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Los Angeles

Enhancing the Distributed Expertise of the Student Success Team Committee Through Reflective Inquiry

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Leticia Sanchez

2015

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Enhancing the Distributed Expertise of the

Student Success Team Committee Through Reflective Inquiry

by

Leticia Sanchez

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2015

Professor Alison Bailey, Co-Chair

Professor Diane Durkin, Co-Chair

The academic difficulties that English Language Learners (ELLs) exhibit appear similar to the characteristics of learning disabilities. Adequate professional development is a priority in providing academic supports to ELLs. Few studies address the impact of explicit professional development on (1) utilizing the distributed expertise of the School Success Team (SST)

committee members and (2) enhancing their decision-making process based on a strengthened common knowledge.

This action research project addressed the linguistic, academic, and cultural needs of Latino ELL students by working with the SST committee members to generate more appropriate and accurate recommendations for Latino ELL student population through reflective inquiry. This action research project attempts to reduce the misidentification of Latino English Language Learners (ELLs) in special education. Its aim is to identify and describe the distributed expertise of the Student Success Team (SST) committee members as they participate in decisions about ELLs. The goal is to generate more accurate and appropriate instructional recommendations and interventions for these learners.

The purpose of this study is to assist in ultimately reducing the misidentification of Spanish speaking ELLs in special education. SST members utilized their distributed expertise to strengthen their common knowledge of language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction to make appropriate intervention recommendations when supporting a Latino ELL student through the special education referral process

Three reflective inquiry sessions were co-created to discuss the topics of language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instructional strategies. Eight SST meeting observations were conducted; one observation was conducted prior to the first reflective inquiry session; two SST meetings were observed after each reflective inquiry session; the eighth, and final, SST meeting observation was conducted to gather data on any significant changes presented by the SST committee when discussing an ELL student.

Data collected from a school staff questionnaire, eight audio recorded observations of SST meetings, three audio recorded reflective inquiry sessions, participants' reflective journal

entries, a document review of SST referral forms, and SST summary meeting forms show that participants reflected on the decision-making process of referred Latino ELLs. Findings indicate a change in the content of student data requested and strategic questioning to bring about culturally relevant data. These changes support the SST committee in making a more informed decision to recommend a Latino ELL for special education assessment.

Findings suggest that reflective inquiry is beneficial for school site decision-making teams when supported by a school leader. Second, the data show that out-of-the classroom support staff view the SST meeting as a collaborative conversation to generate instructional supports for students demonstrating academic difficulties, while the classroom teacher perceives the SST meeting as the forum to request special education assessment. Third, findings indicate that participants learn from the expertise of other team members, but are hesitant to publically self-identify as an expert in their field. Fourth, I found that the school site RTI instructional supports empower the research participants to state that students present characteristics of suspected learning disabilities rather than language acquisition delays. Fifth, I found that participants want more student data presented at SST meetings that clarify and confirm issues of difficulties with suspected learning disabilities versus language acquisition.

This study adds to the growing body of literature that suggests that inquiry sessions are effective strategies to reduce the misidentification of ELLs in special education. The findings of this study add to the body of research in support of pre-referral intervention teams to reduce the misidentification of Latino ELLs as learning disabled when the students present characteristics of English language acquisition issues.

This study highlights the need to provide SST committee members with the time and space for reflective conversations outside of the official 30-minute SST meeting. This action

research project established protocol for reflective inquiry that created the time and space for the SST committee members to reflect on past recommendations and decisions to plan for better-informed decisions for future SST meetings. The findings of this action research point to the importance of implementing a protocol that encourages reflective inquiry to capitalize from members' distributed expertise to strengthen the pre-referral intervention group's common knowledge. Finally, findings suggest that reflective inquiry may improve the accuracy of SST committees to recommend Latino ELLs for special education assessment.

This action research is a descriptive study about the process of reflective inquiry as a professional development intervention to document the shift in conversation and the decision making process of SST committees. This is not a study of the efficacy of reflective inquiry as it pertains to the SST decision-making process.

The dissertation of Leticia Sanchez is approved.

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Alison Bailey, Committee Co-Chair

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DEDICATON PAGE

…A mis creadores- Gloria y Benjamín por dejar todo para que su hija pudiera ir a la escuela del otro lado.

As a K-12 educator I embrace the power that a read-aloud has as an instructional tool. Allow me to "read-aloud" to you from Alma For Ada's *My Name is Maria Isabel*:

> "We all ready have two Maria's in this class, why don't we call you Mary instead…If only her teacher would not insist on calling her Mary… I think my greatest wish is to be called María Isabel Salazar López. When that was my name, I felt proud of being named María like my papá's mother, and Isabel, like my grandmother Chabela… If I was called María Isabel Salazar López, I could listen better in class because it's easier to hear than Mary López." (1993)

For every "Maria Isabel" in academia…embrace your name, yourself, and where you come from. Carry yourself with grace. Show your determination and your worth. Make your mark. Although I carry *Maria Isabel* inside me, please do call me by the name my parents so loving gave me, Leticia.

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A most wonderful THANK YOU to Miss Betsy. She gave up her Thursday nights to be with my girls, driving across town through rush hour traffic, to pick up my girls, help with homework, prep them for Friday's tests, and keeping them safe while they slept.

To my two lovely daughters, thank you for being wonderful study buddies- its time for some fun now!

To the **Super Secrets**, thank you ladies! We studied, we wrote, we laughed, we traveled, we vented, and most importantly- we made it!

Last but not least, thank you to my Sweetie. You kept us all afloat. You kept me going when I needed it most. Thank you for being my number one fan, an awesome dad, and a wonderful husband.

VITA

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CHAPTER ONE

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Introduction

This action research project attempts to reduce the misidentification of Latino English Language Learners (ELLs) in special education. Its aim is to identify and describe the distributed expertise of the Student Success Team (SST) committee members as they participated in decisions about ELLs. The goal was to generate more accurate and appropriate instructional recommendations and interventions for these learners.

Research has demonstrated that in some cases English Language Learners are overrepresented in special education programs (Artiles, Harry, Reschly, & Chinn, 2002; Calhoon, Otaiba, Cihak, King, & Avalos, 2007; Figueroa, 2005). Research further shows that the a Student Success Team (SST) referral is the primary step in the process of English Learners being identified as learning disabled (MacMillan, Gresham, Lopez, & Bocian, 1996).

For this action research project, I guided the members of one School Success Team committee in the co-creation of reflective inquiry sessions. The aim of the sessions was to support the SST committee in making a more accurate and appropriate recommendation of Latino English Language Learners for special education. With the participation of the SST committee members, I co-created series of professional development sessions addressing language acquisition needs of Latino students, specific interventions for students with suspected learning disabilities, and culturally relevant interventions. The action research project provided the SST committee with practical knowledge, gained from the distributed expertise amongst the

committee members, to provide instructional recommendations during an SST meeting when addressing the needs of Latino English Language Learners.

Statement of the Problem

The overrepresentation, underrepresentation, and the misidentification of English Language Learners (ELLs), and minority students in special education have concerned researchers for the past 40 years (Gaviria-Soto & Castro-Morera, 2005). As a proportion of the ELL population, ELLs are frequently found to be more likely placed in special education than monolingual English speaking students (Artiles et al., 2005). Yet, research has shown that ELLs are not recommended for special education services, when they may require additional supports, due to a misunderstanding of the language acquisition process and cultural miscommunication between parents and school staff (Hwa-Froelich & Westby, 2003; Westby, 2009).

While research has documented the success of monolingual students through Response to Intervention, (RTI), the same research has not been conducted with ELLs (McCardle, Mele-McCarthy, Cutting, Leos, & D'Emilio, 2005). This action research project addressed the linguistic, academic, and cultural needs of Latino ELL students by working with the SST committee members to generate more appropriate and accurate recommendations for Latino ELL student population.

The changing demographics of the national student population require that educators be prepared to teach a changing student population, one that requires linguistically and culturally responsive education (Ortiz, Wilkinson, Robertson-Courtney, & Kushner, 2006). According to Zamora (2009),

> of the nation's 5.5 million ELL students…nearly 80% of K-12 ELLs are Spanish-speaking Latinos. ELLs constitute the fastest-growing subgroup of students in U.S. public

> schools, with an annual increase of about 10% and a 72% overall increase between 1992 and 2002. Experts predict that one-quarter of the nation's K-12 student population will be made up of ELLs by 2025. (p. 93)

Research shows an overrepresentation of ELLs in special education programs (Artiles et al., 2002; Calhoon et al., 2007; Figueroa, 2005). Latino students make up 46% of the student population in California, and almost 50% of the Learning Disabled student population (Figueroa, 2005). A contributing factor to the over-identification of Latino ELLs into special education is that a majority of ELLs are Spanish speakers (Guiberson, 2009).

In a review of the literature, Guiberson (2009) defines overrepresentation, underrepresentation, and misidentification of English Language Learners in special education. The overrepresentation of a group of students in special education is determined when a particular student group has unequal proportions in the special education programs as compared to other groups of students (Gaviria-Soto & Castro-Morera, 2005; Rueda & Windmueller, 2006). Under-identification occurs when students suspected of having learning disabilities are not identified and are not provided with appropriate special education services. Misidentification, of concern for this research, occurs when students are identified as having a disability that they actually do not have (Gaviria-Soto & Castro-Morera, 2005). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) defines *Specific Learning Disability* (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 manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. (20 USC 104, section 602 (30) (A))

The referral of ELLs to special education may be due to the misidentification of linguistic and cultural needs for learning disabilities (Guiberson, 2009; Orosco, 2010; Ortiz, Wilkinson, Robertson-Courtney, & Kushner, 2006). The academic difficulties that English Language Learners exhibit appear similar to the characteristics of Learning Disabilities (García & Tyler, 2010); therefore, adequate professional development is a priority in providing academic supports to ELLs. While studies have shown that the overrepresentation of Spanish speaking ELL students in special education is not a national trend, the studies do show that the issue of overrepresentation of English Learners is a problem for states and local school districts (Artiles et al., 2005; Meyer & Patton, 2001).

Background Information on the Problem

The purpose of this study is to assist in ultimately reducing the misidentification of Spanish speaking ELLs in special education. The focus is on linguistic, academic, and culturally appropriate interventions provided through the Student Success Team (SST). Via reflective inquiry sessions, SST members utilized their distributed expertise to strengthen their common knowledge of language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction to make appropriate intervention recommendations when supporting a Latino ELL student through the special education referral process (Orosco, 2010; Ortiz et al., 2006; Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004). The goal of this research is to get at the core of the decision-making process of the pre-referral intervention team as they recommend interventions for Latino ELLs.

At public school sites, the Student Success Team (SST) is a school's first step in reducing the overrepresentation, the underrepresentation, and the misidentification of ELLs in special education. The SST is defined as a "(a) prescribing prereferral interventions and monitoring the effectiveness of such interventions, and (b) making eligibility decisions concerning special

education and related services when prereferral interventions are judged to be ineffective" (MacMillan et al., 1996, p. 136).

Research suggests that SST committee members lack the expertise to differentiate between linguistic needs and learning disabilities (Brown & Doolittle, 2008; Ortiz et al., 2006). Prior research recommends that these multidisciplinary teams have an expert team member in the area of language acquisition instruction to make appropriate recommendations for ELLs in the special education referral process (Guiberson, 2009; Ortiz et al., 2006). This action research adds to the decision-making research by co-creating professional development, via reflective inquiry, for SST committee members in addressing the linguistic, academic, and cultural needs of Latino EL students. Through distributed expertise and the development of common knowledge (Edwards, 2012), the reflective inquiry sessions supported a collaborative team decision-making process of making more accurate and appropriate recommendations for Latino ELLs who demonstrate academic difficulties. The SST committee self-identified their expertise level and co-created professional development sessions addressing language acquisition, suspected learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instructional strategies for Latino ELLs, referred to the pre-referral intervention team, who demonstrate academic difficulties.

The research on professional development indicates that collaboration, coherence, and duration are key components of effective professional development (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richaradson, & Orphanos, 2009; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon 2001; Guskey, 1991). The research also indicates that teachers refer to grade level standards and student achievement as indicators of successful professional development (Ingvarson, Meiers, & Beavis, 2005). Researchers in the area of professional development recommend that teachers identify a school site or classroom concern, generate a plan, implement the plan, and assess the

viability of their results based on student achievement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Ingvarson et al., 2005). This format is adaptable for members of the SST committee.

The SST is typically a multidisciplinary team, consisting of a general education teacher, school psychologist, and intervention support teacher, that ideally meets on a weekly basis, to discuss student concerns, identify supports, and refer students for special education assessment (MacMillan et. al, 1996). In the literature, SSTs have also been defined as Instructional Collaborative Teams (ICT), Instructional Support Teams, (IST), Child Study Teams (CST), Prereferral Intervention Team (PIT), or Student Study Teams (SST) (Athanasiou, Geil, Hazel, & Copeland, 2002; Chalfant, & Pysh, 1989; MacMillan et al., 1996; Rock & Zigmond, 2001; Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004). I use the term pre-referral intervention team and Student Success Team (SST) in this dissertation to refer to this multidisciplinary team. In my study I collaborated with the SST committee to generate a school culture where the linguistic, academic, and cultural needs of Latino ELLs were addressed and supported through the instructional interventions the SST committee recommends at a given SST meeting. The focus for this dissertation, however, was on the decision-making process of the SST committee rather than the outcome or implementation of the recommendations. This action research is a descriptive study about the process of reflective inquiry as a professional development intervention to document the shift in conversation and the decision making process of SST committees. This is not a study of the efficacy of reflective inquiry as it pertains to the SST decision-making process. The focus of this action research project is on the conversational change of the SST committee and how they utilize their distributed expertise to make more informed decisions about recommendations provided to Latino ELLs. This research does not investigate student performance or success, but rather the focus is on the change over-time presented by the SST committee as they participated

in a series of reflective inquiry sessions. The supports and conversational structure provided by myself, a school site leader, are presented as a key element in the process of better-informed SST decision-making.

Legal mandates, professional expertise, and personal experience all create a bias in the special education referral process of ELLs. Professional biases are particularly reflected in the mismatch between the traditional teaching style and the learning background of the ELL student (Garcia & Ortiz, 1988; McCardle et al., 2005; Ortiz et al., 2006). Additionally, once a student is referred to the SST committee, educators are predisposed "to look for evidence to confirm the hypothesis that the child has a special need and to ignore counterevidence" (Cherkes & Ryan, 1985, p. 324). The cultural, linguistic, and life experiences of educators influence their perceptions of ELLs. Educators need to be open, and aware of "the ways in which their unconscious cultural perspectives shape and shade their own view of the teaching/learning process" (Craig, Hull, Haggart, & Perez-Selles, 2000, para. 8).

The use of pre-referral structures, in particular the SST meeting, is a key component in reducing the over-identification, underrepresentation, and misidentification of ELL students to special education (Artiles et al. 2002; Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006). The research in the over-identification of ELLs in special education, according to Gravios and Rosenfield (2006), has focused in three themes: cultural variables; bias in the assessment procedures; and effectiveness of instruction and intervention.

The co-created reflective inquiry sessions in this action research project provided the SST committee with theory and strategies to address the linguistic, academic, and cultural needs of Latino ELLs. Little research exists about the decision-making process of the Student Success Team committee members as they problem-solve and recommend instructional strategies for

Latino ELLs. My study aims to address this gap in the literature by focusing on the distributed expertise of and conversational change of the SST committee as they progress through the series of reflective inquiry sessions.

Research Questions

I add to current research by exploring the linguistic, academic, and cultural supports that ELLs receive during the referral process for special education. The following research questions guided my research:

1. How does a school leader create a reflective learning community among Student Success Team (SST) committee members to use their distributed expertise in the areas of language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction?
   A. How does the leader develop common knowledge within the SST committee?
   B. What reflections are revealed as the SST committee make decisions concerning Latino ELLs in the special education referral process?

The Research Site

Alvarado Elementary, (a pseudonym), is a Title 1 elementary school in a large urban school district in Southern California. 100% of the school student population receives free or reduced lunch. Latino students represent 88% of the student population, and 42% of the ELL student population. Alvarado Elementary currently provides several instructional models: the English Only/English Immersion general education program, Spanish/English Dual Language program, a Resource Specialist Program, and a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) Special Day program. The Student Success Team committee at Alvarado Elementary holds weekly 30-minute SST meetings on Thursday mornings before school to discuss, generate recommendations, and make a group decision if the student will be referred for special education assessment. The

student concerns discussed at the meetings range from learning difficulties, behavioral issues, and health concerns. The Alvarado Elementary school SST committee consisted of the school psychologist, the Resource Specialist Teacher, a Special Day Teacher, the school nurse, the special education school administrator, two general education teachers, and the referring classroom teacher. Although there were two Intervention Teachers on campus, these support providers did not attend the SST meetings on a regular basis. Alvarado Elementary also prides itself on its Spanish/English Dual language program. In the months prior to this action research, several dual language students were recommended for SST and special education referrals. Although academic instruction is presented in both English and Spanish for the Dual-language students, the SST committee has begun to question issues of language acquisition and learning disabilities in order to provide adequate interventions for students enrolled in the Dual-language program.

Research Design

As a participant observer, at an elementary school where I am the Assistant Principal, I conducted this study as a qualitative action research project. My action research dissertation aims to better understand how the SST committee can combine individual levels of distributed expertise to enhance the overall common knowledge of the SST committee. This enhanced level of common knowledge can assist the SST committee in making more adequate and appropriate decisions about the interventions and services recommended to Latino ELLs. Conducting this study as an action research project was appropriate because the research involved active learning and produced collaborative results to support educators (Coghlan & Brannick, 2007) of Latino ELLs going through the SST referral process.

An action research approach is a useful design to meet the needs of students with language needs, suspected learning disabilities, and cultural differences. Further, the action research method allows the researcher to co-create school change. The iterative cycle of gathering data, presenting it to the school site stakeholders, planning next steps, evaluating the data, and planning the next steps (Coghlan & Brannick, 2007) is a suitable method for this research project. To conduct this study as a quantitative study would not yield in-depth information into the decision-making process of identifying ELLs as Specific Learning Disabled when issues of language and culture come into play.

Research participants were informed that this research project was not evaluative of teacher performance. Data were collected from a demographic questionnaire, direct observations of SST meetings, direct observation of reflective inquiry sessions, and participant's reflective journal entries. A demographic questionnaire gathered self reported past work experience and self-identified areas of expertise. Observations of eight SST meetings provided data to record the conversational change of the SST committee as they moved through the decision-making process of generating recommendations for referred students. A series of co-created reflective inquiry sessions provided data on group reflective, distributed expertise, and newly generated common knowledge. Participant journal entries provided information about individual self-reflection. Data were analyzed to find themes and categories descriptive of how distributed expertise was presented, shared, and developed amongst the decision-making team.

Significance of the Study

This research adds to the body of knowledge of the misidentification of English Language Learners as learning disabled students (Gaviria-Soto & Castro-Morera, 2005). Through a study of the decision-making process of the SST committee, the committee gained a

clearer understanding of the ELL characteristics that mimic learning disabilities (García & Tyler, 2010), and recommended more appropriate and adequate interventions for this student population. Through a series of co-created reflective inquiry sessions, the SST committee engaged in sharing their expertise, misconceptions, and biases of the referral process (Rock & Zigmond, 2001).

Through participatory action research, a series of co-created reflective inquiry sessions provided the SST committee members with strategies to provide linguistically and culturally appropriate instructional interventions to Latino ELLs in the referral process prior to the recommendation for special education assessment. Through the reflective inquiry sessions, SST members generated common knowledge and better understood the differences between language acquisition and learning disabilities to make appropriate and adequate intervention recommendations when supporting Latino ELL students through the special education referral process (Orosco, 2010; Ortiz et al., 2006; Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004). According to McCardle et al. (2005),

> Teachers will need to know how to recognize language differences that can interfere with learning (especially in reading, writing, and oral expression) and how to address these educationally, as well as how to distinguish these from indicators of potential learning difficulties that are not attributable to the child's language differences, that is, that are indicative that this child has or is at risk for learning disabilities (p. 73)

Through the results of this study, I hope to add to the research and insight into the decision-making process of SST committees as they tackle issues of language acquisition, suspected learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction. It is the aim of this action research dissertation that the knowledge generated by the SST committee members will bring to bear the

decision-making process of recommending instructional interventions for Latino ELLs as the student progresses through the special education referral process.

Public Engagement

Recommendations will be shared with the school site, the SST committee members, the LAUSD Multilingual and Multicultural Education Department, and the LAUSD Division of Special Education.

CHAPTER TWO

A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Through an examination of the process of reflective practice and the changes in the decision-making process of the SST committee, this action research project attempts to reduce the misidentification of Latino ELLs in special education. ELLs are more likely to be placed in special education than monolingual English speaking students (Artiles et al., 2005). The changing demographics of the national student population require that educators be prepared to teach a changing student population, one that requires linguistically and culturally responsive education (Ortiz et al., 2006). The academic difficulties that English Language Learners exhibit appear similar to the characteristics of learning disabilities (García & Tyler, 2010); therefore, adequate professional development is a priority in providing academic supports to ELLs. The referral of ELLs to special education can often be a result of educators who are unfamiliar with the language acquisition process, thereby misidentifying linguistic and cultural needs for learning disabilities (Guiberson, 2009; Orosco, 2010; Ortiz et al., 2006). Research suggests most school site SST members lack the expertise to differentiate between linguistic needs and learning disabilities (Brown & Doolittle, 2008; Ortiz et al., 2006). A bias in the referral of students for special education is that once a student is referred to a pre-referral intervention team, educators are predisposed to confirm suspicions of learning disabilities and ignore other student data indicating student success (Cherkes & Ryan, 1985).

Taking into account a student's linguistic and cultural factors, allows for the success of interventions provided to ELLs (Ortiz et al., 2006). When these differences are not considered, the intervention team "may inaccurately attribute ELLs' difficulties to poor motivation, lack of effort, disinterest on the part of parents" (Ortiz et al., 2006, p. 59). An awareness of the context

in which ELLs need support can allow for effective interventions for these students. A positive school climate for ELLs exists when there is,

> (a) acceptance of linguistic and cultural diversity; (b) academically rich programs that integrate basic skill instruction into the context of teaching higher order skills in both the native language and in English; (c) elimination of ineffective responses to failure (e.g., retention, low-ability grouping, referral of students without disabilities to special education); and (d) collaborative school, family, and community relationships (Ortiz et al., 2006, p. 55)

When considering the SST referral of English Language Learners, interventions need to address the possible disabilities as well as the language learning needs of the students (Ortiz & Yates, 2001). Due to the academic and language needs of ELLs, studies recommend that members of the SST committee have a range of professional expertise in curricular instruction, language acquisition, and cultural understanding (Chalfant & Pysh, 1989; Ortiz et al., 2006).

This action research dissertation aims to bring to bear the decision-making process of recommending instructional interventions for Latino ELLs as the student progresses through the referral process, addressing a gap in the literature. In this literature review, I explore the structures, supports, and purpose of pre-referral intervention teams and the bias of educators throughout the special education referral process. Followed by a presentation on the need to provide training to the SST committee. Next, I examine teacher perceptions on the implementation of Response to Intervention programs as well as possible strategies to best implement cultural and linguistic support for ELLs. I then discuss the language acquisition of English Language Learners; the symmetry between ELLs and learning disabilities; and best

practices for delivering instruction to Latino ELLs. Followed by a discussion on professional development and distributed expertise of collaborative problem-solving groups.

Framework for Latino ELLs

The research on the overrepresentation of Latino ELLs with learning disabilities has focused on three distinct areas: the sociodemographic model, which examines the characteristics of individuals and their contexts; the sociohistorical lens that looks not only at race but also race relations; and research on the professional practices of individuals that contribute to the overrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education (Artiles, Sullivan, Waitoller, & Neal, 2010; Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney, 2010). In addressing the issue of Latino ELLs, I use the sociohistorical lens, which examines "issues related to race and structural factors" (Artiles et al., 2010, p. 373). Students and teachers are not in a vacuum; they bring with them multiple facets of knowing and understanding. I also borrow from the social constructivist frame which focuses on "the social and cultural nature of teaching and learning; the role of cultural tools and mediation" (Rueda & Windmueller, 2006, p. 102) which is exemplified by "scaffolding, peer instruction, collaborative learning; funds of knowledge, connection to real-world activities; cultural accommodation…multicultural education" (p. 102). Lastly, I also utilize the sociopolitical lens, which looks at "intergroup power relations, larger social and political issues" (p. 102). These frameworks guide the research of the prereferral intervention team providing linguistic and culturally appropriate interventions for Latino ELLs.

The following section presents a summary of the theories utilized to frame this action research project.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Dewey's theory of reflective practice as a theoretical framework. In this action research study, the reflective inquiry sessions presented to the SST committee members require members to collaborate with their colleagues rather than simply receive information. Vygotsky argues that the interaction of individuals with their surroundings, and the communication with others is what allows for true learning (Vygotsky, 1962). Vygotsky further suggests that individuals use language as a tool to mediate self and communal learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Learning, according to Vygotsky, is seen as a social phenomenon. Vygotsky theorizes that through social dialogue, knowledge and learning are co-constructed with peers (1978). This social construction of knowledge is also impacted by the culture of the learning environment (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996); as the SST committee discusses and engages in the reflective inquiry sessions, new learning emerges.

Dewey (1933) presents learning as a reflective process. He defines thinking as "inquiry, investigation, turning over, probing or delving into, so as to find something new or to see what is already known in a different light. In short, *questioning*" (Dewey, 1933, p. 265). He defines reflective thinking as an orderly sequence of ideas that lead an individual to new conclusions. Dewey (1933) further argues that individuals engage in reflective thought by being active, persistent, and by giving careful consideration to the topic at hand. Through reflective thinking, Dewey (1933) argues that individuals can,

> begin to inquire into the reliability, the worth, of any particular indication; when we try to test its value and see what guarantee there is that the existing data *really* point out the idea that is suggested in such a way as to *justify* acceptance of the latter…Reflection thus implies that something is believed in (or disbelieved in), not on its own direct account,

> but through something else which stands as witness, evidence, proof, voucher, warrant; that is, as *ground of belief*. (p. 11)

Through co-constructed knowledge, the SST committee members have the opportunity to question and reflect on the interventions they provide to Latino ELLs discussed during SST meetings.

The following section discusses the characteristics of the Student Success Team (SST); the structure of the SST, teacher perceptions of recommended interventions, the collaborative decision-making process, and the need for training of SST members.

Structural Components of Collaborative Decision-Making

The structure of the pre-referral process impacts the reduction of the over-identification, underrepresentation, and misidentification of ELL students to special education (Artiles, et al. 2002; Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006). The Student Success Team (SST) considers a student referral to special education when consistent, and strategic, classroom interventions have been demonstrated to be unsuccessful (MacMillan et al., 1996; Ortiz et al., 2006; Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004). SST interventions strive to provide effective classroom supports to prevent inappropriate special education placement.

To work as an effective intervention, researchers recommend that multidisciplinary teams: conduct regularly weekly SST meetings, conduct the meeting for 30 to 45 minutes, and identify a clear agenda for the meeting (Chalfant & Pysh, 1989). Further recommendations indicate that SST committees incorporate self monitoring processes, receive feedback from school staff, and track the outcomes of students to identify curricular areas for professional development training that address the topics of student referrals (Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004).

Teacher Engagement. The foundation for the success of intervention strategies for struggling students depends on teacher perception of the pre-referral and intervention process. Studies show that classroom teachers initiate 80% of student referrals for special education services (Ortiz et al., 2006). Classroom teachers expect the SST committee to provide effective, research-based strategies to support struggling students. Accordingly, the SST committee expects the classroom teacher to strategically and consistently teach the interventions recommended in an SST meeting. In a longitudinal ethnographic qualitative study, Slonski-Fowler and Truscott (2004) studied elementary school teachers' perceptions of the prereferral intervention team (PIT) process. Results indicate that teachers disengaged from the PIT process because they felt unvalued as professionals, not provided with productive supports, and received no follow up to the PIT suggestions. The teachers viewed the PIT process as a step to get the students assessed for special education services, when in fact the teachers wanted a collaborative solution for educating difficult students.

A challenge to such teacher disengagement was presented by Bennett, Erchul, Young, and Bartel (2012). In a study of relational communication patterns of the decision-making team, they found that teachers' level of dominance was similar to other team representatives. The findings suggest that among the group members, there was shared directiveness and influence amongst the team members. In other words, the dominance and domineeringness of the pre-referral intervention teams were similar across roles. The collaborative decision-making team ensured "that there was an attempt on the part of group members to make teachers feel 'heard' within group meetings" (p. 202) leading to buy-in and collaborative decision-making. Teacher engagement in decision-making meetings can lead to more concrete and effective strategies

provided to students who demonstrate difficulty mastering behavioral expectations and academic standards. Shared input and influence builds a stronger decision-making school team.

While teacher engagement is crucial to the success of SST meetings, the structural components of collaborative decision-making are also essential. In an investigation of eight problem-solving teams to assist teachers in the mainstreaming of special education students, Williamson and McLeskey (2011) found that most teachers referred students for academic rather than behavioral concerns. Teachers reported that one of the most beneficial aspects of these collaborative groups were the social supports provided by their colleagues and improving their practice through reflection. Problems in generating solutions for students were identified as: (a) time pressures, typically not beginning the meeting on time and not having adequate time to discuss the identified problem; (b) lack of focus on problem identification; and (c) unsupportive dialogue. Therefore, a focused dialogue on a specific student concern is essential to the success of a collaborative decision-making school site committee.

Decision-making of Collaborative Groups. Research suggests that the pre-referral intervention teams develop an ongoing collaborative process rather than an "event that begins and ends in a meeting" (Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004, p. 34). The research further argues for the development of a collaborative problem solving process that identifies the problem, asks for active participation of the referring teacher, and promotes an ongoing consultation with the teacher (Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004).

Within the decision-making teams, roles, duties, and hierarchies are generated as members make collaborative decisions. Research on group decision-making processes indicates that while hierarchies are formed within groups, the minority opinion of the group can have a strong impact on the group's decision-making. In a qualitative study analyzing group work participation of the

decision-making process during a simulated disciplinary activity of a high school student with disabilities, Ochoa, Gottschall, and Stuart (2004) found that the minority opinion strongly influenced the group consensus to reflect the minority opinion. In other words, the opinion of a few participants altered the decision of the majority. The study found that hierarchies formed within the groups, particularly, the note recorder became the group facilitator, who then performed the duties as a gatekeeper. Ochoa et al. (2004) suggest that even without official hierarchical titles, hierarchies are automatically formed. School site decision-making teams, such as the SST, must remain aware that while the hierarchy of roles and responsibilities may occur in the managerial structure of the team, all members' opinions and recommendations are valuable for the continued support of Latino ELLs discussed during SST meetings.

Perceived power within decision-making teams impacts the data presented during SST meetings, the instructional recommendations provided to students, and the timeframe within which students are referred for special education. Knotek (2003a) argues that the differences in roles among team members, leads to a difference in the decision-making power during the social discussions of an SST meeting. In a micro-ethnographic study, Knotek (2003a) explored the SST committee's conceptualization of African American students as the team discussed the student's problems. The study focused on the social aspect of the meeting discussions. The findings suggest that the language use of the SST committee members does have an impact on the decision-making process for special education assessment. Knoteck (2003a) identified a hierarchy in the discussion of addressing the student's needs: "profession, participant, content category, and subcategory" (p. 6). High status members were defined as SST committee members who held a graduate degree and a specialized school site role. The study indicates that social power allowed for influence by high status members. Therefore, a high status member

demonstrated more influence in the decision-making power of the SST conversation and decision-making process. SST committee members possess a wealth of professional knowledge, whether through years of service, professional training, or graduate degrees. This wealth of knowledge and expertise contributes to the common knowledge of the decision-making team. Rather than identifying the varying levels of professional knowledge as social power, the SST committee can utilize the differences in professional expertise to develop and strengthen the common knowledge of team members to recommend more appropriate interventions and supports for Latino ELLs.

School psychologists have traditionally held hierarchical power during SST and IEP meetings. However, in collaborative decision-making teams, the school psychologist is one voice within the group membership. Mehan (1983) studied the linguistic interchange between IEP team members in the decision-making process. His findings provide the impetus for school teams to develop common knowledge and understand the team's distributed expertise. Rather than relying on one individual or privileging one data source of information, the SST committee can utilize the team's distributed expertise knowledge to strengthen the group's recommendations for referred Latino ELL students. Mehan (1983) found that a school psychologist and school nurse present their reports to the IEP team without question or interruption, yet the parent and the classroom teacher are questioned and interrogated about information shared during the IEP meeting. Mehan (1983) found that the school psychologist held the status ranking within the group, presented information, and made the decision whether or not to place a child into a special education program. Mehan (1983) argues that the decision-making process to place students into special education programs can function more as a presentation rather than as a discussion amongst the IEP team.

SST committee members must be cautious to hold collaborative discussions rather than presentations for special education assessment. As a decision-making team, the SST committee challenges its members to utilize their knowledge and expertise to better support students. While a school psychologist does assess and identify students eligible for special education services, during an SST meeting, the school psychologist is one member of the decision-making team providing their knowledge and expertise to generate best supports and services for Latino ELLs. Therefore, the SST committee has the responsibility to question a child's response to supports over time and challenge its members to utilize their expertise to best support Latino ELLs.

A focused dialogue of student need and student progress over time guides the decision-making team to generate structured and effective supports for Latino ELLs. Researchers have focused on the pre-referral team's dialogue for effective decision-making. In a case study exploration, Etscheidt and Knesting (2007), sought to investigate the factors influencing the interpersonal dynamics of an effective prereferral intervention team's problem-solving process. The research was conducted at a school site identified by district administrators as effective and exemplary. The study found that members of the problem-solving committee were committed to the pre-referral process, utilized their multidisciplinary expertise, and presented student data at each meeting. Etscheidt and Knesting (2007) found that the problem-solving team identified a single problem to focus on, which guided the group's discussion and the presentation of multiple options to address the student concerns. The team's focus on a single problem guided the dialogue for effective decision-making. A specific focus, during a 30-minute SST meeting, allows for a structured conversation and specific interventions generated to address a Latino ELL's academic and linguistic needs.

Training Provided to Pre-referral Teams. Decision-making school teams require effective and relevant in-service training (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011) to provide best instructional supports for struggling students. In a seminal study, Chalfant, Pysh, and Moultrie, (1979) studied the in-service training provided to the school site staff and parents to work effectively with the Teacher Assistance Team. Administrators and teachers identified six competency areas required to individualize instruction for mainstreamed students: (a) individualized instruction; (b) behavior management; (c) learning to deal with the students' attitudes, motivation, and self-concept; (d) improve teacher-parent communication; (e) familiarity with characteristics of students with special needs; and (f) materials available. However, when analyzing teacher responses, Chalfant et al., (1979) found that teachers needed a support system to assist in coping with the learning and behavioral needs of their students. Thus, Chalfant et al., (1979) devised a support system via Teacher Assistance Teams to provide the classroom teacher with supports to more effectively teach mainstreamed students. The Teacher Assistance Team provided teachers with problem solving strategies for day-to-day instructional needs. While the SST committee functions as a decision-making team rather than individual support for teachers, in-service training of the SST members contributes to a school-wide support system. Professional development offered to SST committee members provides the capacity to increase the effectiveness of recommendations for Latino ELLs.

Year-long in-service training for SST committee members, prior to and during participation in the decision-making team, promotes informed collaborative decision-making. Research shows the need to provide training for the pre-referral intervention teams to generate the most appropriate and adequate interventions for students. Through a survey study, Lee-Tarver (2006) investigated teacher training, teacher participation, and teacher understanding of the relationship

between the function of student support teams and special education services. The study found that a majority of committee members perceived positive support from the school site administrator. The study found that the majority of respondents did not view a student referral as an automatic path to special education assessment and placement. Furthermore, majority of the SST members reported that although they were in support of the SST process, they had not received training on the SST process until they had become committee members. Lee-Tarver (2006) suggests that SST committee members are assigned to the committee based on their availability and not on their qualifications or professional training. The SST committee members are responsible for making educational decisions for struggling students. It is in the student's best interest that SST committee members be qualified and trained in delivering the best instructional accommodations rather than on their availability to join the committee.

Long-term collaborative training provides SST committees with increased accuracy and appropriateness of recommendations and referrals for special education assessment.
In a four-year longitudinal study, consisting of 17 school sites, Yocom and Staebler (1996), investigated the impact of collaborative consultation and the accuracy of special education referrals. All consultation team members were provided with training in the collaborative consultation model by university special education professors throughout the four-year study. The study found the length of time using a collaborative model positively related to referral accuracy. Statistical significance of referral accuracy was found between years three and four. The teachers in this study reported that participating in a collaborative team assisted them in short and long term professional reflection. The findings suggest that when a school district is committed to long-term training, the accuracy of student referrals increases.

In summary, the student referral process requires not only a consistent school structure, but also a collaborative team trained to make effective instructional decisions for Latino ELLs facing academic difficulties. While collaboration is key, research indicates that hierarchies are formed within team members that can promote the recommendations of particular individuals rather than those of the collective group. Classroom teachers look to the SST committee to provide support for struggling students. The SST decision-making process is made stronger by engaging the classroom teacher in a focused discussion on a single issue to generate best instructional recommendations and supports for struggling students. Long-term training of SST members and training prior to team membership can increase the accuracy of student referrals, thus reducing the misidentification of Latino ELLs as special education students.

The following section discusses elements of bias that Latino ELLs face as they undergo the pre-referral intervention process.

Legal, Professional, and Personal Bias

In this section, I present the legal, professional, and personal background bias that educators present in the decision-making process of recommending Latino ELLs for special education assessment. The legal and policy mandates of the state, district, and school practice influence the decision-making process for Latino ELLs. The professional background of the pre-referral intervention team members, and the personal experiences of educators also impact the decision-making process.

Members of pre-referral intervention teams face pressure from school practices, district mandates, and legal requirements when ensuring that all students receive educational interventions in a timely fashion. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires that students receive Response to Intervention (RTI) prior to being referred to special education assessment

(NCLB, 2001). In an era of high stakes testing, some school sites can find themselves pressured to refer ELLs into special education to assist the school site in meeting statewide testing goals (Harry, Klingner, Sturges, & Moore, 2002). Recent recommendations for the reauthorization of NCLB may diminish some of the political pressures school sites encounter: stabilize the definition of ELLs; recommended 5 years for ELLs to gain English language proficiency; and set academic achievement expectations (Hopkins, Thompson, Linquanti, Hakuta, & August, 2013).

A caution for pre-referral intervention teams is that once a student is identified as having learning difficulties, pre-referral intervention teams may work to "find" a disability (Cherkes & Ryan, 1985). Likewise, teachers may conclude, prior to a special education assessment, that a student may not be able to adequately perform in the general education classroom without special education support services (Ortiz et al., 2006).

The personal background of the pre-referral intervention team also comes into play when providing academic interventions for Latino ELLs. Research demonstrates that when educators share their own family history with learning English or with immigration, a greater connection is made with the students (Gonzalez, 2010). Given the opportunity to examine their cultural views and personal experiences (Ortiz et al., 2006), educators can better understand their decision-making process for providing interventions to Latino ELLs. The cultural, linguistic, and life experiences of educators influence their perceptions of ELLs. Educators need to be open, and aware of "the ways in which their unconscious cultural perspectives shape and shade their own view of the teaching/learning process" (Craig et al., 2000, p. 7).

A child's economic standing and educator background impact the SST committee's decision-making process. Through an ethnographic study, Knotek (2003b) examined the potential bias of student study teams in the decision-making process of referring African American students for

special education. The study found that during an SST meeting, the referring teacher provided the most negativity and evaluative statements in describing the student attributes. These student descriptions framed the focus of the SST meeting. Knotek (2003b) found that teachers consistently focused on student failings rather than instructional failings during SST discussions. The socioeconomic status of the students' was found to be a critical factor in the team's decision-making process; the lower the student's SES, the more negatively the team presented the student's situation. Interventions were less rigorous for students who posed behavior problems or presented a lower socioeconomic status. Knotek (2003b) suggests that the social makeup of the SST committee impeded rigorous and objective interventions for students who presented behavioral problems.

In summary, the legal requirements to address the educational needs of ELLs, the professional expertise and experience of educators, and the personal and cultural background of the pre-referral intervention team members all play a deciding role in the instructional interventions recommended for Latino ELLs as well as the recommendation made for special education assessment.

Response to Intervention

In the following section I discuss the policies and practices for Response to Intervention of ELLs and the incorporation of culturally and linguistically appropriate practices embedded within RTI to address the needs of Latino ELLs. A final section discusses the recommendations for the special education referral process.

Policy and Definition of RTI

At the elementary school level, most academic and behavioral referrals occur in the first, second, and third grades (Rock & Zigmond, 2001). Prior to granting an assessment for special

education, students must receive opportunities to receive interventions. Only after the student shows no growth or response to these interventions, does a special education assessment occur (MacMillan et al., 1996). A child's learning needs, the degree of appropriateness of the interventions, and the level of teacher implementation (Chalfant & Pysh, 1989) impacts the success of ELL students. However, one of the most important factors in providing for student success (Ortiz et al., 2006) is teacher expertise and professional preparation.

In 2004 the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) required that all students receive tiered interventions prior to being assessed for special education services (Artiles et al., 2010; Guiberson, 2009). The tiered interventions, known as Response to Intervention (RTI), provide early interventions to students that demonstrate academic difficulties. Educators and school sites frequently monitor the student academic progress based on the tiered interventions (Artiles et al., 2010; Brown & Doolittle, 2008). IDEA requires that RTI be grounded in research-based practices. Although critiques of RTI indicate a lack of consideration of the needs of language minority students (Klingner & Edwards, 2006), other research indicates that RTI "has the potential to affect change for English Language Learners" (Brown & Doolittle, 2008, p. 66).

RTI is comprised of three tiers: first tier, second tier and third tier. The first tier "is considered quality instruction" in the general education classroom with ongoing progress monitoring toward academic standards (Klingner & Edwards, 2006, p. 108). Tier two provides a more intensive intervention, usually delivered in a small group by an Intervention Teacher, to those students who have not met the grade level benchmark (Klingner & Edwards, 2006). In tier two, students are provided with targeted instruction to meet specific academic goals (Brown & Doolittle, 2008). Tier three interventions, at times provided on a one-on-one basis or in a small

group (Brown & Doolittle, 2008), is typically reserved for students recommended for special education assessment.

While the RTI research has focused on English dominant student populations, Klingner & Edwards (2006) question how RTI should look for culturally and linguistic diverse students. The following section discusses suggestions for the inclusion of cultural and linguistic components for RTI.

RTI for Culturally and Linguistic Diverse Students. RTI attempts to address equity issues for students placed in special education (Artiles et al., 2010). However, if RTI does not have a foundation in culturally and linguistically appropriate instruction, a higher representation of ELLs in special education classes can occur (Brown & Doolittle, 2008). For the interventions to be culturally and linguistically appropriate they must incorporate the students' cultural and linguistic background (Brown & Doolittle, 2008). Successful RTI programs depend "on teachers having access to appropriate evidenced-based instructional approaches that have been validated with diverse populations" (Klingner & Edwards, 2006, p. 113). Research shows that teachers lack the training and knowledge to teach content to ELLs (Brown & Doolittle, 2008). "Nationally, 39% of teachers have students with limited English proficiency in their classrooms, but only one quarter of those teachers have received training to work with them…preparing culturally responsive teacher is a necessity" (Huerta & Brittain, 2010, p. 383). Therefore, professional development that enhances the cultural competency of school site educators is essential.

With an overrepresentation of minority students in special education, the consideration of appropriate cultural and linguistic interventions can make RTI interventions more successful (Artiles et al., 2010). A multilayer approach in addressing the needs of ELLs needs to be taken

into account through RTI where the home, community, school, and society at large are considered when providing this student population with classroom interventions (Klingner & Edwards, 2006).

Recommendations For The Special Education Referral Process

English Language Learners are more likely to be placed in special education than English Only students (Ortiz et al., 2006). Teachers tend to over-refer students with less than adequate academic performance, with the hope that the student receive special education services (Chalfant & Pysh, 1989). When classroom teachers refer students to the pre-referral intervention teams, academic referrals are taken more seriously than behavioral referrals (Rock & Zigmond, 2001) and boys are referred more often than girls (Del'Homme, Kasari, Forness, & Bagley, 1996). For pre-referral intervention teams to be successful, it is recommended that the team members have professional background in the areas of academic need being presented, conduct classroom observations, create timelines for student follow ups, and be diligent in the record keeping of student growth (Ortiz, et al. 2006). When there is no follow up, teachers become frustrated with the referral process, and see it more of a symbolic rather than a process of true interventions that provide students with the opportunity of academic success through structured interventions (Rock & Zigmond, 2001; Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004). While the effectiveness of the pre-referral intervention team may be determined on a case-by-case basis, Ortiz et al. (2006) argue that the key questions that the pre-referral intervention teams must tackle are "what problem-solving processes are successful, under what conditions, and for which ELLs" (p. 61).

In summary, the research on RTI, acknowledges that interventions need to consider the cultural and linguistic needs of ELLs. Appropriate interventions for ELLs can lead to more appropriate recommendations for these culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Language Acquisition Theory and Practice

The following section presents language acquisition theory, ELLs and apparent disabilities, and instructional strategies and best practices for the instruction of Latino ELLs.

Language Acquisition Theory

ELLs do not perform academically, or linguistically, at the same level as their monolingual age peers. ELLs are essentially playing catch up to perform at the same academic level as their same age monolingual peers. The challenges that ELLs face in acquiring the English language are characterized by basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) (Cummings, 1981). BICS is essentially the social English, or conversational fluency, that ELLs use on the playground. While CALP is the academic English, or academic language fluency, that allows ELLs to participate, comprehend, analyze, and synthesize academic content. Cummins (1981) argues that while BICS can be developed within two years, CALP is a 5-7 year process. English language acquisition differentiates the ability to use English in a social and academic setting. In a study of two San Francisco Bay area districts and Canadian immigrant students, Hakuta, Butler, and Witt (2000) found that it takes ELL students three to five years to develop conversational English language proficiency, and four to seven years to develop academic English proficiency. The length of time that ELLs require to attain CALP, calls for caution in the referral for special education assessment of Latino ELLs. Research suggests that conducting an English special education

assessment on an ELL within the first five years of immigrant status is "likely to seriously underestimate their potential academic abilities" (Cummins, 1981, p. 148).

California's total ELL student enrollment is 37.4%, of which 82.7% of these students are Spanish speaking ELLs (CDE, 2013), yet most of the Latino ELLs are enrolled in English Only classrooms (Huerta & Britttain, 2010). While Latino ELLs may actively participate in oral classroom discussions, they may present different results on standardized school assessments due to a lack of proficient academic English (Huerta & Brittain, 2010).

English Language Learners and Learning Disabilities. In 2001 Congress amended Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and reauthorized it as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). According to NCLB (2001) the federal definition of an English Language Learner is an individual between the ages of three and 21 years old who is preparing, or enrolled in an elementary or secondary school, who was not born in the United States or whose native language is a language other than English. NCLB also defines ELLs as individuals who come from an environment "where a language other than English has had a significant impact on the individual's level of English language proficiency" (Public Law 107-110, Title IX, Part A, Sec. 9101, (25)). An English Language Learner is defined as a student "whose English language proficiency is limited" (Artiles et al., 2010, p. 362).

For the purposes of the literature review, the most significant section of the definition of ELLs refers to the similarities between an ELL and students with learning disabilities. NCLB (2001) defines an ELL as an individual,

> whose difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language may be sufficient to deny the individual - (i) the ability to meet the State's proficient level of achievement on State assessments…(ii) the ability to successfully achieve in

classrooms where the language of instruction is English; or (iii) the opportunity to participate fully in society (NCLB 2001)

According to IDEA (2004), to identify a child as learning disabled, the child must demonstrate that they are not achieving State approved grade level standards in oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skills, reading fluency skills, reading comprehension, mathematics calculation and mathematics problem solving (US Department of Education, 2013). The special education assessment must indicate that any found learning disabilities are not primarily a result of a visual, hearing, or motor disability, mental retardation, emotional disturbance, cultural factors, environmental or economic disadvantage, or Limited English Proficiency (US Department of Education, 2013).

Cultural factors and Limited English Proficiency issues bring caution to the identification of Latino ELLs as learning disabled (Artiles et al., 2010; Rueda et al., 2006). Furthermore, the cultural and linguistic differences of Latino ELLs may "mask, mimic, or be mistaken" (Guiberson, 2009, p. 170) for learning disabilities.

Research shows poverty as a factor linked to a higher representation of learning disabilities in Latino and African American students (Artiles et al., 2010). Latino ELLs not provided with opportunities to develop proficiency in Spanish or in English, have a higher risk for being identified with developmental and learning difficulties, which may lead to inaccurate special education placement (González, 2010).

Research indicates that pre-referral intervention team members often lack the knowledge and training to differentiate between learning difficulties due to language difficulties or due to possible learning disabilities (Brown & Doolittle, 2008; McCardle et al., 2005). With a better understanding of these factors, the pre-referral intervention team is more likely to provide

appropriate instructional interventions (McCardle et al., 2005) or assessment recommendations for Latino ELLs.

In summary, multilayered factors impact the referral process of Latino ELLs. Prereferral intervention teams must consider these students' stage of language acquisition as well as suspected learning disabilities when generating recommendations. Poverty, family background and cultural differences continue to be factors in the overall consideration of special education referral process of Latino ELLs.

Instructional Best Practices for Latino Students

The following sections discuss the instructional strategies and best practices for delivering instruction to Latino ELLs. These practices represent culturally and responsive strategies based on research-based best practices.

Best Practices for Latino ELL Instruction

The traditional instructional strategies utilized in the instruction of ELLs are: Total physical response, (TPR), Shared Writing, Language Experience Writing, Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SADIE), and Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) (Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006). Other strategies recommended are "reciprocal teaching, semantic mapping, priming, marginal gloss, advance organizers (and) the language experience approach" (Hart, 2009, p. 200).

Effective teachers of Latino ELs focus on student cultural background and the linguistic capital they bring to the classroom. Teachers that work effectively with Latino ELLs use practices that are "(a) highly interactive, (b) student –centered, and (c) collaborative" (Huerta & Brittain, 2010, p. 383). Effective teachers must not only consider the academic needs, but also

the context of culture, language learning, family, and social factors that contribute to the educational attainment of Latino ELLs.

An educator that presents culturally and linguistic appropriate instructional strategies makes connections with the student, taking the Latino ELLs' sociocultural context into consideration (Klingner & Edwards, 2006). The educator also sees the students' culture and language as an asset rather than a liability (Brown & Doolittle, 2008). Utilizing the ethnic researcher approach and socio-constructivist framework (González, 2010), educators become advocates for Latino ELLs by demonstrating a social and moral responsibility that allows Latino ELLs to develop "more positive self-concepts and self-esteem, and ultimately their learning and developmental processes" (p. 324). Educators of Latino ELLs working towards effective culturally responsive practices should consider what Villegas and Lucas (2007) present as the six characteristics of culturally responsive teachers: (1) understanding how learners construct knowledge, (2) learning about students' lives, (3) being socio-culturally conscious, (4) holding affirming views about diversity, (5) using appropriate instructional strategies, and (6) advocating for all students.

Research recommends that educators develop cultural competency (Guiberson, 2009), to develop an understanding of the student's background. This is also considered to be "funds of knowledge" (Tinajero, Munter, & Araujo, 2010) where the students' culture, language, and sociocultural context are utilized to create classroom lessons that build on the students' background knowledge. Funds of knowledge provide a context to language learning while also providing the ELL student with the development of content knowledge. Research has proven that the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) has fostered academic growth for ELLs (Echevarria et al., 2006). Another strategy proven to be successful with Latino ELs has been the

Family Book Project, where parent and child write a family life history book together (Tinajero et al., 2010).

In summary, ELL students can achieve academic expectations when provided with instruction that is culturally and linguistically relevant.

Professional Development

The following section defines and presents different types of professional development. The final sections discuss the research and the characteristics of effective professional development.

According to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, a professional development activity is defined as an activity that improves and increases teachers' knowledge of the subject they teach. These activities are not a one day or short-term workshop. The professional development activities are of high quality, sustained, and focus on the classroom instruction. For the purposes of this dissertation, the most pertinent section is that professional development activities,

> are designed to give teachers of limited English proficient children, and other teachers and instructional staff, the knowledge and skills to provide instruction and appropriate language and academic support services to those children… provide instruction in methods of teaching children with special needs (NCLB. Section 9101 (34))

Learning Forward, a professional learning association, has established standards for professional learning. Learning Forward addresses seven areas in professional development: learning communities, leadership, resources, data, learning designs, implementation, and outcomes. The two standards that apply to my research are learning communities and learning designs[1].

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[1] (1) "Learning Communities: Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students occurs within learning communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment" and (2) "Learning Designs:

Types of Professional Development

The term staff development is defined by Sparks and Loucks-Horsley (1989) as "processes that improve the job-related knowledge, skills, or attitudes of school employees" (p. 41). These researchers further posit that staff development can be categorized into five models: (1) individually-guided staff development, (2) observation/assessment, (3) involvement in a development/improvement process, (4) training, and (5) inquiry. For the purposes of my research the latter three models are characteristic of the reflective inquiry sessions presented to the SST committee and research participants. Sparks & Loucks-Horsley (1989) define development/improvement process as professional development that "engages teachers in developing curriculum, designing programs, or engaging in a school improvement process to solve general or particular problems" (p. 41). Teachers begin by identifying a problem, formulating a response, implementing a plan, and finally assessing the program. They define the inquiry model as one in which the teachers focus their interest in one instructional area. Sparks and Loucks-Horsley (1989) define the training model as professional development in which teachers acquire new knowledge, either through individual or group instruction.

Research Focus of Professional Development. In the 1970s, research on in-service teacher training focused on teachers' attitudes toward the in-services (Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1989). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the research changed focus to the effective strategies presented to teachers during in-service training (Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1989). In a meta-analysis of professional development research, Showers, Joyce, and Bennett (1987) found that the research focused on teaching skills rather than focusing on the academic content. In the

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Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students integrates theories, research, and models of human learning to achieve its intended outcomes" (Learning Forward, 2011)

1990s, the research on professional development began to focus on the impact that teacher professional development had on student academic achievement. In the past decade, reflection and program efficacy have become an emphasis in the research on teacher professional development (Burbank & Kauchak, 2003; Ingvarson et al., 2005). Currently, action research has become the focus of delivering professional development (Burbank & Kauchak, 2003).

What the Research Shows about Professional Development. To determine if professional development practices were aligned with research-based effective professional development practices, Darling-Hammond et al., (2009) reviewed nationally represented data collected through National Center for Education Statistics' 2003-04 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) Standards Assessment Inventory (SAI, 2007-08), a measures of teachers' perceptions of professional development received in reference to the NSDC's standards for effective professional development. The researchers found that sustained and intensive professional development relates to gains in student achievement. However, Darling, et al. (2009) found that much of the professional development that teachers receive is short-term, with few opportunities for collaboration amongst educators. Further, the degree of teacher support provided varies among state and school sites. Finally, teachers reported receiving professional development not useful to them. When training school decision-making teams, efforts should be made to ensure that the information presented is research based, sustained over time, and provides participants opportunities for collaboration.

Research has demonstrated that coherent, long-term, and collaborative professional development activities contribute to teacher knowledge and student success. In a nationwide sample of 1,000 teachers, Garet et al., (2001) surveyed teachers that had attended various Eisenhower funded professional activities. The researchers analyzed the self-reported increase in

teacher knowledge, skills, and changes in classroom practices based on the professional development activity attended. Garet et al., (2001) assessed the professional development in three ways:

> the extent to which it builds on what teachers have already learned; emphasizes content and pedagogy aligned with national, state and local standards, frameworks, and assessments; and supports teachers in developing sustained, ongoing professional communication with other teachers who are trying to change their teaching in similar ways. (p. 927)

The researchers found that reform activities, such as study groups, mentoring or coaching, teacher collaborative groups or networks, committees, and activities that take place during the school day, have an important influence on duration. That is, reform activities engage teachers for longer periods of time and involve teachers for longer amounts of contact hours. The results suggest that activities with higher number of contact hours are more concerned with content and coherence to previous professional development experiences. Further, when professional development provides coherence, stronger results are shown in teacher knowledge, practice, and student achievement.

To explore the collaborative relationship within classroom teachers and pre-service teachers, Burbank and Kauchak (2003) examined the effective partnerships between pre-service and in-service teachers. The dyad engaged in a four-step action research process to identify a classroom issue, create a program, and resolve that issue/concern. The four-step process included "the identification of a problem statement, the development of a plan of action, data collection, and finally, an evaluation of outcomes in their teaching" (p. 502). The study found that veteran teachers were more positive about collaborative research as a segway into professional

development, than did the pre-service teachers. The results suggest that engaging both pre and in-service teachers in a collaborative examination of instruction enhances their individual professional development. Therefore, collaborative discussions are essential to the professional development of educators.

Implementation of district-wide professional development protocols has been documented via long-term studies. Research shows the benefits of conducting professional development via structured meeting protocols that promote collaboration and group reflection. In a three-year evaluative case study Burke, Marx, and Berry (2011) investigated a district-wide implementation of professional learning communities (PLC). Specifically, Burke et al. (2011) evaluated the implementation of district-wide implementation of critical friends group (CFG). The findings show that implementation fidelity was a higher concern for the district than was the curricular or instructional innovations generated within the individual critical friends groups at the school sites. Gallimore, Ermeling, Saunders, and Goldenberg, (2009) conducted a 6-year prospective case study of the implementation of recursive cycle of collaborative inquiry. This inquiry framework required a group of teachers generate a goal for learning, address it jointly, implement a plan, use common assessments to monitor student progress, reflect, and move on to a new goal or cycle back if the goal has not been met. Continued administrator support and accountability assisted the collaborative inquiry groups to maintain a focus on their goals. The findings suggest that utilizing a specific protocol for conducting professional development is a productive manner to plan, organize, and execute teacher inquiry. The protocol can assist in generating stronger collaborative dialogue and group reflection.

Characteristics of Effective Professional Development. School districts have struggled with how to effectively deliver professional development to teachers, a component of the NCLB Act

of 2001 (Burke, et. al., 2011). Prior research recommends that professional development be flexible, dynamic, and responsive to the specific needs of a teaching population. Further, research recommends that professional development begin at the knowledge level where teachers are in order to build on their knowledge and skills, (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011).

The Impact of Time Spent on Professional Development. Research shows that effective professional development sessions should be more than a one-time presentation. Thus, professional development should be considered a process, not an event (Guskey, 1991). The duration of professional development is a key component in the effectiveness of the knowledge provided (Birman, Desimone, Porter and Garet, 2000; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Garet, et. al., 2001). Research suggests that providing professional development of less than 14 hours has no effect on student learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). Educators are more likely to engage in deeper discussions about the content and try out new practices when engaged in sustained professional development activities (Garet et al., 2001).

To determine what characteristics constitute effective professional development, Birman et al., (2000) surveyed over 1,000 teachers that had participated in professional development partially funded by the Eisenhower Professional Development Program. The study also included six exploratory case studies and 10 in-depth case studies in five states. The study found context and content to be effective characteristics. Context was defined as the structural features of the professional development activities, and content was identified as the core features of the sessions. Three structural features identified are: (1) form, (2) duration, and (3) participation. While the three content features identified were: (1) content focus, (2) active learning, and (3) coherence. The findings suggest that professional development with a longer duration have stronger focus on the content area being delivered. Therefore, more opportunities are provided

for active learning. Further, a longer duration of professional development has more coherence with teachers' other professional experiences. The researchers argue for collective participation, that is, professional development that allows for discussion amongst educators. Through this collective participation, teachers have the opportunity to integrate their new knowledge to the content they teach. Thus, creating a school culture that is a shared professional culture (Birman, et. al., 2000).

In a review of evaluative professional development studies, Ingvarson et al., (2005) reviewed four studies conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). The review sought to investigate the "relationships between process features of professional development programs, such as active learning and follow-up, and outcome measures, such as teacher practice and efficacy" (p. 12). Through self-reported surveys, teachers were asked to describe the process of learning in the professional development they attended. The survey also inquired how the professional development activities impacted their professional knowledge, their practice, and their efficacy. Further, teachers were asked to indicate the impact that the professional development had on student learning. The findings indicate that the duration of the professional development activity had the strongest impact on the outcomes of individual programs. The findings suggest strong relationship between the content of the professional development and the impact on teacher knowledge. Further, the findings indicate that follow-up is important to teacher efficacy. Finally, the study suggests that active learning impacts teacher practice. Ingvarson et al., (2005) further argue that effective professional development not only delivers content but also gets teachers to utilize research based practices, thus leading to effective teaching.

Teacher Collaboration. A collective participation among groups of teachers that represent the same department, content area, or grade level (Birman, et. al., 2000; Garet et al., 2001) strengthens newly gained teacher knowledge. Research shows that teacher collaboration is key in sustaining newly gained teaching practices. Guskey (1994) posits that optimal mix, the processes of professional development that work best in a particular school setting or school context, at a particular time, further strengthens teacher collaboration. The interpersonal relationships of teachers and the culture of the school organization play a key role in the planning, creating, delivering and supporting of effective professional development.

Research suggests that true collaboration exists when participants demonstrate equity in actions and participation (Burbank & Kauchak, 2003). By broadening the definition of professional development to include the experiences of teachers and their environments, educators have the opportunity to collaborate more often. Educators participating in a collaborative model professional development must foster trust. This trust can then allow participants to engage in professional inquiry and voice concerns about addressing student needs (Burbank and Kauchak, 2003). Through a discussion and reflective process between their peers (Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002), collaboration allows teachers to make their new knowledge public.

Creating a professional space for collaborative inquiry promotes effective strategies to address student needs. In a study of the collaborative teaching between content area teachers and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers, Martin-Beltran and Peercy (2014) found teachers created meditational spaces to co-construct knowledge. The participating teachers reconceptualized teaching goals and modified their teaching practices to more appropriately meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Martin-Beltran and Peercy (2014)

argue that collaboration amongst teachers needs to be thought of “not just as shared teaching practices, but as an opportunity for shared teacher learning" (p. 733). Via a dialogic partner, teachers in this study co-constructed knowledge about how to more effectively teach ELLs. Teachers articulated their newly created knowledge as they modified their teaching practices to meet the needs of their ELL students. Collaborative inquiry groups work together to create a space for reflection and the development of new knowledge. In a collaborative inquiry environment, teachers and members in decision-making teams can co-construct knowledge and further strengthen the common knowledge of all participants, which further promotes targeted instruction of Latino ELLs. Long-term collaborative inquiry encourages reflective conversations amongst decision-making teams.

Incorporating Teacher Reflection. Research shows that professional development has not provided teachers opportunities to utilize reflection as a tool to improve their skills (Burke, et. al., 2011). Research suggests that building reflection into professional development activities improves classroom practice. Reflection allows an educator to assess the process and content of new knowledge (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011). A reflective educator can be a better consumer of research and a better participant in research discussions (Burbank & Kauchak, 2003). Reflection is central to professional growth (Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1989).

Teacher attitude toward professional development activities impacts the results of new learning. However, Ingvarson et al., (2005) suggest that professional development programs should focus on delivering a model of effective practice rather than on changing the attitudes of teachers. Research suggests that educators implement new knowledge when the new program, innovation, or intervention becomes a normal practice within the school site. Therefore, teachers can utilize the new skills as part of their professional repertoire (Guskey, 1994).

In summary, research shows that effective professional development considers the duration, coherence, and collaboration among the participants. Reflective conversations and teacher attitude towards new knowledge also impact the success of the professional development activities. A structured protocol that promotes collaborative inquiry and delivers professional development that is coherent to the school community proves to be the most effective manner in which to strengthen the common knowledge of decision-making teams. The following section presents the notion of distributed expertise of teacher groups working together to address an identified problem.

Distributed Expertise

The SST committee represents a multidisciplinary team with varying levels of professional expertise among the individual members. The stronger the individual knowledge of each committee member, the stronger the collective knowledge of the SST committee becomes. Therefore, distributed expertise provides for the creation of common knowledge within the SST committee.

Researchers define distributed expertise as the ability “to work with others to both expand understandings of the complexity of a child’s trajectory; and to respond to that complexity in ways that recognise the priorities of others" (Edwards, Lunt, & Stamou, 2010, p. 31). Edwards et al., (2010) further extend the idea of distributed expertise to include relational agency, requiring that “practitioners are not only able to recognise and draw on the expertise that is distributed across local systems, but also to contribute to it" (p. 41). The notion of distributed expertise therefore challenges SST committee members to explore and deepen their professional knowledge.

The creation of a new professional learning space encourages professional expertise to flourish and promotes a change in team communication. In a five case study Edwards et al., (2010) sought to determine the newly identified professional spaces of collaboration with high school staff and outside service agencies working together to address the needs of at risk students. The study found a change in the relational agency within the collaboration and communication with school staff and outside agencies. This change allowed for distributed expertise to emerge. The new collaborative spaces allowed for the distributed expertise of providers to enhance the relational agency among the school staff.

In a later study, Edwards (2011) continued to develop the concept of relational agency by indicating that it "involves a capacity for working with others to strengthen purposeful responses to complex problems" (p. 34). According to Edwards (2011) this occurs in a two stage process: (1) the motives and resources of colleague's are recognized, and (2) aligning our own responses to the team's interpretations while expanding the ideas. In this study, Edwards (2011) looks at the learning that occurs when individuals, representing different facets of student support systems, gain an understanding of each other's purpose and practice that lead to team collaboration. The study suggests that the new collaborative working space allows for the development of common knowledge. Common knowledge is defined by Edwards (2012) as " the construction of the knowledge that underpins the exercise of relational expertise and mediates relational agency." (p. 27)

Understanding common knowledge between agencies was further developed by Edwards' (2012) review on the working relationships of different child agencies charged with understanding and responding to the complex process of at-risk students. Edwards reviewed three studies that focused on the work that senior leaders of children's services and schools do to

create a horizontal linkage between practices. These inter-professional collaborations in children's services generated common knowledge. The study found that the common knowledge generated was utilized as a resource for the individuals working with the at-risk children. Edwards (2012) found that a future oriented framework, provided these inter-professional collaborative networks with stability and responsive practices.

Without a specific focus, a team of educators can miss the mark on supporting their student population. The distributed leadership of college professors, was examined by Daniel and Peercy (2014) in a 13-month case study that analyzed the supports and challenges offered to students in a Masters teaching program in preparation for teaching elementary English Learners. The researchers found that while the participating educators wanted to support the teacher candidates in their preparation for teaching English Learners, no one took responsibility for implementing a curriculum on how to teach English learners. The educators did not work collaboratively or cohesively to attain this goal. While each individual participant had the distributed leadership to implement a curriculum, no plan was collaboratively developed on how to teach future educators of ELLs. The study suggests that when a collaborative team has and no group reflection, the end result is an underserved student population.

In summary, the distributed expertise among participants develops and strengthens the common knowledge of the group. The relational agency within the decision-making team allows for collaborative discussions that both bring to evidence the expertise of individual members while adding to the group's knowledge in making better-informed decisions.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In the preceding chapters I have argued that that there is a misrepresentation of Latino ELLs in special education programs (Artiles et al., 2002; Calhoon et al., 2007; Figueroa, 2005). The need to accurately identify English Language Learners (ELLs), as Specific Learning Disabled (SLD), is a concern for the Student Success Team (SST). Through action research, a series of co-created reflective inquiry sessions were presented to the SST committee, general education classroom teachers, and school support staff to discuss the distributed expertise and strengthen the common knowledge of participants in the areas of language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction. Thus, generating more accurate linguistic and culturally appropriate instructional interventions for Latino ELLs in the SST referral process. The co-construction of the reflective inquiry sessions involved the identification of participants' knowledge base and professional expertise in the areas of language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction. Through self-identification of distributed expertise amongst the SST committee, members co-facilitated the reflective inquiry sessions. The aim of this action research dissertation was to bring to bear the knowledge of the SST committee members as they participated in the decision-making process for generating instructional interventions for Latino ELLs. This action research is a descriptive study about the process of reflective inquiry as a professional development intervention to document the shift in conversation and the decision-making process of SST committees. This is not a study of the efficacy of reflective inquiry as it pertains to the SST decision-making process. The intervention

provided to the SST committee was a series of three reflective inquiry sessions to discuss the topics of language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction without the need to rush to judgment during a high stakes 30-minute SST meeting. The reflective inquiry sessions provided the decision-making group with the time and space to engage in professional inquiry by sharing distributed expertise and developing the common knowledge of the SST committee members.

Through reflective inquiry sessions, school site teachers, support staff, and SST members, identified elements of language acquisition and learning disabilities to provide appropriate intervention recommendations when supporting an ELL student through the special education referral process (Orosco, 2010; Ortiz et al., 2006; Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004). Thus, the decision-making process of generating instructional interventions to Latino ELLs can be better understood by answering the following research questions:

1. How does a school leader create a reflective learning community among Student Success Team (SST) committee members to use their distributed expertise in the areas of language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction?
    A. How does the leader develop common knowledge within the SST committee?
    B. What reflections are revealed as the SST committee make decisions concerning Latino ELLs in the special education referral process?

I expected to gather answers to these questions by observing a conversational change in the research participants. I hypothesized that if SST committee members engaged in group-reflection on issues related to Latino English Language Learners, they would utilize their newly gained knowledge while generating recommendations for students during SST meetings. I thought that reflective inquiry could bring to light the distributed expertise amongst the SST

committee members and further develop the common knowledge amongst the group, allowing for more informed decisions of Latino ELLs during SST meetings.

Research Design

This qualitative action research project was conducted at Alvarado Elementary School (a pseudonym), an elementary school site where I was a participant observer. Action research is a four step cyclical process: planning, taking action, evaluating, and further planning (Coghlan & Brannick, 2007). An action research study is a collaborative and democratic partnership. My action research dissertation aimed to investigate the distributed expertise and knowledge of the SST committee members, with a specific focus on Latino ELLs (Coghlan & Brannick, 2007). Conducting this study as an action research project was appropriate due to the active learning that collaborative results provide to support educators (Coghlan & Brannick, 2007) of Latino ELLs. To conduct this study as a quantitative study would not yield in-depth information into the decision-making process of the SST committee. Conducting the study as a qualitative study, without the components of action research, would not create the trust and buy-in required of reflective inquiry groups. Co-creating a series of reflective inquiry sessions provided ownership of this project for the SST committee members and school site teachers. This collaborative process allowed for a better-informed decision-making process when considering instructional recommendations for Latino ELLs in the SST referral process.

An action research approach is a useful design to develop a collective understanding of language needs, suspected learning disabilities, and cultural differences due to the "personal investment of the partners, which increases learning and implementation of selected knowledge and skills" (Salm, 2014, p. 95). Further, the action research framework allows the participants to co-create school change by identifying a problem and generating a solution as a team. The

iterative cycle of gathering data, presenting data to the school site stakeholders, evaluating the data, and planning the next steps (Coghlan & Brannick, 2007) is a suitable method for this research project. Action research is an appropriate methodological design because the aim of the research is to enhance the common knowledge of the Student Success Team committee members. In other words, the school team and I, as a school leader, collaboratively problem-solved to gain new understanding (Coghlan & Brannick, 2007) of best practices for Latino ELLs facing academic difficulties, whether due to language acquisition or suspected learning disabilities.

This qualitative action research project is a two part descriptive study. Part one focused on the discussion in the reflective inquiry group sessions; specifically the SST committee's reflection of how to improve the decision-making process: what changes do the participants recommend to the SST Referral form; what student data does the committee need to review and gather to make more informed decisions for interventions provided to Latino ELLs; and recommendations of how to ensure that SST committee generate recommendations that consider language acquisition, suspected learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction. Part two observed the dynamics of the SST committee members during SST meetings, in particular a focus on the questions being asked about the student being discussed and the factors impacting decisions.

The action research project and proposed goals were presented at the end of a staff meeting during April of 2014. The SST committee members, classroom teachers, and school support staff were informed of the goals and timeline of the action research project. During the school staff meeting, an open invitation was made to the certificated staff to participate in a series of three reflective inquiry sessions and the observation of eight SST meetings. Staff

members were informed that participation in the research was voluntary and non-evaluative. They were informed that upon completion of a demographic questionnaire, they would receive a $5 Starbucks card. All participants completing the three inquiry sessions would receive a teacher grab bag, in the value of $50. The staff was also informed that as part of the data collection, they would be requested to write a reflective inquiry journal entry at the conclusion of each of the inquiry session. Consent forms were provided to all certificated staff to audio record and transcribe the reflective inquiry group sessions and the observed SST meetings.

Structure of Reflective Inquiry Sessions

The intervention that I, as a school leader, provided to the SST committee and school site members was the presentation of three reflective inquiry group sessions following the observations of SST meetings. The goal of the reflective inquiry sessions were to present and discuss the issues of language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction with SST committee members to make better informed decisions at SST meetings. After reviewing the data on the demographic questionnaire, I conferred with participants, who self-identified expertise in the area of language arts, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction, for feedback and input on the agendas planned for each of the reflective inquiry sessions.

Prior to the presentation of the reflective inquiry session on English Language Development, I shared the presentation outline with the Resource Teacher to provide feedback on any changes recommended to the presentation. The Special Day Teacher provided input to the outline prepared for the session on learning disabilities. A third grade general education teacher, receiving her Masters in Education with an emphasis on differentiated learning, contributed her insight with the agenda for the culturally relevant instructional strategies inquiry session. Their

feedback was incorporated into the agenda for each reflective inquiry group session. Each of these three teachers co-facilitated the inquiry session for which they provided feedback.

An outline of the reflective inquiry sessions was generated to provide structure to the reflective inquiry sessions. However, because this project is based on action research, the content of the reflective inquiry sessions was influenced and modified by the information provided in the demographic questionnaire, SST meetings observations, and the self identified expertise of the SST committee members.

I created a structured agenda for the reflective inquiry sessions. The structure allowed for continuity of conversation and reflection within each inquiry session (see Appendix A for detailed agenda). The 60-minute reflective inquiry sessions were held after school from 2:50 p.m. to 3:50 p.m. Due to several afterschool ELD intervention classes, PTA meetings, and teacher union meetings, the reflective inquiry meetings were held in different classrooms at the school site: the ELD learning lab, the Parent Center, and the Intervention classroom. Snacks were provided during the reflective inquiry sessions.

Each session began with a silent reading of an excerpt from literature discussing language acquisition, learning disabilities, or culturally relevant instruction. The participants were then asked to respond to the passage via group discussion. I then presented summaries from research based-practices in the three focus areas, followed by a group discussion. Next, the participants reviewed an SST referral of a 1st grade ELD 2 student, Sofia (pseudonym), as a reference for generating changes to the SST referral form relevant to the points of the group's discussion (this SST referral had been discussed and decisions/recommendations had been made for the student at an earlier SST meeting). Participants were presented with a second excerpt from research literature. The participants again were asked to silently read and respond through group

discussion. Participants had an opportunity to contribute closing comments and suggestions for the following inquiry session. Lastly, participants were instructed to respond to four closing questions via a journal reflection; these reflections were handed to me and were not shared with the other research participants.

Observation of SST Meetings. The SST meeting observations took place in the Resource classroom before school from 7:30 a.m. to 8:00 a.m. and during the school day during the months of April and May, 2014. Alvarado Elementary typical holds SST meetings every Thursday morning at 7:30 a.m., prior to the start of the instructional day. Due to the high number of SST referrals during the Spring Semester of 2014, Alvarado Elementary conducted SST meetings twice a week, on Tuesday and Thursday mornings at 7:30 a.m. The school site principal granted additional funding to allow for three school days to conduct SST meetings to accommodate for the high number of SST referrals. This action research project had no influence on the high volume of SST referrals, nor the additional scheduling of SST meetings. The high volume of student SST referrals during the Spring Semester of 2014 were due to teacher and parent concerns for a child's lack of academic progress after the second reporting period, February 2014, of which some teachers indicated that a student could possibly be retained. The school culture at Alvarado Elementary is to conduct an SST meeting for all students recommended for grade retention.

I observed eight SST meetings during the months of April and May 2014. I observed four meetings during the 7:30am time block on a Tuesday and a Thursday morning; and four meetings during the school days assigned to hold SST meetings per the additional funding provided by the school site principal. The first SST meeting was observed prior to the first reflective inquiry group session to gather baseline data of the structure and dynamics of the SST

committee. After the delivery of each reflective inquiry session, two SST meeting observations were conducted. A final SST meeting observation was conducted at the conclusion of the observation cycle to gather data on changes in procedure, questioning, or recommendations presented by the SST committee members.

All eight SST meetings discussed ELL students. Permission was requested of each participating SST member and classroom teacher initiating the SST referral, to audio record and transcribe the SST meeting. Parents of students discussed during SST meetings were informed of the research project. Parent permission was requested to gain access to their child's SST referral information, to audio record and transcribe the SST meeting. Parents were informed that their comments during SST meetings would not be utilized in the write up of this research study. One SST member, a classroom teacher, chose not to participate in the action research project; while the teacher participated in one of the observed SST meetings, the teacher's comments were not transcribed nor included in the this research.

The Resource Teacher coordinated the SST meetings at Alvarado Elementary. She collaborated with the school psychologist and myself, the Assistant Principal, in scheduling the SST meetings. The SST committee members consist of the Resource Teacher, the school psychologist, the assistance principal, a Special Day Teacher, and two general education teachers. At each SST meeting the Resource Teacher, school psychologist, the Assistant Principal, one of the three classroom teacher members, the referring classroom teacher, and the child's parent met to discuss the concerns identified in the teacher generated SST referral. The Intervention Coordinator attended the SST meeting if the student in question had participated in the school site's Intervention Program. All SST meetings were held in the Resource classroom; the classroom had no door to provide full privacy during the SST meeting, at times students,

parents, or school staff walked through the SST meeting to get to an adjoining classroom that also has no door for privacy. During the SST meetings, I, as the administrator, began the meeting by stating the purpose of an SST meeting, the structure of the conversation, and the intent to generate interventions for the student being discussed. The Resource Teacher was the note taker for every meeting. The discussion followed the format on the SST Summary Form (Appendix E): description of the child's strengths at home and in school; known information of student performance and tried classroom modifications; stated student concerns; questions regarding student progress; the generating strategies, identifying action steps to be taken by assigned individuals during particular timelines and the scheduling of a follow-up SST meeting. The Resource Teacher and I took turns facilitating the meetings. On occasions when the school bell rang to indicate the start of the school day, the teachers reported to their classrooms and the Resource Teacher, the school psychologist, and I continued with the meeting until we finalized the actions-steps recommended for student supports.

Site Selection and Background

Alvarado Elementary, with a student population of 636 students, is located in a large urban school district in Southern California. Alvarado Elementary is typical of an elementary school site serving a Pre-K through 6th grade student population in an urban school setting. The school serves students from pre-school through 6th grade via English Immersion programs from Pre-K through 6th grade, a 4-6th grade Special Day class, a K- 6th grade Resource Specialist Program, a K- 6th Spanish-English Dual Language Program, and pre-school students who only receive school site speech and language therapy services. 81% of the students at Alvarado are economically disadvantaged. ELL students make up 42% of the student population, of which

97% are Spanish speaking. Latino students represent 88% of the student population (CDE, 2015).

The teaching staff, range from seven to 23 years of teaching experience. A fifth grade teacher and one 6th grade teacher hold a National Board Certification. Most of the teaching staff either hold a CLAD or a BCLAD, a credential that exposed the teachers to the instruction of culturally diverse students. Eleven of the 17 teachers who completed the staff questionnaire hold a Masters degree, the majority of these Masters degrees are in the field of education. 55% of the teaching staff are Latino, Anglo teachers represent 32% of the teaching staff, and 13% of the teachers are of Asian descent (CDE, 2015).

During the 2013-2014 school-year, Alvarado Elementary conducted a total of 62 SST meetings; 39 were initial meetings and 23 were follow-up meetings. Fifty-two of the SSTs referrals were based on academic concerns, 8 referrals based on student behavioral needs, and 2 SST referrals were due to concerns with student speech and language delays. Of the follow-up SST meetings twelve students were recommended to continue participation in the Intervention Program with an additional recommended follow up meeting during the 2014-2015 school year. Four of the students recommended to continue with the Intervention Program were also recommended for grade retention. Eleven of the 23 follow-up SST meetings led to referrals for special education evaluation to determine eligibility and support services. Seventeen of the 39 initial SST meetings resulted in scheduling a follow-up SST meeting for the 2014-2015 school-year. Fifteen students were recommended to participate in the Intervention Program for the remainder of the school year.

Structure and Membership of SST Committees

Throughout my years as an educator, I have participated in SST meetings as the referring classroom teacher, as school instructional support member, and as the school site administrator. Reasons for SST referrals have ranged form social, behavioral, and academic concerns. Most SST meeting that I have participated in, have focused on students' failure to meet grade level standards and expectations in the area of reading.

Typical SST meetings are conducted within a 30 minute meeting session where a school nurse, the referring classroom teacher, the school psychologist, a school administrator, instructional support staff, and the parent discuss the child's strengths, accommodations and supports already provided, areas of concerns, and an action plan to best support the student in question. An SST Follow-Up meeting is scheduled to, once again, gather as a team, to discuss progress and the need for further student supports. The SST committee will typically recommend a student for special education assessment after several SST meetings have been conducted and student participation in school site Intervention Program proves to be unsuccessful for the students academic gain.

At times, SST members may only present student weaknesses, focusing in on what the student cannot do, and their inability to met grade level standards. Other times, classroom teachers attend the SST meeting unprepared, without student work samples or student assessment data. At times, the classroom teacher begins the SST meeting by stating that the child needs a special education assessment, prior to presenting any data on the student's past performance. Collaborative SST meetings occur when the classroom teacher presents student data, work samples, and student strengths alongside areas of weakness, classroom

accommodations already provided to the students and engages in conversation to better support the student achieve grade level expectations.

At the beginning of the school year, all teachers at Alvarado Elementary sign up for adjunct committees, such as the Book Fair Committee and the Winter Program Committee, to support school activities during the year. Participation in committees takes into account the time commitment required to complete the adjunct duties. Classroom teachers that volunteer to participate as core SST committee members are not required to participate in a second adjunct committee due to the high number of hours required of the teachers during the school year.

A unique characteristic of the SST committee at Alvarado Elementary is that the classroom teachers that participate as core SST members participate in every third SST meeting to avoid teacher burnout. SST members are not compensated for their participation on the SST committee. Therefore, this school accommodation does not overburden any one teacher in particular. The school practice at Alvarado Elementary is that the school psychologist, the Resource Teacher, and a school site assistant principal be core SST members. School support staff, such as the School Coordinator and the Intervention Teacher, participated in SST meetings that discussed students they had serviced in their respective intervention programs.

Site Access

As the Assistant Principal at the school site where I conducted this action research project, I was the administrator in charge of the special education program. My duties as a school site administrator, during the 2013-2014 school year, did not involve the evaluation of the teaching staff. Gaining access to the members of the pre-referral intervention team required me to be honest and upfront about the research study with the SST committee members and the

school certificated staff. Most importantly, I informed the school staff that participation in the study would not be evaluative of their performance.

At the end of a staff meeting in the late Spring Semester of 2014, I invited the staff to participate in the action research study. The goals of the project were shared: to identify the distributed expertise of teachers and the SST committee members to determine how issues of language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction are considered throughout the decision-making process when generating and recommending interventions for Latino ELLs in the referral process.

The project was presented to the school site administrator, the SST committee, and school staff. Parents, whose children were discussed during an observed SST meeting, were also notified of the project, and provided with a consent form to grant access to their child's SST referral documents. Parents were informed that their comments during observed and transcribed SST meetings were not be utilized in the write up of this project. I spent time with each group informing them of my research, and explicitly articulated that my research would not be used to evaluate teacher performance.

Sample Selection

Five teachers and four support staff members volunteered to participate in this action research project. A classroom teacher on the core SST committee chose not to participate in the study; statements made by this teacher were not incorporated into this study. Research participants included the Resource Specialist teacher, the school psychologist, four general education teachers, one Special Day, and myself, as a research participant. The Intervention Coordinator and the Bilingual Coordinator also participated in the research study. One of the general education teachers, a 3rd grade classroom teacher, participated in the reflective inquiry

sessions, but was not a referring classroom teacher for any of the eight SST meetings observed. All the participants in this study were women; two of the participants were Filipino, one was of Asian descent, one was Anglo, and four of the participants were Latina. Pseudonyms were used for all participants.

The Resource Teacher, Diane, has taught 2 years in special education outside the U.S. and has been a Resource Teacher at Alvarado Elementary for the past eight years. She has an understanding of conversational Spanish, holds a Mild to Moderate Special Education teaching credential and had recently completed her Autism Teaching Certificate. The school psychologist, Sandra, has worked in the District for seven years, and has an understanding of conversational Spanish. Penelope, the Special Day Teacher, has taught 1st through 6th grade special education students for a total of 13 years, five as a substitute teacher, and eight years as a fully credentialed Special Day Teacher. During this action research study, Penelope taught the 4th-6th span Special Day class. She holds a Mild to Moderate Special Education teaching credential and had recently completed her Autism Teaching Certificate.

Three general education teachers participated in the SST committee at the research site. Valerie has been a 1st grade teacher for 20 years, Vanessa has taught 1st through 6th grade for 18 years, and Carmen has been a general education teacher for eight years, teaching 3rd through 5th grade. Carmen teaches in the Spanish Dual Language Program as the English teacher, she is currently enrolled in a Masters of Education program focusing on differentiated learning.

Valerie is a core member of the SST committee; she was also the referring classroom teacher for three of the students of the SST meetings observed. Vanessa is not a core member of the SST committee, but she was the referring teacher of four students that were discussed during the observed SST meetings. Carmen agreed to participate in the reflective inquiry sessions; she

was not a referring teacher for any of the observed SST meetings nor was she a core member of the SST committee.

All three general education teachers were female. All three teachers can speak Spanish, yet only Valerie has academic knowledge of the Spanish language. All three general education teachers have participated in extensive English Language Arts training and English Language Development training provided by the school district.

Kristine, the Intervention Teacher, has been a teacher at Alvarado Elementary for 20 years; she has taught kindergarten through 6th grade; she has been the Intervention Teacher for the past three years. Alicia, the School Coordinator, has been a teacher at Alvarado Elementary for 18 years, teaching grades kindergarten through 3rd grade; she has been the school Coordinator for the past eight years. Both Kristine and Alicia are fluent Spanish speakers; they both have a Bilingual, Cross-cultural, Language and Academic Development credential (BCLAD) and have participated in extensive professional development in the areas of language arts and English Language Development.

As the participant observer in this research, I hold a general education teaching credential, a BCLAD, and an administrative credential. I have been a general education teacher, a bilingual teacher, a Spanish Dual Language teacher, Spanish Literacy Coach, and a Writing Coach. I earned a Masters in Language, Literacy, and Culture and a second Masters in Educational Administration. The knowledge and expertise I have gained in my 17 years as a public school educator, specifically my knowledge and expertise in the area of language acquisition and knowledge of linguistically and culturally diverse students was shared with the research participants during this action research study. This project aims to identify the distributed expertise of the SST committee members in order to generate the most appropriate

and adequate instructional interventions for Latino ELLs referred to the pre-referral intervention team.

These individual school members, collectively, provide supports, interventions, and make the decision to assess a student for special education services. Professional background, professional bias, and personal life experiences influence the decision-making process of the individual SST committee members (Cherkes & Ryan, 1985; Craig et al., 2000; Garcia et al., 1988; McCardle et al., 2005; Ortiz et al., 2006). The goal of this research is to utilize reflective inquiry practices to get at the core of the decision-making process of the pre-referral intervention team as they recommend interventions for Latino ELLs.

Data Collection

Review of School Documents

The basis of this action research was that the school site administrator support enhances the distributed expertise of a school decision-making team. Data collection methods included: review of school documents, demographic questionnaire, direct observation of reflective inquiry sessions, journal entries, and direct observation of SST meetings. In utilizing qualitative data collection, I was able to describe the process of reflective inquiry in the decision-making process of the SST committee when discussing Latino ELLs.

A review of the school District's Student Success Team manual was reviewed to gather information of the standard protocol and procedures that is stipulated by the school district on the purpose, procedure, and expectations of SST meetings (LAUSD, 2012). School site weekly bulletins were reviewed to gather information on the communication of SST meetings scheduled. I reviewed the SST monthly meeting calendar and the notices provided to classroom teachers and SST committee members of upcoming SST meetings. I also reviewed the school binder where all

the SST Summary meetings notes are stored to gather information on the number of SST meetings held during the school year and the outcome of each meeting. I accessed the school site demographic data from the CDE and school website. Lastly, I reviewed an SST referral of a 1st grade ELD 2 student, Sofia (a pseudonym), that would be utilized during the reflective inquiry sessions as a working SST referral to reference for generating changes to the SST referral form.

Demographic Questionnaire

A demographic questionnaire was presented to the certificated staff at the end of a staff development meeting. The questionnaire gathered data on years of experience, types of credentials earned, and area of self reported area of expertise. The questionnaire also asked the participants to self-report training received and level of knowledge and expertise in the areas of language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally appropriate instruction (Appendix B). The questionnaire took no more than 5 minutes to complete.

Reflective Inquiry Group Meeting Observations. Three reflective inquiry sessions were conducted during this research study. The first session focused on language acquisition issues, the second on learning disabilities, and the third on culturally relevant instruction. I co-facilitated each session with a research participant that self-identified as an expert in each particular area, the Resource Specialist teacher, the Special Day Teacher, and a 3rd grade general education teacher, respectively. Each session followed the same structure to allow for structured conversations and reflection amongst the research participants (see Appendix A for detailed agenda). Each reflective inquiry session was audio-recorded on an iPhone and transferred to DropVox. All three reflective inquiry sessions were transcribed verbatim. The participants' confidentiality was maintained by assuring that personally identifying information obtained was kept strictly confidential. All participants were given pseudonyms in transcriptions from the

audio-recording. All students discussed in the SST meetings and reflective inquiry sessions were also given pseudonyms. All transcriptions were kept in a locked file cabinet during this research project. All audio-recordings and transcriptions were destroyed at the end of the research study.

Journal Entries. Participants completed a reflection journal at the end of each reflective inquiry session to document questions, perceptions, and new knowledge. The journal entries were transcribed to refer to as a data source of teacher reflection. Participants reflected on the following questions: (1) What do you feel you learned today? (2) What do you think were your greatest contributions today? (3) How will today's discussion impact your decision-making process at the next SST meeting? (4) What questions do you have about today's topic? The journal entries were a data source to document the professional change in the knowledge of language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction.

SST meeting observations. Data were collected from the eight SST meetings observed in the months of April and May, 2014. The meetings were audio-recorded on an iPhone and transferred to DropVox. All eight meeting observations were transcribed verbatim. The participants' confidentiality was maintained by assuring that personally identifying information obtained was kept strictly confidential. All participants were given pseudonyms in transcriptions from the audio-recording. All transcriptions were kept in a locked file cabinet during this research project. All audio-recordings and transcriptions were destroyed at the end of the research study.

Eight SST meeting observations were conducted; one observation was conducted prior to the first reflective inquiry session; two SST meetings were observed after each reflective inquiry session; the eighth, and final, SST meeting observation was conducted to gather data on any significant changes presented by the SST committee when discussing an ELL student. All

students discussed at these meetings were English Learners. One kindergarten and one first grade student were identified as ELD level 1; one first grade and one 2nd grade student were ELD 2; and four second grade students were identified as ELD level 3. During the SST meeting observations, one referring classroom teacher opted out of the research study; her statements, and the Spanish translation to the parent, were audio-recorded but not transcribed nor referenced in this research project.

During the first SST meeting observation I utilized a one-page observation sheet to document the seating arrangement, individuals present, and discussion points addressed. Due to the close proximity of the seating arrangement during the SST meetings, the observation sheet became a distraction to research participants as they continuously turned to read the notes I made on the observation sheet. I made a determination to discontinue the use of the observation sheet during the SST meetings to allow for the continued flow of discussion during the SST meeting.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was aimed at both describing and understanding the SST committee's decision-making process as a result of reflective inquiry (See Table 1). The transcripts from the SST meetings and reflective inquiry sessions were the primary data sources for data analysis. The journal entries and the demographic questionnaire provided additional data of the pre-referral intervention team's decision-making process.

First, I began the data analysis by reading through the transcripts of the eight SST meeting observations and three reflective inquiry sessions. Next, I color-coded the participants' responses that addressed the areas of distributed expertise, the discussion of language acquisition, suspected learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction.

Table 1
Alignment of Methods for Data Collection and Analysis

Research Question	Concept	Data Collection Method(s)	Data Analysis Method(s)
1) How does a school leader create a reflective learning community among Student Success Team (SST) committee members to use their distributed expertise in the areas of language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction?	What supports did the school leader provide?	Structure of inquiry sessions	Participant responses to the structure provided
		Reflective Inquiry session Agendas	Thematic open coding was utilized to document participant responses
	What are the areas of expertise of the SST committee members?	Demographic questionnaire	Self-reported expertise was compared across the school staff
		Distributed expertise/knowledge chart activity	Self perception was compared to how other participants perceived their colleague's level of expertise
1A) How does the leader develop common knowledge within the SST committee	How do SST members make more informed decisions?	Reflective inquiry journals	Participant statements during reflective inquiry sessions were utilized to determine aspects of expertise and professional knowledge
		Demographic questionnaire	
		Questions asked during SST meetings	
1B) What reflections are revealed as the SST committee make decisions concerning Latino ELLs in the special education referral process?	Decision making process	Questions asked during SST meetings	
		Questions asked during reflective inquiry sessions	Written reflections were analyzed to gain an understanding of what changes topic discussion made in the decision-making process
		Reflective Inquiry Journal	
	Changes in the process	Final decisions during SST meetings	Written reflections were coded, open coding was utilized

I then compared the themes generated in the demographic questionnaire, the SST meetings, the reflective inquiry sessions, and the reflective journal, to cross check the key characteristics of the reflective process of the SST committee members. As data were analyzed themes emerged: participation in the Intervention Program, presentation of student data, strategies recommended during SST meetings, structure and purpose of SST meetings, and sharing of expertise. I then read and coded all transcripts a second time to confirm coding categories across the data sets. Next, I reviewed the themes that emerged from the transcripts of the SST meetings and reflective inquiry sessions, and journal entries to identify common themes among these data. I then compared the transcripts of the SST meetings, the reflective inquiry sessions, and the reflective journal entries to triangulate thematic statements made by the

research participants. I created a separate chart for each of the themes that emerged and compared participants' responses in chronological order to document changes over time in the decision-making process. This allowed for a review of the data in terms of timeline of statements generated by participants in relation with the topic of discussion during the reflective inquiry session. A final thematic coding was identified. Themes observed in the different data sets represent key characteristics of: purpose of SST meetings, benefits of reflective conversations, professional knowledge and expertise levels, description of student performance through data and documentation, the utilization of questions as a decision-making tool, and factors that impact the decision-making process. Data were analyzed to find themes and categories descriptive of how distributed expertise was presented, shared, and developed amongst the decision-making team.

Triangulation

Triangulation occurred through the collection of the multiple forms of data, and then cross-checking for similar themes across the data sources. The data were incorporated into key characteristics of thematic categories. Themes from one data source were compared to other data sources. The triangulation of journal entries, transcription of SST meetings and reflective inquiry sessions, and the review the school site documents (Merriam, 2009) supported the research study's key characteristics of themes within the data.

Assumptions

I have made several assumptions in conducting this research. One assumption is that the SST committee has an interest in changing its practice to be more inclusive of culturally and linguistic appropriate instruction. Another assumption is that SST committee is willing to share

their professional and personal biases in relation to the supports provided for Latino ELL students. An assumption is being made that the SST committee members have varying levels of distributed expertise in language acquisition, of students who exhibit a suspected learning disability, and of culturally relevant instruction. A final assumption is that the research participants are willing to share their expertise and knowledge with their colleagues.

Ethical Issues

During this action research project, I was a participant observer at an elementary school site where I am the administrator in charge of the special education program. While I did not evaluate any of the certificated staff, or any of the research participants, my role as administrator was taken into account as I conducted my research and engaged with the school staff. I was diligent in informing the staff that I am a graduate student researcher as well as a school site administrator. I was cognizant of the ethical issues of protecting the privacy of the school staff, students, and parents. I explicitly stated that my research findings were not to be utilized as evaluative measures for teacher performance.

Confidentiality: This study was conducted as an action research project at an elementary school site where I am employed. I assured the participants that anonymity would be utilized to the greatest extent. Due to the small number of research participants, the responses of research participants could be easily identified. Steps were taken to protect the individual participant so that responses may not adversely impact their employment status or working relationships at the school site. Pseudonyms were provided to all research participants so as not to identify any particular individual. Students discussed during SST meetings were also provided with a pseudonym.

Informed consent: All staff were informed of the action research project, invited to participate, and given the opportunity not to be part of the action research project. A list of non-participants was kept to identify which school site staff opted out of the research. No observations, conversations, or SST meeting information generated by those individuals was utilized in the research project.

Participant observer: As an administrator at the school site where the action research was conducted, I informed the participants that the research was not to be utilized as evaluative of teacher performance, nor that participation in the research project was mandatory. At the beginning of all observed SST meetings, the committee was informed that the information presented and discussed would be utilized for the purposes of the research project. As a participant observer, I kept in mind to make decisions about reporting activities that were illegal or harmful to students or other school staff.

Validity/ Credibility

The validity and reliability of the data gathered during interviews was insured when I presented key characteristics of thematic categories to the SST committee through member checks (Merriam, 2009) to determine if the researcher's interpretation of the data was accurately represented. This action research project has issues of transferability due to the small sample size (Merriam, 2009). Reactivity is also a concern with the small sample size (Maxwell, 2013).

As I conducted my research and analyzed the data, I was also aware of my own professional and personal bias toward the treatment of Latino English Language Learners through the SST process. I am aware that as a Latina researcher, a product of English Language instruction, and a product of public school education, I needed to be cognizant to not to let these factors influence

how I conducted my research and analyzed my conclusions (Maxwell, 2013).

Summary

This chapter presented the methodology used in the study. Data were drawn from school site records, a demographic questionnaire, reflective inquiry sessions, journal entries, and SST meeting observations. Data analysis methods were presented, and the issues of credibility and reliability as well as ethical concerns were discussed. The following section presents the key characteristics of thematic categories.

CHAPTER FOUR

KEY THEMATIC FINDINGS

Introduction

This action research study was conducted at an urban elementary school in Southern California to investigate the impact that a series of reflective inquiry group sessions, amongst SST members and school site teachers, would make on the decision-making process discussing Latino ELL students in the SST referral process. The action research study took place during April and May of the 2014 Spring Semester. The participants were invited to participate in a series of three reflective inquiry sessions. Each inquiry session was conducted after the observation of two SST meetings. A total of eight SST meeting observations were conducted, which included a pre-observation and post-observation. The SST committee, general education classroom teachers, and school support staff were invited to participate in this action research project to explore concepts of the language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction as they relate to the SST referral process of Latino ELLs.

In Chapter 1, I presented the premise that the overrepresentation of Latino students in special education has been documented as a misidentification of learning disabilities for language acquisition needs (Artiles et al., 2002; Calhoon et al., 2007; Figueroa, 2005). Research indicates that while SST committee members bring their personal and professional biases to team meetings (Knotek 2003b; Ortiz et al., 2006), the distributed expertise of a collaborative decision-making group can generate better-informed decisions (Edwards, 2010). Research shows that providing the pre-referral intervention team with long-term engaging and coherent professional development strengthens the team's common knowledge and promotes active learning within the

collaborative team (Bennet et al., 2012; Edwards, 2012; Ingvarson et al., 2005; Yocom & Steubler, 1981).

Little research exists on the impact of structured professional development to inform the decision-making process of the SST committee. This action research targets educational factors that impact the educational process of Latino ELLs. These factors--language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction-- were discussed, questioned, and developed to better inform decisions for a child's educational experience.

As a school leader, I provided the SST committee, a high stakes decision-making team, with the time and space for reflective practice. Through a series of reflective inquiry sessions on language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction (see Appendix A), the participants had the opportunity to demonstrate, share, and strengthen the team's common knowledge of factors that impact the SST decision-making process. During each inquiry session, the participants were prompted to review the school site's SST referral document and incorporate new learnings to make better-informed decisions on Latino ELLs. The structure of the inquiry sessions allowed the participants to share, present, and question their expertise in a collaborative, engaging, and systematic manner.

Of the eight SST meetings observed, one student was recommended for grade retention, one student was referred for outside counseling, three students were recommended to begin services in the school site's Intervention Program, and three students were recommended for a special education evaluation to determine the need for special education services. In comparison with the decisions made for the previous school year, four less Latino ELLs recommended for special education assessment. This action research project addressed the following research questions:

1. How does a school leader create a reflective learning community among Student Success Team (SST) committee members to use their distributed expertise in the areas of language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction?
   A. How does the leader develop common knowledge within the SST committee?
   B. What reflections are revealed as the SST committee make decisions concerning Latino ELLs in the special education referral process?

The key thematic findings in this chapter are based on my analysis of the following data: a school staff questionnaire, transcriptions of eight audio recorded observations of SST meetings, transcriptions of three audio recorded reflective inquiry sessions, participant reflective journal entries, a document review of SST referral forms, SST summary meeting forms, and field notes.

This chapter presents the key characteristics on the changes of the decision-making process. First, data suggest that reflective inquiry is beneficial for school site decision-making teams when supported by a school leader. Second, the data show that out-of-the classroom support staff view the SST meeting as a collaborative conversation to generate instructional supports for students demonstrating academic difficulties, while the classroom teacher perceives the SST meeting as the forum to request special education assessment. Third, findings indicate that participants learn from the expertise of other team members, but are hesitant to publically self-identify as an expert in their field. Fourth, I found that the school site RTI instructional supports empower the research participants to state that students present characteristics of suspected learning disabilities rather than language acquisition delays. Fifth, I found that participants want more student data presented at SST meetings that clarify and confirm issues of difficulties with suspected learning disabilities versus language acquisition. Table 2 presents key thematic findings.

Table 2
Key Thematic Findings

Data Source	Theme	Example	Description
Inquiry Session	Benefit of time and space to engage in group reflection	And I feel that if we had time to actually [meet prior to the SST] that as a team it would be so much more effective	The need to review student data prior to SST meeting generates more informed decision-making
Inquiry Session	Purpose of SST meeting	to get strategies on how to intervene	SST meeting seen as a support for teacher and student
SST Meetings	Need for student data	When you say well, how many more or less would you say she knew	Specific student data informs the decision-making process
Inquiry Session	Reluctance to sharing expertise	You're so humble. Learning disabilities come on… you should be higher	The distributed expertise needs to be shared to develop common knowledge
Inquiry Session	Labeling as suspected learning disability, not an ELD issue	But I don't see anything about language. I know [she's] ELD level 2…So I think this is beyond…this is more than a language acquisition	Student performance more readily characterized as a suspected learning disabilities than a factor of language acquisition

The following section describes the creation of group reflective inquiry, the benefits of group inquiry, and participants' perceived purpose of SST meetings.

Creating a Culture of Reflective Inquiry

As a school leader, I provided the SST committee with structured time and space to reflect on factors that impact the decision-making process when considering the language development and learning needs of struggling Latino ELLs. After a document review of the school site's SST meetings held during the school year, I identified the educational factors of language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction as the key focus areas for reflective inquiry.

To provide the SST committee the opportunity to discuss, question, and reflect on their professional expertise, in relation to their decision-making process during SST meetings, I generated a protocol for the reflective inquiry sessions (Appendix A). As a participant observer, I organized the structure and content of the reflective inquiry group sessions with feedback from the Resource Teacher, the Special Day teacher, and a 3rd grade general education teacher. Each session was co-facilitated by myself and these three self identified experts in the areas of language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction.

The reflective inquiry sessions created the time and space for members of the pre-referral intervention team to share their expertise and develop the group's common knowledge; they did not have the pressure to make a decision on a child's educational future within a 30 minute SST meeting. Although parents were present at the SST meetings, parents were not involved in the reflective inquiry group intervention.

The structure of the reflective inquiry sessions allowed participants to reflect on language acquisition, suspected learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction as it relates to Latino ELL students. In her first reflective journal entry, the Intervention Teacher wrote: "I learned about others' experiences and perspectives." Her final journal entry, reiterated her thought: "I always enjoy the discussions and value the perspectives and expertise of my colleagues." The Intervention Teacher welcomed, valued, and discovered the expertise amongst her colleagues, knowledge that supports students with academic challenges.

The inquiry sessions specifically provided time to analyze connections between language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction. During the first session, the Special Day Teacher wrote: "Basically I feel that today's session helped [me] consciously analyze the relationship between these three facets and reflect on how they pertain to my

students." The Special Day Teacher was able to relate the group's discussion and make a direct connection to the instruction of her students. Her journal entry continued: "I am thinking about how language acquisition has affected my students' status in a SDC [special day] class." The Special Day Teacher began to contemplate the connection between language acquisition, learning disabilities, and placement of ELL students into Special Day classrooms. During the reflective inquiry session she stated that she had become frustrated that, due to her students' learning disabilities, her students "get stuck as English Language Learners" because they cannot pass District assessments to reclassify out of ELL identification. During the reflective conversation with her peers, the Special Day Teacher did not assert her expertise in the area of learning disabilities, yet her journal entry stated that her contribution to the inquiry session was "voicing how these [topics] relate to [her] own students and [her] experience in the classroom." For the Special Day Teacher, the inquiry sessions provided the opportunity to reflect on her own practice, rather than publically share her knowledge and expertise with her colleagues.

Prior to the reflective inquiry sessions, the SST committee had not had the opportunity to engage in reflective conversations as a group. During the first inquiry session, the school psychologist, Special Day Teacher, and the Intervention Teacher engaged in a discussion questioning and clarifying information provided on a completed SST referral that had been presented, discussed, and decided upon at an SST meeting during the previous month:

> School Psychologist: [the referral] has conflicting information…for example…under "Attention Span" no issues [are] noted. However, [it states] 'she can become easily discouraged.' Yet on the last page "How does this compare to other students in your classroom" [it states] 'She can become easily distracted.'

Intervention Teacher: I can actually speak to that… in a small group with us in Intervention, there are absolutely no issues noted…

Special Day Teacher: … maybe just [write] afterwards … ‘and therefore doesn't finish work’ cause it's not so much attention disorder…she gets frustrated right?

Intervention Teacher: …she can focus…but then she can get discouraged…

Special Day Teacher: So that wouldn't be attention span…

Intervention Teacher: …she can become discouraged and stop working, yeah…

During this exchange the school psychologist and the Special Day Teacher utilized their background knowledge of identified learning disabilities that are due to a student’s attention deficit disorder to suggest that the student in question did not present attention issues, but rather characteristics of a student who became discouraged when the academic work became too difficult.

During the third inquiry session, the participants engaged in a discussion about culturally relevant instruction. The following is an excerpt from their reflection on a quote from Huerta and Brittain (2010) describing the notion of culturally relevant instruction that actively engages students in learning rather than being passive learners:

Administrator: So when you thought of culturally relevant instruction, were you thinking of it in terms of the way it is described here?

Intervention Teacher: I didn't think 'how learners construct knowledge.' I interpreted it completely differently.

Resource Teacher: Me too, I was thinking of looking into what the kids are coming from, you know their cultural background, that's just how I see it.

Intervention Teacher: Yeah, their own lives, their perspective, and being sensitive to that.

Resource Teacher: Yeah I didn't think of it this way, this is new.

Intervention Teacher: …I suspect that is good pedagogy in general…good teaching.

The Resource Teacher and the Intervention Teacher began to explore what culturally relevant instruction means and what it may look like in the classroom. In the reflective journal the Intervention Teacher wrote: "I learned that I really have not had a complete understanding of 'culturally relevant instructional strategies.' The reality of it is more complex than my initial ideas." The discussion challenged the beliefs and understandings of what and how culturally relevant instruction looks like in the classroom.

Data collected from the demographic questionnaire indicate that culturally relevant instructional strategies have not been incorporated as instructional recommendations during SST meetings. The school psychologist commented, "[this] is really not our focus." During the third reflective inquiry session the Intervention Teacher stated that culturally relevant instructional strategies are "not embedded in the curriculum." Her journal entry stated: "not many people refer to cultural background in completing [the SST referral]." While the majority of the staff had

received District training or had taken university courses in culturally relevant instruction, there was little evidence during the observed SST meetings where the referring teacher or the SST committee members generated culturally relevant instructional strategies. Five respondents reported having expertise in culturally relevant instruction, however, all questionnaire respondents reported not attending any SST meeting where culturally relevant instruction was discussed. A third grade teacher responded by stating "[culturally relevant instruction] hasn't been brought up specifically to my knowledge."

Reported Benefits of Time and Space for Group Reflection

During the third reflective inquiry session, the participants shared their perceived benefits of the reflective inquiry sessions:

> Intervention Teacher: I just enjoyed the opportunity to talk with my colleagues…in this kind of format, I…enjoyed hearing from [colleagues]…it's refreshed me, and gives me a lot of hope...
>
> Special Day Teacher: I think having someone to bounce ideas with…you could take things in…things get questioned, things brought up, other anecdotes brought in, it totally helped. It makes things fuller.
>
> Intervention Teacher: …and then you hear other perspectives that you may not have thought of or considered.

The exchanges in this dialogue suggest that the opportunity to engage in a structured discussion with fellow SST committee members provides an opportunity to learn from the groups' distributed expertise. The diverse perspectives, and the new learnings presented by team

members “makes things fuller” as referenced by the Special Day Teacher, thus developing the common knowledge of the SST committee.

The participants’ statements suggest that the creation of structured conversations within a given time and space allowed them to engage and learn from the expertise of their colleagues. The guided and structured inquiry sessions provided the participants the opportunity to discuss, question, and disagree with a topic in a structured, non-threatening, and collegial manner. At the conclusion of the three inquiry sessions, the Intervention Teacher stated:

> These guided readings that you have, excerpts, are really helpful [because] they make you think about different things and everyone interprets them, or has their own spin on it, or has an idea. So that adds to the discussion. This is a really effective way of encouraging people to speak.

The support of a school site administrator has been identified as a key factor in the accountability for decision-making teams to remain focused on prioritized goals (Gallimore et al., 2009). My participation in the creation and implementation of a reflective protocol supported the SST committee members in the creation of reflective learning community with the purpose of supporting Latino ELLs in the SST referral process.

Perceived Purpose for SST Meetings. Data from the inquiry group discussions and the reflective journal entries reveal that school support staff, such as the Resource Teacher and the Intervention Teacher, identified SST meetings as a place to collaborate with peers to identify and generate instructional supports for struggling Latino ELLs. In contrast, the data collected from the general education teacher show that the classroom teacher perceives the SST meeting as the platform to request and recommend a student for special education assessment.

The Resource Teacher stated, "the SST meeting is a place where, like we always say, we come together and everybody has…different backgrounds and expertise and we are all able to share and help out that teacher." The Resource Teacher followed-up her statement by indicating that an SST meeting is a place teachers go to, to get help and share concerns for students who are struggling in the classroom. For the Resource Teacher the SST meeting is the arena to provide help both for the student in question and the classroom teacher. Her perception is that the SST meeting is not only the coming together of distributed expertise amongst colleagues, but it is the combined efforts and expertise of support staff to provide assistance for students not meeting academic standards.

School support staff echoed these sentiments. The Bilingual Coordinator identified the SST meeting as a place to share concerns about a child's progress. The Special Day Teacher reported that the SST meeting is conducted to zone in on the problem and get the child help. The Intervention Teacher reflected that an SST meeting is the setting where classroom teachers go to collaborate with peers. She followed up with the comment: "I think a good component is, and an important part of it is, teachers really do want to communicate in an environment with other people to parents, and to bring parents into the conversation. It's so important."

A 3rd grade general education teacher also indicated that the SST meeting is the setting to get strategies on how to intervene with students who demonstrate no academic growth after several in-class modifications and interventions. However, in contrast to the other research participants, she identified the SST meeting as an avenue to request a special education assessment. She voiced this opinion during the second reflective inquiry session:

> …sometimes I feel like I don't want this child to be sent away for another year because I feel strongly that there is something here that I want clarification for. So sometimes I do

> feel strongly. Like I wanted this student tested, just to see, because I feel there's something up and I want to know what to do. I think. I don't know if I were in kinder and 1st if I would be different and it would be 'what can I put in place to, what strategies could help me?'…a lot of times when I've gone in [to SST meetings], there's been an outcome of like 'ok we need to test this child.'

In her experience as an upper grade teacher, she noted that every one of her students discussed during an SST meeting have been recommended for special education assessment. In her reflection, she ponders the different experience she might have had were she a kindergarten or 1st grade teacher discussing her student at an SST meeting. She confirms that SST meetings do provide instructional strategies for students, yet her experience with the referral process, as an upper grade teacher, has been to formally request, and be granted, special education assessment for her students that are severely underperforming.

The data show that all participants indicated that the purpose of an SST meeting was to provide a collaborative setting, to share student concerns, with the intent of providing the teacher with interventions to support their student, based on their areas of expertise. The additional component of parent participation at the SST meeting completes the data gathering for the committee as they learn about the child's behavior during the instructional day as well as the child's behaviors at home.

All of the participants stressed that the SST meeting is a setting to share concerns and gather strategies in a collaborative manner to support the student in question. For the general education teacher, however, the SST meeting is also the setting to request an assessment to determine if a child qualifies for special education services due to her strong belief that the student demonstrates academic skills far below grade level expectations. In contrast, the school

site support providers, such as the Resource Teacher and the Intervention Teacher, present a 'slow to judge' framework, where they provide the students with structured classroom interventions over a period of time prior to making a judgment to recommend a student for special education assessment.

The Following section presents the expertise represented by the SST committee and research participants.

Distributed Expertise

Defining the Distributed Expertise of the STT Committee

In this action research project, expertise was determined through self-identification, via a demographic questionnaire, by statements the research participants contributed during the reflective inquiry sessions and observed SST meetings, through the professional role assigned to the SST members, and by means of journal reflection. Table 3 below shows examples of expertise found in the data sets.

The research participants had the opportunity to self identify their expertise levels via a demographic questionnaire. Data collected from this questionnaire indicate that research participants are knowledgeable in their field, as evidenced by their years as an educator and earned credentials. Research participants ranged from at least seven to 20 years of experience; about half of the research participants have earned a Masters Degree, and SST members have credentials specializing in their particular fields of education.

Data collected form the demographic questionnaire indicate that three of the participants, the Resource Teacher, the Special Day Teacher, and the school psychologist, identified learning disabilities as an area of expertise. These same participants presented their self-perceived level of

expertise as learning disabilities during the reflective inquiry sessions. Their comments and suggestions during SST meetings also presented their understanding of learning disabilities as they guided the SST meeting discussion while suggesting classroom instructional accommodations to support students performing below grade level expectation. A majority of the teachers indicated that, during SST meetings, they were provided the opportunity to share their professional expertise; five teachers however, self-reported that they have not been able to share their expertise during their participation in SST meetings.

Table 3
Representations of Expertise

Data Source	Example	Description
Demographic Questionnaire	14 years teaching experience National Board Certification BA from Cal State LA CLAD Credential GATE certificate	Knowledgeable of how to best provide differentiated instruction
Inquiry Session	…for this being 1st grade, not being able to recognize number[s], I would question is there some kind of visual processing [issues]…	Experience in working with students that demonstrate processing disorders
SST Meetings	You know we were approaching it in different ways, you know drawing it, and clapping it; and writing it big, and doing tactile things.	Classroom interventions provided to student demonstrating difficulty with letter identification
Inquiry Journals	I was able to share some of my knowledge about students with learning disabilities in the gen. ed. class	Common knowledge developed amongst the research participants

During the second SST meeting observation, a core member of the SST committee demonstrated her expertise of 1st grade level expectations:

> at this point, first graders are reading more fluently, they know all their sounds, they can name all the sounds, their sentences are complete, they have a lot of adjectives, a lot of descriptions, and in terms of reading it's evidence [based] text.

This SST member, a 1st grade classroom teacher, was able to support her concern with the student's academic needs by explicitly stating the expectations for 1st grade students in the late Spring Semester, demonstrating her expertise as a general education teacher.

Research participants also assigned expertise to their colleagues based on the professional role and duties performed at the school site. During the second inquiry session on learning disabilities, a third grade general education teacher stated: "Kristine [the Intervention Teacher] has an amazing background of knowing all of these strategies, or you Penelope [Special Day Teacher] you do too ... [in] your toolbox of how to intervene." The school-staff recognize that a school site member assigned to a professional role has the qualifications and expertise to accomplish their professional duties.

Reflections written in the inquiry journals provided opportunities to consider changes within individual participants as well as the group as a whole. The Resource Teacher reflected on her contributions to the discussion of students with learning disabilities, "I was able to share some of my knowledge about students with learning disabilities in the gen[eral] ed[ucation] class." The Resource Teacher's reflection suggests that she felt her contributions to the discussion on learning disabilities added value to the instruction of general education classroom teachers. The goal of this action research project is to take the knowledge and expertise amongst the SST committee to develop the common knowledge of the decision-making team to further improve the recommendations for Latino ELLs discussed in SST meetings.

Reluctance to Share Expertise. Data collected from inquiry sessions and journal entries suggest that while research participants consider their colleagues as experts, research participants hesitate to publically acknowledge their own self-perceived level of expertise. During the inquiry

sessions, the participants engaged in a pre and post activity to self-identify their level of expertise to document perceived changes.

During the first reflective inquiry session, I asked the participants to self-identify their level of expertise on a chart indicating beginning level knowledge, average expertise, and high level of expertise for the areas of language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction. Participants were instructed to reflect on their formal education, District provided professional development training, and any self-directed learning that related to these three areas. On the chart, they were to choose an image, such as star, diamond, etc. to chart their self-perceived level of expertise (Appendix C).

The group hesitated to chart their perceived level of expertise in a public fashion. The participants asked me to be the first one to place my expertise level on the chart. The Bilingual Coordinator stated: "How about you show us where you are, so we can see what you think." As I charted my own perceived expertise levels in the areas of language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction, I shared with the participants why I believed I was at those particular levels. As a research participant, my public acknowledgement of my professional experiences, promoted a culture of trust and buy-in; the creation of trust was an essential component to the implementation of reflective inquiry. Only after I publicly acknowledged and shared my self-identified levels of expertise did the participants willingly chart their own perceived levels of expertise. We revisited the self-perceived expertise chart at the conclusion of the third inquiry session to determine if and how much our self perceived expertise had changed as a result of participating in the reflective inquiry sessions.

All of the participants, including myself, identified within the average expertise level for culturally relevant instructional strategies. The Bilingual Coordinator and I placed our-selves in

the higher range of expertise in the area of language acquisition while the rest of the participants self identified as average. In the area of learning disabilities, the school psychologist identified herself at the top level of expertise, followed by the Resource Teacher at the top tier. The Special Day Teacher identified herself slightly above average; the rest of the participants identified themselves slightly below average expertise levels, with the Intervention Teacher self-identifying at the high beginner level, the lowest level of self-identified expertise amongst the participants. During the first inquiry session, we observed the visual representation of distributed expertise amongst the participants and engaged in reflective conversation on the group's reported knowledge. The Resource Teacher directed her comments to the Special Day Teacher:

> Resource Teacher: You're so humble. Learning disabilities come on!
>
> Special Day Teacher: I'm learning…
>
> Resource Teacher: You should be higher
>
> Special Day Teacher: No, I'm sorry.

The data from the staff demographic questionnaire indicate that the Special Day Teacher has a special education credential, has taught Special Day classes for the past eight years, and identified her area of expertise as special education. However, in this inquiry session, she identified her level of expertise as slightly above average. Although the Resource Teacher pointed out the expertise of the Special Day Teacher, she presented a reluctance to publically affirm herself as an expert in the area of learning disabilities, a point of discussion in the third inquiry session. In the second reflective journal entry, after discussing the topic of learning disabilities, when asked "What do you think were your greatest contributions today?" the Special Day Teacher responded with a question mark, suggesting that while the SST committee had identified her as an expert in the area of learning disabilities, she continued to doubt her own

expertise. A comment by the general education teacher, during the second inquiry session, addresses why educators may be reluctant to publically state their levels of expertise: "… it's the culture of education right now, 'Be effective! Are you an effective teacher?' So [for] some people it's hard to ask [for help] or afraid to admit [that] this is not [their] strength'." This suggests that educators struggle with admitting they need assistance for fear as coming across and non-effective teachers. In the case of the Special Day Teacher however, her peers do see her expertise of special education, and do consider her an effective teacher; it is her self-doubt that hinders her ability to fully share her knowledge of special education.

The Bilingual Coordinator's reflection speaks to the discomfort with the public acknowledgement of personal levels of expertise. The Bilingual Coordinator noted the need to understand one's level of expertise to generate professional goals:

> What I think is interesting considering that we're all educators, you know, when you sit back and look at something like this [chart] you…would like to think that we're at a 100%.... and…we start questioning ourselves, what do we really know…It's something to look at where are we, and how am I going to improve this…

At the conclusion of the first inquiry session, the Bilingual Coordinator expressed similar sentiments in her reflective inquiry journal:

> I feel that I helped the group to realize that we don't often take the time to assess our own skill levels and abilities in our practice of teaching and that it would be a great benefit [for] us to set goals for improving our skills.

Through verbal and written reflection, the Bilingual Coordinator expressed the need to analyze levels of expertise and set professional learning goals to improve practice. She recognized that educators do not have 100% of all professional knowledge, yet she noted she challenges herself

to identify her strengths and weaknesses in order to set goals to further her knowledge as an educator. The data suggest that through participation in reflective dialogue, the Bilingual Coordinator was able to canvas the distributed expertise amongst the research participants and further challenge the group to generate professional goals to strengthen the group's common knowledge and build on the group's level of expertise.

At the conclusion of the third inquiry session, I asked the participants to review the distributed expertise chart to document any perceived changes in their levels of expertise. The Intervention Teacher commented: "I'd say after these conversations, I'm still here [below average], for learning disabilities…a little refreshed and renewed in [culturally relevant instructional strategies]." Data in the demographic questionnaire indicate that the Intervention Teacher self-identified expertise in language acquisition. Through reflection, she identified growth in the understanding of culturally relevant instruction, but did not identify growth in the area of learning disabilities, an area of knowledge required to develop, implement, and support students participating in the Intervention Program. The Special Day Teacher, who demonstrated hesitance in publically stating her expertise, did not perceive a change in her level of knowledge and understanding: "I know I need to learn in every area, tons…" The Special Day Teacher continued to perceive her knowledge base as average, yet alluded to setting professional learning goals, echoing the Bilingual Coordinator's sentiment, to take time to assess current knowledge and set goals to improve professional skills.

Participants indicated the benefit of self-assessment to generate professional goals that allow for the improvement of practice and knowledge. The research participants demonstrated a sense of discomfort to self-identify levels of professional expertise in a public forum; trust had to be built amongst the research participants to call out the group's distributed expertise.

The following present key thematic findings in the participants' common knowledge of identifying academic difficulties as characteristic of suspected learning disabilities versus language acquisition.

Referrals Attributed to Suspected Learning Disabilities, Not Language Acquisition

In data collected from transcripts of reflective inquiry meetings, discussions on a completed SST referral of an ELL student, and inquiry journals, I found that participants identified the academic difficulties presented by Latino ELLs as representative of suspected learning disabilities rather than characteristic of students struggling with acquiring academic English. The analysis of transcription data, suggests that the school site's Response to Intervention (RTI) process provided participants with the foundation to identify student performance as characteristic of suspected learning disabilities rather than attributed to the development of English language acquisition.

The first reflective inquiry session presented issues of language acquisition of Latino ELLs, while the second session focused on learning disabilities. During these two sessions, I posed the question of how to determine if an SST referral was due to a student's issues with language acquisition or to a suspected learning disability. I asked, "How do we know? How can we distinguish when it is a language issue and when it is a suspected learning disability?" The participants commented that a child's learning difficulties most often present characteristics of a suspected learning disability rather than difficulties due to language acquisition. "You can pretty much gage it," stated the Resource Teacher. A general education teacher echoed the same sentiment, "I feel like you can…tell." The Resource Teacher further supported this idea, "… you just know, actually." Participants attributed a student's academic difficulties to a suspected

learning disability rather than academic difficulties due to the student's continuum in the language acquisition process. The Resource Teacher expanded on this notion of labeling low academic performance as a suspected learning disability:

> …you know right away, well not right away, but after for at least servicing the child for at least half a year. You'd know if that child would need an assessment because it just seems that they're not really…performing…as well as their peers.

This comment suggests that the notion of associating low academic performance with a suspected learning disability is supported by having provided a student with targeted instruction over time; more specifically students received Response to Intervention (RTI) services, either in the classroom or through official participation in the school site's Intervention Program. Thus, it appears that a student's lack of academic progress with targeted instruction over time provides the affirmation to suggest that a child demonstrates attributes of learning disabilities rather than difficulties with acquiring the English language.

Upon further probing during the second inquiry session, participants were able to articulate and expand on their professional judgment for suggesting that a Latino ELL student represents behaviors typical of a suspected learning disability rather than difficulties with language acquisition. The participants articulated evidence of their professional expertise to justify their professional opinion for attributing academic difficulties to suspected learning disabilities rather than as a result of a child's continuum in their language acquisition. The 3rd grade general education teacher shared how she identifies children that may present a suspected learning disability:

> …as you're going through lessons, as you notice the same child doesn't retain what you did the day before, or even the week before… on a regular basis, not just once or twice...

The Resource Teacher referenced her professional experience to support her assumptions of a 1st grade struggling student:

> The child doesn't know the letters and the sounds yet? That's a huge problem. Again with that I don't think it's a language thing…. the child is native Spanish speaker…But I don't see anything about language. I know [she's] ELD level 2…So I think this is beyond…this is more than a language acquisition

The Resource Teacher interprets the academic performance of an ELD 2 student as being impacted by factors other than language acquisition; she believes that the difficulties lie beyond language acquisition.

The Intervention Teacher, as well, referenced her expertise as she described a student whom she suspects may have a learning disability as opposed to the need for extra time to acquire English:

> Like when we see the youngest ones, let's say you're doing just letter recognition, which is real mechanical, and you work with the same letter maybe four weeks, or same group of letters. There's no acquisition of it, there's no memory of it at all. There's no sound, and in some cases, with the ones that really don't speak English well, I use Spanish as a support to see, you know, sometimes I'll say something like 'perro' [dog] or you know or 'gato' [cat] or something. And I count that as a viable answer. But there are times when they just don't acquire it, to me it just seems unusual when a child cannot move beyond a certain [point]…Sometimes you just know.

The Intervention Teacher referenced working with a student on one letter for four weeks, which the student was not able to master. The student's failure to make academic gains after the provision of targeted instruction, over-time, provided the evidence to suggest that the child

exhibits characteristics of a suspected learning disability. Students that participate in the Intervention Program have demonstrated below average skills in reading, most have been discussed at least once during an SST meeting, and most have participated in one Intervention Program cycle of 12 weeks. Therefore, the Intervention Teacher can make the assertion of labeling student performance as characteristic of suspected learning disability based on the opportunity to instruct and review student progress, over a targeted period of time, a direct result of a student receiving RTI support services.

The Resource Teacher continued to reference her work experiences as the foundation for knowing that a child exhibits characteristics of suspected learning disabilities rather than issues with language acquisition:

> Yeah you just know and it's years of experience of being a teacher. You know what's normal or what is typical... So whenever some teachers would talk to me about 'I really think this child would need an assessment or whatever.' So we ask them to refer the student to [the] SST team, and so yeah, upon discussion when we listen.... when the teacher shows us all the intervention that has been put into place and still the child is not performing even if he is or she is ELD level 1 or 2, you kind of just know. And it's really again, and it's experience just working with so many students.

For the Resource Teacher, it is the student's failure with RTI that provides the affirmation that a student demonstrates characteristics of learning disabilities rather than representative of difficulties with language acquisition.

During the reflective inquiry sessions, the participants were presented with an SST referral of a 1st grade ELL student that had been previously discussed by the SST committee, an SST meeting not observed for this research study. With a review of a completed student SST

referral, The Resource Teacher continued to demonstrate her understanding of why a suspicion of a learning disability is stronger than a child's continuum in language acquisition:

> The child doesn't know the letters and the sounds yet? That's a huge problem. Again, with that, I don't think it's a language thing, because really knowing the letters and knowing the sounds, the sounds are actually easy…the child is native Spanish speaker, the sounds are basically the same [as in English]. Except for the long vowels. But I don't see anything about language.

Upon further reflection of the student's SST referral, the Resource Teacher incorporated her knowledge of servicing students with identified special education disabilities and her understanding of language acquisition:

> …toward the end of 1st grade, you can kind of tell…I don't know if because of my special ed[ucation] background, but I think even classroom teachers can tell if it's a language acquisition issue or if it's really a learning difficulty. Yeah for example, say…like the SST meeting that we had earlier. Obviously that child is ELD level 1, but I don't think that it would really affect her ability to retain the alphabet, right? Cuz it's already her second year, and we gave her that chance to repeat kindergarten, and to be taught the same concepts, and she even had Intervention. She's ELD level 1 and it's her second year of instruction. But I feel that that… that particular case is, totally a big red flag that this is not just a language acquisition issue…

The Resource Teacher's comments emphasize the delivery of interventions provided for the student. This particular student had participated in the Intervention Program and has also been retained. Therefore, the lack of academic success with interventions, provided over time, gives the Resource Teacher the necessary historical context to make the declaration that the student,

although identified as ELD 1, presents learning needs based on more than just difficulties with English language acquisition.

The Intervention Teacher, Resource Teacher, and Special Day Teacher engaged in a conversation depicting the student need as suspected learning disability rather than a need due to language acquisition development. The discussion began with a reflection of a kindergarten student and then shifts to a 5th grade student, who qualified for special education services during the 2013-2014 school-year, as a 5th grader, and placed into a Special Day class. The teachers acknowledge their professional experience and the students' lack of mastering basic skills as the basis for affirming their belief that a students' academic difficulties are due to a suspected learning disability rather than to the child's English language development.

> Intervention Teacher: There's certain behaviors right? So one of children that was retained in kinder last year, it was at the end of the year, it was very interesting. I saw her with a book, she was looking at it upside down. I said 'honey what are you looking at?'…there was no recognition…but that was after a year of school. And I thought that was unusual. But again, she's an EL and was only an ELD 1. But to me that behavior was curious. And then now that we are working with her in Intervention, and this is her second year of kinder, she still doesn't know her alphabet, but has gained a lot of capacity in the English Language.

> Resource Teacher: And especially in your program where you work on one skill, one or two basic skills. And after 8 weeks, or hours of instruction, they still don't get it, then there's something wrong there.

The discussion makes reference to the student's progression with ELD skills, yet indicates unsuccessful results with provided RTI supports via the Intervention Program. The Resource Teacher affirms that 'there's something wrong' based on the student's lack of academic progress over a two-month period of targeted instruction. The conversation then discusses a student placed in the Special Day program:

> Intervention Teacher: And then one boy I felt really strongly. One that is in your [Special Day] class…
>
> Special Day Teacher: Oh yeah
>
> Intervention Teacher: …and I remember I was told…well what are you doing wrong? Cuz you have to alter the instructional practice. But I thought, of all the instructional practice from labeling, to coloring, to clapping, and coding, to drawing, to making letters big with your hand, I was unable to really get him to move significantly forward…
>
> Special Day Teacher: …It's like total disability, there's no question about it at all.
>
> Intervention Teacher: You just know from that. It's not like the child is just a little behind… I worked with him in 1st grade and now he's in 5th. But definitely, he was not like other children. But I didn't take it like, oh this is a first language issue, this is beyond.

The dialogue amongst the research participants continues to confirm the groups' belief that students represent stronger indications of suspected learning disabilities rather than a gradual

process in the acquisition of English language learning. This sample of group reflection, alludes to the student support services provided by the school site's RTI process: students with academic difficulties have been referred to the SST committee, an SST meeting was held, classroom interventions were provided, student participation in the Intervention Program yielded little to no academic progress, students were referred for special education assessment, the child qualified for special education services, and is now enrolled in the Special Day program. Thus, when research participants affirm that students' academic difficulties are a result of suspected learning disabilities rather than issues with language acquisition, they are referring to a student's lack of academic success after receiving specific and targeted interventions over a period of time. The school site's Response to Intervention process has provided the research participants a foundation to affirm that these Latino ELL students exhibit behaviors of a suspected learning disability.

The data collected from inquiry journals also suggest that suspicion of learning disabilities is stronger than a student's development of English language acquisition. The Special Day Teacher reiterated the group consensus during the third reflective inquiry session, a written reflection that captures the notion of targeted interventions over a period of time:

> …realizing that it isn't all [a] language issue, realizing that it has nothing to do with being a second language learner, having tried all the things and realizing ok, maybe this isn't just a language issue. We've tried all these things, or also finding out that this child is also having difficulty in their home language…and maybe that other evaluations need to be done to see what is needed, what is necessary…

As a group, the SST committee at Alvarado Elementary, attribute a child's difficulties with academic progress to suspected learning disabilities rather than to the acquisition of the English language. The past experiences with children, now placed in Special Day classes, solidifies their belief. For the research participants when a Latino ELL demonstrates difficulties meeting the grade level expectations, the child is suspected of having a learning disability rather than a representation of a student's English language development. When students failed to show academic improvement after exposure to RTI services, research participants made professional judgments to identify academic difficulties with suspected learning disabilities rather than with the child's continuum in their English Language Development. Although labeling the academic difficulties exhibited by Latino ELLs as a suspected learning disability, the participants exhibit a 'slow to judge' school culture where Latino ELLs are expected to participate in at least one cycle of Intervention Program support services prior to making the recommendation for special education assessment.

The following section discusses an increased awareness of the impact that language acquisition plays in the learning process of Latino ELLs.

Impact on Common Knowledge

Data collected from the reflective inquiry journals indicate that the participants made a change in their decision-making process to consider a child's English language acquisition prior to making a suggested identification of suspected learning disabilities for Latino ELLs.

At the conclusion of the first inquiry session, the Intervention Teacher wrote: "I have renewed awareness of the potential role of primary language on academic achievement, and I realize that we often neglect this component in our discussion/ SST meetings." The Intervention Teacher walked away from the first session with the intention to consider a child's language

development in the decision-making process during an SST meeting. The Bilingual Coordinator also indicated that in future SST meeting she would inquire further regarding issues of language acquisition by "probing deeper to ask questions about what's happening for students in their language acquisition." She followed up her reflection by stating: "I learned that one needs to be cognizant of the language abilities of students based on their life surroundings…and take such things into great consideration." The Bilingual Coordinator also walked away from the inquiry session with the intent to ponder language acquisition as a factor in student success.

The Special Day Teacher reflected on the impact of language acquisition on students evaluated and placed into the Special Day class: " [I] am thinking about how language acquisition has affected my students' status in a SDC class [Special Day class]." The Special Day Teacher further wrote in her reflective journal that during SST meetings she will "question if the issues/problems raised by the teachers are true learning disabilities and if all strategies suggested have been utilized to assist the child." In accordance with fellow research participants, the Special Day Teacher plans to consider a student's progress of English language acquisition as a factor in the overall decision-making process for Latino ELLs that present academic difficulties.

The data reveal that the participants present a change in the consideration of language acquisition as a factor in the decision-making process for Latino ELLs during SST meetings. Thus, while not expressed in conversation during the inquiry sessions, participants' written reflections suggest that language supports and language acquisition are additional factors considered in the decision-making process when discussing Latino ELLs in the referral process. The Intervention Teacher summarizes this change in her reflection:

> We have to know clearly whether the deficits that we perceive…that we're not confusing a child's lack of ability with, the ability to speak the language with their cognitive ability. So if we get a child like an ELD 1… we have to know clearly, you have to be kind of reassured that teachers know clearly what the difference is between a child that can, because these are other factors…

The entries in the reflective journals suggest the development of common knowledge in the SST committee's understanding on language acquisition issues. In the previous section, participants' statements made in inquiry sessions indicate that struggling Latino ELLs are more likely to be characterized as exhibiting suspected learning disabilities rather than indicative of English language acquisition. The journal entries suggest a change in the consideration of language acquisition as a factor in the overall decision-making process for Latino ELLs. In the timeframe of this action research, the consideration of language acquisition, as a source of academic difficulty was minimally observed during the inquiry sessions and the SST meetings; language acquisition was mainly addressed to indicate students' ELD level.

As an educational leader I was able to impact the groups' common knowledge of language acquisition as a factor in the academic development of Latino ELLs. However, this newly developed knowledge and understanding did not transfer to the SST meeting discussions. Therefore, the consideration of language acquisition is an area that can be further developed in future reflective inquiry sessions.

The following section discusses the changes the research group recommended for the SST referral form in an effort to better identify issues of language acquisition, suspected learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instructional strategies.

Recommended Modifications to the SST Referral

Data from transcripts of the reflective inquiry sessions show that participants recommended changes in the area of language acquisition and culturally relevant instruction. However, no changes were recommended to document a teacher's suspicion of a learning disability. Participants' distributed expertise and the discussion of newly formed common knowledge fostered recommendations for changes to the SST Referral form.

During each reflective inquiry session, the participants were presented with a single SST referral document that had been presented, discussed, and decided upon at an SST meeting held about one month prior to the beginning of this research project. The student referral, referenced during the reflective inquiry sessions, was a first grade female student, with an ELD level 2 enrolled in the Structured English Immersion classroom. The student characteristics, and teacher identified needs, are typical of most ELD students referred for an SST meeting. The student produced work below the grade level expectation. She had not mastered basic skills in reading, writing, or mathematics.

At each of the three reflective inquiry sessions, I asked the participants how, and if, the SST Referral Form needed modifications to incorporate information that could better inform and support the child's language acquisition, suspected learning disability, and ways to document culturally relevant instructional strategies delivered in the classroom. The participants unanimously agreed that completing an SST referral form in and of itself is a teacher's indication of a suspected learning disability. The general education teacher expressed this idea:

> …because if you fill this [SST referral] out, you already suspect… this is kind of saying… these are my suspicions. These are my observations, let's try some more strategies, but if that's not working, then assessment would be the next step.

Therefore, the participants did not recommend the addition of new items to the SST Referral Form to indicate a suspicion of a learning disability. The school psychologist further elaborated:

> I think [adding a check off box for suspected learning disabilities] would be difficult unless [teachers] were really trained to do that [psychological evaluation] because…often times, if they put like 'difficulty retaining information, is easily distracted.' You don't really know. Is it because of attention, or is it a true auditory [processing disorder]? …It's really hard to tell, and the only way you'll get to know that is with testing and observations.

The school psychologist demonstrated her expertise in evaluating students for learning disabilities; she affirmed the participants' recommendation not to add new information to the referral form with regards to suspected learning disabilities. However, the school psychologist stressed that a learning disability can only be identified once a student has been assessed. She cautions that untrained educators cannot identify a learning disability based on the perception of student classroom performance, but through assessment results conducted by a trained school psychologist. Therefore, stating that a student presents behaviors of a suspected learning disability does not immediately qualify a student for special education assessment; the student must demonstrate a lack of academic growth over a period of targeted instructional interventions, prior to special education assessment.

I further asked the participants to consider what, if any, additional questions be added to the SST Referral form to document a stronger indication that a child's academic outcomes are impacted by their lack of English language acquisition. The Bilingual Coordinator pointed out that the SST Referral form requires the referring teacher to indicate the students' dominant

language. The Intervention Teacher noted that the referral form already requests that the referring classroom teacher indicate the ELD level of the student. She provided her insight:

> On page two [of the SST Referral] it says 'communication skills/ speech' and there's no mention to, per say, how the primary language may be affecting or what is her progress in English language development, how is she meeting norms that are set by her according to that parameter…it could be reworded [to]…how might the student's primary language impact her ability to achieve or access the core [instruction]…if a student is a second language learner, how might the second language [have] had an impact on the ability to master these skills or did it?

The Intervention Teacher suggested that a change be made in the SST referral document to indicate how the progress in English language acquisition impacts mastery of academic skills.

During the first reflective inquiry session, I presented a review of the components of the District's English Learner Master Plan (LAUSD 2012) (see Appendix A). The participants indicated the need to incorporate these language development expectations into the SST referral form to provide the referring classroom teacher with the opportunity to indicate the child's language development and language needs. The general education teacher recommended that a checklist be added to the SST Referral form to allow the referring classroom teacher to identify the development of a student's language acquisition. The Resource Teacher suggested a modification to the questions in the "Additional Information" section of the SST referral form. The question currently asks "How is the pupil significantly different from others of similar educational, linguistic, or cultural background." She suggested separating the question into 3 questions "so that the teacher can really think about that, the background of the student."

With regards to recommended changes to the SST Referral Form to provide additional

information about the provision of culturally relevant instructional strategies, the participants recommended a checklist be created to indicate supports provided. The participants utilized the resource presented during the reflective inquiry session on the culturally responsive teacher, Villegas & Lucas (2007), to address this concern. The Resource Teacher referenced the section in the SST referral form that requires teachers to indicate Tier I interventions and accommodations provided to the student. The Resource Teacher and the Special Day Teacher suggested a change from "How is the pupil significantly different from others of similar educational, linguistic, or cultural background" to:

> Keeping in mind the cultural background of the child what have you implemented from the following: (1) understanding how learners construct knowledge, (2) learning about students' lives, (3) being socio-culturally conscious, (4) holding affirming views about diversity, (5) using appropriate instructional strategies that address the student's learning style- visual, auditory, and (6) indicate how you have advocated for your student.

The specific recommendation to generate a new section to the SST Referral form to address culturally relevant instruction suggests that this is an area that will be discussed in future SST meetings.

The data suggest that participants utilized their expertise and newly formed common knowledge to recommend improvements to the SST referral form. The research participants agreed that recommended changes would be reviewed by the SST committee members at the beginning of the school year prior to modifying the SST referral form.

The following section presents changes in factors considered in the decision-making process of the SST committee.

Changes in Decision-Making Processes

The SST committee has the responsibility of making long-term educational decisions for students within a 30 minute SST meeting. The collegial relationships of the group, the data presented at the SST meeting, and the distributed expertise of the committee members, impact the decision-making process. For the purposes of this action research study I chose to focus my observations on the participants' demonstrated changes in the data requested and presented during SST meetings, changes in the questions considered when discussing Latino ELL students, and changes in the final decisions recommended for students as compared to the prior school year.

Data collected from reflective inquiry journals, transcriptions of reflective inquiry sessions, and transcriptions of the eight SST meetings observed, show that committee members want more information from the referring teacher and the home environment to make better informed decisions. The data also show that the questions posed during SST meetings by research participants, integrated areas of language acquisition, suspected learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction. All of the observed SST meetings discussed children ranging from kindergarten through second grade, with an identified ELD level 1 to an ELD level 3.

Describing Student Performance

A typical SST meeting requires the general education teacher to present data on student performance, instructional modifications provided for the student, and the identification of key areas of concern for the student being referred. The Alvarado Elementary SST Referral Form requests that the general education teacher indicate the ELD level and dominant language of the student; state the reason for the referral; indicate dates and outcomes of parent conferences; provide a brief statement of academic performance and social behaviors; identify specific Tier 1

interventions; compare the child's performance to the typical behaviors of other students; and write a statement of any home life events that may impact the child's school performance (See Appendix D). The SST Referral form is the document that allows the pre-referral team to 'meet' the student. The Resource Teacher stipulates the importance that student data plays in making informed decisions:

> …all of the information that we're asking for is necessary for us to be able to really make a good recommendation or figure our the next steps for that child…I think it's very important that we know the strengths of the child first. So that where we could [know] where to start with, right. So if the child is struggling say, I don't know reading, but at least the child knows the sounds. So at least you know that you have that to start with. And yeah, it's also important that we have the CUM [cumulative student record]. Which sometimes isn't there. It's so important because especially, because let's say the child is already in 3rd or 4th grade, it's important to see where the child came from, what he or she was able to do in 2nd or 1st, or kindergarten, the complete background of the child.

The typical data presented during observed SST meetings were assessment data for language arts, specifically letter name identification, letter sound recognition, ability to write letters, words, and sentences, reading consonant blends, ability to read grade level sight words, CVC words, and tracking while reading. Reading fluency assessments routinely presented during SST meetings were the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), a reading assessment utilized to measure early literacy skills to identify early on at risk students. When in attendance at an SST meeting, the Intervention Teacher was able to share the number of sessions, hours, and specific skills addressed with each student that participated in the Intervention Program. The Intervention Teacher attended five of the eight observed SST meetings. The

referring classroom teacher provided student work samples in six of the eight SST meeting observations. Data on student's math progress was presented via teacher comments rather than formal assessment results. Formal math assessment data were presented during four of the eight SST meetings observed.

In the reflective inquiry journals, participants contemplated the need for additional student data to conduct a thorough SST meeting. In session one, the school psychologist wrote: "[we need to] gather data from [referring] teachers and more info from parents regarding student's English language skills." At the conclusion of session two, the psychologist again stressed the need for information from parents: "[we need to] gather more information from parents regarding language/communication that occurs at home." The Resource Teacher also reflected on the need for additional data required during SST meetings: "[we need to] give data more importance, ask for more work samples of the student before making recommendations." This suggests the need for concrete evidence of student performance. Of the eight SST meetings observed, 6 meetings presented student work samples, while two meetings relied on the information shared by the classroom teacher and the parent. The 3rd grade general education teacher similarly reflected on the need to provide more student data for review: "I hope to have more documentation." This student documentation indicates a documented need for student assistance and instructional supports; it is the specificity of the student data presented that provides the SST committee with solid evidence on which to base their decisions.

The following section describes the changes in observed questions presented during SST meetings.

The Purpose of Questions During SST Meetings. Data collected from transcriptions of the reflective inquiry sessions and SST meetings show that the questions raised by participants

during SST meetings appear to serve several purposes: questions guide the discussion, clarify and confirm statements, inform a suspicion of learning disabilities, and probe for information about the home environment. Questions also provide the opportunity to engage in disagreements of student data.

During the reflective inquiry sessions and through written reflections, all research participants described a change in the future questions they will ask during an SST meeting. The Intervention Teacher wrote: "It…[will] have an impact on the types of questions we ask, or on the way we evaluate the kids." The Special Day Teacher also shared a similar reflection: "…this has had an impact on questions I might ask at SST meetings…"

The use of questions facilitated structure to the 30 minute decision-making discussions. For example, to share the success of previously set strategies, the Resource Teacher asked: "Ok. So how has the attendance been? Has there been an improvement?" To transition into a new area of concern the SST facilitator asked: "Ok we can move on to academics. Vicky would you like to talk about Alejandra's strengths?" The use of questions provided transitions in the discussion about concerns with student performance. The SST facilitator asked: "Would you like to talk about your concerns for Alejandra?" Questions also provided all interventions generated for the student be presented at the SST meeting: "So you want to talk about what he's done in [the] Intervention [Program]?"

Clarification and confirmation of information were also facilitated through questions. To confirm the timeline of supports and assessments, the SST facilitator asked: "You gave this in April right? The scores right here are for April?" The facilitator also asked clarifying questions to consider student work samples in context: "So there's like a lot of discussion before [writing]?" The Intervention Teacher raised questions to ensure that the student progress

observed in the small group setting, provided by the Intervention Program, was aligned to student performance in the general education classroom: "Are you finding that as well? You actually found that too?" The school psychologist utilized questions to further probe on suspicions of learning disabilities: "How significant is his attention?...Is he easily redirected?...Does he have friends…How is his speech?"

Through questions, the SST committee gathered information about the student's home environment. In several meetings, the Resource Teacher posed the following questions to gather information from parents to gain a better understanding of the support system at home:

> Meeting #7: Are there any consequences set at home...for not performing [in class]…
>
> Meeting #5: …so what's keeping them up though? I mean 10:00pm, 10:30pm is extremely late for kids their age? What is keeping them up?
>
> Meeting #5: And why is dad not able to take them to school?...
>
> Meeting #3: There was a talk about a behavior chart as well, that the therapist recommended to mom to do at home. Was that done and how, was it successful?
>
> All meetings: What are mom's plans for the summer [to support the child's academics]?

The answers to these questions provided the SST committee with data to gain a more in depth understanding of the child's support system at school as well as in the home.

Through questions and discussion of student performance data, the SST members were able to discuss conflicting data. The following discussion is an excerpt from Alejandra's SST meeting:

Referring classroom teacher: …yeah we're having a hard time with it. And I also gave her the CVC words, based on the assessment. And she was only able to read 4. Um, no she was able to read two out of five words. Four out of five, and here at the bottom [of the assessment] she was not able to read any.

Intervention Teacher: What date did you give that?

Referring classroom teacher: … the 28th

Intervention Teacher: Cuz we did it the on the 8th and she [read] 15, all 15.

Referring classroom teacher: This one? (pointing to assessment document)

Intervention Teacher: Yeah absolutely. We did the same, she got all 15, all of them.

Referring classroom teacher: I don't know.

Intervention Teacher: And the blends she did seven out seven, but we kind of stopped there because… from day to day it changes…

The referring classroom teacher and the Intervention Teacher presented conflicting student assessment results. Neither teacher challenged the results of the other's assessment data. Through dialogue and questioning, it was understood that different results were attained in a large group versus a small group setting.

During the reflective inquiry sessions the participants expressed that they would alter the questions presented during SST meetings. In the first reflective journal entry, representative of the other participant's entries, the Resource Teacher wrote: "[I will be] asking the appropriate question[s] about the child so as to rule out difficulty due to language acquisition issues." During the first inquiry the Special Day Teacher shared: "I will probably be questioning what SDAIE strategies are being used to help students access the curriculum." The development of questions considered by the research participants suggest that questions will be re-structured to incorporate a student's language development when discussing academic difficulties, thus creating better-informed decisions.

The following section discusses the factors that impact the final decisions of the SST committee.

Factors Impacting Final Decision-Making

The SST committee is charged with making decisions on a child's academic future within a structured 30-minute SST meeting. At the table sit the school site professionals, the classroom teacher, the school psychologist, the Resource Teacher, the Intervention program teacher, the Special Day Teacher, a general education teacher, a school site administrator, and the child's parent. The distributed expertise of these individuals impacts the decision-making process of the group. During the 30-minute SST meeting, these individuals are challenged to access their professional repertoire to provide the best possible support for the child's continued academic growth and success.

I conducted eight SST meeting observations during the time period between April and May, 2014. When I reviewed the number of SST meetings held during the school year between the months of April 2014 to May 2014, four students were recommended for retention and a total

of eight students were recommended for a special education evaluation (See Table 4). When comparing the same time period to April through May of the prior school year, six students were recommended for retention and nine students were recommended for special education. During the 2012-2013 school year, all nine students recommended for special education assessment were Latino ELLs. During the 2013-2014 school year, however, only five of the eight students recommended for special education assessment were Latino ELLs. Data for the 2011-2013 school year do not present significantly different recommendations. The differences in the number of students recommended for special education assessment, during the 2013-2014 school year cannot be directly correlated to the provision of reflective inquiry sessions, as the reflective inquiry sessions were provided only during the months of April and May of 2014. As part of this action research project, I was able to observe three of the five SST meetings that recommended students for a special education assessment.

Table 4
Comparison of SST Meeting Results

Recommendations	April - May 2012		April - May 2013		April - May 2014	
	EO	ELL	ELL	ELL	EO	ELL
Special Education Assessment	1	8	0	9	3	5
Intervention Program	0	2	3	1	0	3
Grade Retention	2	2	2	4	3	1
Referred to Outside Services	1	0	0	0	0	1

Notes: Data includes SST meetings from April-May 2011-2012; April-May 2012-2013 and April-May 2013-2014 only; EO- English Only; ELL- English Language Learner

Data collected from transcriptions of the SST meetings represent the decision-making statements for students recommended for grade retention, for participation in the Intervention Program, and students recommended for special education assessment. The data show that the SST committee members focus on characteristics of learning disabilities more highly than on

students' language acquisition or culturally relevant instruction. All students discussed in this action research were given a pseudonym to protect their identity.

Alejandra, a 1st grade ELD level 1 student, was recommended for grade retention. The following discussion excerpt demonstrates the recommendation for grade retention to the child's parent:

> Referring classroom teacher: She is not ready for 2nd grade…I really, I highly recommend it for her to be retained in 1st grade because she is definitely not ready for 2nd [grade].
>
> Intervention Teacher: …but thinking of her moving on to second grade, kind of will overwhelm her… I would recommend that, if you [parent] would consider [retention].
>
> Resource Teacher: She'll be more confident, especially in the beginning of the school year. Where, you know, she's gonna be at a level where the rest of the class will be and she will move ahead with them… it would be a good idea…it's a hard decision.

The team considered the parent's concerns for retention by stating that it is a "hard decision." The team discussed the social concerns of being the oldest student in 1st grade class. The team considered the educational benefits of repeating the grade as a benefit for Alejandra.

For Clara, a 2nd grader, the team recommended participation in the Intervention Program as a viable resource rather than grade retention. The classroom teacher expressed why Clara should receive support from the Intervention Program, but not be retained in 2nd grade:

> Referring teacher: I wasn't thinking retention, because she has the capacity to improve. Because it's really all behavior, motivational, because she does have the capacity to learn.

> It's just that she really needs more support at home… because she's going to [the] Intervention [Program]. She's attended 2 Interventions [cycles] already.
>
> Resource Teacher: We can recommend [the] Intervention [Program] because she is going to need help with language arts and math

The SST committee emphasized that the student had the capacity to learn, and therefore does not believe that grade retention, nor a special education assessment were viable supports for Clara. Therefore, a recommendation was made that she continue to participate in the Intervention Program, where she will continue to receive structured intervention supports during the following school year.

The decision to recommend a child to special education assessment is detailed in the following discussion excerpts. The first student is Raul, a 2nd grade ELD 2 student enrolled in the Dual Spanish/English program; the second student is Beatriz, a kindergarten ELD 1 student enrolled in a Structured English Immersion classroom.

Data collected from the transcription of the SST meeting show that Raul had participated in the Intervention Program for the past three years, Kindergarten, 1st grade, and 2nd grade. His participation in the Intervention Program yielded minimal academic growth. The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) reading test indicated an ability to read four words per minute. The Intervention Teacher and the referring classroom teacher shared Raul's writing samples, which were difficult to decipher. The classroom teacher shared other work samples, in English and Spanish, and explained that when Raul did complete assignments, they were illegible, incorrect, or dictated to the teacher.

The SST committee engaged in the decision to refer Raul for special education assessment, the parent was not present at the meeting:

Intervention Teacher: We've seen him for a few years now… last year we saw him…

Resource Teacher: Ok, and that's really all we can [do], and…we can also recommend him for Intervention program for next year…until the [special education] evaluation

Referring teacher: Well, since, I've had him from the beginning of the year, he actually has gone down. Well, no I guess he's made tiny improvements. But he's still I would say two grades below.

Referring teacher: So he's been intensive all year in English and Spanish, for reading and writing. And… he's also been attending [the] Intervention [Program]. And so after an entire year of intervention and small group work in the classroom with both Ms. Scott and I, he hasn't made any improvement at all. So he has real difficulty decoding in both languages [English and Spanish]…

Intervention Teacher: Yeah, we've seen him for 30 hours, this is 60 days…Susan is using the transitional curriculum with absolute fidelity…for example on the 'a' blank 'e.' The card is posted, the spelling pattern is there, they've done multiple teaching. And then after, many days of the same skills, these are the kinds of things he can't do…but that's with the card there. 'A' blank 'e,' remember 'grape', 'a' blank 'e,' what are the sounds, g-r-a-p, and it's almost, every single one was wrong. And [Susan] was like, you know

we've covered this for already 8 sessions, and it's still not [mastered]. So that was a concern… the response to [the intervention] has been very, very limited.

Referring teacher: …from the beginning of the year I made it very clear (to mom) because we had already had our beginning of year assessment. And for Spanish, you know, he read two words a minute, and the goal was 35. So that was very concerning. So that's when we first recommended that he attend [the] Intervention [Program]. And she agreed. He's been going for 30 hours…

Resource Teacher: Ok…recommending assessment for him, only because it has been a whole year of intervention, 30 hours, 4 words to 10 words…it's very concerning…would you agree with that?

The Resource Teacher reiterated that the decision to recommend special education assessment for Raul was based on the minimal academic progress, both in English and Spanish, after consistent participation in the Intervention Program. Her statement, "that's really all we can [do]" affirmed that the Intervention Program has provided academic supports, but to no avail, and the next step is to determine if Raul qualifies for special education services to better support his continued academic growth.

Beatriz, a kindergarten ELD 1 student, was also recommend for special education assessment. The following depicts a typical SST meeting discussion held for the three SST meetings I observed that resulted in a recommendation for special education assessment.

> Intervention Teacher: … my concern is that she doesn't seem to retain information. … worked on the letter M for like four days… She was not retaining. It takes a lot of time.

> Resource Teacher: And it's a great concern because she has been retained, this is her second year in kindergarten…Unfortunately at this point we you know she's already been retained in kindergarten and so we either…Yeah I would think that's the next step here right, because she's been retained. It's her second year in kindergarten and yet she is still not mastering any of her skills…

The determination to recommend a special education assessment for these students was not taken lightly. Both students had received intervention supports for at least one school year; both students had demonstrated minimal academic gains. The SST committee demonstrates a 'slow to judge' process for students exhibiting characteristics of suspected learning disabilities by the provision of intervention supports, over a period of time, prior to referring the student for special education assessment.

Summary

Data collected from a school staff questionnaire, eight audio recorded observations of SST meetings, three audio recorded reflective inquiry sessions, participants' reflective journal entries, a document review of SST referral forms, and SST summary meeting forms show that participants reflected on the decision-making process of referred Latino ELLs. Key thematic findings from this study suggest that the participants are now questioning and modifying the referral process to better understand the academic difficulties of Latino ELLs referred to SST meetings. Furthermore, the participants have an understanding of their colleagues' levels of expertise to further develop the common knowledge of the entire school staff. Findings suggest a

change in the content of student data requested and strategic questioning to bring about data of culturally relevant and language acquisition issues. These changes support the SST committee in making a more informed decision to recommend a Latino ELL for special education assessment.

In the next chapter, I discuss the implications of this action research for school site SST committee members and lessons learned from facilitating a reflective inquiry process with a decision-making school team.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study adds to the growing body of literature that suggests that collaborative school teams can effectively recommend appropriate supports for students in the special education referral process (Bennett et al., 2012; Etscheidt & Knesting, 2007; Knotek 2003b; Salm, 2014; Yocom & Staebler, 1996). The empowerment of a local level school site decision-making team, such as the SST committee, provides immediate access to assessing student need, which can prove most effective for student success (Garet et al., 2001). This study demonstrates that the use of reflective inquiry sessions can strengthen the distributed expertise of a pre-referral intervention team. This is a research area rarely examined in the decision-making research (Martin-Beltran & Peercy, 2014; Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011; Williamson & McLeskey, 2011). Furthermore, few studies address the impact of explicit professional development on (1) utilizing the distributed expertise of the School Success Team committee members and (2) enhancing their decision-making process based on a strengthened common knowledge (Daniel & Peercy, 2014; Edwards, 2011; Edwards, 2012; Lee-Tarver, 2006). Findings indicate that the enhanced common knowledge of the SST committee is therefore seen as one possible way to reduce the misidentification of Latino ELLs to special education.

For this project, I developed and co-facilitated a series of reflective inquiry sessions addressing issues of language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instructional strategies. My intent was to study the decision-making process of the SST committee as they shared and learned from the distributed expertise of their fellow committee members. I wanted to explore the impact of targeted professional development on the decision-

making process of the SST committee. I documented the shift in the decision-making team's dialogue across the reflective inquiry sessions. In particular, I documented the SST committee members' changes in student data requested, changes in the types of questions asked during SST meetings, and changes the final decisions made by the SST committee after participation in reflective inquiry.

In this action research study, I examined the process of reflective inquiry as a professional development intervention to document the shift in conversation and the decision making process of SST committee members when presented with an SST referral of Latino ELLs. The design of this study utilized Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Dewey's theory of reflective practice. Previous studies have examined the impact of the social dynamics amongst the pre-referral intervention teams and the impact of decision-making for culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students in special education (Knotek, 2003a; 2003b). Some studies found that requiring pre-referral intervention team members to participate in professional development can be effective in making more informed and appropriate recommendations (Vineyard, 2010; Yocom & Staebler, 1996). Other studies found that the social dynamic of the pre-referral intervention team attributes to the efficacy of generated recommendations (Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011; Williamson & McLeskey, 2011). This action research provided the opportunity to examine and contribute to the common knowledge of the SST committee members, thus providing the pre-referral intervention team with opportunities to make a more informed decision when discussing the needs of Latino ELLs.

While the sample of research participants was small, the dialogue observed during the reflective inquiry sessions and the conversations during the eight SST meetings observed provided data that can guide future SST committees to incorporate reflective inquiry in their

decision-making process. The findings of this action research point to the importance of implementing a protocol that encourages reflective inquiry to capitalize from members' distributed expertise to strengthen the pre-referral intervention group's common knowledge.

In this final chapter, I begin by sharing key thematic findings. I then present implications of the professional development of SST committees, Response to Intervention programs, for administrators, and the implications for recommending Latino ELLs for special education assessment. I share the lessons learned from co-creating and facilitating the reflective inquiry sessions. I conclude the chapter by presenting the limitations of the study, plans for sharing the research, and recommendations for future practice.

Key Thematic Findings

This study adds to the growing body of literature that suggests that inquiry sessions are effective strategies to reduce the misidentification of ELLs in special education (Gallimore et al., 2009). The findings of this study add to the body of research in support of pre-referral intervention teams to reduce the misidentification of Latino ELLs as learning disabled when the students present characteristics of English language acquisition issues (Brown & Doolittle, 2008; González, 2010; Guiberson, 2009; McCardle et al., 2005).

The findings suggest that research participants attribute Latino ELLs learning difficulties to suspected learning disabilities rather than factors of the student's English Language Development. While the group dynamics indicated a consensus of characterizing Latino ELL's academic difficulties as an indication of a suspected learning disability, the participants' journal entries noted the consideration of English Language Development as a factor to students' academic struggles. This action research project found that the indication of a suspected learning disability in Latino ELLs was based on the child's unsuccessful progress with interventions

provided over time; specifically no academic gains made while provided with intervention services, either formally in the Intervention Program or informally in the general education classroom setting. A caution, however, was presented by the school psychologist, indicating that while a referring classroom teacher may characterize a child as having a suspected learning disability, an identification of learning disability can only be determined through a psycho-educational evaluation, deeming it inaccurate and counter to ethical and legal guidelines to hypothesize that a child has a learning disability.

The study suggests that classroom teachers view the SST meeting as venue to request and be granted special education assessment for students demonstrating severe academic difficulties, while the school support-staff consider the SST meeting a gathering of school site experts discussing, generating, and recommending support-services for students. In other words, teachers see the SST meeting as the process to begin a special education evaluation, while the SST committee slows down the process by generating interventions prior to recommending a special education assessment.

Findings indicate that participants self-identify at lower levels of expertise as compared to how they are seen by their colleagues. This was observed through a group exercise in self-identification of distributed expertise levels, through group discussions, and through participants' journal entries. Minimizing one's professional expertise may hinder the degree to which SST committee members are willing to share their knowledge and expertise during SST meetings, ultimately impacting instructional interventions and academic supports provided to struggling Latino ELLs. If SST members are hesitant to publically share and acknowledge their expertise, not only does the common knowledge of the decision-making team suffer, but so do struggling Latino ELL students in need of intervention.

The school culture at Alvarado Elementary has been to present, provide, and deliver information to the teaching staff; they have not had the opportunity to engage in reflective inquiry. Therefore, this was a new and different process of professional development for them. Participation in a high stakes decision-making team, such as the SST committee, and being asked to demonstrate their professional knowledge is a shift in the cultural norms of the school site. Steps were taken to create buy-in and trust amongst the research participants. Participation in a reflective learning community that is responsible for the educational future of struggling Latino ELLs carries a weighted responsibility not only to the student in question, but also to the colleagues that collaboratively make these decisions. Therefore, a participant's reluctance to share their self-perceived expertise in a public fashion can be the first step in acknowledging the responsibility that comes with being a member of a high stakes decision-making team.

This study highlights the need to provide SST committee members with the time and space for reflective conversations outside of the official 30-minute SST meeting. This action research project established protocol for reflective inquiry that created the time and space for the SST committee members to reflect on past recommendations and decisions to plan for better-informed decisions for future SST meetings. Participation in reflective inquiry provided the SST committee members the opportunity to share their distributed expertise as well as strengthen the common knowledge of the group. The findings suggest that the reflective inquiry conversations prompted changes in the decision-making process of the SST committee, particularly the consideration of language development as a factor of learning difficulties. Over the course of the action research project, the SST committee members were able to self-evaluate their professional growth over the two month period. The research participants began with a reluctance to state and share their expertise and concluded with generating professional goals for themselves and the

SST committee. The research participants gained an awareness of what they needed to know to make better-informed decisions; particular an indication to consider language acquisition and culturally relevant strategies in their decision-making process when discussing Latino ELLs.

Implications for Student Success Teams

Protocol for Professional Development

This action research provided a protocol for establishing collaborative inquiry that brought to light the expertise of each SST committee member while contributing to the common knowledge of the decision-making team (Appendix A). The reflective inquiry protocol provided a structured and guided collaborative dialogue for group reflection (Gallimore et al., 2009). Professional development through collaborative and reflective inquiry allows for the collective participation (Birman et al., 2000) of SST committee members. The new knowledge and group understanding gained, is thus integrated into decisions made during SST meetings to more effectively provide recommendations for Latino ELLs. During the last observed SST meeting, the Resource Teacher brought up concerns that incorporated points addressed during the first and second reflective inquiries, the discussions of language acquisition and suspected learning disabilities.

The Resource Teacher stated that it was "very concerning" that after receiving 30 hours of Intervention Program support, Raul a 2nd grader, identified as an ELD 3 in the Dual Language Program, "[was] reading 10 words per minute, from four per minute in the beginning of the year." She referred to Raul as "one of the extreme cases." The Resource Teacher asked the team clarifying questions about Raul's performance in both the English and Spanish classroom settings. Her expertise as a special education teacher prompted the SST committee to consider Raul for special education assessment.

Multiple opportunities to participate in reflective inquiry, with pre-identified areas of discussion to address issues of student academic progress, has the potential to provide the SST committee with the professional development required to provide more accurate recommendations for Latino ELLs prior to recommendation for special education. Providing professional literature relevant to the concerns brought to the Alvarado Elementary SST committee gave the committee members opportunities to reflect on their professional practice and consider how multiple factors, such as language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction, impact the educational attainment of Latino ELLs. The opportunity to engage in social discourse, without the time constraint and pressure of having to make decisions about a student's instructional program, offered the decision-making team time to reflect on their roles and responsibilities for the educational support system of Latino ELLs. Prior research has demonstrated that long-term professional development provided via a structured protocol with content relevant to the school staff produces effective results for student achievement (Birman et al., 2000; Garret et al., 2001). While this action research presented three reflective inquiry sessions in the Spring semester, engagement in year-long group inquiry has the potential for providing deeper and stronger knowledge for practitioners participating in decision-making teams such as the SST committee, thus increasing the accuracy of referrals for special education assessment (Yocom & Staebler, 1996).

Providing the time and space for group reflection is key in supporting collaborative inquiry. Through inquiry, a collaborative team has the opportunity to build trust amongst one another (Burbank and Kauchak, 2003) as they make their knowledge public. The collaborative dialogue allowed for the creation of new knowledge and provided a space to articulate team members' concerns regarding effective strategies for Latino ELLs in need of academic support.

During the first inquiry session, the school psychologist, the Intervention Teacher, and the Special Day Teacher engaged in conversation about the information provided in Sofia's SST Referral Form (a completed sample SST Referral Form). The three members challenged each other's notion on the definition of attention span, being easily discouraged, and not accomplishing tasks. The collegial trust amongst the participants encouraged a discussion of disagreement that led to a group understanding of behaviors students present that have difficulties with attention span. Making knowledge public (Hiebert et a., 2002), can then lead to more effective strategies for students in need of academic support because all members of the decision-making team share a collective knowledge to best support this student population. Reflective inquiry offers a decision-making team opportunities for discussing, questioning, and reviewing professional literature that can provide guidance when confronting instructional issues for students in general, but specifically Latino ELLs demonstrating academic difficulties due to language acquisition. As decision-making teams engage in collaborative inquiry that address issues impacting Latino ELLs, decisions can be more informed when recommending Latino ELLs for special education assessment, thus reducing the misidentification of this student population (Artiles et al. 2002; Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006).

Structural Supports for SST Meetings

The SST committee is under pressure to propose solutions for students within a 30-minute meeting session. The Resource Teacher expressed her concern with having limited time to generate student interventions: "all these cases just falling on our laps, and [we] come on [in and] think of something right now, like fast. And it just doesn't work out that way." Structural features such as agendas, a focus on one student need, and prior access to student records can support the decision-making team to strategically meet this time demand.

Research shows that pre-referral intervention teams that work with a set meeting agenda, utilize a structured process, and identify a team facilitator (Doll, Haack, Kosse, Osterloh, Siemers, & Pray, 2005) conduct efficient team meetings. Utilization of a meeting template to guide the discussion (Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011) provides structure to the 30-minute SST conversation.

The SST committee at Alvarado Elementary utilized an SST Summary Form (Appendix E) where notes were taken and action steps recorded. The SST Summary Form structures the conversation (Santangelo, 2009), directs the participants to identify crucial areas of discussion, end ensures that action steps be provided. At the end of every SST meeting, a copy of the completed form was provided to the parent, the classroom teacher, placed in the student's cumulative record, and provided to any school personnel that would continue to provide supports for that student. During follow-up SST meetings the SST Summary Form was reviewed in consideration of services provided and further actions to be considered and recorded in the SST Follow-Up SST (Appendix F). Roles were assigned to SST committee members: the Resource Teacher assumed the role of note taker, as the administrator I took lead in stating the purpose for and summarizing the meeting, the classroom teacher took lead in presenting student performance data, and the school psychologist took lead with probing questions into the child's educational background and characteristics that addressed areas of suspected learning disabilities.

Prior research has recommended pre-referral intervention teams focus on one issue (Etscheidt & Knesting, 2007) during an SST meeting to allow for meaningful discussion and workable solutions for the student in question. The SST committee members at Alvarado Elementary tend to focus on the reading ability of students. A student's reading fluency scores are a strong influence in the types of recommendations provided. However, because the SST

committee does not review the student referrals as a team prior to the SST meeting, several academic and behavioral issues are brought up at once, making it difficult to offer solid solutions within the 30-minute meeting sessions. On occasion, due to lack of classroom teacher coverage, the referring classroom teacher returned to the classroom while the parent, the Resource Teacher, myself- the administrator, and the school psychologist continued to discuss student needs and provide solutions. Without the presence of the referring teacher to provide his/her point of view in the 'action steps' process, it is doubtful if all recommendations would be followed through in the classroom.

It is essential that the SST committee have background knowledge of the student being discussed prior to the SST meeting. If the team spends time prior to the SST meeting reviewing the student's academic and behavioral background, more informed decisions can be made during the SST meeting rather than spending time with questions about the student's demographic information. A pre-planning team session has the potential of providing the committee with student background information to target a specific student issue, therefore providing more time to discuss solutions and instructional recommendations appropriate for the student. The Resource Teacher expressed her concern for the need to review student documents prior to holding an SST meeting:

> I really think we need to have the SST team have a day where we just go over the referrals….and if we could use that time to maybe pull some teachers that are part of the committee, and just really sit down and go through the referrals that would be really helpful… there should be planning beforehand. We should have…talked about it as a team… there is a lot of unexpected things… it's like the moment you sit down [at the SST meeting], you don't know what to expect. Even after reading [the referral], there is

> something that the parent or the teacher adds in… It would be really helpful if we knew those things, [specific background information], beforehand…

To effectively utilize the 30-minute SST meeting, the Resource Teacher recommended that the team read the student referral prior to the meeting to allow for group knowledge of the student the concerns, and possible solutions for teacher identified concerns. In prior research, Chalfant et al. (1979) recommended that the familiarity of the student by a team member, other than the referring teacher, validated the teacher's concerns. Therefore, classroom observations made by the SST committee members or pre-team meeting prior to the SST meeting, is beneficial not only to the decision-making team but to the student in question as more informed decisions can be made. The recommendations provided by Chalfant et al., (1979): have each team member read the referral prior to the meeting, identify problem areas, and prepare recommendations allows for more problem solving discussion and less discussion of needless questions. Therefore, more time can be given to generating supports and instructional interventions. Thus, creating time and space for group discussion prior to the SST meeting is essential to deliberate, plan, and strategize instructional interventions for struggling Latino ELLs. Via reflective inquiry sessions, the SST committee can have the opportunity to discuss, question, and create instructional strategies without taking time away from the 30-minute SST meeting, where team decisions are made.

The efficiency and effectiveness of the SST committee is related to the collective knowledge of the group members. Each committee member utilizes their professional experience and expertise in the identification of a student's academic difficulties and development of instructional strategies. Their professional preparedness and distributed expertise leads to the effectiveness of the SST meeting (Doll et al., 2005).

Successful pre-referral interventions teams use their meeting time efficiently, are egalitarian, collaborative, have a diverse faculty membership, and have access to quality training (Doll et al., 2005). While the SST committee at Alvarado Elementary works collaboratively to offer best interventions to students, observations of SST meetings suggest that committee members need to focus on one particular problem of student need and collectively preview the student records to best assess and address the language development and academic needs of Latino ELLs.

Distributed Expertise and SST Meetings

The SST committee members at Alvarado Elementary attended a weekly SST meeting, except for the classroom teacher committee member. The practice at Alvarado Elementary is to rotate the classroom teacher committee member on a weekly basis, a structure agreed upon by the committee members to avoid teacher burnout. This systemic rotation supports the professional growth of each member as “one team member every quarter or semester [rotates] so that others have an opportunity to serve and learn" (Chalfant et al., 1979, p. 89). By rotating the classroom teacher committee members, the Alvarado SST committee had the opportunity to learn from the presentation of diverse student needs, but also share their expertise with the committee to make appropriate recommendations. A recommendation for the school site pre-referral intervention team would be to strategically assign the attendance classroom teacher committee members to particular SST meetings, particularly to grade alike meetings to allow the classroom teacher’s professional expertise to be fully utilized when generating instructional recommendations for the student being discussed.

Discussions during reflective inquiry sessions and responses in the reflective journals indicate that culturally relevant instruction has not been an area of focus for Alvarado

Elementary. Upon review of the work of Villegas and Lucas (2007), during the third inquiry session, the research participants recommended changes to the referral form to address culturally relevant instruction. After a discussion of the characteristics of Latino ELLs student's language acquisition needs and how these characteristics may mimic characteristics of learning disabilities (Guiberson, 2009), the participants were able to identify the benefits of addressing culturally relevant instruction of Latino ELLs, particularly when the student demonstrates difficulties making academic gains.

Addressing a Latino ELLs language needs, academic needs, and providing supports that are culturally relevant provide the student with an all encompassing support system that can provide for more informed and more appropriate instructional recommendations. The recommendation to add a section in the SST referral that specifically addresses the area of culturally relevant instruction suggests that the research participants understand the importance of addressing other factors alongside language acquisition and academic difficulties. In future SST meetings, the inclusion of culturally relevant factors may prove to reduce the number of Latino ELLs referred for special education assessment.

The school-site administrator should work in collaboration with the SST Coordinator to ensure that SST members are consistently trained and have received up-to-date practitioner information to best support Latino ELLs. These data suggest the need for continued professional development and training for all school site members on how to support English Learners. The Bilingual Coordinator reflected in her journal entries that she would consider a student's language acquisition and life surroundings, such as years in the country, proposed language growth targets and parent's literacy levels, in future SST meetings. The Bilingual Coordinator is not a regular participant in SST meetings; she attends Language Appraisal Team (LAT)

meetings, which address a child's inability to move up an ELD level after instructional supports. School support-staff clearly require consistent and long-term training in providing Latino ELL support. Experts outside the immediate school staff, such as district department personnel, university, or outside educational consultants may be needed to provide in-service to the SST committee, that strategically supports the education of Latino ELLs.

Implications for School Site Response to Intervention Program

An effective RTI program is essential for continued academic support of all students with academic difficulties. Participation in an RTI program supports Latino ELLs prior to their consideration for special education assessment. When the Intervention Coordinator participated in SST meetings, she presented specific student data and performance: pre and post assessment results, the amount of hours of service provided, and specific reading, writing, or math student performance, and a summary of student improvement or student need. The specificity of student data supported the recommendations made by the SST committee. During the observation of the seventh and eighth SST meetings, the referring classroom teacher made general statements about students' lack of progress:

> Referring Classroom Teacher: *no hace nada del trabajo en el salón… academicamente ella se está bajando bastante, porque no pone de su parte*… she's still not producing the work.
>
> (Translation: she does not do any of the work in the classroom…academically she is falling behind a lot because she does not put in the effort…)

During the eighth SST observation the referring teacher indicated:

> …she does not put in any effort at all. She doesn't focus, she cant see sit still, she's constantly out of her chair… She just can't focus. She doesn't put any effort…

Specific student data are necessary to make informed and appropriate recommendations for Latino ELLs during SST meetings. It is recommended that the Intervention Coordinator share data collection strategies with classroom teachers so they too can collect similar data for solid presentation during SST meetings of students that have not participated in the RTI program. More informed student data presents a true indication of student performance rather than general statements made by classroom teachers when referring to student difficulties.

Implications For School Site Administrators

The school site administrator must think creatively in supporting professional development opportunities and in creating the spaces (Martin-Beltran & Peercy, 2014) that allow the SST committee to meet, strategize, and reflect on support systems that can be provided to students in question. Previous research has documented that administrative support is a high indicator of teacher participation and satisfaction with the work of the problem solving team (Gallimore et al., 2007; Santangelo, 2009).

School administrators can support the work of the SST committee members by providing time during the school day for collaborative meeting times for training, and for endorsement of the group's work (Doll et al., 2005). Recognition needs to be made that teacher participation in the SST committee and inquiry sessions is heavily dependent on uncompensated teacher time, which impacts teachers' willingness to participate in additional school site activities (Doll et. at, 2005). SST committee members at Alvarado Elementary, particularly classroom teachers, are asking for school paid time to meet as a collective group to review the SST referral, to develop instructional interventions, and time to plan strategies for the potential outcomes of the SST meeting. The discussion of compensation for the additional work that the SST committee members provide did not arise during the reflective inquiry sessions nor was it shared during my

interaction with any of the committee members. The research participants did however share being overwhelmed with District and school site responsibilities.

At the beginning of the school year all teachers sign up for adjunct school committees. Prior to volunteering for the SST committee, teachers are informed of the time commitment to participate on the SST committee. However, not all SST members receive training on how to conduct an SST meeting, nor how to resolve the academic concerns presented in the SST referrals. Lee-Tarver (2006) suggests that SST committee members are assigned to the committee based on their availability and not on their qualifications or professional training. Therefore, the school-site administrator should work in collaboration with the SST Coordinator and school support staff to provide the SST committee members with professional development opportunities that provide the decision-making team with information to better support students during SST meetings.

The school site administrator can provided a collaborative decision-making team with support by providing school time to meet, discuss, and plan to make effective decisions when discussing a student referral at an SST meeting. This continued support from the school site administrator can provide accountability and strengthen the goals (Gallimore et. al, 2009) of the SST committee members.

Implications For Recommending Latino ELLs For Special Education Assessment

Previous research has found the school psychologist as the team member holding a higher decision-making power within a decision-making group (Mehan, 1983). The findings in my study suggest that for the three students recommended for special education assessment, the data provided by the Intervention Teacher were key in the decision-making process. The length of

time receiving services in the Intervention program, the rate of progress, and the Intervention Teacher's comments about the student were a strong influence in the decision-making process.

For each of the three students referred for special education assessment, the Intervention Teacher not only provided data to demonstrate student progress, but she also shared concern with the lack of student achievement. When referring to Beatriz, a student who had been retained and had received 19 days of support services from the Intervention Program, the Intervention Teacher stated: "my concern is that she doesn't seem to retain information." At the time of this study, Raul had participated in the Intervention Program for 60 days, a total of 30 instructional hours. With the regards to Raul, the Intervention Teacher shared her concerns: "So other kids are moving forward and you see that he's been going down…after, many days of the same skills, these are the kinds of things he can't do… the response to [the support] has been very, very limited."

The Intervention Teacher also shared her concerns for Vicente, who had received 23 days of Intervention services: "… we're noticing that he's made very minimal progress… I mean he's gotten a lot of the transitional curriculum that the other kids in [the] Dual Language [program] are getting, but he definitely is having a hard time." While prior research indicates the school psychologist as the lead in decision-making, my study however, indicates that the Intervention Teacher held a high status within the SST committee, by supporting her concern with student progress with specific data. The SST committee members relied on the presentation of the Intervention Teacher for an informed decision on recommending a Latino ELL student for special education assessment.

While the Intervention Teacher did provide specific and targeted data in the decision-making process, there was a definite sense of shared decision-making amongst the group. In

other words, one person was not the decision maker in the group (Bennet et al., 2012). Whereas prior research has presented a hierarchy within the decision-making team (Ochoa et al., 2004), the SST committee at Alvarado Elementary has been able to break down the hierarchical mentality and work in a true collaborate decision-making culture.

To make effective and appropriate academic recommendations for Latino ELLs, SST committee members must require that the referring classroom teacher present concrete and specific student data; the stronger the evidence, the more strategic the instructional recommendations that can be generated by the SST committee.

Lessons Learned

As an educational leader I had the opportunity to not only provide a time and space for the SST committee to discuss issues on language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instructional strategies, but I also had the opportunity to provide a structure to the reflective inquiry of the SST committee. Participation in reflective inquiry was intended to support the committee members in generating more informed decisions. The findings from this study suggest that reflective inquiry led to a change in the decision-making process of the pre-referral intervention team, particularly in the questions posed during SST meetings and in the team's consideration of a student's language acquisition in academic attainment.

Group norms, in an effective committee culture, need to be established at the beginning of the school year to inform all committee members of their roles and responsibilities in the collaborative decision-making that occurs during SST meetings. SST meetings should also begin and end on time to make effective use of the 30 minute meeting sessions. Administrative accountability is essential in supporting that all team members are at the SST meeting to not only provide their professional expertise but to generate strategic interventions for the student being

discussed at the SST meeting. Starting the meeting on time also allows the team to generate instructional strategies prior the teacher returning to his/her classroom. SST committee members need face-to-face meeting time to work as a cohesive decision-making group, without fully understanding the strengths of each team member, there is no trust amongst the team to generate instructional recommendations or trust that a recommendation for special education is in the best interest of the student being discussed during an SST meeting. Reflective inquiry provides the decision-making team with opportunities to learn from one another, investigate issues affecting their student population, and develop a professional trust that promotes more effective and appropriate instructional recommendations during SST meetings. In a short timeframe, this action research project showed that by providing the time and space for group reflection, impacted the decision-making process of the SST committee.

Limitations

In this study, I worked with a small group of teachers and support staff. Additionally, participation in this study was voluntary. Because of the small sample size, I recognize that the findings from this study cannot be broadly applied to SST committees in all contexts. However, due to the small sample size, I was able to capture each participant's voice, which may not have been possible with a large sample size. Therefore, I expect that the results from this study can be used to add to the knowledge base on school decision-making teams such as the SST committee.

This was a study that examined the process of reflective inquiry as a professional development intervention, not the efficacy of group reflective inquiry. I did not study the academic gains made by students beyond the referral process, such as the accuracy of a special education assessment referral nor the level of implementation of interventions recommended for the students. I focused instead on providing the SST committee with a professional development

intervention that would develop the team's common knowledge, and thus enhance the decision-making process as a result of engaging in reflective group inquiry.

Another limitation of the study is that my presence at the inquiry sessions and the SST meetings may have caused participant reactivity. I did not perform supervisory duties during the time of the research project, but I had worked with the research participants for 1½ years prior to conducting this research. My position as Assistant Principal may have impacted the authenticity of SST committee members' willingness to participate in the action research study and their willingness to fully express themselves during the inquiry sessions.

Finally, this action research was conducted during the Spring Semester at Alvarado Elementary. The school calendar limited the number of inquiry sessions that were conducted. Future research could focus on the delivery of year-long inquiry to document the impact that duration of group inquiry has on the decision-making process of SST meetings.

Public Engagement/ Sharing the Work

First, I plan to meet with the research participants and share the findings from the action research project. Second, I plan to share the results with the school site administrator to demonstrate how to strengthen the services provided by the SST committee members. Finally, I plan on sharing the study results with school site staff, district administration, district special education and multicultural department to indicate the need for further professional development of school site staff charged with the decision-making power to determine if a Latino ELL is recommended for school site interventions, for outside services, or for special education assessment.

Recommendations for Practice

The composition of SST committee members is key for successful SST committees. Once members are identified, their role on the SST committee should be clarified to make the most effective use of each team member on the committee. School site decision-making teams have the capability of utilizing reflective inquiry as the basis for improving the teams' practice, common knowledge, and decision-making process. Through reflective inquiry, the SST committee members can select target areas of student need and participate in professional development to address those areas of most concern.

The SST committee members also need consistent meeting times, prior to an SST meeting, to review the SST student referrals and time to observe the student in the classroom to gather coherent information about student background, performance, and needs. Familiarity with student's needs and concerns can provide for more effective 30 minute SST meetings where more time can be devoted to providing solutions for students and teachers rather than taking time to review student information.

In Conclusion

The research participants at Alvarado Elementary created a culture of inquiry that led to better-informed decisions about Latino ELLs demonstrating academic difficulties. The protocol utilized to conduct the reflective inquiry sessions, provided the research participants with acknowledgement of their professional expertise and the strengthened common knowledge of the school decision-making team.

Research shows that effective professional development has coherence with teacher learning and teacher development (Birman et. al., 2000). Rather than a focus on abstract instructional methods, the content of professional development activities must address concrete

and specific solutions to the daily challenges educators face (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). Professional development needs to have coherence with the professional and instructional needs of the school-site and the classroom (Garet et al., 2001). Professional development should be designed with a vision, with incremental and long-term goals (Guskey, 1994). Effective professional development focuses on the teaching and learning of academic content. Teachers must also receive regular feedback if new practices are to sustain overtime (Guskey, 1994). Furthermore, professional development promotes strong working relationships among educators. Finally, effective professional development is "intensive, ongoing, and connected to practice" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009, p. 5). However, effective professional development gradually implements incremental goals so as not to overburden teachers or disrupt the current instructional practice at the school site (Guskey, 1994).

Changes in the dialogue during the inquiry sessions and SST meetings suggest that a professional development intervention that utilizes a structured protocol to discuss and reflect on issues related to the academic supports of Latino ELLs in the SST referral process can lead to growth in the team's common knowledge, changes in the team's processes, and enhanced decision-making. Future research can take this process and determine the efficacy of how teacher's self concept and knowledge impacts reflective inquiry and collaborative decision-making process in the overall success of Latino ELL students. The SST committee at Alvarado Elementary has begun a professional journey that will continue to positively impact the education of future Latino ELLs.

Appendix A

REFELCTIVE INQUIRY AGENDA-a

Session One: Language Acquisition

Opening Quote (1 minute)

> "No other staff member is more identified or professionally linked to a student than the child's teacher. The teacher typically has more contact with and responsibility for a student than any other member of the school staff. Given this responsibility, the teacher stands to loose more than anyone else if a student is not academically performing up to par, let alone misbehaving. Furthermore, the SST process is set up in such a way that the teacher discusses his or her problems with students in front of an administrator, the counselor, the school psychologist, and fellow teachers. It therefore should come as no surprise that the study teachers' initial descriptions of the students were the most negative and evaluative of all the team members'. Built into this process is an inherent bind for the teacher: By acknowledging that a student is having a problem, the teacher is implicitly acknowledging that she or he is also having difficulty and may need assistance. Before a single word has been spoken, a social context is set up in which the teacher is in the position of describing either the student or him or herself as a problem. As noted, this is problematic in a setting in which teachers' reputations are potentially being evaluated. Within the SST process, the teachers' descriptions of the students were especially important because they framed the initial discussion. Being the initiator, the teacher set the tone and, as the referral form said, the 'focus of the meeting'." (Knotek, 2003, p. 7)

Reaction to quote (2 minutes)

- Research participants given the opportunity to react to the quote and share their perspective on the SST process

Introduction of Reflective Inquiry Sessions (1 minute)

- Description of the structure of the 3 reflective inquiry sessions
    - 1 session per topic: language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction
    - Looking at the distributed expertise (Edwards, Lunt, & Stamou, 2010) amongst the SST committee members to make the most informed recommendations during SST meetings
    - Goal is to understand the decision-making process of the SST committee members when providing interventions during SST meetings for Latino ELLs

Team Building Activity: Distributed Expertise Knowledge Chart (10 minutes)

- Activity to identify knowledge base, and level of expertise

- The research participants will chart:
    - Their role within the SST committee
    - Their knowledge base in the area of language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction
    - Their perceived level of expertise in the areas of language acquisition, learning disabilities, and culturally relevant instruction
- The chart will be reviewed at each inquiry session

<u>Presentation of instructional strategies/ research on language acquisition (20 minutes total)</u>

- Language acquisition Research Presentation/Discussion
    - **Cummins (1981; 2008)**
      •basic interpersonal communicative skills BICS, and academic English language as cognitive academic language proficiency, CALP
    - **Hakuta, Butler, and Witt (2000)**
      •found that it takes ELL students three to five years to develop oral English language proficiency, and four to seven years to develop academic English proficiency
    - **NCLB definition of an English Language Learner**
      •"an individual between the ages of three and 21 years old who is preparing, or enrolled in an elementary or secondary school, who was not born in the United States or whose native language is a language other than English." NCLB also defines ELLs as individuals who come from an environment "where a language other than English has had a significant impact on the individual's level of English language proficiency" (Public Law 107-110, Title IX, Part A, Sec. 9101, (25))

      •"whose difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language may be sufficient to deny the individual - (i) the ability to meet the State's proficient level of achievement on State assessments…(ii) the ability to successfully achieve in classrooms where the language of instruction is English; or (iii) the opportunity to participate fully in society."
    - **LAUSD Master Plan for English Learners**
        - Figure 4. Minimum Progress Expectations for Structured English Immersion to Mainstream (Elementary) (p. 26)

        - Figure 6. Minimum Progress Expectations for English Learners in the Mainstream English Program (Elementary) (p. 28)

        - Figure 13. Minimum Progress Expectations for Dual Language Two-Way Immersion Program (ELs in Elementary) (p. 38)

        - p. 39 Figure 14. Minimum Progress Expectations for Dual Language Two-Way Immersion Program (EOs and IFEPs/RFEPs in Elementary) (p. 29)

Review of students SST referral document (10 minutes)

- Discussion of possible language acquisition issues related to the student referral that will be discussed at a later date in an SST meeting.
- Possible intervention strategies for a student with typical needs
- Recommended Changes to the SST Referral Form

Closing Quote (1 minute)

> "The policies' (i.e., Prop 227 and Proposition 209) disregard for the language acquisition process, paired with unrealistic expectations for academic progress in English-based instruction, is posited to exacerbate the chances for misidentification of Latino ELLs as disabled (Case & Taylor, 2005). Researchers have called attention to the fact that ELL Latino student special education referrals and potential misdiagnosis are influenced by the availability of instructional services that promote English proficiency and acquisition of academic content simultaneously, and premature exiting from language support programs (Ochoa, Robles-Piña, Garcia & Breung, 1999)." (Artiles, Sullivan, Waitoller, & Neal, 2010, p. 367)

Closing comments (1 minute)

Discussion/suggestion points for next session (2 minutes)

- Questions based on today's inquiry session
- Questions regarding instructional strategies
- Suggestions for follow-up inquiry session

Journal Reflection- answer 4 questions (5 minutes)

What do you feel you learned today?

What do you think were your greatest contributions today?

How will today's discussion impact your decision-making process at the

next SST meeting?

What questions do you have about today's topic?

AGENDA-b

Session Two: Learning Disabilities

Opening Quote (1 minute)

> "Perhaps no one grasps the complexity and gravity of acquiring literacy skills more than a teacher who must take on the responsibility of helping and intervening with students who do not keep pace or meet grade-level expectations for reading and writing. Teachers are crucial facilitators of early reading intervention. They generally observe the first signs that a student is struggling. Often within the first months of the school year, teachers can tell which students are falling behind their peers. Teachers then must decide how to proceed with instruction" (Bailey, & Drummond, 2006, p. 150).

Reaction to quote (2 minutes)

- Research participants given the opportunity to react to the quote and share their perspective on students who exhibit learning difficulties.

Intro of topic (1 minute): Learning Disabilities

Revisit Distributed Expertise Knowledge Chart (5 minutes)

Presentation of instructional strategies/ research (20 minutes)

- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) defines *specific learning disability* (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 manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia" (20 USC 104, section 602 (30) (A)).
- IDEA (2004), the criteria to determine if a child may be identified as learning disabled, the child must demonstrate that they are not achieving State approved grade level standards in oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skills, reading fluency skills, reading comprehension, mathematics calculation and mathematics problem solving (http://idea.ed.gov/explore/view/p/,root,dynamic,TopicalBrief,23,)
- Review of ELL instructional strategies to support students with academic difficulties: Total Physical Response (TPR); comprehension strategy instruction; reciprocal teaching; semantic mapping; language experience approach; cooperative learning groups; peer tutoring (Hart, 2009).

Review of students SST referral document (10 minutes)

- Discussion of possible learning disability issues related to the student referral that will be discussed at a later date in an SST meeting.

- Possible intervention strategies for a student with typical needs
- Recommended Changes to SST Referral Form

Closing Quote (1 minute)

> "Teachers will need to know how to recognize language differences that can interfere with learning (especially in reading, writing, and oral expression) and how to address these educationally, as well as how to distinguish these from indicators of potential learning difficulties that are not attributable to the child's language differences, that is, that are indicative that this child has or is at risk for learning disabilities." (McCardle, Mele-McCarthy, Cutting,, Leos, & D'Emilio, 2005, p. 73)

Closing comments (1 minute)

Discussion/suggestion points for next session (2 minutes)

- Questions based on today's inquiry session
- Questions regarding instructional strategies
- Suggestions for follow-up inquiry session

Journal Reflection- answer 4 questions (5 minutes)

What do you feel you learned today?

What do you think were your greatest contributions today?

How will today's discussion impact your decision-making process at the next SST meeting?

What questions do you have about today's topic?

AGENDA-c

Session Three: Culturally Responsive Instruction

Opening Quote (1 minute)

> "Contrary to having students memorize predigested information, culturally responsive teachers strive to support students in their construction of knowledge by actively involving them in learning tasks and challenging them with problems that promotes higher-order thought processes (i.e., hypothesizing, predicting, comparing, evaluating, integrating, and synthesizing). Activities that involve active roles include: inquiry projects, collaborative projects for small groups of mixed-ability students, authentic dialogues, and encouragement of students to assume increasing responsibility for their own learning" (Huerta & Brittain, 2010, p. 389).

Reaction to quote (2 minutes)

- Research participants given the opportunity to react to the quote and share their perspective on culturally responsive teaching

Intro of topic: Culturally Responsive Instruction (1 minute)

Revisit Distributed Expertise Knowledge Chart (5 minutes)

Presentation of instructional strategies/ research (20 minutes)

- 6 characteristics of culturally responsive teaching
    - (1) understanding how learners construct knowledge, (2) learning about students' lives, (3) being socio-culturally conscious, (4) holding affirming views about diversity, (5) using appropriate instructional strategies, and (6) advocating for all students (Villegas & Lucas 2007)
- instructional strategies (Salend, S., Garrick, D. L., & Montgomery, W. (2002).
    - "(a) emphasizing verbal interactions, (b) teaching students to engage in self-talk, (c) facilitating divergent thinking, (d) using small-group instruction and cooperative learning, (e) employing verve in the classroom, (f) focusing on real-world tasks, and (g) promoting teacher–student interactions." (p. 292-293)
    - involve families in school activities
    - train staff to work with CLD students; cultural communication patterns
    - hire and retain a diverse staff

Review of students SST referral document (10 minutes)

- Discussion of possible culturally relevant instructional issues related to the student referral that was discussed at prior SST meeting.
- Possible intervention strategies for a student with typical needs
- Recommended Changes to SST Referral Form

Closing Quote (1 minute)

> "Latino English learners are one of the fastest-growing student populations in U.S. schools today and improving education outcomes for these children is one of our nation's most significant challenges. Now is the time for researchers, policy makers, and practitioners to work collaboratively, channeling resources to develop a deeper understanding of the great potential that these children present, and focus new resources on the tremendous opportunities for present and future success" (Villamil Tinajero, Munter, & Araujo, 2010, p. 499).

Closing comments (I minute)

Discussion/suggestion points for next session (2 minutes)

- Questions based on today's inquiry session
- Questions regarding instructional strategies
- Suggestions for follow-up inquiry session

Journal Reflection- answer 4 questions (send via-email) (5 minutes)

What do you feel you learned today?

What do you think were your greatest contributions today?

How will today's discussion impact your decision-making process at the

next SST meeting?

What questions do you have about today's topic?

Figure 4. Minimum Progress Expectations for Structured English Immersion to Mainstream (Elementary)

Minimum Progress Expectations for Structured English Immersion to Mainstream (Elementary)					
Timeline (Starting Point Based on Initial Level at 1st Year)	**1st Year →**	2nd Year	3rd Year	4th Year	5th Year
		1st Year →	2nd Year	3rd Year	4th Year
			1st Year →	2nd Year	3rd Year
				1st Year →	2nd Year
CELDT	Beginning	Early Intermediate	Intermediate	Early Adv / Adv - Not English Proficient	English Proficient[1]
ELD Standards-based measures (e.g., revised ELD progress profile)	ELD 1	ELD 2	ELD 3	ELD 4/5	ELD 4/5
English Lang. Arts: CST/CMA, Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) (K-3), Core K-12	FBB	BB	Basic[1] (low to mid*)	Basic (mid* to high)	Proficient/ Advanced
Math: CST/CMA, Core K-12	FBB	BB	Basic (low to mid*)	Basic (mid* to high)	Proficient/ Advanced

FBB=Far Below Basic, BB=Below Basic, B=Basic, P=Proficient, A=Advanced. (*Mid-Basic = 325 on CST/CMA-ELA.)

[1]ELs are expected to meet reclassification criteria within 5 full years of instruction. ELs not meeting reclassification criteria at the beginning of their 6th year are considered Long-Term ELs.

Figure 6. Minimum Progress Expectations for English Learners in the Mainstream English Program (Elementary)

Minimum Progress Expectations for English Learners in the Mainstream English Program (Elementary)					
	For ELs enrolled via Parental Request			For ELs transitioned from SEI or TBE	
Timeline (Starting Point Based on Initial Level at 1st Year)	**1st Year →**	2nd Year	3rd Year	4th Year	5th Year
		1st Year →	2nd Year	3rd Year	4th Year
			1st Year →	2nd Year	3rd Year
				1st Year →	2nd Year
CELDT	Beginning	Early Intermediate	Intermediate	Early Adv / Adv - Not English Proficient	English Proficient[1]
ELD Standards-based measures (e.g.,ELD progress profile)	ELD 1	ELD 2	ELD 3	ELD 4/5	ELD 4/5
English Lang. Arts: CST/CMA, DIBELS (K-3), Core K-12	FBB	BB	Basic[1] (low to mid*)	Basic (mid* to high)	Proficient/ Advanced
Math: CST/CMA, Core K-12	FBB	BB	Basic (low to mid*)	Basic (mid* to high)	Proficient/ Advanced

FBB=Far Below Basic, BB=Below Basic, B=Basic, P=Proficient, A=Advanced. (*Mid-Basic = 325 on CST/CMA-ELA.)

[1]ELs are expected to meet reclassification criteria within 5 full years of instruction. ELs not meeting reclassification criteria at the beginning of their 6th year are considered Long-Term ELs.

Figure 13. Minimum Progress Expectations for Dual Language Two-Way Immersion Program (ELs in Elementary)

Minimum Progress Expectations for Dual Language Two-Way Immersion Program Target Group: English Learners (Elementary)					
Timeline (Starting Point Based on Initial Level at 1st Year)	**1st Year →**	2nd Year	3rd Year	4th Year	5th Year
		1st Year →	2nd Year	3rd Year	4th Year
			1st Year →	2nd Year	3rd Year
				1st Year →	2nd Year
CELDT	Beginning	Early Intermediate	Intermediate	Early Adv / Adv - Not English Proficient	English Proficient[1]
ELD Standards-based measures (e.g., ELD progress profile)	ELD 1	ELD 2	ELD 3	ELD 4/5	ELD 4/5
ELA (CST/CMA, DIBELS (K-3), Common Benchmark Assessments, Periodic Assessments, Core K-12)	FBB	BB	Basic[1] (low to mid*)	Basic (mid* to high)	Proficient/ Advanced
Math (CST/CMA, Core K-12, Common Benchmark Assessments, Periodic Assessments)	FBB	BB	Basic (low to mid*)	Basic (mid* to high)	Proficient/ Advanced
Target- Language Arts[2]	Proficient/ Advanced	Proficient/ Advanced	Proficient/ Advanced	Proficient/ Advanced	Proficient/ Advanced
Target- Language Math[2]	Proficient/ Advanced	Proficient/ Advanced	Proficient/ Advanced	Proficient/ Advanced	Proficient/ Advanced

FBB=Far Below Basic, BB=Below Basic, B=Basic, P=Proficient, A=Advanced. *Mid-Basic: 325 on CST/CMA-ELA.

[1]ELs are expected to meet reclassification criteria within 5 full years. ELs not meeting reclassification criteria at the beginning of their 6th year are considered Long-Term ELs.

[2] Students are expected to perform at grade level when they are instructed and assessed in their primary language.

Figure 14. Minimum Progress Expectations for Dual Language Two-Way Immersion Program (EOs and IFEPs/RFEPs in Elementary)

Minimum Progress Expectations for Dual Language Two-Way Immersion Program **Target Groups: English Only and Fluent English Proficient (IFEP/RFEP)** **(Elementary)**						
Timeline (Starting Point Based on Initial Level at 1st Year)		**1st Year →**	2nd Year	3rd Year	4th Year	5th Year
			1st Year →	2nd Year	3rd Year	4th Year
				1st Year →	2nd Year	3rd Year
					1st Year →	2nd Year
Target Language Development (TLD) Measures		TLD 1	TLD 2	TLD 3	TLD 4	TLD 5
Language Arts[2] (CST/CMA, DIBELS (K-3), Common Benchmark Assessments, Periodic Assessments, Core K-12; STS for IFEPs, RFEPs)		Proficient/ Advanced	Proficient/ Advanced	Proficient/ Advanced	Proficient/ Advanced	Proficient/ Advanced
Math[2] (CST/CMA, Common Benchmark Assessments, Periodic Assessments, Core K-12; STS for IFEPs, RFEPs)		Proficient/ Advanced	Proficient/ Advanced	Proficient/ Advanced	Proficient/ Advanced	Proficient/ Advanced
Target-Language Arts	EOs only	FBB	BB	Basic[1] (low to mid*)	Basic (mid* to high)	Proficient/ Advanced
Target-Language Math	EOs only	FBB	BB	Basic (low to mid*)	Basic (mid* to high)	Proficient/ Advanced

FBB=Far Below Basic, BB=Below Basic, B=Basic, P=Proficient, A=Advanced. *Mid-Basic: 325 on CST/CMA-ELA

[1]ELs are expected to meet reclassification criteria within 5 full years. ELs not meeting reclassification criteria at the beginning of their 6th year are considered Long-Term ELs.

[2] Students are expected to perform at grade level when they are instructed and assessed in their primary language, and in the case of RFEPs, the language in which they have attained proficiency.

APPENDIX B

Questionnaire:

1. What is your name? _____

2. How many years have you been employed in LAUSD? _____

3. What positions have you held during your employment in LAUSD?

_____

_____

4. How many years have you been employed in your current position as: school psychologist, Resource Specialist Teacher, Intervention Teacher, general education teacher, Special Day Teacher, nurse, Title 3 Coordinator, or Bilingual Coordinator? (Circle one)

_____

5. What credentials do you hold? _____

_____

6. What colleges have you attended? _____

_____

7. What degrees have you earned? _____

_____

8. What was your major when you received your bachelor's degree? _____

9. How many years have you been a member of the SST committee? _____

10. What is your role in the SST committee? _____

_____

11. What training have you received about the roles, duties, and responsibilities to participate in an SST meeting?

_____

12. What training have you received in the area of language acquisition?

_____

_____

13. What training have you received in the area of learning disabilities?

_____

_____

14. What training have you received in the area of culturally relevant instruction for Latino students?

_____

_____

15. What do you consider to be your area(s) of expertise in the field of education?

_____

_____

16. Have you been able to share your expertise during SST meetings?

_____

_____

17. Approximately how many SST meetings have attended during the last school year? ____

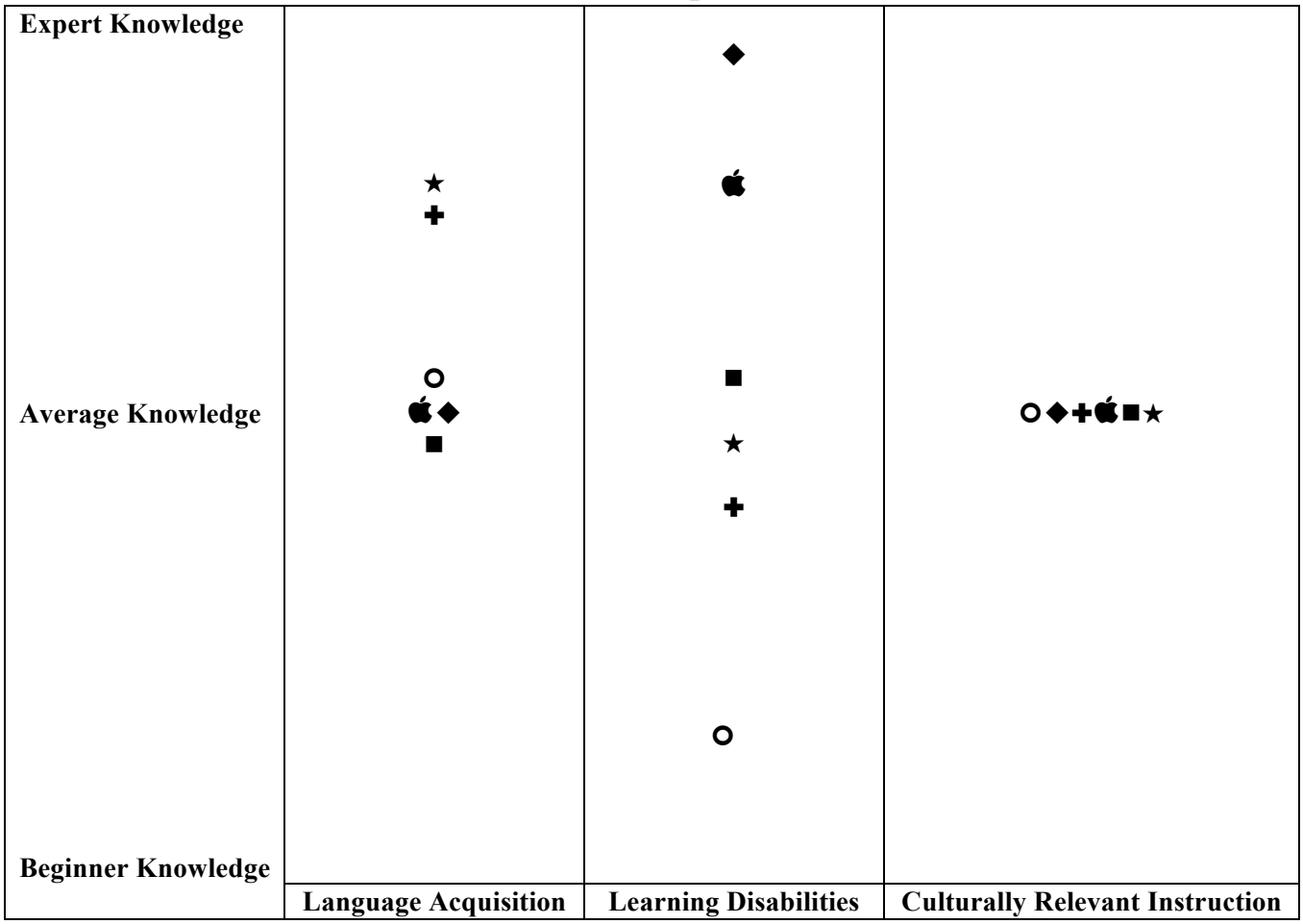
18. Approximately how many SST meetings have you attended that involved an ELL student? _____

19. Approximately how many SST meetings have you attended that involved students with suspected learning disabilities? _____

20. Approximately how many SST meetings have you attended that involved culturally relevant instructional strategies? _____

Appendix C

Distributed Expertise



	Intervention Teacher	School Psych	Bilingual Coord	Resource Teacher	SDC Teacher	Administrator
Initial Change	○	◆	✚	✆	■	★

Appendix D (a)

Date of Referral _____

[redacted] ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Referral to Student Success Team

Student: _____ Parent Name: _____

Grade _____ Room_____ Track_____ Address _____

Birthdate _____ _____

Teacher: _____ Telephone: (H): _____

Primary Language: _____ Telephone: (W): _____

Dominant Language: _____ Language of Instruction: _____

☐ED ☐LEP/ELD Level_____ If new to Country, # yrs. In U.S. _____ # of Schools_____

Referral For: ☐Academic Difficulties ☐Behavior Modification ☐Attendance
☐Counseling ☐Health ☐Speech

Reason for Referral (**Be Specific.** Use attachment if needed):

_____

_____

_____

Support Services Received by student:

☐Counseling ☐After-School ☐Intervention ☐RSP/IEP ☐ Other: _____

Student's Strengths: _____

_____

_____

DATE(S) PARENTS CONTACTED AND OUTCOME:

Remedial steps, including parent meetings, MUST be taken prior to initiating a referral request.

Date	Topic and outcome

Appendix D (b)

Date of Referral_____

Reading:

Writing:

Math :

Communication skills/Speech:

Social Skills/Peer relations:

Relations with adults/authority:

Attention span:

Other:

Tier I Interventions/Accommodations

Please be specific and state focus of intervention/Accommodation, duration and progress monitoring used.

Tier1 Intervention/Accommodation Provided. Please be specific & state what skill/strategies used.	Start Date Implemented	Duration/ Frequency	Progress Monitoring/ Assessment. How was/will outcome measured? How frequently?	Outcome

Please attach page for additional interventions/accommodations.
Be sure to include all of the above information.

Appendix D (c)

Date of Referral_____

Student name:_____

Please check any of the following that describes the student:

Academic Performance

___Difficulty with reading comprehension
___Difficulty with math computation/reasoning
___Written expression is below grade level
___Does not complete assignments
___Difficulty expressing self in primary language
___Cannot work independently
___Delayed fine/large motor skills
___Confused in understanding/following directions
___Short Attention span/inattentive
___Does not bring materials
___Other (Describe) _____

Health and Development

___Appears to stutter
___Exhibits articulation and/or voice problems
___Known medical problems_____
___Is receiving medications
Name & Purpose_____
___Extreme weight gain/loss
___Poor personal hygiene
___Lethargic/sleeps in class
___Has dental/vision needs
___Displays difficulty in eye/hand movement
___Poor balance
___Other (Describe) _____

Accommodations/Modification

+/positive -/no effect

___Changed seating
___Peer helper/tutor or cross age tutor
___Incentive Program
___Modify/simplify assignments
___Individual help (Teacher/T.A.)
___Individual contracts
___Small group reteach
___Simplified/Clarified directions
___Frequent breaks
___Tasks broken into parts

Social/Emotional Development

___Shows inadequate self-concepts
___Identity issues (Describe) _____
___Lacks motivation or uninterested in school
___Frequently sad/moody
___Shy/withdrawn
___Defiant towards authority and/or of rules
___Disrupts others
___Aggressive/short temper
___Lies
___Steals
___Does not take responsibility for actions
___Erratic Behavior (Describe) _____
___Frequent daydreaming/attention strays
___Unaccepted by peers/Difficulty making friends
___Influenced by peers/ Peer pressure
___Other (Describe) _____
___Bulling

Home Environment

___Not living with biological family/foster care
___Problems with parent or guardian
(Describe) _____
___Unstable living arrangement_____
___Parent does not follow-through
___Cares for younger sibling(s)
___Suspect abuse at home_____
___Problems with siblings
___Inconsistent discipline at home
___Death of significant person _____
___Family is homeless/frequently moves
___Parent unable/unwilling to discipline at home
___Divorce or separation in family
___Addition to family; sibling/stepparent
___Frequent tardies/absences
___Other (Describe) _____

Appendix D (d)

Date of Referral_____

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:
Are there any environmental factors that may affect learning? Describe any drastic family changes that may have an impact on student performance/behavior:

Before submitting referral be sure that::

All areas of SST form are completed
MY DATA summary sheet is attached to the referral
MY DATA attendance records attached
Samples of pertinent student work are attached
Medical evaluation form completed and submitted to school nurse.

Submitted by: _____ **Date:**_____

Appendix D (e)

Date of Referral_____

SUBMIT to SCHOOL NURSE

Student Name:		ID Number
Grade/Room #	Birthdate:	Teacher:

GENERAL HEALTH (School Nurse to complete)

Vision:_____ Date:_____ Comments:_____

Audio :_____ Date:_____ Comments:_____

Medications, physical limitations and other information:

Appendix E

SST SUMMARY FORM

STUDENT: _____ SCHOOL: _____ TEAM: _____ DATE OF INITIAL SST: _____

PRIMARY LANGUAGE: _____ GRADE: _____ BIRTHDATE: _____ PARENTS: _____

STRENGTHS	KNOWN Information	KNOWN Modifications	CONCERNS (Prioritize)	QUESTIONS (Clarification)	STRATEGIES (Brainstorm)	ACTIONS (Prioritize)	Who	When

Follow Up Date: _____ ***Invite:*** _____

Team Members' Signature & Position:

1. Parent: _____ 5. _____ / _____
2. Student: _____ 6. _____ / _____
3. Administrator: _____ 7. _____ / _____
4. Referring Teacher: _____ 8. _____ / _____

SST SUMMARY FORM—REV 2000

Appendix F

SST FOLLOW UP FORM

Today's Date: _____

STUDENT: _____ SCHOOL: _____ TEAM: _____ DATE OF INTITAL SST: _____

PRIMARY LANGUAGE: _____ GRADE: _____ BIRTHDATE: _____ PARENTS: _____

NEW INFORMATION	PREVIOUS ACTIONS	OUTCOMES	NEW ACTIONS	Who	When

Follow-up Date: _____ ***Invite:*** _____

Team Members' Signature & Position:

1. Parent _____ 5. _____ / _____
2. Student _____ 6. _____ / _____
3. Administrator _____ 7. _____ / _____
4. Referring Teacher _____ 8. _____ / _____

2-SSTF~1.DOC

Glossary of Terms:

CLD- Culturally and Linguistically Diverse

ELD- English Language Development

EL- English Learner

ELL- English Language Learner

RTI- Response to Intervention

SLD- Specific Learning Disability

SST- Student Success Team

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