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An Analysis of Three Models of SLD Identification ...

By **Sarah Holman, Ph.D.**

The identification of Specific Learning Disability (SLD) has become increasingly complex as our understanding of the brain and how it relates to academic achievement has grown. The emergence of pattern of strengths and weaknesses (PSW) approaches to identification enables practitioners to apply these advancements to more effectively identify the cause of a student's learning difficulty. As there are currently several PSW models available in the field, it raises questions regarding the consistency of outcomes among the various methods. Stakeholders need reasonable assurance that the presence or absence of SLD is not a product of the methodology implemented.

Without consistency, a student may be identified with a SLD in one state or locality but not in another. Establishing the accuracy of evaluation results, independent of the analysis procedure utilized, enables educators to meet students' educational needs regardless of their geographic location. Consequently, the purpose of this article is to highlight a recent study that compared the identification outcomes and diagnostic consistency of three PSW models: Cross Battery Assessment (XBA; Flanagan, Ortiz, & Alfonso, 2013), Dehn's PSW Model (Dehn, 2017), and the Core-Selective Evaluation

Process (C-SEP; Schultz & Stephens, 2015; Schultz & Stephens-Pisecco, 2017).

The study examined SLD outcome results on 50 cases identified as SLD and 25 DNQs. Each case was examined through all three PSW models. Study results indicated that there was consistency in SLD identification among the three PSW models in only about two-thirds of the cases examined in the study (Holman, 2018). Issues related to consistency in identification have also arisen in other comparison studies (see Stuebing et al. 2012; Miciak et al., 2014; & Jones, Miller, and Maricle, 2016).

While the study was not designed to draw any conclusions as to the best or most accurate PSW approach, an analysis of the cases included in the study may offer some meaningful implications for assessment personnel. Based on this analysis it appears entirely possible that the lack of consistency has less to do with the model per se, but is rather a function of the professional capacity of the person applying the model.

Applying these models with fidelity necessitates significant understanding of the SLD construct as well as the ability to analyze the relationships between cognitive functioning and academic achievement. Additionally, the fact that virtually all subtests contain aspects of multiple abilities requires the practitioner to be cognizant of the influence that each individual process measured by a subtest can have on the student's performance (why the student may or may not have performed on a particular test the way they did).

Practitioners must also be able to recognize how additional factors (e.g., speech/language disorder, ADHD, second language acquisition, cultural influences) can impact performance, particularly with diverse populations and how results on formal measures fit into the larger profile of performance of the student. This includes an examination of exclusionary factors (EF). Analysis conducted as a part of this study revealed that in 5 cases of previously identified SLD using XBA, C-SEP did not corroborate those findings due to EF. This highlights the important emphasis C-SEP places on examining and ruling out EF as the primary cause of academic underachievement.

Professional judgment plays an essential role in the consideration and interpretation of the various formal and informal data components of an SLD evaluation. Each PSW model, to varying degrees, requires professional judgment in the interpretation of data. However, the incorporation of multiple sources of information interpreted through a lens of professional judgment is explicit, systematic, and essential in the C-SEP framework. Professional judgment occurs throughout the entire C-SEP process, from analyzing pre-referral data, forming a working hypothesis, interpretation of informal and formal testing results, to the comprehensive integration of data for pattern seeking. As such C-SEP offers a unique and valid approach to data analysis for the identification of PSW relevant to SLD. Finally, evaluators can feel confident in their interpretations due to the vast array of data used to support findings, making C-SEP a legally defensible PSW model. ❖

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Future Training Opportunities

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ESC 8 Pittsburg, **TX,** June 8, Error Analysis as an Assessment Tool and Strategy (critical C-SEP skill)
ESC 6 Huntsville, **TX,** June 13-14, C-SEP
ESC 8 Pittsburg, **TX,** July 12, Advanced Interpretation of Cognitive Assessment Data (critical C-SEP skill)
ESC 11 Fort Worth, **TX,** July 30, C-SEP Overview
ESC 14 Abilene, **TX,** (tentative Oct 23), C-SEP Overview
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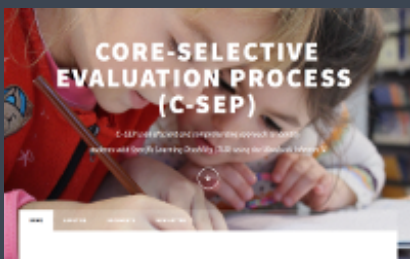
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