Using the Core-Selective Evaluation Process to Identify a PSW: Integrating Research, Practice, and Policy

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Abstract

Much controversy and debate have surrounded the appropriate assessment processes of a specific learning disability (SLD). With the movement away from using discrepancy models, many "third methods" of evaluation have developed. Most models developed surrounded the identification of an individual's patterns of strengths and weaknesses (PSW). Consequently, the purpose of this article is twofold: 1) discuss the various PSW models available, and 2) introduce the Core-Selective Evaluation Process (C-SEP) model; highlighting the characteristics and benefits of using the model for SLD identification.

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Since the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) and the subsequent U.S. Department of Education Final Regulations and Commentary regarding implementation of IDEA (34 CFR Parts 300 and 301; Federal Register, 2006), the issue of specific learning disabilities (SLD) identification continues to be a source of much debate. A decade of policy and practice debate, numerous innovative procedures to identify SLD using a pattern of strengths and weaknesses (PSW), response-to-intervention (RTI), and to some degree discrepancy approaches have failed to bring consensus to what is the best method of SLD identification. The following paper will highlight significant points of the debate, briefly describe the various SLD-PSW methods introduced to the field, and propose an alternative SLD-PSW identification process, specifically the Core-Selective Evaluation Process (C-SEP). The C-SEP is designed to comprehensively and efficiently identify SLD and is compatible with all federal and state regulations. It is considered a psychoeducational approach with a particular emphasis on using norm-referenced tests in a manner which reduces overestimating the effects of cognitive deficits on academic performance (Flanagan & Schneider, 2016) and sound professional judgment (Schultz & Stephens, 2009).

School psychologists and educational diagnosticians have traditionally been tasked as the primary data interpreter and decision-maker for SLD evaluations because of their specialized training in psychometrics and cognitive psychology. The identification of any disability does not solely fall upon the school psychologist or educational diagnostician but rather a "group of qualified professionals and the parent(s) of the child." The ideas presented may broaden the lens in which PSW-SLD identification is viewed by a) considering policy and practice, b) teaching and learning, c) using a variety of assessment tools and strategies, and d) the role of language in identification.

Issues Concerning the PSW Debate

The best way to operationalize and identify SLD has been debated for decades. Over the course of the last 30 years, the debate has ranged from the effectiveness and utility of the IQ-achievement discrepancy procedures (Francis, Fletcher, Stuebing, Lyon, Shaywitz, & Shaywitz, 2005; Gresham & Vellutino, 2010) to the role of response-to-intervention (RTI) in the identification process (Buttner & Hasselhorn, 2011; Kavale, Kauffman, Bachmeier, & LeFever, 2008; Kavale & Spaulding, 2008; Lindstrom & Sayeski, 2013). As "third method" approaches have emerged and been enacted at the policy and practice level, the debate on which the PSW model is most effective has been a considerable topic of debate in recent years (Christo, D'Incau, & Ponzuric, 2016; Miller, Jones, & Maricle, 2016; Kranzler, Floyd, Benson, Zaboski, & Thibodaux, 2016; McGill, & Bussse, 2016; Miciak, Fletcher, Stuebing, Vaughn & Tolar, 2014; Stuebing, Fletcher, Branum-Martin, & Francis, 2012). A particular focus of PSW models is presented as a considerable body of literature regarding the limitations of both IQ-achievement and RTI approaches (Lindstrom & Sayeski, 2013) are well documented. In addition, it is the authors' position that several contemporary SLD-PSW models over-rely on norm-referenced standard scores to create a confirming "discrepancy" to identify the presence of SLD. The role and importance of cognitive assessment remain a critical element of SLD identification and the ideas presented are not to discount the role of cognitive functioning and SLD, nor discredit the methods to understand relationships between cognitive functioning and achievement but rather to better contextualize the role of norm-referenced testing when using PSW models.

It is important to recognize *all* SLD models and policy related to SLD (i.e. RTI) have no doubt contributed to the reduction of SLD rates with an 18% decline in the SLD category since 2002 (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014) and had moved the field forward to more accurate diagnosis and treatment of students who have SLD. It is equally important, when discussing various SLD identification models issue, to recognize *none* of the SLD-PSW identification models in practice have a research base which allows them to be considered the "gold standard" method of identification (Stuebing, Fletcher, Branum-Martin, & Francis, 2012). The primary reason is SLDs involve a complex set of interacting variables including biology, genetics, development, quality of teaching, curriculum demands, state and local policy (Cottrell & Barrett, 2016), cognition, language, social competence, academic behavior, co-morbid disorders (i.e., ADHD), family's educational history, and other sources of data. Consequently, any method which purports to be the most accurate arguably over-simplifies the construct.

Acknowledging the complexity of the SLD construct, the professional literature discussion regarding SLD-PSW models has been narrowly focused on the cognitive aspects of SLD and formula-based methods (Miller, Maricle, & Jones, 2016; Kranzler, Floyd, Benson, Zaboski, & Thibodaux, 2016; McGill, & Bussse, 2016; Miciak, Fletcher, Stuebing, Vaughn, & Tolar, 2014; Stuebing, Fletcher, Branum-Martin, & Francis, 2012). The body of literature regarding SLD identification fails to acknowledge the complexity of the SLD construct adequately, focusing on cognitive explanations and comparisons of statistical models purporting to "identify" SLD. In addition, the PSW debate has been primarily viewed from a "psychological" perspective (e.g., use psychometrics, cognitive processing, role of school psychologist, etc.) with a focus on the cognitive-achievement aspects of the federal SLD definition with less attention paid to the other salient features of the definition, specifically "in using language" and the "imperfect ability to

listen, speak, and think." Integrating other data sources to support decisions is often mentioned, however rarely discussed in much detail. These data sources are underused in both theory and practice (Kwiatek & Schultz, 2014)

Schultz, Simpson, and Lynch (2012) describe the PSW approach as characterized by (a) multiple sources of data collected over time using "a variety of assessment tools and strategies", (b) data analysis grounded in pattern seeking techniques, (c) having predictive and treatment validity, and (d) evidence-based and logical decision making. An essential feature of the PSW framework is the emphasis on the trustworthiness of the information collected by the multiple data sources and the appropriate weighting, use, and consideration of norm-referenced testing. Additionally, "over time" is emphasized as the majority of students referred for testing have several years' worth of data identifying patterns and trends in academic behavior resulting in the referral question. Data collected "prior to and as part of" the referral allows the interpretation of similar data under different conditions over time. For example, a construct such as math problem solving can be evaluated over time by examining school history related to the referral question, under testing conditions (i.e., statewide tests), in classroom instructional conditions (e.g., work samples, teacher reports, observation), and grouping arrangements (i.e., large or small group instruction or individualized tutoring). Data collected "prior to" the referral becomes "part of", when fully integrated and considered, within additional data, primarily performance on norm-referenced tests. When assessment data is used deliberately and carefully analyzed, patterns of academic strengths and weaknesses are easily identified and the primary role of norm-referenced testing becomes to understand the underlying psychological processes (including language) and the relationship with the referral question.

Several SLD identification models described in the professional literature, all have features which make them useful to understand the underlying psychological processes and the relationship with the referral question and will be collectively referred to as PSW-Cognitive Models (PSW-COG). The most prevalent models considered "third method" approaches are the Concordance-Discordance Method (C/DM; Fiorello, Hale, & Snyder, 2006; Hale, Wyckoff, & Fiorella, 2011), the Discrepancy/Consistency Method (D/CM; Naglieri, 1999; Naglieri, 2011), Dehn's processing Approach (Dehn, 2014), and Cross-Battery Assessment (XBA; Flanagan, Ortiz, & Alfonso, 2007). All three models require a statistical discrepancy to identify a student's profile of PSWs and to examine the relationship between cognitive weaknesses and achievement areas. Technically sound instruments (i.e., norm-referenced tests) and theory-based (e.g., CHC, PASS) cognitive explanations are used to identify SLD once the exclusionary factors are ruled out (Flanagan, Fiorello, & Ortiz, 2010; McGill & Busse, 2016; Schultz et al., 2012; Stuebing et al., 2012). None of these models presented use an IQ-achievement discrepancy. However, measures contributing to an FSIQ or global cognitive scores are used. An FSIQ score is an aggregate score comprised of an individual's cognitive PSW. The models identified are utilized by administering several cognitive tests beyond the ones required for an FSIQ. These are then separated into "cognitive strengths" and "cognitive weaknesses" and statistically compared to each other and then to "academic weaknesses" as measured by norm-referenced achievement tests (Flanagan et al., 2010).

Dehn (2014) suggests using an integrated PSW model which purports to address some of the psychometric criticisms and enhance diagnostic accuracy. Dehn's cognitive processing model

uses a cross-battery test selection and analysis approach. The approach differs from the other models mentioned because a profile analysis of the psychological processes is conducted rather than a particular standard score discrepancy cut-off. It requires statistically significant intra-individual weakness with at least one cognitive process in the average range. In addition, language, memory, and attention play a more prominent role in the assessment. Like other models discussed, processing deficits must be related to deficit academic skills. Dehn's model, as well as the XBA approach, requires the transferring of scores into software programs for statistical comparisons when tests from different batteries are used.

Organizing and analyzing norm-referenced cognitive test data makes logical sense as the relationship between cognition and achievement are well documented. A significant body of empirical evidence exists which support the direct relationship between cognitive processing and academic achievement (Decker, Hale, & Flanagan, 2013; Dehn, 2013; Fiorello & Primerano, 2005; Flanagan et al. 2010; Johnson, Humphrey, Mellard, Woods, & Swanson, 2010). In addition, the SLD definition as historically defined was maintained in the most recent reauthorization of IDEA (Cottrell & Barrett, 2016; Kavale, Spaulding, & Beam, 2009; Mather & Gregg, 2006). The SLD definition has included "basic psychological processing" as a salient component since its inception. The majority of professional organizations (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, National Center for Learning Disabilities, Learning Disabilities Association of America, and National Association of School Psychologists) dedicated to issues regarding SLD, assert cognitive assessments are a critical part of a comprehensive evaluation (Lindstrom & Sayeski, 2013). It should be noted all the PSW-COG models described stress the importance of using multiple data sources to confirm the presence of SLD.

Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs, & Barnes (2007) propose an SLD identification model considered the "hybrid" approach and markedly differ from PSW-COG. The "hybrid" approach relies on a robust RTI, low achievement, and adhering to exclusionary requirements for the identification of SLD. While cognitive testing and neuropsychological tests can be administered in the "hybrid" model in a limited fashion, the authors cite the lack of evidence using extensive assessments of cognitive, neuropsychological, or intellectual skills contribution to intervention selection or distinguish SLD from low achievers (Fletcher, Denton, & Francis, 2005). In the "hybrid" approach, "inadequate response" to RTI using curriculum-based measurements (CBM) to measure treatment response is a necessary component for SLD identification and arguably the "heart" of the comprehensive assessment.

The PSW-COG approaches have key differences from the approach described in the "hybrid" approach developed by Fletcher et al. (2007). While all models acknowledge the role of RTI and other pre-referral data, the "hybrid" model makes RTI and CBM the "centerpiece" of the evaluation. The "hybrid" method does not rely solely on RTI data solely; however, RTI is the primary basis of diagnosis. SLD identification models reliant upon RTI are criticized for not satisfying the definition of SLD (Hale, Kaufman, Naglieri, & Kavale, 2006; Ofiesh, 2006), the inability to distinguish SLD from low achievement (Kavale et al., 2008), research on RTI has been too narrowly focused on reading, and the professional and case law confusion regarding RTI (Daves & Walker, 2012). Another major difference of the "hybrid" model is the de-emphasis on the use of norm-referenced testing whereas the PSW-COG approaches rely on a

minimum number of tests which have to be administered to satisfy the formula requirements of the PSW-COG model. The difference stems partly from the belief that cognitive testing can distinguish true "SLD" from "low achievers" (Fletcher, Denton, & Francis, 2005) and the necessity of using PSW-COG versus directly assessing achievement (Miciak, Taylor, Denton, & Fletcher, 2015).

When all these methods are critically evaluated, it is clear the field has moved significantly forward in the last decade due in large part to the development and refinement of innovative "third method" approaches. While the debate will no doubt continue, it is scientifically healthy to scrutinize current practices and look for ways to further refine practices. The remainder of this article will identify some of the general limitations of the current models and suggest an alternative approach (e.g., Core Selective Evaluation Process [C-SEP]) and provide a rationalization for its use.

Limitations of Current Approaches

Many sound educational and psychological practices are inherent in all of the PSW-COG models which include: maintaining the definition of SLD, informing treatment, integrating RTI data, and theory-based assessment. However, several limitations also exist, these include: a) over-reliance on norm-referenced tests, standard scores, and statistical formulas, b) overvaluing the effects of cognitive deficits on academic performance, c) dichotomizing continuous variables, and d) limited weight given to other data sources.

Norm-Referenced Testing

Individual norm-referenced tests of cognitive testing (e.g., IQ) and achievement have a long history of use in the identification of SLD. The utility of using these tests to identify SLD has been questioned extensively in the professional literature (Buttner & Hasselhorn, 2011; Fletcher, Coulter, Reschly, & Vaughn, 2004; Francis et al., 2005; Gresham & Velluntino, 2010) and has been questioned at the policy level. The IDEA regulations' commentary states "the Department does not believe an assessment of psychological or cognitive processing should be required in determining whether a child has an SLD" (2006, p. 46651) and "In many cases, though, assessments of cognitive processes simply add to the testing burden and do not contribute to interventions" (IDEA Regulations' Commentary, 2006, p. 46651). While the department does not provide empirical citations for these statements, it can be noted some current models require administration of 30 or more subtests according to case studies described in the literature (Fiorello, Hale, & Snyder, 2006; Flanagan & Alfonzo, 2017). In the past decade since these comments and with the decline of the IQ-Achievement, cognitive testing has remained a fundamental component in most states (Hauerwas, Brown, & Scott, 2013; Maki, Floyd, & Roberson, 2015) in some capacity. The opinion of whether assessments of cognitive processes "adds to the testing burden" and "do not contribute to interventions" is not universally shared among professionals as evidenced by the number of PSW-COG described in the professional literature.

Cognitive Assessments and Interventions

While the Department posits the use of cognitive assessments does not contribute to interventions, the professional literature does not support this statement. Johnson et al. (2010) conducted a meta-analysis of 32 studies to examine cognitive differences among students with

SLD. Results of the meta-analysis reported moderate to large effect sizes of variance between students with SLD compared to non-SLD students. Further, these findings support the use of cognitive assessments in the evaluation of SLD, particularly in working memory, processing speed, executive functioning, and expressive/receptive language. Consequently, some research has indicated that identifying these cognitive deficits may lead to better outcomes. Specifically, Fuchs, Hale, and Kearns (2011) highlight the growing body of intervention research concerning cognitively focused approaches to instruction. In their review, the researchers reported data results from carefully selected cognitive assessments included in the evaluation results in a better selection of interventions and programming. The link between identification and intervention is critical for educators to design instruction for the most difficult to teach students. Research has shown cognitively focused instruction may be a viable option for these students. Kearns and Fuchs (2013) reviewed 36 investigations comparing traditional interventions with cognitively focused instruction. Nearly half (16 of the 36 studies) reported positive effects of cognitive interventions. While more research must be conducted, to dismiss and disregard the emerging research in the link between cognitive processing and intervention is at the expense of students who may fail to respond to traditional approaches and may require specialized instruction based on their unique needs.

The concern of cognitive tests adding to the "testing burden" raises some interesting points. The word "burden" implies a "heavy load" and in the context of using individualized norm-referenced tests, administering numerous tests can be "burdensome" if the data is not used to inform diagnosis and intervention. The third method approaches require arguably extensive individualized norm-referenced testing to determine the presence of SLD. As mentioned previously, some models require over 30 individualized subtests (Fiorello, Hale, & Snyder, 2006; Flanagan & Alfonzo, 2017) to identify SLD. Absent of any additional data, administering a greater number of tests may be necessary, however, when other data sources are considered (state assessment, RTI data, classroom, etc.), the argument of "testing burden" is valid. In such cases of over testing students, the validity of the test results should be questioned. The administration of 30+ subtests would result in increased levels of fatigue and frustration in some subjects.

While it is not the authors' purpose to discount these methods in psychometric design or procedures, but rather to illustrate the volume of tests required to determine whether a student has an SLD. From a purely psychological or clinical perspective evaluating performance may require numerous individualized norm-referenced tests, however from a psycho-educational perspective or to meet educational classification criteria, performance must be evaluated using a "variety of tools and strategies" which may include individualized norm-referenced tests. It is important to note "evaluate and assess" do not mean "test" and simple and complex referral questions can be answered using a more deliberate assessment strategy which includes information from a variety of reliable and valid sources. The C-SEP method uses a practical approach to norm-referenced testing while balancing existing data sources, including RTI, with the complexity of the referral question. A description and rationale of the C-SEP model will now be discussed.

Core-Selective Evaluation Process (C-SEP)
The C-SEP model is defined as a third-method PSW approach to identify specific learning disabilities (SLD). It is characterized as legally defensible, efficient, precise, and comprehensive by measuring all the salient features of SLD. It utilizes data-driven professional judgment process rooted in contemporary Cattell-Horn-Carroll (CHC) theory and uses an approach to individualized norm-referenced testing that is conducted in a systematic, purposeful and deliberate manner (Schrank, Stephens-Pisecco, & Schultz, 2017; Schultz & Stephens, 2015; Schultz & Stephens, 2017). C-SEP was conceptualized following the release of major revisions and improvements of individualized norm-referenced cognitive, language, and achievement tests. With the release of the new robust versions of test batteries, a decade of change of SLD identification, and feedback from the field, the C-SEP was created to provide a viable option for identifying SLD.

Organizational Framework
The C-SEP method is a PSW approach to SLD identification and assumes its application to reflect current federal policy regarding SLD identification, making it legally defensible. Using a PSW approach that is heavily grounded in CHC, C-SEP measures the most prominent features of the SLD definition (i.e., psychological processes, language, and achievement) and the imperfect ability to "listen, think, and speak." The C-SEP method uses individualized norm-referenced tests in an integrated manner along with a "variety of assessment tools and strategies" and professional judgment. Exclusionary factors are comprehensively assessed and ruled out as the primary cause of the student's struggles, and data is collected to ensure the student has had appropriate instruction prior to referral. Such data includes data collected during an RTI process "prior to and as part of" the special education referral.

Since C-SEP is a PSW approach, low-achievement patterns can be established without the use of norm-referenced tests. For example, a student with a history of reading struggles, failing grades in reading, and limited progress when given intensive reading instruction has demonstrated a pattern over time, consequently, a logical prediction based on all the data is that unless something changes the student will continue to struggle in reading. Norm-referenced tests are not used to establish underachievement in C-SEP model, but rather to collect observable and measurable academic behavior samples representing underlying cognition and language. To use C-SEP as a viable model for identifying SLD eligibility, the option of using PSW in the federal regulation will be operationalized.

> *" the child exhibits a pattern of strengths and weaknesses in performance, achievement, or both, relative to age, State-approved grade level standards or intellectual development consistent with 34 CFR 300.309(a)(2)(i); or the child exhibits a pattern of strengths and weaknesses in performance, achievement, or both, relative to age, State-approved grade-level standards or intellectual development consistent with 34 CFR 300.309(a)(2)(ii);"*

PSW Operationalized

1. Data-based documentation showing appropriate instruction prior to and as part of the referral. Typically accomplished through response-to-intervention (RTI) service delivery, supplemental tutoring, classroom interventions, etc. If a student is making adequate progress when provided

targeted instruction, then the student is demonstrating the ability to learn and may not require specialized instruction. If on the other hand, the student is making little or no progress, then the data is considered and integrated within the context of a full and individual evaluation.

2. When provided appropriate instruction, the student does not achieve adequately for the child's age or meet state-approved grade-level standards (IDEA, 2004). Multiple measures and data sources are used in order to determine if the student is achieving or underachieving academically (e.g., Curriculum-Based Measurement (CBM), Curriculum-Based Assessment (CBA), state testing, grades, work samples, etc.). Academic underachievement is established using multiple sources of actual achievement data collected over time and under varying conditions.

3. The pattern is evident by significant variance and a learner's profile must show strengths and weaknesses. In order to differentiate a "strength" from a "weakness," variance between scores must be established (Evans, Floyd, McGrew, & Leforgee, 2001; Flanagan, Fiorello, & Ortiz, 2010; Floyd, Evans, & McGrew, 2003; Floyd, Meisinger, Gregg, & Keith, 2012; McGrew & Wendling, 2010; Newton & McGrew, 2010). The variation can be statistical when using technically sound instruments and must be meaningful. Variations can have statistical meaning when scores differ by ~1 SD considering confidence intervals of the standard scores. Professional judgment and integrated data analysis are used to confer clinical or practical significance to the statistical variations. Such patterns are identified and confirmed by using data obtained from norm-referenced tests of cognition, language, and achievement. Integration and consideration of other data beyond norm-referenced scores are necessary for the identification of SLD when using C-SEP.

The federal definition of SLD is comprehensively assessed as well as the qualifying areas (e.g., basic reading, math problem solving, oral expression, etc.) and the data is applied to federal, state, and local policy. C-SEP is flexible in its application; individualized testing can be conducted without any conflict with state policy. Testing data is used to identify a student's profile of scores and confirm actual patterns versus using a "discrepancy score" cut-off. However, examiners have the option if they deem it useful to analyze data in multiple ways including discrepancy analysis and consistency analysis between constructs. The pattern must be consistent with the federal definition of SLD and include a "disorder in one or more basic psychological processes…." A student who demonstrates a pervasive weakness (i.e., a statistically similar score profile) does not have a "pattern of strength and weakness" as described in 34 CFR 300.309(a)(2)(ii).

C-SEP Procedures

The C-SEP approach can be used with a number of norm-referenced test batteries. Statistical precision is strengthened when batteries are co-normed, or a strong relationship exists between instruments. The design of the WJ-IV tests of cognition, language, and achievement, with its co-normed batteries and a strong emphasis on a core set of tests for each battery (McGrew, LaForte, & Shrank, 2014), has been statistically validated using C-SEP (see Shrank, Stephens-Pisecco, & Schultz, 2017). Other batteries such as the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children 5th edition (WISC-V) and Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement-3 (KTEA-3) can be used with the C-SEP approach (Schultz & Stephens-Pisecco, 2017). Importantly, C-SEP is compatible with federal and state regulations regarding SLD identification (Schultz & Stephens, 2015) as it

strictly adheres to the procedural safeguards. The following procedures refer to the norm-referenced testing aspects of C-SEP. As a PSW approach, all other data sources are considered with testing as well as the assessment of exclusionary factors in the SLD definition.

Specific Learning Disability Identification

The C-SEP model comprehensively assesses academic concerns and all of the other components of the federal definition of SLD (see bold below). C-SEP allows an interpretation that limits the overestimation of the cognitive explanations of SLD (Flanagan & Schneider, 2016). In addition, the impact of the disability on teaching and learning can also be assessed and inform interventions (Schultz & Stephens, 2017). An emphasis on teaching and learning and "an imperfectability to listen, think, and speak." is a distinguishing characteristic of C-SEP from other "third method" approaches. The following 4-step process is general guidelines for the use of norm-referenced testing within the C-SEP model. The federal SLD definition will be utilized while illustrating the use of C-SEP.

> …Means a ***disorder*** in one or more basic ***psychological processes***, involved in understanding or in using ***language***, either ***written*** *or* ***spoken***, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to ***listen, think, speak***, ***read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations….***

C-SEP Step 1: Measure Psychological Processes

> …Means a ***DISORDER*** in one or more basic psychological processes, involved in understanding

Administer Cognitive Core: Select a core set of tests that measure the broadest range of abilities recommended by the publisher (e.g., Tests 1-7 of the WJ IV COG makes up the Core set of tests).

Cognitive Core Tests	Score	Average (Yes/No)
FSIQ/GIA		
Index Scores		
Composite Scores		
Comprehension Knowledge		
Fluid Reasoning		
Short-Term Working Memory		
Visual Processing		
Auditory Processing		
Processing Speed		
Long-Term Retrieval		
Other		
Other		

Average Cognitive Test Scores? (~>85 SS)

YES

If all core scores are average, it is indicative of intact psychological processing, integrate and interpret.

Move onto Step 2: Measure Language

NO

If one or more core scores are < average, additional cognitive testing may be needed determine if a disorder in psychological processes is evident.

Administer additional Cognitive test(s) in areas of weakness; integrate and interpret.

C-SEP Step 2: Measure Language

> ….. or in using ***LANGUAGE***, either *written* **or *SPOKEN***, and which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak….

Administer Core Oral Language Tests: Select a core that broadly measures the CHC factors related to oral expression and listening comprehension (e.g., Tests 1-4 of the WJ IV OL makes up the core set of tests).

Oral Language Core Tests	Score	Average (Yes/No)
Oral Expression 1		
Listening Comprehension 1		
Oral Expression 2		
Listening Comprehension 2		

Average Oral Language Test Scores?

YES

If all core scores are average, it is indicative of intact language skills, integrate and interpret.

Move onto Step 3: Measure Academics*

NO

If one or more core 4 scores are < average, additional language testing may be needed identify a disorder in psychological processes involved in using language is evident. Assessment should be conducted.

Administer additional language test(s) may be needed in areas of weakness; integrate and interpret.

C-SEP Step 3: Measure Academics

… read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations….

Achievement Core 6 Tests	Score	Average (Yes/No)
Basic Reading		
Reading Comprehension		
Reading Fluency		
Math Calculation		
Math Problem Solving		
Written Expression		

***NOTE:** The Core 6 Achievement Tests can be utilized for districts that require all academic areas be assessed for an initial referral (not required by all state policies). Other districts may choose to administer only those tests which assess the area of the referral concern.

C-SEP Step 4: Use Integrated Data Analysis Procedures to identify PSWs

Integrated data analysis is the analysis of multiple data sets (e.g., norm-referenced test results, RTI data, criterion-referenced test, etc.) which have been gathered. It involves the examination of a chain of evidence by determining the trustworthiness (weight, accuracy) of the data collected, organization, triangulation, and logical cross-validation analysis (Schultz, Simpson, & Lynch, 2012). The data collected is then applied to the respective state rules regulating the identification of SLD using a PSW methodology.

SLD Determination Using C-SEP

SLD determination is multifaceted, and the C-SEP model will help assessment teams integrate information obtained from norm-referenced tests with all other information (e.g., exclusionary factors, educational history, other reports, etc.) related to the referral question. The C-SEP approach is driven by professional judgment and does not use rigid cut-off points or a statistical formula as a determinate of SLD. It instead informs decision-making and provides statistical support to consider when making the determinations. As with any model of SLD identification, it is critical that all data collected (i.e., state tests, RTI data, work samples, teacher reports, etc.) is integrated with obtained norm-reference test scores, and results of data collected during appropriate instruction. Analysis of all data should then be considered according to local and state policies.

Distinguishing Features of C-SEP

Most methods of SLD identification have similar features and processes when operationalizing the definition of SLD. It is generally agreed a student with SLD is: a) not responding to appropriate traditional and supplemental instruction, b) exhibiting a disorder of basic psychological processes is evident and directly impacts the identified academic area of concern, c) exclusionary factors need to be assessed and ruled out as the primary cause of the student's struggles, d) an assessment of SLD should be linked to instructional recommendations, and e) adhere to the Code of Federal Regulations (Flanagan & Alfonso, 2010). The following are important components of the C-SEP model which distinguish it from other models:

1. Expressive (Oral Expression) and Receptive Language (Listening Comprehension) are formally tested and considered with every evaluation. These results are compared with cognitive measures, academic measures, and classroom functioning. In addition to providing diagnostic information, language assessment but also provides insight into teaching and learning.

2. Statistical analysis is conducted using actual norms and software/tables from the publisher. Data collected from other batteries can be included in the assessment using integrated data analysis. Task demands analysis is also used in a statistical context. For example, data can be examined when sorted logically such as tasks requiring processing speed, tasks requiring auditory processing, etc. allowing a richer interpretation of the data.

3. Statistical analysis using publisher calculations inform decision-making and professional judgment instead of being the determinate factor of the eligibility decision. It is used to identify or confirm a PSW rather than adhere to an arbitrary cut-off score. Integrated data analysis including pattern seeking techniques is used to make eligibility decisions.

4. All tests administered including the core should be administered in a purposeful and deliberate manner. Testing should only occur to provide new or previously unknown information. Examiner time is dedicated to the interpretation and integrating data instead of test administration.

5. Academic underachievement is determined using multiple sources of actual achievement data (e,g., curriculum-based assessments, assessments based state standards, work samples, classroom data, etc.). Standard scores obtained from norm-referenced testing are used to understand the relationship between cognitive and language constructs. Standard scores of achievement are interpreted with the understanding of the limitations of norm-referenced achievement measures (i.e., curriculum alignment, item density, score interpretation; Schultz & Stephens, 2017)

6. The C-SEP model requires professional judgment be utilized when making an eligibility decision. All decisions are made by strictly adhering to state and local policy and are supported by a) examining logical relationships (task demands, validity), b) empirical relationships, and c) statistical relationships. Through these multiple lenses, professionals can be confident in their decisions.

7. Local, state, and federal special education policy and assurances are strictly adhered to provide the most comprehensive and appropriate evaluation and outcome.

8. The *imperfect ability to listen, think, speak* are salient features of the SLD definition and are critical assessment areas when identifying a PSW and the instructional implications of a student's profile.

Concluding Thoughts and Future Directions

The C-SEP approach is an effort to address the concerns surrounding the role of norm-referenced testing and the controversy with current SLD identification methods. The approach, as all SLD-PSW models, requires sound professional judgment combined with sound data collection and analysis. The approach recognizes the need for formal measures (i.e., norm-referenced testing) to fully assess all aspects of the SLD construct. However, it balances the need for the practical and policy implication of SLD identification. The issue of the best way to identify SLD will continue as policy changes and lessons are learned.

Current research has failed to locate the "gold standard" (Stuebing, Fletcher, Branum-Martin, & Francis, 2012) of SLD identification. However the *National Center For Learning Disabilities* (2017) the percentage of students in special education who were identified with SLD decreased 9.3% from 43% in the fall of 2008 to 39% in the fall of 2015. It is logical to assume that several actions regarding SLD identification contributed to the decline in the SLD category including the focus on early intervention (RTI), most states abandoning the discrepancy approach, and the use of "third method approaches." The overlapping OHI category has increased from 11% to 15% (NCLD, 2017) and has contributed to the decline of SLD but may also be a result of third method approaches that better able to differentiate classifications. Continued research along with the employing innovative approaches (i.e., C-SEP) and improving on existing PSW-COG models will continue to move the field forward.

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