

*The Perspectives and Assumptions of Pupil Appraisal Professionals in the Identification Process  
for Students with Behavioral Concerns*

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Researchers have long been disconcerted with the lack of a clear definition and objective criteria in identifying students with behavior problems (Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice, 1999; Forness & Kavale, 2000). As a safeguard, federal and state laws mandate the use of multidisciplinary teams to “reduce the inappropriate and discriminatory referral and placement of students into special education” (Knotek, 2003, p. 2). It is this team that makes the decisions throughout the formal identification process; “...no single procedure is used as the sole criterion for determining whether a student is a student with an exceptionality” (Louisiana Department of Education, 2000, p. 23). However, the safeguard is not fail-safe. Tensions may arise when there are opposing viewpoints, divergent interpretations of events or circumstances, and, in particular, competing philosophical orientations among team members.

Professionals, whether consciously or subconsciously, use their philosophical perspective as a basis for their general understanding of an exceptionality and their opinion of the method of identification. With regard to the classification of Emotional Disturbance (ED), some view this condition as pathological, having universal characteristics, i.e., exists within the student. They are comfortable basing the identification of ED on quantifiable instruments such as standardized rating scales and objective measures. Others view the characteristics and definition of ED as specific to an environment or culture that changes over time. They may believe that the environment, in fact, influences the behavior problems students exhibit. To them, the identification process includes activities such as interviews with family members to learn about the student’s behavior at home and in relation to peers and neighborhood friends. At times they also use norm-referenced activities such as classroom observations in an effort to compare the student to peers. Then there are those professionals who believe that too many students receive the ED classification. They tend to blame the entire educational organization and its inability to address the needs of all students in general education. These individuals view labeling and the stratification system as a way society marginalizes or oppresses certain groups. They value diversity and maintain the importance of treating individuals as unique. So, while some team members question the reality of a condition known as Emotional Disturbance, others appear comfortable in the belief that there is such a condition and concentrate on developing the most effective way to identify it. These various philosophical orientations provide the framework for this article.

*Theoretical Framework*

Skrtic (1991) describes three dominant philosophies as a way to deconstruct or analyze special education. He uses the traditions of objectivism, subjectivism, and critical pragmatism. According to Skrtic, an objectivist sees reality as definable, objective, and having universal characteristics. Objectivists study reality to determine regularities and causal relationships that can then be used to control, order, and/or predict outcomes. As a result of this knowledge,

society operates more efficiently and progresses. The methods used to investigate reality are those associated with empirical science, e.g., data, neutral observers, quantifiable descriptors.

The subjective tradition, as the name implies, views reality as subjective and created through people's interaction with the environment. Language and symbols serve to describe, understand, and negotiate reality. Knowledge of reality, according to the subjective tradition, continually evolves and is best understood from the perspective of a person at a particular place in time. However, groups of people can also have a collective understanding of reality (consensual reality). People interact within the environment and do not attempt to control it. Norms are developed to describe the immediate environment. Methods of investigation used in the subjective realm are often qualitative in nature and seek to describe ways people construct their reality (Guba, 1990; Ferguson & Ferguson, 1995).

The third tradition according to Skrtic (1991) is critical pragmatism, a denial of the existence of an objective reality. According to the critical pragmatists, reality is based rather on the values of the powerful and influential members of society. People's reality is limited by their conditioning and history. Their knowledge of reality is gained by examining the myths, values, behavior, and language learned by mass culture (Shor & Freire, 1987) and by continually questioning the economic and social forces that keep these existing values, practices, or institutions in place (Skrtic, 1991). Methods such as critical reflection (the analysis of professional practice) and action research (on-going research intended to shape practice) are methods used to uncover the forces in society that influence values, practices, and institutions.

### *Theory Applied to Practice*

Coleman, Sanders, and Cross (1997) use a similar framework to tie philosophical traditions to the identification process of students who are exceptional. Though they use the exceptionality of Gifted to discuss this process, an easy transition to students with Emotional Disturbance is quite possible. Both of these exceptionalities or classifications fall outside the norm of the school population. Therefore, it is possible to ask the same kinds of questions of each: What does it mean to be Gifted? What does it mean to be classified with Emotional Disturbance? Likewise, educators adopt certain ways of identifying both exceptionalities: How is giftedness determined? Or how is Emotional Disturbance determined?

Coleman et al. (1997) use different terms to frame their theory, but, in effect, reflect the essence of Skrtic's three traditions: empirical/analytic for objectivism, interpretive for subjectivism, and transformative for critical pragmatism. They refer to a "mode of inquiry" as a way to discuss the principal approach a person uses when considering what an exceptionality means and the method of choice to identify a student with an exceptionality. Coleman et al. recognize that people may not consciously be aware of their mode of operation. In fact, the philosophical orientation from which they operate often becomes part of their tacit assumptions; tacit assumptions that are taken for granted, rarely questioned, and often presumed to be shared by others.

The first "mode of inquiry" which may become entrenched in a person's tacit assumptions is the empirical-analytic. This mode claims laws are universal and can provide proof of what is true or false and uncover cause and effect relationships which aid in the process of making predictions. An exceptionality can be defined and measured. Objective methods are used in the investigative process, and standardized instruments can be used to identify these students. Emphasis is placed

on accuracy in the identification process and, as a result, efforts are continually made to develop better instruments and reduce errors.

According to the interpretative mode, knowledge is gained by understanding how others see the world. Interpretivists seek to understand how people or groups view order or patterns in their relationships. People who operate from this mode of inquiry understand that people who are exceptional demonstrate abilities falling outside the norm in certain areas at certain times. Assessment practices, including evaluations, are not static and can vary according to change in circumstances and/or participants, e.g., measurement is determined by local school district. Furthermore, methods used to identify students are not limited to formal measurements and may include portfolios, observations, and informal tests.

The final model of inquiry presented by Coleman et al. is the transformative mode. Knowledge, according to this view, is “embedded in a cultural matrix of values” (Coleman et al., p. 107). That is, our way of knowing and investigating is wrapped up in the “power” relationships that involve struggles emerging from differences of gender, race, social class, and culture. According to this mode of inquiry, the influential in society not only determine the parameters of what is acceptable, they marginalize those who fall outside the dominant way of thinking. It is, therefore, important to identify these relationships and the ways people marginalize or are themselves marginalized. These realizations facilitate personal transformations and serve to help others in this same process. According to the transformative mode, standardized tests should not be used in an evaluation process since the nature of standardization depends on characteristics that have been valued by the dominant society and reinforced over time.

The purpose of this study is to describe the perspectives and underlying assumptions of Pupil Appraisal (PA) Professionals (i.e., education diagnosticians, certified school psychologists, qualified school social workers) at key decision points in the identification process for students with behavior problems (pre-referral and eligibility determination). The study attempts to understand the lived experiences (how people react and interact) of the evaluators as they are involved in this identification process.

Webster’s Dictionary provides the source of the definitions for perspective and assumption used in this article. Perspective is the “evaluation of events according to a particular way of looking at them, *historical perspective*;” assumption is the “supposition that something is true; a fact or statement taken for granted.” Key decision points refer to those determinations occurring at the pre-referral and eligibility determination level. The first key decision point transpires after the pre-referral information has been gathered, and the pre-referral team or School Building Level Committee (SBLC) meets to make a recommendation whether or not to proceed with the evaluation. The second key decision point occurs when all components for the individual evaluation have been completed, and the multidisciplinary team meets to determine the eligibility for special education. These team decisions are guided by the Pupil Appraisal (PA) Handbook, a state policy document that mandates the definitions, criteria, screening and evaluation procedures for the identification of students with disabilities.

Classifications in the Pupil Appraisal Handbook, however, sometimes include definitions and criteria with language that is relative and vague, particularly in the case of the ED classification. Ambiguous language in the ED definition and criteria such as “extended period of time,” “appropriate,” and “severe” is open to professional judgment. In addition, although specific

standardized test scores or medical diagnoses greatly assist in the determination of other classifications, the Emotional Disturbance label does not have the support of “hard evidence” or the requirement for certain scores on standardized tests. Thus the perspectives and assumptions of PA Professionals have the potential of playing a significant role in accepting students with behavior problems into the evaluation process at SBLC as well as later when the determining if the student qualifies for an exceptionality.

### *Method*

#### *Participants*

##### *Site Selection*

Convenience sampling was used to select two sites for this study. These sites were chosen because of proximity and the interest of administrators. One site was an urban school district with more than 60,000 students and a Pupil Appraisal staff of more than 70 PA Professionals (Louisiana Department of Education, 2001). The other was a rural school district with approximately 10,000 students and a Pupil Appraisal staff of fewer than 25 appraisal professionals (Louisiana Department of Education, 2001).

##### *Participant Criteria*

Purposeful sampling, according to Maxwell (1996)

*is the deliberate selection of particular informants who can provide important information that others could not. Since, the study involved decisions made at the pre-referral meeting of the School Building Level Committee (SBLC) and the Eligibility Determination meeting, participants who actively participated at both of these key decision points when students with behavior problems were discussed were targeted. Though it is recognized that teachers, parents, and administrators play significant roles in referring students to SBLC, it is the PA Professionals on the team who have the responsibility of ultimately determining the eligibility for special education services. This study, therefore, concentrates on the perceptions of these professionals.*

Following the approval of administrators in both school districts, letters were sent to all PA Professionals introducing the principal investigator, describing the details of the project, listing the possible participation benefits and requesting participation. Ultimately, twelve PA Professionals involved in the identification process for Emotional Disturbance volunteered to provide an in-depth examination of their practices. A deliberate attempt was made to recruit an equal distribution from each PA discipline. Therefore, in the urban district three specialists from each profession--school psychologist, educational diagnostician, and social worker-- were recruited, and in the rural school district, one person was recruited from each of the three disciplines.

##### *Interviews*

Appraisal professionals were interviewed using a semi-structured interview format (see Appendix A). Initially, in a pilot study, observations were used to gather information on perceptions of PA Professionals. This method, however, proved inadequate and inefficient because of difficulties gathering in-depth information and scheduling, using interviews allayed these concerns. Questions were posed to elicit opinions on issues surrounding referrals and

evaluations within the identification process. Interviews lasted approximately sixty to ninety minutes. Each participant then received a summary of his/her interview for verification. Furthermore, ten of the professionals agreed to participate in follow-up interviews for further clarification and elaboration.

### *Field Notes*

Maxwell (1996) speaks of the merits of incorporating the practice of regularly writing memos about the research process (e.g., ideas, hypothesis, categories, observations). Notes were maintained on the interview process regarding both technical (e.g., outlets, integrity of audio equipment) and logistical (e.g., setting, availability of water and snacks) concerns. Methodological issues were also documented such as times when participants strayed from the topic, effectiveness of certain probes, the need to clarify questions and researcher subjectivity. Extensive notes regarding analysis were maintained following analysis of the transcript and conversations with external reviewers.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis involved data reduction, data displays, and conclusion drawing. The first procedure, data reduction, involved analyzing verbatim transcriptions and identifying meaningful units or codes found in the words and actions of the participants in the study as they related to the research question. Later, these passages or data chunks were examined to determine even more distinct patterns/themes as a base for larger categories of meaning.

Data was then visually displayed according to three broad themes: student, environment, and system. Each theme was divided into the two key points of decision: SBLC and Eligibility Determination. Passages from transcripts were cut and pasted on charts under each of these key decision point and tagged according to the specific discipline headings: educational diagnostician, school psychologist, and social worker.

This visual display greatly assisted in designing conceptual maps, drawing conclusions and identifying the underlying assumptions that were suggested by participants' comments. These assumptions were later used to form the perspectives that served to answer the research question.

### *Confirmability*

Marshall and Rossman (1989) and Glesne (1998) suggest a number of ways to address an over-interference of researcher's bias or subjectivity. Some of these ways include the use of external reviewers, member checks, and triangulation.

### *External Reviewer*

Two researchers served as external reviewers for this study. These experts asked critical questions, verified or disputed themes/patterns, and proposed alternative hypotheses. Meetings were held following the first, eighth, and last interview. Conversations occurred in the room with the data analysis. Both external reviewers critiqued the written report of the results.

### *Member Checks*

Each person interviewed received a written summary of the main points of his/her individual interview for review and verification. All respondents confirmed or clarified information from the summaries. The first three people interviewed took time to further elaborate on their original interviews.



### *Triangulation*

Janesick (1998) lists data sources as a type of triangulation. This study used a variety of data sources, that is, multiple participants with varying points of view. Twelve participants confirmed and/or contradicted what others said and what the researcher believed. Bias was held in check by the differing points of view of these various participants.

### *Results*

Various terminology has been used to describe methodological approaches to deconstruct or analyze education (Skrtic, 1991; Borlund, 1990, Guba, 1990). However, for the purpose of discussion, results are organized according to the three broad perspectives outlined by Coleman et al: Empirical-analytic, Interpretive, and Transformative. Although it is impossible to precisely compartmentalize or assign rigid, definitive boundaries for each of these perspectives they should be viewed as fluid rather than static boundaries: one shades off another. Perspectives and assumptions regarding the identification process are embedded in the PA Professionals' accounts of their experiences. Attentive listening can tease these out; critical analysis can categorize them.

Each section begins with a brief description of each perspective and the assumptions it entails regarding the ED definition and classification criteria. The information gleaned from the interviews with the PA Professionals is used to illustrate each perspective. To give the reader some sense of who is speaking, codes and numbers are assigned according to professions and the order in which they were interviewed. For example, "P" represents psychologists; "E" represents educational diagnosticians, and "S" represents social workers. And P1 represents the first psychologist interviewed, P2 the second psychologist, and so on. Each section ends with a discussion of the factors that study participants acknowledged are important to them at key decision points in the identification process.

### *Empirical-Analytic*

Coleman, Sanders, and Cross (1997) use the term, "empirical-analytic," borrowed from Popkewitz (1984), to describe a perspective that suggests that social reality is definable and objective with universally recognizable characteristics. In addition, according to this perspective, reality exists whether people are aware of it or not. Therefore, in order to learn more about reality, followers of this perspective search to uncover new knowledge and strive to perfect existing knowledge. One of the ways they refine existing knowledge is to seek out cause-and-effect relationships. They believe that these causal relationships lead to a better understanding of how to control and/or predict social reality.

How does the empirical-analytic perspective relate to PA Professionals and the identification process for students with behavior problems? The answer to this question is framed by outlining two main assumptions that relate to the nature of Emotional Disturbance and the way Emotional Disturbance is identified.

*Assumption 1: There are students who have a condition known as Emotional Disturbance.*

There are two kinds...of true Emotional Disturbance; Those kids who may hear voices, cry a lot, or can't function within the education setting...on high doses of medicine or could be

schizophrenic... This one I think is more behavioral; his is more outbursts and not wanting to comply with the teacher demands, acting impulsively and not thinking about the end. (E4)

The state definition of Emotional Disturbance contained in The Pupil Appraisal (PA) Handbook describes students whose identification can be based on generalized behaviors or on the definition found in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM). The generalized definition addresses behavior that is so different from the “appropriate age, cultural, or ethnic norm”, that it affects performance, and is “consistently exhibited in two different settings”. A diagnosis based on the DSM must indicate a “severe mental disorder”.

The appraisal professionals in this study described both of these behavioral conditions. E2 describes an image of a generalized condition,

[He] had all kinds of problem behaviors, walking out of school, fighting, cursing out the teacher, cursing out his family, just being real mean to his siblings...and it extended to the community.

P1 describes a student who she thought had schizophrenia, a diagnosis associated with a DSM classification,

...She was having hallucinations, and she'd just laugh. Those are the easy [children to identify]...where you have a child who is behaving with hallucinations.

Findings suggest that appraisal professionals believe that there is a condition that can be defined as Emotional Disturbance. Appraisal professionals also recognize characteristics and identify the criteria used in the identification process.

*Assumption 2: There are Reliable Criteria on which to base the Identification of Students with Emotional Disturbance.*

The Pupil Appraisal Handbook that mandates the procedures and criteria for the identification of a student with emotional problems also includes a diagnosis of a severe mental disorder based on the criteria found in the Diagnostic Statistics Manual (DSM). Participants presented opinions on both the PA Handbook and DSM.

One participant indicated that the PA Handbook, “provided structure to the process;” another considered it as “a general guideline,” and yet another viewed it as a “flow chart” of the necessary steps and components. P3 spoke of the merits of the Handbook,

It's easy enough to go through the evaluation and complete the steps. If they all add up and you can go to the diagnostic manual, [PA Handbook] and determine...he's emotionally disturbed. And later this same psychologist (P3) stated,

If they fit the characteristics they're in. I don't have any choice on that. If I have evaluated a kid and I see the characteristics of an emotionally disturbed kid and it's interfering with their educational performance and that of others. I mean they're in. I might not like it but there's no alternative.

Ten of the 12 professionals made reference to diagnoses found in the DSM. Some spoke of existing conditions of “schizophrenia”, “depression”, and “selective mutism.” Three participants welcomed the involvement of the psychiatric profession. Two reported that a DSM diagnosis

facilitated for or provided the direction in the identification of Emotional Disturbance. S1 told how the psychiatric report was used as the basis for the decision at SBLC, “ We already had the completed evaluation [psychiatric]...So I mean it was ready, right there. We had everything we needed.” When asked if the student was then immediately referred for an evaluation and participant replied, “With a child with that kind of diagnosis?” [Of course, the youngster was referred for an evaluation.]. E1 used the psychiatric report to provide direction for SBLC,

I tried to get the mother and father to consider having them [their children] seen by a psychiatrist or a medical doctor...If I don't have anything from a psychiatrist or a medical doctor now [at SBLC meeting] and they [SBLC] haven't made any effort to get any of that...now, where am I going with this [referral]?

This same PA Professional emphasized the relationship of DSM categories and Emotional Disturbance, “To me ED [Emotional Disturbance] is something that is psychiatrically...diagnosed.”

All 12 PA Professionals are required to use the pre-determined criteria found in the PA Handbook. However, there are varying levels of satisfaction when it comes to this document. Some acknowledged the importance or validity of some procedures and criteria; while other participants voiced its inadequacy. We now focus attention on the factors that study participants acknowledged were important to them at both the SBLC and Eligibility Determination levels – factors that again reflect the Empirical-Analytic Perspective.

#### *Key factors in decision-making at SBLC*

All 12 participants indicated that criteria existed that could be used to identify students with Emotional Disturbance. However, appraisal professionals suggested that at the SBLC level two types of interventions were given more attention than others: medication and documentation of implemented interventions.

#### *Medication as an intervention*

Nine professionals referred to discussions at SBLC meetings that involved the use of medication, with the implication that the youngster had a pathological condition that could be remedied with medicine. E1 at an SBLC meeting asked if a doctor had prescribed medication for the student. This question was answered with, “He was given medication all the time, but it didn't do any good.” P3 hoped that the student's behavior would improve as a result of medication, “Let's see if medication would help him, so we don't have to label him and put him in a special education classroom.” P3 also spoke of experiences with students where medication had been prescribed, “...If it works, it's quick.”

It appears for these nine professionals that, if in fact the medication alleviates the behavior problem, the decision was made not to refer the student for an evaluation. If however, medication was not prescribed or if it was prescribed with no noticeable change in the behavior, then the decision was made to refer the student for a full evaluation.

#### *Documented interventions*

All 12 professionals referred to interventions as necessary activities in the pre-referral process. Some participants used the results of these interventions to decide if the student needed to be referred for an evaluation: they assumed that if a student was able to change a behavior, then in



all likelihood, this student probably did not have an Emotional Disturbance. P4 believed that, "The intervention is to look at if this child is learning like a handicapped student or not. It is not to remediate him...if he responds to the intervention, then, no, he is not a special ed candidate." E4 developed a systematic way to conduct objective and measurable interventions,

When the teacher comes to the SBLC and say, "We are going to do a support system for behaviors." We will ask them to define what that behavior is. What does aggressive mean? Is he hitting; is he spitting; is he kicking? What behaviors are the most problematic for you in the classroom? Once we determine what the problematic behaviors are, and the frequency of them, then an intervention is developed. We'll ask the teacher to chart it. And then we'll go in weekly and see how they are doing, and chart it, and then graph it to see if they responded to the intervention.

This example indicates the precision with which interventions are designed. For these five PA Professionals, the interventions and the terms used to describe the behaviors are objective, measurable, and verifiable.

These two factors appeared important for PA Professionals when making decisions at SBLC: medication and interventions. Five PA Professionals in particular, emphasized the importance of calculable interventions. The next key decision point, "Eligibility Determination," reflects many of these same considerations.

#### *Key factors in decision-making at Eligibility Determination*

Five PA Professionals emphasized the need for multiple sources of data at the Eligibility Determination level. Five of these participants actually did more than what was minimally required by the Handbook. E3 relied on information from numerous sources to help in determining eligibility for special education services, "You really think you have to gather a lot of data and look at multi sources of data, not one or two pieces of data." E4 listed the data she considered important such as:

...observations, teacher interview, parent interviews, behavioral scales. [The School Psychologist] and I look at where the behaviors precipitated where it happens most often. Is it structured/unstructured? What are his academic levels? Is it the academic work we are really looking at? I am really not sure at this point until we go in and do observations or interviews, until I can do some informal testing, some standardized testing, some curriculum based, to see if the curriculum is too hard for him.

The second assumption of the Empirical-Analytic Perspective focuses on the existence of criteria that can be used to identify students with Emotional Disturbance. Respondents suggested that the PA Handbook and the DSM could be used to determine this exceptionality. Furthermore, the PA Handbook lists the certain activities and components that are required at the pre-referral and eligibility determination levels. Though all PA Professionals satisfy these requirements, some factors are given special consideration such as medication and interventions at the SBLC level, and multiple sources of data at "Eligibility Determination."

#### *Interpretive Perspective*

The interpretive perspective acknowledges the importance of the interaction of people and their environment. In this perspective, reality is subjective and shaped by individuals and groups as

they seek to understand it. Language, signs, and symbols are used to describe, interpret and negotiate reality. The following two assumptions inherent in this perspective, once again, concentrate on the nature of Emotional Disturbance and the way it can be identified.

*Assumption 1: There are Students who have a Condition known as Emotional Disturbance that Results from the Student's Interaction with his/her Environment.*

The first assumption is the crux of the ecological or Interpretive Perspective: students have behavior problems that point to the influence of home, school, and/or community situations. All of the 12 professionals, to some extent, acknowledged the influence of the environment on student behavior.

Seven PA professionals, in particular, strongly emphasized the influence of environment. S3 expressed her opinion on the relationship between the youngster's behavior and the home environment in this way:

With all family problems, the instability in the home and the child exposed to that all day...And then he comes to school and he's expected to sit still and do his work...When you know that, what's at home is not resolved, and he has to deal with this every day.

S2 told me of a situation in which a student lived with his Grandmother but really wanted to be with his mother. The Grandmother complained of his "disturbed" behavior. This participant presented an alternate interpretation for this youngster's behavior,

...behavior that you would expect from a child who had been through what he had experienced, not knowing whether he was always going to be with the Grandmother...or if his Mother was going to take him, because sometimes she would take him for a visit. He didn't know how long it would last, when he would see her again. That can contribute to a child not being able to concentrate in school.

These professionals believed that it is the environment that contributes, perhaps even in a decisive way, to the students' behavioral difficulties. They juxtaposed home environmental issues with expectations at school.

*Assumption 2: The Criteria used to Identify Emotional Disturbance are Problematic.*

Respondents raised two essential considerations that influenced them at the pre-referral and eligibility determination: the vague language of the Handbook, and the impact on the student once the label Emotional Disturbance was assigned.

*Problematic language in the PA Handbook*

As previously stated, the PA Handbook defines Emotional Disturbance and the criteria and procedures used to identify it. All twelve participants made references to the language of this Handbook. Four PA Professionals admitted that terms such as, "socially maladjusted," "severity," and "appropriate" were vague. This ambiguous language generated three topics of conversation: "working" definitions of terms, opportunities to use professional judgment, and possibility of misidentification of students.

The individual PA Professionals incorporated their own terms to interpret the ambiguous language of the PA Handbook. According to four PA Professionals, "severe," behaviors were

synonymous with terms such as “malicious,” “very disruptive,” and “shows no remorse.” P3’s “working” definition involved the differentiation between a student who “...can’t behave himself or won’t behave himself.” The implication was that if the students “can’t” behave themselves then they had Emotional Disturbance. Three other PA Professionals assumed that if students behaved a certain way just to get attention then they probably did not have an Emotional Disturbance. E2 explained, “His behaviors were more geared to getting the teacher’s attention. You know a lot of ED kids when they’re doing something, they’re not even aware of who’s around and what’s around. They’re just acting up.”

Three of the twelve professionals actually appreciated the fact that the Handbook contained terms that were vague as it allowed them to use professional judgment. E4, in speaking about the PA Handbook stated,

It shows you what you need to address, the general overview of everything that you need to cover in your report. It gives you some leeway also... to make professional judgment...you have all the data to support a classification, and, in your professional judgment, this child should have this classification or not; then you use it.

Two professionals addressed the problem of misidentification that results from language in the definition and criteria that is vague and arbitrary. P2 worried that, “...a child can be written to fit into the label.” S2 was troubled by PA Professionals who read the definition and criteria for the exceptionality and then go in search of those behaviors, “But, I think, too often we find what the Handbook says.”

The following discussion illustrates the three opinions posited by the PA Professionals regarding the language of the Handbook: the need for further refinement and interpretation, the advantage of the opportunity to use professional judgment, and the fear of identifying a student wrongly.

#### *The label of Emotional Disturbance*

All 12 participants spoke of the negative effects of the ED label. Some, however, were more adamant than others; they considered the negative consequences at Eligibility Determination. They used terms such as, “agonize,” “take it seriously,” and “cautious,” to describe the decision-making process. Some professionals described the label as a “life-sentence,” “death sentence,” “red-flag,” “red alert,” and “stigma”. Terms used for the special education placements were equally negative: “prison setting,” “hold-down facility,” “juvenile jail,” and “crazy class.” S3 voiced her objection to the label of Emotional Disturbance:

This is a child who’s been identified as somebody with problems and un-teachable. This child can’t perform socially and is not allowed to participate in activities that other kids participate in...The child goes through school, graduates, and this is still on his record even though...after graduation there are no services to prepare this child for living in society. Now, he’s on the street. Where does he go? And for an ED kid, let’s say he gets into trouble...We hear he’s been emotionally disturbed all of his life...the label stays with them. If they go for employment and somebody finds out they’ve been labeled Emotionally Disturbed. How does this affect employment? So the long [term] effects of these classifications [are] something that I’ve been struggling with for years.

When asked about how her attitude regarding the label influenced the daily practices involved in the identification process, she replied as follows:

It did when I first started...I had a hard time writing ED evaluations. I hated to have a kid come to the table with behavior problems. Over the years when I've seen how disruptive that is for the regular class and how that can affect the child who is having the problem...It affects their self esteem. So, I was trying to determine what's the lesser of two evils. Do we label them and put them in a situation where they can find some sense of acceptance and achievement? Or do we keep them in a setting we know that they're going to be the ones identified with the problem. That's something I've been struggling with...

These professional raised issues that others expressed as well. These professionals were cautious about assigning the label Emotional Disturbance. They worried that this label had implications that affected students' instructional programs, long-term outcomes, and the way they were perceived by others. Thus respondents suggested that language created problems for them throughout the identification process.

#### *Key factors in decision-making at SBLC*

All participants indicated that the home and school situations influenced both the students' behaviors and the decisions made at SBLC. They also considered these environmental factors when suggesting interventions.

#### *School environmental factors*

Four professionals focused on the influence of teacher behavior on student behavior, in particular classroom management and unreasonable expectations for students. S2 offered an example of the classroom management problem of one teacher,

...The teacher was inexperienced also...A first-year teacher with a class of little problem children. He was still learning classroom management skills. They all seemed out of the ordinary to him.

In a case such as this, the professional attributed the problem to the teacher and not the student. Other professionals suspected that some students' behavior problems were related to the academic expectations the teacher imposed. P1 complained that teachers do not assess the academic skill levels of their students,

[A] teacher will say, 'She just doesn't get her work done. He just doesn't finish anything.' And amazingly much of the time the child has never been assessed to see where he or she is." Respondents claimed that teacher behaviors were often implicated as a critical contributor to student behavior problems.

#### *Home environmental factors*

Home environmental factors discussed by ten professionals, included problems created by exposure to models of unacceptable behavior as well as to lack of exposure to acceptable behaviors. Professionals also commented upon the effects of recent changes in a youngster's life such as traumatic events. P2 acknowledged the propensity of a child to model observed behaviors, "He was influenced by a brother in particular who had other behavior issues...he [student] would model some of that behavior from home." S3 provided an example involving a

child in kindergarten who had not had the opportunity to be socialized to the school environment,

This was his first exposure to school. And he's in a house with his grandparents, an uncle, his father. He has all these people that probably cater to him...He just has not been given the chance to mature...they won't even let him go on a field trip with the class unless one of them can go.

PA Professionals at SBLC mulled over numerous issues associated with a student's home environment. Their experiences suggested that exposure to appropriate and inappropriate behavior contributed to the student's behavior problems.

### *Interventions*

Interventions, according to the PA Handbook, are a pre-referral requirement. The interventions, proposed by those who focused on environmental factors, often involved counseling. S4 conveyed that the advantage of counseling was that it provided an opportunity "...to work with that child individually, to help him cope with what's going on." S3 was confident that counseling might effect a change in the student's behavior to the point where an evaluation was not necessary,

Where there are a lot of family issues going on...it may not be just the kid's problem; it's the family dynamic going on too. With counseling, the behavior is improved to the point where it doesn't need to go into the evaluation.

The home and school environment, according to PA Professionals, played a pivotal role in the student's behavior as well as in decisions that were made at SBLC. Counseling was recommended as a way to change a student's behavior and his or her reaction to the environment.

### *Key factors in decision-making at Eligibility Determination*

The seven participants who focused on environmental issues seemed to be caught in a dilemma. They were concerned about the ambiguity of the language in the Handbook and the negative effects of the label. However, they were still confronted with a student who exhibited considerable behavior problems. One option they considered was exploring qualifications for another exceptionality. The other option was to weigh the consequences of the youngster remaining in the present general education setting.

### *Other Exceptionalities*

The number of PA Professionals who explored qualifications for other exceptionalities was not limited to the seven who focused on the influence of the environment; in fact, 11 out of 12 participants did so. There were three optional exceptionalities that were considered: Other Health Impairment (OHI), Specific Learning Disability (SLD), and Gifted (G/T). P1 rationalized, "I think OHI is a less stigmatizing exceptionality" while S1 considered OHI "much more benign" than Emotional Disturbance. A few respondents thought it would be better to try another exceptionality first to see if that would address the behavior problems. P2 reasoned, "The team decided we'd try the academic exceptionality first, which was [S]LD. We'd address that and supplement it with the counseling." Eleven PA Professionals investigated other exceptionalities when it appeared that students might fit the criteria.



### *Weighing the Consequences*

All of the PA Professionals, even those who acknowledged significant environmental influence, indicated that there were times when the identification of this exceptionality was necessary. E1 who conceded that Emotional Disturbance was the only option opined, “You can’t take the kid out of the environment. So when you look at the situation where we are now, and what the child needed to do at this particular time in his life, he just cannot do it.” Another time a PA Professional, P3, deemed this exceptionality necessary was when the student was a danger to himself,

[He was] easily provoked and he provokes other people; he looks for problems, he looks for trouble, and he pushes everybody’s buttons until they start fighting, and then he fights back...He needs a smaller setting. It might save his life.

Three professionals mentioned the interruption of instructional time as another reason for labeling a student with Emotional Disturbance. This often happened when youngsters were suspended or expelled. S1 regretfully stated, “The only other alternative I find would be actually an ED class, unfortunately. For that child it’s almost a last resort because he’ll keep on getting expelled.”

And finally, three other professionals agreed that the ED classification was necessary when the youngster’s behavior was disruptive to other students. Two professionals who expressed this opinion stated “...just seeing how disruptive this is for the other children.” (E2) and “...it’s not fair to those other kids; so you kind of have to do something”(E1).

Professionals who practice from an Interpretive Perspective emphasized environmental issues. They focused on the interaction between youngsters and their environment. They also grappled with the language of the PA Handbook and how to translate it in their daily lives as appraisal specialists. Participants who were inclined to the Interpretive Perspective still conducted the required pre-referral activities and evaluation components. However, these procedures were not given nearly the emphasis as in the Empirical-Analytic Perspective.

### *Transformative Perspective*

The Transformative Perspective, applied to an education system, analyzes both the values of people and the power relationships within that system. Skrtic (1991), a critic of the separate special education system, elucidates this perspective. He sees special education as a way of preventing the larger educational system from addressing the fact that schools are failing students. As it stands, the system’s response to students who have difficulty functioning in the regular class is to move them into special supplemental programs. Thus, rather than locating the pathology in the organization where it really belongs, the system locates it in the student.

*Assumption 1: The Identification of the Condition known as Emotional Disturbance must be Understood in the Context of the Web of Power Relationships Surrounding Socioeconomic Class, Gender, Community Culture, Race, and Economic Parameters.*

Observers of the Transformative Perspective seek to uncover how values implicit in organizations influence the practices of those organizations. Participants in this study considered values related to five social contexts: socioeconomic class, gender, community culture, race, and economic parameters.

### *Socioeconomic class*

One way observers of the Transformative Perspective might view the concern surrounding students with problems is to examine the relationship between socioeconomic class and the educators' values. P1 presented her point of view on the relationship between socioeconomic factors and the identification process:

People who have money...their kids are not in those public schools...if they need services, they are able to go to a private psychiatrist where they do not become part of the public system....

In addition ...

An upper middle class [family] would never put up with the questions that we ask. They just wouldn't answer you. (laughs) Or they'd tell you very quickly, "It's just none of your business." Everything is kept within the family unit. Whereas, with the students we deal with, the parents don't have any choice.

### *Gender*

Four PA Professionals acknowledged the role gender played in the identification process. P1 linked the way society socialized children to the identification of Emotional Disturbance:

Gender differences in our society are learned. Girls learn to behave in a certain way, and boys learn to behave in a certain way. Boys are pushed to be more aggressive than girls. And aggression is what gets kids in ED classes...

S3 recognized that behavior for boys is often developmentally appropriate and should not be construed as "bad". And finally, two participants thought that female teachers relate better to girls as they share certain "gendered" characteristics. E2 suggested, "that most of the teachers are female, and they might be able to relate better to children that are female."

### *Community culture*

The Transformative Perspective is concerned with the struggle for domination between different cultures. P4 was conscious of the disparity that existed when cultures collide, that is, when behaviors are acceptable and even advisable in their community setting but not in the school setting. She described the dilemma that she often faced:

A lot of our kids that have behavioral problems...a lot of them are learned. They mouth off; they demonstrate inappropriate behaviors because that was learned...because they had trouble changing the expectations from home to school to community. Whenever I have an ED kid these days, I really walk the fence and I am not one that is quick to make judgments.

The implicit values of a youngster's home/community culture, are embedded in the youngster, and are demonstrated by the way he/she behaves. However, this only becomes a problem if the values of the home/community culture conflict with the values of the school culture in which he/she is expected to operate.

### *Race*

Only one PA Professional, S3, expressed an opinion regarding how issues of race

relate to the identification process. She admitted that she was in the early stages of wrestling with this issue but willingly shared her opinion as follows:

The timing for special ed and the timing for integration...there seemed to be some correlation there...when black kids were put into white schools, all of a sudden they were considered unable to perform. They were told they couldn't perform.

This PA Professional is searching to uncover the relationship that she believes exists between the special education system and the abolition of segregation in schools. Though she admitted that she had not formally investigated this relationship, she had at least identified something that she believed needed to be uncovered in order to get at the root of the problem.

#### *Economic parameters*

Two issues surfaced during the interviews regarding the "matrix of values" evident in the school system. PA Professionals spoke of how behavior problems might be prevented if funding were available to reduce class size and provide needed resources for classroom teachers and their students. S1 explained her frustration,

...given what needs to be done and knowing the reality of the resources available...We can all go and say this is what needs to be done, but if the resources are not out there to help us accomplish these goals... the priorities are just a little bit skewed...

A second issue raised by one professional was how the priorities of administrators directly affect the way a system operates. As a result, both factors were blamed for teacher frustration, low tolerance for student differences, and eventual referral of students for special education services.

#### *Assumption 2: The Criteria Used to Identify Emotional Disturbance are Related to Uncovering the Power Relationships in the System.*

Followers of the Transformative Perspective analyze the various power relationships as a way to better understand their role in perpetuating these relationships. The way to such an analysis is through critical reflection. The professionals suggested various levels of engagement in the reflection process. Their comments centered around three relationships: their relation to the special education system, to the job of identification, and to other team members.

#### *Relationship to the Special Education System*

S3 willingly shared her opinion regarding her role as part of the special education system. She worried,

Statewide, nationwide, we're not doing a good job for our children with special needs...My role, I thought, was going to be helping. Now, I'm not sure if I'm not just contributing to the problem...the child is not going to get his needs met. Am I helping or am I hurting...that's my own professional dilemma.

#### *Relationship to the job of identification*

Five respondents pointed out, what they believed to be the subjective nature of the identification process. P4 explained,

I can say this from experience, that as a psychologist, if you put three of us together you will probably get three different opinions about the degree of the problem. There are kids that I know that I didn't qualify that another psychologist would have...It depends on the combination of the team and the evidence that is brought into it.

P3 assumed that everyone was aware of the subjectivity involved in both the diagnostic process used by psychiatrists and the identification process used by pupil appraisal,

If you look at that [DSM-IV], it's sometimes ambiguous...It's all up to interpretation. If you look at a psychiatric evaluation, you can look at five different ones of the same kid and you're going to come up with five different pictures because the evaluator is different...That's the only difference. The kid's the same, but who sees him is going to write up a different report. Now there might be some commonality but we're dealing with something we can't measure. We're dealing with a kid's mind, and emotions, and everything that makes up that kid and you can't measure that stuff. You can't take it out and look at it, tweak it and put it back in. It's subjective. E3 discussed the difficulties created by an identification process that does not use objective measures,

"ED" is a classification that is hard to standardize. I can give a test, and I can come up with a standard score, and I can say this child is MD or this child is LD. But because the evaluator... what they bring to the job in terms of what they do...their background, their life experiences can influence a person... their personality you know, just so many other factors. Because it's not a classification that is standardized.

PA Professionals presented their analysis regarding their relationship to the special education system, to the job of identification, and with other members of the multidisciplinary team. The Transformative Perspective involves uncovering the power relationships that exist in society, and for purposes of this study, in the educational system. The respondents provided evidence that PA Professionals ponder the power relationships involved in the process of assigning the label of Emotional Disturbance to students. Some PA Professionals recognized the role society plays in this process, and pointed to issues related to economics, gender, culture and economic parameters. Other participants recognized that the identification of students is very much affected by the perspectives and assumptions that individual PA Professionals bring to the table. This kind of reflection in some cases resulted in a new and deeper understanding of the PA Professional's own place and function within the system and a more thorough critique of the system as a whole.

### *Discussion*

The appraisal professionals in this study did not operate on the basis of only one theoretical perspective in their actual practices. At times they based decisions on whether or not to identify a student with Emotional Disturbance on what they considered to be objective or unbiased measures. At other times, they considered the impact of the environment on the student's behavior and acknowledged its consequences. And yet at other times, they pondered the impact of the various inequities on the appraisal process existing in a school system. In fact, the appraisal professionals in this study operated from a combination of perspectives.

Not surprisingly, appraisal professionals frequently referenced facets of empirically-based models in their practices. One reason for this perspective is of course, their professional training. A long-standing and rarely disputed tradition exists for the study of empirical methods for evaluation. Current training programs for appraisal professionals focus almost exclusively on the quantitative model. Another reason the numerous references to empirical approaches were not surprising is the school system's assessment emphasis. Schools incorporate observable and measurable practices, i.e., high stakes testing. Many still believe the words of Thorndike (as cited in Custer, 1996), "Anything that exists exists in a certain quantity and can be measured."

However, despite prevailing hegemony, professionals do not operate exclusively from the Empirical-Analytic Perspective. Rather, participants referred to environmental factors as well. A mixture of assumptions from both the Empirical-Analytic and Interpretive Perspectives influenced participants' practices. Thus, strictly defining an absolute and impervious boundary between these two perspectives is problematic. Then there are those who believe that the nature of Emotional Disturbance cannot be reduced simply to the result of an inherent pathological condition, nor can it be solely based on the interaction of the child in the environment. It is far more complex than that. These people maintain that too much time has already been spent on debating the definitions and criteria for special education categories. Instead, it may be time to acknowledge that special education classifications are actually defined into existence by certain constituents (e.g., policy makers, administrators) within a system. This acknowledgement points to another controversial dimension of the special education system, one that has been referred to as the Transformative Perspective.

The Transformative Perspective scorns reality based on objective terms. Rather, followers of this perspective posit that reality reflects the predominant values of the powerful and influential people in society. Years of history and conditioning inculcate values on peoples' sense of reality and suppress the need for closer examination of these values. As a result, professionals, willingly or not, play a role in perpetuating the values of the existing special education system when they conduct the evaluations designed to place students in special education instructional programs. How they see their role in this process is dependent on any number or combination of factors both explicit and assumed. Professionals are called to examine their place in the existing "web of power relationships." This critical self-examination will serve as a way of "remaking ourselves as we think, act, write, read, and talk more about ourselves and our practices and discourses." (Skrtic, 1991, p.29)

#### *Implications for Theory and Practice*

The process of identification to determine whether or not a student receives a disability label is, indeed, a very serious matter. This study has implications for persons presently in the field of appraisal as well as those who plan to be.

Coleman, Sanders, & Cross (1997), Guba (1990), Skrtic (1991, 1995) are the voices in the literature that press us to grapple with our tacit assumptions, wrestle with paradigm shifts, and revolutionize the current education system. Their models provide a framework for, and a vehicle on which, to examine personal and professional practices. This study specifically affirms the need for PA Professionals to embark in critical examination of their professional practices. Realizations gained from this introspective process can empower professionals both individually and collectively to engage in contemplative actions. Professional organizations and Pupil Appraisal Departments should include seminars on critical reflection linked to theory and



practice. The result of these seminars might spawn core groups that tangle with issues relevant to their field as a responsible way of affecting practice. The intent of these groups would not be to find solutions to crisis situations but rather to grapple with the complex nature of on-going and evolving issues. Issues generated within groups of this nature should then be disseminated to other professionals (e.g., newsletters, journal articles, presentations) and policy makers (e.g., school/state education boards, professional organizations). Finally pre-service or certification courses for Educational Diagnosticians, School Social Workers, and School Psychologists could include exposure to, and examination of, the implications of the dominant worldviews.

Pupil Appraisal Professionals are called upon to examine issues from a variety of perspectives, uncover their tacit assumptions, and develop actions based on careful deliberations. It is through these actions that one can consciously commit to the process of becoming an ethically responsible professional.

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## APPENDIX A: INITIAL INTERVIEW GUIDE

### Interview Guide

#### Opener

Can you tell me a little about your experience or background? What is your degree in? Did you think this was good preparation as an appraisal professional?

1. Recall a student with behavior problems who was referred to SBLC and there was little difficulty determining your next course of action.
  - What made it easy?
  - Was there anything that made it difficult?
  - What was the final SBLC decision?
  - What were your considerations? (What did you consider important? Why was it important?)
2. Tell me the story of a student with a behavior problem who was referred to SBLC and you had difficulty knowing what to do.
  - What leads you to say that or to feel that way?
  - What were your considerations?
  - What was the final SBLC decision?
  - What were the consequences of the decision?
3. Think of a time that you disagreed with the SBLC decision? Why or what lead you to feel that way?
  - What was at stake for you in this experience?
4. Think of a student who the committee in fact referred for an evaluation.
  - Was there anything that made this evaluation easy?
  - What were your considerations?
  - What was the final outcome?
  - What would you have changed about the experience?
5. In what ways does the Handbook assist you in your role? Are there other criteria, not in the book, that help in making decisions? Are there times when the procedures listed in the Handbook are difficult to follow?
6. How do you think your opinion affects decision-making on the team?
  - What leads you to say that or feel that way?
7. How do you think your training as a -----affects your decision making. Think of an example.
8. What do you see your role as in regards to the identification process?
  - Is there anything that impedes your role?
  - What would you like to change?