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2019

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

School Psychologists' Assessment Practices with English Learners:

Recommendations to Increase Accurate Identification

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

By

Lisa Ann Miller

2019

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

School Psychologists' Assessment Practices with English Learners:
Recommendations to Increase Accurate Identification

by

Lisa Ann Miller

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2019

Professor Alison Bailey, Co-Chair

Professor Diane Durkin, Co-Chair

This action research project engaged school psychologists to address a problem within a specific school district: to accurately identify English Learner (EL) students with a Specific Learning Disability (SLD). School psychologists are responsible for conducting comprehensive psycho-educational evaluations with students to determine if they have a disability. SLD, the most common eligibility category for which they assess, is broadly defined as a discrepancy between a child's cognitive potential and achievement. Unlike other categories of eligibility that are medically determined—such as deafness, blindness, or traumatic brain injury—SLD is somewhat subjective and abstract. When a student is acquiring a second language, SLD determination becomes more abstract than with English-only students. A reason for the increased complexity is the fact that some second language acquisition traits overlap with SLD traits (Harris, Sullivan,

Oades-Sese, & Sotelo-Dynega, 2015; Sullivan, 2011). For example, an EL student might struggle with reading comprehension, paying attention, and following directions. Those traits are also true for a student with SLD. Consequently, despite good intentions, it is possible that a student can be misclassified with or without a SLD if he/she is also an EL.

My study aimed to identify strategies school psychologists could use in their assessment practices with EL students to reduce the potential of misclassification. Through participatory action research, participants named three recommendations: obtain information about the student's oral language profile through direct observations of the student during non-structured time and consultation with speech therapists, adjust test administration protocol to allow the student maximum opportunity to understand the directions rather than rigid adherence to standardized administration, and organize a panel of colleagues who are proficient in second language acquisition to provide case consultation with school psychologists on their evaluations with EL students.

Results from my study also revealed how participatory action research can be an effective approach to address disproportionate special education data in a school district. I believe the effectiveness of this approach is rooted in the organic and exploratory nature of action research design. The school psychologists self-identified existing practices that might be causes for misclassification of Hispanic students made eligible with an SLD. Then, the participants collaborated on actions to ameliorate the problem. Ultimately, the participants addressed the problem without the need for top-down mandates.

The dissertation of Lisa Ann Miller is approved.

Mark Hansen

Jeffrey Wood

Alison Bailey, Committee Co-Chair

Diane Durkin, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2019

DEDICATION

Mom, Dad, and Leslie, thank you for your unlimited support and encouragement.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, thank you Dr. Linda Rose. Thank you for 4 years of dedication to ELP and empowering women to pursue leadership positions unapologetically. To my co-chairs, Dr. Durkin and Dr. Bailey. Your insights and feedback profoundly enhanced my study and I am grateful for your time, guidance...and patience. Matt, thank you for being my class partner and friend. Holly, you brought so much joy and humor to our group, and to me, individually. Alan-Michael, thank you for sharing your wisdom and friendship.

I also want to acknowledge the wonderful participants in my study. Thank you for volunteering your time and serving students with special needs. I admire your commitment to grow continuously as educators.

VITA

- 1996 B.S., Human Development
University of California, Davis
Davis, California
- 2002 M.S. Counseling/School Psychology
California State University, Sacramento
Sacramento, California
- 2010 M.A. Education Leadership and Administration
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, California
- 2018-2019 Assistant Superintendent Student Support Services
Conejo Valley Unified School District
Thousand Oaks, California
- 2017-2018 Director, Special Education
Conejo Valley Unified School District
Thousand Oaks, California
- 2012-2016 Director, Special Education
San Francisco Unified School District
San Francisco, California

CHAPTER ONE

Project Summary

School psychologists are the primary professionals in public schools tasked with evaluating students for special education eligibility. Of the 14 possible special education eligibility categories, defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) is the most commonly applied (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs [OSEP], 2016). Therefore, the majority of school psychologists' work time is dedicated to assessing students for SLD. An SLD is broadly conceptualized as a difference between a student's cognitive ability and his/her achievement level; whether he/she is learning what his/her potential suggests and, if not, whether the discrepancy is due to an underlying learning disability. Although guidelines exist on how to evaluate a student for SLD, the decision includes subjectivity because, unlike other categories such as deaf or blind, SLD is imprecise as a construct.

When a student is a second language learner, the evaluation process for SLD becomes more complex and even less precise. The increased complexity stems from the overlapping characteristics of second language acquisition and a learning disability (Sullivan, 2011). Examples of overlap include difficulty attending, difficulty with reading comprehension, and slower processing speed (Chu & Flores, 2011). If the underlying reason for the characteristic is misunderstood, it is possible to misclassify a student with—or without—a disability (Rhinehart & Bailey, 2019). The purpose of this study to use participatory action research to investigate what strategies school psychologists recommend to accurately distinguish between English Learner (EL) traits and SLD traits so the right students are identified and served.

Statement of the Problem

History of School Psychology

The role of a school psychologist began in the early 1900s when compulsory education laws took hold across the U.S. With the influx of new students, school district staff felt some students should not be sent to school, particularly those with disabilities (Fagan, 1992). School psychologists were tasked with ascertaining students' mental and physical wellbeing; if a student was determined *uneducable*, then the parents were required to keep the student home (Farrell, 2010). At the time, the assessment process primarily used observations, which changed with the development of standardized intelligence tests. Once standardized tests were published, school psychologists were trained to administer the tests, using the results to indicate if a child had a disability. Since this time, assessing for disabilities has not changed in the school psychology profession. What has changed, however, are the legal rights of children with disabilities, which I outline next.

History of Special Education

In 1954, the United States Supreme Court heard the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* and concluded that "separate was inherently unequal" (Biegel, Kim, & Welner, 2016, p 18.). The Court's interpretation of the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment, on which they relied to decide *Brown*, paved the way for other student populations to argue for equal educational access that had been historically denied. One of the key populations that had been routinely denied access was students with disabilities. Although the U.S. had compulsory education laws, as stated previously, school staff could send a child home if they felt he/she was uneducable due to a disability (Skiba et al., 2008). In the early 1970s, two landmark lawsuits, *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens (PARC) v. Pennsylvania* and *Mills v. Board of*

Education, challenged school districts' practice of sending students home. On the heels of the students prevailing in both cases, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) was enacted in Congress in 1974. Subsequently, additional federal regulations were written to protect the rights of children with special education needs, now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). These rights included access to schools, regardless of disability, and the assurance that students make adequate progress in their learning (Biegel et al., 2016).

With the foundations of special education law and the role of school psychologists established, next I provide statistics on the increasingly diverse student population school psychologists serve in public schools.

English Learners: Fastest Growing Subgroup

Between 1998 and 2008, EL student enrollment jumped by 53.2% from prior years. Since 2008, EL student enrollment has continued to represent one of the fastest growing subgroups in public schools. Disaggregation of the national data to state levels shows the percentage of EL representation ranges widely; in several states, ELs represent less than 5% of total enrollment, whereas others are in double digits. California has the highest rate of EL students enrolled compared to all other states, at 29%, equating to nearly a third of the country (Migration Policy Institute, 2017). In California, EL students—not inclusive of Reclassified Fluent English Proficient (RFEP) students—represent 21.4% of students enrolled in K-12 public schools (CDE, 2017). With the rise EL students in public schools, school psychologists require training in order to understand the nuances of second language acquisition to ensure that this process is not misinterpreted as a disability. Subsequently, I summarize the literature indicating that such training has been insufficient.

Gaps in School Psychology Training

To become a school psychologist, one must complete a graduate degree in a school psychology specific program, then fulfill internship hours in order to obtain a Pupil Personnel Services Credential to work in public schools in California. There are hundreds of graduate programs across the country, with just over 200 accredited by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2017). Securing NASP accreditation means the program fulfills the requirements set forth by NASP, such as required courses and required content, designed to best prepare a school psychologist for the career. One of the requirements to be NASP approved is inclusion of courses specific to second language acquisition. In 2015, Aldridge, Bernstein, and Davies surveyed graduating school psychologists from NASP-accredited programs to learn if the graduates felt their training on EL was adequate. The survey responses overwhelmingly indicated that the graduates did not feel sufficiently trained or prepared. The work by Aldridge et al. extended earlier work by Styck (2012), which found that school psychologist interns did not feel their graduate program included sufficient training for them to fully understand second language acquisition and how it affects evaluation practices. The gaps in training identified by Styck (2012) and Aldridge et al. (2015) were previously established by Ochoa, Rivera, and Ford (1997). Ochoa et al. surveyed over 1,500 school psychologists across eight states regarding their training on EL and best practices in how to evaluate EL students for special education eligibility. Responses showed that 83% felt their training was “less than adequate” (p. 22).

Training on EL is essential because research shows it is easy for educators to mistake second language acquisition traits for SLD traits (Sullivan, 2011). Ortiz and Maldonado-Colon (1986) pointed out that a student who is learning English may appear to: have difficulty with comprehension and with following directions, be inattentive, and struggle to read and write.

These are also characteristics of SLD. IDEA regulations conceptualize an SLD as “a disorder...in understanding or using language, spoken or written...manifesting itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, write, read, spell or do mathematical calculations” (U.S. Department of Education, 2017, p.). Characteristic overlap can be difficult to discern, and in the absence of meaningful training, it is possible for school psychologists misinterpret the underlying cause of the trait and misclassify a student either with, or without, a disability. Either way, the student is disserved.

Beyond gaps in training, literature shows that if and when school psychologists receive with guidance on how to assess EL students for SLD, they rarely apply the guidance. One example of an unused guideline is that only 6% of all school psychologists surveyed by Harris et al. (2015) determined primary language before conducting assessments: a significant break from best practice protocol. The gaps in training and lack of application of best practices are potential causes for students to be inaccurately identified with, or without, a disability. Decades of research regarding inaccurate identification, particularly for minority students, made eligible for special education and placed into restrictive learning environments triggered new monitoring requirements as part of IDEA, which I summarize next.

Federal and State Monitoring

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, federal IDEA regulations mandated monitoring of special education data by state and school districts. The monitoring was triggered by decades of research pointing to disproportionate representation of minority students being labeled with a disability and subsequently placed into restrictive settings (Albrecht, Skiba, & Losen, 2011; OSEP, 2006; Zhang, Katsiyannis, Ju, & Roberts, 2014). Annually, each public school district submits their special education data to the state Department of Education, which submits

statewide data to the federal Department of Education. If a school district and/or a state overall is found to have disproportionate representation of a certain student group in special education, they must take corrective action to address the disproportionality (Tschantz, 2002).

In California, 62% of school districts are identified with at least one category of disproportionality (California Department of Education, 2017). In August 2018, the Lincoln Valley Unified School District¹ (LVUSD) Superintendent received written notice from the California Department of Education (CDE) that Hispanic students were disproportionately represented in special education: overrepresented to be exact. Consequently, LVUSD was required to investigate causes for overrepresentation and identify solutions, otherwise the district will face sanctions. Later in this chapter I outline the current study with LVUSD related to the disproportionate data. Next, I summarize both sides of disproportionality: overrepresentation and underrepresentation.

Overrepresentation and Underrepresentation in Special Education

Research shows that both overrepresentation and underrepresentation occur in special education data. Historically, African American students and Native American students have been overidentified in special education; some researchers indicate that Hispanic students are increasingly overidentified as well (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010). Other researchers suggest that Hispanic students are not overidentified, but rather underidentified, especially in elementary grades (Morgan et al., 2015). Ultimately, both forms of disproportionality are problematic. Either a student is inappropriately labeled with a disability and access to general education instruction is reduced, or he/she is left without the necessary

¹ Lincoln Valley Unified School District and LVUSD are pseudonyms.

special education interventions to help him/her succeed (Losen & Orfield, 2002; Rhinehart & Bailey, 2019).

Disproportionate representation cannot occur without errors in the special education evaluation process, which is at the center of my study. In particular, I investigated school psychologists' assessment practices with EL students for SDL. Subsequently, I describe my research study.

Overview of Research Design

This action research project engaged participants to address a problem within a specific school district: accurate identification of a SLD with EL students in LVUSD. This study was necessary because research showed school psychologists are inadequately trained to accurately discern EL traits from SLD traits, and subsequently misclassification with a disability is possible. Data from the 2017-2018 school year indicated that LVUSD had a disproportionate representation of Hispanic students eligible for special education under the category of SLD, per data analysis by the CDE. When disproportionate data is identified, school districts are required to evaluate underlying causes of the data and identify strategies to ameliorate misclassification (Roy, 2012), or potentially defend the data if assessment practices are accurate and the right students are being found eligible with a disability.

Through participatory action research, I answered the following research questions via input from LVUSD school psychologists:

1. In what ways, if at all, does engaging in the action research process enable school psychologists to reflect on their own practices in assessment of EL students and determine how their practices need to change?

2. In what ways, if at all, are school psychologists adjusting their assessment practices during participation in action research?
3. After participating in my action research study, what do school psychologists identify as the most salient actions and/or recommendations to improve and/or ensure accurate assessment of EL students for SLD?

Qualitative Action Research

The design for my project was qualitative action research. A qualitative study was appropriate because one of the desired outcomes of my study was to determine if engagement in an action research process affects participants' perspectives regarding their own assessment protocols of EL students for SLD consideration. Specifically, I sought to learn if participants' attitudes, and subsequently actions, shifted over the course of the study. Attitudes are internally constructed and vary between and among individuals. Therefore, this study was exploratory because I could not fully anticipate or prescribe participants' attitudes. Creswell (2018) points to learning and exploration as central tenets of a qualitative research design, which aligned with the purpose of my study. A quantitative study would have required prescribed answers (e.g., a survey), which automatically limits and confines one's potential responses; hence, this approach was inappropriate for the purposes of my study.

Within qualitative research, I narrowed my method to action research because I wanted to support a team to address a practice-based problem: disproportionate representation in special education. Addressing a problem within the setting is a cornerstone of action research, and one reason this method was appropriate for my study: namely, because I focused on one school district identified by the CDE as disproportionately reflecting SLD-eligible Hispanic students (Herr & Anderson, 2014). A second principle of action research important to my study was

engagement *with* participants to improve practice rather than imposing guidelines upon participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants are empowered to analyze the problem and generate strategies to address the problem, rather than administration using their position of power to impart solutions upon staff. I wanted to know what school psychologists would recommend to address disproportionality since they are the stakeholders who conduct the special education assessment with EL students. Their voices mattered. A third principle of action research that aligned with my study was the emphasis on conducting the research in the participants' natural setting (Creswell, 2018). Engagement in natural settings increases the likelihood of authentic participation and lends itself to participant buy-in (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). If the problem studied requires change in the system, buy-in is essential to ensure change occurs.

Overall, my study required qualitative action research because in order to address the problem of misclassification of EL students with or without a SLD, it was essential to gather input from the stakeholders who are responsible for assessment.

Data Collection and Analysis

I used three sources of data in my study. The first was a brief pre and post questionnaire completed by the participants (Appendix C). I sent the pre-participation questionnaire to the participants 1 day before the first session of my study. The participants completed the post-participation questionnaire 1 day after the final session of my study. The questionnaires included five questions intended to ascertain if participants' confidence in their knowledge of EL and SLD trait overlap changed as a result of participating in the study.

The second source of data was transcripts from the audio recordings across six sessions. Action research is exploratory and group dialogue during the six sessions revealed invaluable

information about the participants' thinking, how their thinking evolved over time, and how interactions with one another influenced participants' actions and ultimately their recommendations to address the problem.

The third and final source of data was participants' online journals via Google Form. The online journals asked the same questions of the participants at the end of sessions one through five. Session six had different questions to obtain summative information from the participants. Use of a Google Form offered me easy access to the participant's reflections and allowed me to compile the data across all the journal entries. At the end of each session I set aside time for the participants to complete the online journal, which I sent to them just minutes before I asked them to complete the form. I used online journaling for two primary reasons: to create space for participants to have a confidential place to provide input in case they were uncomfortable sharing in the group, and to prompt the participants toward self-reflection. Journal responses were also of significant value for my study because they allowed me to observe individual introspection over the course of the study.

I used coding and narrative analysis to obtain meaning from the data. Narrative analysis allowed me to create a story about the participants' experiences with the study and how their experiences shaped their thinking and input. The second analysis approach was coding, which was applied to the transcripts and journals and connected to assessment practices and recommendations to improve assessment practices. Grounded theory guided my data analysis approach because I entered analysis without preconceived ideas and relied on participants' input to inform my study's outcomes.

Site and Participant Selection

I selected LVUSD as the site for my study because the CDE had identified it as having disproportionate representation of Hispanic students eligible for SLD in the 2017-2018 school year. Additionally, I had access to LVUSD through professional relationships with the district Superintendent, who consented to me conducting my study with LVUSD staff. Participant selection was focused on LVUSD school psychologists. I reached out to all 19 school psychologists in the district and used voluntary sampling. Those who agreed to participate were welcomed into the study. Ten school psychologists agreed to participate and remained with the study through its duration. School psychologists were my target participants because they are primarily responsible for conducting psycho-educational evaluations with students to determine if they meet special education eligibility for SLD. Participants were informed that their time was voluntary and no reimbursement would be provided. Also, the participants were informed that sessions would take place during their workday, per permission received from the district Superintendent.

Public Engagement

School psychologists serve a unique and important role in public schools because they conduct comprehensive psycho-educational assessments of students to determine if they have disabling conditions that affect their educational progress. Determining whether or not a student has a disability is significant because research shows that placing students into special education does not necessarily result in improved life outcomes. With my research, I hoped to inform other school districts identified as disproportionate by the CDE about the process by which school psychologists come together to address the problem. Ultimately, my hope was to influence the

broader California school psychologist community given that disproportionality is a statewide issue.

In addition to influencing the school psychology profession, I believe my study may be pertinent to other California school districts. Specifically, other districts may follow or learn from the actions within the study, whereby special education assessors engaged in meaningful self-reflection and analysis of their assessment practices with EL students and made concrete recommendations to improve accuracy in assessments.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Public schools in America have a legal requirement to “search and serve” students who have a disabling condition. School psychologists are the primary professionals at public schools who fulfill the “search” portion of the mandate by conducting special education evaluations with students. One can imagine how complex it is to complete an evaluation given that each student and his/her life circumstances are unique. Adding to this complexity is the reality that the assessment process is founded on a social construct, which creates space for interpretation. Therefore, despite school psychologists adhering to best practices in their assessment protocols, it is possible that some students might be misclassified with a disability whereas others might be misclassified without a disability. For the purposes of my study, I narrow the complexity range to students who are second language learners and referred for an SLD: the most common eligibility category of the 14 possible in special education.

In order to address the problem of potential misclassification of second language learners for SLD, I begin with a history of the school psychology profession and the legal journey of students with special needs. In the second section I highlight the linguistically diversity of the student population that school psychologists serve. Section three explores how school psychologists are inadequately trained to serve this diverse population and, when they are trained, they are unlikely to put that training to use. The fourth and final section considers federal and state monitoring requirements and how these requirements are designed to ensure that certain student demographics, such as second language learners, are not disproportionate in special education representation. Following a review of existing literature, I discerned a need to engage school psychologists in a process that allows them to reflect on their existing assessment

practices of EL students and identified strategies to minimize and hopefully eliminate misclassification.

History

School Psychology: An Evolving Profession

In 1852, Massachusetts became first in the United States to enact a compulsory education law, which required parents to send their children to school or be fined. By 1918, all states had compulsory education laws. As a result of these new laws in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, an influx of children who previously had not attended school, and potentially did not receive any prior instruction, began arriving at schoolhouses across the country (Fagan, 1992). With the influx of children, school staff felt the need to assess the new students to determine if they were educable, and thus began the informal role of a school psychologist. School psychologists assessed the mental and physical wellbeing of these newly enrolled students, despite having had no formal training to guide their decisions at that time (Farrell, 2010). Consequently, school psychologists became known as the gatekeepers to education, and if they deemed a student uneducable then the parents were advised to keep their child at home.

The informality of how school psychologists made their decisions about student educability changed when French psychologist Alfred Binet created the first intelligence test in the early 1900s. The French government commissioned Binet to write a test to help educators discern which students would likely experience difficulty in school. Subsequently, Binet's test and research made it to America, and a comparable measure, the U.S. Army Alpha and Beta Tests, was used during World War I to screen draftees for cognitive capabilities. America's widespread use of intelligence testing during the War led schools to adopt similar measures to determine which students were fit to attend school. From such adoption arose the central

responsibility of school psychologists: administering intelligence tests to students in schools in order to determine placement (Thomas & Grimes, 1990).

In 1925, New York established the first school psychology training program. By 1930, programs had expanded across the country, and today there are graduate programs in every state. The expansion of graduate programs occurred due to the legal mandate for school districts to provide special education services to students who met specific eligibility criteria defined by the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, also known as Public-Law 94-142 (EHA). In 1975, when EHA was federally authorized, public schools could no longer send children home for being uneducable; instead, schools became required to provide special education services to students identified with a disability (Fagan, 1992).

Just prior to EHA's authorization in 1975, in 1969 the NASP formed and became an advising entity for the profession: a profession that was experiencing increased scrutiny regarding how school psychologists were making decisions on who was, or was not, educable (Maldonado-Colón & Ochoa, 2008). In particular, special education litigation erupted in the early 1970s, which propelled the passing of EHA, and subsequently the emergence of new rules and procedures for special education identification in schools (Farrell, 2010). NASP helped guide school psychologists through the evolving professional landscape.

With the onset of EHA, and subsequently reauthorized to IDEA regulations and guidance from NASP, the role of a school psychologist solidified: namely, they were tasked with administering standardized assessments to students to determine if they met one of 13 categories of special education eligibility as defined by IDEA (Maldonado-Colón & Ochoa, 2008). Of the 13 categories originally recognized by IDEA, the category of an SLD has continued to be the most prevalent category used across the country. In 2016 (the most recent year for which

national data were available at the time of this writing), the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) reported that 39.8% of all students eligible for special education had been given an SLD label. The second most frequent category is Speech and Language Impairment (SLI), with 20% of all students eligible (OSEP, 2016). For the purposes of my study, I focused on SLD because it is the category in which school psychologists spend the majority of their time evaluating students for special education eligibility. As a result, it is also the area of greatest emphasis in school psychology graduate program courses (Farrell, 2010).

In 1975, IDEA defined SLD as:

a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may have manifested itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The basic psychological processes include attention, visual processing, auditory processing, sensory-motor skills, cognitive abilities including association, conceptualization and expression. (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.,)

The definition has not changed since its inception. When SLD was established as a special education eligibility category, guidance was also given on how to measure for this disorder. In layperson's terms, in order for a child to be identified with SLD, a trained school psychologist administers standardized tests to obtain a cognitive profile that is compared to an achievement profile. If a significant discrepancy between the two profiles emerges in the data, then the student is considered to have met the criteria for SLD. There are nuances to how eligibility criteria is met when testing a student, yet for the purposes of this literature review I limited the criterion to discrepancy between cognitive and achievement because this continues to be the primary method used by school psychologists (Maldonado-Colón & Ochoa, 2008).

Conducting formal special education evaluations has been a primary function of school psychologists for more than 40 years. Although the profession was established much earlier,

special education evaluations originated from a lengthy legal journey. Subsequently, I review the legal history that defined special education as a right for students in America's public schools.

Special Education Becomes Law

The pursuit of educational equity has been elusive for minority populations in America's schools, including students with special needs (Artiles, 2013). Since the 1950s, various minority populations have pursued litigation at both the state and federal level to ensure equal access to education. This next section summarizes salient lawsuits that afforded students with disabilities rights to a free education. I also explore literature that suggests how special education legislation was used as a way to work around *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Access Denied

The pivotal case of *Brown v. Board of Education* (hereafter referred to as *Brown*), unanimously decided by the Supreme Court in 1954, confirmed that "separate was inherently unequal" (Biegel et al., 2016, p.). Prior to *Brown*, African American students were legally segregated from their White peers and required to attend schools that lacked comparable resources (e.g., books), safe infrastructure (e.g., flushing toilets), and opportunities (e.g., extracurricular activities) afforded to White students. The Supreme Court determined that segregation was unconstitutional, and subsequently required federally funded schools to integrate and provide equal opportunity for African American students (Biegel et al., 2016).

Although *Brown* necessarily defined the rights for African American students, the Court's interpretation of the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment galvanized other subgroups historically discriminated against by America's public education system: for example, students with special needs. Historically, students identified with a disability were separated

from their non-disabled peers and left to languish in institutional settings or were required to remain home and not receive an education. In fact, just prior to the 1970s, state laws permitted exclusion from education for students with disabilities if school officials, such as school psychologists, deemed the student unable to benefit (Yell, Rogers, & Rogers 1998). Teacher disgust at watching a student drool was cited as a viable reason to exclude a student from attending school. Worse discriminatory opinions were cited and used to perpetuate the denial of educational opportunities for children with special needs in U.S. public K-12 school systems. Two seminal cases that confronted these injustices were *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens (PARC) v. Pennsylvania* (1972; hereafter referred to as *PARC*) and *Mills v. Board of Education* (1972).

In *PARC*, the plaintiffs relied on the Supreme Court's previous interpretation of the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment in *Brown* decision and argued that students with disabilities could not be denied their right to an education (Skiba et al., 2008). Prior to *PARC*, students who had not shown the mental capacity of a 5-year-old by the time they enrolled in first grade were legally denied an education. In 1972, *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens* prevailed, and a consent settlement established the right for all children between the ages of 6-21, regardless of mental capacity, to be afforded admission to a public school program (Yell et al., 1998).

Access Required, Regardless of Funds

Just after the *PARC* decision, a class action lawsuit was filed in the District of Columbia: *Mills v. Board of Education* (1972; hereafter referred to as *Mills*). Whereas *PARC* solidified the requirement to educate students regardless of cognitive capability, *Mills* sought expanded protections for students with emotional, behavioral, mental, and physical disabilities. Prior to

Mills, students with emotional, behavioral, mental, and physical handicapping conditions were denied a public school placement and school districts cited insufficient funds for the denial. The District of Columbia schools acknowledged that during the 1971-1972 school year, they denied 12,340 students with disabilities an education because of budget constraints (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996). The United States District Court ruled that school districts must offer students with disabilities a publicly funded education and cannot cite insufficient funds to deny student placement. Another outcome of *Mills* was the guarantee of due process safeguards, namely protecting students with disabilities from change of school placement (e.g., suspension, expulsion, transfer to an alternative placement) without offering first formal notice of the proposed change, an opportunity for legal representation, a right to be heard, and full access to the student's educational records. Congress ultimately incorporated the due process safeguards and protections from *Mills* into Public Law 94-142, and they also served as the outline for due process rights in the forthcoming Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EHA).

Access and Protections

The groundbreaking work of *PARC* and *Mills* cannot be overstated. School districts were now required to open their doors, which were previously closed to millions of children. As students with special needs entered school, additional legal protections took hold, including expansion of the Rehabilitation Act/Section 504 (hereafter "Section 504") in 1973 (Biegel et al., 2016). Section 504 put into place anti-discrimination requirements with entities in receipt of federal funds, including schools. Specifically, Section 504 stated that persons with disabilities cannot be discriminated against based on their disabling condition. However, public entities essentially ignored the anti-discrimination requirements of Section 504 because it was an unfunded mandate without monitoring (Martin et al., 1996). In 1975, when Congress passed

EHA, this time the regulations included funding and monitoring to ensure students with disabilities a free and appropriate public education. Subsequent amendments to the EHA in 1983 and 1990 resulted in a name change to IDEA. IDEA was reauthorized in 1997 and again in 2004, each time increasing the amount of federal funds dedicated to support implementation of the Act, though never fulfilling the commitment. In addition to the funding formula, IDEA broadly describes how schools are to ensure equal access and opportunity to students with disabilities.

The legal journey for students with disabilities to secure their right to a free public education has been long and continues to this day. In the next section I explore two influential lawsuits that capture the complexities that emerged when civil rights and special education protections converged. Although numerous lawsuits have been filed regarding violations of IDEA implementation, I narrowed my research to two lawsuits in order to recognize the difficulties school psychologists faced in accounting for racial and linguistic diversity when assessing students for special education. These difficulties arose despite NASP guidelines for the profession, IDEA established eligibility criteria, and ever-expanding graduate level training.

Convergence of *Brown v. Board of Education* and IDEA

Although *Brown* promised integration, minority students experienced a different method of segregation. African American students were disproportionately tested for special education and subsequently legally segregated into special education settings when compared to their White classmates (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Losen & Orfield, 2002; MacMillan, Hendrick, & Watkins, 1988). For example, just after the *Brown* decision, Washington D.C. public schools designated 24% of their newly enrolled African American students with special education eligibility, and soon thereafter African American students accounted for 77% of the special

education population within the district (Ferri & Connor, 2005). In his research on racialized practices within special education, Connor (2017) pointed out that many states and school districts across the country intentionally delayed integration following the landmark ruling, and over time a the U.S. witnessed a steady increase in special education labels, specifically of minority students. Two influential lawsuits confronted what appeared to be racial bias in the determination of which students were found eligible for special education: *Diana v. State Board of Education* (1970) and *Larry P. v. Wilson Riles* (1979).

Diana v. State Board of Education (1970; hereafter referred to as *Diana*), a case in California, challenged special education assessment practices with Mexican-American students because a disproportionate number of Mexican-American students were identified with Mental Retardation² and placed into a separate special education setting. The plaintiffs challenged the intelligence test administered by school psychologists, accusing it of being culturally and linguistically biased in favor of White English-only speaking students and thereby discriminatory (MacMillan et al., 1988). The court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs and required the California State Board of Education to: (a) develop an appropriate intelligence test and re-assess the students in their native language, and (b) examine inequities of minority students in special education.

Shortly after *Diana*, the groundbreaking *Larry P. v. Wilson Riles* (1979; hereafter referred to as *Larry P.*) case was heard in federal court in San Francisco. The plaintiffs in *Larry P.* challenged the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) with racial and cultural discriminatory practices in intelligence test administration to African American students, which

² Mental Retardation was one of the original 13 categories of special education eligibility under EHA. President Barack Obama eliminated the use of that term in 2010 and replaced it with Intellectual Disability (Schalock, Luckasson, & Shogren, 2007).

resulted in overrepresentation of African American students in Educable Mental Retardation (EMR)³ special education programs (Banks, 2017). At the time of the lawsuit, African American students made up 9% of total enrollment in SFUSD, yet accounted for 27% of the population in EMR classes. The lawyers representing *Larry P.* argued that the discriminatory practices violated the students' rights under the 14th Amendment, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, and EHA. The plaintiffs prevailed; school districts in California could no longer administer intelligence tests to African American students for the purposes of determining Mental Retardation eligibility because the tests were found to be discriminatory (Banks, 2017).

I included a summary of the *Diana* and *Larry P.* cases because they established that if school psychologists conduct special education assessment assuming all students are the same—ignoring ignore cultural, ethnic, and linguistic differences—the results might be unjust. Consequently, California-based school psychologists were to be trained in culturally and linguistically sensitive approaches to assessing students considered minorities in the school setting (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Conducting linguistically appropriate assessments was at the core of my study, and the outcomes of *Diana* and *Larry P.* indicate that sensitivity to student background has been an expectation within the field for decades.

The next portion of the literature review discusses just how linguistically diverse the student population has become in our public schools, with a focus on California demographics. I also include a brief summary of how California voters initially responded to this increase in diversity. I emphasize linguistic diversity going forward because assessment of second language learners is key to my study.

³ EMR was a formal classification within special education programs at the time.

A More Linguistically Diverse Student Population

Demographic shifts in America over the past 4 decades show a surge in Hispanic representation. Between 1970 and 2016, the U.S. Hispanic population accelerated from 9.6 million to 57.5 million. Similarly, EL enrollment in public schools jumped by 53.2% in the same time. Today, EL student enrollment accounts for 9.4% in America's public schools. California has the highest rate of EL students enrolled compared to all other states, at 29%, equating to nearly a third of the country's Hispanic population (Migration Policy Institute, 2017). A closer look at California's demographics shows that EL students—not inclusive of RFEP students—represent 21.4% of students enrolled in K-12 public schools (CDE, 2017). Therefore, at least one of every five students in California is an EL.

As California experienced a steady increase in EL student enrollment in public schools during the latter part of the 20th century, school officials and politicians debated how to meet second language learners' needs in school. The debate ultimately became a proposition on the California voters' ballot in 1998. California voters weighed in on whether or not public schools were required to provide instruction to students in their native language or to require English-only immersion. Proposition 227 was passed by the voters in 1998, cementing English-only instruction as the legal mandate and default educational experience for EL students.

Subsequently, school districts dismantled bilingual programs in schools, despite the tidal wave of EL enrollment. Proponents of Proposition 227 believed EL students would experience greater academic success through English immersion rather than being taught, initially, in their primary language. Opponents of Proposition 227, including language education researchers, viewed the proposition as discriminatory and failing to recognize that unqualified teachers and inadequate

bilingual program implementation might better explain the limited achievement of EL students up to that point in time (Gándara et al., 2000).

I cite Proposition 227 in this section of the literature review because it provides context to the working conditions of school psychologists at the time. Although the legal outcomes of *Diana v* made clear, in 1970, that second language learners were to be assessed in the students' native language to the extent possible, results of Proposition 227 suggested that access to instruction in the student's native language was nonessential. As a school psychologist who began practicing in 2001, I am left wondering if the outcome of Proposition 227 diminished the requirements set forth by *Diana*. Accordingly, I also wonder if the English-only blueprint in California at the time was a contributing factor to what I discuss next: insufficient training of school psychologists to address trait overlap between EL and SLD.

As a footnote, in 2016, Proposition 58 passed in California, which repealed Proposition 227. Proposition 58, known as the California Multilingual Education Act, was enacted on July 1, 2017. Because of its recent implementation date, it is too early to garner any meaningful information about whether or not this change has had an impact on student outcomes and how, if at all, school psychologists consider how a student is educated (English only immersion or dual language supports) when assessing him/her for special education.

School Psychologist Training and Practices with Linguistically Diverse Population

To prepare school psychologists to meet the changing professional demands commensurate with the changing student population, NASP, the American Psychological Association (APA), and the California Association of School Psychologists (CASP) formalized recommendations on best practices when assessing a student whose primary language is other than English (Reynolds & Gutkin, 1999). As noted earlier, *Diana* and updates to IDEA indicated

that the best practice is to conduct special education assessments in the student's primary language (Thomas & Grimes, 2002). Although the law and guidelines are clear on assessment in primary language, there is a longstanding shortage of bilingual school psychologists in America (Aldridge et al., 2015). Presently, 90% of school psychologists are White and 6% are Hispanic. Furthermore, 86% of school psychologists speak only English. When a Spanish-speaking school psychologist is not available, interpreters are used; these individuals are not uniquely trained in test administration, which can substantially alter standardized protocol and ultimately affect validity and reliability (Figueroa, 1989; Ochoa, González, Gallarza, & Guillemard, 1996).

The insufficient number of bilingual school psychologists to conduct special education assessments with EL students necessitates explicit training with monolingual psychologists on how to test with an interpreter (Figueroa & Newsome, 2006). Research by Ochoa et al. (1997) sought to understand the adequacy of school psychologists' training was on bilingual assessments and use of interpreters. Ochoa et al. surveyed 1,507 school psychologists across eight states about their training and 83% of the respondents who conducted bilingual assessments indicated that their training was "less than adequate." Furthermore, 56% of respondents reported having "none" or "very little" training in how to interpret assessment results from bilingual assessments. Ochoa et al. concluded that although *Diana* had been settled more than 25 years earlier, school psychologists were receiving insufficient training to appropriately assess bilingual students.

Subsequent to Ochoa et al.'s (2017) study, Aldridge and colleagues (2015) researched countrywide NASP accredited school psychologist programs to determine the adequacy of EL training, as determined by surveying 41 school psychology interns nearing completion of the program. In order for a program to receive NASP accreditation, the program must include some

coursework on English Language Development (ELD). Results from Aldridge et al.'s study showed that, in general, the programs offered insufficient training and the majority of interns who completed the survey felt “less than adequately prepared” (p. 19) to meet the needs of EL students. Aldridge et al.'s study replicated previous research by Styck (2012), who found that NASP and APA accredited school psychology programs were in need of improved practices to better prepare school psychologists to work with EL students, among other diverse student groups.

In addition to training school psychologists on appropriate use of interpreters, both bilingual and monolingual psychologists require training on how to discern ELD, or second language acquisition, from a learning disability (Figueroa, 1989; González & Artiles, 2015; Sullivan, 2011). California law requires school psychologists to be “trained and prepared to assess cultural and ethnic factors appropriate to the public being assessed” (CDE, 2014, p. 29). The characteristic overlap between second language acquisition and a SLD is large and easily misunderstood without formal training (Sullivan, 2011). Ortiz and Maldonado-Colón (1986) pointed out over 3 decades ago that a student learning English while in school may appear to have difficulty with comprehension and following directions; he/she may also appear inattentive and to struggle to read and write at the same pace of an English-only speaking student. Such characteristics are also identified as indicators of a student with a SLD. IDEA regulations conceptualize an SLD as “a disorder...in understanding or using language, spoken or written...manifesting itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, write, read, spell or do mathematical calculations” (U.S. Department of Education, 2017, p.). The difficulty in differentiating characteristic overlap is furthered by teachers, particularly in elementary grades, who under-refer EL students for special education evaluations because they attribute academic

difficulties to second language acquisition (Morgan et al., 2015; Rhinehart & Bailey, 2019). Consequently, the right students might not be identified for special education.

Even though NASP and the APA publish best practices guidelines for school psychologists to use to account for second language acquisition traits from those of a disability, preliminary research of school psychologists' use of the guidelines shows they are rarely applied (Figueroa & Newsome, 2006; Harris et al., 2015). Figueroa and Newsome (2006) evaluated 19 psychoeducational reports of EL students written by school psychologists in California. The researchers compared the reports to EL best-practice assessment guidelines by NASP and APA as well as California's legal guidelines. Results from Figueroa and Newsome's study showed that 68% of the assessments were not conducted in the students' primary language. None of the reports acknowledged the students' scores on the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) and how those scores indicate second language acquisition proficiency. The overall results from Figueroa and Newsome's study highlighted that school psychologists do not sufficiently consider the confounding effects of second language acquisition when testing for SLD.

Harris et al. (2015) conducted a comparable study to Figueroa and Newsome (2006) in Colorado. Harris et al. reviewed 34 psychoeducational assessments completed with EL students. The psychoeducational reports were reviewed for adherence to the NASP and APA best practices guidelines (e.g., identify the student's language proficiency, consider the student's acculturation, report use of interpreter, how are the student's cultural and linguistic backgrounds taken into consideration for test reliability and validity, etc.) and only half of school psychologists surveyed determined primary language before conducting assessments. Failure to determine a student's primary language represents a significant break from best practice

protocol. Next, five of the 34 reports included a description about use of an interpreter; the remaining 29 reports made no mention of the interpreters.

Results from the Harris et al. (2015) study confirm prior research findings; school psychologists are inadequately prepared and/or insufficiently apply best practices when assessing EL students for a learning disability. If psychologists are inadequately trained or only apply guidelines insufficiently, misclassification of EL students with or without a disability is a realistic outcome. In 1997 and 2004, when IDEA was reauthorized, federal regulations introduced monitoring requirements to target misclassification, especially for ethnically and linguistically diverse students. In the following section, I review the federal and state monitoring requirements.

Federal and State Monitoring

In 1997 and 2004, IDEA was reauthorized. A new addition to the federal regulation was the requirement of states to identify and monitor Local Education Agencies (LEAs) on disproportionate representation of racial and ethnic groups in special education. The monitoring requirement surfaced following decades-long research. Various researchers found that certain student demographics—particularly African American, Native American and Hispanic students—were being found eligible for special education at a rate that exceeded their representation in the overall population (Frankenberg, Lee, & Orfield, 2003; Morgan et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2014). Subsequent to the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, the U.S. Department of Education issued a memo to all states indicating that “States are required to review the LEAs in the State to determine the extent to which the disproportionate representation of racial and ethnic groups in special education is the result of inappropriate identification” (Posny, 2007, p. 1). It is important to note that the U.S. Department of Education defines disproportionality as both the

overrepresentation and underrepresentation of a particular population or demographic in special education programs relative to the presence of this group in the overall student population. However, the memo issued in 2007 highlighted the increasing trend of minority students placed into special education outpacing the rates of enrollment, hence an emphasis on overrepresentation.

A demographic is deemed at “risk” for being disproportionate by “comparing the risk of one racial/ethnic group to be in special education against the corresponding risk of all other racial/ethnic groups combined” (Roy, 2012, p. 134). Overrepresentation happens when a racial/ethnic group’s risk of being placed in special education is higher than that of the comparison group. Under-representation occurs when a racial/ethnic group’s risk of being placed in special education is lower than that of the comparison group. In order to draw more meaning from risk, the *risk ratio* calculation is used in California to determine if an LEA has disproportionality. Risk ratio provides quantitative information about the likelihood of, or the risk, that a particular racial/ethnic demographic will be found eligible for special education or be found eligible within a particular category. In order for the state to determine if a LEA has disproportionality, mathematical formulas are applied based upon the size of the district to determine a *tolerance* level, or, a range permissible within the district without being determined as disproportionate. If a district goes beyond the tolerance level, either too far below or too far above, then the CDE notifies the district that they are disproportionate (Roy, 2012).

The CDE conducts an annual analysis of each school district’s special education data to determine if there are disproportionate data associated with ethnicity and second language learners. If a district receives notice from CDE that there is disproportionate representation, the district is required to address the disproportionate data via a root-cause analysis of practices

within the district and then take action to address the problematic practices. As of 2017, 62% of school districts in California had been identified to have at least one category of disproportionality (California Department of Education, 2017).

In August 2018, the LVUSD Superintendent received a letter from the CDE notifying LVUSD that they had a “disproportionate representation” of Hispanic students found eligible in the SLD special education eligibility category. CDE’s data indicated that Hispanic students had a risk ratio of 3.1, which means Hispanic students were 3.1 times more likely than all other ethnicities to be made eligible via SLD. The permissible level, as defined by CDE, was 3.0. Therefore, LVUSD was just over the permissible risk ratio. In comparison, White students have a .51 risk ratio for the same eligibility category. Whereas some might question whether or not a .1 overage is cause for concern, it is important to put the data into a larger context. Hispanic students make up approximately 24% of the total enrollment in LVUSD, and White students make up 68% of the total enrollment. In view of the enrollment data, the difference in the risk ratios between the two ethnicities is stark. Also, earlier in my literature review I summarized two lawsuits centered on disproportionality, *Diana* and *Larry P.* Both California-based lawsuits were settled before federal regulations required all LEAs to monitor their data. Some researchers posit that the pattern persisted in the absence of formal monitoring (Frankenberg et al., 2003; Morgan et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2014). Hence, the federal and state monitoring requirements now come with sanctions if the LEA disproportionate data remains uninterrupted. An example of a sanction is that the Superintendent’s pay can be suspended.

Upon receipt of notice from the CDE, LVUSD was required to take action and provide evidence of the actions to the CDE. Analysis of school psychologists’ assessment practices with Hispanic students is one action the district can take, and a practice I identified as a problem for

my study. As I indicated earlier in this chapter, school psychologists serve a more linguistically diverse population and yet are under-trained or under-utilizing their training in order to best meet the needs of the diverse student groups. I sought to engage directly with LVUSD school psychologists on their existing assessment protocols with second language learners. I was curious if direct engagement with school psychologists on a practice-based problem would lead them to identify strategies to better distinguish second language acquisition from a disability and ultimately ensure the right students are found eligible.

In the final section of my literature review I explore overrepresentation and underrepresentation of minority students in special education. Research shows this is an area of contention, yielding divergent perspectives about whether or not the data demonstrate one trend or the other exists.

Disproportionality: Overrepresentation and Underrepresentation

Federal and state level monitoring originated out of an ongoing concern that minority students were found eligible for special education and subsequently placed into more restrictive settings at a higher rate than White students. This is also known as disproportionate representation. Subsequently I consider research on both sides of disproportionality - overrepresentation and underrepresentation.

Overrepresentation of Minorities in Special Education

The United States has historically segregated students of color in public education. In 1968, Dunn coined the term “disproportionate” in reference to the frequency minority students were placed into separate settings due to a disabling condition. Dunn (1968) provocatively questioned the separate placements as an unjustifiable means to segregate. Research shows disproportionality persists, particularly for African American and Native American students.

OSEP, an office within the U.S. Department of Education, reported in 2016 that African American students are 1.59 times more likely to be identified for special education than their White and/or Asian peers. Hispanic students are 1.31 times more likely to be identified with a disability than their White and/or Asian peers. Native Americans are 50% more likely than White students to be identified with a learning disability (OSEP, 2016).

Of the 14 possible special education eligibility categories, three are considered subjective, meaning the criteria lack medical and/or physical definition (Artiles et al., 2010; Klingner et al., 2005). SLD, Emotional Disturbance (ED), and Intellectual Disability⁴ (ID) are the three special education eligibility categories with subjectivity inherent in the criteria, and unfortunately can reflect deficit view biases. Historically, these three categories show the highest rates of minority overrepresentation (Artiles et al., 2010). For example, African American students are three times more likely to be identified as ID and more than 200% likely to be identified with an ED than their White peers (Artiles, 2013). Native Americans are seven times more likely to be identified as ID than their White peers. Hispanic students are steadily increasing in overrepresentation statistics and currently make up 47% of all students identified with a SLD. Researchers point to the high rate of Hispanic students being ELs as a contributing factor for the increasing representation of this student group in SLD (Anastasiou, Morgan, Farcus, & Wiley, 2017).

California mirrors national trends. Nationally, African American, Native American, and Hispanic students outpace their White and Asian peers in special education placements. In California, 638 of 1024 possible school districts were identified with a risk ratio⁵ of two standard

⁴ Intellectual disability was previously known as Mental Retardation. The terminology changed in 2010 when Congress unanimously passed Rosa's Law.

⁵ Risk ratio is a measure of disproportionality; 1.0 risk ratio equates to proportionate representation, 1.20 risk ratio or higher indicates concern of disproportionality (Oswald & Coutinho, 2006).

deviations above the national median for overrepresentation of minorities in at least one special education eligibility category (OSEP, 2016). In the 2014-2015 school year, more than half of all California students in special education were Hispanic and African American, yet they accounted for less than half of all student enrollment in the state. In California, African American students are 2.9 times more likely to be labeled as ED than non-African-American peers. Similarly, Hispanic students accounted for 55.7% of all students identified with ID, compared to 22.1% accounted for by White students in California. On a local level, 16 of 20 school districts in Ventura County were identified as disproportionate in minority representation in special education for the 2015-2016 school year (California Department of Education, Special Education Division, 2016).

For the purposes of this study, I focused on ELs, a group that federal and state monitoring show are increasingly made eligible for special education. As of 2016, at the national level, 13.5% of EL students are special education eligible, compared to a national average of 6% for non-EL students (OSEP, 2016). An SLD is the most common category of special education eligibility. It includes a discrepancy between one's intellectual ability and academic achievement. EL students make up 50.5% of all SLD eligibilities, nationally, compared to 38.2% of non-EL students. In California, 11.51% of total students enrolled have special education eligibility and Hispanic students make up 55% of the total (California Department of Education, Special Education Division, 2016). The rate at which EL students are placed into special education outpaces the rate of EL enrollment in general (Albrecht et al., 2012).

In sum, the aforementioned citations and data suggest minority students are overrepresented in special education. Other research shows the opposite is true; that minority students are under-referred for special education evaluation and subsequently are denied

interventions. Subsequently, I explore the research on underrepresentation of minorities in special education.

Underrepresentation of Minorities in Special Education

A multi-year longitudinal study completed by Morgan et al. in 2015 concluded that minority students were less likely to be identified for special education eligibility than their White peers. Morgan et al. analyzed data of students who entered kindergarten in the 1998-1999 school year, then tracked them in subsequent years—via parent, teacher, and student surveys—regarding their educational progress and whether or not they were referred for special education and/or found eligible for special education. Results from the study indicated that Hispanic students were 29% less likely to be identified with a learning disability than their White peers. Additionally, Hispanic students were found to be less likely to be made eligible for an SLI or Other Health Impairment than their White peers. Ultimately, the researchers concluded their study “failed to find any evidence that racial, ethnic or language minority children in the United States are being disproportionately overrepresented in special education” (Morgan et al., 2015, p. 119). Consequently, minority children were found to be underrepresented in this study, which built upon an earlier study completed by Bal, Sullivan, and Harper (2014).

Bal et al. (2014) used mixed method to analyze disproportionality trends in a Wisconsin public school district between 2006 and 2010. Their research uncovered that Hispanic students and Limited English Proficient (LEP) students had comparable Relative Risk Ratios⁶ (RRRs) in 2010 to White students when evaluated for SLD. The RRR for White students and SLD eligibility was 3.1. Hispanic student RRR was 3.3 and LEP student RRR was 3.4 for the same eligibility category. These RRRs are dramatically lower than those for African American

⁶ Relative Risk Ratio is the likelihood of identification in a given disability category relative to white student’s risk for the same disability category (Bal et al., 2014)

students (RRR = 9.1) and American Indian students (RRR = 5.1). The researchers concluded that their findings were consistent with other research (Donovan & Cross, 2002) indicative of Hispanic and LEP students being underrepresented, and potentially underidentified, in special education.

Prior to Bal et al.'s (2014) research, Shifrer, Muller, and Callahan (2011) studied disproportionate representation of students with a learning disability. The researchers expressed the importance of looking beyond race and gender (bivariate) to define disproportionate representation and therefore included additional variables (multivariate), such as socioeconomic status (SES), parent education level, and students' academic history in their study. When multiple variables are considered, Shifrer et al. found "being a nonnative English speaker is not significantly associated with increased odds of identification with a learning disability once sociodemographic characteristics are considered" (p. 252). Ultimately, the study concluded that other relevant factors, in particular SES, are necessary to consider when determining if students are more or less likely to be identified for special education. Therefore, it is misleading to claim EL students are overrepresented in special education for the sole reason of being ELs.

Additional research regarding disproportionate rates of EL students identified with, or without SLD, points to rate differences depending upon the student's grade. Samson and Lesaux (2009) analyzed data from the national Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Cohort, which included 22,782 students. The researchers focused on special education eligibility rates of the population in their kindergarten, first and third grade years. The data showed that EL students were underidentified in special education in kindergarten and first grade when compared to the proportion of EL students in the sample population. However, by the third grade, EL

students were now overrepresented. Results from this study underscore the complexity of claiming EL students are, or are not, disproportionate in special education data.

Depending on which research one reads, it is possible to conclude that EL students are either overrepresented or underrepresented in special education; both matter equally. To prevent the trend, in either direction, school psychologists must conduct accurate assessments EL students, which was the focus of my study.

Conclusion

Student enrollment in America's public schools has become more linguistically diverse over the past 40 years. Of the states in the nation, California has experienced the greatest growth in EL students enrolled when compared to all other states. Acquiring English as a second language can cause a student to appear distractible, have difficulty following directions, have slow reading comprehension development, and demonstrate other traits that mirror a child with a SLD. Research shows school psychologists are insufficiently trained to distinguish between EL and SLD. Consequently, EL students are misclassified with, and potentially without, a disability. Federal and state monitoring requirements surfaced in the '00s to hold school districts accountable for disproportionate trends of minority populations being placed into special education, including EL students. When a district is identified with disproportionate representation, they are required to investigate the cause of the disproportionality and make necessary adjustments to address disproportionate data.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

This action research project engaged participants to address a problem within a specific school district: to accurately identify EL students with an SLD and avoid misclassification. In May 2018, the CDE notified the LVUSD Superintendent that the district had a disproportionate representation of Hispanic students identified with an SLD⁷. When a district is notified of disproportionality, they are required to take corrective actions to eliminate disproportionate representation. The CDE findings, coupled with my professional background as a school psychologist and therefore commitment to the profession, were the catalysts for my study topic. After conducting an extensive literature review, I organized my study to focus on school psychologists' assessment practices of second language learners for a SLD. In particular, I used action research to engage LVUSD school psychologists and learn:

1. In what ways, if at all, does engaging in the action research process enable school psychologists to reflect on their own practices in assessment of EL students?
2. In what ways, if at all, are school psychologists adjusting their assessment practices during participation in action research?
3. After participating in my action research study, what do school psychologists identify as the most salient actions and/or recommendations to improve and/or ensure assessment of EL students for SLD?

⁷ Report from the California Department of Education determined that Hispanic students in LVUSD had a risk-ratio of 3.10. This means Hispanic students are 3.10 times more likely to be found eligible for a specific learning disability than non-Hispanic students. The permissible risk-ratio was 3.00. Although a .10 seems miniscule, CDE requires corrective action regardless of how far above the permissible risk-ratio.

Research Design and Rationale

The design for my project was qualitative action research. A qualitative study was selected because one of the desired outcomes of my study was to learn about participants' views regarding their existing assessment practices with second language learners, and how their perceptions and subsequent actions changed as a result of participating in the study. Perceptions are internally constructed and vary between and among individuals. Therefore, this study was exploratory because I could not fully anticipate or prescribe participants' views. Creswell (2018) points to learning and exploration as central tenets of a qualitative research design, which aligned with the purposes of my study. A quantitative study would have required prescribed answers (e.g., a survey), which automatically limits and confines one's potential responses; hence, this approach was not as useful for the purposes of my study.

Within qualitative research, I narrowed my method to action research because I wanted to address a specific problem within a practice-based setting: a cornerstone of action research (Herr & Anderson, 2014). In LVUSD, the problem I sought to address was school psychologists' assessment protocols of ELs for an SLD. During the 2017-2018 school year, the CDE identified LVUSD as having a disproportionate representation of Hispanic students made eligible for special education with an SLD. When CDE notifies a school district of disproportionality, the district is required to take action to address it. Examples of actions districts can take include closely exploring school psychologists' special education evaluation practices and/or investigating pre-referral supports and interventions within the general education setting. I decided to focus on school psychologists and their assessment practices rather than pre-referral interventions for two reasons. The first is the fact that I started my career as a school psychologist and sought to have my dissertation contribute to the profession. Second, the time

constraints of my graduate program helped me narrow the scope of my research to something that would be achievable in months as opposed to years. Assessment practices are specific and narrow when compared to the broad array of general education interventions.

A second principle of action research important to my study was engagement *with* participants to improve practice rather than imposing guidelines upon participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In Chapter Two I reviewed literature about the overlapping traits between second language learners and having an SLD. My literature review also highlighted the difficulty assessors face in accurately discerning those traits. Therefore, I organized my action research to engage school psychologists to learn how, if at all, their participation in the study influenced their views and actions regarding assessment practices of EL students for a SLD.

A third principle of action research that fit with my study was the emphasis on conducting the research in the participants' natural setting (Creswell, 2018). Engagement in natural settings increases the likelihood of authentic participation and lends itself to participant buy-in. They contribute to addressing the problem (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My study took place in LVUSD with LVUSD school psychologists. I was originally concerned about securing enough LVUSD school psychologists to participate in my study given the demands of their workload. Thankfully, 10 agreed to participate and all 10 attended all the sessions. When I asked the participants in the final session to share why they agreed to participate, six shared that they wanted an opportunity for professional development. One participant reported that she is considering a doctoral program and wanted to learn more about conducting research. Another participant reported his motivation centered on a desire to "improve his craft" and the remaining two participants indicated that they were unsure what to expect, yet thought it might be a good opportunity to spend more time with their colleagues. Ultimately, engagement in the natural

setting proved positive for me because the commitment from the participants was high and consistent.

Overall, my study necessitated a qualitative action research approach because I sought to observe participants' learning from one another and to ascertain their views and actions: all of which would have been impossible in a quantitative study.

Site and Population

Public school districts were the first level of site selection criteria because the IDEA federal regulations apply only to public schools. Private and independent schools are not governed by IDEA and therefore assessment for special education eligibility is not required. Although school psychologists work in private and independent schools, without IDEA they are not required to conduct assessments to determine if a student has an SLD. I also ruled out charter schools because they are not required to offer the full continuum of special education services. Instead, charter schools may inform parents that if their child's learning needs exceed what their charter offers, at which point the student must re-enroll in a public school. Therefore, charter schools do not present with the same assessment demands for school psychologists as those working in public schools.

I narrowed my site selection to LVUSD for two reasons. First, CDE had identified LVUSD as having a disproportionate representation of Hispanic students made eligible for SLD in the 2017-2018 school year. Also, I selected LVUSD for convenience sampling because I had access to district leadership and secured an early approval from the leadership to conduct my study with the district .

I had access to LVUSD via professional relationships between and among district leadership and the County Office of Education that supports LVUSD. I spoke to the LVUSD

Superintendent in November 2018 regarding my proposed study and the Superintendent responded in kind with approval to conduct the study with District school psychologists.

In order to access the LVUSD school psychologists directly, I spoke briefly at their monthly professional development meeting in January 2019. During the presentation, I shared the purpose of my study, that participation was completely voluntary, the overall outline of the time requirements, and that their participation would be kept confidential. I asked the participants to share their email addresses with me by writing it on a sign-in sheet I sent around the room. Once I had their email addresses I was able to pursue their participation.

My study was designed for school psychologists because they hold the singular responsibility within a school district to conduct special education assessments for the purposes of determining if the student has a SLD. There were 19 school psychologists in LVUSD at the time of my study and I used voluntary sampling to secure participants: each person who expressed an interest in participating had an equal likelihood of becoming a participant. Although I originally considered stratified random sampling to include representation of both monolingual psychologists and bilingual psychologists within the LVUSD school psychology department, the sample size of bilingual psychologists was too small ($n = 3$) and I feared that none of the three would express an interest. Ultimately, the criteria for participation in my study were twofold: (a) employed with LVUSD, and (b) held a clear California school psychology credential (e.g., not an intern). Of the 19 school psychologists employed with LVUSD, I aimed to have 10 participate and anticipated that one or two might drop out over time. Eight participants was the minimum for my study to ensure ample dialogue during the sessions. Ultimately, 10 responded to my recruitment communication and all 10 remained with the study through its entirety.

Although I used voluntary sampling, I do think the makeup of the 10 participants, in regard to monolingual/bilingual and years in the profession, provides some additional information I consider relevant to my study. Two of the 10 participants are bilingual (Spanish and Vietnamese); six of the 10 participants have been in the profession for 5 or fewer years; one participant has been in the profession between 6-10 years; and three participants have been in the profession for 11 or more years, yet less than 15 years. As indicated earlier, there are a total of three bilingual psychologists in LVUSD, so having two participate was fortunate and ultimately did bring a unique voice to the discussion, which is explored in Chapter Four.

Years in the profession proved to be another asset for discussion purposes during the sessions. Overall, the years ranged from 1-14. The difference in years in the profession resulted in dialogue about the changes in training in graduate programs (the participant with 14 years indicated there was no graduate level course nor training on assessing second language learners and the six participants with 5 or fewer years in the profession all reported taking specific graduate courses on second language acquisition) and how experiences over time inform their work. Although the previous discussion of the makeup of the participants does not address the research questions of my study, I mention them here to help paint a picture of how the group dynamics cultivated dialogue.

The recruitment process for study participants included three steps. First, I announced my study to the LVUSD school psychology department at their monthly meeting held in January 2019. I shared a brief overview of action research design, that their participation was purely voluntary, and the expected commitment level needed for the study. Next, I emailed each school psychologist with an introduction letter (Appendix A) that included more specifics about the study and informed them about the confidentiality of their participation. Initially, three people

responded agreeing to participate. Subsequently, I sent a follow up email to the remaining school psychologists asking if they had any questions about the study and offering to answer them. At that point, six responded and indicated that they could not participate due to personal commitments. Fortunately, seven responded with an agreement to participate. The remaining three did not respond (it is important to note that a response was not required).

As indicated previously, 10 of the 19 school psychologists in LVUSD agreed to participate. The 10 remained with the study through the six sessions. I am extremely grateful for their time and commitment to the research.

I assigned a pseudonym to each of the participants to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Therefore, any names used throughout my dissertation are not the participants' true names but instead are pseudonyms. A pseudonym was also given to the school district.

Data Collection and Analysis

I used three sources of data in my study. The first was a five-question multiple choice answer pre-participation and a post-participation questionnaire (Appendix C). The purpose of the questionnaires was to gather information from the participants on their confidence levels regarding their knowledge of EL and SLD trait overlap and if this knowledge level, and perhaps their confidence level, changed as a result of participating in the study. The questionnaires took approximately 3 minutes for each participant to complete. Although my study was primarily qualitative, the questionnaires did provide a quick and easy way to learn about the participants' confidence and knowledge of trait overlap and how, if at all, that knowledge changed as an outcome of study participation.

The second source of data was audio recordings from the six study sessions. Transcripts were derived from the audio recordings; these proved to be valuable data sources because they

allowed me to capture how the dialogue between and among the participants influenced their problem analysis and recommendations to address the problem being studied. After each session, I used Rev.com to transcribe the audio recording and then I used Quirkos (Appendix F) to code the transcripts.

The third source of data was individual online participant journals (Appendix E). I created a Google Form and emailed a new form to each participant near the end of each session for them to complete prior to departure. The purpose of the journal was to create a space for participants to share additional thoughts and input that they might not have felt comfortable sharing in the group. Additionally, the journals created an opportunity for me to hear from all participants on specific questions/prompts that were closely aligned to my research questions. Similar to the audio recordings, the journals were an invaluable data source. I asked the same questions for sessions 1-5 and then the final session included questions that were more comprehensive and summary oriented. Similar to the transcripts, I used Quirkos to code and categorize the data.

In order to answer my three research questions, I applied grounded theory and began with open coding to the transcripts and journals. Grounded theory was an appropriate method for my data analysis because my study was exploratory and I did not have pre-conceived themes about the data. Rather, I needed to analyze the data for emerging themes, and these themes would inform the overall results of my study. The inductive nature of my study and the absence of pre-conceived themes are consistent with grounded theory methodology (Mills, Bonner, & Francis 2006).

After each session, I uploaded the audio recordings to Rev.com for transcription. Next, I uploaded the transcripts to Quirkos.com, a data analysis website. While in Quirkos, I read the

session transcripts and highlighted words and key phrases by moving them into a Quirkos.com bubble, which began the categorizing stage of my analysis. For example, I began to see words and key phrases connected to “speech therapist” and “standardized tests” and subsequently named two bubbles accordingly (Appendix F). Then, each time I read a word or phrase that was connected to a speech therapist or a standardized test, I dragged the word/key phrase into the appropriately named bubble. I continued open coding across the six sessions. After the first full round, I had 14 categories; this felt too broad, and I recognized that some of the codes were not connected to my research questions. For example, the category “speech therapist” did not convey much meaning and I realized, when I reread the words and phrases I added to that category, there were random additions. Consequently, I recoded all the transcripts with a focus on what about speech therapists was relevant and the theme *consultation for oral language profile* emerged.

After four rounds of coding the transcripts, I then analyzed the contents within the seven remaining categories (e.g., oral language profile, bilingual colleagues, test selection and administration, self-reflection, etc.). At this level, I was looking for themes that would provide meaningful answers to my research questions. For example, I was curious to learn what the data would show regarding participants’ self-reflection about their assessment practices as a result of partaking in my study. Keeping this question in mind, I analyzed the categories and observed how important intentional professional development is to the participants – and how little of it they receive.

Ultimately, three themes surfaced from the transcript and journal data. Within the themes, I organized the data into pertinent findings, which provide detailed answers to my research questions, described in Chapter Four.

The organic process inherent in grounded theory allowed me to see how participants' thinking changed over time, and the outcomes were unanticipated.

Action Research Process

According to Coghlan and Brannick (2014), action research follows a general pattern of describing, planning, and acting, then evaluating how the process itself is unfolding. I completed one full cycle of action research with 10 participants across six sessions. Each session was originally scheduled for 75 minutes; however, each session lasted slightly longer per participant requests. A Doodle Poll was used to secure dates and times based upon participant availability. Once responses were received, six sessions were scheduled all starting at 3:15pm during the workweek, spread over 5 weeks. A confidential office space was used for each session. Two days prior to each session I sent a group email reminding the participants of the date, time, and location of the next session. Table 1 presents a summary of my action research process. Subsequently, I provide more details about each of the six sessions.

Session 1: Introduction and Problem Identification

The first meeting was dedicated to introducing the action research study, establishing norms and problem identification. I began the session by seeking written consent for their participation (Appendix B), then I reiterated that no personally identifiable information would be included in my dissertation and that their input would be kept confidential. I also reminded the participants that the sessions were being audio recorded. Once the logistics of the study were established, I introduced a visual of an action research cycle (Appendix D) and provided details about why I chose to conduct this type of research. The purpose of the visual was to facilitate participants' understanding and enable them to see the stages through which we would move during the six sessions. I asked the participants if they were familiar with action research and all

10 said no. Consequently, I spent a little more time than originally planned describing action research and how their involvement, dialogue, and participation were at the core of my study.

Table 1

Overview of Action Research Sessions

Action Research Phase	Session #	Meeting Focus
Problem Identification	1	Introductions, reviewed Action Research Cycle as a process, reviewed CDE data on disproportionality (localize the problem), identified the problem to study (trait overlap and accurate discernment)
Studying the Problem	2	Read research on complexities of trait overlap of EL and SLD, discussed existing knowledge and new learning from the readings
Studying the Problem & Reflection	3	Read research on complexities of trait overlap of EL and SLD, discussed how, if at all, participants are controlling for the overlap in their assessment practices
Studying the Problem & Reflection	4	Guest speaker with a background in second language learning, discussed the difficulties second language learners experience in schools when trying to learn English as a language and English academic content, reflected on existing assessment practices
Studying the Problem, Reflection & Taking Action	5	Read research on complexities of trait overlap of EL and SLD, reflected on existing assessment practices and discussed recommended actions
Reflection & Taking Action	6	Discussed recommended actions to accurately discern EL from SLD, discussed the AR cycle, closing

When the participants had no additional questions about the action research process, I introduced a copy of the CDE disproportionality data for LVUSD from the 2017-2018 school year (Appendix D). The data showed that in LVUSD, Hispanic students had a risk ratio of 3.10 of being determined eligible with a SLD in comparison to all other ethnicities. The 3.10 was deemed “disproportionate” by CDE; too many Hispanic students are being made eligible for SLD. I used this data to localize the problem for my study: something occurring specifically

within LVUSD. Because school psychologists are the professionals who conduct the special education evaluations for students when they are suspected of having a SLD, this category of eligibility resonated with the participants. Upon seeing the data, one participant stated, “Well, this is our fault.” I responded quickly to that statement by sharing that this is not about placing blame, but rather an opportunity for the group to look more closely at their assessment practices of second language learners when considering SLD.

I also used that participant’s statement to pivot to the heart of my study; the goal is not to correct (or focus on) disproportionality, but rather to look more closely at accurate discernment of EL traits from SLD traits during assessments. The transition of addressing disproportionality designation by the CDE to ensuring accuracy in assessment resulted in a robust conversation among the participants, which ultimately led the group to identify the problem. The participants began to question how would they know if they were accurately discerning traits and I followed their lead by describing the subsequent five sessions and how, through the next sessions, they might be able to come to their own answers.

Session 1 solidified the problem to be studied; how, if at all, does participation in action research influence assessment practices by the school psychologists when the student is EL and they are assessing for SLD? The session ended with participants completing their first journal, which took about 5 minutes.

Session 2: Studying the Problem

Session 2 began with a brief review of the dialogue from session 1: restating the problem the group identified. In order to study the problem (ensuring and/or increasing accuracy in discernment of EL traits from SLD traits), I provided copies of relevant research by Case and Taylor (2010), which looks closely at second language development and then reviews shared

symptoms of second language development and a learning disability. The participants were given 15 minutes to read the research and annotate them with highlighters. I also gave vocal reading prompts in advance of their reading time to facilitate intentional reading. The prompts included: (a) highlight what the researchers indicate are visible traits of a second language learner in a classroom setting, (b) highlight what the researchers indicate are visible traits of a learning disability in the classroom setting, (c) highlight two to three statements/passages that are new information to you, and (d) note any questions that come up for you as you are reading.

When it appeared that the participants had completed the reading (e.g., highlighters down, looking around the room, beginning to talk to a neighbor) I asked if any additional time was needed. None was requested so I shifted the session into discussion via asking participants to share what they highlighted based upon the reading prompts. I paid close attention to the frequency with which participants spoke, and when two participants had not yet spoken, I asked if either of them would like to share, yet indicated it was not required. As the sessions unfolded, I found intentional inquiry of certain participants beneficial because each time they responded by contributing to the dialogue.

With 25 minutes left in the session, I facilitated new dialogue by asking pre-established questions consistent with my research questions: (a) how, if at all, do you currently account for characteristic overlap in your selection of assessment tools when assessing an EL student for SLD?, and (b) how, if at all, do you see yourself applying what you read today and heard from your colleagues in current and future assessments of EL students when looking at SLD? Initial responses by 9 of the 10 participants indicated a feeling of being under-prepared and under-trained in understanding the importance of characteristic overlap and that the readings included several pieces of information that was new to them. For example, one participant shared how in

her assessments she does not look at pronunciation, syntax, and semantics of the student's language and yet, according to Case and Taylor (2005), those are important skills to study closely and discern if they are second language related or disability related. Four other participants stated that they agreed with a current gap in their practice being awareness of pronunciation, syntax, and semantics.

The dialogue during session 2 resulted in the session lasting 10 minutes longer than originally planned. I regretted stopping the dialogue, yet needed to ensure completion of the participant journals. The session ended with my request that if any of the participants had a current assessment of an EL student, they would bring any existing data to the next session. Or, if they did not have an open assessment, they would bring one that had been completed within the last year.

Session 3: Studying the Problem and Taking Action

At the core of action research as a methodology, is the understanding that the participants' thinking patterns change during the process (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014). I began to see evidence of this from session 2 and hoped to build upon it during session 3. To continue the momentum, I provided copies of research by Farnsworth (2018), which elaborates on similar findings from Case and Taylor (2010). Farnsworth's research goes deeper into the process of second language acquisition and the importance of genuinely understanding the student's language development when assessing for SLD. I selected Case and Taylor and Farnsworth's research because of the focus on second language acquisition and how oral language skills are central to better understanding a child's learning profile. School psychologists typically have extensive training in what to look for, and how to evaluate, a SLD. However, less training is

provided to school psychologists in the process of second language acquisition and therefore the research I selected for my study emphasized this area.

Session 3 began with a brief review of the study problem and a summary of statements made during session 1. I asked if there were any questions or clarification needed before prompting the participants to read Farnsworth (2018). The reading for session 3 was more extensive than the reading from session 1, so I built in additional time. I also provided reading prompts to facilitate intentional reading. The prompts provided were: (a) highlight information about dual language learner profiles you believe are important for both teachers and school psychologists to be informed about when considering SLD, (b) highlight two to three statements/passages that reflect new learning for you, and (c) note any questions you have from the reading.

When the participants completed the reading, I facilitated dialogue by asking what the participants highlighted in the research based upon the reading prompts. A robust conversation ensued primarily about observing the student's pragmatic language, which is not something presently included in their assessment practices. Participants questioned one another about whether or not their speech therapist colleagues assist them in looking at pragmatic language; three participants stated this is something they plan to do going forward. I asked for more details about the plan and two shared how they do not feel equipped to look closely at pragmatic language skills, and given that is the expertise of a speech therapist, asking speech therapists to be part of an EL assessment might result in more reliable results.

After 20 minutes of conversation between and among the participants, I prompted them to think about a current assessment and how, if at all, they are already using the new information from the action research sessions and/or what they plan to do going forward. Seven of the 10

participants did not have a current assessment of an EL student, so their responses focused on what they will do next time. The three participants with a current open assessment of an EL student shared how they were making adjustments to do additional observations of the student in the classroom and on the playground to obtain more information about how the student uses language in social contexts.

Session 3 ended late again, per participant requests. I prompted them to complete the journals before leaving and shared that session 4 would include a guest speaker, distributing a printed copy of the guest speaker's research.

Session 4: Studying the Problem and Taking Action

Session four included guest speaker Ms. Rhinehart, a doctoral candidate at UCLA who is studying predictive factors that make a child less or more likely to be identified with a disability. One of the predictive factors Ms. Rhinehart is researching is second language acquisition. Ms. Rhinehart's background in studying second language learners is extensive. As stated earlier, school psychologists receive ample training on SLD assessment protocols and far less training on second language acquisition. Therefore, the purpose of inviting Ms. Rhinehart as a guest speaker was to provide my study's participants with an opportunity to engage directly with an expert in second language learning.

In anticipation of Ms. Rhinehart joining the study, the participants were provided a copy of "The Case Against the 'Long-term English Learner' Label" (Rhinehart & Bailey, 2019) and encouraged to read the guest speaker's research prior to session 4. Additionally, I emailed the participants 2 days before session 4 and encouraged them to write down questions they might have for Ms. Rhinehart regarding second language acquisition.

After I introduced Ms. Rhinehart to the participants, she shared a brief PowerPoint of her dissertation study then engaged in a question and answer session with the school psychologists for approximately 60 minutes. At the end of the session, participants completed the online journal. I verbally reminded participants to bring a copy of an open EL assessment for SLD, or a completed assessment report for session 5.

Session 5: Studying the Problem and Taking Action

Session 5 began with a brief discussion of session 4 and what, if anything, the participants learned from conversing with Ms. Rhinehart. I started here because I anticipated the group might share additional thoughts, between and among themselves, in the absence of Ms. Rhinehart. All participants stated they did not previously know about the impact the label long-term English learner (LTEL) has on students; that was new learning for everyone. Eight of the participants shared that, following the conversation with Ms. Rhinehart, they became more concerned about the insufficient early interventions and supports made available to EL students in LVUSD. I asked for clarification on their statements and three shared that if we know EL status is a predictor of experiencing learning difficulties, as Ms. Rhinehart's research reveals, why does a gap continue to exist in providing the necessary interventions?

Following a debrief from session 4, participants were given a copy of research by Chu and Flores (2011). Similar to sessions 2 and 3, I gave the group time to read the research and shared guided reading prompts. The team discussed how Chu and Flores's research expanded upon earlier readings shared during the study. Based on dialogue during session five, it became apparent that the participants were making connections between the reading and their individual practices. One school psychologist stated, "I've been underestimating how complex learning is for EL students and am dreading looking at my report today because

Since participants brought copies of open assessments or completed reports, the dialogue shifted from reflections on the reading to how they are, or would, make changes to their assessment practices at this time in the study.

Session 6: Taking Action, Reflections, and Closings

Since it was the last session, session 6 did not include any new readings or research. Rather, the focus of this session was to obtain concluding thoughts from the participants on their experience with the study, if participating impacted how they assess or will assess EL students for SLD to increase accuracy in discernment of trait overlap, and ultimately recommendations they would make to other school psychologists related to the study's topic. I wanted to be sure to hear from all participants, so I monitored closely and inquired as needed to achieve this outcome.

The questions I used to guide the final session were: (a) how, if at all, has this process informed your understanding of second language acquisition and the complexities of testing EL students for SLD?, (b) what, if anything, has already changed about your assessment practices since participating in this study, and why that change?, and (c) what, if any, recommendations would you make to the school psychology department to ensure and/or improve accuracy in assessment of EL students for SLD?

The input from all the participants indicated a lot of new learning occurred during the study. Seven of the 10 participants shared that at the beginning of the study, their confidence in their skills was higher than it is now because they realize their assessment practices of EL students was inadequate. The other two participants found it ironic that their confidence grew substantially because prior to the study they did not have any confidence in their skills to accurately discern EL traits from SLD traits. When I stated that building confidence levels was not the purpose of the study, but rather determining if and how their assessment practices would

change, all 10 voiced that their assessment practices are changing or will change based upon their experience with the study. More details about the changes and what they recommend for other school psychologists regarding accurate assessment of EL students for SLD can be found in Chapter Four.

Participants completed their last journal and nine of the 10 participants asked if the sessions could continue through the rest of the year. I asked for the rationale behind the request, and three shared that talking to one another was invaluable and that, as school psychologists, they are too isolated in their work. Two shared that they recognize how much ongoing professional development is needed as a school psychologist and that having ongoing sessions was much more meaningful to them than a 1-day seminar, which they said is the typical professional development model. One reported that knowing another session was around the corner kept the topic of the study in the forefront in her mind, which resulted in more reflection on her practices. Similar to the other participant, she stated that if it were a 1-day discussion or seminar, the learning would leave that night as a new issue would emerge the following day. I responded to their input that hearing about the structure of action research having a positive learning impact is informative to my research.

The session ended with appreciations and a reminder that all of their personally identifiable information would be confidential and would not be used in my written dissertation.

Credibility and Ethics

Ethical considerations for my study centered on the participants' confidentiality: both of their personally identifiable information and the school district where they are employed. Although my study did not include direct engagement with students, it did include dialogue from adults who have worked with students for the purposes of special education eligibility decisions.

Consequently, I maintained strict participants' confidentiality via: (a) use of pseudonyms throughout this dissertation, (b) holding sessions in a confidential office space where passersby could not see in and identify the participants, (c) use of a pseudonym for the school district where the participants work, (d) maintaining anonymity of the County Office of Education where the school district is located, and (e) obtaining informed consent from each of the participants prior to conducting the research. Additionally, I reviewed the importance of confidentiality at the beginning and end of each session, with particular emphasis on confidentiality during the first session when group norms were established.

Next, in order to ensure participants felt safe discussing their work and sharing reflections on prior actions, I consistently informed the group that their participation was voluntary and that there was no requirement to share, especially if at any time sharing would make them feel uncomfortable. I also informed the participants that the audio recordings would be deleted once they were transcribed and that I would use pseudonyms in the transcripts rather than their real names. Lastly, and of significant importance, the group agreed to refrain from using any actual student names or any student identifiable information when discussing cases during the sessions and journal entries. I reviewed the transcripts and journals for any student identifiable information and none existed.

The primary threat to credibility with my study was inauthenticity; did the participants speak their truth or did they say what they thought their colleagues wanted to hear? I controlled for this threat by triangulating data by using multiple sources of data collection. Pre and post questionnaires, session transcripts, and individual journals allowed me to corroborate, and at times question, the input from the participants. Specifically, I cross-checked participant

statements when I coded the data to confirm the statements were consistent across inquiry type. By triangulating the data, I was able to control for authenticity.

A second threat to credibility was my own bias about school psychology profession. I am a school psychologist; that was my first job when I started working in public schools. Because of my professional background, I am intimately familiar with trainings and guidelines regarding assessment best practices with EL students and am also familiar with the demands of the profession and the competing priorities placed upon school psychologists. I knew going into this study that my professional background could not enter into the dialogue, otherwise it could negatively affect the study's credibility. To control for this credibility threat, I conformed strictly to the session protocols, which included pre-written facilitation questions to keep the dialogue moving if at any time there was stagnation. Also, at the end of each session, I listened to the transcripts for any inappropriate self-provided input about the topic and fortunately I was able to refrain from doing so. Therefore, the data obtained for this study were genuinely that of the participants.

The third and last threat to credibility is the small sample size of the participants in my study. Ten participants represented just over half of the school psychology department in LVUSD, yet is too small to allow for any external generalizability beyond LVUSD. Disallowance of external generalizability is not uncommon in action research because action research is often organized around a practice-based problem that is specific to the entity in which it is being studied. That phenomenon is true for my study. However, internal generalizability is possible based upon repeated inquiry with the participants about their experiences in LVUSD and the natural cross-section represented by the participants as it relates to years in the profession and years working in LVUSD.

Public Engagement

School psychologists serve a unique and important role in public schools because they conduct comprehensive psycho-educational assessments of students to determine if they have disabling conditions that affect their educational progress. Determining whether or not a student has a disability is significant because there are potential lifelong consequences if he/she is labeled with a disability inappropriately. Through my research, I hoped to inform future training so it might be more reflective of school psychologists' perceptions of their training needs; such training could be used by the broader California school psychologist community. In particular, I aimed to enhance the assessment skills of school psychologists to accurately control for characteristic overlap of EL with SLD, so that the right students are being found eligible and no students are being found inappropriately eligible.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

This study engaged 10 school psychologists at LVUSD in one participatory action research cycle. The problem identified in the first of the six sessions was how the participants ensure, and or increase, accuracy in their assessment practices of second language learners when evaluating them for the special education eligibility category of SLD. The action research participants studied the problem in subsequent sessions and shared how they began to make shifts in their own assessment practices during the study. Ultimately, after the participants analyzed the problem through the six sessions, they provided suggestions for school psychologists to improve discernment between EL and SLD traits so that the right students are found eligible for special education.

This chapter begins with a brief review of the action research cycle the participants completed. Then, I discuss seven significant findings of my study, organized by themes that emerged in relation to each of my three research questions.

The Action Research Process

Action research follows a process of problem identification, studying the problem, reflecting on the problem, then organizing action (McIntyre, 2007). The collaboration between and among the participants influences individual reflection and informs the collective recommended actions. Participatory action research as a methodology is ideal when the participants are invested in addressing a practice-based problem (Herr & Anderson, 2014). In LVUSD, the CDE reported to the district that they have a disproportionately higher number of Hispanic students being made eligible for a SLD than other ethnicities during the 2017-2018 school year. The CDE notice puts a district on alert that a root-cause analysis is necessary to

address the disproportionality. Therefore, LVUSD was required to take action, which established the practice-based problem for my study: assessment practices of second language learners. Since school psychologists are responsible for conducting the special education assessments for SLD, they were my targeted participants.

Six 80-minute sessions with 10 school psychologists took place in February and the first 2 weeks of March 2019 to complete one cycle of action research. Each session built upon prior sessions whereby the participants dug deeper into problem analysis, which led to recommendations to address the problem during the final session. The actions taken by the participants included reading research about second language acquisition and how traits of EL students mirror those of SLD, discussing the research, connecting the research to their existing practices, and reflecting on both their individual practices and group practices.

The first goal of the study was to learn if engagement in participatory action research, as described previously, influenced participants' actions and perspectives about assessment practices of EL students for SLD. The participants confirmed this to be true; this finding is discussed subsequently as Theme 1. Further, participants made adjustments to their assessment protocols *during* the study, discussed as Theme 2. Specifically, three participants had open assessments with EL students; as they acquired new knowledge, they changed their protocol to increase accuracy in distinguishing EL traits from SLD traits. Interestingly, the data showed that English-only school psychologists made different adjustments to their assessment protocols with EL students compared to the Spanish bilingual school psychologist.

The second and broader goal of the study, which carries more weight for the overall school psychology profession, was for participants to determine salient recommendations to improve accuracy in discernment of EL traits from SLD traits when assessing a second language

learner for special education eligibility. They identified three salient recommendations, which are discussed in detail subsequently in Theme 3.

Findings

This section reviews the seven major findings from my study and is organized by the three themes identified previously. Findings were derived from the data obtained via brief pre and post participation questionnaires, transcripts from audio recordings of the six sessions, and participant journals completed at the end of each session. I applied grounded theory methodology to the data, which began with open coding. Through open coding, I analyzed words and phrases in the data that informed me about the participants' thinking related to the identified problem. After multiple rounds of coding the data, I organized the codes into eight categories that reflected the input from the participants during the study. An example of a category I created was "Standardized Tests." This category captured all the words and phrases from the participants that referenced tests they currently used, tests about which they expressed concerns (e.g., cultural bias), tests with which they were unfamiliar, and how the standardized tests are administered to students. Once I identified the eight categories, I analyzed the data within each category further to identify the most significant and relevant themes connected to the problem of study. Ultimately, three themes emerged from the data, with seven significant findings. The transcripts and journals proved the most valuable as data sources because they captured participants' original voices and showed how their thinking—and actions—evolved over time.

Theme 1: The Need for Ongoing Interactive and Intentional Dialogue

One of the questions I sought to answer was whether participation in action research, itself influences school psychologists' perceptions about EL assessment practices, and ultimately

the actions they take when assessing EL students. All 10 participants indicated that they had no prior experience with action research. At the end of each session, I asked the participants to share their thoughts on the action research process and if engagement in the process influenced their actions and perspectives on assessment of EL students for SLD eligibility. Data obtained from transcripts and online journals indicated that as the sessions continued, 10 of 10 participants reported changes in their understanding of the difficulties regarding distinguishing EL traits from SLD traits. When their understanding changed, their actions followed. Subsequently, I review two prominent findings, based upon input from the participants, that explain why they all felt strongly about the impact on them of participating in the study.

Finding #1 (RQ 1): Learning from Colleagues

The total time the participants engaged in the study was 8 hours. One of the 8 hours was used for silent reading and 30 additional minutes were used to complete journals at the end of each session, leaving 6.5 hours for group discussion and self-reflection centered on problem analysis and solving. By the end of session 2, six participants made statements indicating that through group collaboration, they began to self-reflect on the topic. Marina⁸ stated,

I thought I knew what I was doing when I assessed EL kids. I just never thought too much it and now I am second-guessing myself. I can't think of a time when we talked as a department about trait overlap, this is actually new for me.

When Marina shared that she was questioning her skills, others began to express similar concerns about their skills and ultimately a deeper dialogue arose about the problem; how do school psychologists ensure accuracy in assessment of EL students for SLD? Aaron stated,

I honestly didn't know this was a problem. Probably because I test so few EL students each year, but I'm starting to realize that if I test a few, and each of you tests a few, that actually means a lot of EL students are being tested.

⁸ All participant names are pseudonyms.

Aaron's recognition of the potential range of the problem occurred as a result of participating in the study, which he described in his journal. Specifically, Aaron wrote, "I think all of us, all the psychs in the District, should be required to participate in your study because I am learning more in this than attending the County trainings."

At the end of the sixth session, all participants voiced how influential the conversations were, not just for problem analysis but also for problem solving. When the group coalesced around confidence concerns and the depth of the problem, relational trust developed. Then, participants began to share specific ideas with one another to address the problem, such as creating a list of standardized tests that are normed for EL students and a list of tests to avoid. Subsequently, solutions began to take root. For example, the group proposed a panel of "expert" colleagues with whom they could consult who are more proficient in understanding second language acquisition. Additionally, specific group recommendations to address the problem are discussed in Theme 3 subsequently.

An example of how solutions began to surface within the group was when Robert spoke about the Test of Auditory Processing Skills (TAPS) in session 2. The TAPS is a commonly used assessment tool when school psychologists evaluate for SLD, according to nine of the participants (the 10th participant did not voice an opinion on the TAPS one way or the other).

One participant noted in the online journal at the end of session 2,

I didn't know the TAPS was a test we shouldn't use with bilingual students until Robert shared that he called the publisher to express concerns about how frequently bilingual students score low on it and then realized it was not normed for second language learners.

After I read this participant's journal entry, I revisited the transcript from session 2 and found that the group had an 18-minute discussion about standardized tests they use when assessing EL students.

During the 18-minute discussion, the two bilingual school psychologists (Robert and Lucy) shared explicit examples of actions they take into account for second language acquisition when administering standardized tests. Robert, a Spanish-speaking school psychologist, stated that because he is bilingual he can shift between English and Spanish when providing subtest directions. If he observes a student not understanding the directions (e.g., via non-verbal indicators, the student says he/she does not understand, or misses the first question), he will re-read the directions in the second language and invite the student to try again. Robert shared that he “frequently uses both English and Spanish throughout the entire evaluation” for second language learners because some students are not necessarily “fluent in either language.” The input from Robert resulted in the other participants discussing how they accommodated second language learners during the assessment process, most notably through use of non-verbal standardized assessments to reduce language demands placed on the student. When the group spoke about use of non-verbal assessments, which require the examiner to model the task through gestures and eye contact, the participants began to explore how gestures and non-verbal signals are culturally defined as well. Aaron mentioned, “I thought eye-contact in some cultures means they are challenging authority,” and Lucy continued, “and is disrespectful.” Subsequent to the conversation about non-verbal measures, the team began to discuss if their use was actually accommodating a second language learner or was not really an accommodation at all.

Another example of how group dialogue enhanced participant learning and group recommendations came in the form of input from Lucy about how certain pictures on cognitive assessments are culturally loaded. Lucy shared a picture of a lawnmower, noting that the student is asked to name the item in the picture. When Lucy administered the subtest to a student from Vietnam, she realized most homes in Vietnam do not have lawns, and therefore a student from

Vietnam might not know what a lawnmower is. Lucy knew this because she has been to Vietnam and her parents emigrated from Vietnam; she had cultural knowledge that her colleagues might not have. Carrie responded to Lucy's input by stating, "I would have never thought about whether or not a student has seen a lawnmower." Sarah stated, "Now I am wondering about a lot of other pictures we use and if students from Nicaragua or Ecuador have even seen some of the things we ask them to name." The reflections voiced by Carrie and Sarah highlight how the participants began to analyze the identified problem differently, as part of a group, then if they did so individually.

Additional evidence of how interaction with colleagues enhanced the group's problem analysis and recommended solutions included statements made in the final journal entries. All 10 participants shared that they found value in conversing with colleagues. One comment spoke for all participants, indicating that "bouncing ideas off one another, given the vast range of backgrounds, training and years working, really helped me feel more confident in what I need to change when I test an EL student." Other statements revealed that too often training is delivered to them without conversation. Sarah's comment on conversation speaks for many:

I learned so much more and thought differently about how to improve my assessments based upon what my colleagues said. I doubt I would have thought about the changes I need to make if I was doing this on my own.

Based upon the data from transcripts and journals, participatory action research enhanced the participants' professional growth towards solving a practice-based problem. All 10 participants affirmed this conclusion in their session 6 journals.

Finding #2 (RQ 1): Failures of the "Spray and Pray" Approach

The first finding highlights the influence group dialogue has on one's ability to analyze a work-related problem and develop recommendations to address the problem. The second finding

that emerged from the data was how one-time training or one-session training is insufficient to adequately address a work-related problem. During the first session, I informed the participants about the action research cycle and that the team would complete one cycle, which would require a total of six 75-minute sessions. In their first journal entries, three participants expressed concern about the time commitment for the study and noted that they might not be able to attend all sessions. Despite these initial concerns, the three participants did attend all sessions. The other seven participants did not mention time commitment issues. Interestingly, dialogue in sessions 5 and 6 surfaced about how beneficial the time commitment proved to be in comparison to other experiences the participants have had, as it relates to really understanding an issue within the profession and working toward strategies to ameliorate the issue. Nine of the 10 participants shared specific examples of how the ongoing sessions influenced their ability to genuinely analyze the problem, self-reflect, and contribute in a meaningful way to addressing the problem. In session five, Rebecca spoke about how the continuous nature of the study made her think more about the topic; “It was on my mind a lot because another session was around the corner, in fact I woke up thinking about it a few times.” Sarah furthered Rebecca’s input by sharing how the accumulation of information, over time, helped her better see where changes in her assessment practices are needed. Sarah said “Usually, we talk about assessment issues once, like one time in the year, and then it is on to the next issue. Talking about the same issue several times was very meaningful and helpful.” When I asked Sarah to provide an example of something that was “helpful,” she stated how she began to consult with the speech therapist at the school site where she works regarding one of her assessments of a second language learner. She realized, based upon session dialogue, that it is necessary to look more closely at a student’s oral language of and she sought the expertise of her colleague to assist her in the student’s

assessment. Seven additional participants contributed to this finding by stating how much deeper their learning and reflections were as an outcome of the time commitment.

When participants began to see time commitment to the study as a benefit, I inquired about professional development opportunities through their work and how the two structures compared. The 10 participants spoke about how, at best, most professional development is usually 2-3 hours, one time per year, per topic. One participant stated, “You know, the spray and pray approach. Spray the information and then pray we all heard it, understood it, and would use it.” Eight participants contributed to the dialogue by voicing how the “drive-by” nature of most professional development seems insufficient now that they have experienced an ongoing learning opportunity that is focused on addressing an underlying issue within the profession. Two participants expressed hesitation about whether or not it is reasonable to expect school psychologists to engage in regular and ongoing professional development given their workloads. However, it is worth noting that both participants said if the professional development was built into their work calendar and not added to their calendar ad hoc, they would readily participate.

Evidence derived from the study suggests that school psychologists find value in conversing with their colleagues and that dialogue between and among professionals enhances their professional growth and supports them in reflecting on their own practices. This finding is true if the dialogue occurs over time, as it did in my study. The same outcome, however, might not be true if the dialogue and consultation is limited to a one-time opportunity.

Overall, the first theme speaks to how engagement in action research positively affected the participants’ ability to analyze the problem and work toward improving their own practices of assessing second language learners for SLD, along with working as a group toward making recommendations to address the problem as a department of school psychologists. The next

theme explores what adjustments participants made in their assessment practices of EL students for SLD during the course of the action research.

Theme 2: Adjustments Along the Way

A second purpose of my study was to learn about how, if at all, school psychologists adjusted their assessment practices of EL students for SLD eligibility *while* participating in the study. Of the 10 participants, three had open assessments of second language learners being evaluated for SLD. Therefore, although there are noteworthy findings regarding this research question, it is limited to input by three participants. It is unknown how, if at all, the other seven participants might have made adjustments while participating in the study. Ensuring all participants have an open assessment with an EL student as a requirement to participate in the study is discussed as a limitation in Chapter Five.

Two of the three psychologists who had an open assessment with an EL student during the study were monolingual English; the third was bilingual Spanish. I mention this because when I analyzed the data, the English-only psychologists indicated a higher level of adjustments made to their assessment practices when compared to the bilingual psychologist. I believe the differences are worth discussing because the data revealed how much the English-only psychologists relied on one test (WJ-M for Spanish speaking students) administered to the student by an interpreter, the results of which dictated their next steps. Conversely, the bilingual psychologist did not rely on one test to inform next steps, so the starting point in the overall assessment approach differed from that of his monolingual English colleagues.

Finding #3 (RQ 2): English Only Psychologists

When I conducted my literature review for this study, research pointed to the overwhelming dominance of English-only school psychologists in the profession, despite the

substantial increase in linguistically and culturally diverse students in America's public schools. In 2015, 24.5% of all students enrolled in California K-12 schools were EL, the highest percentage in the country (Migration Policy Institute, 2016). Research by Aldridge et al. (2015) suggested that, ideally, a student should be assessed by a school psychologist who shares the student's primary language in order to better understand the student's learning profile in both the academic language and the primary language. When a bilingual school psychologist is not available, guidelines point to use of an interpreter. Use of an interpreter was standard operating procedure in LVUSD, per the participants' input. The interpreter in LVUSD is Spanish speaking with a high school diploma, and therefore not a trained professional. Since Spanish is the second most frequent language of LVUSD students, after English, the District hired a full time Spanish interpreter 6 years ago to assist with special education evaluations. I asked the participants if the interpreter received special training to assist them in assessments; seven participants said no, and the other three stated that they did not know the answer. If a student's primary language is other than English and Spanish, the administrative assistant to the Director of Special Education requests an interpreter from a private agency.

Relying less on the interpreter was the first change the English-only school psychologists made while participating in the action research study. Specifically, one of the psychologists stated that she called her bilingual colleague following session 3 and asked if he would help her conduct the assessments with the EL student she was assessing. I asked Allison to share reasons for her phone call; she shared that after reading the research during the sessions and engaging in dialogue on test selection and test administration to second language learners, she was "horrified" by her approach. Up to that point, Allison relied on the student's test results from the WJ-M administered by the interpreter.

In 2016, the County Office of Education that supports LVUSD provided a 3-hour training to school psychologists on best practices in EL special education assessments. Included in the guidelines was to have an interpreter administer the WJ-M test to the student. Then, results from that test are used to determine which language (English or the student's primary language if other than English) all other tests are administered in for the special education evaluation. When the group talked about WJ-M results, one participant, who obtained his graduate degree three years ago from a NASP accredited program, said, "And you hope the results show English is the stronger language. When it isn't, I'm not nearly as confident in what I am doing."

Allison and her colleagues employed the county guidelines when assessing second language learners. Now, as a result of participation in the study, Allison stopped following those guidelines and instead sought to collaborate with her bilingual colleague throughout the assessment with the EL student. Allison expressed a desire to better understand the student's cultural background via communication with the student's parent, and to obtain an oral language sample. In order to obtain the most meaningful information, she felt a trained bilingual psychologist would be better prepared to do these tasks than an interpreter. When I pressed on Allison to share why she felt this way, she responded by stating,

The conversations we've been having in these sessions made me think about how an interpreter likely doesn't know about trait overlap, and likely doesn't know how difficult it is to obtain valid assessment data. Really, at this point I just have more confidence in my bilingual colleague who is specifically trained.

A fellow participant asked if the interpreter could still assist with interviewing the family, since an interview does not require a specific test. Allison stated that she would be open to this if she knew that the interpreter "was trained on what to ask the parents and how to ask." However, she indicated that without training, she is not confident that "the right questions will be asked to help us learn about the student's educational, linguistic, and cultural history."

Collaboration and consultation with a bilingual psychologist in LVUSD is limited to Spanish and Vietnamese. I asked Allison what she would do if the current open assessment were with a student whose primary language was other than Spanish, Vietnamese, or English. This question ultimately engaged all 10 participants and their responses highlighted a variety of unanticipated concerns about their work. The 10 participants shared that they know to request an interpreter from an agency if the student they are assessing speaks a language other than what existing LVUSD staff speak. Four of the 10 participants have conducted assessments with an interpreter from an agency as an employee in LVUSD. The four participants said the experiences were “awkward,” or “uncomfortable” because they did not know the interpreter nor did they know the interpreter’s background and skill level. Also, the four participants mentioned how important rapport is with the student during assessment and that when an interpreter is there—one neither the student nor the psychologist knows—rapport is “more difficult to establish.” When the four psychologists shared these experiences with agency-based interpreters, all the participants expressed concern about using an agency going forward. A suggestion by the group to address the concern was to create a list within the county of all the languages spoken by school psychologists and before asking for an interpreter from an agency, first ask if a fellow school psychologist within the county could assist in the assessments.

The second English-only school psychologist with an open EL assessment during the study mirrored Allison’s actions and made the same adjustment subsequent to session 4. In addition to seeking collaboration with her bilingual psychologist, Megan also conducted additional observations of the student in the classroom and on the playground: something she was not doing prior to the action research study. Specifically, Megan shared that she had conducted one in-classroom observation of the EL student she was assessing and did not intend

to conduct additional observations. However, upon reflection of her assessment practices while participating in the study, Megan said she “realized [she] need[s] to do a lot more.” Megan shared with the action research team that she scheduled three more observations of the student and also asked the teacher for student work samples from the beginning of the year in order to see growth over time. Another participant asked Megan how she would have time to do more observations given how busy everybody is, and Megan responded, “I realize now that is the priority. Relying on the WJ-M is wrong and I worry I made too many kids eligible because I wasn’t looking closely enough at their true language abilities.”

During the session, Megan’s response did not specifically address how she would find the time, so I spoke to her after analyzing the data to learn how, if at all, she is able to find the time. Megan shared that she withdrew her participation in Student Study Team (SST) meetings for 1 week to create space in her calendar for the observations. I asked if this would be her longer-term solution to ensure adequate time for observations and she said, “It is my short term solution until I can figure out a different one.”

My post-sessions conversation with Megan revealed that she spoke with the principals at the two elementary schools where she is assigned regarding her concern about previous assessment actions and special education eligibility results of EL students. According to Megan, one principal responded by stating, “If they [EL students] aren’t put into special education, we don’t have any other supports for them.” The second principal was “more sympathetic” to Megan’s concern and offered to talk with the teachers about gathering oral language samples. The divergent responses from two principals points to a potential future area of inquiry; how does support, or lack thereof, from site principals influence how a school psychologist conducts special education evaluations of EL students?

Overall, results from the two English-only school psychologists with an open assessment include four concrete changes to their assessment practices: (a) sought collaboration with their bilingual school psychologists, (b) less reliance on the WJ-M test results, (c) increased observations of the student with a focus on how they talk with their peers, and (d) increased communication with the parents via dialogue with a trained bilingual psychologist rather than the interpreter. Per session 5 journal entries from Megan and Allison, both reported that the changes in their assessment practices would not have occurred without involvement in the study.

Finding #4 (RQ 2): Bilingual Psychologist

In contrast to Megan and Allison, Robert, one of the two Spanish bilingual school psychologists in LVUSD, made different adjustments to an open EL assessment. In particular, Robert had not previously relied upon an interpreter given that he is bilingual. Also, Robert was already accommodating subtest administration to ensure the student was able to understand the test directions by asking the student in both Spanish and English if he/she understood. Consequently, Robert's change in his assessment practices differed from his monolingual colleagues in the study.

The primary change Robert made while in the study was to pivot away from using California English Language Development Test⁹ (CELDT) scores as a measurement of students' second language development over time. Since the CELDT was annually administered to students in kindergarten through 12th grade, and the student Robert was assessing was in the 4th

⁹ The California English Language Development Test was administered to all students in California public schools who were identified as second language learners, based upon what the parent/guardian indicated was the home language on the home language survey. If a language other than English was indicated, then the student was required to take the CELDT. The CELDT included five categories: listening, speaking, reading, writing and comprehension. Five classifications were possible for each of the five categories. The classifications were: beginning, early intermediate, intermediate, early advanced and advanced. The CELDT was administered annually to the student until they were Reclassified Fluent English Proficient (RFEP). The CELDT was replaced with the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC) in the 2018-2019 school year.

grade, he had access to 4 years of CELDT results. Prior to participating in the study, Robert and his colleagues turned to CELDT scores as a valid measurement of language proficiency over time. Consideration of CELDT results is consistent with “best practice” guidelines provided to school psychologists when assessing EL students (Figueroa & Newsome, 2006). According to the participants, the school psychologists would review the student’s CELDT scores, particularly in reading, writing, and comprehension, and if a student did not demonstrate improvement over time, the data was considered to be an indicator of a possible underlying disabling condition.

Robert’s shift away from reliance on the CELDT scores occurred as an outcome of the discussion held in session 4. Ms. Rhinehart, a doctoral candidate at UCLA studying early indicators of a learning disability, was the guest speaker. Ms. Rhinehart completed her master’s thesis on the fallacy of the LTEL label. Participants were given a copy of Ms. Rhinehart’s thesis prior to session 4 and were encouraged to read the thesis and come to session 4 with questions about second language acquisition. During session 4, the group talked about the “eye-opening” fact that the measurements used to determine if an EL student was English proficient proved even too difficult for some English only students to demonstrate proficiency. (It is important to note that the English only students who were unable to demonstrate proficiency on English-proficiency measures might have had an underlying disability, or might not have tested well on the day they took the test. Why English-only students under-performed are is and therefore conclusions drawn from the research require deeper consideration.) Robert reflected in his journal at the end of session 4 that CELDT scores were the *only* scores he used to describe the student’s language proficiency, and that reliance only on CELDT “is inadequate.” Robert reported that as he learned more information about CELDT, and second language acquisition in general, he recognized no other data is gathered or made available to him when he assesses an

EL student. Confronting the absence of additional data was at the center of Robert's shift away from CELDT score use.

During session 5, the team revisited the discussion from session four and Robert reported that he deleted the CELDT score information in the open assessment report he was writing because "it is too unreliable." Instead, Robert shared that he sent an email to the student's teacher the following morning to ask for work samples that spanned the academic year and he would review the work samples as evidence of growth over time. Robert also asked the teacher for oral reading scores, over time, that he could review as part of the student learning profile.

After coding the data for this study and observing Robert's shift away from the CELDT, I called him to see if he would talk with me more in depth about his decision. We spoke on the phone for approximately 25 minutes. During the conversation, Robert expressed disappointment with the district, as a whole, regarding ELD supports and interventions. He stated that when he participates in SST meetings, the school site staff uses the student's CELDT scores as a reason to refer the student for special education. Although he would ask for other examples of data regarding the student's language proficiency, too often "no other data was provided, not even talked about." Then, when he learned more about the CELDT during the action research cycle, he felt a need to act and force his colleagues "to find other ways to measure the student's growth." As long as CELDT scores "were part of my assessment, I don't think the teachers would gather other data."

Robert did reflect that he might have "taken it too far" by eliminating the use of CELDT scores entirely, yet he was steadfast in his resolve to have the teachers gather more meaningful data to SST meetings. I inquired about what "more meaningful data" looks like, to which he

replied, “I’m not sure I know the answer to that, but I am willing to work with the teachers and principals to figure that out.”

In sum, the special education evaluation adjustments made along the way by three participants in the study differed if they were monolingual English only psychologists or a bilingual Spanish psychologist. Despite the difference in the psychologists’ linguistic abilities, what they did have in common was that they took action when they realized action was necessary, or felt it was necessary, to improve accuracy in assessing EL students for SLD.

Presented subsequently is the third theme of my study, which reviews the most salient recommendations the participants made to increase the likelihood that the right students are being found eligible for special education, regardless of their second language acquisition status.

Theme 3: Recommendations to Improve Accuracy in Discernment of EL traits from SLD traits

Obtaining input from school psychologists on strategies to improve accuracy in assessment of EL students for SLD was at the heart of my study. I sought input from school psychologists through participatory action research because my literature review revealed that school psychologists feel underprepared to assess EL students appropriately (Figueroa & Newsome, 2006; Harris et al., 2015). Therefore, to address inadequate preparation and the CDE finding in LVUSD of over-representation of EL students eligible for SLD, I aimed to learn what strategies school psychologists themselves, would recommend to increase accuracy in discerning EL from SLD.

Subsequently I discuss three findings on recommendations that emerged from the data. First, oral language assessment proved to be the most dominant recommendation from the participants: an area that had been previously under-assessed according to the team. Next, the

school psychologists repeatedly discussed standardized administration protocol and ultimately recommended shifting the focus from adherence to standardization to ensuring the student understands the task. The third finding that surfaced from the study was the recommendation for case consultation with colleagues who are proficient in second language acquisition.

Finding #5 (RQ 3): Importance of Oral Language Skills

Results from my study point to a new direction for school psychologists' assessment of second language learners, which is to include a thorough review of the student's oral language profile. Prior to participating in my study, the 10 school psychologists indicated that they rarely, if at all, looked closely at the student's oral language skills. Oral language entered the session dialogue in session 2 and continued through session 6. Oral language was also the most frequently recommended strategy to improve assessment of EL students by the 10 participants in their session 6 journal entries.

During session 2, the team read research by Case and Taylor (2010), which included a review of the relevance and importance of a second language learners' oral English proficiency as a prominent indicator of growth. The research also pointed out that focusing on reading and writing skills, more so than the student's oral language skills, was a reason for ongoing confusion about EL traits and those of a student with SLD. After the first reading, the dialogue between and among the participants included a new awareness of the emphasis needed on oral language development. Specifically, the team discussed their existing assessment practices, how they did not include an oral language profile, and that without this, the only information in their assessments regarding second language acquisition progress is CELDT results.

Nine of the 10 participants reported that up to that point they had not thought to consider the student's oral language skills, including pronunciation and oral uses of syntax and semantics.

Rather, they focused on reading and writing to inform their understanding of the student's second language development, possibly because they were more familiar with these domains from English language arts assessments and interventions. Also, all 10 participants reported not having consulted with a speech therapist previously when assessing an EL student for SLD. Eight of the participants indicated that the biggest learning outcome for them from session 2 was looking closely at the student's oral language skills, yet feeling ill equipped to do so. Subsequent session dialogue allowed the participants to identify strategies to overcome this feeling.

Over time, the participants began to formalize strategies to ascertain EL students' oral language, both in the pre-referral process and during the evaluations. The first strategy most commonly recommended, by nine of the 10 participants, was to create a checklist for the SST to complete as part of the pre-referral process. Specifically, the group suggested that the teacher gather verbatim oral language samples over time (two recommended at least monthly) to provide information to the team about the student's oral language growth. The purpose of the oral language sample, according to six participants, was to determine if sentences increased in complexity, if the student used new words, and if their word choice was syntactically correct.

The second most commonly recommended strategy to ascertain a student's oral language profile, as proposed by seven participants, was to expand observations of the student beyond behavior-based observations (e.g., is the student paying attention?). Rather, the team suggested sitting closer to the student to hear how the student engages verbally with his/her peers both in the classroom setting and on the playground. Three psychologists discussed how this might be challenging because when school psychologists move closer to students, often the students become quiet. The team then discussed the possibility of asking the teacher, or another adult who is frequently in the classroom, to do verbatim scripting of the student during non-academic

portions of the day. Oral language samples would provide school psychologists with supplemental data to the state-required English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC) assessment data, which leads to multiple measures and is consistent with best practices in assessment protocol.

The third recommendation by the action research team was to work closely with a speech therapist, both in the pre-referral process and during the assessment. Nine participants indicated in their journal entries, at some point between sessions 2 through 6, that working closely with a speech therapist was “necessary” and/or “important” because of the speech therapist’s expertise on language development in general. In session five, three school psychologists indicated that they planned to meet with the speech therapist with whom they work at their school site to share the research reviewed in this study to see if they had additional recommendations.

In session 6, I inquired with the team about why oral language skills rose to the top of their strategy recommendations; six participants said they felt this would be the best way to control for trait overlap between EL and SLD. Megan, Sarah, Allison, and Lucy pointed out that the overlapping traits do not include oral language, but rather behaviors (e.g., distractibility) and academic skills (e.g., reading and writing). Therefore, as per Allison, an analysis of “oral language zeros in on the second language acquisition itself and isolates that area of development from a learning disability.” Three additional participants contributed to this point by sharing that they currently did not have any data in their report to speak to how the student was acquiring his/her second language (English) and could weigh that growth against academic growth, or the lack thereof. Overall, the participants reported that the importance of looking closely at oral language would better inform them about the student’s second language proficiency: a profile currently missing from their assessments.

Finding #6 (RQ 3): Understanding the Directions

The second recommendation from the action research team, and my sixth finding, was to ensure that the students understand the subtest directions. When a school psychologist assesses a student for special education eligibility, he/she uses norm-referenced standardized measures. In graduate school, school psychologists repeatedly practice how to administer the tests in a manner consistent with the publisher's guidelines. Test manuals indicate that any deviation from standardized administration could yield invalid and unreliable results. Despite publisher warnings about invalid and unreliable results if administration deviates from standardized protocol, 10 of the 10 participants discussed the importance of making sure a student who is a second language learner first understands what is being asked of him or her on the tests, otherwise the results are also invalid and unreliable. Of significance, with this recommendation, is that not all 10 participants were early adopters of this idea. Rather, considerable group dialogue proved necessary before consensus was reached.

Conversation regarding adjustments to standardized test administration initially emerged during session 2 and continued throughout the entire study. Session 2 began the process of participants reading peer-reviewed research specifically related to overlap of EL and SLD traits. Upon exposure to the research, the group discussed new information they gathered from the reading. Listening comprehension and following directions were traits consistently highlighted in the research (Case & Taylor, 2010; Chu & Flores, 2011; Farnsworth, 2018) as overlapping areas, and captured new learning for eight of the 10 psychologists. The two bilingual psychologists reported that they were already aware of these overlapping characteristics.

When the group discussed listening comprehension and following directions as overlapping traits, they began to question the validity of scoring student test performance if the

student might not actually understand the directions. This concern was expanded upon during session 4 when the group learned from Ms. Rhinehart that some monolingual English students were unable to show proficiency on the CELDT: a test designed to measure English proficiency for second language learners. The combination of reading research, learning more about second language acquisition, and group dialogue resulted in participants questioning how valid test results are if, as the test administrator, they cannot confirm the student actually understood the directions. One participant summarized her developing awareness about assessment practices of second language learners by stating, “It feels really wrong to report standardized scores, for the sake of reporting standardized scores, if I don’t have confidence that the student understood the directions.” Another participant shared, “We are so focused on using standardized tests and scores from the tests to make the [eligibility] decision, that we lose sight of gathering the most meaningful information about a student.”

As participants expressed concerns about what they felt was “fair” or “right” versus “just because,” an increasing number of the participants began to agree that test administration protocol adjustments are reasonable. One of the participants who had initially been resistant to the idea noted in her journal,

For me, I struggled to let go of what I know most and maybe what is easiest for me, which is to follow the rules of the test. But, I can see now that doesn’t mean I am actually obtaining valid data and so how can I keep doing that if I don’t believe in the results.

Another reflection highlighting a deep level of self-reflection, read as follows:

It took me some time to realize that I have no problem adjusting test administration to a student with Autism because I know they might have language difficulties, yet I couldn’t see how that change was acceptable for EL students. I’m embarrassed by my resistance, yet thankful my colleagues kept pushing the topic.

By the end of the study, all 10 participants indicated that they recommend checking for understanding (which is standard protocol) after each subtest direction, and if the student does not understand then they should adjust how the directions are given. Adjustments the team agreed upon were to model/demonstrate the task and/or provide additional practice items beyond what the publisher recommends if necessary, yet refrain from altering the construct of the subtest. In reviewing the transcripts and journal entries, citations were made about the research-based evidence of difficulties second language learners have in following directions and listening comprehension. Therefore, modeling and/or extra practice items might reduce the reliance on following verbally delivered directions. The team also emphasized the importance of noting the accommodations provided to the student in the evaluation report, and that the accommodation was made to control for second language acquisition traits that might be interfering with understanding the task directions. The participants reported that making adjustments to test administration was more meaningful and appropriate than reporting scores that might be invalid or unreliable if the student did not understand what was being asked.

Finding #7 (RQ 3): Case Consultation

The seventh finding, based upon input from the action research team, was to establish case consultation sessions made up of a small team of school psychologists and speech therapists. Participants expressed a desire to organize a group of colleagues proficient in second language acquisition in order to provide case consultation with school psychologists when they are assessing EL students. Interestingly, case consultation emerged as a recommendation in session 6 after the school psychologists were asked to share if their confidence in assessment skills of EL students changed as a result of participating in the study. Although confidence level was not a research topic for my study, I sought this information because I thought their answers

might elucidate if participation in the study was valuable (being confident in one's craft does influence job satisfaction). I did not anticipate confidence levels being used as a springboard for assessment practice recommendations. Nonetheless, the results showed that inquiring about confidence level led the team to make the case consultation recommendation.

Seven school psychologists reported drops in confidence levels from the beginning of the study. As a result of participating in the study, these eight participants recognized their own knowledge gap about second language acquisition traits. One participant reported, "I worry about the six EL kids I tested so far this year because I did not second guess my approach and I believed the test data was valid." The same participant shared that without participating in the study, and learning from her colleagues, she would not have reflected on these prior assessments and used the same approach going forward. The team began to recognize that some colleagues had more experience and proficiency in understanding second language acquisition than others, and if case consultation became a requirement for assessments of EL students, then all school psychologists in the department would need to look at their practices more closely.

In LVUSD, it is possible for a school psychologist to go the entire year without assessing an EL student for SLD, because the population of EL students is about 25% of the total enrollment. Therefore, opportunities to practice and refine assessment protocols of EL students are variable. Four participants reported that if the number is low, they might not see the need to reflect on how they are conducting the assessment, but rather assume how they are doing it is appropriate. A school psychologist stated, "This makes me feel the same as when I test a student for traumatic brain injury—I do it so infrequently I don't realize what I don't know."

The participants offered the following reasons why they recommended case consultation as a vital practice for school psychologists: the combination of recognizing (a) an inflated belief

about their knowledge, (b) the fear that their colleagues who did not participate in the study might also have inflated confidence in their skills, (c) how consulting with one another helped them deepen their knowledge and ultimately shift how they plan to assess EL students in the future, and (d) that a few in the department have a lot more experience and proficiency in second language acquisition. The group discussed that the ultimate decision about eligibility would still be made by the Individual Education Program (IEP) team, and not by the case consultation group. However, by consulting with others, the school psychologist might receive feedback that additional assessments and/or data are needed and/or that how they were interpreting the already gathered data might need to be considered more closely with awareness about second language acquisition traits.

Summary

The participants in my action research study identified three meaningful recommendations to increase accurate identification of EL students with and without a SLD. The recommendations are: include oral language profile in the assessment, provide adjustments to test administration, and consult with a panel of colleagues. Recommendations surfaced from the exploratory nature of participatory action research, which puts power in the hands of staff to solve a setting-based problem.

In addition to the proposed recommendations, my study also unveiled the importance of intentional professional development. Participants shared that the structure of my study with ongoing sessions that were centered on one topic deepened their learning and facilitated self-reflection, which participants said does not happen in existing professional development opportunities. Lastly, my study highlighted that English-only school psychologists required more adjustments to their assessment practices than their bilingual colleague. At the center of

the adjustment is a shift away from reliance on an interpreter and toward consultation with a bilingual school psychologist. Overall, the findings from my study contribute to the field of school psychology assessment practices, especially with EL students.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusion

Between 1970 and 2016, the U.S. Hispanic population increased from 9.6 million to 57.5 million (Migration Policy Institute, 2017). Similarly, EL enrollment in public schools jumped by 53.2% in the same time period. Accurately evaluating EL students for an SLD has proven difficult for school psychologists: a profession that originated in the early 1900s. Several factors contribute to the difficulty, such as the insufficient number of bilingual school psychologists in the profession (Aldridge et al., 2015). Another difficulty is that many characteristics students show when acquiring a second language mirror those of a student with an SLD. An unintended outcome of these difficulties is that EL students are misclassified either as having or not having a disability (Case & Taylor, 2005). If the rate of misclassification becomes disproportionate, as defined by California Education Code, the school district is required to take corrective action.

Through participatory action research, my study engaged school psychologists to reflect on their special education assessment practices with EL students. At the end of the study, I obtained participants' recommendations to minimize misclassification. In this chapter, I discuss the study's main findings and their contribution to the larger body of research regarding school psychologists' special education evaluations with EL students. I then recommend participatory action research as a strategy for school districts to use to address disproportionate special education data. I end this chapter with a review of the inherent limitations of my study's design and propose directions for future research.

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

Existing research indicates that school psychologists are underprepared to assess EL students for SLD accurately (Figueroa, 1989; Sullivan, 2011). My study extends this research

and reconfirms that school psychologists are insufficiently trained on the nuances of EL and SLD trait overlap.

Throughout my study, eight participants expressed disbelief about their knowledge gap regarding trait overlap. Two participants, both bilingual, did not express the same level of disbelief as the monolingual English-speaking psychologists, although both recognized that their personal background with two languages accounts for increased knowledge rather than any particular training. The English-only participants' statements such as "I can't believe I didn't know this before" and "I really thought I was doing the right thing, until now" exemplify how school psychologists see their training gaps. Their feelings corroborate existing research that highlights these gaps. Figueroa and Newsome (2006) along with Aldridge et al. (2015) identified that school psychology graduate programs have inadequately prepared school psychologists to serve the fast-growing EL population. In fact, professors in the graduate programs reported to Aldridge et al. that time constraints in graduate programs precluded them from providing enough training on the complexities of assessing EL students. This gap in training is not new. In 1997, 1,507 NASP members completed a survey regarding second language acquisition training; 80% of respondents felt their training was "less than adequate in the second-language acquisition process" (Ochoa et al., 1997, p. 38).

All 10 participants in my study echoed what was established previously in the research; graduate school training on second language acquisition is deficient. Interestingly, their responses remained consistent despite how long ago or where they attended graduate school. All participants graduated from a NASP-accredited graduate school, and six participants graduated less than 5 years prior to the study. In order to be NASP accredited, a graduate program is required to provide specific courses on serving diverse populations and learning the complexities

of second language acquisition (Styck, 2012). Therefore, one might assume that the participants in my study, especially those who graduated less than 5 years ago, would indicate a higher level of training in their programs with the EL population than they did.

Results from my study are also consistent with literature by Harris et al. (2015), which found that school psychologists insufficiently accounted for EL and SLD trait overlap in their assessments. Eight participants in my study shared that once English was determined to be the dominant language (via test results from the WJ-M for Spanish speaking students, administered by an interpreter), they moved forward with English-only assessments with EL students. The participants also shared that they interpreted the test results as valid and reliable indicators of an SLD without further consideration of second language acquisition. Thus, they did not account for trait overlap.

The absence of a close analysis of trait overlap leads to misclassification of EL students as either a student with a disability when he/she does not have a disability (Figueroa & Newsome, 2006; Harris et al., 2015), or as a student without a disability when he/she likely does have a disability (Rhinehart & Bailey, 2019). Although my study reinforces earlier research, I recognize that results from my study cannot be extrapolated to broader conclusions about graduate program training and consideration of trait overlap in school psychologist assessment practices given the small number of participants in my study. I discuss this limitation in more detail later in this chapter.

What is new to the research, as a result of my study, is that school psychologists overestimate their knowledge and skills regarding best practices in assessing EL students for SLD. Seven of 10 participants entered my study indicating that they “strongly agree” with the following statement: I feel confident in my assessment practices and selected protocols when

assessing an EL for an SLD. As the study unfolded, participant statements highlighted that their confidence waned, which was converse to my original hypothesis. I anticipated that participants' confidence in skills and knowledge about assessing EL students would increase over time, not decrease. Given the unexpected outcome, I analyzed the data to better understand how this phenomenon arose and examined what overestimated confidence means for future training with school psychologists.

The first indicator of a shift in confidence emerged in session 2 when one participant, who originally indicated “strongly agree” on the pre-participation questionnaire, stated,

I just had no idea. How is it possible I attended graduate school for two plus years and I did not know more about oral language development and that this is more important to understand than a reading comprehension subtest?

Subsequent statements, throughout the remaining sessions, further exemplified overestimation of skills, such as,

Can I take that questionnaire again? I am embarrassed and clearly cocky. I realize now, especially after reading this research, that I am not taking the time to know the student's true language levels, but I administered all the tests anyway and said they qualified.

At the end of session 6, another participant who answered “strongly agree” at the start of the study shared, “I want to go back and re-test the EL kids I already did this year, I am just so worried I did it wrong because I did not address trait overlap.”

A realistic possibility of school psychologists overestimating their skills is misclassification of students with or without a disability. It is the potential misclassification that makes this finding significant. I believe that statements shared previously confirm that misclassification occurs in LVUSD, despite good intentions on behalf of the assessors.

Ultimately, I consider that a school psychologist's overestimation of knowledge and skills does contribute to disproportionality; therefore my study revealed a likely cause for

overrepresentation of Hispanic students identified with SLD in LVUSD. Identifying a cause is the first step in addressing disproportionate data, ultimately providing direction to LVUSD staff on next steps to ameliorate misclassification, both underrepresentation and overrepresentation.

Out of an increased awareness of my participants' overestimated knowledge and skills and a desire to accurately identify EL students with SLD, the participants strategized to pinpoint salient recommendations to improve their assessment practices. Next, I summarize three recommendations put forth by the school psychologists to prevent misclassification.

Obtain More Information about Students' Oral Language Proficiency

After the participants read research by Case and Taylor (2005), Chu and Flores (2011), and Farnsworth (2018) during the six sessions, they concluded that their existing assessments with EL students lacked sufficient consideration of the students' oral language skills, in both their native and academic languages. Consequently, the group recommended future assessments with EL students to include an explicit section dedicated to an oral language profile. Their reasoning behind this suggestion is rooted in the research; oral language is the basis for all other uses of language, such as reading and writing (Farnsworth, 2018). In the absence of considering the student's oral language, the group expressed concern that the student might be able to show a higher level of oral language proficiency in English than what they are able to demonstrate in academic tasks, such as reading and writing, which might result in a premature misclassification with a disability.

The participants expressed further concern about their specific training in oral language development, which led them to include consultation with a speech therapist as part of building the oral language portion of the evaluation. Additionally, the participants recommended that teachers obtain verbatim scripting of students over time (e.g., once a month for 6 months) to

capture their oral language skills. The goal of doing this over time is to allow the assessors to learn if progress is occurring, and at what rate. Progress in oral language proficiency is an indicator for future progress in reading and writing in the second language (Case & Taylor, 2005). Consequently, the incorporation of information about a student's oral language proficiency will allow school psychologists to examine how the student is progressing in his/her second language acquisition, and weigh that information against the student's progress in academic tasks.

Adjustments to Standardized Test Administration

A best practice in evaluations of EL students is to have a bilingual school psychologist conduct the assessment (Thomas & Grimes, 2002). The bilingual school psychologist can then probe the student in both English and his/her primary language. Probing in both languages maximizes opportunities for the student to share his/her knowledge. It is feasible that a second language learner might not be able to provide an answer in English because he/she has not yet acquired the language to do so; however, he/she could answer the same question in his/her native language.

Unfortunately, there are too few bilingual psychologists in the field; therefore, my study's participants recommended that monolingual English psychologists adjust the standardized test administration protocol to first focus on the student being able to understand the directions (Aldridge et al., 2015). Adjustments the group recommended were: (a) if the student answers the first few items on a subtest inaccurately, then (b) reduce the text directions to minimize language the language demand and observe the student's response, then (c) model for the student how to complete the task, then (d) provide additional learning opportunities for this student. Accommodating test administration via simplifying the directions and reducing the

language-load of the directions is supported by research (Abedi, 2006; Abedi, Courtney, Miroacha, Leon, & Goldberg, 2005).

Once the participants concluded that test administration adjustments are a worthy strategy to reduce misclassification, they discussed the importance of accounting for the adjustments in their evaluation reports. The group deduced that if and when adjustments are made, those adjustments provide qualitatively meaningful information about how the student learns. For example, if the student is not able to comprehend test directions when first presented by the school psychologist, yet shows an increased ability to do so when the directions are simplified, the psychologist has meaningful information about how much language the student can hold on to. Additionally, if the school psychologist scored the student's performance based only on the unadjusted directions, a false negative is possible and, consequently, the student's skills might be underestimated.

Case Consultation with Colleagues During the Assessment Process

Through complete chance¹⁰, two of the three bilingual school psychologists in LVUSD volunteered to participate in my study. Their contributions throughout the sessions proved invaluable and I believe they greatly enhanced the monolingual English participants' learning. I make this claim because the third recommendation from the group was to organize a panel of "experts" on second language acquisition, including bilingual school psychologists and bilingual speech therapists. The panel would consult with the assessing school psychologists during their evaluation with EL students with a focus on what standardized tests were used, how the tests

¹⁰ I did not use stratified random sampling with participant selection because my bigger focus was to ensure I had enough participants. Upon reflection, I think that was an oversight and am fortunate two bilingual psychologists volunteered to join my study.

were administered, how the results are interpreted, and how the student's primary language was thoroughly considered.

During my study, two English-only school psychologists were actively assessing an EL student and shifted away from reliance on an interpreter¹¹, instead choosing to consult with a bilingual psychologist. The shift centered on their new knowledge that interpreters are under-qualified, despite good intentions, to probe adequately in the areas needed in the student's primary language. According to one of the English-only psychologists, input from their bilingual colleague was "invaluable" and "made me feel much more confident in what I needed to do." Additionally, the group reflected on the complexity of oral language development and the need to engage speech therapists directly for this portion of the assessment, hence the recommendation that a speech therapist be part of the panel.

Prior to my study, the participants shared that they did not consult with one another about EL assessments due to overconfidence in their skills, insufficient understanding of trait overlap, and not realizing the importance of doing so. Now, the group worries about the other psychologists in the department who did not participate in my study. Therefore, to ensure all EL students in LVUSD are evaluated in a manner more closely aligned with research, the team recommends case consultation with a designated panel as a necessary action going forward.

The three recommendations made by the group are intended to increase EL students' accurate identification with an SLD and contribute to the field of school psychology preparation to meet the needs of linguistically diverse students. Group dialogue, exposure to research, and prompted self-reflection were the necessary actions that propelled the team to arrive at these recommendations.

¹¹ Interpreter training is discussed in the recommendations for future research section later in this chapter.

Next, I discuss one more recommendation that resulted from my study, which is targeted to district leaders. I propose that districts use participatory action research to address disproportionate special education data.

Participatory Action Research to Address Disproportionate Special Education Data

The federal government requires the CDE to monitor all public school districts for disproportionate representation of students in special education (Roy, 2012). When a school district is identified with overrepresentation or underrepresentation of a certain student demographic in special education, the district is required to investigate why the data exists and take corrective action. I propose that school districts consider participatory action research as a method to determine the causes of the disproportionality and as an approach to pinpoint corrective strategies. Results from my participatory action research study yielded salient recommendations to address a practice-based problem in LVUSD, and I believe similar outcomes are possible for other school districts.

One of the tenets of participatory action research is the focus on a setting-specific problem (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The setting-specific component lends itself well to school district disproportionality analysis because school districts are distinct entities. Although multiple school districts might be identified with the same disproportionate indicator (e.g., overrepresentation of Hispanics made eligible for SLD), the unique variables within the district preclude the district from copying other district strategies as corrective actions. Examples of unique variables are size of district, demographics of student enrollments, budget, and leadership philosophies. Therefore, the setting-specific tenet of participatory action research ensures identified causes and strategies are relevant to the individual district.

A second tenet of participatory action research that fulfills the problem analysis and problem solution requirements of addressing disproportionality is the direct engagement *with* stakeholders (McIntyre, 2007). When district staff are directly engaged in the process, they are more likely to take ownership of the problem being studied and subsequently enact the necessary changes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I found this to be true with my study. Three participants began making changes to their assessment practices with EL students during the study; they did not wait for it to end (the other seven participants did not have an open assessment with EL students while my study took place). Their changes were self-directed, which exemplifies the ownership element of participatory action research.

A third tenet of participatory action research, and unique to this method when compared to other research methods, is how the exploratory process allows for participant reflection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), encouraging both individual and group reflections. Participatory action research is dynamic and the process does not begin with predetermined outcomes or answers. Rather, the participants individually and collectively generate recommendations to resolve the setting-based problem when their knowledge and understanding of the problem increases. As stated earlier in this chapter, the recommendations put forth by the participants in my study were unanticipated. Only after the participants explored the problem, explored relevant research related to the problem, engaged in group dialogue, self-reflected, and reflected as a group were they able to generate meaningful recommendations specific to their department and district. I believe similar outcomes are possible in other districts if they apply this methodology.

The prior recommendations surfaced via data obtained during my study. As the researcher, I add two additional recommendations based upon my own reflections. The first is

directed toward the CDE and the second is a test-accommodation decision tree for school psychologists to use when assessing EL students.

Though there are merits to the CDE monitoring school district data on special education, I consider the terms overrepresentation and underrepresentation to be relatively arbitrary and separate from individual student learning needs. More precisely, as a special education administrator I do feel CDE focuses on quotas rather than making sure the right students are identified. It would be more meaningful and helpful to school leaders if CDE focused on intervention evidence and individual student progress, rather than number of students eligible. The shift to individual student outcomes, as a measurement of district performance, sends the right message to educators that we want students to benefit from their education, even if that means they are eligible for special education. If evidence shows a student is benefitting from special education, does demographic eligibility rate matter?

The second recommendation I put forth, based upon my own reflections, is to develop a test accommodation decision tree for school psychologists to use when assessing EL students. A decision tree, co-developed by test publishers and practitioners, would inform school psychologists of the importance of taking the student profile into consideration. Additionally, an established decision tree would increase the likelihood of consistent practices by school psychologists and lead to more valid and reliable results. An example of a decision tree is the Selection Taxonomy for English Language Learners Accommodations (STELLA), which was created by researchers who found EL students were given the same accommodations, yet needed individualized accommodations (Kopriva, Emick, Hipolito-Delgado, & Cameron, 2007).

Currently, based upon results from my study, test administration accommodations are inconsistent and even unused out of fear of violating publisher guidelines. A collaborative effort

between test publishers and assessors to identify the appropriate accommodations will lead to more accurate data, which ultimately leads to increased accuracy in eligibility determination.

Limitations

Participatory action research is local and therefore limited in scope. Although the problem studied is one many districts face, the particulars about the school district where my study occurred are unique enough to limit the generalizability of the outcomes. Particulars include number of bilingual psychologists employed, number of EL students enrolled, access and opportunities for early interventions, parent and family systems, and district culture. It is impossible to control for all the variables that define a school district that would allow results from my study to be replicated. Additionally, the size of my study narrows the scope and eliminates the possibility of replicability. Outcomes from 10 school psychologists do not equate to the same outcomes potentially derived from a larger group. Consequently, use of the recommendations from my study beyond the school district where I conducted the research should be done with awareness of the limits in scope.

A second limitation of my study was that only three of the 10 participants had an open assessment with an EL student for SLD during the study. The input from the three participants regarding the immediate actions they took to adjust their assessment practices was meaningful and informative. However, if all participants had entered the study with an open assessment, additional insights could have been obtained about how psychologists were making adjustments along the way.

A final limitation of my study is the time intensive requirement of participatory action research. Six 80-minute sessions were held across 6 weeks during the school year and during the work hours of the participants. The number of sessions and length of time in each session

was decided to secure participation given that it was voluntary and with professionals who face a tremendous workload. Eight hours did limit the depth and breadth into which participants could go for generating data for the current study.

Considerations for Future Research

Results from my study point to four areas for future research. First, future studies can continue to probe into school psychologists' assessment practices with EL students via participatory action research while also ensuring all participants have an open assessment with an EL student. I suggest this inquiry because only three of the 10 participants in my study had an open assessment. I cannot help but wonder if the other seven psychologists might have engaged in deeper self-reflection about their assessment practices if they were facing an immediate circumstance. The sense of urgency voiced by the three psychologists with an open assessment highlighted a future area of study.

Second, if LVUSD implements case consultation, as described previously, the effects of the case consultation could be studied for meaningful outcomes. Areas of inquiry include whether the district sees a change in data regarding who is found eligible and ineligible, whether there are changes across the school psychology department in their assessment practices, and whether the entire department grows more competent in accurately discerning EL traits from SLD as a result of talking through a student profile with colleagues. Results from such a study would inform the school psychologist field either about a successful or unsuccessful strategy to address disproportionate representation.

Third, I believe future research on the training of interpreters is warranted and could lead to consequential information about best practices in assessment protocols with EL students. My suggestion derived from input from the participants that they were unfamiliar with what training,

if any training at all, the interpreter with whom they work had in helping a school psychologist to assess an EL student. Also, despite not knowing about the interpreter's competencies, the psychologists relied upon the interpreter's skills without hesitation. An outcome from such a study could lead to guidance for interpreter training that subsequently leads to increasing accuracy of student eligibility identification. The stakes are too high to have an untrained interpreter participate in a complex evaluation process.

The fourth recommendation I make for future research is to analyze whether or not participatory action research is a more impactful and meaningful approach to professional development than traditional models. During my study, participants shared that the professional development they previously received was brief, limited in depth, and without follow up. In comparison, the ongoing nature of participatory action research requires one topic to be studied over time with participants leading the learning.

Reflection and Conclusion

Accurate identification of a disabling condition is the cornerstone of school psychology. Despite considerable effort by policymakers and researchers, identification of an SLD remains messy. When a school psychologist assesses a second language learner, the degree of messiness grows. I embarked on this study because I began my career as a school psychologist and the messiness caused me great consternation. When a school psychologist cannot point to valid and reliable data to help guide the eligibility decision, he/she must rely on subjective information. Subjectivity opens the door for implicit and explicit biases, which are the enemy of accurate eligibility decisions. Knowing that 10 school psychologists have grown in their knowledge about EL and SLD trait overlap and uncovered strategies to increase accuracy in distinguishing the traits allows me to feel I have made a positive impact on the profession.

An additional reflection from my study is the observation of adult learning that took place by the participants across the six sessions. Adult learning theory highlights that adults need to know why they are learning something; when they know the why, they are self-directed in the learning and less dependent upon a teacher (Collins, 2004). This proved true in my study. Although I organized and facilitated the sessions, the participants' learning was dependent upon group dialogue and self-reflections. I periodically prompted the group back on topic, or voiced a topic-related question, yet it was the richness of the participants' input that moved the group toward deeper learning: learning that I could not have imposed upon them. Another principle of adult learning theory that I observed during my study was that the participants were intrinsically motivated; they voiced a desire to be better at their work (Collins, 2004). When participants expressed concern about how they previously administered standardized tests without taking into account the student's oral language background, they did not stop at acknowledging a weakness. The participants moved the learning forward by discussing strategies to improve their practices. Watching the participants own what they did not know and then collaborating toward solutions highlight how adult learning theory played out during my study. Similar to what I wrote previously about participatory action research, I believe better outcomes are possible when work-related professional development incorporates adult learning principles.

I am deeply grateful to LVUSD for allowing me to conduct my research. I am even more grateful to the 10 school psychologists who volunteered their time to engage in a practice-based problem that they did not know existed. Their willingness to reflect, recognize room for growth, and collaborate with one another informed me about the value of participatory action research. I could not have predicted the outcomes of my study, yet the structure of the study did result in

recommendations to address a problem: a problem that has significant implications for EL students.

Appendix A

Participant Recruitment Letter

Dear School Psychologist,

I am a doctoral candidate at UCLA - studying education policy and leadership with an emphasis on social justice. To complete my studies, I seek to conduct action research with a group of school psychologists to learn: “Through Action Research How Do School Psychologists Reflect on Their Own Assessment Practices of EL Students Evaluated for SLD, and What Key Strategies Do They Recommend to Improve and/or Enhance Accuracy in Discernment of EL Characteristics from Those of SLD?”

In order to conduct my research, I am looking for school psychologists to volunteer to participate in one *complete cycle* of action research. The cycle includes:

1. Six 75-minute sessions as a group, to occur two times per week, at approximately 3:30-4:45pm, with the first session the last week of January and the last session the end of February, 2019
2. Online journaling at the end of each session
3. There is no work required outside the sessions
4. Total time commitment is eight hours

As a volunteer, all information shared will be kept **confidential** and when my dissertation is published a pseudonym will be used rather than any identifiable information. During the six sessions, I will seek your approval to audio record the sessions. The recordings are only used to help me capture all dialogue from the sessions. The recordings will not be shared and deleted at the end of my study.

My ultimate goal for this dissertation is to support the school psychologist profession and inform future psychologists of key strategies in how to assess EL students for SLD eligibility - based upon input from you.

If you would like to participate in this research project, please either email me at [REDACTED] or call/text [REDACTED]. Upon receipt of communication from you, I will send an invitation to the scheduled sessions.

With appreciation,

Lisa Miller

Lisa Miller

UCLA Doctoral Candidate

Educational Leadership Program

Appendix B

Participant Consent Form

Dear School Psychologist,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my action research study. As a reminder, all information shared will be kept confidential and when my dissertation is published a pseudonym will be used rather than any identifiable information. During the six sessions, I will audio record. The recordings are only used to help me capture all dialogue from the sessions. All recordings will be deleted at the end of my study.

My ultimate goal for this dissertation is to support the school psychologist profession and inform future psychologists of key strategies in how to assess EL students for SLD eligibility - based upon input from you.

Please complete the consent portion of this document, below. Your written consent indicates:

1. You consent to participate in the study
2. You consent to be audio recorded during the action research sessions

If you have any questions and/or concerns about providing consent, please contact me via email me at [REDACTED] or call/text [REDACTED].

With appreciation,

Lisa Miller
UCLA Doctoral Candidate
Educational Leadership Program

I, (name) provide written consent to participate in Lisa Miller's dissertation and I understand that I will be video and audio recorded during the action research sessions.

Date: _____ Signature: _____

Appendix C

Questionnaire Protocols and Tallied Responses

Pre-Action Research Cycle Participant Questionnaire

Introduction:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. As I previously shared, I am doctoral student with UCLA. My research interest is in learning how, if at all, participation in an action research impacts school psychologists assessment practices of English Learners for a Specific Learning Disability. Therefore, in order to learn if change occurs, responses to this pre-participation questionnaire will be compared to post-participation responses.

The questionnaire is confidential and I will use a pseudonym so that none of the information is traceable back to you.

This questionnaire should last approximately 5 minutes.

Please select *one*, and only one, answer for the following questions:

1. I feel confident in my knowledge about English Learner characteristics and how these characteristics manifest in the classroom setting:
 - a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Disagree
 - d. Strongly Disagree

2. I feel confident in my knowledge about Specific Learning Disability characteristics and how these characteristics manifest in the classroom setting:
 - a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Disagree
 - d. Strongly Disagree

3. I feel confident in my ability to discern English Learner characteristics from Specific Learning Disability characteristics:
 - a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Disagree
 - d. Strongly Disagree

4. I feel confident in my assessment practices and selected protocols when assessing an English Learner for a Specific Learning Disability:
 - a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree

- c. Disagree
 - d. Strongly Disagree
5. I feel confident in my ability to provide guidance to fellow school psychologists on how to accurately assess an English Learner for a Specific Learning Disability:
- a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Disagree
 - d. Strongly Disagree

Post-Action Research Cycle Participant Questionnaire

Introduction:

Thank you for participating in the action research sessions. The purpose of this post-participation questionnaire is to learn how, if at all, your experiences in the action research cycle result in different responses to the same questions you answered prior to participation.

The questionnaire is confidential and I will use the same pseudonym applied to the pre-participation questionnaire so that none of the information is traceable back to you.

This questionnaire should last approximately 5 minutes.

Please select *one*, and only one, answer for the following questions:

1. I feel confident in my knowledge about English Learner characteristics and how these characteristics manifest in the classroom setting:
 - a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Disagree
 - d. Strongly Disagree

2. I feel confident in my knowledge about Specific Learning Disability characteristics and how these characteristics manifest in the classroom setting:
 - a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Disagree
 - d. Strongly Disagree

3. I feel confident in my ability to discern English Learner characteristics from Specific Learning Disability characteristics:
 - a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Disagree
 - d. Strongly Disagree

4. I feel confident in my assessment practices and selected protocols when assessing an English Learner for a Specific Learning Disability:
 - a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Disagree
 - d. Strongly Disagree

5. I feel confident in my ability to provide guidance to fellow school psychologists on how to accurately assess an English Learner for a Specific Learning Disability:
 - a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Disagree
 - d. Strongly Disagree

Tallied responses to the questionnaires:

Questions	Pre-Participation Responses	Post-Participation Responses
1: I feel confident in my knowledge about English learner characteristics and how these characteristics manifest in the classroom setting	Strongly Agree = 7 Agree = 2 Disagree = 1 Strongly Disagree = 0	Strongly Agree = 4 Agree = 6 Disagree = 0 Strongly Disagree = 0
2: I feel confident in my knowledge about Specific Learning Disability characteristics and how these characteristics manifest in the classroom setting	Strongly Agree = 8 Agree = 2 Disagree = 0 Strongly Disagree = 0	Strongly Agree = 6 Agree = 3 Disagree = 1 Strongly Disagree = 0
3: I feel confident in my ability to discern English Learner characteristics from Specific Learning Disability characteristics.	Strongly Agree = 8 Agree = 1 Disagree = 1 Strongly Disagree =	Strongly Agree = 7 Agree = 3 Disagree = 0 Strongly Disagree = 0

<p>4: I feel confident in my assessment practices and selected protocols when assessing an English Learner for a Specific Learning Disability</p>	<p>Strongly Agree = 7 Agree = 2 Disagree = 0 Strongly Disagree = 1</p>	<p>Strongly Agree = 4 Agree = 4 Disagree = 2 Strongly Disagree =</p>
<p>5: I feel confident in my ability to provide guidance to fellow school psychologists on how to accurately assess an English Learning for a Specific Learning Disability</p>	<p>Strongly Agree = 6 Agree = 3 Disagree = 1 Strongly Disagree = 0</p>	<p>Strongly Agree = 8 Agree = 2 Disagree = 0 Strongly Disagree = 0</p>

Appendix D
Session Protocols

Session 1

Purpose: Introduce the study, describe the action research process and identify the problem to be studied.

Location: Conejo Valley Unified School District (LVUSD) Campus

Time (60 min): TBD

Materials:

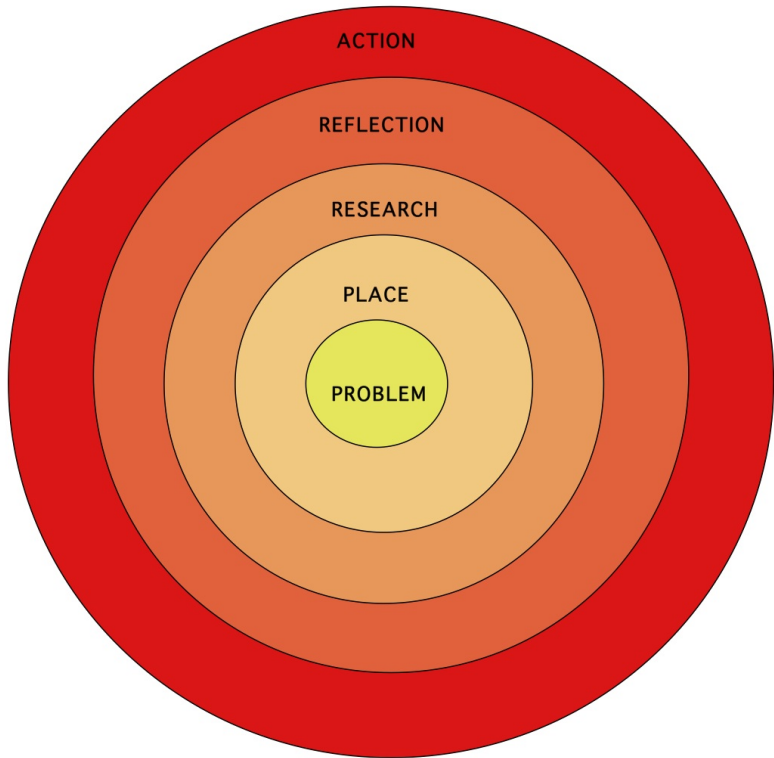
- Visual of Action Research Cycle
- iPhone for audio recording
- Participant journals

Meeting Agenda:

- Introductions
- Inform participants of audio recording
- Review purpose of my dissertation study
- Discuss and agree on meeting norms
- Introduce Action Research Cycle concept (use of visual)
- Problem identification:
 - With CDE identifying LVUSD as disproportionate in identification of Hispanic students eligible for SLD, an opportunity arose to look closely at how school psychologists discern EL from SLD.
 - The goal is not to address disproportionality, but rather learn and reflect on assessment of EL students for SLD with hope of identifying recommendations for the future to ensure and/or improve accuracy of discernment and eligibility determination.
- Complete journal entries
- Review next meeting date and time

Action Research Process

MODEL for ACTION RESEARCH



PROBLEM

- Identify Problem
- Develop/Frame Problem

PLACE

- Frame Research Objectives
- Engage Additional Stakeholders

RESEARCH

- Collect Data
- Conduct Joint Fact Finding
- Analyze & Interpret Data

REFLECTION

- Interpret Information
- Draw Conclusions
- Make recommendations
- Identify Method for Dissemination
- Share Knowledge

ACTION

- Mobilize for Action
- Monitor & Evaluate Impact
- Apply Learning

Session 2

Purpose: To review relevant research on English Learner (EL) traits and how these traits overlap with a Specific Language Disability (SLD) for the purposes of participant learning and reflection of their existing assessment practices

Location: LVUSD Campus

Time (75 min): TBD

Materials:

- Copies of Case & Taylor (2010) research
- iPhone for audio recording
- Participant journals

Meeting Agenda:

- Review agreed upon norms
- Review problem identification from Session 1
- Introduce Case & Taylor (2010) research article and provide a reading guide with the following prompts:
 - Highlight the traits of EL students
 - Highlight the traits of SLD
 - Highlight 3-5 new learning for you (something you did not previously know, or understand)
 - Note any questions and/or topics you would like more information on
- Large group discussion about Case & Taylor reading
- Complete journal entries
- Review next meeting date and time

Large Group Facilitation Questions:

1. Based upon the reading, what characteristics overlap with EL and SLD?
2. Based upon the reading, what, if anything was new information to you?
3. How, if at all, do you currently account for characteristic overlap in your selection of assessment tools?
4. How, if at all, do you see yourself using the reading from today, and our discussion, to adjust your assessment practices?
 - a. Why?

Session 3

Purpose: To expand on literature review of characteristic overlap with English Learner (EL) and a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) for the purposes of participant learning and reflection of existing assessment practices.

Location: LVUSD Campus

Time (75 min): TBD

Materials:

- Copies of Farnsworth (2016) research
- iPhone for audio recording
- Participant journals
- Copies of Bailey and Rhinehart’s “The Case Against the ‘Long-term English Learner’ Label” (2019)

Meeting Agenda:

- Review agreed upon norms
- Briefly review purpose of study and identified problem from
- Summarize discussion from Session 2
- Introduce Farnsworth (2016) research article and provide a reading guide with the following prompts:
 - Highlight information about Dual Language Learners (DLL) profiles you believe are important for both teachers and school psychologists to be informed about when considering assessment for SLD
 - Highlight 3-5 new learning for you (something you did not previously know, or understand)
 - Note any questions and/or topics you would like more information on
- Large group discussion about Farnsworth (2016) reading
- Complete journal entries
- Review next meeting date and time
- Request participants bring a current open assessment of an EL student they are considering SLD eligibility or to bring an already completed assessment of an EL student they considered SLD eligibility to the next session
- Provide participants with a copy of Bailey and Rhinehart’s paper and request they read the paper prior to the next session- Rhinehart is the guest speaker at the next session

Facilitation Guidelines and Question:

1. Based upon the reading, what, if anything was new information to you?

2. What, if anything, did you read that informs you about how to increase accuracy of discerning DLL from an SLD?
3. How, if at all, do you see yourself using the reading from today, and our discussion, to adjust your assessment practices?
 - a. Why?
 - b.
4. How, if at all, are you already making changes to your assessment practices to improve accuracy in discernment of EL from SLD?

Session 4

Purpose: To build on previous discussions about assessment practices, to ascertain if they are already making changes in their practices based upon participation in the study, and to continue the dialogue between and among the participants on discerning second language acquisition traits from those of a specific learning disability. This session will include a guest speaker, Laura Rhinehart who has researched the overlap of second language acquisition and learning disabilities and can provide insights into when and how misidentification occurs. The guest speaker will also be able to provide answers to participants questions.

Location: LVUSD Campus

Time (75 min): TBD

Materials:

- Copies of Bailey and Rhinehart’s “The Case Against the ‘Long-term English Learner’ Label” (2019)
- Participants to bring a copy of a current assessment or a completed assessment
- iPhone for audio recording
- Participant journals

Meeting Agenda:

- Review agreed upon norms
- Briefly review purpose of study and identified problem
- Introduce guest speaker
- Guest speaker provides participants with current research on overlap of second language acquisition and learning disability
 - Participants take notes and propose questions to the speaker
- Large group discussion about the guest speaker presentation
- Prompt participants to highlight in their own assessment reports how they are currently discerning EL from SLD and input where they see necessary changes to improve accuracy of the discernment based upon the discussions thus far
- Large group discussion about assessment reports
- Complete journal entries
- Review next meeting date and time

Facilitation Guidelines and Question:

1. What, if anything, did you hear that informs you about how to increase accuracy of discerning EL from an SLD?
- 2.

3. How, if at all, do you see yourself using the reading from today, and our discussion, to adjust your assessment practices?
 - a. Why?
 - b.
4. How, if at all, are you already taking action to improve accuracy in assessment practices to discern EL from SLD?

Session 5

Purpose: To build on previous discussions about assessment practices and ascertain if they are already making changes in their practices based upon participation in the study, and what strategies might they use going forward when assessing EL students.

Location: LVUSD Campus

Time (75 min): TBD

Materials:

- Copies of Chu and Flores (2011) research
- Participants to bring a copy of a current assessment or a completed assessment
- iPhone for audio recording
- Participant journals

Meeting Agenda:

- Review agreed upon norms
- Briefly review purpose of study and identified problem
- Briefly summarize discussions from Sessions 2 and 3
- Introduce Chu and Flores (2011) research article and provide a reading guide with the following prompts:
 - Highlight the characteristic overlap the authors discuss
 - Highlight 3-5 new learning for you (something you did not previously know, or understand)
 - Note any questions and/or topics you would like more information on
- Large group discussion about Chu and Flores (2011) reading
- Prompt participants to highlight in their own assessment reports how they are currently discerning EL from SLD and input where they see necessary changes to improve accuracy of the discernment based upon the discussions thus far
- Large group discussion about assessment reports
- Complete journal entries
- Review final meeting date and time

Facilitation Guidelines and Question:

1. Based upon the reading, what, if anything was new information to you?
2. What, if anything, did you read that informs you about how to increase accuracy of discerning EL from an SLD?
3. How, if at all, do you see yourself using the reading from today, and our discussion, to adjust your assessment practices?
 - a. Why?

4. How, if at all, are you already making changes to your assessment practices to improve accuracy in discernment from EL to SLD?

Session 6

Purpose: Taking action and closing - what are participants identifying as strategies to improve their own assessment work and what do they recommend for future assessments?

Location: LVUSD Campus

Time (75 min): TBD

Materials:

- iPhone for audio recording
- Participant journals

Meeting Agenda:

- Review agreed upon norms
- Briefly review purpose of study and identified problem
- Briefly summarize discussions from prior sessions
- Large group discussion about accuracy of assessment practices of EL students when considering SLD
- Complete final journal entries

Facilitation Questions:

1. How, if at all, has this process informed your understanding of second language acquisition and the complexities of testing EL students for a SLD?
- 2.
3. What, if anything, has already changed about your assessment practice since participating in this study?
 - i. Why?
 - ii.
4. If you were responsible for leading the school psychology department, what suggestions would you make to the team about assessment practices of EL students for SLD?
 - i. Why those suggestions?
 - ii.
5. What, if any, recommendations would you make to district administration about the needs within the school psychology department to ensure and/or improve accuracy in assessment of EL students for a SLD?

Appendix E

Participant Journal

Sessions 1-5

1. What are your key takeaways with respect to what took place during today's session?
2. What, if anything, was informative to you as it relates to your assessment practices of EL students for a SLD?
3. How, if at all, are you currently making changes to your assessment practices of EL students for an SLD as a result of participation in this study?
4. What, if any, changes do you intend to make to your assessment practices of EL students for an SLD as a result of participating in this study - for the purposes of increasing accuracy of discernment of EL from SLD? Why?
5. What, if anything, would you recommend to fellow school psychologists as necessary actions to improve accuracy of discerning EL from SLD based upon your participation in this study?

Participant Journal

Session 6

1. After participating in this study, what steps will you take to increase accuracy in discernment of EL from SLD?
2. What, if anything, was informative to across all sessions regarding assessing EL students for SLD?
3. How, if at all, are you currently making changes to your assessment practices of EL students for an SLD as a result of participation in this study?

4. What are concrete action items/steps you would recommend for other school psychologists to increase their skills in accurately discerning EL from SLD?

5. Please reflect on your overall participation in this action research study. (e.g., did you grow in your skills, did you obtain new knowledge, did/will you adjust assessment practices knowing what you know now, etc.?)

6. Would you recommend other psychologists participate in a similar study? Please explain your answer.

Appendix F

Screenshot of Quirkos



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