issue, though. I think a lot of our teachers are not rigorous enough. And they want to try and help children at their levels. But I'm a big believer in rigor, and it can come off as uncaring because it's like, this kid's having such difficulty just grasping this concept. You want me to try to do this concept? It's like, well, when you believe in your kids, the kids believe they can do more, and I think that's a social/emotional aspect to it that they're not necessarily seeing the benefits of...So I think sometimes we are targeting areas a little too much that are at the child's level, and we should be pushing them more to perform at a higher level...

Participants felt that fostering a positive school climate was important to students being able to experience success within the school. In part, this was to support children's ability to learn and participate in their classes. It was also essential in modeling an inclusive classroom to the other students. While positive school culture was important for students, participants went on to share that it's also important to consider parents' experiences with school when addressing school climate.

Considering Parents' Experiences While Cultivating a Positive School Culture

A positive school culture is just as important to meet parents' needs to support their child's learning. Participant 2 shared how focusing on a school's environment from a parent perspective can address their experiences within the community. They acknowledged that for many of their families, there is a generational cycle of poor school experiences. Because of that, Participant 2 felt that it was imperative of creating positive experiences for current students and their parents, saying:

> [W]e have to make school a good experience for their kids. So maybe if they see that school is a good experience for their kids, they'll be more likely to come in, they'll be more likely to hear us out. So even if the kid is struggling and not really doing that well, if they see that their kid is surrounded by people who really care about their growth, they'll probably be more open to coming in or asking for help or asking for resources to get their kids the help that they need. So, I think just in terms of environment, you have to really create a welcoming environment that people don't feel like they're being judged.

Participant 5 also felt that coming from a place of respect and understanding that parents want the best for their children is important to school culture. Participant 5 said:

> ...I know a lot of economically disadvantaged parents that if you give them the right stuff...they will do those. I t's not a function of money. There's some economically stable parents that are maybe not doing those things with their children either. I think a lot of parents want to know how to work with their kids. They want some information for at home...they want to know how to do it, and they want to be able to help them.

Participant 5 shared that some of the teacher they work with have found ways to partner with parents to provide them with the knowledge and materials that they need. However, this was not a consistent, systematic effort within the school building or the district as a whole. Participant 5 shared the benefits that they have observed with fostering a collaborative approach where parents feel that they are a meaningful member of their child's team:

> …[A] couple of the teachers themselves send home packets and…it's called helpful homework. So it's not homework. It's just things that they can do at home. And…what they do is, they spell out exactly what they want. Like just the sight words. And this is how I want you to do the sight words. Here's a technique called the folding in technique, and this is how you apply it to this. You're only doing 10 words at a time and do seven familiar words in three unfamiliar words. And they really lay out the instructions and parents love that, they love it.

Beyond teaching intervention strategies for parents to try at home, those teachers also taught parents progress monitoring approaches. Participant 5 goes on to describe:

> And they have taught parents like here's a chart…count up the number and then that number goes here…[A]nd it's great information for the parent because they can see [growth]…And I think that the parents really appreciate that too. They can see that, and they feel like, "Oh, I'm making some progress with my child because you know, I am able to see that. He does know more."

Participant 2 reported that they also try to include parents in intervention plans during the RTI process. Participant 2 said:

[F]or our RTI process, we always give the parent a copy of the intervention plan

to say, these are the things that we're going to work on, but these are also

something that we're going to give you to work on at home...

Fostering parent engagement as a member of MDTs is also important once a

student is suspected of having a disability. The school should let parents know that they

are truly an important part of their child's team and encourage them to take an active role.

Participant 1 said:

I work hard to educate the parents and empower them so that they understand that

they are a part of the process. This isn't something the school is doing. This is

something we are doing, because the parent is integral to the process. And I think

for a lot of parents that could be surprising because they think, you know, you're

the school, you're supposed to be doing this. It's like, no, you're the parents.

You're the most important person in this process. We need your insight and

expertise.

When sharing ideas related to this theme, participants emphasized the importance

of creating a positive school culture that is responsive to the unique lived experiences of

their students and their families. It is especially important to consider historical and

structural forces that students and families often encounter in under-resourced urban

setting. This means making a welcoming environment that supports students, in addition

to creating an environment where parents feel understood and supported so they can

better support their child. It also means fostering confidence in the school and

knowledge about the special education process so that parents can fully participate as part

of their child's MDT.

Theme Eleven: Ambiguity of Student Data

> "I would say like half the kids we qualify as SLD are not SLD. At least half.
>
> They're poor." - Participant 1

The participants noted that, in addition to concerns about services provided within the schools, environmental factors that many of the students experience can make it difficult for MDTs to interpret student data and, ultimately, determine whether a student has a SLD. MDTs are most comfortable identifying SLD when multiple data points converge and there are few confounding factors in a student's history. Participant 4 shared their process of interpreting the data:

> I'm looking at attendance...Looking at their history of measures of academic
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> progress, which is universal screening. Looking at progress monitoring from
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> things like AIMSweb. And then I use that to kind of put into the context of what
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> my own scores are. So I'm looking for convergence...The information is
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> converging as a developmental disability. There's been history of intervention,
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> kid's had access to intervention, all that. And then try to see if it converges with
>
> any processing difficulties, converges with anything in the history.

Participant 7 spoke about the importance of finding consensus among other MDT members who have different areas of expertise. They shared that they felt more comfortable when a similar student profile emerged between their results as school psychologists and the results of the occupational therapist and speech/language pathologist, saying:

...I think with cases like that, when there is clear language deficit and orthographic processing in which you see it across the board with the speech path, myself and the OT, I kind of feel like those are the more clear-cut ones.

Additionally, participants also found cases to be clear when they ruled out environmental factors as a cause for learning difficulties. Participant 2 shared that when they know families well, and they are involved with the school, they feel more comfortable ruling out exclusionary factors. Participant 2 provided the following example:

I know that he's getting help at home. The relative is very, very active in their lives. Even reached out to us about concerns. So it was like the relative is making more of a proactive approach to get to get help for the students. So I'm like, no, this is not one of those cases where I could say it's just due to disadvantage. Like your family is doing everything that they need to do. We're doing everything that we need to do here. So kind of just one of those clear-cut things.

Participant 3 also said that it was helpful when they could rule out other areas of need and see that "nothing else is getting in the way..." of obtaining the academic skill.

While participants sometimes felt that they came across cases that they felt confident with, that was not always the case. Participant 2 said:

[S]ometimes it's not always clear, especially for some of our kids...coming [with] other backgrounds and a lot of home life stuff...[Their behavior] may look...like [an] attention [issue, but is] not really an attention issue...[It's,] 'I'm thinking about something at home and I'm just kind of off in the clouds.'

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Environmental factors directly impact SLD identification practices. In the state of Ohio, environmental or economic disadvantage is an exclusionary factor on the ETR. However, this can be problematic for teams where many students face economic hardship. When considering whether learning difficulties are primarily a result of environmental or economic disadvantage, Participant 2 shared:

...I feel like that's a very unfair question...Because I feel like when you're in a lower income area, like you can really check that box for 99% of your kids, and I don't think it's a very fair box to have because it puts us in a very ethical kind of situation of like I really could check this box and say, "No, you don't qualify." But if I check this box and say no you don't qualify, then 99% of you won't qualify or get any kind of help.

They often question whether a student has a SLD or if other factors are impacting learning; however, even with reflecting, Participant 2 found it difficult to know for certain, saying, "...is it economic disadvantage? And like I said, working in an urban setting you can pretty much always leave that box unchecked because is it economic disadvantage? You'll never really know.

Participant 1 shared similar concerns of the impact of environmental or economic disadvantage's impact on the SLD identification process. They found that "sometimes it's very difficult to tell what is what..." They also shared that they did not feel that most of the students they identified under the category of SLD actually had a learning disability, saying, "I would say like half the kids we qualify as SLD are not SLD. At least half. They're poor." Participant 1 further said, "You have poverty disability, you don't have a learning disability..."

Participants provided information about environmental factors that act as confounding variables throughout the SLD identification process throughout this theme. This can make it difficult for MDTs to clearly determine whether student underachievement is due to a SLD or those environmental factors. MDTs struggle with this question, and it is directly related to the identification process. The state of Ohio requires teams to rule out environmental or economic disadvantage as a primary reason for learning difficulties. In districts where the majority of students face such disadvantages, it is nearly impossible to eliminate it as a possibility. Given many concerns that participants have shared about the identification process, what is the motivation to continue to refer students for evaluations?

Theme Twelve: Motivation for Special Education Identification: "People are Pushing to Test, Test, Test"

"Have they had adequate instruction? I would say no, [laughs] but people are pushing to test, test, test." – Participant 5

Given the many challenges to the SLD identification process that participants reported above, many members of MDTs still refer students to go through the special education evaluation process. Participant 5 shared that despite concerns regarding environmental factors and services delivery in the schools, which they feel would indicate that students have not had adequate instruction, "people are pushing to test, test, test." Participants attributed the push toward testing to the following influences: wanting to get help for students, staffing concerns, and getting students removed from their roster.

"They Need Help"

Overwhelmingly, participants brought up the idea of qualifying students for special education as a way to get them help that they need. This is likely due to the concerns that have been presented about the intervention systems in place at their schools. When asked why they felt the team found it important to identify students with SLD, Participant 7 said:

Honestly, [laughs] I think special education brings the consistency that we've already kind of pointed out that is lacking elsewhere. [Special education students] are legally assigned to a person and that person legally has to provide services for X amount of minutes focusing on your areas of weakness.

Participant 7 additionally stated that this focus on getting students additional supports created pressure for MDTs to qualify students who may not have a SLD but need intervention services saying, "And I think there is a pressure on identifying kids as SLD, as a result of kids needing help. And they may be a slow learner and not necessarily have a learning disability."

While Participant 6 also shared that they felt that some teachers expressed that they were referring students for an evaluation to get them additional support, Participant 6 questioned, given concerns about resources and how instruction was being implemented, whether special education would yield positive supports for students who had not received appropriate intervention services prior to referral. Participant 6 share that a in a recent meeting, a teacher told them, "We just want to get him help. We just want to get him help." However, Participant 6 wondered, "Um, like, I don't know how that equates to help." Similarly, Participant 4 shared that they also felt that teachers

thought that special education would provide students additional help, but in reality, having a robust and healthy tiered system for interventions would be able to address student concerns. Participant 4 said:

> ...[I]t's related to that idea that they need help. And then the idea that we have an RTI model going, they are getting help...[M]aybe we're not correctly matching their instructional needs to what's available, let's talk about that. But doesn't mean that they're a learning-disabled student.

"Concerns about [Filling] Staffing [Positions]"

When talking about resources, many participants shared concerns about staffing, including large classroom sizes, high caseloads for intervention specialists, and not enough people to provide individualized intervention services. Some shared how their staffing had been directly affected by lack of resources. For example, Participant 3 shared that "our intervention specialists are sometimes taking on caseloads that are beyond the legal maximum." However, others shared that staffing is directly related to the numbers of students who are identified. Participant 4 provided the following illustration of this issue:

> I think that because staffing is done by number of special ed students identified, you never get rid of this push for, "Let's call them as many of them LD or whatever they are as we can." Because it gets us more staff. In fact, had a principal tell me this year, I need at least five more kids identified by the end of the year. And me saying, "That's not what we're gonna do."

Participant 4 went on to describe how this sets up situations where they feel pressured to identify students, which can cause strain within the team:

But then I had teachers come to me and say, "I hear we may not get another intervention specialist, we may be denied another intervention specialist." So it's like there's that pressure that's ridiculous pressure... And that pressure I haven't felt for a while, but that's coming back because they're denying more and more special education teachers.

General Education Teachers Want to "Get Them Out" of Their Classroom

Participants shared that they felt another motivation for going through the special education evaluation process was so that students would no longer be the responsibility of the general education teacher. Participant 2 indicated that they wished teachers understood the special education process in more detail because "[t]his is not like you're getting rid of these kids." Participant 6 shared that they also got the sense that general education teachers sometimes wanted students to be identified as special education students so they would no longer be in their classroom. When asked about MDTs' motivations to identify students, Participant 6 said:

> Probably to get kids out of their gen ed classrooms. [Laughs] And to take responsibility off their shoulders and, "Oh, if they're in special ed then the intervention specialist is in charge of them." That seems to be the general feeling I get. And that's with every district I've been in.

Participant 6 went on to share that they felt this occurred, in part, because of teacher evaluation systems implemented by the state, "[a]nd if kids aren't growing, then it makes the teacher look like they're not doing their job." Participant 4 shared that they also felt that teachers wanted to shift responsibility of students to an intervention specialist. While some of that is due to no longer wanting to be the primary responsible

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teacher, it also appears that many teachers want to be able to focus on other students in their class. Both are directly impacted by the teacher evaluation system. Participant 4 shared:

> I think that there's still that idea that if they are a problem in my class, I want them out. Somebody else is smarter than me, more patient than me. There's this belief that they don't have the skills to do it or if they do have the skills to do that, they simply do not want to. Because they have 28 other kids that are demanding of their attention, and I get that. But I feel like it is a matter of let that kid be somebody else's [responsibility?]. So if that kid, and especially in line with how teachers are evaluated, it's like put them on somebody else's list...

Despite many concerns about the SLD identification process, many students continued to be referred for special education evaluations. Throughout this theme, participants indicated that there were several apparent causes for this "push" for an evaluation, including wanting to get help for students, staffing concerns, and getting students removed from their roster. Even after completing the ETR process, many participants questioned its utility.

Theme Thirteen: Questioning the Utility of the ETR: "It Doesn't Really Mean Anything"

> "So that idea that just because we can put a number on it doesn't mean it's that important, that you're really looking at the whole thing. And numbers are just a means of communicating. And yes, it does mean something if somebody's in the tail versus in the middle, but does that 82 really mean anything?" – Participant 4

Even though participants regularly engage in conducting ETRs to determine whether students qualify for special education services, they often questioned the utility of the ETR. Participants expressed concerns about cognitive assessments, indicating that they don't find the scores they yield especially useful in their evaluation. Additionally, many participants shared that they felt the ETR process served as a "rubberstamp"; they felt that they were expected to qualify all students who were referred for an evaluation. Further, they felt that the category of SLD was often used in place of other categories that more appropriately matched students' needs because it is seen as a more acceptable term than other categories. While MDTs put in a lot of time and energy into completing the ETR document, at the end of the process, many participants felt that the information within the document was not being used. Indeed, several doubted that anyone read them at all.

Concerns Regarding Assessment Scores: "People Aren't Numbers"

As we saw earlier, school psychologists presented concerns about the accessibility they had to various assessment tools that they felt would be more culturally sensitive for their students. But when thinking about the utility of the ETR process, they also questioned what meaning the assessments they conduct brings to the MDTs. This was especially true for cognitive assessment. Participant 4 shared:

> …I still look at IQ, although it has become increasingly less important to me over the years. And honestly at this point I'm just looking to see if they have any indication of…[an] intellectual disability…I'm not going to let it go, but…the scores have been increasingly less important…

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Participant 3 also did not find a lot of meaning from cognitive assessments, but continues to do them because it is an expectation in their district. Participant 3 said the following about cognitive measures: "I do it because people like to see it. You know, I don't know that I usually get a lot of good information from it...So it's there. I do it, but I'm not a big fan of it." Participant 6 agreed that cognitive assessment took less of a priority than it did during their training. Participant 6 provided the following example of how they complete Part 3 of the ETR and the uncertainty it causes them:

> So I'll maybe write down like, "So-and-so's verbal comprehension is significantly stronger than their non-verbal." But it doesn't really mean anything. Like I remember in my training, I thought that was so important, and then, I saw another professional development that said the overall IQ is more important than the different areas. So I'm like, "What am I even doing?" [laughs].

Participants shared that numbers provided through scores can be a way to communicate information. If a student has extremely high or low scores, that might be something of note. But most students fall somewhere in between, and if those scores are not in the tails of the normal curve, they question how much meaning they provide. Participant 4 stated:

> So that idea that just because we can put a number on it doesn't mean it's that important, that you're really looking at the whole thing. And numbers are just a means of communicating. And yes, it does mean something if somebody's in the tail versus in the middle, but does that 82 really mean anything?"

While numbers may potentially be helpful in certain situations to communicate meaning, Participant 4 shared an additional reason they find scores from cognitive measures to be

less important in their practice is that scores do not represent a wholistic understanding of their students, sharing:

> …As well as that kind of spiritual sense of people aren't numbers. And I think when I was first trained, I was really, really focused on the numbers…I've become less attached to the numbers and more attached to like the whole situation.

Participant 4 felt that was important because an over reliance on numbers, especially those that might not "really mean anything" could impact outcomes for students, saying, "Like if we have an iffy kid, putting them in a program may not be the best thing because it may actually handicap them more in some ways depending on what it is."

ETRs as a "Rubber Stamp"

As shown above when discussing motivation for evaluations referrals, many participants felt pressure to identify students as having SLDs. When considering ETR process, several participants shared that regardless of the MDTs motivation to refer students for evaluations, they felt that the expectation is to identify all students who are referred. Participant 6 shared, "It seems like anyone who gets referred qualifies in our district [laughs]. That sounds really bad, but, yeah." Participant 4 had similar experiences with this expectation and said, "I think that referral automatically led to being diagnosed. It was like you just rubber stamped it." At certain buildings within their district, "you had some [teachers]…that were like, 'You will make them LD.'" Participant 6 similarly shared that members of their MDT seemed to expect certain outcomes, regardless of what was presented in the student's ETR, stating, "I felt like my entire report was pointless, and they already have their mind made up before the meeting even happens."

Perceptions of Disability Categories: "Let's Call It What It Is"

Participants also expressed that they felt that SLD, as a category, was over-used instead of other categories that more closely represented the needs of the students. This was reportedly done because individuals find it easier to accept that students have a SLD than other categories like Emotional Disturbance (ED), Intellectual Disability (ID), or Autism (AU), that carry a heavier connotations for some. Participant 4 shared, "It's [SLD] always been the more acceptable choice than some of the other definitions on there. So that's where some pressure comes in too." They later went on to say, "I just think that, for years, it's become the most acceptable definition of anything that's wrong with the student. Always better to be that than it is to be anything else."

Participant 5 also felt that MDTs used SLD instead of other disability categories that might be more appropriate because the term "was more palatable" and parents were more willing to accept it. They provided several examples of this occurring within their practice. Sometimes they felt that their colleagues were opting to use the SLD identification category because they felt that it would be easier to share with the parents. Participant 5 said:

> When you're testing someone, and they have these really low adaptive scores and really low cognitive scores, are we really talking about a learning disability? ...[T]his child has an intellectual disability...I know you don't want to say that to a parent. It's easier to say it's a learning disability, but did it get this child the proper things that they need? Like let's just call it what it is.

Participant 5 also shared that sometimes other identification categories are not used

because of the type of assessment to which parents will consent. Participant 5 provided

the following example of this type of case:

> I had a child who was clearly on the spectrum, but parents said, "I don't want any
>
> of that testing for autism done with my child. Learning disability's what I want
>
> you to put at the top of the planning page." And those are really hard.

> Reduced stigma does not only occur for the SLD category. Participant 7 feels that

Other Health Impairment (OHI) can often be seen as more acceptable than ED. They

shared several examples of wresting with identification categories within their MDTs:

> [F]or me personally, sometimes there's difficulty with OHI and ED...I think the
>
> stigma that emotional disturbance brings, I think there are a lot of OHI kids who
>
> could be ED. But then you think of ED and it's like, "Oh...oh, no." Like you
>
> think of ED and you think of more extremes. And on the other side of that, I have
>
> fought for kids who the team wants them to be ED. And I personally feel like the
>
> child had ADHD, and then there was some environmental things going on to
>
> where, like, if you think about this situation, the way that they're responding to
>
> that trauma or their situation is not uncommon for someone [laughs] who would
>
> be going through that...[W]hat you would expect?

ETRs That "Nobody Reads"

Even with all of the other concerns related to how participants think about the

ETR is used, many participants felt that the MDT goes through the identification process,

but no one uses the information from the report once students qualified. Participant 5 did

not feel that IEP services were provided based on the students' profiles. The IEPs

reportedly do not match the areas of needs reported in the ETR and students with similar profiles receive different services that vary in terms of frequency, intensity, or service minutes.

Participant 3 felt that "you're going to be writing ETRs that nobody reads." In terms of compliance, their district and the state do not seem to be concerned with the content of ETRs, but rather whether technical items are completed correctly. Participant 3 said, "'Cause in the end, that's the only thing that matters. And our job is the dates, and did we write the right words in the right places at the right time?" To emphasize this point, they went on to say, "I always feel like I can write my ETR in Greek and nobody would know as long as the signatures are there and the date's right." Participant 6 agreed, sharing, "I feel like nobody reads what I write unless there's a real problem. Or they wanna move a kid to a more restrictive environment."

As seen through the quotes within this theme, participants often question the utility of the ETR. In addition to not having resources to attain the most culturally sensitive assessment tools, participants indicated that they did not find cognitive scores, in general, to be especially meaningful in their evaluation. Further, many expressed that the process was essentially viewed as a hoop for the MDT to jump through to get a student qualified for special education services; participants felt as though they were expected to "rubberstamp" all evaluation for every referral. Once the assessment was completed, and the team had to determine under which category a student qualified, participants shared that SLD was often used instead of other categories that were more representative of student needs. SLD was viewed as a more acceptable of "palatable" term than some of the others. MDTs put in a lot of time and energy into completing the

ETR document; however, at the end of the process, many participants felt that the information within the document was not being used to learn about the student or drive instruction. This was the final theme included in the Context of Sense-Making section. Below, themes related to the policy design portion of Spillane's sense-making framework will be presented.

The Sense-Making of Policy

The final aspect of sense-making is related to policy design (Spillane, 2002). Things like study of past policies, policy language, and resource allocation all impact the ways in which school psychologists make sense of the SLD identification process. Themes fourteen through eighteen focused on issues with the definition of SLD, how special education policy is inconsistently applied within and between school districts, the need for clearer parameters surrounding SLD identification, and the need to advocacy to make policy changes at the state level. These themes provide information about the policy design with which school psychologists make sense of identifying SLD as part of their MDTs.

Theme Fourteen: Definition of SLD

"There's really no clear-cut process in how to make a student eligible for SLD."

- Participant 6

Participants shared that the definition of SLD itself was a concern for them in the sense-making process. They felt that the written definition was vague and left a lot to interpretation. Additionally, they also felt that the guidance they received from the state and supervisors within their districts regarding SLD identification was inconsistent.

Needing "A More Operational" Definition

The first issue surrounding the SLD definition is its vagueness. When talking about the definition of SLD, participants were referring to the definition provided by ODE (2014):

> Specific learning disability means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in the understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia...Specific learning disability does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of intellectual disability, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

Referring the definition, Participant 4 said, "Well, the federal definition is ridiculous, as far as I'm concerned. It's never been, like, helpful." Participant 4 went on to describe the different areas of the definition with which they take issue:

> It's too broad...[B]asically it defines a language-based disorder, but operationally you don't need to necessarily prove that there's a language basis to it. So, let's start with that...[T]he part that's about it affects reading, writing, mathematical calculations, alright get that. Then there's that part that just kind of throws in everything but the kitchen sink. It could be minimal brain dysfunction, like it could be dyslexia... I can't stand that part of it. They're just, I think, trying to give a nod to previous terms that have been used or terms that are used medically...I

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don't think it really ferrets out the processing parts of it. What does it mean to have a processing deficit? And then...Oh, I hate that one word that's at the beginning of the definition, an "imperfect ability." An imperfect ability has always really aggravated me because imperfect ability is like completely undefinable, and it pretty much describes the population.

Participant 6 felt that using the guidance by the state, "there's really no clear-cut process in how to make a student eligible for SLD." Specific to the SLD definition, they also expressed lack of clarity, saying that "it's general or generic and also convoluted at the same time." Similar to Participant 4, Participant 6 also felt that there were parts of the definition of which they were uncertain of its meaning. Participant 6 said:

> ...[T]here's something in the process of the brain that prohibits a child from learning something. If I could figure out what that process is [laughs], that would be great. What does that mean? I think that would be more helpful because it's so vague and so general. A little more guidance in that regard would be nice.

The crux of the issue is that the definition is not written in a way that MDT members can easily understand what each part of the definition truly means and how they can apply it to their practice. Participant 2 shared that they did not feel that the state gave clear operational definitions of how to make sure MDTs were compliant with the law, and shared, "...[I]t just really goes back to the state really doesn't give you clear definitions of what they're expecting...[T]hey're not telling you how to do it appropriately." Participant 4 also felt that having a more operationalized definition would be helpful to MDTs, saying:

What I think would be helpful is to have it be a more operational definition. I

think that it would help to say some of the things that clinicians look for and

really define those out. That this is a kid whose intelligence has been ruled out to

be in the deficit range, or whatever they want to say. That it describes a student

who has been given adequate instruction, adequate intervention using some of

those RTI factors, yet still doesn't show a rate of improvement that shows like it's

going to close the gap...And then I think that if they want to look at the continued

processing basis of it, then that's where they can...kind of say, that 'It's thought

that this is caused by some sort of a processing deficit.' But I think that those

parts of the definition becomes secondary to the operational parts of the

definition.

Inconsistency of Guidance

In addition to having concerns about how to apply the SLD definition as currently

written, participants also shared concerns about the inconsistency of guidance they

receive from the state and their districts. For example, when attending trainings provided

by their State Support Team (SST), Participant 4 often felt that presenters did not want to

provide answers to specific questions. Additionally, they have experienced being told

conflicting information by different individuals employed by the SST, which caused to

confusion in practice. Participant 4 provided the following example:

But then when they tell you...[it's] RTI, and you should have charts in this. And

then another person could come in and tell you, well you don't need the charts,

and you can write it like this. And it's five different ways that you've heard it.

And you're like "I'm not really sure." So it's easier to just pick the way you're

most comfortable with. Like I would do it if I had gotten some clear guidance

that was consistent across multiple people...But since I've heard five different

ways to do it, I'm not exactly comfortable 'cause I don't know which one is right

This inconsistency does not only occur from those working with the state, but also within

school districts. Even with the most technical of tasks, practitioners complete them

differently based on what they have been told by different members within their districts.

Participant 6 shared, "So I have been in multiple settings, and I have talked to multiple

people, and I feel like no one person fills this section out the same way."

Participants shared that the definition of SLD itself was a concern for them in the

sense-making process. They felt that the written definition was vague and left a lot to

interpretation. Additionally, they also felt that the guidance they received from the state

and supervisors within their districts regarding SLD identification was inconsistent.

Because different teams can interpret the definition differently, it is relative depending in

which district student attends school. This "relativity" is often highly dependent upon the

socio-economic make-up of the schools' student body.

Theme Fifteen: "Relativity" of Policy Application "Depending on the District"

"[T]here's in-district decisions that get made which aren't the same necessarily as

the district that's next to you. And then we get reports from other people and then

it's like, great, they were LD in that district. Would we have called them LD in

this district?"

– Participant 4

Participants shared that how students qualify for special education services under

the SLD category is often dependent upon the district in which the qualify. Participant 1

shared, "Everyone's doing their own thing. There's a general idea of what you should be doing, but the actual implementation of that theory differed depending on the district." Participants reported that the variation in whether a student is identified often is due to expectations that school districts have for their students; higher SES school districts tend to have higher expectations for students, while lower SES districts tend to accept lower academic functioning. Students who have somewhat lower academic skills in higher SES school districts tend to stand out more than if they were in lower income districts. This means that if they attend school in a more affluent district, they may be identified as having a disability, where their skills may not stand out as much in schools who tend to have more students with academic needs. Participant 2 saw significant differences in how students qualified for special education between higher and lower income districts and shared:

> For my internship I was in an urban setting and also a suburban setting, so I got to really see the cultural differences. So that really helped in terms of being able to kind of distinguish how things look different and how they would identify if you were in like an upper-class kind of suburban area compared to identification in more of a low income [area]…

Participant 4 shared that identification decisions within their districts often look different than decisions made by neighboring districts. This often becomes apparent when students who have qualified for special education in other districts move in and likely would not have qualified in theirs. Participant 4 said:

> [T]here's in-district decisions that get made which aren't the same necessarily as the district that's next to you. And then we get reports from other people and then

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it's like, great, they were LD in that district. Would we have called them LD in

this district?

Participant 1 has had similar questions for students who move in from neighboring

districts. They provided the following example:

> ...[D]epending on the district you're in, you qualify. We once had a kid come in
>
> from [Middle Class Neighboring District]...and this kid had a single goal for
>
> writing. They didn't really have a tremendous need in writing, but they were on
>
> an IEP...[A]nd the teacher's looking at it and we all are saying like, this kid would
>
> probably be one of the top performers in my class and he's on an IEP. We have
>
> kids with greater need. Isn't it weird? And I'm like, well, I don't know if we
>
> should just exit the kid because within our district the skills they're displaying are
>
> great. There's data in the curtain ETR to support a need in writing, a lack of
>
> growth in writing within that district's curriculum and their standards. So we
>
> adopted it, but no one was really comfortable with it.

Despite their discomfort, participants understood that this was something that occurred

regularly and made efforts to come to terms with the variability in policy applications

between different districts with varying resources and needs. When describing her own

practice, Participant 4 said, "And I am sure that if I went somewhere else it would be

different. And, but I've come to kind of accept that relativity with some parameters

around it."

Quotes throughout this theme demonstrated that policy application related to SLD

was relative based on the school district. Variation in SLD identification criteria varied

widely depending on the expectations of the school district, often stemming from the

socioeconomic make-up of the district. The same student may or may not qualify for special education services depending on the district they attended. While policy was inconsistently applied between school districts, application was also inconsistent within participants' own districts as well.

Theme Sixteen: "Absolutely Inconsistent" Application of Policy Within Own District

"I would see kids that were eligible that, if I had been the assessor, I would have never thought were eligible." – Participant 4

Consistency was not only reported to be a problem across different school districts, but also within the participants' own districts. This may have to do with the fact that districts have schools with various levels of income and academic functioning, that interpretation of unclear guidance is left to professional judgement, and because school psychologists have been trained in and use different identification methods depending on how long they have been in the field.

When asked whether they felt SLD identification was consistent across their district, Participant 3 said, "No," and indicated that there could be variations of SLD identification even within the different MDTs that they are a part of within their schools. Participant 4 indicated that they did not feel that SLD identification was consistent across their district either. When they were asked if SLD identification practices were consistent throughout the district, Participant 4 said:

Absolutely not. Absolutely not. In fact...I would see kids that were eligible that, if I had been the assessor, I would have never thought were eligible. But I have to understand that team discussions happened that I was not part of...So I've never

said, "Well this is ridiculous," 'cause I can't suppose what was being said at the a

team discussion, but I've come close to saying it's ridiculous. You know, like

saying, "Like what do you mean?" [laughs].

Participant 4 went on to illustrate a specific example and explain why misidentifying

students was detrimental, saying:

I'll give you a perfect example. [Higher Performing Elementary in District] all the

way to [Higher Performing High School in District], where we had kids that were

like an 89 and 92, their IQ was a hundred, and they lasted in LD all those years. I

just did not, would not have, just by looking at the record, considered that a good

placement. And then what I felt was then kids were becoming dependent on

special education placements and assistance. And so they looked LD when they

may never [have been], it's almost like we made them LD in some ways. So that

was very frustrating.

Some participants felt that this inconsistency may be due, in part, to school

psychologists using different identification methods depending on their training.

Participant 7 explained, "[S]o there's four psychs in the district and, like, each of us could

be doing something different." Participant 5 agreed. When asked about consistency

within their district, they said that is was "absolutely, absolutely inconsistent."

Inconsistency was such a prevalent problem that their district has created a committee to

review SLD evaluations:

We have...[a] SLD committee...Somebody looks at them all. And I think what

they're seeing is that people are doing so many different ways of identifying when

there's people that are still talking about the discrepancy model in their reports

and using that...I think that's 'cause there's so many of us from so many different trainings and some people have been there for so long that really are not keeping up with what is going on with learning disabilities.

This theme highlighted that participants felt that the identification process was inconsistent within their own school districts. Inconsistency often stemmed from variation of student performance between buildings within the same district, a reliance on interpretation of policy at the team level, and various forms of identification in which school psychologists may be trained. Given inconsistency in policy application both within and between school districts, participants felt that their MDTs would benefit from clear parameters regarding the SLD identification process.

Theme Seventeen: Need for Clear "Guidance" Surrounding SLD

"It would be really nice if the state had some kind of protocol, so everyone's doing the same thing. And I know that kinda takes away from...professional judgment. But honestly, if it's something that needs to be legally defensible, we should all be doing the same stuff." – Participant 6

Because of ambiguity found within the definition and guidance, as well as inconsistent application between and within districts, Participants felt that, while it would be impossible and unhelpful to make inflexible rules about SLD identification, their MDTs needed clearer parameters placed around the definition. This should occur both at the district and state level.

When using the current guidance from the state, participants felt that MDTs did not have a common understanding of the SLD identification process. Participant 1 referred to it as "The Wild West" while Participant 4 felt that "it can't be a free-for-all."

Participant 4 felt that putting some operationalized parameters within the definition would be helpful:

> I think it would help to have some guidelines, not rules for LD, so that my LD
> definition is similar to your LD definition, leaving some error for clinical
> practices. So not direct number type thing. That would be really helpful. So that,
> I could actually say to somebody, "How did you come to that decision?" Rather
> than just saying, "Well, it was a team decision. I can't do anything about it."
> Kind of keeping people...sort of similar. That's not happening.

Participant 6 agreed that additional information regarding SLD Identification protocol would be helpful to their MDT's practice, stating:

> It would be really nice if the state had some kind of protocol, so everyone's doing
> the same thing. And I know that kinda takes away from...professional judgment.
> But honestly, if it's something that needs to be legally defensible, we should all be
> doing the same stuff.

> Participant 6 felt that additional resources such as clear flowcharts, guides, or

checklists could help guide MDTs' decision-making during an SLD evaluation.
Participant 2 also felt that guidance beyond that offered in the "Ohio Operating Standards for the Education of Children with Disabilities" is needed for school psychologists and their team mates to come to a general consensus about SLD identification, indicating that clearer communication of expectations, case examples, examples of how to appropriately complete documentation, and in-depth trainings about the SLD identification process provided by the state would supplement school psychologists understanding and skills.

While participants felt that more parameters within state-level guidance and supplemental learning opportunities are needed, they reported that district-level guidance would also improve SLD identification practices within their district. Participant 1 said:

I think for better or worse, there has to be a process in the district. There has to be, 'Well we're going to start here, and then the next point we're going to go to here, and then we're going to go to here. And these are the kids that qualify.' There needs, there needs to be parameters for it.

Participant 6 also felt that there needed to be "some kind of district-wide protocol...because it seems like every building does their own thing." These variations, in part, may link back to the idea that school psychologists practice differently and use different identification models based on their training. Participant 7 shared that districts should provide more specific guidelines about their expectations related to SLD identification, saying:

...[I]t's like some people might be using discrepancy model, some people might be using strengths and weaknesses. Some people are trying to just totally look at rate of improvement...[H]aving guidance in that area of like, what is the model that we're using for this district? What's the criteria in that respect?

Participant 4 shared that if school psychologists at least had agreement at the local-level, consistency would improve, which can be a protective factor for MDTs. Participant 4 explained:

And I also think that there's safety in local agreements that you have. So like if you're out there by yourself, you have a lot less protection than if you say, "Hey, in this district, right or wrong, this is kind of the agreement that we have."

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Throughout this theme, participants illustrated the need to have clearer guidance regarding the SLD identification process at the state- and school district- levels in order to address inconsistent application of special education policy. Participants stressed the importance of "guidance" while also indicating that they did not feel that strict cut scores would be beneficial. Rather, they felt that guidance that helped them operationalized definitions provided by the state, and policy support within the district, would be the most helpful. In addition to addressing concerns about current policy through clearer guidance, participants also shared then need for professional advocacy to change other education policies as well.

Theme Eighteen: Need for Advocacy to Influence Policy Changes

"I'm a big systems person, rather than, like, the individual district. And we talk about the 'wild west,' and you know, one school district has a child who's SLD versus in our district where they would not be SLD, and why is that? And I think it goes back to the idea of equity." – Participant 1

Participants explored concerns with current education policies and ideas they had for addressing them throughout their interview. We can see throughout the themes above, especially those related to the context of sense-making, that many felt that their districts were not equitably resources when compared to other higher income districts. This manifested itself in things like not having the same amount or quality of resources in their schools and communities, economic opportunities, and special education identification practices, to name a few. Every participant spoke about the inequity that their students face; some spoke about it more directly than others, calling for advocacy to

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influence needed policy changes. Recommendations for needed policy change primarily focused on educational funding and special education identification policy.

Policies surrounding funding for schools and students with disabilities was a primary concern for participants. How school districts are funded is one of the most overreaching policy design concerns. Participant 1 stated that while their district is under-resourced, they see other schools in the county who can provide their students not only with a minimal education level, but are also able to provide enriching opportunities. Participant 1 said:

> So I know money's an easy thing to say. It's like, we need more money, everyone
>
> needs more money. But when you consider the fact that kids in [Name of
>
> Affluent District in County] are not starving for resources and kids in [Name of
>
> Their District] are, we have to look at this and think, "What is equity? Are we
>
> doing what's right for all people, or are we segregating our kids?"

The structure through which the state relies on local property value for school funding impacts schools in lower income areas. Because families with lower SES families are often only able to afford housing in areas with lower property values, school districts within those communities are challenged when generating funds. Participant 1 said:

> Changing the way school districts are funded. It's modern day segregation to base
>
> it on property value because guess what? The properties in [Name of Affluent
>
> Community] are kicking up more property taxes than the properties in [Name of
>
> Their Community].

They felt that "the way school districts are funded using property taxes obviously is not equitable." Participant 1 expressed that "we need to find a way to make policy in the

state work better for our kids because right now it is not." By improving equity of

funding to address the needs of students in low-income communities, Participant 1felt

that it would "support the rights of all kids" and "support educators." It is important to

note that equity as suggested by Participant 1 likely meant prioritizing resources to

districts with the highest needs. Participant 1 went on to share:

> But I do think making sure lower performing districts maybe even get more
>
> resources than higher performing districts. 'Cause how are you expecting lower
>
> performing districts to do more with less? Doesn't make any sense. Um, and this
>
> goes all the way back to No Child Left Behind and, like, punishing districts who
>
> are underperforming and rewarding those who are doing well. Like, I understand
>
> the idea behind it. Like, if you do better, we'll reward you, so find a way to do
>
> better. And that makes sense, but at the same time, you're dealing with...a whole
>
> variety of issues in [Name of Their District] that you are not dealing with in your
>
> [Name of Affluent District] and your [Name of Affluent District].

In addition to concerns about inequitable school funding policy, many of these

under-resourced schools are also underperforming in terms of student outcomes. When

this becomes a habitual problem, school districts often fear state takeover. We saw

earlier in this chapter that this can impact the decisions they make, choosing instructional

resources and assessment tools that improve their chances of appeasing the state rather

than what would be most beneficial to educators and students. Participant 1 shared the

following views about this policy:

> ...I think that's a draconian way of handling these issues. What we need to do is
>
> provide more assistance and resources to school districts that are struggling, and

the state needs to understand why they're struggling. Which again, it's a resource issue. It's a property issue. And if you want to zoom out even more, it's a systemic racism issue.

Many of the participants had ideas about how to provide their communities with resources that they need in earlier themes. However, it is important to form policy that funds and enforces provision of early intervention services. Participant 1 suggested universal Pre-K as one policy that can help address some of the inequity that many students face. While other participants did not directly name universal pre-k as a strategy, their noting of lack of resources, the upside-down RTI triangle, and need for early intervention suggests that this may be one strategy they would support for reducing inequities. This type of programming could focus on providing evidence-based instruction and support to families to help reduce the gap we often see between students who attend urban school districts and those who attend affluent suburban ones. Participant 1 shared:

> Our priority should be equity and universal pre-K and trying to make sure that all children, all districts, in all walks of life, in all SES environments, have equal opportunity. I always use the example of [Name of Affluent District] versus [Name of Their District]. It's like we criticize [Name of Their District]'s education system based on the state test scores. But when you look at the kids in [Name of Affluent District] who have had every opportunity by the time they are in kindergarten, whereas…many of the kids in [Name of Their District] don't know their letters. They don't have access to books. Even though there's a public library, the family doesn't have the time or the resources to get them there

consistently. You're just talking about two different playing fields...Whereas if the kids in [Name of Their District] have access to universal Pre-K, then we're talk about a...still not equal, but more equal playing field.

Participant 1 was most specific in their view of a broad context of inequity, as evident in their description of the positive impact that universal pre-K would likely have positive impact on the SLD identification process, because students would have access to learning opportunities to enter kindergarten with requisite preacademic skills to experience more success. Participant 1 shared, "I think, [Name of Their District] would certainly have less children qualify for disabilities 'cause it would be about prevention, right? You're giving them the resources before problems started. Early intervention is key."

Policy related to how school districts are funded as well as creating general education policy to support early intervention were both noted by participants as important. An additional piece to appropriately funding schools is directly related to special education policy. Participant 4 highlighted that "full funding for IDEA" would assist in providing students with disabilities services to address their needs. There are also other policies directly related special education funding. For example, Participant 4 shared that inconsistency in SLD identification could impact whether students qualify for the Jon Peterson Special Needs (JPSN) Scholarship, a scholarship through the ODE that students on IEPs can qualify for if they attend private school or participate in home schooling, and the amount that they receive. Participant 4 shared, "There's implications for funding for Jon Peterson and I just think we need to have better control over what we're doing." Additionally, the JPSN scholarship takes what would have been allocated to public school districts and allows parents to apply those funds to private intervention

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service providers that have been approved by ODE. Participant 4 highlighted the need to review how we structure and fund special education policy to better meet the needs of all students.

Unfortunately, often times change for equitable access is not easily gained, and it calls for educators and other stakeholders to advocate for change in policy design, funding, and enforcement. Participant 1 felt that while "the state professional association…is excellent at advocating for the profession," individuals within the organization have "different ideas of what advocacy means." Most participants were aware that advocacy efforts happening at different levels of professional organizations, but many were not sure about what advocacy initiative were taking place, what resources the organizations had available to advocate on behalf of their members, or the practical aspects of how advocacy was completed. Participant 1 felt that organizations should most strongly focus on causes of systemic inequities within the education system. Additionally, they felt that joining forces with other organizations might make school psychology advocacy more powerful. While not knowing how the process works, Participant 1 encouraged their professional organizations to partner with other educationally related organizations, saying, "I think if the professional associations worked with, like, teacher unions. I think if we all grouped together as educators, and were, like, one big voice, I think that that might have a greater impact on legislators." Additionally, they felt that national associations could add weight to state-level advocacy, potentially fostering specific changes at the state-level. Participant 1 shared:

> Maybe even if NASP was more in tune in working with state associations and
> using their resources to support state association. But I'm approaching this from

ignorance. I don't know what NASP's demands are. I don't know what their

resources are. But, I mean, in a perfect world I think that would be pretty great.

Because you not only would have...the weight of the state association, but you'd

also have a national association coming to bat for you. Which, even if it's just one

representative like, "I'm a delegate from NASP, and here's why I'm supporting

what OSPA's trying to do," I think that could hold a lot of weight.

Participants also shared that advocacy was needed to address policy specific to

disability category definitions. As we saw in Theme Fourteen, which address concerns

about the legal definition of SLD, many participants took issue with the guidance that has

been provided to them by the state of Ohio and felt that there needed to be a more

operationalized definition with consistent guidance and support MDTs. Participant 4 felt

that school psychologist professional organizations should advocate for changes of the

SLD definition to better support MDTs who use it during eligibility determinations.

They expressed the need for ODE to participate in "structured conversations" in order to

create a research-based, practical definition of SLD. In order to achieve this goal,

Participant 4 stated that the ODE should include both research experts in SLD and school

psychologists with practical experience when considering how to move forward with

making changes to the definition:

I think that that highest level of people trained and seeing things around the

state...Like, [Name of Researcher] who has done a ton of research in reading and

learning disabilities. [A]nd I'm sure there are more people like [them] in

university settings kind of taking the helm, but then at a point including work

groups of people that are actually out there because there's sometimes a disconnect between them and what's going on."

Participant 4 felt that it was important for the ODE to implement a collaborative team effort and have very specific guidance once they reached out to educators in Ohio, saying, "I think they have to get their stuff together first before they tell us. I think that's the biggest thing."

Related to services that students receive either before or after the special education identification process, participants felt that their students needed more opportunity to receive a variety of high-quality, evidence-based instruction and intervention. Participants shared their thoughts about this topic in many themes above, including needing more RTI resources, ambiguity with student data, and teams' motivation for special education assessment. Participant 4 questioned the need for separating general and special education under different policies, asking, "And why do we have to say they're LD to get an intervention specialist?" They felt that having a "needs-based education system without labels" would lead to supports being provided to all students, regarding of whether they meet any legal definition. Participant 4 shared that this type of system of support could be done "[i]n kind of an MTSS type model, and honestly, I would like to see special education, not even named special education, just being a part of the continuum that deals with kids." However, this type of system is hindered by the way funding for special education services is currently structured. Even with current barriers, Participant 4 believed that we could make changes to our policy, although this would take significant reimagination to policy that would be unlikely to change in the immediate future. They shared:

And eventually, after my career is over, it would be really nice if we had services

without labels, services based on needs. And I know that's always been kind of a,

"What does the label really matter?" But it is the accessibility to funds. I mean,

you can't almost get around it. So well wouldn't that be nice? If we just knew a

kid needed behavior support, needed help in math, with this, this, and this. And

we don't call them anything."

Addressing issues with policy that perpetuate inequities within our school system

to better meet the needs of educators and students is viewed by the participants as a way

to solve many of the concerns that the participants presented throughout this chapter.

Many issues regarding resources and practices within the school could be solved through

fair policy that is appropriately funded and enforced. While there are many issues that

affect all areas of education, addressing these systemic issues will also specifically

improve SLD identification. Emphasizing this point, Participant 1 said:

I'm a big systems person, rather than, like, the individual district. And we talk

about the "wild west", and you know, one school district has a child who's SLD

versus in our district where they would not be SLD, and why is that? And I think

it goes back to the idea of equity. Like, if all districts were equal...[W]e're judged

on the same state standards, but the fact the matter is the opportunities within

those districts based on funding, based on family environment, things like that. If

things more equitable, we wouldn't have this wild west issue. People would be

more able to consistently categorize children as being SLD or not. And I think,

that's the real heart of why SLD is an issue is because every district is different so

different.

In this theme, participants explored concerns with current education policies and ideas they had for addressing them throughout their interview. Throughout this chapter, many participants felt that their districts did not have equitable resources when compared to other higher income districts. All participants shared about issues with inequity that their students and districts face. Several talked explicitly about the need for advocacy to influence changes in policy that perpetuate this inequity. These participants focused on concerns about funding and special education identification.

Summary

The aim of this qualitative case study was to gain a greater understanding of school psychologists' experiences of identifying students as having a SLD in urban schools. Seven school psychologists with at least five years of experience who currently work at an urban school participated in this study. They were currently employed in one of six urban public schools in Cuyahoga county.

Spillane's (2002) sense-making framework was used to organize themes that emerged from the data. The themes (one and two) related to the idea of school psychologists as sense-makers focused on the participant's graduate training and professional development and areas in which participants felt like they would benefit from additional training. These themes add to school psychologists' schemas through which they interpret the SLD identification process.

The context in which sense-making occurs is another important aspect of the sense-making framework. Within this section of the frame-work, themes (three though thirteen) covered information about MDT members' understanding and expectations of the SLD identification process, leadership, resources, and unique lived experiences of

students within the urban environment. These themes help explain the context in which school psychologists make sense of identifying SLD as part of their MDTs.

The final aspect of the sense-making framework is related to policy design. Themes related to policy design (fourteen through eighteen) focused on issues with the definition of SLD, inconsistent application of special education policy within and between school districts, the need for clearer parameters surrounding SLD identification, and the need for advocacy to make policy changes at the state level. Themes related to policy design inform how school psychologists make sense of the SLD identification process.

Findings in Chapter IV were derived from information provided directly by the participants and were triangulated with other data sources in an attempt to gain an understanding of participants' experience with the making sense of the SLD identification process. The following chapter will provide greater discussion about the findings and their implication.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gain information about school psychologists' experiences of the Specific Learning Disability (SLD) identification process in urban school settings. Previous chapters have highlighted important factors that contribute to how school psychologists make sense of the SLD identification process. This included history of special education law, factors that led to changes to special education law, current legal guidance, school psychologists' role in the SLD identification process, guidance provided by professional associations, school psychologist graduate training, and school psychologists' perceptions and beliefs that comprise various aspects of the sense-making process.

As part of the current study, seven school psychologists with at least 5 years of experience who currently work in urban public schools in Cuyahoga County completed a brief demographic survey and participated in two semi-structured interviews. Collected data were used to learn more about what resources and existing knowledge school psychologists draw on in the SLD identification processes and the challenges that occur for them in that process.

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This chapter will cover a synthesis of the findings within the sense-making framework and their implications. Recommendations will be made based on those findings. Additionally, this chapter will provide greater detail of the current study's limitations. Upon consideration of findings and limitations, potential future research directions will be discussed.

Synthesis of Findings within the Sense-Making Framework

Spillane's (2004) sense-making framework was used both as a theoretical framework for the study, as well as a structural framework in which to organize themes. While the previous chapter used the framework as a way to organize themes within groups, this chapter will view it as a theoretical framework to help derive additional meaning from the findings.

Spillane's cognitive framework focuses on "the interpretive or sense-making dimension of the implementation process" (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002, p. 392). Sense-making is comprised of three main elements: the individual who will be implementing policy, the situation in which the individual must make sense of the policy, and the policy itself (Spillane et al., 2002). Each element focuses on different areas that impact the sense-making process. Themes found in Chapter IV were organized within each element of the sense-making framework. Figure 5 provides a visualization of themes related to the participants' sense-making of the SLD identification process.

School Psychologists' Sense-Making of the SLD Identification Process

Sense-Maker	Context	Policy
• Prepared for the Profession "But Not All of the Stuff" • Professional Development: "Everything Sounds Good When You See It on Paper."	• Lack of Shared Understanding of the Process Among Teachers • Need for Improving Teacher Understanding and Skills • Building and District Leadership • Importance of Maintaining Quality School Psychologist Communities • Responsibility of the SLD Identification Process on School Psychologist • Resources: "We Use What We Have" • Need for Greater Understanding of Experiences within the Urban Community • Need for School Culture That is Responsive to Their Community • Ambiguity of Student Data • Motivation for Special Education Identification: "People are Pushing to Test, Test, Test" • Questioning the Utility of the ETR: "It Doesn't Really Mean Anything"	• Definition of SLD • "Relativity" of Policy Application "Depending on the District" • "Absolutely Inconsistent" Application of Policy Within Own District • Need for Clear "Guidance" Surrounding SLD

Figure 5. Codes Related to School Psychologists' Sense-Making of the SLD Identification Process

School Psychologists as Sense-Makers

Making sense of policy is a nonlinear process and the sense-making framework considers many levels that play into it. In this study, school psychologists were considered sense-makers of the SLD identification process because they are a member of the Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) who is often most familiar with special education law. This study considered participants' "experiences, knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes" (Spillane, 2004, p. 76), which are elements that get organized into school psychologists' schemas; their prior knowledge and experiences get organized in a way that guides their

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understanding of policy. Because educators have different areas of personal and professional knowledge and experiences, individuals can derive different meanings from the same policy.

Themes One and Two were considered to be aspects related to school psychologists' knowledge and experiences that form the schemas through which they make sense of the SLD identification process. These themes focused on participants' experiences with graduate-level training as well as professional development that followed. Participants shared that, though they did receive intensive training for their profession, they were not prepared for "all of the stuff" that they would need to function as an effective school psychologist. They expressed need for additional, specialized training in special education law, SLD identification, and cultural competence. Additionally, they expressed the need for having practical experiences that not only provided high-quality supervision, but were reflective of real-life professional expectations. These findings were consistent to research presented in Chapter II. Researchers indicated a need for improved training in SLD identification models including the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model (Barrett et al., 2015), RTI (Barrett et al., 2015; Maki, 2015), and Patterns of Strengths and Weaknesses (PSW) (Decker et al., 2013; McGill et al., 2015). Findings by Newell and Looser (2017) also supported the idea of the need for additional training in multicultural assessment, consultation, and intervention. In relation to practical training, Harvey & Struzziero (2008) reported that supervision within school psychology has been weaker than that provided by other related fields. Lindberg (2016) asserted that additional collaboration between universities and urban districts could improve support for school psychologists in those urban

districts. Participants also shared that it was difficult to find worthwhile professional development opportunities that improved their understanding and provided practical strategies to bring back to their students.

Context of Sense-Making

Situational context is another important aspect of sense-making. Social norms, organizational structures, informal communities, historical events, and values and emotions all lend to the situational context that affects sense making in policy implementation (Spillane, 2002). Participants "encountered a complex web of organizational structures, professional affiliations, social networks, and traditions" (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 404) that are important in making sense of SLD identification. The complexity of this "web" is reflected by how many themes grouped within this area of the sense-making framework.

Themes Three through Thirteen were related to the participants' context. These themes focused on a variety of topics that impact the context in which the team makes sense of the SLD identification process. One area on which participants focused was their experiences within their teams. They expressed concerns about not experiencing a shared understanding of the SLD identification process, or special education more broadly. They felt that teachers also did not have adequate understanding and practice with special education, SLD, or processes related to SLD identification, such as environmental impacts, assessment, or RTI. Participants shared concerns about their experiences with building and district leadership as well.

Similar to concerns about their teacher colleagues, participants expressed that they often felt that leadership did not have a high-level understanding of the special

education or SLD identification processes; when they did experience leadership with a great understanding of these processes, it facilitated a more positive experience for the participants. However, most participants shared that they did not often experience strong leaderships within their contexts, whether due to personality, understanding and skills, or turnover rates. Additionally, because of stressors related to a lack of resources, the state's focus on lower student scores on standardized tests within their school, and requirements from the state that administrators feel stressed to meet, participants felt that leadership often did not make system-level decisions that best addressed the needs of students or their educators.

These themes related to team members highlighted the need for change in order to help facilitate healthy systems within their schools. Many participants viewed concerns with their team members as usually being caused by missing skills or understanding of special education, and not inability on the part of their team members. They felt that there was a need for creating systematic approaches to improve teacher understanding and skills through teacher training programs, professional development opportunities, school-level trainings, and providing individual support to teachers. Participants expressed that if teachers were better able to implement evidence-based practices that were successful within their classrooms, it would help shift the mindset within the school from a limited capacity to carry out interventions to more openness to attempting best practices within the Multitiered System of Support (MTSS).

Throughout their interviews, participants expressed that they felt that the responsibility to identify students with SLD often fell solely on their shoulders. This, in part, was due to the team's perception of school psychologists being the expert in SLD

identification and ultimately being the one to decide whether a student qualifies. Another factor that led to unequal decision-making responsibility was that many teachers did not have enough foundational knowledge of various mechanisms of the SLD identification process, so school psychologists felt that they had to step in when team members were having difficulties completing certain aspects of the evaluation. While MDTs are required for SLD identification (ODE, 2014), participants did not feel identification decisions were generally reached through a meaningful team approach. Participants shared that if all team members were more knowledgeable about the process and felt more confident in their skills, all team members would be able to be more meaningfully involved in the special education process.

Given the pressure of responsibility that participants felt within the SLD identification process, they expressed the importance of maintaining quality school psychologist communities for support. Participants found connections with colleagues within their districts, informal professional networks, and structured professional groups were all ways in which they could find support with people in similar roles to their own. These participant responses align with findings in past research. Lindberg (2016) reported that there were a number of strategies that would improve support for school psychologists, including greater opportunity to exchange information with peers and the opportunity to observe other school psychologists in practice.

Another important concern for the SLD identification process is the resources with which educators have to work. Teams do the best with what they have, but it often impacts the quality of services and assessments that their students receive. For example, participants shared concerns about the quality of their schools' general education

curriculum, the need for RTI resources to create a robust MTSS system on which to base

decisions, strain that is put on teachers who have high class enrollments and limited time

to address student needs, and the need for more differentiated and culturally appropriate

assessment tools. This was similar to research reviewed in Chapter II. Burns et al.

(2008) shared that there were many factors that occur in schools that reduce the validity

of RTI such as not having access to appropriate resources like teacher training,

intervention material, and reliable progress monitoring tools.

There are also factors that are unique to the under-resourced urban communities

in which participants work. Students often need to filter through stress caused by poverty

and racism that impact their learning. Things like student transiency, low attendance,

limited exposure to skills, and experiences of trauma all play into how students do in

school as well as their special education identification. Additionally, parents often have

their own stress to filter through, such as financial pressures that need to take a priority,

racism within the community, and negative experiences with their own schooling.

Participants shared that they felt their districts needed to create a positive school culture

that was responsive to their communities' unique needs. This includes both creating

positive culture within school buildings as well as improving and expanding community

outreach programs.

All of the concerns related to service provision within schools, issues related to

economic disadvantage at home, and suboptimal assessment tools create ambiguity with

how student data is interpreted. Even so, participants reported that there was still a push

by teachers and administrators to evaluate students to determine SLD identification.

Participants felt that the motivation for special education identification generally came

from three concerns: providing students with extra help, maintaining or increasing the number of special education teachers by having adequate numbers of students identified as qualifying for special education services, or general education teachers wanting to get particular students out of the classrooms and onto a specialist's caseload.

Participants question whether the evaluation process "really mean[s] anything" even once students have been evaluated by their MDTs. During the process, they have concerns about the value of information they gain from cognitive assessments. Researchers have provided criticism for each SLD identification method, including concerns regarding which IQ scores to use (Hale et al., 2010) and whether that information adds to educational planning (Willis & Dumont, 2006). Participants also felt that the culture of the team often leads to the expectation that any student who is referred for an assessment is "rubber stamped" and will qualify for services. Teams' perceptions of disability categories can also be problematic within the identification process; participants felt that SLD is viewed as a more "palatable" category, and is sometimes misused for students for whom another category might be more representative of their needs. Finally, participants questioned the utility of the Evaluation Team Report (ETR) that MDTs complete as part of the special education identification process, sharing that they did not feel that teams used the ETR to guide subsequent intervention service planning, often times not even reading them at all.

Sense-Making of Policy

The final aspect of Spillane's (2004) sense-making framework is the policy itself. Policymakers are responsible to communicate and enforce policy. They often provide abstract information that represents underlying principles rather than promoting specific,

concrete practices to make it applicable to those who may implement the policy. In the case of this study, instead of telling MDTs exact requirements, state policy makers describe the process and allow for professional judgment. To make sense of a policy, the sense-maker needs many resources, including "time, mental effort, advice from experts, and other resources you use in figuring out the significance of these ideas in order to develop a new way of thinking" (Spillane, 2004, p. 93). Human resources, consisting of individual knowledge, expertise, and experiences; social resources; and time and materials are most crucial in aiding the sense-making process and can be addressed through policy design (Spillane, 2004).

Themes Fourteen through Eighteen were related to broader policy issues. These themes focused on a variety of topics related to education policy that impact how teams make sense of the SLD identification process. Within their interviews, participants raised concerns about the legal definition of SLD, the relativity of how special education policy is applied across districts depending on socioeconomic makeup, and even inconsistent application of special education policy within their own districts. Research also points to the inconsistent application of SLD identification policy, occurring across many levels; this includes between states, school districts within the same area, and within the district itself (Hale et al., 2010). Participants also expressed the need for clearer SLD identification guidance that provides parameters for MDTs as well as professional advocacy to influence changes in current policy. Both federal- and state-level guidance exists regarding SLD identification; however, MDTs are left without specific requirements, ultimately leaving SLD identification to the discretion of students' MDTs (Cottrell & Barrett, 2015).

Implications

As we saw from the sense-making framework (Spillane, 2004), sense-makers' prior knowledge and experiences get organized into schemas that guide school psychologists' sense-making of the SLD identification process. School psychologists' individual experiences vary, and individuals can derive different meanings from the same policy. Additionally, as school psychologists gain new information and experiences, their practice surrounding the SLD identification process could potentially change as their schemas shift and transform. Essentially, opportunities to cultivate new "experiences, knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes" (Spillane, 2004, p. 76) would likely add to or modify their schemas, causing a shift in their sense-making of and practice around SLD identification.

Throughout their interviews, participants shared ways in which their understanding of SLD identification has changed through often self-initiated formal and experiential learning opportunities. For example, participants sought out specialized webinars on their own, sought support from their communities of school psychologists to gain new perspectives, and researched new assessment tools and advocated for their use within their district. Participants also shared the desire to continue their own learning as well as that of their team members. This desire to gain new knowledge, skills, and experiences shows that school psychologists see themselves as agents capable of change; however, the systems that they work within are organized in a way that present many barriers.

As shown above, the situational context is also an important influence in the sense-making of policy (Spillane, 2004). Social norms, organizational structures,

informal communities, historical events, and values and emotions add complexity to the

SLD identification process. These contextual influences can be powerful; while

participants and their colleagues try their best in their situations, participants expressed

that there are many barriers to the SLD identification process within their school settings.

Of concern to the participants was MDTs' lack of background knowledge and skills

necessary to meet student need. Additionally, participants identified school culture that

reflected an often uninformed or misinformed justification for student referral as well as a

lack of appreciation for the shared decision making of a multidisciplinary team. Finally,

participants narrated a scarcity of school and community resources as getting in the way

of effective identification processes. Often times, issues within their situational context

did not allow participants to prioritize what they knew as sense-makers to be most

beneficial to students. They often worked under these challenging circumstances and

pointed to problems with structural arrangements that they came in contact with daily.

Professionally and personally, participants expressed dissatisfaction with systemic issues

within their districts that negatively impacted students' educational outcomes and their

educators' ability to address their needs. Despite many perceived barriers, participants

expressed hope and identified ideas to improve educators' knowledge and skills and

create healthy structures at the local and state levels.

Recommendations

There are many system-level issues that impact the SLD identification process,

and participants pointed out the need for advocacy to make policy design changes within

Ohio to address inequity for students of color and/or low socioeconomic status. At a

fundamental level, our state and federal government need to prioritize funding to support

our students. While this was not the primary research question, participants felt that our state particularly needs to provide early intervention, either through universal pre-k or community programming, and provide funding to districts so schools have appropriate resources to provide students and their families with supports. Such supports would be possible through a healthy and robust MTSS framework. Participants recommended that ODE structure its scholarships in a way that does not take resources from public schools. They also emphasized the need to fully fund IDEA (2004).

For many practitioners, these system-level changes can seem daunting or impossible to achieve; however, while participants shared concerns regarding SLD identification, even at the federal level, there are many systems closer to their own practice that can influence positive change for the lives of their students.

University-Level Educator Training

All educators deserve to be able to meet their students' needs and act as fully participating members of their students' MDTs during the special education process. Improving certain aspects of educator training programs can address concerns regarding educator knowledge and skill level to make sure that is a reality.

For school psychologists, that means being better prepared in areas essential to the SLD identification process. Participants expressed the need for additional, explicit instruction related to special education law, with a focus on in-depth training of SLD identification (and the other disability categories). Additionally, universities should strengthen training regarding cultural competence. Courses should address diversity and racism, but also need to provide a more explicit understanding of cultural competence related to the field of school psychology. It is not enough to appreciate the experiences

of different groups of people; school psychologists also need a thorough understanding of cultural concerns related to special education and assessment practices. Finally, school psychology training programs need to provide superior practical experiences to their students. This includes carefully vetting potential school psychologist supervisors and their districts to ensure that students will be placed in a setting where they can be supported, have access to a variety of experiences, and learn best practices within a real-life setting.

Participants reported the need for teacher training programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels to make program enhancements to address the needs of future teachers. This was particularly evident in Themes Three and Four where participants expressed a lack of shared understanding of the special education process among teachers and the need for improving teacher understanding and skills related to it. It is important for teacher training programs to embed the needed knowledge and practical experiences within their curriculum to ensure that all students leave their programs with a firm understanding of educational theories, evidence-based strategies, and understanding of special education law that they will need.

Teacher training programs should provide course work about educational theory; however, they also need to provide practical evidence-based strategies that teachers can implement in their classrooms. This includes evidence-based approaches to teaching reading, writing, math, and language. Education students should be provided an understanding of the science behind learning these skills but also should be provided frequent, quality opportunities to practice proper approaches. Additionally, teacher training programs should dedicate a portion of the curriculum to understanding progress

monitoring and why it is important. Teachers need to be able to conduct data collection in a reliable way that can be used to inform decision-making. This means that they should have an in-depth understanding of how to choose appropriate progress monitoring tools that measure the skills they are targeting and why that data is important both for general education students and those that may be evaluated for SLD in the future.

Students in general education classrooms have a wide variety of skill level; it is essential that teachers are equipped with the knowledge and strategies to provide high quality instruction across the continuum of needs. This means having the understanding and skills to provide evidence-based Tier I and Tier II interventions within their classrooms. While an understanding of how students learn a variety of academic skills is essential to teaching, teachers also need to be provided instruction and practice in how to differentiate their lessons for different learners within the Tier I setting. Participants shared serious concerns regarding Tier I practices, but only addressing that is not enough. Teachers are not only required to teach a Tier I curriculum; they have to be able to provide evidence-based Tier II interventions as well. Teacher training programs must provide their students with an understanding of and skills to address student need at that level, including how to identify students needing intervention, evidence-based intervention for different skill areas, and progress monitoring.

Finally, training programs need to provide future teachers with a stronger understanding of special education law, including appropriate referrals, the assessment process, and how to complete their portion of the evaluation well. Participants noted concerns regarding teachers' ability to understand what a disability is, not appreciating how exclusionary factors impact learning and the SLD identification process, steps to the

evaluation process, or how to complete required portions of the Evaluation Team Report (ETR) in a way that brought meaningful information that could contribute to the identification process.

There have been recent efforts by universities to recognize that general education teachers need to be prepared for an inclusive classroom environment and support them with that goal in mind. For example, some universities have moved toward a dual-license program which prepares teachers to obtain general education and special education licenses. In addition to embedding necessary knowledge and skills within the teacher training curriculum, universities should consider implementing dual-licensure programs, or other creative programming initiatives, to ensure that all teachers have the training that they need whether their students have been identified as having a disability or not. By having a strong understanding of underlying concepts and confidence in their abilities, general education teachers could find meaningful membership within their MDTs. The added benefit of the dual-licensure programs is that schools with limited resources could utilize all of their educators with any student, regardless of their level of need.

In addition to being able to meet their students' needs and participate in the students' MDTs in an equitable way, improving teacher training program will have an added benefit; it will also improve future district and building leadership's understanding and skills related to the SLD identification process. Often times, teachers are those who secure leadership positions within school districts. As building and district leaders, they make many decisions that directly impact students and educators alike. By having a very strong understanding of the underlying constructs of learning, intervention, and assessment, they will be better positioned to make decisions that create a strong MTSS

framework, incorporating evidence-based instruction at all levels and implementing school and district policies that best meet the need of their students.

Professional Development Opportunities

Even if university-level educator training programs make substantial changes to improve educator understanding and skills, it is important to address professional development opportunities as it serves as a way to keep school psychologists in-touch with current research and best practices and acts as a way to address any areas that might not have been adequately covered in their training program.

First, organizations that offer professional development, such as professional organizations, State Support Teams (SSTs), and universities, should ensure that a clear description of the professional development content is provided and that presenters take care to meet the course objectives. Additionally, these organizations should hold presenters accountable to presenting material that closely relates to the description and is at a level of intensity that matches school psychologists' skill sets. Participants often shared that they do not find many of the presentations they currently attend to be worthwhile. This is often because, while they felt that a training would be a good fit based on the description, it actually focused on basic theories and descriptions and did not focus on practical recommendations. If a training is geared towards school psychologists, presenters should have an understanding of the level of familiarity they likely have with the topic and work to start at that level and increase their knowledge; most participants do not need a basic review, but rather an in-depth look that provides additional understanding to their practice.

Related to SLD identification, many participants expressed an interest in learning more about the theoretical underpinnings of learning reading, writing, math, and language, additional training in appropriate assessment tools that add to the comprehensive understanding of students' skills, and intervention strategies that they can incorporate into their recommendations and bring back to their team for immediate use. Additionally, participants presented a need for frequent professional development opportunities related to special education law. Many do not feel that they currently have access to helpful legal updates. Further, several participants reported that presentations that are available often lead them to feel that, as a profession, they are all doing things differently from one another and differently from what the presenter is reporting should happen. This can make them feel like what they are doing is "wrong." While typical legal updates may invoke stress, it is an important topic that can add to school psychologists' understanding of SLD identification. Changing the structure to focus on improving MDT's skills, reviewing best practices, and including school psychologists in the presentations could potentially better meet school psychologists' needs.

Not only can organizations incorporate these areas of interest into their own trainings, they can publicize high-quality trainings related to SLD identification that are being put on by other organizations. This would provide school psychologists with resources to vetted professional development opportunities. Furthermore, organizations can survey their membership to learn about professional development preferences and use the results to drive their planning of events.

Community Outreach and Inclusion

School districts should continue to improve community outreach efforts, as well as actively including students' families. Just as all educators deserve meaningful membership in MDTs, parents do as well. As most are not educators, they have the least familiarity with learning and teaching or with the SLD identification process. Schools should put systems in place to improve communication with parents, include them in problem-solving processes, and help train them in how to provide additional support in their child's area of need. Providing intervention and progress monitoring strategies to practice at home would likely be very helpful to students and mitigate some of the environmental concerns that school psychologists worry about during the assessment process. Schools should also improve systems to get to know the family and link them with existing community resources or resources provided by the school. This not only would require a shift in many schools' culture but would also require improved funding to provide families with the resources that they need.

Recommitting to Students' Right to a Free Appropriate Public Education

Throughout their interviews, participants questioned if how students were provided services and assessed were appropriate. They reported many concerns about knowledge and skills that they and their team members had regarding learning and teaching, SLD identification, school and community resources, and policy. We need to prioritize educational funding within the state to provide training and funding to under-resourced districts. School districts need to fundamentally change the way that they address educational needs, and they need the knowledge and resources to allow them to implement those changes. First, school districts need to create robust, healthy MTSS

frameworks within their schools. This includes implementing a strong, evidence-based general education curriculum that addresses all foundational learning areas, as well as providing exposure to advanced experiences and information to build their knowledge base. Additionally, MTSS frameworks need to incorporate reliable progress monitoring to identify student needs, including identifying which students need Tier II and Tier III services and monitoring students' growth within those tiers. It is essential that all intervention services are evidence-based and are provided with appropriate frequency and fidelity. Often, we see what once may have been evidence-based intervention reduced to the point that it no longer serves its purpose due to lack of resources within the schools. Providing students with high-quality intervention services that correlate with their areas of need can ensure that students being evaluated for SLD have received appropriate instruction, an important consideration for MDTs, but also will preemptively provide students with quality instruction to meet their specific needs before even considering special education.

Attempts at the district level to implement positive changes is not enough, however. There need to be fundamental policy changes at the state level to support the capacity of districts, especially those with limited resources. The ODE should work to provide more meaningful, reliable, and accessible information through formal guidance, training opportunities, and communication with districts and educators. Financially, we need to prioritize education in our state through meaningful, actionable policy to ensure that no group of students is left without a free appropriate public education.

Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations to this study. For example, only school psychologists were identified as participants; however, the SLD identification process takes place using MDTs. Analysis and subsequent themes were based on the school psychologist perspective, which may vary from other team members such as students, parents, general and special education teachers, district administrators, and related service providers.

Additionally, all participants currently work within urban school districts in Cuyahoga County. While school psychologists from all 10 urban districts in Cuyahoga County were invited to join the study, only 6 school districts were represented. Experiences of these participants could differ from those working in other urban school districts in Cuyahoga County who were not part of the study. Participant experiences may also differ from school psychologists working in urban schools in other parts of the state or in other district typographies.

This study was intended to have a narrow scope, focusing on current SLD identification practices and the resources and knowledge school psychologists draw from in their sense-making process. Yet there are many other issues that impact the inequities that students in under-resourced urban schools face. Issues such as racism and poverty permeate every aspect of urban schools, including how schools are funded, service delivery, and assessment procedures and tools. In this study, issues related to race and class were largely articulated by participants as being systemic problems. Participants were not asked direct questions that required them to reflect upon how institutional racism may have affected their students' experiences, professional deliberations, or

struggles in identifying SLD. They were also not directly asked questions about their own biases. Many participants were concerned about how bias and inequity impacted their students' lives and educational outcomes. However, because of a focus on procedures required during SLD identification, these issues were not examined in great detail.

Research subjectivity is another limitation to this study. As demonstrated in Chapter III, all qualitative researchers have a unique positionality. In this social constructivist case study, the researcher is a school psychologist with experience working in urban school environments. While this may be beneficial in some ways, it can also cause challenges to the study. For example, someone outside of the field might not have as much background knowledge, but would be more likely to press participants to explain their statements, therefore potentially gaining additional information.

Finally, qualitative research is not generalizable. Those working in similar settings may find commonalities that could transfer to their districts. Those who see similar patterns in the findings and their own schools may find that they could benefit from recommendations that are applicable to their situation. However, findings are not generalizable to all urban school districts within the county or beyond.

Future Research

There are many ways to supplement or advance the findings reported above by creating future research studies that address both findings and limitations of this study. Potential research directions include focusing on other team member's experiences of making sense of the SLD identification process; situating a case study on other contexts,

such as rural or suburban settings; gaining further information about educator training; and using different methodologies to study themes found within this study.

Considering Other Team Members as Sense-Makers

This research study focused on school psychologists' experiences of the SLD identification process. There are many others who take part of the MDT in the identification process. Future studies should focus on the experiences of parents, general and special education teachers, administrators, and related services providers. By learning about their experiences with the SLD identification process, we could ascertain whether they have similar experiences and concerns and how best to address them.

Exploring Different Contexts

This study was conducted with participants from urban school districts in Cuyahoga County. It would be helpful to conduct similar research in different contexts. This could include other urban school districts in other counties as well as school districts in other typographies. By studying the SLD identification process in rural, small town, and suburban school districts, in addition to urban settings, we could gain a better understanding about what issues are pervasive across school district types and what issues are context specific. This may lead to law makers and trainers in Ohio being provided information about how educational practices can be improved across the board.

Using Various Methodologies

Finally, a different methodology could be developed to further examine themes found within this study. For example, responses in the findings can guide future quantitative studies to gather information about themes related to school psychologists' experiences identifying SLD in urban school districts. This would allow researchers to

gather information in a different way gain additional information about the SLD identification process.

Conclusion

This study explored school psychologists' experiences of the SLD identification process in urban public schools in Cuyahoga County. Specifically, it sought to illuminate what resources and existing knowledge school psychologists draw on in the SLD identification process and what challenges occur for them during the SLD identification process. To improve their experience as sense-makers, participants felt that their training and subsequent professional development opportunities should be more in-depth and substantial. They also shared about concerns within their professional context, such as issues that their team members face, lack of strong leadership, not implementing a meaningful team approach to SLD identification, the need to exchange information with other school psychologists, lack of school and community resources in urban settings, the motivation for special education evaluations, and whether the evaluation process is helpful in getting students what they need. Finally, participants shared their concerns with educational policy including difficulties MDTs face with the SLD definition, the relativity of how special education policy is applied depending on the socioeconomic make-up of the district, and inconsistency of policy application even within their own district. Participants desired clearer SLD identification guidance from the district- and state-level, and also felt that there needed to be an increase in professional advocacy to ensure that students in urban school districts got the services they need and deserve.

This social constructivist case study is significant, because it adds to the body of literature about the experiences of school psychologists in the SLD identification process.

This case study highlights concerns about the SLD identification process, which were also reported in the literature. Related to school psychologists as sense-makers, participants reported the need for additional training across identification methods (Barrett et al., 2015; Maki, 2015; Decker et al., 2013; McGill et al., 2015); training to improve cultural competence (Newell & Looser, 2017); improved supervision and practical training opportunities (Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; Lindburg, 2016). Past research also aligned with findings regarding participants' concerns with their situational context, including the importance of exchange of information with peers (Lingberg, 2016); issues with the RTI system within schools (Burns et al., 2008); and concerns about what assessment data is appropriate in SLD identification (Hale et al., 2010) and how that information adds to the understanding of the student and their educational plan (Willis & Dumont, 2006).

Further, this study emphasizes the changes that could reduce barriers that school psychologists and their teams in urban school districts face. The Ohio State Board of Education provides the following vision statement:

> The State Board of Education's vision is for all Ohio students to graduate from the PK-12 education system with the knowledge, skills, and behaviors necessary to successfully continue their education and/or be workforce ready and successfully participate in the global economy as productive citizens. Ultimately, all students will graduate well prepared for success (ODE, 2017).

While the goal of public education may be to provide students with what they will need to have positive future outcomes, it is clear that inequities for students in urban settings are exacerbated by policies and structures we have created within Ohio's educational

system. We often assume that various components of the SLD identification process are being carried out well. Things like knowledge, skills, and resources are presumed to be available within the education system, but often they are not, and this negatively shapes student outcomes. Until those foundational issues are addressed, MDTs within urban districts will continue to struggle with identifying and meeting the needs of exceptional learners. If we want to get to the root cause of under-performing districts, we must address many of the systemic issues reported by participants of this study, particularly by addressing issues with training, creating healthy and robust MTSS frameworks within our school districts, supporting families, and funding our schools in a way that meets the needs of all students.

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Informed Consent

Cleveland State University
engaged learning

School Psychologists' Experience of Identifying Students with Specific Learning
Disabilities in Urban Schools
Informed Consent Form

My name is Jennifer Murphy. I am an Urban Education PhD student at Cleveland State
University. I am working on my dissertation research with Dr. Tachelle Banks and Dr.
Anne Galletta, faculty in the Urban Education Ph.D. program.

What the study is about: I am contacting you to participate in a research study. It aims
to learn about your experience in identifying students with Specific Learning Disabilities
(SLD).

What participants would be asked to do: If you agree to participate, you would be
asked to take part in an interview of about 60 minutes. You would also be asked to may
participate in a second one-hour follow-up interview as well. The follow-up would occur
within a month following the first interview. This would give you a chance to clarify
what you said in the first interview. You would be asked if it's all right to digitally audio
record the interviews. If you don't want to be audio recorded, I will take notes on your
responses to interview questions. At the beginning of the first interview you would also
be asked to complete a brief survey on your training and professional experience. This
survey should take about 10 minutes to finish.

Participation is voluntary: If you agree to participate, you may end an interview at any
time. You may choose not to answer a question, if you don't want to respond. Should
you be willing to be audio recorded, you may turn off the digital recorder at any point.
The digital recorder belongs to me. Only I have access to the recorder. You may choose
to withdraw from the study at any point in time with no consequences.

Confidentiality: Your response to the questions will be kept confidential. The interview
will be given a code number. It will be transcribed by me. Only Dr. Banks and Dr.
Galletta and I will see the transcripts. This is to ensure your confidentiality. Parts of the
interview may be included in a final report, or in related reports during and after the
study. Your name will not be attached to the interview or transcripts or any later reports.

Risks of participating: One risk of participating in this study involves confidentiality.
There are times in an interview where participants discuss work place practices. There

may be the risk the interview data would be traced back to you. To lessen this risk, participants will use pseudonyms for their names, school name, and school district. Reports on the research will not include identifying information. Also, to lessen the risk that confidentiality would be breached, consent forms will be stored in a locked cabinet in Dr. Galletta's office. Should you decide not to be audiotaped, notes will be scanned and uploaded to my password protected computer. The hard copies of the notes will be shredded.

Interview transcripts and the digital audio recording files or scanned interview notes will be stored on a password protected USB in Dr. Galletta's office and on my password protected computer for a minimum of three years. After that, they may be destroyed. Otherwise, there are no risks beyond those of everyday living.

Benefits of participating: There are no direct benefits to participating in the study.

If you have questions: If you have any questions regarding this project and/or would like to receive the final report, please call me at 440-479-1944, or Dr. Anne Galletta at 216-687-4581.

Please read and sign one of the copies of this consent form and keep the other one for your records.

Thank you for your contribution to this research and for your cooperation and support. Signing below indicates you are 18 years or older and that you agree to participate.

I understand that if I have any questions about my rights as a research subject, I can contact the Cleveland State University Institutional Review Board at (216) 687-3630.

I have read and understood this consent form and agree to participate.

Signature: _____

Name: _____ (Please Print)

Date: _____

Appendix B

Demographic Survey

- How many years have you been practicing as a school psychologist? _____

- What year did you graduate from your school psychology program? _____

- At what university were you trained as a School Psychologist? _____

- In what setting did your School Psychology practicum take place?
  - ☐ Urban
  - ☐ Suburban
  - ☐ Rural

- In what setting did your School Psychology internship take place?
  - ☐ Urban
  - ☐ Suburban
  - ☐ Rural

- Please indicate your highest level of education
  - ☐ Master's
  - ☐ Specialist (Ed.S., Psy.S., etc.)
  - ☐ Doctorate

- Currently, what grades do you serve? _____

- How many schools do you serve? _____

- What is your student to school psychologist ratio? _____

- What is your approximate caseload this year?
  Evaluations: _____
  RTI Cases: _____
  Consultation Cases: _____
  Section 504 Cases: _____

- How may school psychologists are in your district? _____

- In which professional organizations are you active?
  - ☐ Cleveland Association of School Psychologists
  - ☐ Ohio School Psychologist Association
  - ☐ National Association of School Psychologists
  - ☐ Other: _____

Appendix C

Semi-Structured Interview

Type	Question
Main	What led you to choosing the field of school psychology?
Main	Tell me about your training to become a school psychologist.
Probes	What types of courses did you take? Did you have any courses that focused on Special Education Law? What were they like? Did you have any courses that directly addressed SLD eligibility? Tell me about them. Can you tell me about how your training program addressed cultural competence related to the SLD identification process? What types of practical experiences were you involved in?
Main	Tell me about your professional background.
Probes	What types of work experiences have you had as a School Psychologist?
Main	What resources do you draw from when completing SLD cases?
Main	Tell me about any specific guidance your district provides.
Probes	What is the guidance? Who has provided it? Supervisor, District Attorney, etc. Do you feel that SLD identification is consistent across the district?
Main	Walk me through what typically happens for an initial SLD assessment.
Probes	Who is involved? How are the responsibilities divided among team members? How does the team decide what data to include as part of the evaluation? What steps do you take in conducting your portion of the evaluation? How do you decide what assessments you will administer when you suspect SLD? Which assessments do you typically use? Why?
Main	Does an initial SLD evaluation look different than a reevaluation?
Probes	If yes, in what ways?
Main	After you complete the assessment, the team then meets to determine eligibility. If the team determines that the student qualifies for special education services under SLD, walk me through the steps you take in completing section 3 of the Evaluation Team Report (ETR).
Probes	Do you complete this section independently or as a team? What data do you include? How does the team decide which academic areas to endorse? Do you complete Part B, C, or both?
Main	Do you feel that SLD assessments conducted by your team are generally easily defensible if it were to become litigious?
Main	Could you talk about a time where you felt like you and the team struggled to come to an agreement about an SLD determination?
Probe	What were points of struggle for this particular case? Do you see these barriers in other SLD cases? Is this a common issue?

	What assistance do you feel would help you in difficult cases?
Main	Tell me about a time where you felt like your team was able to accurately identify a student with SLD easily.
Probe	What made you feel positive about this situation? Were there any specific supports that facilitated the process?
Main	Have issues regarding economic disadvantage and race related to the SLD identification been a concern for you and/or your school?
Probe	In what way? How does your team address it?
Main	How have your practices changed over time? What do you attribute that to?
Main	Could you talk about any professional groups or other supports that you feel add to your understanding of the SLD identification process?
Main	What recommendations would you make to help support SLD identification?
Probe	What do you feel like you need to better support your team in eligibility determinations?
Main	Is there anything else you want to add?

Appendix D

ODE School District Typology

2013 Typology Code	Major Grouping	Full Descriptor
1	Rural	Rural - High Student Poverty & Small Student Population
2	Rural	Rural - Average Student Poverty & Very Small Student Population
3	Small Town	Small Town - Low Student Poverty & Small Student Population
4	Small Town	Small Town - High Student Poverty & Average Student Population Size
5	Suburban	Suburban - Low Student Poverty & Average Student Population Size
6	Suburban	Suburban - Very Low Student Poverty & Large Student Population
7	Urban	Urban - High Student Poverty & Average Student Population
8	Urban	Urban - Very High Student Poverty & Very Large Student Population

Appendix E

Urban School Districts in Cuyahoga County (2017-2018) ODE Statistics

District	Enrollment	Med Income	Disadvantage	Disability	Minority
Bedford	3,215	$31,014	65%	19%	92%
Berea	6,132	$36,156	33%	16.2%	23%
Brooklyn	1,232	$31,602	54%	16.5%	57%
Cleveland	38,949	$24,500	100%	21.8%	84%
East Cleveland	2,159	$20,912	100%	27.2%	100%
Euclid	5,217	$28,489	60%	19.1%	93%
Garfield Hts.	3,521	$29,228	73%	19%	84%
Maple Hts.	3,478	$27,164	98%	17.3%	98%
Parma	10,658	$33,837	48%	15.7%	22%
Warrensville Hts.	1,538	$25,834	98%	22.5%	99%

Email Recruitment

My name is Jennifer Murphy, and I am an Urban Education PhD student at Cleveland State University. I am contacting you to participate in a research study. I hope to gain insight into school psychologists' experience in identifying students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) in urban schools. If you have over 5 years of experience as a school psychologist and are currently working in a K-12 urban school in Cuyahoga County, please consider participating.

Should you agree to participate, you would be asked to complete a brief demographic survey. This should take less than 5 minutes to complete. You would then be asked to complete an audio recorded semi-structured interview with me. We would focus on your experience with the SLD identification process. This interview would take approximately one hour. We would then schedule a second follow-up interview. The follow-up interview may also last up to an hour and would focus on clarifying information from your first interview. The interviews would be set up at a time and place that is best for you. At the time of the interview, I will bring an informed consent form for you to read and sign before we begin the survey and interview.

If you would like to participate in this study, please contact me at j.l.murphy1@vikes.csuohio.edu. You may also contact my supervising professor, Dr. Tachelle Banks in the Urban Education Ph.D. program.at t.i.banks@csuohio.edu. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thanks,
Jen Murphy

Appendix G

Evaluation Team Report

ETR Evaluation Team Report   District: _____

CHILD'S INFORMATION:

CHILD'S NAME: _____   ID NUMBER: _____

STREET: _____   GENDER: [▼]   GRADE: [▼]

CITY: _____   STATE: OH   ZIP: _____

DATE OF BIRTH: _____

DISTRICT OF RESIDENCE: _____   DISTRICT OF SERVICE _____

TYPE OF EVALUATION:

☐ INITIAL EVALUATION   ☐ REEVALUATION

DATES

DATE OF MEETING: _____

DATE OF LAST ETR: _____

REFERRAL DATE: _____

DATE PARENT CONSENT RECEIVED: _____

PARENT/GUARDIAN INFORMATION

NAME: _____

STREET: _____

CITY: _____   STATE: OH   ZIP: _____

HOME PHONE: _____   WORK PHONE: _____

CELL PHONE: _____   EMAIL: _____

NAME: _____

STREET: _____

CITY: _____   STATE: OH   ZIP: _____

HOME PHONE: _____   WORK PHONE: _____

CELL PHONE: _____   EMAIL: _____

PLANNING FORM (required):

School Age ◯   Preschool ◯

ETR FORM STATUS

☐ PART 1: INDIVIDUAL EVALUATOR'S ASSESSMENT (Separate assessment from each evaluator)

☐ PART 2: TEAM SUMMARY

☐ PART 3: DOCUMENTATION FOR DETERMINING THE EXISTENCE OF A SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITY

☐ PART 4: ELIGIBILITY

☐ PART 5: SIGNATURES

INSTRUCTIONS

Evidence of planning for the evaluation process is a requirement. Using one of the two planning forms (preschool or school age) that are included with this ETR form is required (Prior to PR-05 Parent Consent for Evaluation).

There are five parts to this form, i.e., Part 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. Parts 1, 2 and 4,5 must be completed for all initial evaluations and reevaluations. Part 3 must be completed for initial evaluations if the suspected area of disability is Specific Learning Disability. Part 3 must be completed for reevaluations if the child is currently a child identified as having a specific learning disability or if the team is considering a change in the child's disability category to Specific Learning Disability.

In Part 1, each member of the evaluation team will list in the "Areas of Assessment" box the area or areas that they will be assessing, i.e., vision, hearing, fine motor, gross motor, emotional/behavioral or intellectual ability. The evaluator will also provide, in Part 1, the evaluation method and strategies used to conduct the assessment by checking the appropriate boxes. A detailed summary of the results of the assessment or assessments will be provided in the "Summary of Assessment Results" section. The evaluator will sign their assessment page and include his or her position title. The date on this section will be the date the evaluator completed his or her assessment.

Part 2 will be completed by the team chair or district representative by gathering all team members' assessments (Part 1) and summarizing them in the boxes provided in Part 2. Complete the interventions summary for both initial evaluations and reevaluations per the instructions found on the form. The reason(s) for the evaluation is also completed for both initial and reevaluations. The summary of information provided by the parents of the child will include information from the referral form as well as any information provided by the parent through behavioral checklists, interviews or meetings and outside evaluations.

Once all assessment information is gathered and summarized, the team will meet and review all information. The team will then describe the child's educational needs based on the information gathered, and state the implications for instruction and progress monitoring in the appropriate text box.

The team will then consider whether or not the child may have a specific learning disability based on the elements found in Part 3. If no one suspects a disability under this category, the team may skip Part 3 and move into Part 4.

In Part 4, the team determines whether or not the child is eligible for special education and related services by addressing each of the statements found in this section. Complete the final text box in this section with the information that supports the team's eligibility determination.

In Part 5, all members of the team sign the report at the conclusion of this section. If any team member disagrees with the team's determination, the team member must attach a written statement of disagreement to the report.

ETR Evaluation Team Report

District: [_____]

CHILD'S NAME: [_____]   **ID NUMBER:** [_____]   **DATE OF BIRTH:** [_____]

① INDIVIDUAL EVALUATOR'S ASSESSMENT
Part 1 to be completed by each individual evaluator

EVALUATOR NAME: [_____]
POSITION: [_____]

AREAS OF ASSESSMENT: [_____]

Indicate the area(s) that were assessed by the evaluator in accordance with the evaluation plan.

EVALUATION METHODS AND STRATEGIES
Indicate the types of assessment strategies used to gather information about the child's performance

- ☐ OBSERVATIONS
- ☐ INTERVIEWS
- ☐ REVIEW OF RECORDS AND RELEVANT TREND DATA (SCHOOL RECORDS, WORK SAMPLES, EDUCATIONAL HISTORY)
- ☐ SCIENTIFIC, RESEARCH-BASED INTERVENTIONS
- ☐ CURRICULUM-BASED ASSESSMENTS
- ☐ OTHER (Specify) [_____]
- ☐ NORM-REFERENCED ASSESSMENTS
- ☐ CLASSROOM-BASED ASSESSMENTS

ASSESSMENT INFORMATION
Provide a summary of the information obtained from the assessment results per the evaluation plan, including the child's strengths, areas of need and baseline data

SUMMARY OF ASSESSMENT RESULTS:
[_____]

DESCRIPTION OF EDUCATIONAL NEEDS:
[_____]

IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTRUCTION AND PROGRESS MONITORING:
[_____]

Evaluator's Signature: _____   Date: [_____]

[Add Part 1]

☐ Part 1 Complete

ETR Evaluation Team Report

District:

CHILD'S NAME: ID NUMBER: DATE OF BIRTH:

② TEAM SUMMARY

Combine all Part 1's Individual Evaluator's Assessment from all evaluators into team summary

INTERVENTIONS SUMMARY

Provide a summary of all interventions done prior to the child's referral for an evaluation or done as part of the initial evaluation. For all reevaluations, provide a summary of interventions routinely provided to this child.

Initial Evaluation:

Reevaluation:

REASON(S) FOR EVALUATION:

SUMMARY OF INFORMATION PROVIDED BY PARENTS OF THE CHILD:

SUMMARY OF OBSERVATIONS:

MEDICAL INFORMATION:

SUMMARY OF ASSESSMENT RESULTS:

DESCRIPTION OF EDUCATIONAL NEEDS:

IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTRUCTION AND PROGRESS MONITORING:

☐ Part 2 Complete

ETR Evaluation Team Report

District: [   ]

CHILD'S NAME:	ID NUMBER:	DATE OF BIRTH:

③ SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITY DOCUMENTATION FOR DETERMINATION

REQUIRED NOTIFICATION

If the child has participated in a **process that assesses the child's response to scientific, research-based intervention,** indicate if the parents were notified about the following prior to the evaluation:

The state's policies regarding the amount and nature of student performance data that would be collected and the general services that would be provided   ☐ YES ☐ NO

Strategies for increasing the child's rate of learning   ☐ YES ☐ NO

The parents' right to request an evaluation   ☐ YES ☐ NO

Section A must be completed
Either Section B **OR** Section C must be completed

A. IDENTIFIED AREAS

Identify one or more of the following areas in which the team has determined that the child is not achieving adequately for the child's age or state-approved grade-level standards when provided with learning experiences and instruction appropriate for the child's age or state-approved grade-level standards.

☐ Oral Expression   ☐ Reading Fluency Skills   ☐ Written Expression   ☐ Mathematics Calculation

☐ Listening Comprehension ☐ Reading Comprehension   ☐ Basic Reading Skill   ☐ Mathematics Problem solving

B. RESPONSE TO SCIENTIFIC, RESEARCH-BASED INTERVENTION

Assessment information should be summarized in this section if the evaluation team used a process based on the child's response to scientific, research-based interventions to determine whether the child has a specific learning disability in one or more of the areas identified in Section A.

[   ]

C. PATTERNS OF STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Assessment information should be summarized in this section, if the evaluation team used alternative research-based procedures to determine if the child exhibited a pattern of strengths and weaknesses in performance, achievement or both, relative to age, state-approved grade-level standards or intellectual development that the team determined to be relevant to the identification of a specific learning disability in one or more of the areas identified in Section A.

[   ]

D. EXCLUSIONARY FACTORS

The evaluation team has determined that its findings are NOT primarily the result of:

☐ A Visual, Hearing, or Motor Disability   ☐ Limited English Proficiency

☐ Intellectual Disability   ☐ Environmental or Economic Disadvantage

☐ Emotional Disturbance   ☐ Cultural Factors

E. DOCUMENTATION- UNDERACHIEVEMENT NOT DUE TO A LACK OF APPROPRIATE INSTRUCTION

Regardless of the process used to identify a child as having a specific learning disability, the team must ensure that the child's underachievement is not due to a lack of appropriate instruction in reading or math by considering the following information:

1. Data that demonstrate that prior to, or as part of the referral process, a qualified personnel delivered appropriate instruction to the child in general education settings.
Summarize the data the team used to document this requirement:

2. Data-based documentation that the child's parent received about repeated formal assessments of student progress during instruction, done at reasonable intervals. Summarize the data-based information the team used to document this requirement:

F. OBSERVATION

Summarize the child's academic performance and behavior in the areas of difficulty as observed in the child's learning environment, including the general classroom setting.

G. MEDICAL FINDINGS

Describe the educationally-relevant medical findings, if any.

☐ Part 3 Complete

ETR Evaluation Team Report

District: [_____]

CHILD'S NAME:	ID NUMBER:	DATE OF BIRTH:
[_____]	[_____]	[_____]

4 ELIGIBILITY

ELIGIBILITY DETERMINATION

It is the determination of the team that:

The determining factor for the child's poor performance is not due to a lack of appropriate instruction in reading or math or the child's limited English proficiency. For the preschool-age child, the determining factor for the child's poor performance is not due to a lack of preschool pre-academics. ☐ YES ☐ NO

The child meets the state criteria for having a disability (or continuing to have a disability) based on the data in this document. ☐ YES ☐ NO

The child demonstrates an educational need that requires specially designed instruction. ☐ YES ☐ NO

If the response is **NO** to any question, then the child is **NOT** eligible for special education.
If the response to all three questions is **YES**, then the child **IS** eligible for special education.

The child is eligible for special education and related services in the category of: [_____]

BASIS FOR ELIGIBILITY DETERMINATION: (or Continued Eligibility)

Provide a justification for the eligibility determination decision, describing how the student meets or does not meet the eligibility criteria as defined in OAC Rule 3301-51-01 (B)(10) (Definitions) and OAC Rule 3301-51-06 (Evaluations). **Include** how the disability affects the child's progress in the general education curriculum.

[_____]

☐ Part 4 Complete

ETR Evaluation Team Report

District:

5 SIGNATURES

DATES

DATE OF MEETING:

DATE OF LAST ETR:

REFERRAL DATE:

EVALUATION TEAM

The names, titles and signatures below identify the members of the evaluation team and indicate whether or not each team member is in agreement with the conclusions of the report.

NAME	TITLE (No Abbreviations)	SIGNATURE	DATE	STATUS
				☐ Agree ☐ Disagree
				☐ Agree ☐ Disagree
				☐ Agree ☐ Disagree
				☐ Agree ☐ Disagree
				☐ Agree ☐ Disagree
				☐ Agree ☐ Disagree
				☐ Agree ☐ Disagree
				☐ Agree ☐ Disagree
				☐ Agree ☐ Disagree
				☐ Agree ☐ Disagree
				☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

STATEMENT OF DISAGREEMENT

If a team member is not in agreement with the team's determination, the team member will attach to this report a written statement explaining his or her reason for disagreeing with the team's determination.

☐ Part 5 Complete

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Triangulated Data

Documentation found from various organizations that might add school

psychologists' sense-making of SLD identification were reviewed. Sources included: the

Ohio Department of Education, graduate training programs, and professional

organizations.

Ohio Department of Education Guidance

The Ohio Department of Education provides a number of forms of guidance

regarding special education evaluations for SLD including the *Ohio Operating Standards*

for the Education of Children with Disabilities, Evaluation Team Report, *Special*

Education Model Policies and Procedures, and *A Guide to Parent Rights in Special*

Education: Special Education Procedural Safeguards Notice.

Ohio Operating Standards for the Education of Children with Disabilities

The Ohio Department of Education (2017) provides requirements regarding many

aspects of special education, including evaluations. It provides information about the

about determination of eligibility in general, as well as additional information about

identifying students with SLD.

General procedures indicate that after completing the assessment, a student's

parent along with a group of qualified school professionals decide whether a student

meets the definition of a child with a disability. The assessment should gain information

from a variety of sources and be documented within the report. The school must provide

the written report to the parents, which includes a summary of the evaluation and

signatures of each team member indicating whether each team member agrees with the

team's determination. The Operating Standards indicate that students "must not be determined to be a child with a disability" due to lack of appropriate instruction in reading, lack of appropriate instruction in math, or limited English proficiency (ODE, 2017, p. 110).

Specific to SLD assessment, the Operating Standards indicates that the state allows the use of a response to scientific, research-based intervention process, and allows the used of other alternative research-based processes. It does not require the use of ability-achievement discrepancy. Eligibility determinations made by school must be consistent with Ohio criteria. The Operating Standards also provide additional information about group members required in the Multidisciplinary Team (MDT). The MDT must include the child's parent, general education teacher (or a general education teacher who works with same-aged peers if the student doesn't have a teacher available), and at least one person who has the qualifications to conduct individual diagnostic evaluations. Indicators that warrant a diagnostic evaluation include the following: the student does not achieve according to grade level standards even when appropriate instruction and educational experiences have been provided; when using an RTI process, the student does not make sufficient progress towards grade level standards; the student demonstrated a pattern of strengths and weaknesses in performance and/or achievement or intellectual ability. This lack of achievement may occur in oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skills, reading fluency skills, reading comprehension, mathematics calculation and/or mathematics problem solving. Based on these considerations, the MDT determines a student has a SLD. The MDT must also indicate that underachievement is not primarily due to a visual, hearing, or motor

disability; mental retardation; emotional disturbance; cultural factors; environmental or economic disadvantage; or limited English proficiency. To show that underachievement is not due to lack of appropriate reading and math instruction, the MDT must provide data that indicate that qualified personnel provided appropriate instruction in the general education setting before the evaluation referral. The MDT must also provide documentation of data from repeated assessments given at appropriate intervals showing progress during instruction. The ODE indicates that districts may use a response to scientific, research-based intervention process, which begins once a student has been provided targeted and individualized intervention and enough data have been collected to analyze to show that their response to intervention was inadequate and that the student will likely need specialized instruction beyond that provided in the general education setting to meet their needs. Scientifically-based interventions must be provided with appropriate intensity, frequency, duration, and integrity based on the student's needs. Progress monitoring is done using scientifically-based, technically adequate assessments. The data analysis must be provided in the written report to show whether there is a discrepancy between actual and expected rate of progress and level of achievement. ODE also states that the RTI process "may not be used to delay unnecessarily a child's being evaluated to determine eligibility for special education services" (ODE, 2017, p. 113).

Evaluation Team Report

The Ohio Department of Education (2018) requires that the MDT completes an Evaluation Team Report (ETR) to document the special education evaluation and eligibility determinations. It is comprised of five parts: the individual evaluator's

assessment, team summary, specific learning disability documentation for determination, eligibility, and signatures.

Each examiner is responsible for completing their own Part 1, the individual evaluator's assessment. This includes a summary of assessment results, description of the student's educational needs, and implications that has for instruction and progress monitoring. Part 2 is the team summary, which should provide a cohesive summary of information provided in the individual member's Part 1 assessment.

Part 3 is specific to students with SLD. Specific Learning Disability Documentation for Determination contains 7 sections: identified areas; response to scientific, research-based intervention; patterns of strengths and weaknesses; exclusionary factors; documentation-underachievement not due to lack of appropriate instruction; observation; and medical findings. In the "identified areas" section, the MDT identifies the areas in which the student is not achieving adequately in oral expression, listening comprehension, reading fluency skills, reading comprehension, written expression basic reading skills, mathematics calculation, and/or mathematics problem solving. The MDT must then input their evaluation data into either the "response to scientific, research-based intervention" or the "patterns of strengths and weaknesses" section. Next, the team must check boxes in the "exclusionary factors" section indicating that findings are not primarily due to a visual, hearing, or motor disability; intellectual disability; emotional disturbance; limited English proficiency; environmental or economic disadvantage; or cultural factors. In the "documentation-underachievement not due to a lack of appropriate instruction" section, the MDT provides data that the student received appropriate instruction provided by qualified personnel in the general education

setting prior or as part of the referral process. The MDT must also provide documentation of repeated formal assessment of student progress. Next, the MDT completes the "observation" section, summarizing academic performance and behavior observed in the student's learning environment. Finally, the MDT provides educationally relevant medical findings in the "medical findings" section.

The team then completes Part 4, eligibility. In this part, the MDT must check boxes indicating that underachievement is not due to lack of appropriate reading or math instruction or limited English language proficiency; the child meets Ohio criteria for having a disability; and that the child requires specially designed instruction due to the needs documented throughout the ETR. If all three of these areas are marked "yes," then the student qualifies for special education services. The team then enters the disability category under which the student qualifies and provides the basis for the eligibility determination, where they document a justification for the decision. Finally, the MDT completes Part 5, where each team provides their name, their signature, and whether they agree or disagree with the report findings. Should any member disagree, they must submit a statement why they disagree with the determination.

Special Education Model Policies and Procedures

The Ohio Department of Education addresses "identifying children with specific learning disabilities" (ODE, 2009, p. 26) within its *Special Education Model Policies and Procedures*. It states that the MDT determines that a district determines if students meet the definition of having a SLD if the students do not achieve for their age or to meet grade-level standards when given appropriate instruction in at least one of the following areas: oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skills,

reading fluency skills, reading comprehension, and/or math problem solving; and do not respond adequately when providing scientific, research-based intervention; or exhibit a pattern of strengths and weaknesses in performance, achievement, or intellectual development. Additionally, it states that districts may choose a third method to determine SLD eligibility with prior approval from ODE.

If the MDT identifies SLD based on response to scientific, research-based intervention, ODE states that the evaluation can take place once the district has sufficient data suggesting the need for specialized instruction from "scientifically based instruction and targeted and intensive individualized interventions" (ODE, 2009, p. 27). In this evaluation approach, districts use scientifically-based interventions with appropriate intensity, frequency, duration, and integrity that address students' needs. Additionally, technically adequate assessments should be used on an ongoing basis, and the data should be analyzed to show that the rate of student progress did not meet expectations.

For all SLD evaluations, ODE (2009) indicates that a MDT must be used in determining whether a student has a SLD. This must include "At least one person qualified to conduct individual diagnostic examinations of children, such as a school psychologist, speech-language pathologist or remedial reading teacher" (ODE, 2009, p. 28). Students must be observed within the general education classroom to gain information about their academic performance. The district is also responsible to show that underachievement is not due to lack of appropriate instruction in reading or math by providing data that the student received appropriate instruction by a qualified teacher in the general education setting prior to an evaluation and by providing data of repeated assessments to show progress on formal assessments over time. Progress must be

reported to the parents. The district seeks parental consent to conduct a special education evaluation in a prompt fashion if a student doesn't make appropriate progress when provided appropriate instruction and whenever there is a referral for an evaluation. The MDT must also ensure that results of the evaluation are not primarily due to exclusionary factors (a visual, hearing, or motor disability; mental retardation; emotional disturbances; cultural factors; environmental or economic disadvantage; or limited English proficiency) when identifying a student with SLD (ODE, 2009, p. 29). When conducting an assessment for SLD, the district must complete an observation of the student, including in the general education classroom, noting their behavior and academic performance.

Specific documentation when determining SLD eligibility is required. The team must document whether the student has a SLD; the basis for making that determination; any relevant observed behavior; medical findings that are educationally relevant; whether the student does not achieve age expectations or grade level standards, does not make appropriate response to meet standards, or exhibits a pattern of strengths and weaknesses; underachievement is not due to visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, mental retardation, emotional disturbance, cultural factors, environmental or economic disadvantage, or limited English proficiency; and, if the student has participated in the RTI process, the instructional strategies uses and progress monitoring and that the parents have been notified about services and data collection, strategies to increase achievement, and their rights to request an evaluation. Every member of the MDT must sign the report document and indicate whether they agree or disagree with the team's conclusion. If a member disagrees, they must provide a separate statement indicating their own conclusion.

A Guide to Parent Rights in Special Education: Special Education Procedural

Safeguards Notice

The Ohio Department of Education requires that parents be provided *A Guide to Parent Rights in Special Education: Special Education Procedural Safeguards Notice* (ODE, 2017). This guide is shared with parents when they request an evaluation because they suspect a disability or when the team would like to conduct a special education evaluation. It is also provided annually to parents of students who have qualified for special education services. Related to the SLD evaluation process, it provides parents information regarding informed parental consent, withdrawing consent, special education eligibility categories, the procedures for requesting that the district evaluates their child, and a description of Independent Educational Evaluations (IEE).

Graduate Training Programs

There are three school psychology graduate training programs in Northeastern Ohio. Publicly available information about their current programs (as of 2020) is provided below.

Cleveland State University

Cleveland State University offers a school psychology program that is accredited by the National Association of School Psychologists and the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation. Upon completion of a three-year program of 81 semester credits, graduates obtain a Master of Arts degree (after 51 credit hours) and Psychology Specialist degree (after 30 additional credit hours). The table below provides course requirements for the program.

Table 5

Cleveland State University Required Courses for Psy.S.

Credits	Course Title
3	Functional Assessment of Behavior
3	Tests and Measurement in School Psychology
2	Lifespan Development
3	Role & Function of the School Psychologist I
3	Social Psychology
4	Intellectual Assessment and Practicum
3	Child and Adolescent Assessment and Intervention
3	Functional Assessment of Academic Behavior
4	Univariate Statistics
4	Field Placement
3	Multicultural Psychology and Diversity
3	Introduction to Special Education
3	Therapeutic Interventions
3	Family-School Collaboration
4	Field Placement II
3	Clinical Psychopharmacology
2	Crisis Intervention in the Schools
2	Directed Observation in Schools
3	Role and Function of the School Psychologist II
2	Reading Assessment and Intervention
3	System Consultation in School Psychology
2	Student-based Consultation in School Psychology
6	Supervised Experience in School Psychology I
2	Internship Seminar I
6	Supervised Experience in School Psychology II
2	Internship Seminar II

John Carroll University

John Carroll University offers a school psychology program that is accredited by the National Association of School Psychologists, Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Educator Preparation, North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, and the Ohio Department of Higher Education. Upon the completion of a three-year program of 78 semester hours and a written comprehensive examination, graduates obtain a Master of Education degree and Education Specialist degree. The table below provides course requirements for the program.

Table 6

John Carroll University Required Courses for Ed.S.

Credits	Course Title
3	The Exceptional Learner
3	Orientation to Ed Environment
3	Tests and Measurements
3	Developmental Psychology
3	Learning-Teaching
6	Psycho-Educational Evaluation
3	Role and Function of School Psychologist
3	Counseling Children and Adolescents
3	Counseling Theories
3	Research Methods
3	Introductory Statistics
3	Child Psychopathology
3	Practicum Experience: School Psychology
3	Multicultural Education
3	Literacy Assessment and Intervention Model

Credits	Course Title
3	Practicum: Psych-Ed Diagnosis/Intervention
3	Consultation Skills
6	Seminar in School Psychology
15	Internship
3	Group Procedures

Kent State University

Kent State University offers a school psychology program that has been accredited by the National Association of School Psychologists. Upon completion of a minimum of a three-year program of 85 semester credits and a comprehensive examination, graduates obtain a Master of Education degree (after a minimum of 30 credits) and Education Specialist degree (after a minimum of 55 additional credits). The table below provides course requirements for the Ed.S. program.

Table 7

Kent State University Required Courses for Ed.S.

Credits	Course Title
3	Statistics I for Educational Services
3	Child and Adolescent Development or Life Span Development
3	Role of the School Psychologist
3	Diagnosis of Childhood Disorders in Schools
3	Individual Counseling Techniques for Rehabilitation Counselors & School Psychologists
3	Instructional Assessment for School Psychologists
6	Practicum I in School Psychology
3	Social-Emotional Assessment for School Psychologists
3	Interventions with Culturally Diverse Students
3	Cognitive Assessment of Children in Schools

Credits	Course Title
3	Social-Emotional Interventions in School Psychology
1	Introduction to Digital Citizenship for School Psychologists
3	Developmental Assessment
3	Instructional Interventions for School Psychologists
3	Group Counseling Techniques for Rehabilitation Counselors and School Psychologists
6	Practicum II in School Psychology
3	Consultation in the Helping Professions
3	Legal, Ethical, & Professional Issues in School Psychology
3	Diagnosis & Remediation in Reading
3	Home, School, and Community Collaboration
3	Principles and Techniques of Supervision and Special Education or Administration and Supervision in Special Education
6	Issues and Approaches in School Psychology
12	Internship in School Psychology

Kent State University also has a Ph.D. school psychology program. Upon completion of a minimum of a minimum of 91 semester credits (post Master degree) and a comprehensive examination, which are completed over 5 years, graduates obtain a Ph.D. This program is accredited by the American Psychological Association and National Association of School Psychologists. The table below provides course requirements for the Ph.D. program.

Table 8

Kent State University Required Courses for Ph.D.

Credits	Course Title
3	Statistics I for Educational Services
3	Child & Adolescent Development or Life Span Development
3	Administration and Supervision of Special Education or Administration and Supervision in Special Education
3	Diagnosis of Child Disorders in Schools
3	Social-Emotional Assessment for School Psychologists
3	Instructional Assessment for School Psychologists
3	Social-Emotional Interventions in School Psychology
3	Interventions with Culturally Diverse Students
3	Cognitive Assessment of Children in Schools
3	Developmental Assessment
3	Diagnosis and Remediation in Reading
3	Instructional Interventions for School Psychologists
3	Group Counseling Techniques for Rehab Counselors & School Psychologists
3	Consultation in the Helping Professions
3	Role of the School Psychologists
3	Legal, Ethical, & Professional Issues in School Psychology
6	Legal, Ethical, & Professional Issues in School Psychology
6	Practicum II in School Psychology
3	Physiological Psychology or Learning and Conditioning
3	Introduction to Cognitive Psychology or Cognitive Neuropsychology or Cognitive Development
3	Social Psychology or Community Psychology
3	Social & Personality Development or Theories of Personality
3	History and Contemporary Systems
3	Psychology Elective

Credit	Course Title
3	Quantitative Research Design and Application for Educational Services or Quantitative Statistical Analysis I
3	Qualitative Research Design and Application for Educational Sciences
3	Advanced Quantitative Research in Educational Services or Advanced Qualitative Research in Educational Services or Quantitative Statistical Analysis II
3	Individual Research in School Psychology
2	School Psychology Seminar Series or Individual Research in School Psychology
3	Doctoral Residency Seminar in School Psychology
3	Research Seminar in School Psychology
3	Professional Seminar in School Psychology
3	Professional Seminar in School Psychology or Research Seminar in School Psychology
6	Advanced Practicum in School Psychology
12	Doctoral Internship in School Psychology
30	Dissertation
2	Field Experience in Education for School Psychologists
6	Issues and Approaches in School Psychology
2	Integrating Experience in School Psychology

National Association of School Psychologists

The National Association of School Psychologists is responsible for accrediting school psychology graduate programs to assure they align with their *Standards for Graduate Preparation of School Psychologists.* Additionally, NASP also provides resources to its members. Their Position Statements regarding a number of topics, including those related to SLD identification, are available to the general public through their website. In the section below, the standards are detailed as is NASP's position statement on student SLD identification.

NASP Standards for Graduate Preparation of School Psychologists

The Standards for Graduate Preparation of School Psychologists (2010) guide the accreditation process for school psychology graduate programs. It enumerates the competencies needed to prepare school psychologists. It includes standards that address school psychology program context/structure; domains of school psychology graduate education and practice; practica and internship in school psychology; and school psychology program support/resources. Most applicable to SLD identification are the 10 domains of school psychology graduate education and practice: Data-Based Decision Making and Accountability; Consultation and Collaboration; Interventions and Instructional Support to Develop Academic Skills; Interventions and Mental Health Services to Develop Social and Life Skills; School-Wide Practices to Promote Learning; Preventative and Responsive Services; Family-School Collaboration Services; Diversity in Development and Learning; Research and Program Evaluation; and Legal, Ethical, and Professional Practice. See Appendix J for the NASP Criteria for Program Review and Approval Rubric (NASP, 2010b).

NASP Position Statement: Identification of Students with SLDs

NASP's position statement on identification of students with SLDs (2011) indicated support of the following:

- SLD identification and instruction for students suspected of having a SLD should be completed within an evidence-based multitiered system that provides students with learning needs with timely high-quality instruction and a continuum of evidence-based instruction within the general education setting (NASP, 2011).

- Within that multitiered system, interventions are provided more intensively in the general education setting before considering a special education referral (NASP, 2011).

- Universal screenings should be implemented at the elementary school level and as needed at the secondary level.

- When a student is suspected of having an SLD and has been provided appropriate instruction and intervention within the general education setting that did not meet the student's needs, a MDT conducts a comprehensive evaluation to determine whether they are eligible for special education and their individual needs (NASP, 2011).

- NASP encourages best practices of considering multiple sources of data, including response to scientifically-based instruction, indicating that "relying upon an ability–achievement discrepancy as the sole means of identifying children with specific learning disabilities is at odds with scientific research and with best practice" (NASP, 2011, p. 2).

- Finally, this position statement indicated that school psychologists must continue to update and improve their knowledge and practice and only use methods that are supported by research (NASP, 2011).

NASP Position Statement: School Psychologists' Involvement in Assessment

NASP's position statement on school psychologists' involvement in assessment (2016) recognizes that school psychologists play an important role in assessments within a multitiered system of support because of their preparation and expertise. Within their statement, they indicate that school psychologists should have "substantial roles in data-driven decision-making" (NASP, 2009, p. 2) in the following areas:

- School psychologists make routine decisions from informal assessments, such as grades, teacher notes, attendance records, office referrals, etc. to inform practices for students meeting grade-level expectations (NASP, 2009).

- School psychologists are involved in screenings, occurring 1-4 times a year, to identify students who are not meeting grade-level expectations. They should also collect information to determine whether students are making appropriate progress. This information should be used to identify the needs of individual students, groups of students, and at the system level (NASP, 2009).

- School psychologists work with other leaders to improve universal supports that are made available to all students in the general education setting. If many students are not achieving with current supports, school psychologists collaborate with other educators to change instructional supports to improve student outcomes (NASP, 2009).

- School psychologists conduct assessments to identify needs at the individual-, group-, and system-levels. They use the information from the assessments to match interventions with student needs (NASP, 2009).

- School psychologists collaborate with school leaders to evaluate effectiveness of instruction and intervention. The use data in order to evaluation student outcomes and recommend changes (NASP, 2009).

- School psychologists make special education eligibility and diagnostic decisions by collecting and synthesizing data. When students not appropriately respond to interventions, school psychologists aid in designing, delivering, and monitoring intensive interventions (NASP, 2009).

NASP Position Statement: Integrated Model of Academic and Behavior Supports

NASP's position statement on integrated model of academic and behavior supports (NASP, 2016) provides information about the use of a multitiered system of support and the role of school psychologists at Tiers I, II, and III. Within this system, evidence-based interventions are chosen to correlate with student needs, they are implemented with fidelity, and student progress monitoring is done with valid measures. The goal is to improve outcomes of all students. Interventions provided at each tier should be "culturally responsive and provide a continuum of both academic and behavior supports that incorporate awareness of student diversity in race, culture and background, language, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and educational need" (NASP, 2016, p. 1-2). It reports that a multitiered system of support should have the following features:

- Comprehensive Tier I instruction that has clearly stated expectations; explicit instruction; strategies to engage students; scaffolding and support for learners; and much corrective feedback (NASP, 2016).
- Screenings should be completed with all students to identify student need early (NASP, 2016).
- Students should be provided increasingly intense evidence-based interventions as appropriate (NASP, 2016).
- Reliable and valid assessments should be used to determine if a student is responding to intervention and to make decisions about any necessary changes (NASP, 2016 ab).

The role of school psychologists at each tier is also described within this position statement:

At Tier I, school psychologists should help in designing and implementing core curricula; lead teams in universal screening to inform instruction and identify students who are at-risk; engage in collaboration to address students needs; and advocate for the mental health needs of all students (NASP, 2016).

- At Tier II, school psychologists should help educators select appropriate interventions and progress monitoring tools; support progress monitoring; consult with educators to improve understanding of progress monitoring data to determine whether students are making adequate progress; and lead social skills and mental health interventions in small groups (NASP, 2016).

- At Tier III, school psychologists should conduct assessments to develop individual plans for students; assist in choosing evidence-based interventions that match student needs; provide individual counseling services with significant mental health needs; and collaborate to frequently review progress monitoring data to determine whether referral for a comprehensive evaluation is warranted.

Ohio School Psychologist Association

The Ohio School Psychologist Association (OSPA) is the state professional association for school psychologists in the state of Ohio. It provides conferences every fall and spring to provide professional development opportunities. Below is a table that provides information about the presentation related to SLD identification.

Table 9

OSPA Presentations Related to SLD Identification

Presentation	Topic
Fall 2016	Using Systems to Enhance Instructional Problem-Solving & Data-Based Decision Making
Fall 2016	Establishing a Multi-tiered System of Support for Mathematics
Spring 2016	Research Informing Practice: Evidence from the Florida Learning Disabilities Research Projects
Spring 2016	Untangling Reading Comprehension: Diagnosing and Articulating Comprehension Difficulties
Spring 2016	Evidence-Based Interventions for Preventing Reading Failure: Lessons from the Florida Center for Reading Research
Fall 2013	Integrating RtI with Cognitive Neuropsychology: A Scientific Approach to Reading; A Framework for Specific Reading Intervention
Fall 2013	Organizing Cross-Battery Assessments for Intervention with Emphasis on Differential Diagnosis of SLD
Fall 2012	Assessment of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students
Fall 2012	Mathematical Learning Disabilities and Other Obstacles to Mathematic Success
Fall 2011	Assessment to Intervention Within an RTI Framework
Spring 2011	Intervention and Strategy Training in a Three-Tier Model
Spring 2011	Focus on Contemporary Cattell-Horn-Carroll (CHC) Cognitive-Achievement Relations Research
Spring 2011	Work it! Stretch your value and benefit of AIMSweb® Data-Make it work harder for you!
Spring 2010	Innovative Response To Intervention Responses: Planning to Implementation
Fall 2009	Using the Outcomes-Driven Model and DIBELS for Response to Intervention
Fall 2008	RTI and the School Psychologist: Making What Matters Happen
Fall 2008	Identifying and Treating Learning Disabilities: The Importance of Response to Intervention

Presentation	Topic
Spring 2008	Understanding Specific Learning Disabilities: From Assessment to Interventions
Spring 2007	Essentials of Cross-Battery Assessment, Including Overview of KABC-II and its Use in Cross-Battery and Nondiscriminatory Assessment
Spring 2007	Best Practices in SLD Assessment: A Process That Begins with RTI and that May Culminate in the Use of Norm-Referenced Tests for Redirecting Intervention
Fall 2005	Dysgraphia and Dyslexia Presentation

Cleveland Association of School Psychologists

The Cleveland Association of School Psychologists (CASP) is the regional professional association for school psychologists in Cuyahoga, Lake, Geauga, Ashtabula, and Trumbull counties in Ohio. It provides professional development opportunities at each general meeting held in fall, winter, and spring. Information related to professional development presentation titles and dates were not available.

Appendix I

Prior Written Notice to Parents (PR-01)

PR-01 PRIOR WRITTEN NOTICE TO PARENTS

CHILD'S INFORMATION

NAME: DATE OF BIRTH: DATE OF NOTICE

This is to notify you of the district's action:

TYPE OF ACTION TAKEN

- ☐ Proposes to initiate an initial evaluation
- ☐ Refusal to initiate an evaluation
- ☐ Expedited evaluation
- ☐ Change of placement
- ☐ Change of placement for disciplinary reasons
- ☐ Proposes to change the identification, evaluation or educational placement of the child or provision of FAPE
- ☐ Refusal to change the identification, evaluation or educational placement of the child or provision of FAPE
- ☐ Reevaluation
- ☐ IEP issues/meetings where the parent(s) disagree with the district
- ☐ Revocation of Consent
- ☐ Due process hearing, or an expedited due process hearing, initiated by the district
- ☐ Graduation from high school
- ☐ Exiting high school due to exceeding the age eligibility for FAPE
- ☐ Other

2. A description of the action proposed or refused by the school district:

3. An explanation of why the school district proposes or refuses to take the action:

4. A description of other options that the IEP team considered and the reasons why those options were rejected:

5. A description of each evaluation procedure, assessment, record or report the school district used as a basis for the proposed or refused action:

6. A description of other factors that are relevant to the school district's proposal or refusal:

PROVISION OF PROCEDURAL SAFEGUARDS

As a parent of a child with a suspected or identified disability, you have procedural safeguard protection under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004. You will be given a copy of your procedural safeguards once per year. In addition, you will be given a copy of your procedural safeguards when you request a copy, when your child is referred for their first evaluation, when you request an evaluation for your child, when you file a formal written complaint or request a due process hearing and in accordance with the discipline procedures in 34 CFR 300.530(h).

If you have any questions about the action(s) described in this form, your rights as described in the Procedural Safeguards Notice, other related concerns, or you wish to obtain a copy of the Procedural Safeguards Notice, please contact the following:

Name: Title:

Address:

City: State: Zip Code:

Telephone: E-mail:

School District:

Appendix J

NASP Criteria for Program Review and Approval Rubric (2010)

2010 NASP CRITERIA FOR PROGRAM REVIEW AND APPROVAL
NASP Program Approval Board
Condition Standard I Rubric

Element	Not Acceptable	Marginal	Acceptable
C.1.	___ A primary focus on or affiliation with school psychology is not evident in the program's title, degree, or documents.	___ Although "school psychology" may be in the program's title it is unclear if the primary focus or affiliation is school psychology.	___ The program is clearly identified by title, degree, and program documents as being a "school psychology program."
	___ The program has no framework/objectives, or ones that are very broad or vague, doesn't articulate candidate outcomes, or articulates outcomes not consistent with the field of school psychology	___ The program has a framework/objectives, but it is unclear if they articulate candidate outcomes consistent with the field of school psychology.	___ The program has a clear framework and set of goals or objectives for candidate outcomes consistent with the field of school psychology
	___ Little or no emphasis on human diversity is evidenced in program objectives, development of candidate knowledge and skills, and other aspects of the program, or is represented much less than expected given the program's focus/location.	___ Human diversity is minimally represented in program objectives, development of candidate knowledge and skills, and other aspects of the program, or is represented somewhat less than expected given the program's focus/location and NASP Standards.	___ Human diversity is infused throughout program objectives, development of candidate knowledge and skills, and other aspects of the program to an extent consistent with the program's focus/location and NASP Standards.
	___ There is little or no evidence of an integrated, sequential program of study and field experiences or, if one is required, candidates don't appear to follow it consistently based on evidence of practice (e.g., transcripts)	___ There is some evidence of an integrated, sequential program of study and field experiences, but evidence of practice (e.g., transcripts) is not entirely consistent with policy.	___ The program has an integrated, sequential program of study and field experiences based on the program's philosophy/mission; evidence of practice (e.g., transcripts) is consistent with policy.
	___ It is not clear whether full-time or part-time study is required, and/or it cannot be determined how or when candidates develop a professional identity as school psychologists or an affiliation with colleagues and faculty, or program practice appears inconsistent with policy.	___ The program requires either full-time study, or part-time or alternative study that provides some opportunity for candidates to establish professional identity as school psychologists and an affiliation with colleagues and faculty, but they are not multiple and systematic, or are otherwise inadequate.	___ The program requires either full-time study, or part-time or alternative study that provides multiple and systematic opportunities to establish professional identity as school psychologists and an affiliation with colleagues and faculty.

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	___ There is little or no evidence that systematic, performance-based evaluation and accountability procedures are used to improve the quality of the program	___ Attempts appear to be made to use to use performance-based evaluation and accountability procedures to improve the quality of the program, but efforts are limited, or do not appear to be systematic.	___ Systematic, performance-based evaluation and accountability procedures are used to improve the quality of the program

IMPORTANT: Comment on C.1. Explain any ratings of less than "Acceptable" and make recommendations for improvement, as necessary

Element	Not Acceptable	Marginal	Acceptable
C.2	___ It is not clear how many faculty are assigned to the program, and/or there are fewer than two, and/or the number of faculty appear grossly insufficient to support candidate learning.	___ Evidence is provided that the program faculty total two full-time equivalents and/or has somewhat insufficient faculty to support candidate learning.	___ Evidence is provided that program faculty total at least three full-time equivalents and are in sufficient numbers to support candidate learning.
	___ It is not apparent that any program faculty members hold doctoral degrees with specialization in school psychology and are actively engaged in school psychology.	___ The program appears to have at least one faculty member with a doctoral degree with specialization in school psychology and others who may have school psychology credentials or experience, or other relevant degrees, but does not meet the standards for "Acceptable."	___ At least two school psychology program faculty members (including the program administrator) hold doctoral degrees with specialization in school psychology and are actively engaged in school psychology.
___ Not applicable to program	___ It cannot be determined what other faculty actually contribute to the program, or if their degrees and credentials support their responsibilities in the program.	___ Some but not all other school psychology faculty members, as applicable to the program, hold doctoral degrees in psychology, education, or a closely related field with specializations supportive of responsibilities in the program.	___ Other school psychology program faculty members, as applicable to the program, hold doctoral degrees in psychology, education, or a closely related field with specializations supportive of responsibilities in the program.

IMPORTANT: Comment on C.2. Explain any ratings of less than "Acceptable" and make recommendations for improvement, as necessary

Element	Not Acceptable	Marginal	Acceptable
C.3 (for specialist level programs only)	___ Program policy regarding the length of the program is unclear or consists of less than three years full-time study or equivalent, or policy is clear but practice (as evidenced in transcripts) is inconsistent with policy.	___ Program policy requiring a minimum of three years of full-time study at the graduate level, or the equivalent if part-time is clear; practice (as evidenced in transcripts) is somewhat inconsistent with policy.	___ The specialist program requires a minimum of three years of full-time study at the graduate level, or the equivalent if part-time; practice (as evidenced in transcripts) is consistent with policy.
	___ Program policy regarding the number of graduate semester hours	___ The specialist program requires at least 60 graduate semester hours or the equivalent, with at least 54	___ The specialist program requires at least 60 graduate semester hours or the equivalent, with at least 54 hours

	is unclear or consists of less than 60 with at least 54 hours exclusive of credit for the supervised specialist-level internship, or policy is clear but practice (as evidenced in transcripts) is inconsistent with policy	hours exclusive of credit for the supervised specialist-level internship, but practice (as evidenced in transcripts) is somewhat inconsistent with policy	exclusive of credit for the supervised specialist-level internship; practice (as evidenced in transcripts) is consistent with policy.
	___ Little or no evidence is provided of institutional documentation of completion of the school psychology specialist program, or evidence indicates that the only such documentation is provided *prior* to completion of internship.	___ Program policy is to provide institutional documentation of specialist program completion, but such documentation is inadequate or practice is not entirely consistent with policy.	___ Institutional documentation of completion of the school psychology specialist program (e.g., degree, certificate of advanced study, or transcript notation) provided to graduates after completion of all requirements, including internship. (Note: this does not preclude programs from bestowing a non-terminal degree prior to internship as long as documentation is also provided after internship)

IMPORTANT: Comment on C.3. Explain any ratings of less than "Acceptable" and make recommendations for improvement, as necessary

Element	Not Acceptable	Marginal	Acceptable
C.4 (for *doctoral level* programs only)	___ Program policy regarding greater depth is absent or very unclear, or policy is clear but practice is inconsistent with policy.	___ Program policy regarding greater depth is somewhat unclear, or policy is clear but practice is somewhat inconsistent with policy.	___ The doctoral program provides greater depth in one or more school psychology competencies identified by the program; practice (as evidenced in transcripts) is consistent with policy.
C.4 (for *doctoral level* programs only)	___ Program policy regarding minimum of four years of full-time study is unclear or less than four years, or policy is clear but practice (as evidenced in transcripts) is inconsistent with policy.	___ Program policy regarding minimum of four years of full-time study is somewhat unclear, or policy is clear but practice (as evidenced in transcripts) is somewhat inconsistent with policy.	___ The doctoral program requires a minimum of four years of full-time study at the graduate level, or the equivalent if part-time; practice (as evidenced in transcripts) is consistent with policy.
	___ Program policy regarding the total number of credit hours is unclear or consists of less than 90 graduate semester hours or the equivalent, with at least 78 hours exclusive of credit for the supervised doctoral internship experience and any terminal doctoral project (e.g., dissertation), or policy is clear but practice is consistent with	___ Program policy regarding at least 90 graduate semester hours or the equivalent, with at least 78 hours exclusive of credit for the supervised doctoral internship experience and any terminal doctoral project (e.g., dissertation); practice is somewhat inconsistent with policy.	___ The doctoral program requires at least 90 graduate semester hours or the equivalent, with at least 78 hours exclusive of credit for the supervised doctoral internship experience and any terminal doctoral project (e.g., dissertation); practice is consistent with policy.

Standards II - VIII Rubric

Standard II	Not Acceptable	Marginal	Acceptable
Standard II: Practices that Permeate all Aspects of Service Delivery: Data-Based Decision-Making and Accountability	___ There is little or no evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of varied methods of assessment and data collection methods for identifying strengths and needs, developing effective services and programs, and measuring progress and outcomes.	___ There is some or inconsistent evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of varied methods of assessment and data collection methods for identifying strengths and needs, developing effective services and programs, and measuring progress and outcomes.	___ There is strong evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of varied methods of assessment and data collection methods for identifying strengths and needs, developing effective services and programs, and measuring progress and outcomes.
	___ There is little or no evidence that candidates **demonstrate the skills** to use psychological and educational assessment, data collection strategies, and technology resources and apply results to design, implement, and evaluate response to services and programs	___ There is some or inconsistent evidence that candidates **demonstrate the skills** to use psychological and educational assessment, data collection strategies, and technology resources and apply results to design, implement, and evaluate response to services and programs	___ There is strong evidence that candidates **demonstrate the skills** to use psychological and educational assessment, data collection strategies, and technology resources and apply results to design, implement, and evaluate response to services and programs
IMPORTANT: Comment on Standard II. Explain any ratings of less than "Acceptable" and make recommendations for improvement, as necessary			

Standard III	Not Acceptable	Marginal	Acceptable
Standard III: Practices that Permeate all Aspects of Service Delivery: Consultation and Collaboration	___ There is little or no evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of varied methods of consultation, collaboration, and communication applicable to individuals, families, groups, and systems and used to promote effective implementation of services	___ There is some or inconsistent evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of varied methods of consultation, collaboration, and communication applicable to individuals, families, groups, and systems and used to promote effective implementation of services	___ There is strong evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of varied methods of consultation, collaboration, and communication applicable to individuals, families, groups, and systems and used to promote effective implementation of services
	___ There is little or no evidence that candidates **demonstrate the skills** to consult, collaborate, and communicate with others during design, implementation, and evaluation of services and programs	___ There is some or inconsistent evidence that candidates **demonstrate the skills** to consult, collaborate, and communicate with others during design, implementation, and evaluation of services and programs	___ There is strong evidence that candidates **demonstrate the skills** to consult, collaborate, and communicate with others during design, implementation, and evaluation of services and programs
IMPORTANT: Comment on Standard III. Explain any ratings of less than "Acceptable" and make recommendations for improvement, as necessary			

Standard IV: Direct and Indirect Services: Student Level Services			
Standard IV	**Not Acceptable**	**Marginal**	**Acceptable**
4.1 Interventions and Instructional Support to Develop Academic Skills	___ There is little or no evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of biological, cultural, and social influences on academic skills; human learning, cognitive, and developmental processes; and evidence-based curriculum and instructional strategies.	___ There is some or inconsistent evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of biological, cultural, and social influences on academic skills; human learning, cognitive, and developmental processes; and evidence-based curriculum and instructional strategies.	___ There is strong evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of biological, cultural, and social influences on academic skills; human learning, cognitive, and developmental processes; and evidence-based curriculum and instructional strategies.
	___ There is little or no evidence that candidates, in collaboration with others, **demonstrate skills** to use assessment and data-collection methods and to implement and evaluate services that support cognitive and academic skills.	___ There is some or inconsistent evidence that candidates, in collaboration with others, **demonstrate skills** to use assessment and data-collection methods and to implement and evaluate services that support cognitive and academic skills.	___ There is strong evidence that candidates, in collaboration with others, **demonstrate skills** to use assessment and data-collection methods and to implement and evaluate services that support cognitive and academic skills.
IMPORTANT: Comment on Element 4.1. Explain any ratings of less than "Acceptable" and make recommendations for improvement, as necessary			
4.2 Interventions and Mental Health Services to Develop Social and Life Skills	___ There is little or no evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of biological, cultural, developmental, and social influences on behavior and mental health; behavioral and emotional impacts on learning and life skills; and evidence-based strategies to promote social-emotional functioning and mental health	___ There is some or inconsistent evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of biological, cultural, developmental, and social influences on behavior and mental health; behavioral and emotional impacts on learning and life skills; and evidence-based strategies to promote social-emotional functioning and mental health	___ There is strong evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of biological, cultural, developmental, and social influences on behavior and mental health; behavioral and emotional impacts on learning and life skills; and evidence-based strategies to promote social-emotional functioning and mental health
	___ There is little or no evidence that candidates, in collaboration with others, **demonstrate skills** to use assessment and data-collection methods and to implement and evaluate services that support socialization, learning, and mental health	___ There is some or inconsistent evidence that candidates, in collaboration with others, **demonstrate skills** to use assessment and data-collection methods and to implement and evaluate services that support socialization, learning, and mental health	___ There is strong evidence that candidates, in collaboration with others, **demonstrate skills** to use assessment and data-collection methods and to implement and evaluate services that support socialization, learning, and mental health
IMPORTANT: Comment on Element 4.2. Explain any ratings of less than "Acceptable" and make recommendations for improvement, as necessary			

Standard V: Direct and Indirect Services: Systems Level Services – Schools			
Standard V	**Not Acceptable**	**Marginal**	**Acceptable**
5.1 School-Wide Practices to Promote Learning	___ There is little or no evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of school and systems structure, organization, and theory; general and special education; technology resources; and evidence-based school practices that promote academic outcomes, learning, social development, and mental health	___ There is some or inconsistent evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of school and systems structure, organization, and theory; general and special education; technology resources; and evidence-based school practices that promote academic outcomes, learning, social development, and mental health	___ There is strong evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of school and systems structure, organization, and theory; general and special education; technology resources; and evidence-based school practices that promote academic outcomes, learning, social development, and mental health.
	___ There is little or no evidence that candidates, in collaboration with others, **demonstrate skills** to develop and implement practices and strategies to create and maintain effective and supportive learning environments for children and others	___ There is some or inconsistent evidence that candidates, in collaboration with others, **demonstrate skills** to develop and implement practices and strategies to create and maintain effective and supportive learning environments for children and others	___ There is strong evidence that candidates, in collaboration with others, **demonstrate skills** to develop and implement practices and strategies to create and maintain effective and supportive learning environments for children and others
IMPORTANT: Comment on Element 5.1. Explain any ratings of less than "Acceptable" and make recommendations for improvement, as necessary			
5.2 Preventive and Responsive Services	___ There is little or no evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of principles and research related to resilience and risk factors in learning and mental health, services in schools and communities to support multi-tiered prevention, and evidence-based strategies for effective crisis response	___ There is some or inconsistent evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of principles and research related to resilience and risk factors in learning and mental health, services in schools and communities to support multi-tiered prevention, and evidence-based strategies for effective crisis response	___ There is strong evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of principles and research related to resilience and risk factors in learning and mental health, services in schools and communities to support multi-tiered prevention, and evidence-based strategies for effective crisis response
	___ There is little or no evidence that candidates, in collaboration with others, **demonstrate skills** to promote services that enhance learning, mental health, safety, and physical well-being through protective and adaptive factors and to implement effective crisis preparation, response, and recovery	___ There is some or inconsistent evidence that candidates, in collaboration with others, **demonstrate skills** to promote services that enhance learning, mental health, safety, and physical well-being through protective and adaptive factors and to implement effective crisis preparation, response, and recovery	___ There is strong evidence that candidates, in collaboration with others, **demonstrate skills** to promote services that enhance learning, mental health, safety, and physical well-being through protective and adaptive factors and to implement effective crisis preparation, response, and recovery
IMPORTANT: Comment on Element 5.2. Explain any ratings of less than "Acceptable" and make recommendations for improvement, as necessary			

Standard VI	Not Acceptable	Marginal	Acceptable
Standard VI: Direct and Indirect Services: Systems Level Services – Family-School Collaboration	___ There is little or no evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of principles and research related to family systems, strengths, needs, and culture; evidence-based strategies to support family influences on children's learning, socialization, and mental health; and methods to develop collaboration between families and schools	___ There is some or inconsistent evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of principles and research related to family systems, strengths, needs, and culture; evidence-based strategies to support family influences on children's learning, socialization, and mental health; and methods to develop collaboration between families and schools	___ There is strong evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of principles and research related to family systems, strengths, needs, and culture; evidence-based strategies to support family influences on children's learning, socialization, and mental health; and methods to develop collaboration between families and schools
	___ There is little or no evidence that candidates, in collaboration with others, **demonstrate skills** to design, implement, and evaluate services that respond to culture and context and facilitate family and school partnership/ interactions with community agencies for enhancement of academic and social-behavioral outcomes for children	___ There is some or inconsistent evidence that candidates, in collaboration with others, **demonstrate skills** to design, implement, and evaluate services that respond to culture and context and facilitate family and school partnership/ interactions with community agencies for enhancement of academic and social-behavioral outcomes for children	___ There is strong evidence that candidates, in collaboration with others, **demonstrate skills** to design, implement, and evaluate services that respond to culture and context and facilitate family and school partnership/ interactions with community agencies for enhancement of academic and social-behavioral outcomes for children

IMPORTANT: Comment on Standard VI. Explain any ratings of less than "Acceptable" and make recommendations for improvement, as necessary

Standard VII	Not Acceptable	Marginal	Acceptable
Standard VII: Foundations of School Psychologists' Service Delivery: Diversity	___ There is little or no evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of individual differences, abilities, disabilities, and other diverse characteristics; principles and research related to diversity factors for children, families, and schools, including factors related to culture, context, and individual and role differences; and evidence-based strategies to enhance services and address potential influences related to diversity	___ There is some or inconsistent evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of individual differences, abilities, disabilities, and other diverse characteristics; principles and research related to diversity factors for children, families, and schools, including factors related to culture, context, and individual and role differences; and evidence-based strategies to enhance services and address potential influences related to diversity	___ There is strong evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of individual differences, abilities, disabilities, and other diverse characteristics; principles and research related to diversity factors for children, families, and schools, including factors related to culture, context, and individual and role differences; and evidence-based strategies to enhance services and address potential influences related to diversity
	___ There is little or no evidence that candidates **demonstrate skills** to provide professional services	___ There is some or inconsistent evidence that candidates **demonstrate skills** to provide professional services that promote	___ There is strong evidence that candidates **demonstrate skills** to provide professional services that promote effective functioning for

that promote effective functioning for individuals, families, and schools with diverse characteristics, cultures, and backgrounds and across multiple contexts, with recognition that an understanding and respect for diversity in development and learning and advocacy for social justice are foundations of all aspects of service delivery	effective functioning for individuals, families, and schools with diverse characteristics, cultures, and backgrounds and across multiple contexts, with recognition that an understanding and respect for diversity in development and learning and advocacy for social justice are foundations of all aspects of service delivery	individuals, families, and schools with diverse characteristics, cultures, and backgrounds and across multiple contexts, with recognition that an understanding and respect for diversity in development and learning and advocacy for social justice are foundations of all aspects of service delivery

IMPORTANT: Comment on Standard VII. Explain any ratings of less than "Acceptable" and make recommendations for improvement, as necessary

Standard VIII: Foundations of School Psychologists' Service Delivery: Research, Program Evaluation, Legal, Ethical and Professional Practice

Standard VIII	Not Acceptable	Marginal	Acceptable
8.1 Research, Program Evaluation, Legal, Ethical, and Professional Practice	___ There is little or no evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of research design, statistics, measurement, varied data collection and analysis techniques, and program evaluation methods sufficient for understanding research and interpreting data in applied settings	___ There is some or inconsistent evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of research design, statistics, measurement, varied data collection and analysis techniques, and program evaluation methods sufficient for understanding research and interpreting data in applied settings	___ There is strong evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of research design, statistics, measurement, varied data collection and analysis techniques, and program evaluation methods sufficient for understanding research and interpreting data in applied settings
	___ There is little or no evidence that candidates **demonstrate skills** to evaluate and apply research as a foundation for service delivery and, in collaboration with others, use various techniques and technology resources for data collection, measurement, analysis, and program evaluation to support effective practices at the individual, group, and/or systems levels	___ There is some or inconsistent evidence that candidates **demonstrate skills** to evaluate and apply research as a foundation for service delivery and, in collaboration with others, use various techniques and technology resources for data collection, measurement, analysis, and program evaluation to support effective practices at the individual, group, and/or systems levels	___ There is strong evidence that candidates **demonstrate skills** to evaluate and apply research as a foundation for service delivery and, in collaboration with others, use various techniques and technology resources for data collection, measurement, analysis, and program evaluation to support effective practices at the individual, group, and/or systems levels

IMPORTANT: Comment on Element 8.1. Explain any ratings of less than "Acceptable" and make recommendations for improvement, as necessary

| **8.2 Legal, Ethical, and Professional Practice** | ___ There is little or no evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of the history and foundations of school psychology; multiple | ___ There is some or inconsistent evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of the history and foundations of school psychology; multiple service models and | ___ There is strong evidence that candidates **acquire knowledge** of the history and foundations of school psychology; multiple service models and methods; ethical, legal, and |

	service models and methods; ethical, legal, and professional standards; and other factors related to professional identity and effective practice as school psychologists	methods; ethical, legal, and professional standards; and other factors related to professional identity and effective practice as school psychologists	professional standards; and other factors related to professional identity and effective practice as school psychologists
	___ There is little or no evidence that candidates **demonstrate skills** to provide services consistent with ethical, legal, and professional standards; engage in responsive ethical and professional decision-making; collaborate with other professionals	___ There is some or inconsistent evidence that candidates **demonstrate skills** to provide services consistent with ethical, legal, and professional standards; engage in responsive ethical and professional decision-making; collaborate with other professionals	___ There is strong evidence that candidates **demonstrate skills** to provide services consistent with ethical, legal, and professional standards; engage in responsive ethical and professional decision-making; collaborate with other professionals
	___ There is little or no evidence that candidates **apply professional work characteristics** needed for effective practice as school psychologists, including respect for human diversity and social justice, communication skills, effective interpersonal skills, responsibility, adaptability, initiative, dependability, and technology skills	___ There is some or inconsistent evidence that candidates **apply professional work characteristics** needed for effective practice as school psychologists, including respect for human diversity and social justice, communication skills, effective interpersonal skills, responsibility, adaptability, initiative, dependability, and technology skills	___ There is strong evidence that candidates **apply professional work characteristics** needed for effective practice as school psychologists, including respect for human diversity and social justice, communication skills, effective interpersonal skills, responsibility, adaptability, initiative, dependability, and technology skills

IMPORTANT: Comment on Element B.2. Explain any ratings of less than "Acceptable" and make recommendations for improvement, as necessary

Overall comments on exemplary practices, areas of concern, and/or recommendations for improvement and explain any ratings of less than Acceptable:

Standard IX - Practica and Internships in School Psychology

Element	Not Acceptable	Marginal	Acceptable
9.1.	___ The program does not require practica experiences for academic credit, or documentation of associated academic credit is lacking	___ The program requires field-based experiences associated with courses but they are not clearly described as practica or documentation of associated academic credit is unclear	___ Completion of practica, for academic credit or otherwise is documented by the institution
	___Transcripts are inconsistent with policy or the program lacks written policy that indicates practica are distinct from and precede, the school psychology internship	___It is unclear from transcripts or written policy if practica are distinct from and precede, the school psychology internship or some practica experiences occur concurrently with internship	___Transcripts and/or written policy provides evidence that practica are distinct from and precede, the school psychology internship
	___There is a lack of documentation that required activities and systematic evaluation of skills are completed in settings relevant to program objectives for development of candidate skills	___It is unclear if required activities and systematic evaluation of skills are completed in settings relevant to program objectives for development of candidate skills	___Written policy provides evidence that specific, required activities and systematic development and evaluation of skills are completed in settings relevant to program objectives for development of candidate skills
	___Specific, required activities and systematic development and evaluation of skills that are consistent with goals of the program are not described in policy	___Written policy is vague or unclear in regard to specific, required activities and systematic development and evaluation of skills that are consistent with goals of the program	___Written policy provides evidence of specific, required activities and systematic development and evaluation of skills that are consistent with goals of the program
	___Specific, required activities and systematic development and evaluation of skills that emphasize human diversity are not emphasized in practica	___Written policy is vague or unclear in regard to specific, required activities and systematic development and evaluation of skills that emphasize human diversity are emphasized in practica	___Written policy provides evidence that specific, required activities and systematic development and evaluation of skills that emphasize human diversity are emphasized in practica
	___There is no evidence that the program provides direct oversight of the practicum experience	___Written policy is vague or unclear in regard to the program's provision of direct oversight to ensure appropriateness of the	___Written policy provides evidence of direct oversight by the program to ensure appropriateness of the placement, activities,

	placement, activities, supervision, and collaboration with the placement sites and practicum supervisors	supervision, and collaboration with the placement sites and practicum supervisors
	___ Written policy is lacking in regard to the program's supervision of candidates by program faculty and qualified practicum supervisors to ensure that candidates are developing professional work characteristics and designated competencies	___ Written policy is vague or unclear in regard to the program's supervision of candidates by program faculty and qualified practicum supervisors to ensure that candidates are developing professional work characteristics and designated competencies	___ The program provides written policy or other evidence (e.g. field-supervisor evaluation forms; site visit forms) of close supervision of candidates by program faculty and qualified practicum supervisors to ensure that candidates are developing professional work characteristics and designated competencies
	___ There is no evidence of policy and/or procedures for practica performance assessment	___ Policy and procedures for practica performance assessment are unclear or vague.	___ Policy and procedures for systematic performance-based evaluation by field supervisors and program faculty are clearly articulated in written policy (e.g. practicum guidelines, program handbook).

IMPORTANT: PLEASE PROVIDE COMMENTS FOR ELEMENT 9.1 (8 items above)

Element	Not Acceptable	Marginal	Acceptable
9.2	___ The school psychology program does not require a culminating internship in school psychology for academic credit or the internship is completed at the same time as or before critical coursework has been completed and thus is not a culminating experience, or the internship appears to be completed more as initial employment than as a training experience.	___ The school psychology program requires a culminating internship in school psychology that is completed for academic credit but it is unclear in written materials if the internship is comprehensive, supervised, and/or carefully evaluated as a training experience.	___ The school psychology program requires a comprehensive, supervised, and carefully evaluated internship in school psychology that is completed for academic credit and otherwise documented as a training experience.
	___ The internship is narrow in scope and emphasizes	___ The internship experience emphasizes	___ The internship experience as documented

	one or a few areas rather than provide candidates with the opportunity to integrate, apply, and attain the full range of comprehensive school psychology competencies.	most areas constituting a full range of comprehensive school psychology competencies, but one or more major areas (e.g. data-based decision-making, consultation and collaboration) are not represented in policy or practice.	in policy and practice emphasizes breadth and quality of experience so that candidates have the opportunity to integrate, apply, and attain the full range of comprehensive school psychology competencies
	___ It is not apparent that the internship experience requires activities that ensure candidates can provide school psychology services that result in direct, measurable, and positive impact on children, families, schools, and/or other consumers.	___ Internship guidelines or syllabi are unclear or vague in regard to required activities that ensure candidates can provide school psychology services that result in direct, measurable, and positive impact on children, families, schools, and/or other consumers.	___ Internship guidelines or syllabi indicate that the internship experience emphasizes the provision of professional school psychology services that result in direct, measurable, and positive impact on children, families, schools, and/or other consumers.
	___ There are no formative and summative performance-based evaluations of interns completed either by program faculty or field-based supervisors.	___ Formative and summative performance-based evaluations of interns completed by program faculty and field-based supervisors are used but do not evaluate the full range of competencies and/or professional work characteristics needed for effective practice as school psychologists.	___ Formative and summative performance-based evaluations of interns completed by both program faculty and field-based supervisors are comprehensive ensure that interns demonstrate professional work characteristics and attain competencies needed for effective practice as school psychologists.

IMPORTANT: PLEASE PROVIDE COMMENTS FOR ELEMENT 9.2 (4 items above)

Element	Not Acceptable	Marginal	Acceptable
9.3	___ The program does not present documentation of policy and practice that interns complete a minimum of 1200 clock hours completed on a full-time basis over one year or at least a half-time basis over two consecutive years, including a minimum of 600 hours completed in a school setting.	___ The program presents documentation of policy that interns complete a minimum of 1200 clock hours completed on a full-time basis over one year or at least a half-time basis over two consecutive years, including a minimum of 600 hours completed in a school setting, but evidence of practice is unclear or inconsistent with policy.	___ The program presents documentation of policy and practice that interns complete a minimum of 1200 clock hours (1500 for doctoral) completed on a full-time basis over one year or at least a half-time basis over two consecutive years, including a minimum of 600 hours completed in a school setting.

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IMPORTANT: PLEASE PROVIDE COMMENTS FOR ELEMENT 9.3 (1 item above)			
9.4	__ The program does not provide evidence of policy or practice that each intern receives field-based supervision from a school psychologist holding the appropriate state credential	__ The program provides evidence of policy that each intern receives field-based supervision from a school psychologist holding the appropriate state credential, but evidence of practice is unclear or inconsistent with policy.	__ The program provides evidence of policy and practice that each intern receives field-based supervision from a school psychologist holding the appropriate state credential
	__ The program does not provide evidence of policy or practice that each intern receives field-based supervision an average of at least two hours per full-time week, primarily on an individual, face-to-face basis	__ The program provides evidence of policy that each intern receives field-based supervision an average of at least two hours per full-time week, primarily on an individual, face-to-face basis, but evidence of practice is unclear or inconsistent with policy.	___The program provides evidence of policy and practice that each intern receives field-based supervision an average of at least two hours per full-time week, primarily on an individual, face-to-face basis.
IMPORTANT: PLEASE PROVIDE COMMENTS FOR ELEMENT 9.4 (2 items above)			
9.5	___ No written plan specifying collaborative responsibilities of the school psychology program and internship site is required by policy.	___ A written plan specifying collaborative responsibilities of the school psychology program and internship site is required by policy but the description of the responsibilities in the written plan is not comprehensive, or is vague or general.	___ A written plan specifying collaborative responsibilities of the school psychology program and internship site in providing supervision and support and ensuring that internship objectives are achieved is required by policy.
IMPORTANT: PLEASE PROVIDE COMMENTS FOR ELEMENT 9.5 (1 item above)			
9.6	___ There does not appear to be a clear, systematic process for determining if interns demonstrate competencies to begin effective practice as school psychologists, evidenced by direct, measurable, positive impact on children, families, schools, and other consumers.	___ The process by which program faculty ensure that interns demonstrate competencies to begin effective practice as school psychologists, evidenced by direct, measurable, positive impact on children, families, schools, and other consumers, is not systematically employed, is vague or is unclear.	___ The school psychology program employs a systematic, valid process by which program faculty ensure that interns demonstrate competencies to begin effective practice as school psychologists, evidenced by direct, measurable, positive impact on children, families, schools, and other consumers.
IMPORTANT: PLEASE PROVIDE COMMENTS FOR ELEMENT 9.6 (1 item above)			