

UNDERSTANDING ELIGIBILITY PRACTICES OF SPECIFIC LEARNING
DISABILITY SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES FOR UNDERACHIEVING
IMMERSION STUDENTS

by

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Interest

From a special education perspective, the immersion education setting brings to light the daily challenges of teasing out issues of language acquisition versus the academic challenges that arise due to a learning disability. On a personal and professional level, working as a special education teacher in an elementary French immersion school, I continue to be challenged in my role as assessor, child study team coordinator and teacher given the complexity of a learning environment that entails students learning in a second language. Acquiring my Masters of Arts in ESL concurrently with this job experience helped me feel well suited for this position. Yet even with my experience and genuine interest in working in second language environments, I was unaware of the dilemmas that could arise when determining if students were eligible for special education services. As a special services team, we struggle to obtain information that can guide us and that specifically reflects our unique issues and challenges.

Purpose

I am writing about the challenges of identifying second language learners in an elementary French immersion setting for special education services under the categorical

label of Specific Learning Disability (SLD), as defined by the state. I want to study the nature of the decision-making process in determining eligibility for underachieving immersion students in order to understand how the students at an early total French immersion school are being identified for special education services.

Based on a review and exploration of relevant immersion, foreign language and English Language Learner (ELL) research, processes and issues will be reviewed that are supported and practiced by professionals in these fields and are still reflective of state guidelines when determining the appropriateness of special education services for students in an immersion setting.

The challenges that multidisciplinary teams face when determining if students qualify for special education services under the categorical label of SLD, as outlined by the state department of education, are many. For educators making these decisions for students in an elementary immersion setting, the issues become more challenging and complex for a multitude of reasons. These reasons will be outlined later, but first, major concepts for this research need to be defined.

Early Total Immersion Programs

To explore the complexities of this research topic we must have a basic understanding of immersion education. Genesee (1991) describes the trademark of immersion education as a language program model in which subject matter instruction occurs through the medium of a second language. In this manner, subject matter and second language learning are integrated. Communication and content discussions in the

target language are placed on equal footing to meet the academic demands of a program's curriculum. The success of this integrated approach is evidenced in research findings that focus mostly on the successful achievement of academic standards as measured by standardized tests administered in English. Reviews of immersion research show no evidence of a long-term lag in acquiring academic English skills or content knowledge taught in early immersion programs via the second language (Genesee, 1987; Swain & Lapkin, 1991). As Cummins (2000) notes, immersion education promotes additive bilingualism for majority language speakers (e.g., English-speakers in French immersion programs) where children work to achieve high levels of fluency and literacy in both languages.

Overall, immersion education seeks to achieve three main goals through content instruction in a second language. These are to promote high levels of academic achievement, to develop functional proficiency in two languages (English and the target language), and to enhance cross-cultural understanding with speakers of the target language. Johnson & Swain (1997) identify eight core elements of immersion programming:

1. The second language (L2) is a medium of instruction.
2. The immersion curriculum parallels the local first language (L1) curriculum.
3. Overt support exists for the L1.
4. The program aims for additive bilingualism.
5. Exposure to the L2 is largely confined to the classroom.
6. Students enter with similar (and limited) levels of L2 proficiency.

7. The teachers are bilingual.
8. The classroom culture is that of the local L1 community (pp. 6-8).

In addition to these core features there are a number of possible variations in immersion programs. For example, the grade-level at which a given program begins or the amount of instructional time spent in the target language can differ. Early total immersion programs, which usually begin in kindergarten, use 100% target language instruction for academic purposes until second or third grade when English language arts are introduced on a daily basis. In grades four and five a more equal distribution of English language instruction is established with a gradual decline of instruction in the target language through grade twelve (Cummins, 2000).

Learning Disability Defined

Under Federal rules, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 (IDEA) states the following:

Specific Learning Disabilities means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding and using language, spoken and written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. (Federal Rule: 34 C.F.R. §300.7 (b)(10), Minnesota (MN) Educational Services, 1999, p.1-1)

This state's interpretation of federal rule (1992) outlines a definition and criteria for determining eligibility of SLD special education services. It defines "specific learning disability" as "a condition within the individual affecting learning relative to potential" (MN Educational Services, 1999, p.1-3).

- ❖ A specific learning disability is manifested by an interference with the acquisition, organization, storage, retrieval, manipulation, or expression of information so that the individual does not learn at an adequate rate when provided with the usual developmental opportunities and instruction from a regular school environment.
- ❖ A specific learning disability is demonstrated by a significant discrepancy between a pupil's general intellectual ability and academic achievement in one or more of the following areas: oral expression, listening comprehension, mathematical calculation or mathematics reasoning, basic reading skills, reading comprehension, and written expression.
- ❖ A specific learning disability is demonstrated primarily in academic functioning, but may also affect self-esteem, career development, and life adjustment skills. A specific learning disability may occur with, but cannot be primarily the result of: vision, hearing, or motor impairment; mental impairment; emotional disorders; or environmental, cultural, economic influences; or a history of an inconsistent educational program. (MN Educational Services, 1999, p.1-3)

This definition outline encompasses the criteria a student must meet to receive special education services. To determine eligibility to such services, educators move through a process. First, there is documentation of severe underachievement “in response to usual classroom instruction” (p. 1-3) as determined through a classroom observation and from document review of various sources such as cumulative records, informal tests, work samples and anecdotal teacher records. Second, there is documentation of a severe discrepancy (-1.75 SD below the mean using the state’s regression table) between general intellectual ability and achievement, using individually administered standardized tests that reflect “the general population of individuals at the pupil’s chronological age level” (p. 1-4). Third, there is documentation of an information processing condition that occurs in a variety of settings (MN Educational Services, 1999). An SLD Eligibility Criteria chart is graphically summarized in Appendix A.

To review state guidelines, three requirements must be met for a student to be eligible for special education services under the categorical label of SLD. As noted previously, there must be a discrepancy in ability (I.Q.) and academic achievement, evidence of severe underachievement in the classroom setting and a noted information processing condition. Providing evidence for all three of the above mentioned domains in one content area, such as math, reading and/or written language, qualifies a student for special education services under the categorical label of SLD (MN Educational Services, 1999).

Academic Delays

One of the many challenges educators face in a language learning setting is distinguishing between academically delayed students and learning disabled students. As Genesee (1987) writes, “The task of identifying and treating difficulties is compounded in second language classes by not knowing what is a developmental lag associated with the second language and what is an underlying problem” (p. 98). While a learning disability has been defined earlier, academic delays refer to students who are working to their cognitive potential, yet may need a broader time line to master the academic skills necessary to succeed in school in their first language. Some students may be developmentally immature, so when “the linguistic demands of an academic setting exceed the cognitive and linguistic development of the child, problems may occur” (Wiss, 1992, p. 199). This issue is especially difficult to decipher in the earlier grades, K-2. In this context, it is difficult to diagnose a learning disability when a student is below grade level because the underachievement may regress with time and maturity.

Background for the Study

To review, evidence of severe underachievement, severe discrepancy in test scores and poor information processing skills qualify a student for SLD special education services. To understand the essence of this case study, these three criteria will now be revisited but within the context of an immersion program.

According to state guidelines, state recommended achievement tests are given in the child’s first language, which for this study’s participants is English. Because students

are not formally instructed in English until third grade, however, these test results may not accurately reflect student achievement. The child may show a discrepancy between ability and academic skill as a result of little exposure to or delayed instruction in English, but not necessarily because he/she has a learning disability. Genesee (1987) notes that while there is evidence of immersion students lagging with language arts skills in English in the primary grades in early total immersion programs, this does not pose a long-term threat on English language and literacy development.

Additionally, state criteria stipulate there must be evidence of severe underachievement in the classroom setting. Determining “severe underachievement” is complicated by whom the child is being compared to throughout the day. Great efforts are made to use district grade-level benchmarks to determine severe underachievement, but district benchmarks don’t exist for the target language in the immersion setting. Therefore, immersion teachers must make additional adjustments to take this unique learning environment into account. For example, consideration is also made as to the variance in ability with second language acquisition among students, as noted through teacher observation, class participation and informal assessments. This variance in ability is often dependent on transference of skills from the first language to the immersion language. Exposure and practice in first language literacy skills (English) outside the school environment can also influence a student’s literacy skills in the second language (Cummins, 2000; Genesee 1987).

Finally, there must be evidence of an information-processing condition. This condition is complicated to decipher given any setting, but in particular the dual language

setting. Assessments used to document an information-processing condition are not reliable. Unless it is clearly reflected in ability tests, what may appear to be difficulty with information processing may be a result of emotional, motivational or attentional factors or a lack of aural or written understanding in the immersion language.

“Information processing is the act of: receiving, recalling, and using information to function in an environment” (MN Educational Services, 1999, p. 11-4). This same source also notes that these behaviors occur in a variety of settings and can encompass the following:

Inadequate or lack of organizational skills (such as in following directions, written and oral; spatial arrangements; correct use of developmental order in relating events; transfer of information onto paper), memory (visual and auditory), expression (verbal and nonverbal), and motor control for written tasks such as pencil and paper assignments, drawing, and copying (p. 11-4).

Once the child is in third grade, the English class is a helpful determiner, but again, documenting evidence of an information-processing condition is a challenge in kindergarten through second grade. Input from the home environment and specialist classes taught in English (art, music, and physical education) are vital.

The process that leads to the determination of SLD services also merits special attention. Implementing pre-referral strategies is a process that requires thorough documentation, time, and willingness on behalf of the classroom teacher to explore and try new instructional and curricular strategies that could prove beneficial for the student of concern. Ideally, a school’s Child Study Team can support a teacher through this

process, but parental pressure often pushes for a hastier approach that rushes the pre-referral stage of this decision-making process. In this pre-referral stage, taking the time and effort to determine appropriate accommodations and modifications for a child in an immersion setting, in conjunction with adjusting instructional and curricular strategies, can feel unclear and time consuming and consequently, frustrating.

Given the aforementioned challenges that are evident in an immersion school setting, commonalities can be found in the challenges that exist in qualifying English language learners in US public schools for special education services as well. First, however, research cites obvious differences between the two sets of learners. For example, language majority immersion students have home language and community support for English language levels as well as motivating encouragement to learn a second language, while English language learners have access to English mainly at school and in the larger community and are expected to acquire the dominate language with little support for first language maintenance (Bruck, 1982). She further notes that the primary difference in these two groups of learners is more closely related to social psychological conditions versus language of instruction or linguistic abilities. Language minority learners, whose home language is other than English, need to function in the dominant culture of the English language (Hernandez-Chavez, 1984). Although varying socioeconomic levels and ethnic/cultural backgrounds and their implications further distinguish between majority and minority language groups, there are similarities with pre-referral procedures, interventions and assessment for these two groups of learners in a school setting. Genesee (1987) notes that “immersion programs are a form of bilingual

education designed for majority language students” (p. vii) who speak the dominate language when they enter school. Bilingual education for minority language children and immersion programs for majority language children both work toward the goal of bilingual proficiency, allowing them to share certain conceptual commonalities (Genesee, 1987).

For ELLs there is adequate research information to draw upon to help guide multidisciplinary teams that determine eligibility of services for ELL students (Garcia & Ortiz, 1988; Baca, 1990). In contrast, it appears there is a lack of research information to help multidisciplinary teams make these determinations in an immersion setting. Immersion research touches upon controversial issues such as determining when students should transfer to an English setting, or determining if immersion education is appropriate for all students. Findings on immersion education also highlight the importance of administering tests in English (or the child’s first language) for testing of learning disabilities. Foreign language research discusses whether or not learning disabled children should learn foreign languages (Mabbott, 1994; Schwarz, 1997). Overall, however, there appears to be a gap in immersion research when it comes to addressing effective decision-making processes in determining special education services for those students who remain in the program. To assist in framing the issues being explored in this study, special education research in the related fields of foreign language and English as a second language (ESL) will be reviewed.

Question

The research question to be explored in this study is: What is the nature of the decision-making process and the comprehensive assessment practices in understanding eligibility practices of SLD special education services in one early total French immersion school?

Objective

This case study will address the nature of the decision-making process and the comprehensive assessment practices in understanding eligibility practices for underachieving immersion students at an early total immersion school who are being identified for special education services.

Findings will inform and deepen our understanding of special education determination for dual language learners and the practices of a Child Study Team in an immersion setting. Much of the data gathered throughout the research process will stem from interviews with colleagues who are directly involved with this process. Findings from this case study may be of interest to and serve as a guide to support teams in other immersion settings that are similar to the program that is documented here. This descriptive investigation may also provide evaluative insight on how immersion support teams currently adhere to state guidelines, and at the same time point to ways they might more effectively meet the needs of their dual language learners. I hope that as a special service team we will be able to document and critically evaluate our current practices. In so doing, we may be able to further our

understanding of the process involved in accurate identification of second language learners, or more precisely, foreign language learners in the immersion context, who are eligible for SLD special education services.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This study addresses the nature of the decision-making process in determining eligibility of special education services for elementary French immersion students with learning disabilities in accordance with the categorical label of Specific Learning Disability (SLD) for the state of Minnesota. This chapter addresses the following areas of study relevant to this discussion: learning disabilities and second language acquisition; commonalities between learning disabled native speakers and second language learners; the decision making process in the immersion setting; assessment practices in immersion research; and, further explanation for the need for this study. Research in the related fields of foreign language and ELL practices will also be explored in efforts to more accurately identify issues that are relevant for dual language learners with learning disabilities.

Learning Disabilities and Second Language Acquisition

Landurand & Cloud (1991) explain if a learning disability is noted in the first language, then similar processing constraints will transfer to second language acquisition, possibly making the process more challenging. This holds true for speech/language difficulties, behavior disorders, sensorial deficits, neurological disorders and cognitively limited individuals. Cloud (1994) highlights Spolsky's (1989) framework of the

language acquisition process, which reflects internal and external factors, classifying present knowledge, ability, motivation and opportunity as major factors that work together in learning a language. While these factors will not be fully discussed here, these elements are noted to remind educators of the complexities that exist when we are deciphering why a child isn't learning in a first or second language and what interventions must follow to ensure that learning occurs.

Research in both foreign language and immersion education have cited evidence that when there are cognitive and academic deficits in the first language they are present in the second language as well. Mabbott (1994) notes the work of Sparks and Ganschow (1992, 1993) that at the base of reading disabilities in the first language and difficulties learning a foreign language is an inadequate ability to process phonological information. This parallels findings from LD reading research. Cummins (1987) proposed a "common underlying proficiency" that allows for the transfer of skills across languages, citing that academic skills in a first and second language are interdependent. In support of this hypothesis, Wiss (1987) suggests that children with cognitive/academic deficits in French immersion programs would then show evidence of these cognitive/academic difficulties in English.

Further research on the issue of immersion and first language disability supports these findings,

The language disabled children in both immersion and English-medium programs were behind their nondisabled peers in terms of basic literacy and academic achievement. What is interesting is that there were no significant differences between

the two groups of language disabled children: those in immersion had developed linguistic, cognitive, and academic skills at a rate similar to that at which they would develop were they placed in an all-English classroom.” (Bruck, 1978, p. 65)

Related to the previously stated issues, Swain’s (1984) research of immersion education in Canada discusses the relevance of I.Q. level and immersion education. Simply stated, studies by Swain (1975b) and Genesee (1976b) indicate “that a student’s I.Q. does not play a more significant role in the immersion program than in the regular English program as far as success in school is concerned” (p. 103). Mannavarayan (2002) notes several studies that purport there is little variance in IQ among students who experience learning difficulties in a foreign language setting and those who do not. These points are not meant to convey any biased opinion about the appropriateness of immersion education for all children; rather, to highlight various sides of the issues that surround this topic. All in all, it is felt that motivation, personality and attitude have a greater influence on foreign language learning than intelligence (Mannavarayan, 2002).

Commonalities Between Learning Disabled Native Speakers and Second Language Learners

It is also important to explain the complexity of similarities evident between a child with a learning disability and a child as a second language learner. Fradd and McGee (1994) list several of these characteristics with their respective domains. Among many characteristics with the process of reading that both groups of students share are

confusion in sound/symbol associations, a general lag in content reading areas, difficulty remembering what has been read, and poor eye tracking of text. In regards to written language, shared similarities are poor visual memory (letter reversals), underachievement in spelling and expression of ideas, and poor grammar and syntax. Common receptive and expressive language characteristics are a delay in language acquisition, limited vocabulary, inability to rhyme words and difficulty comprehending and remembering what is said. Many of these behaviors may also affect the child's ability to acquire mathematical operations and concepts. Overall, teachers may additionally observe poor sustained attention/concentration, anxiety, frustration, and poor peer relationships among learning disabled native speakers and second language learners. So as to not overgeneralize these characteristics, the learning disabled native speaker will most likely show a consistency with these behaviors over time, whereas the second language learner will most likely show these behaviors temporarily. This may explain the difficulty with making appropriate educational decisions during this period.

Viewed from another vantage point, educators may observe the following behaviors when they suspect a second language learner with a language disorder: inadequate expression of basic needs, very little interaction with peers or inappropriate responses in dialogue, overuse of gestures to communicate, inappropriate nonverbal language for the cultural context, consistent repetition needed for items stated simply, poor word-finding skills, and difficulty maintaining topic in conversation, to name several (Fradd & McGee, 1994). Additionally, it can be difficult to decipher a "silent period" during second language acquisition in a student with perhaps poor auditory

discrimination/memory or weak expressive skills, the latter of which impair the child's ability to echo words and phrases in the second language. These characteristics can prompt teachers to adjust instruction accordingly as their students progress through the developmental stages of language acquisition. If problems continue, then a referral for a special education assessment may be appropriate; however, a hasty decision in this direction may ultimately mislabel a student whose performance is more reflective of the second language environment, not necessarily a language disorder or learning disability.

In efforts to help teachers and parents respond appropriately to a child's academic needs in a French immersion setting, Alberta Education (1997) lay out the following early warning signs that can act as signals to initiate further dialogue when a child is experiencing difficulty in school:

Kindergarten - your child often has difficulty expressing herself clearly in her first language (that is, she can't get her meaning across) or difficulty articulating some sounds in her mother tongue

- Grade 1
- she has difficulty paying attention even for short periods of time
 - she is unable to echo words and phrases in French
 - very little letter/sound recognition

- Grade 2
- there is very little word identification
 - she has difficulty paying attention for extended periods of time

- Grade 3
- she often has difficulty understanding or recalling the information from a story she hears or reads
 - she often has difficulty giving information about something she has just seen or experienced
 - difficulty with phonetic analysis of words

- Grade 4
- she is still reversing letters
 - difficulty with phonetic analysis hinders comprehension

- At any time
- continuing unhappiness at school
 - ongoing behavioral or social problems
 - sudden changes in behavior
 - obvious lack of confidence
 - a definite lack of interest in learning French

(p. 105)

In general, awareness of these behaviors can guide a team's dialogue in determining the next step and ensure that the team does not jump to a hasty conclusion. These factors alone may help prevent inappropriate referrals, yet they won't necessarily alleviate the uncertainty that can surround each individual case.

The Decision-Making Process in the Immersion Setting

The nature of the decision-making process in understanding eligibility practices of SLD services for underachieving immersion students does not follow a consistent formula. Rather, it is a synthesis of various information sources including observation, interviews with parents and teachers, and experience with a variety of cases. In light of this, it is important to consider possible risk and success factors that lead to a successful or unsuccessful experience in an immersion setting, in this case French immersion. Based on his experience and training as a specialist in learning disabilities and in the field of French immersion, Demers (1994) constructed a profile that acts as a guideline for teachers, parents and school-based teams in predicting a child's success in a French immersion program. The following list is not to be used as a sole basis for determining

eligibility of special education services, or as a means to justify transferring a student from immersion to English. They are possible factors influencing student performance in the immersion program and again, highlight the complexities that surround the nature of this decision making process.

The successful student in French Immersion

- is verbal, likes to talk
- imitates easily
- self-corrects
- experiments without fear of making mistakes
- is exposed to many models of good modeling (at home, in the community and in school)
- readily accepts challenges
- shows strengths in first language
- trusts
- is usually attentive and focused
- is willing
- has good auditory discrimination
- has good memory and good meta-cognitive awareness
- has determined parental support and convinced parents

(pp. 3-4)

The unsuccessful student in French Immersion

- is often a reluctant speaker
- imitates with difficulty
- doesn't notice errors
- often fears making mistakes
- poor modeling environment (at home, in the community and in school)
- has a defeatist attitude
- often has poor first language skills
- mistrusts
- often is inattentive and unfocused
- is often unwilling
- has poor auditory discrimination
- has poor memory and poor meta-cognitive awareness
- often has unconvinced parents, and unprepared or unwilling to help

The Vancouver School Board (1997) has published French immersion support documents that also list possible factors influencing student performance in French immersion in efforts to “facilitate discussion among the classroom teacher(s), learning

assistance teacher(s), and other School Based Team members” (p.1). They closely shadow the points that Demers (1994) makes. Furthermore, they list possible success factors and possible risk factors related to the domains of social development, school behavior, family, first language acquisition, learner characteristics and academic progress. See Appendix B for a complete list of these domains and factors.

On the other hand, it is important to realize that it would not be unusual for “bright” children to experience initial frustration because they are not learning as quickly as they are used to. Nor would it be unusual for shy or anxious children to show delays in second language speaking skills due to a resistance to participate in class. Nor would it be unusual for a teacher to notice a lack of readiness skills in the boys and youngest children in their class. This awareness can enable educators to sort and address student concerns at an early stage in a child’s education (Alberta Education, 1997).

Educational difficulties involve variables that are vague, abstract, and ‘within-child’ (cognitive processing skills, intelligence, cooperation, motivation, verbal reasoning, etc.), yet also include variables such as teacher skill, teacher style, parental support, external stimulation, and learning opportunity. Transitory influences such as mood, fatigue, illness, and personal difficulties also impact upon learning. ...Learning is not determined solely by within-child variables, but rather by a multitude of variables within both the child and the child’s learning environment: teacher skills, teacher style, effective strategies, corrective feedback, classroom management, peer relationships, class size, classroom dynamics, parental support, etc. ...Academic problems may in fact reside within students, but not to the exclusion of other

variables. ...The notion that the student owns the problem, therefore fix or remove the student must be dispelled. (Keep, *French Immersion Attrition: Implications for Model Building*, doctoral thesis for the University of Alberta Department of Educational Psychology, pp. 239-240, as cited in Alberta Education, 1997, p. 106)

As educators determine eligibility for immersion students, it is essential to not only consider the aforementioned points but to involve assessors that are knowledgeable about immersion education and can judge when a student's academic difficulties are a result of natural delays in acquiring a second language or are reflective of transfer and interference between languages (Alberta Education, 1997). In this domain, assessors and immersion educators will benefit the children they work with if they understand the characteristics of second language acquisition, such as transfer, interference, cognition and metacognition, and how these characteristics affect the learning process for learning disabled students (Demers, 1997). For example, learning disabled students often experience difficulties with their short or long-term memory skills due to a poor ability to file and retrieve information; therefore, helping students to build a cognitive awareness for language acquisition strategies and to understand the processes being learned is a vital component to teaching. These efforts help reduce interference, which students experience when they overgeneralize rules and assume that their first language systems apply to a second language (Demers, 1997).

Foreign Language Learning

In efforts to broaden the base of research that can assist educators in understanding the nature of second language learners who have learning disabilities, we will look more closely at research findings from foreign language learning. This area of research is important because the French immersion program under consideration is a foreign language immersion program. That is to say, students' exposure to the immersion language, in this case French, is for the most part limited to the in-school experience and peers enter the program with limited to no second language proficiency.

Mabbott (1994) addresses the concern of students labeled LD that are being discouraged from foreign language study and the possible implications that the maturational lag theory (Mann 1986, as cited in Mabbott, 1994) may have on foreign language learning. During decision-making meetings about students that appear to be underachieving in language, it is very difficult for teachers to discern if the underachievement should be attributed to a learning disability or simply a maturation lag. This is discussed in Mabbott's 1994 study:

The maturational lag theory states that since the reading and spelling errors made by children labeled LD are of the same nature as those made by younger students who are normal in their linguistic abilities, the LD-labeled children are experiencing delayed development rather than disability. (p. 298)

As with acquiring a foreign language, should the expected timeline of skill acquisition be simply broadened, allowing for more exposure in the second language, before proceeding with assessments and possibly mislabeling a student? Although this study gave support to the maturational lag theory, it also highlighted the reality that LD foreign language

learners, while acquiring many skills with extended instruction, could not bridge the learning gap at an efficient enough pace in order to be on par with their peers (Mabbott, 1994).

In the same light, clinical studies have indicated that a very small group of learners will struggle in a second language program due to immature cognitive and linguistic skills (Wiss, 1989). These students often appear to do well in kindergarten when second language acquisition is easier. However, as the increasing academic and linguistic demands in a bilingual setting go beyond their developmental abilities, the developmentally immature child will struggle with the added curricular pressures present in an immersion setting (Wiss, 1989). Drawing upon her own experience as an immersion teacher, Mannavarayan (2002) suggests that although lower ability students can achieve similar results in the areas of pronunciation, fluency and interpersonal communication skills as their higher ability peers, there are notable differences in their levels of literacy acquisition.

Research in the area of foreign language and learning disabilities highlights the work of Ganschow and Sparks (1993a, 1993b, 1993c) who propose the Linguistic Coding Deficit Hypothesis (LCDH). Built upon reading disabilities research that Vellutino and Scanlon (1986, as cited in Ganschow and Sparks, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c) completed, the LCDH suggests that the difficulties experienced by foreign language students in learning a second language is a result of deficiencies in the phonological, syntactic and/or semantic linguistic codes in their first language, thereby impeding a student's ability to accurately perceive and produce the language necessary for overall comprehension and

communication purposes. Their hypothesis parallels a broad base of research on reading disabilities (1993c). At the root of these difficulties is a lack of phonological awareness that greatly impacts reading, spelling, speaking and language comprehension.

Consequently, foreign language learning becomes a daunting task for the LD student because it plays upon his/her phonological weaknesses, as evidenced in their inability to understand the linguistic codes in their native language (Ganschow and Sparks, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c). Likewise, Demers (1994) profiles the auditory deficient student as a learner who will experience significant stress in a French immersion school, a program that relies heavily upon auditory discrimination in its first few years, in particular. This learning barrier may then lead to high anxiety, low motivation or a poor attitude about acquiring a second language – affective variables which Ganschow and Sparks (1993a, 1993b, 1993c) view as a result of a learner's weak language codes, not the primary reason for foreign language difficulties.

Affective Variables

As just indicated, surely other behaviors will also impact a child's ability to acquire a second language and should not be overlooked in the decision-making process. They reflect previously noted risk factors, and also include lack of effort, poor work habits and overall, low language abilities. For example, a child's level of frustration may result in an unmotivated learner (Demers, 1994). On the other hand, a child who is learning disabled, may feel anxious as a result of failing to succeed in the foreign language environment, yet anxiety is not necessarily the cause (Schwarz, 1997). As

Ganschow and Sparks (1993a) suggest, high anxiety, low motivation and poor attitude are the consequences of language learning difficulties. As discussed earlier in regards to their work with the LCDH, the cause lies in a learner's inability to understand and use the linguistic codes of their native language (LCDH), which ultimately hinders their ability to learn a foreign language (Ganschow and Sparks, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c). Teasing these behaviors apart from one another in efforts to determine eligibility of special education services is another critical step to this process.

In the end, for those students whose lack of success can't be attributed to I.Q., motivation or anxiety, a specific foreign language disability may be at the root of such problems (Mannavarayan, 2002). On the other hand, studies completed by Ganschow and Sparks (1993c) refute the idea of a foreign language learning disability; instead, there is a continuum of weak to strong foreign language learners. This brings the discussion back to the complexities of language learning problems, in general, and the need to consider the level of achievement in the child's first language and level of motivation (Demmers, 1994). Although Demers' insights ultimately seek to provide guidance as to if and when students should transfer from French immersion programs, his observations offer critical points to be considered when understanding the nature of the decision-making process that determines eligibility of SLD special education services for underachieving immersion students.

Referral Practices in Immersion Education

Over the past few years, more pertinent information regarding intervention, pre-referral process and assessment practices within immersion settings have surfaced. Alberta Education (1997) has put together a brochure for parents offering guidance as to how to communicate with school personnel if their child is experiencing difficulties in the immersion setting. It encourages parents to establish a consistent pattern of communication with the classroom teacher. It prepares them for the emotions they may experience and broadly explains how strategies should be tried, but if proven unsuccessful, why an assessment may be appropriate. It briefly explains the purpose of an assessment and what information it will provide.

Demers (2001) notes more specifically the importance of establishing a systematic intervention process with a school-based team to ensure collaborative follow-through and consistency. Not only does this type of system address student needs, but informs and teaches teachers, as well, about developing accommodations and interventions to enhance student learning. Teachers learn in the process what it means to modify curriculum, drawing upon student strengths and identifying areas of need all in an effort to keep the child in the least restrictive environment; that is, to educate the child in the mainstream classroom to his or her utmost capabilities while providing appropriate accommodations and modifications as deemed appropriate. Gaffney (1999) also emphasizes the importance in establishing “a systematic approach to identifying learners with special needs early in the program” (p.5). While this idea has become a noted necessity, as supported by Demers (2001) and Gaffney (1999), it begs for a more detailed

clarification as to the step by step nature of the decision making process when determining eligibility of special services for immersion students.

Parallels to English Language Learners

With these ideas in mind, one starting point is to take a closer look at which parallels, if any, can be drawn from ELL findings and possible models or considerations to follow that would be applicable to an immersion evaluation process. Findings on immersion research led Genesee (1994) to outline lessons from immersion education that are applicable to other types of second language instruction. “For example, issues of second language pedagogy are important for educational planners working with limited-English-proficient (LEP) students, given the long-term goal of English language proficiency for these students” (p.2). Although his intentions are not to lump these two groups of varied learners together, his points do support the appropriateness of focusing on selected aspects of second language learning, in general, in order to see if connections can be drawn between the two.

Proceeding then with an ELL perspective, Garcia and Ortiz (1988) and Baca (1990) advocate for an effective pre-referral process to ensure that educators are distinguishing academic difficulties resulting from inadequate accommodations for individual differences from those resulting from a handicapping condition. Baca (1998) notes that with newer emphasis on prereferral interventions there is hope for change in school assessments. Ideally, these systems then push special education assessments to

include “multiple perspectives, address the educational environment, and consider students within the context of their classroom, school, family, community, and culture” (p.158). By doing so, assessors will be more accurate in labeling a language disability because they have compiled a variety of information on the student. Unfortunately, this decision-making process is often not as thorough as it should be, resulting in ineffective educational programs for culturally and linguistically diverse children.

Garcia and Ortiz (1988) suggest each school building have a Teacher Assistance Team (TAT) that would establish process and procedures when student concerns arise. Their pre-referral model consists of seven steps that aim to improve the quality of education for second language learners in the mainstream and investigate the validity of referral and assessment practices. The end result is fewer students tracked for assessments and inappropriately targeted for special education services. This is cost-effective for school districts.

The following is a brief outline of the pre-referral model as described by Garcia and Ortiz (1988). Step 1 asks if the student is experiencing academic difficulty. Step 2 inquires if the curricula and instructional materials are effective for second language students. In efforts to decipher what is at the root of a second language learner’s underachievement, teachers need to take a closer look at the curriculum and how it is being implemented. One difficulty for second language learners is when teachers over estimate what their students can produce with higher academic tasks based on what they hear from their students in conversation. All second language learners exhibit what Cummins (Garcia & Ortiz, 1988) describes as strong basic interpersonal communication

skills, but have not yet developed cognitive academic language skills necessary to meet the demands of content area instruction. Step 3 asks if the problem has been validated. Observations and collection of data need to represent the parent's perceptions, the student's work and behavior and if the problem is evident across several settings. Step 4 investigates any systematic efforts to identify the source of the difficulty and action taken. This involves taking a closer look at the teacher's style, expectations and perceptions, and the student's language competency, culture and socio-economic status. If student difficulties persist (step 5), then step 6 encourages other programming options such as Chapter 1 or tutorial programs. Step 7 states that if the difficulties continue in spite of alternatives, then the student may be a candidate for a special education assessment (Garcia & Ortiz, 1988).

It is hoped that all schools have TATs, but the reality may not be so; therein lies the difficulty of accurately diagnosing second language learners, or rather foreign language learners in the immersion context, with learning disabilities.

Need for this Study

Reflecting upon what has been covered thus far, the reader gathers a sense of the perspectives that have surfaced in the field of immersion education in conjunction with the complexities that surround students who are struggling in such a learning environment. The purpose of this study is to further a seemingly limited knowledge base on understanding eligibility practices of SLD special education services for underachieving immersion students. As noted in the introduction and evidenced in this

literature review, immersion research does briefly address controversial issues such as determining when students should transfer to an English setting (Rousseau, 1999) or determining if immersion education is appropriate for all students (Vancouver School Board, 1997, Mannavarayan, 2002).

Findings on immersion education also highlight the importance of conducting assessments in English (or the child's first language) for testing of learning disabilities (Alberta Education, 1997). While there is no direct answer to the predicament of testing an immersion child's English reading and writing skills when he or she has not received formalized English instruction yet (i.e., grades K-2 in the French immersion setting), special education laws state that assessments be conducted in the child's first language. Additionally, immersion researchers advise that French only assessments are not in the student's best interests either because the students are not francophones, and this would place them at an even greater disadvantage in an evaluation (Demers, 1994; Swain 1984; Wiss, 1987). Until there are more standardized instruments that are recognized by the state and represent a national sample of French immersion children (Wiss, 1987), cumulative results stemming from a variety of assessment measures in both languages need to be considered (Alberta Education, 1997). A diagnosis based on English only assessment measures or French only tests may likely prove invalid, leading to inappropriate methods of remediation. A framework that would be valid and reliable should "account for the relative importance and possible interactions of cognitive and linguistic variables across languages" (Wiss, 1987, p. 312).

Overall, there is a lack of information to help multidisciplinary teams determine when students in an immersion setting should qualify for special education services. Rousseau (1999) refers to the substantive contribution of Lapkin and Swain (1989) supporting a need for additional research that investigates “characteristics, problems, resources and services available for children having difficulties in French immersion” (p. 16). To further support this need, Mannavarayan (2002) cites, as well, the necessity and complexity of identifying students in an immersion program who are experiencing learning difficulties. She highlights the importance of addressing “appropriate remedial help in relation to the specific disability if the child is to remain in the program” (p. 48). This issue has not yet been systematically addressed for immersion programs in the United States. This research project seeks to address this gap as well as the need for systematic documentation of school processes to be followed when determining appropriate services for LD children in immersion programs. Instructional and curricular strategies need to also be included as part of this documentation of school processes.

As Genesee (1987) summarizes, for the many students who do not want to transfer to English programs, nor should, identification of learning difficulties and determination of specialized remedial services in the immersion program has become a complicated task. Once again, the difficulty of this task is compounded in the dual language environment by “not knowing what is a developmental lag associated with the second language and what is an underlying problem” (p. 98), in addition to understanding how intelligence, personality, motivation, attitude and anxiety related factors can affect

second language acquisition. These final points highlight the many considerations that surround this decision-making process.

Closing

In closing, the nature of this unique decision-making process has been established based on this review and exploration of immersion, foreign language and ELL research. However, the limited volume of concrete, detailed data represents research-based findings from immersion programs in Canada. For U.S. immersion students with learning disabilities, the process of adhering to a state's guidelines throughout this process, a U.S.-specific consideration, is lacking, as multidisciplinary teams determine eligibility of SLD special education services.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Objective

The research question explored in this study was: What is the nature of the decision-making process and comprehensive assessment practices used to determine eligibility of special education services in one early total French immersion school in accordance with the categorical label of Specific Learning Disability (SLD) for the state of Minnesota? The aim of this study was to observe and document the decision-making process as well as the comprehensive assessment practices followed thereafter within this French immersion school to identify an immersion language learner with learning difficulties.

A Case Study Research Design

The research methodology that corresponds to this research question is the case study. Research that uses case study methodology can highlight a set of decisions, such as those addressed in this study, and examine why they were taken, how they were implemented and what was the result (Nunan, 1992). Further, these understandings can then influence and bring about positive change in educational practice (Merriam, 1998). Throughout this study, emphasis is focused on the current policies and procedures of the Child Study Team (CST) that result in a multidisciplinary team assessment and

determination of SLD special education services. Thus, this decision-making process and comprehensive assessment practices make up the bounded unit, or rather, the case under study.

The case study methodology allowed this researcher to investigate the nature of the decision-making process in determining eligibility of SLD special education services in the context of the immersion setting. To strengthen reliability and validity, the case study approach entails a rich description of this process, enabling the reader to make comparisons across settings (Merriam, 1998). This strategy helps “determine how closely their situations match the research situation, and hence, whether findings can be transferred” (Merriam, 1998, p. 211). Additionally, triangulation was used, whereby the researcher sought multiple participant perspectives on this case through a variety of data collection techniques, including individual and focus group interviews, as well as current document review (Merriam, 1998). Collected data was used to construct a holistic description of this process and reflect the observations and understandings among various CST members, including parents. As the school’s special education teacher and coordinator of the CST, the researcher’s own observations of this process were also incorporated into the study. Documents reviewed include a pre-referral form for the referring teacher, a teacher questionnaire for specialist teachers and informal note-taking procedures during Child Study Team and parent meetings.

Through one-on-one and focus group interviews with Child Study Team members, further clarity was sought on processes already in place. Discussion evolved around how effectively current processes work, and what systems are in place in order to

understand how to more accurately identify dual language learners with learning disabilities in this type of setting. Interviews provided the baseline of data from which the researcher could analyze this decision-making process, noting participant-identified areas of quality and needs for improvement. This went beyond description, and incorporated the participants' viewpoints regarding their role and perceptions of the process within an existing immersion setting.

During analysis, the researcher looked for relationships, patterns and recurring themes throughout this decision-making process that stemmed from the interviews and observations. Because case study knowledge is broadened by the reader's interpretation (Merriam, 1998), it is hoped that other professionals in the field will be able to identify with the issues and concerns raised here, draw upon the viewpoints presented, and yield insights that could be applied to their immersion setting.

Site

The context for this study is a K-5 early full French immersion school in the Midwest. Students in kindergarten through second grade receive academic instruction only in their second language, French. Specialist classes, such as art, music and physical education are instructed in the students' first language, English. As of third grade, English language arts instruction is scheduled 70 minutes a day, and this amount of English instruction continues throughout the fourth and fifth grades. This school adheres to the same curriculum that is followed by the other five elementary schools in this

suburban district; however, the curriculum is taught in French. A partial French immersion program is offered through grade nine.

Approximately 575 students attend this study's K-5 French immersion school. Over 95% of the student body speak English as their first language and English is also the language spoken in their homes and in the community at large. The majority of parents have no formal education in the language of French; they have chosen this program in an effort to provide their child with an education that includes the goal of proficiency in a second language. There are approximately 35 teachers on staff and 25 students per class. The school was established in 1990. Other demographics that shed light on this student body are the following: 1% are eligible for free or reduced lunch, 5% receive special education services, 2% speak a language other than English as their home language; and 95% are European American.

In general, information gathered about the district as a whole show that students “have significantly higher academic achievement and stronger cognitive abilities than the state and nation...these students rank at the top in the Minnesota Basic Standards Tests and Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments in meeting the state basic and high standards” (Du and Weymouth, 2001, p. x). This immersion school's standing within the district rests in the top quartile.

Academic and Behavioral Support Services in this Immersion School

The **Child Study Team** (CST), which is central to this case study, includes the following individuals: a special education teacher, social worker, psychologist, nurse, principal, Foundations of Learning coordinator and three teachers. The speech/language

pathologist, although not a regular member of the CST at the time this study was completed, is consulted on an as-needed base within the school. To explain further, the speech/language position at this site is part-time and is currently shared between two people. Additionally, this site is not the home school for either individual; therefore, regular attendance at CST meetings is not expected, nor feasible. In previous years, the speech/language pathologist has been a regular member of the school's CST when the position has not been shared.

The CST's mission is to provide educational and emotional/behavioral support to students, families and classroom teachers. The CST meets for 90 minutes every other week throughout the school year and serves as an advisory group for teachers with issues and/or concerns about particular students. The team seeks to provide immediate support to classroom teachers through practical suggestions for modifying curricular and instructional practices and directs them to appropriate support services. Additional meetings with parents, teachers, administration, and other support personnel are held when necessary.

Foundations of Learning and Success Center programs are critical to the school's process of identifying academically challenged students. These services frequently act as an intervention to be tried before a child is referred for a special education evaluation. This type of service acts as a "safety net" for many individuals that need the extra academic support but who wouldn't necessarily qualify for special education services because a learning disability is not yet evident. In grades 3,4 and 5, these students have scored at the 40th percentile or below on the district's Achievement

Level Tests in reading and/or math. Teacher recommendation for such services is necessary at all grade levels.

Foundations of Learning (FOL) is an academic support program available during the school day for identified students in the areas of math and language arts. Remediation is provided in French and and/or English for grades K-5 by licensed teaching staff or paraprofessional support. Support is provided in or out of the classroom as much as 30 minutes per day or week, depending on need. It is a district-funded program, separate from special education services.

The **Success Center**'s mission is similar to that of FOL, but with a heavier emphasis on preventing at-risk students from falling behind their peers in math or reading. Success Centers are one of the state-funded targeted services designed to give students additional instruction and time to improve their skills in reading and/or math through an extended school day and school year. Instruction is delivered in English only, using specifically designed materials, for students in the third through fifth grades. All participating students need a Continuous Learning Plan from the referring teacher.

All **Special Education** programs are designed to provide individualized assistance to students with a handicapping condition in the least restrictive environment with maximum exposure to mainstream curriculum. The special education program strives to support students through the use of classroom intervention strategies, curriculum modifications and individualized instruction. Successful students are those who meet or exceed their Individual Education Plan (IEP) goals and/or no longer require assistance from special education services.

State and federal laws determine the types of special education services provided. Students are eligible for assessment and services in grades K-5. Services include academic, organizational and emotional/behavioral support, as well as speech/language, occupational therapy and deaf/hard of hearing. For this case study the focus is on those students who may qualify or have already qualified for special education services under the categorical label of Specific Learning Disability (SLD). The following description relays how these services are organized at this school site: Students' needs are met through collaboration with classroom immersion and English teachers, in-class instruction and pullout instruction in small groups with the special education staff. These services are provided in French and English. While IEP goals and objectives reflect services and progress with English skills via working with the English-speaking special education teacher, a French-speaking paraprofessional is available to support these students' academic needs in French as well. This additional support position allows services to link to the French classroom and content.

Participants

Information was gathered via focus groups and interviews with CST members and parents. As noted earlier, CST members include the school principal, psychologist, special education teacher, social worker, Foundations of Learning/Success Center lead teacher, nurse and three teachers. Information was also gathered from interviews with two parents whose children have qualified for SLD services. These parents were directly

involved in multidisciplinary meetings that reflected the CST process and determination of special education services. Table 3.1 and 3.2 provide a profile of each interviewee.

Table 3.1:**Child Study Team Profile**

Name	Role within School	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	Number of years at French immersion school	Number of Years on CST	Linguistic Background
Grace	Psychologist	50	F	European American	5	5	Monolingual English
Sydney	Foundations of Learning/Success Center Lead Teacher	52	F	European American	3	1	Bilingual English/French
Brad	Principal	46	M	European American	1	1	Monolingual English
Kathie	Social Worker	25	F	Canadian American	2	2	Monolingual English
Karmen	Nurse	57	F	European American	1	1	Monolingual English
Jane	French classroom teacher #1 Grade 1	44	F	European American	6	5	Bilingual English/French
Mali	French classroom teacher #2 Grade 4	27	F	Senegalese	3	1	Multilingual English/French Spanish/Wollof
Rachel	Physical Education teacher	58	F	European American	10	5	Monolingual English
Kris	Special Education Teacher	35	F	European American	5	5	Monolingual English

*Names have been changed to protect identity.

Table 3.2:**Parent Profile**

Parent	Relation to Child	Ethnicity	Linguistic Background	Child's Education at French immersion school (years)
Ann	Biological mother of 2 nd gr. male	European American	Monolingual – English	3 (K-2 nd gr.)
Dave & Karla	Biological mother & father of 1 st gr. male	European American	Monolingual – English	2 (K-1 st gr.)

*Names have been changed to protect identity.

Data Collection Techniques

The main source of data in this study came from interviews and focus groups carried out with CST members and parents. To ensure internal validity, the strategy of triangulation was used so that the interviews/focus groups reflected multiple participant perspectives on this case study's issue. These multiple perspectives helped "to confirm the emerging findings" (Merriam, 1998, p. 204). One focus group was initially comprised of the school principal, social worker and nurse; however, the nurse was unable to attend the scheduled interview and was interviewed separately using the same interview format. The school principal and social worker, therefore, comprised the first focus group. A second focus group was comprised of the team's three teachers. Additional data were gathered through individual interviews with the psychologist and lead teacher of the Foundations of Learning and Success Center programs. The purpose of the latter interview was to fully explore the process used to identify students in the school in need of academic support in the areas of reading and math. Information was also individually gathered from two parent interviews, one with a mother, the second with a mother and father.

Interviews with CST members and parents were managed through a semi-structured interview style with the purpose of soliciting their feedback and perspective on the school's CST process in this immersion setting. A predetermined list of open-ended questions was used, reflecting a discussion format that incorporated the study participants' observations and viewpoints. The goal of these interviews was to negotiate through dialogue a more complete understanding of the decision-making process that can

lead to a comprehensive assessment. Both the CST process and comprehensive assessment practices were clarified and interpreted together.

Before the interview/focus group began, the interviewee/focus group participants were briefed and provided with an explanation of the research topic and its purpose. Interviews/focus groups were tape-recorded and supplemented with written notes. Each interview/focus group lasted approximately 30-60 minutes in length. Interviews were carried out over a three-month period in the spring of 2002. The interviewer is the researcher, who is also the special education teacher and coordinator of the CST. See Appendix C for a complete list of interview questions.

The following questions are a sampling of what was asked of this study's interviewees/focus group participants.

- ❖ Think back on our experiences as members of the CST. Please describe the decision-making process that is followed for a child who is referred to CST for academic/learning concerns.
- ❖ How would you describe the CST's purpose in the school?

Sampling of additional questions asked of the school psychologist.

- ❖ As an evaluator in a formal assessment, how do you perceive balancing multiple participants – parent/teacher/student – throughout this process given the immersion setting?
- ❖ As the member of the multidisciplinary team who administers the cognitive ability tests, what do you keep in mind as you score and interpret the results and as you share

these data with other team members, given the fact that the child has been educated in an immersion school?

Sampling of questions asked of the Foundations of Learning coordinator.

- ❖ Please outline the steps the district takes in deciding whether or not a child qualifies for FOL services.
- ❖ How do you perceive your role as FOL coordinator aligning with the CST process in this school?

Sampling of questions asked of the parents.

- ❖ Based on your experience as a parent of a child receiving special education services, what is your perception regarding the process used by the CST in determining the need for a special education assessment in an immersion setting?
- ❖ Please describe your feelings about this process and the CST's determination.

In addition to collecting data via interviews and focus groups, the researcher, who is the special education teacher and coordinator of the school's CST, incorporated her own observations of this process. This is evidenced in the interview dialogue with colleagues on the CST and parents.

Data Analysis Techniques

Once the data were collected, then responses to interview questions were reviewed and analyzed.

In efforts to analyze the interviews/focus groups in a thorough yet timely manner, the following steps were taken as suggested by Kvale (1996). During the interviews, the interviewer made a point to condense and interpret what the interviewee had described and sent the meaning back to ensure a shared understanding. The interviewee/focus group participant then responded and restated their meaning as necessary. This back and forth dialogue continued until an interpretation of what had been stated was mutually agreed upon.

Upon completion of the interviews/focus group data, each audiotape was listened to twice and written notes were expanded accordingly. The key content was identified by the researcher; “for example, by eliminating superfluous material such as digressions and repetitions, distinguishing between the essential and the non-essential” (Kvale, 1996, p. 190). From here, the meaning that evolved during the interview/focus group was distilled through *meaning condensation* in which the content of the interviews was condensed into shorter statements (Kvale, 1996). This reduction of the text made the meaning of the interviews/focus groups more succinct, enabling the reader to focus on central themes that emerged and that were specific to the purpose of this study (Kvale, 1996). Results from data analysis will reflect the understandings of the CST’s decision-making process and practices regarding immersion students.

In the final chapter, discussion will address how this study may offer insights on how to more accurately identify dual language learners with learning disabilities in an immersion setting. As noted earlier, findings will inform and deepen our understanding of issues specific to elementary immersion learners and our role as a support team in an

immersion setting. Analytical generalizations (Kvale, 1996) of this case study project may be of interest to and possibly guide support teams in other immersion settings that are similar to the program documented here. This investigation will provide insight as to how immersion support teams currently adhere to state guidelines, and seek to meet the unique needs of its dual language learners. In the following chapter, findings from the interviews and focus groups will be presented, as well as a review of current documents that are used in this decision-making process.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Data will be presented by describing the phases that participants identified as making up the decision-making process and comprehensive assessment practices (see Table 4.2). Discussion of the process itself will center on themes that emerged regarding the purpose of the CST, general concerns of CST members and parents, and difficult questions raised during the process.

Table 4.1: Overview of Interview/Focus Group Data

Name	Role	Date	Length of Interview	Nature of Data
Grace	Psychologist	June 21, 2002	50 minutes	Individual interview
Sydney	Foundations of Learning/ Success Center Lead Teacher	April 9, 2002	45 minutes	Individual interview
Brad Kathie	Principal Social Worker	April 16, 2002	60 minutes	Focus group interview #1
Karmen	Nurse	April 17, 2002	25 minutes	Individual interview
Jane Mali Rachel	French classroom teacher French classroom teacher Physical Education teacher	April 22, 2002	50 minutes	Focus group interview #2
Ann	Parent	April 12, 2002	50 minutes	Individual interview
Dave & Karla	Parent(s)	April 18, 2002	60 minutes	Individual interview

*All names have been changed to protect identity.

The Decision-Making Process

Over the past 5 years, the decision-making process has become increasingly more refined with a discernable procedure in place. The following ten phases outline this process.

Phase 1: Teacher observes low student performance

When a teacher is concerned about how a student is learning, the referring teacher obtains a pre-referral form from the CST coordinator. Once the form is completed and returned, the child is placed on the next CST's meeting agenda. The pre-referral form (Appendix D) includes academic, social/emotional and attention concerns, as well as a positive attribute checklist. The teacher notes what communication they have had with the parents and the interventions they have tried in the classroom or via the home environment. This form will be used as the base of discussion at the CST meeting.

Phase 2: Gathered data are shared at the initial CST meeting

Initially when students are presented to the CST, it is more of a brainstorming session. CST members work to support the referring teacher with interventions and by recommending instructional accommodations that may help the student succeed in the classroom. Many interventions/accommodations are suggested that reflect the needs of the learner at their grade level; we discuss the possibilities of peer tutoring, study guides, highlighting of text, extending time, reducing work, listening to audio tapes, allowing for dictation of ideas, preferential seating, working in small groups, utilizing FOL support, using mnemonics, paraphrasing, breaking down tasks and directions, and creating check-in systems, graphic organizers and behavior plans, to name a few. At times, we also draw upon strategies that are outlined in the Nebraska K-12 Foreign Language Frameworks (1996) that suggests strategies for diverse learners in the foreign language classroom (Appendix E) and the MN Department of Children, Families & Learning (1997) specially designed instruction and adaptation suggestions for students with information processing

difficulties (Appendix F). This information is initially shared with staff at the beginning of the year.

The referring teacher is present at the CST meeting, as well as the grade level English teacher for children in third, fourth or fifth grade. An English teacher may also initiate a referral and in that case, the French homeroom teacher would be invited to attend the meeting. We also obtain information from previous teachers to see if problems were present in the past and then review current work samples. By viewing the child's cumulative file we can check district and state testing outcomes and educational history. We note what support services have been provided thus far like Foundations of Learning, Success Center, even tutoring, and obtain information from these people. Our main question at this point is: Is the concern a long-standing difficulty?

To get a broad perspective on the child's functioning across a variety of settings, teacher questionnaires (Appendix G) are also completed by the specialist teachers, which are music, physical education and art. Jane and Mali, both CST classroom teachers, expressed their appreciation in the interview for feedback from the specialist teachers. They stated in their interview, "We value the discovery that we are not the only ones who may be experiencing difficulty with a particular child, but this input also affords us the opportunity to hear where the student may be excelling." In addition to the specialist teachers, the school nurse is made aware of the specific students being discussed on the CST agenda and will check medical history of each student, noting any concerns through the health associate's office, for example, frequent health office visits, medications or health plans.

All documents are completed without direct contact with the family. This is purposeful because it is in an effort to keep it low key. Typically at this initial stage we haven't yet met with the parents so we don't pretend to know what the home support has been like. Prior to the meeting, however, the referring teacher has informed the parent about the CST meeting. This contact ensures that communication is established, not only about the purpose of the CST, but about the referring teacher's concerns, as well.

Phase 3: Conclusion of CST meeting

Before the CST meeting concludes, we determine who will be in contact with the parent(s) to inform them about what was discussed at the meeting. As noted in chapter 3, we may choose to monitor the student for a while, try various interventions in the mean time and place them back on a CST agenda in a couple of months. If we feel the concerns are more pressing, and/or there is documentation of several interventions over a period of six to eight weeks, then we invite the parents in for a meeting with selected members of the CST. CST members who may be involved at an initial parent meeting depending on the type and severity of the concern, include the classroom teacher, school principal, school psychologist, social worker, special education teacher, speech/language pathologist and nurse. Throughout all meetings, informal notes are taken and organized with the prereferral form and specialist questionnaires in a CST student file.

Phase 4: Meet with the speech/language pathologist (optional)

As noted in chapter three, the speech/language pathologist is consulted with on an as needed base within the school when a student's learning is hindered by weak expressive or receptive skills. To ensure thoroughness in this decision-making process,

the speech/language pathologist is briefed on a CST student referral. The CST makes this initial determination. The speech/language pathologist may then choose to meet with the student informally if receptive and/or expressive language skills are of special concern. This observation is conducted in the child's first language (English) for the purpose of evaluating language development and making recommendations regarding the need for further assessment.

Language assessments administered by the speech/language pathologist address language processing skills beyond what cognitive and achievement tests offer in an otherwise typical SLD evaluation. This information is very useful because evidence of an information processing condition is necessary when qualifying a student for SLD special education services. However, given that a student must show significant delays in their receptive and/or expressive language skills to qualify for special education services with the speech/language pathologist, a full language assessment is often not necessary. The opportunity for an informal student interview helps the speech/language pathologist determine this decision.

To further illustrate an informal student interview, the speech/language pathologist would do the following based on student need. To begin with, information is gathered from teachers and parents to better target the areas of concern. Medical history and any previous documentation of observations are also reviewed. If the concern is related to receptive language skills, then the speech/language pathologist, within the framework of a discussion with the student, may check for understanding of vocabulary, concepts discussed and different grammatical forms used; provide a series of words and

directions to check if the child is remembering what has been heard; give simple problem solving solutions and check for understanding, and/or have the child distinguish differences in sounds. If the concern is related to expressive language skills, then the speech/language pathologist may ask the child to tell a story to check for a logical sequence, content and form; engage the student in conversation to observe the use of specific vocabulary versus empty references, and/or have the child answer “why” questions.

This phase is only completed with written parent consent. The speech/language pathologist following the observation completes a recommendation for further assessment or a report of observations.

Phase 5: Monitor progress and document interventions

In the case with Dave and Karla, parents interviewed for this study, there were no previously documented concerns or interventions on file about their son, so his progress needed to be monitored throughout the fall of his first grade year. In the mean time, FOL services in French began four times a week for 30 minutes, strategies were suggested for Dave and Karla to use at home, and accommodations were implemented for their son’s teacher to use in the classroom. With the parent’s permission, informal observations were completed during this time frame as well. After 6-8 weeks, the CST met again to discuss the boy’s progress, document interventions, and determine a plan of action. Because there continued to be evidence of severe underachievement and lack of progress with reading and writing, a meeting was scheduled with Dave and Karla to discuss an assessment plan.

Phase 6: Parent meeting

At the parent meeting we share all the data gathered at the CST meeting, including any informal notes that were taken. We discuss any family/genetic learning difficulties that may be present or environmental factors, such as changes within the family structure, for example divorce, also single parents who are working and possibly lack the time and/or energy to support their child with homework and other school responsibilities. We try to look at the environment that the child lives in and see how that might be affecting learning. We discuss how we should proceed in helping their child, whether that be monitoring and documenting interventions for a period of time in the school setting, pressing ahead with an assessment, or offering suggestions for further help outside the school setting. Many parents inquire about tutoring, special programs in the area or other clinical settings that complete evaluations. Again, informal notes are taken throughout the meeting, highlighting tried interventions, outcomes and plans for how to proceed.

Phase 7: Assessment plan and evaluation

When we determine the need for a special education evaluation, we consider several criteria. To begin with, we review interventions that have been tried within the school setting and/or via home for a 6-8 week period and inquire about the success of those methods. If there has been minimal progress, then we look closely at the information gleaned from the parent meeting. Is there any family history of learning difficulties or recent family changes? What observations did the parents share regarding their child's behavior? At this juncture we are trying to understand if the observed

difficulties have been ongoing, consistent over a period of time in school and at home and are present in both languages. Early identification of learning or behavioral challenges helps validate the necessity for an evaluation, ensuring that this route will be a good use of the school's time and money.

If it is determined that an evaluation is appropriate, then we develop an assessment plan that covers the appropriate areas. We do this as a team, including our social worker, to see if we need to include a clinical interview or any behavior rating scales to address social/emotional issues or behavioral concerns. As noted earlier, we also confer with the speech/language pathologist when the child's expressive/receptive skills are of significant concern. Parents are involved throughout this assessment-planning phase. Once we receive signed permission from the parents to proceed with the evaluation, then due process timelines are followed thereafter, according to special education law.

In any basic learning assessment, the school psychologist does the cognitive testing and the special education teacher, myself, does the academic achievement testing and observations. The child's Intelligence Quotient (IQ) is measured by the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised (WISC-R) (Keyser & Sweetland, 1984) and academic achievement is measured by the Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement – III (Woodcock, McGrew & Mather, 2001). These assessments are conducted in English. The French language is assessed informally through data gathered by the classroom teacher. The school nurse completes a health review and sometimes either she or the psychologist will do attention-rating scales, if necessary. Parents complete a home-

family questionnaire (Appendix H) that addresses family history and information processing and teachers complete an information-processing questionnaire (Appendix I), as well. These forms are provided by the state and inquire as to how the student stores, organize, acquires, retrieves, expresses and manipulates information. The district referral form is completed by the homeroom teacher, which notes areas of concern and interventions tried. As noted earlier, if additional concerns are present then appropriate staff are included in the assessment planning and evaluation.

At this point, people who are directly involved in the assessment are termed the multidisciplinary team. This also includes the parents, the child's classroom teacher and a district representative.

Phase 8: Pulling it all together – the assessment feedback meeting

Once the assessment is complete, the multidisciplinary team pulls all the data together and reviews special education eligibility worksheets in light of the assessment results. The determination for SLD special education services is not only contingent on testing results, but also a review of CST notes, observations, parent dialogue and work samples and informal assessments in both languages. To review, we weigh the discrepancy between achievement and cognitive ability, the severity of underachievement, and evidence of an information processing condition.

We consider what supports have been in place but haven't seemed to work and check that our data reflects both first and second language learning tasks. Most students who are assessed have already been receiving FOL/Success Center services. Soliciting feedback from these teachers is insightful. We inquire about the student's status within

the grade level FOL group, how the student is meeting projected trimester benchmarks, and how he/she compares to his/her peers. This information helps distinguish which students may just be delayed in their skills versus learning disabled and provides additional documentation, when necessary, of severe underachievement and evidence of an information processing condition.

To further clarify, let us say a female is one of six students at a particular grade level receiving FOL reading support in French. Her skill level places her in the middle of this group. She is showing slow but steady progress. She demonstrates the ability to retain information and applies learned skills to new tasks. In order to bridge the gap that is necessary for her to keep pace with the classroom learning environment, this more individualized support is necessary for the review and reinforcement of skills. Generally speaking, this student is more likely delayed in her skills, not learning disabled. In a different light, another student in the same group is near the bottom in skill level. She is showing little progress and is in constant need of reteaching and review of skills to progress forward. The learning gap continues to broaden throughout the year. There is more evidence here to support a possible learning disability and need for special education services.

To continue with the assessment feedback meeting, we then use the SLD eligibility worksheet to help formalize the process, justify the determination for parents, and show that we are meeting state criteria for Specific Learning Disability. Sometimes further testing is suggested to rule out attention concerns. Not to be overlooked, however, are the emotional indicators of low self-esteem or anxiety and what, if any,

stem from the demands of a second language learning environment. All of these angles are seriously considered in our decision for eligibility of special education services.

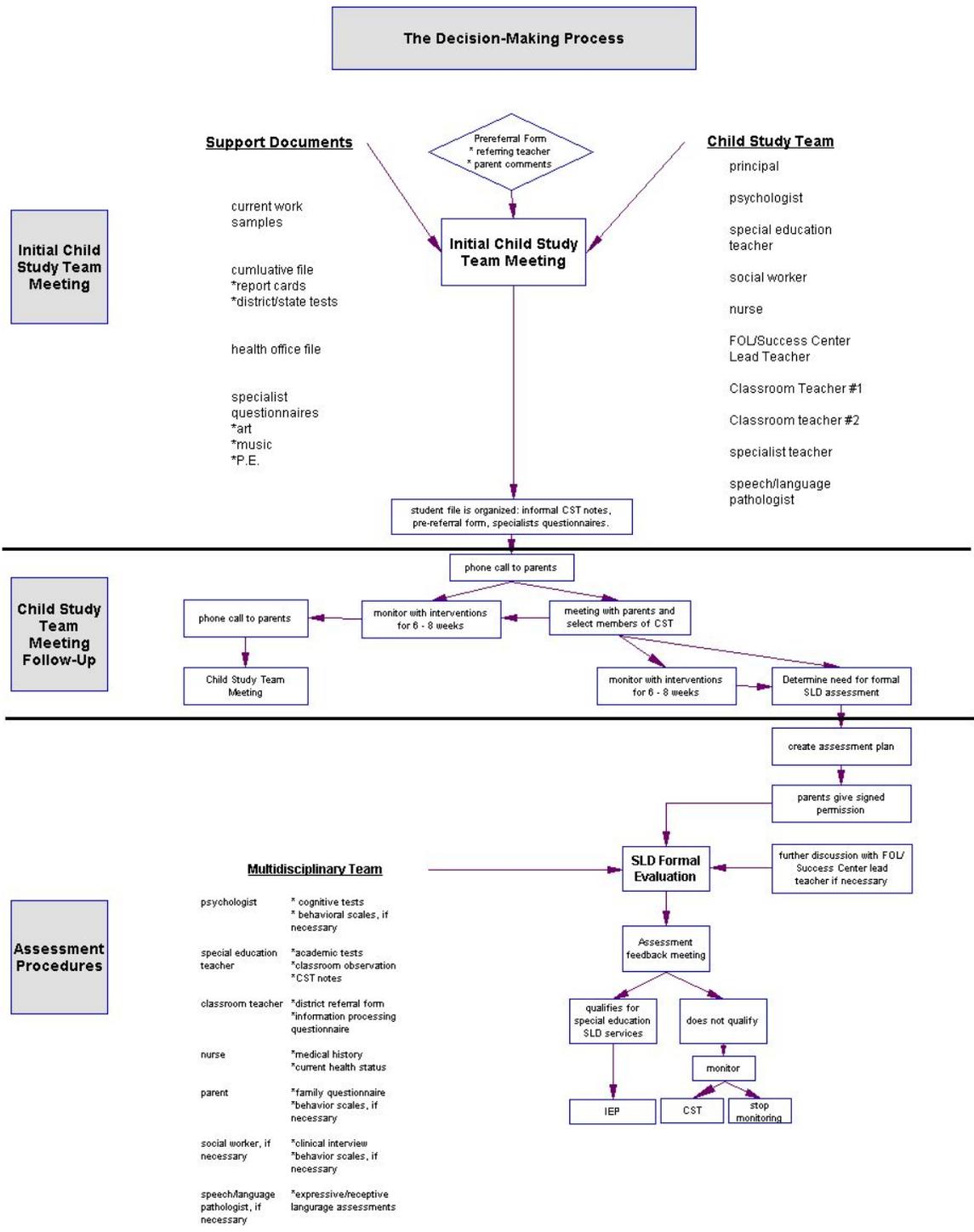
Phase 9: Individualized Education Plan

If the student qualifies for special education services, another meeting is held soon thereafter to draft an Individualized Education Plan. To assist in the transference of literary skills, parents are informed that special education services are provided in English with French paraprofessional support available on an individual or small group basis or in the classroom.

Phase 10: Discussing the appropriateness of the immersion setting

Toward the end of this decision-making process, opportunity is provided for the parents to dialogue about the appropriateness of the immersion setting for their child in light of the assessment data. Depending on the severity of the child's learning needs and the parent's desire to continue with this dialogue, we often refer to a support document published by the Vancouver School Board (1997) titled "Possible Factors Influencing Student Performance in French Immersion." In efforts to facilitate this discussion, those of us who were directly involved with the evaluation convey that we feel it is our professional responsibility to inform and document our present concerns about the immersion setting, or on the contrary, reasons why this type of learning environment is realistic for their child. We support our statements with current immersion and second language research. In the end, we want to be supportive of second language learning, but realistic and sharing of information we believe parents should know, as well.

Now that the phases for this decision-making process have been described, themes will be presented that emerged from the individual and focus group interviews. These themes fall into three main categories: purpose of the child study team, general concerns of CST members and parents, and difficult questions raised during the process.



Purpose of the Child Study Team

Comprehensive student information

Staff and parents interviewed for this case study emphasized how the Child Study Team (CST) provides a system for teachers to follow when they have student concerns. Kathie, our social worker, expressed, “This is a chance to get our approach organized as a CST by synchronizing communication with the family and establishing goals and further timelines. This forum prevents a piece meal approach, ensuring follow through by pulling together a wealth of perspectives from professionals who directly work with the child.”

The CST is also a screening tool to sort out the severity and relevance of each referral. As the special education teacher and coordinator of the CST, the process has helped the psychologist and myself determine if we should invite the parents in for a meeting right away and possibly initiate an assessment, or simply monitor the child’s progress and document interventions.

There are some students that have been monitored through our CST for 2-3 years and testing has never felt like an appropriate avenue. The CST format helps to organize documentation of interventions, student progress and communication with the family over a period of time. As Sydney, our FOL/Success Center Lead Teacher noted, “The CST format allowed for a continuous dialogue about a student case that I was directly involved with for three years. Every intervention and meeting were documented over this period of time, enabling me to see the big picture. The CST format ensured communication from second grade to third grade with the child’s teachers and other

support staff that I had to work with closely. Cues were offered on how to communicate with parents given the child's history which ensured a united message from the school staff." Here was an example of a student underachieving due to family-life circumstances, not because of a learning disability; therefore, consistent, proactive discussions about the student's needs and appropriate interventions helped prevent further regression.

Non-judgmental support for teachers

Our principal, Brad, commented, "The CST is an opportunity for teachers to be able to open up to a group of colleagues about a student issue, not necessarily to have the child tested, but a safe forum for support without judgement on their teaching. It's confidential." In addition to the CST affirming the referring teacher's concerns, thereby relieving some anxiety, Kathie noted that the meetings are a chance to think outside the box with ideas for support. Through listening and talking with one another, staff feel a greater sense of security in knowing they are doing what is expected. Jane emphasized, "It is a relief for the teacher to know the responsibility is being shared and the concern is out in the open. The feeling of urgency to solve the problem quickly is calmed when suggested interventions can be used immediately in the classroom while the rest of the process is taking place."

A filter for concerns

Grace, the school psychologist, highlighted a different angle in which our CST serves a purpose. She stated, "The CST provides a team approach to parent concerns which crop up fairly often, partly because the district has such a highly involved parent

community, but also because the students at our school represent yet another population of families that really value education, really want this second language opportunity and are closely monitoring their child's progress. The CST acts as a filter for some of these parent concerns and allows us to get together as a team to discuss the severity of the concern and what interventions have been tried before we proceed with a special education assessment." Consequently, the CST process is a proactive way of ensuring that we are not over-testing and over-identifying kids for special education. We really need to sift through the information, and we also need to balance the academic concerns with a developmental perspective. We discussed how sometimes parents need to hear that it's a demanding day for the kids and kids sometimes take a longer time to grow into reading and grow into being a student.

Both parent interviews, however, affirmed the CST process and indicated appreciation of the initial parent meeting that followed the CST meeting. All parents, Ann, Dave and Karla, shared they were aware themselves of their child's struggles in school and that the dialogue with us felt supportive.

General Concerns of CST Members

The challenge of recommending appropriate instructional accommodations

A challenge to this process is that we don't always feel we have solid solutions for teachers frustrated with students who aren't keeping up with the majority of the class. As a CST we feel like we are sometimes floundering for ideas on how to support teachers with good systematic interventions for academic support. Grace shared,

“One of the most challenging aspects of my role as psychologist in the immersion setting is knowing how best to help teachers with academic concerns; what to tell them to do to support the kids who are struggling but still manage the rest of the class.”

Although we have plenty of typical suggestions for academic support, behavioral reinforcements or goal setting with the students (see phase 2 and Appendices E and F), it still comes down to this issue of knowing enough about the student to know if it is truly a learning issue or the environment. In addition, it is also an issue of knowing enough about the teacher, the class and how it is managed. Guiding teachers on how they could or should differentiate their instruction to better meet the needs of a student is a delicate task. Our principal noted, “Our talk at meetings becomes very child specific, naturally; but people don’t look to each case in generalities of what may work.”

The challenge of managing time constraints and appropriately distributing responsibilities

It was agreed upon that this lack of dialogue in recommending appropriate instructional accommodations is often the result of time constraints at our CST meetings. To begin with, our CST student agendas are always full. Pertinent steps at each meeting are noting background information on the child, and providing opportunity for the referring teacher to share his or her trials and tribulations regarding the student; but as a result, we lack the time necessary to thoroughly brainstorm interventions to support the teacher.

Several members of the CST also felt dialogue is limited during the meetings because the group has inadvertently set a precedent of delegating many of the follow-up responsibilities among the psychologist, social worker and special education teacher. Some of these responsibilities include talking with parents and advising them, arranging parent meetings, meeting with the student individually or in a small group, observing the classroom environment, and conducting informal assessments. As the special education teacher, my thought is that we are often rushed at the end, which limits the dialogue among all team members. We get caught up in the pressure of the moment and want to provide some relief for the teacher. For as reassuring as our follow-up efforts may be for the teacher, I don't believe the teacher walks out with enough interventions to try immediately in the classroom. On the contrary, both Jane and Mali emphasized again, "It is just a relief for the teacher to know the responsibility is being shared, even if we walk out of the meeting with no concrete ideas. The concern is out in the open." Yet, as several members of the CST recommended, every member needs to be involved in the dialogue as we advocate for differentiated instruction and additional training for teachers in prereferral interventions for students with academic difficulties.

General Concerns of Parents

In what language will the assessment be completed?

With most assessments, parents at some point express their concern about the tests being administered in English. Grace explains to parents that the cognitive testing is

less susceptible to difficulties within the immersion setting because it is not so much tapping academic skills, like reading, writing and math, as it does raw problem solving skills. Consequently, the outcome is not greatly affected by the immersion setting. For example, there are questions that involve verbal reasoning, understanding vocabulary words, and general knowledge. Parents are assured that because their child has grown up in a home environment where there has been adequate exposure to these types of questions in their first language, the testing can be considered a valid representation of their true cognitive ability.

It is the achievement tests that are a little trickier. In this case I explain how we must use testing instruments that are adopted by the state and besides, there is limited availability of diagnostic tests in French. Based on our experience, we share that we feel comfortable interpreting the achievement test standard scores in light of the child's limited exposure to instruction in English. For instance, based on the child's full-scale IQ, we refer to the MN Regression Table that informs us if there is a severe discrepancy between general intellectual ability and academic achievement. This is one of the three areas we must weigh when considering SLD eligibility. Often, an achievement test standard score may fall just under the -1.75 SD below the mean; but, given the immersion setting and a delayed exposure to English instruction, this is not necessarily worrisome. The question we ask is, "If the child had been receiving English instruction since kindergarten, would this reading or writing standard score be high enough to place them above the -1.75 SD mark?" While the answer varies, the question helps guide our dialogue when we consider other assessment data in determining eligibility of SLD

services. We consider the child's grade level, their range of cognitive abilities and any scatter that is present among the cognitive subtests. We look closely at the errors made on the achievement tests – is there any transference of skills occurring between the two languages with reading or writing? What have past teacher reports and observations indicated about the child's ability, achievement and rate of progress?

Students who have previously qualified for SLD special education services in this French immersion school have achieved standard scores that fall 10, 20 or 30 points below the -1.75 SD cut-off. In general, if the achievement test standard score is within ten points below the -1.75 SD mark, then weighing evidence of severe underachievement and a language processing condition may swing the decision.

It is equally important to explain to parents how other assessment data from the classroom is gathered, as well, noting the child's progress with French. Although the gathering of French assessment data is more informal, it reflects rate of progress over time, work samples from various content areas and the teacher's concerns. Additionally, I inform parents that other immersion schools, as well as second language research, recommend that testing for possible learning difficulties be done in the child's first language to ensure validity.

Should we stay or should we go?

The interview with Dave and Karla revealed that the prereferral intervention period throughout the fall of their son's first grade year was difficult for them. As suggested by the CST, their son's progress was monitored for 6-8 weeks while accommodations were made to see if an assessment would be appropriate. Karla shared,

“This was a difficult time period for us because we had to wait while our son’s progress was being monitored, and we didn’t know if we should keep our son in the immersion program. If we wanted to go to an English school, then we knew we needed to act quickly.”

As noted earlier, at some point during the evaluation process, we try to take time to talk with parents about the appropriateness of the immersion setting in light of their child’s strengths and weaknesses. We often refer to a document published by the Vancouver School Board (1997) that lists possible risk and success factors influencing student performance in French immersion to guide this discussion. The parents interviewed for this study appreciated that we did not introduce this document until special education services had been underway for a period of time. Ann stated, “It would have felt like too much information, too early.” In support of her feelings, I agreed that much of this decision is based on how the child responds to special education services and to act sooner would seem premature.

One of Dave and Karla’s greatest concerns was that they thought the school may only promote the idea that they keep their son in the immersion program. They were actually relieved when we expressed a willingness to discuss the appropriateness of the immersion setting for their son. It was appreciated that we were looking out for their son’s needs and not just advocating for the school. The desire to dialogue about this decision stemmed from the fact that all three parents shared, “The immersion program seems to be adding another layer of work and set of expectations, as well as additional

challenges completing homework. We also worry about our child’s acquisition of first language skills in reading and writing.”

In response to these concerns, Grace and I ask, “What kind of experience do you want your child to have in school? How does the acquisition of a second language weigh against other family priorities?” We encourage parents to step away from the immediate situation and get a sense of the big picture through grade five, encouraging them to look for benchmarks of progress on a year to year basis, versus every trimester. This can help with the long-term perspective and expectations and allow for adequate development of first language literacy skills. We also share that our experience in the immersion setting has helped us understand that although reading and writing in English may be delayed initially, it’s not necessarily the French that is getting in the way of the English. If their child would be in an English school, he/she would be having the same learning difficulties. Our contact with families who have left the immersion program due to their child’s learning difficulties have shared that the academic difficulties are just as present and the need for special education services continues.

Difficult Questions Raised During the Process

Are we (the teachers) making “appropriate” referrals? Is it inattention, the French language, and/or a language processing weakness? How can we tell?

This is a key point to the study and the decision-making process and justifiably difficult as evidenced in the interviews. Karmen, our school nurse who participates on several CSTs in the district has observed, “It’s been evident that this school uses the same

criteria, or standards, as the other elementary schools in the district. It's the same process – same playing field for all students. The French, however, can muddy the waters in this decision-making process.”

Other team members noted that making an appropriate referral certainly seems more difficult at the primary grades because of the students' limited vocabulary and what they are really actually able to comprehend. Figuring out that struggle and what might be at the base of it is difficult, especially for the newer staff. This thought may as well explain why we have fewer referrals at the kindergarten level. Given any language environment, most academic concerns at the earlier grades are accompanied with the concern that the school team may be jumping the gun and acting prematurely, especially when the concerns are inattentiveness and slow academic progress. The added complexity for this school, however, is the immersion environment. Deciphering if these behaviors are the result of the immersion environment or one of many other variables such as inattention, negative attitude, or maturity complicates any referral and the decision for further assessment.

In light of this, Rachel, our physical education teacher, stated the value of the specialists' role throughout the decision-making process. She shared, “Our observations can help discern some of the issues, for example attention and language processing concerns, because not only do we see students' development over a period of years, but we work with them in their first language and in a variety of settings.” All CST members concurred that feedback from the specialist and English teachers adds valuable insight.

Mali, a CST member and intermediate French classroom teacher, shared, “I find that many of my students are very smart and sense that they could do the task if it was in English, but given that everything is in French, it frustrates them, slows them down, and hinders their comprehension of the task. I also observe that there is such a variance at the intermediate grades in the students’ ability to speak the French. Some are proficient and many are not. When we have a student who is struggling, we may think it is because of the French language, but also wonder if it might be an underlying learning issue. And as with some students, there is the difficulty of deciphering why a child is not speaking French – is it the result of anxiety, other emotional factors, or language processing weaknesses?”

Jane commented, “The longer we work with students in this setting, it is evident that the second language actually magnifies the issues - even quicker in some respects. As with attentional concerns, a student is more apt to tune out the French before they tune out English, and this brings those behaviors to the surface sooner. In theory, then, I feel I can put interventions into place and make referrals in a more timely fashion.” I agreed that the second language can often magnify a particular concern, but I was unsure if it always highlighted the right issue. She, however, pointed out that in all likelihood the inattentive behaviors are indicative of something. She continued, “Why is this child fidgeting? It may well be because he does not understand what is going on. Why doesn’t he understand? Is it a language processing issue? Why can’t he organize all of the different structures and words coming at him and put that in an organized fashion in his head? There’s something getting in the way.” So even though particular behaviors

magnify a problem, we have to accept that it doesn't always mean we can pinpoint what that problem is and write a prescription for what needs to be done.

Is it a learning disability? What to keep in mind when determining eligibility of SLD special education services in the immersion setting

Still the greatest concern or challenge for everyone involved is knowing if we are truly identifying students with learning disabilities or identifying students who do not respond to the system of mastering skills in a second language. As a multidisciplinary team, we try to be very sensitive to the emotional indicators that are often associated with learning disabilities and second language learning, for example, being overwhelmed, anxious, unmotivated, worried, dependent, passive, angry and/or defensive. When we talk about children and more of these internalizing symptoms that they have when there might be a learning problem, we discuss several factors in light of the immersion setting. We discuss the child's learning style, and strengths and weaknesses as a result of the assessment and classroom performance, noting this program relies heavily upon verbal and auditory processing skills. We try to surmise if the child is possibly in a period of cognitive disorganization where they haven't mastered their native language but are trying to acquire the skills necessary to succeed in a second language; it's simply not coming as quickly as expected and may come later.

Grace explained, "In addressing possible learning difficulties in the immersion setting, we are trying to understand if the child's problems are environmental, developmental, or related to neuropsychological functioning (brain processes). Developmental would be the idea that learning to read is very much an individual process

and that some children seem to naturally develop these skills earlier, while others are simply “late readers” – they need more time and practice. Also, some may struggle more with transferring skills from the French they are exposed to at school to English reading. Neuropsychological refers to cognitive assessment, achievement, memory, attention, executive functioning, etc. – all of which may provide information about learning difficulties.” Keeping these thoughts at the forefront of our discussions when determining eligibility of special education services is critical.

Further questions highlighting these concerns surfaced in several of the interviews: Are the learning difficulties a result of a mismatch with our educational approach? Do we call children learning disabled or even attention deficit disorder, when in fact, in a different setting they might look different? This student didn’t do that well on this district achievement test and yet his/her cognitive ability is seemingly high. The rigor of the program and of our district, the expectations that have been placed on kids – does this pressure us to say we will evaluate? What is the benchmark for “severe underachievement” in our school and how does this vary from teacher to teacher, or grade level to grade level? Because of the overall above average student ability in this school, students who have been previously assessed and appeared to be severely underachieving when compared to their immersion peers were actually performing in an average range when compared to their peers on a national level. Are we considering all the right variables? Are we providing accurate impressions? These questions are always of concern.

Grace and I dialogued about our CST and assessment experiences, noting the commonalities that have been present in many past academic referrals, “There is a lack of confidence and self-esteem. Students have tried to compensate or hide their struggles as evidenced when we observe they are copying other student’s work. We see the chewed fingernails. There are comments from the teachers or parents that the student feels dumb in the class, and is experiencing overall stress.” I shared that in many cases, I have observed students who are verbal and participating in class discussions with confidence but are later in tears at the hand of a reading or writing task. Some students appear not to understand or track any verbal dialogue as evidenced in their lack of participation, inattention and difficulty following and remembering directions. Children who are often referred for an assessment are disorganized, as evidenced by an inability to organize school materials and follow through with homework. Most evident is their low academic performance in both languages. As in the case with reading, there is inadequate retention of sound-symbol relationships that they have been exposed to at home in English, as well as in school with the French language. Consequently, there is minimal transference of skills between the two languages. Many of these learning characteristics are evidence of language processing difficulties, which in the same context is proof of an information processing condition.

After looking at the many variables in this decision-making process, Grace and I agreed that it often is a judgement call. We don’t rely just on test scores; we rely on many other data, such as, work samples, observations and numerous discussions with the classroom teacher to gather evidence of severe underachievement, but also to hear them

out – what does their intuition tell them about what is going on with the child?

Furthermore, we reflect on our conversations with the parents, their family history and their perceptions about the concerns at hand. From the same data pool we gather evidence to support an information processing condition. If the speech/language pathologist has had any involvement in the process then this step is made easier because of their expertise in deciphering language-processing weaknesses. However, forms from the state on information processing have helped guide us in our efforts to site specific examples of a student's weakness or inability to store, organize, acquire, retrieve, express and/or manipulate information. See Appendix J for examples that support an information processing condition.

It is the researcher's hope that these interview excerpts illustrate the discourse that this school's staff engages in as we partake in the decision-making process.

Member Check

Upon the completion of data collection and review of findings, the school psychologist was called upon to dialogue further about specific instances in which an information processing condition surfaces as a concern in the evaluation process. During this member check Grace clarified additional measures, formal and informal, that we consider when determining eligibility of SLD special education services. On a more informal basis we gather additional information from parents, teachers, and student work samples. Through meetings and conversations with parents, we inquire about their child's memory and his/her ability to complete homework and follow directions, for example. As previously noted, parents complete a home/family questionnaire in which a

section addresses information-processing concerns. The teacher also completes an information-processing questionnaire. With this and additional teacher reports and student work samples in both languages we look for reversal of letters and problems with spatial organization, among many other variables when looking closely at how the student produces work. Informal reading and writing samples in both languages also offer helpful information in terms of reading comprehension and written expression.

As for more formal measures, parts of the WISC-III are often used to provide evidence of an information-processing condition. Grace explained that we look at the composite score for processing speed, which is derived from two subtests – coding and symbol search. These two subtests address visual motor coordination, concentration and visual scanning ability. We also look at the child's overall perceptual organization abilities, which include all the non-verbal subtests. Here we look for scatter in the student scores to see if their scores are uneven, showing significant peaks and valleys in ability. Even more specifically, the picture arrangement subtest, in which the child has to sequence visually presented information, can also indicate information-processing weaknesses. Other formal measures that provide supporting data can be gathered through various behavior rating scales which measure opposition, cognitive problems, inattention, hyperactivity, aggression and anxiety. In a broader sense these scales provide related information-processing data in the areas of attention problems and learning problems.

Closing

In the following chapter, discussion will reflect how this study may offer insights on how to more accurately identify dual language learners with learning disabilities in an immersion setting. As noted earlier, conclusions will inform and deepen our understanding of issues specific to elementary immersion learners and our role as a support team in an immersion setting. This case study project may be of interest to and possibly guide support teams in other immersion settings that are similar to the program documented here. This descriptive investigation may provide evaluative insight, as well, on how immersion support teams currently adhere to state guidelines, and better meet the unique needs of its dual language learners.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY DISCUSSION

This case study explored the following research question: What is the nature of the decision-making process and the comprehensive assessment practices in determining eligibility of Specific Learning Disability (SLD) special education services in one early total French immersion school?

To begin with, I will summarize and briefly discuss the key findings of this case study. In so doing, I will draw upon other research that highlights these points of discussion. Second, I will address study limitations. Last, I will consider implications for practice, noting how these findings can provide direction for further research and for determining eligibility of special education services for students with learning disabilities in an immersion setting.

Key Findings

The key findings in this case study center around the following themes: the ten phases that outline this decision-making process and the comprehensive assessment practices; the role of the Child Study Team (CST) in the initial stages of the decision-making process; parent concerns; noted gaps in the assessment process; and finally,

additional comprehensive assessment practices and other variables to consider when determining eligibility of SLD special education services.

The decision-making process

The ten phases to this decision-making process are only outlined here to serve as a guide for the reader and to show evidence that a process is in place and working at this school. Chapter four describes each phase in detail.

1. Teacher observes low student performance.
 - The referring teacher completes a prereferral form for the next CST meeting agenda to discuss student concern.
2. Gathered data is shared at the initial CST meeting.
 - Referring teacher presents student concerns.
 - Specialist questionnaires, work samples, cumulative file, health office file and general parent concerns are discussed.
 - CST brainstorms classroom interventions/accommodations to be tried.
3. Initial CST meeting concludes with follow-up plans in place.
 - CST determines who will be in contact with the parents.
 - CST determines if the student's progress will be monitored while documenting interventions; or alternatively schedules a parent meeting with select members of the CST.
4. A meeting with the speech/language pathologist occurs. (optional)

- The speech/language pathologist will meet with a student who shows signs of significant receptive and/or expressive language processing weaknesses. This observation is for the purpose of evaluating language development and making recommendations regarding the need for further assessment.
 - Written parent consent is necessary for the speech/language pathologist to meet with the child.
5. Progress is monitored and interventions are documented.
- This phase lasts for 6-8 weeks.
 - At end of monitoring period, CST may meet again to discuss progress, and/or a parent meeting will be scheduled with select members of the CST and referring teacher.
6. Parent meeting is held.
- All CST information is shared.
 - Any family/genetic learning difficulties and the home environment are discussed.
 - The child will continue to be monitored while interventions are documented, or assessment procedures begin.
7. An assessment plan is developed and an evaluation is completed (if determined to be necessary).

- The multidisciplinary team creates an assessment plan that states the people involved and their responsibilities.
 - Parents give written consent to proceed with the evaluation.
 - Evaluation is completed according to due process timelines.
8. All information is pulled it all together for the assessment feedback meeting.
- Multidisciplinary team reviews SLD eligibility worksheet in conjunction with assessment results and observations in both languages to determine if student qualifies for SLD special education services.
 - Student progress in considered in FOL/Success Center, if applicable.
 - Emotional/behavioral indicators are considered that may stem from the demands of a second language learning environment.
9. Individualized Education Plan is developed.
- If student qualifies for special education services, then another meeting is held to draft an Individualized Education Plan.
 - Services are provided in English with the special education teacher.
 - French paraprofessional support is provided for any special education student needing academic assistance, as well.
10. The appropriateness of the immersion setting is discussed.
- Opportunity is provided to dialogue with parents about this topic.

- A support document titled “Possible Factors Influencing Student Performance in French Immersion” is used to facilitate this discussion.

As cited earlier in the literature review for this case study while discussing parallels to English language learners, Garcia and Ortiz (1998) and Baca (1990) advocate for an effective prereferral process to ensure that educators are distinguishing academic difficulties resulting from inadequate accommodations for individual differences from those resulting from a handicapping position. This immersion school’s process shadows many points that Garcia and Ortiz outline for a prereferral model for English language learners and as Baca advocates, it takes into consideration multiple perspectives, the educational environment as well as the context of the student’s classroom, family and community.

The role of the Child Study Team (CST)

“A good way to assure that students receive the attention they need is to establish a simple and systematic school-based team process” (Demers, 2001, p.6). The CST plays an essential role within this school by providing a starting point for the decision-making process. As noted above and in chapter four, the decision-making process and comprehensive assessment practices encompass ten phases. The entire CST plays an integral part in at least three of the early phases by gathering comprehensive student data, providing non-judgmental collegial support for teachers, and filtering premature concerns, especially those of parents.

More specifically, the CST provides a multi-dimensional, comprehensive system for teachers to follow when they have student concerns. There is a process that is followed in gathering student data. This begins with the referring teacher filling out a prereferral form and contacting parents, followed by the CST coordinator placing the student on the next CST meeting agenda. Specialist questionnaires are then distributed to the art, music and physical education teachers. Feedback is also solicited from the English teacher and Foundations of Learning (FOL)/Success Center teachers. The child's cumulative file and work samples are reviewed at the initial CST meeting, in conjunction with other collected data from the specialists and referring teacher. Particular appreciation is given to feedback from the English teacher and specialists given their work with the students in English. Also, the FOL/Success Center teachers, as well as the specialists, often have the opportunity to work with students over a period of two to three years or more. Their multiple perspectives balance the French classroom experience and aid dialogue when trying to understand if a child's difficulties are environmental, developmental or related to neuropsychological functioning (cognitive ability, achievement, memory, attention, language processing).

The benefits of the CST process are many. Pulling together a wealth of perspectives from professionals who directly work with the child in the school in addition to the knowledge base of the CST, provides a sense of non-judgmental collegial support for the referring teacher. This process also ensures follow-through as responsibilities for

communicating with the family are delegated, suggested interventions are tried and progress is monitored. CST meetings provide a forum to think outside the box with ideas for support, brainstorming immediate interventions or establishing longer-range goals. This systematic and consistent collaboration is necessary in order to support teachers, and ultimately the students, in building a knowledge base of interventions and accommodations (Demers, 2001). The CST format allows for a continuous dialogue as a student's progress is monitored over a period of years, if necessary. At each CST meeting the CST coordinator takes informal notes and then organizes them in a student file with other collected data.

It is of interest, however, to note that as the CST strives to discuss the educational context of each student referral in greater depth, it was the feeling of several of its members that information is lacking regarding what is being taught and what instructional strategies should be used to assist students who struggle academically. This is a gap in our school's current process. We find that it is a delicate balancing act to support a teacher and be sensitive to their needs, while at the same time advocating for changes within their classroom environment, and/or in their style or approach to teaching students who are struggling academically. Based on a descriptive profile of an underachieving student, our process could more thoroughly address, as Baca (1998) would propose it should, the need for varied teaching strategies, learning activities and ways to modify curriculum. In doing so, we would establish a stronger framework for

problem solving within the immersion setting. In efforts to improve our practices, we need to be more diligent in systematically using documents that offer helpful suggestions. For example, the Nebraska K-12 Foreign Language Frameworks (1996) provides strategies for diverse learners in the foreign language classroom, and the MN Department of Children, Families & Learning special education website (1997) provides specially designed instructional recommendations and adaptations for students with information processing difficulties (see Appendices E and F for these documents).

The CST also acts as a filter for premature concerns especially those of parents. A teacher may refer a student to the CST because a parent has expressed concern about his or her child's progress. Because of the highly involved parent community in which this school is situated, and given the uncertainty and confusion that parents can experience in sending their child to an immersion program, concerns about academic difficulties are even more likely to surface. A forum such as the CST is essential in that it provides opportunity for the team to discuss the severity of the referral and sift through information that may or may not support a special education assessment. In these initial phases, the CST process acts as a support system for teachers in their communication with the family as they document interventions over a 6-8 week period. Its format allows us to be comprehensive and at the same time slows down the process, thereby preventing a sense of premature panic. In the end, the group serves to ensure that the school is not over-testing and over-identifying children for special education.

A soundboard for parent concerns

If we consider the ten phases described in chapter four, it becomes apparent that the parent is involved every step of the way. In the initial phases of the decision-making process, parents often need a knowledgeable sounding board for their immediate concerns regarding language immersion issues. For example, parents may have questions about their child's later development of English reading, hesitancy to speak the French language, feelings of stress or feeling tired from a demanding school day. As Mannavarayan (2002) notes, families can experience added pressure in the immersion setting. A spokesperson from the CST, often the CST coordinator, psychologist or classroom teacher, can help the parents deal with these initial pressures and uncertainties.

We try to help them balance the academic concerns with a developmental perspective, emphasizing that some kids take a longer time to grow into reading and grow into being a student. Experience in the immersion setting has led us to believe that the timeline for expected "typical" academic benchmarks needs to be extended even further in the immersion context. It is important to inform parents that students with learning difficulties may need more time to learn than other children (Mabbott, 1994); but this does not need to negate the opportunity to learn a second language. Planning a comprehensive assessment or choosing to leave the program in the immediate future are options that need more time and consideration before they can be recommended.

If and when the time does arrive for a comprehensive assessment, different parent concerns arise that must be addressed. As communicated through the parent interviews, parents express their concern about the tests being administered in English. Once SLD special education services are deemed necessary, they wrestle with the dilemma of whether or not their child should remain in the immersion program. Although I believe this to be a very important topic, as evidenced by parent feedback, its conclusion does not have a direct impact on determining whether or not a child is eligible for SLD special education services. Discussing the appropriateness of the immersion setting is noted as the final phase in the decision-making process because it frequently surfaces in our dialogue with parents once the assessment is complete.

The language of tests: Regarding the matter of testing, parents are informed that best practice in other immersion schools, as well as second language research recommend that testing for possible learning difficulties be done in the child's first language (English) in conjunction with other assessment tools that include a sampling of skills in both languages (Alberta Education, 1997). Additionally, testing instruments must be used that are adopted by the state, ensuring reliability and validity. A French-only assessment is not advisable (Demers, 1994; Swain 1984; Wiss, 1987) until there are more standardized instruments representing a national sample of French immersion children (Wiss, 1987). However, reflecting on what would be considered best assessment practices in an immersion setting, French-language diagnostic tests currently being used

with Canadian French immersion students should be explored for possible use within this immersion program in the immediate future. In doing so, a complete profile of the child's strengths and weaknesses in both languages will be obtained. At present, French assessment tools and the subsequent information garnered from them is lacking. Informal classroom assessments in the French language are certainly taken into consideration as evidence of severe underachievement or as examples of an information processing condition, but that is the extent to which they are used in a comprehensive assessment within this immersion program.

Parents are also informed that the cognitive testing which measures general intellectual abilities is less susceptible to difficulties within the immersion setting because it draws upon a child's raw problem solving skills versus academic skills. Having grown up in a home environment where there has been adequate exposure to vocabulary, reasoning and general knowledge in the first language, the testing can be considered a valid representation of their child's true cognitive ability. Both verbal and non-verbal subtests are administered so as to obtain a full-scale IQ score.

Although the achievement tests are trickier to interpret, given no formal English instruction until third grade, assessment experience in the immersion setting has established some confidence in interpreting the achievement test standard scores. This confidence has increased with each completed evaluation. However, we initially lacked a general understanding of immersion education as a special services team and still find it

hard to judge if our own knowledge base as assessors in an immersion program is adequate. Frequent turnover of special services staff only exasperates this concern. This point highlights the importance that “tests be interpreted by someone with a good theoretical understanding of the immersion approach, someone who’s able to judge whether and to what degree the difficulties encountered are caused by transfer and interference between languages or by the natural delays to be expected during the first few years of instruction in a second language” (Alberta Education, 1997, p.108). For those of us in immersion programs who are directly involved in the administering and interpretation of test scores and have a limited second language background, exposure to immersion literature and dialogue with French speaking staff about assessment results is critical. Within the context of this case study, the time necessary to achieve this goal is desired, but lacking.

To continue with interpreting academic achievement test scores, using the state’s regression table, we explain a trend of how students who have previously qualified for SLD special education services in this school have achieved standard scores that fall 10 to 30 points below the -1.75 standard deviation cut-off. Their full-scale IQ determines this cut-off. In general, if the achievement test standard score is within ten points below the -1.75 SD mark, then weighing evidence of severe underachievement and a language processing condition may swing the decision. The question we find ourselves asking is, “If the child had been receiving English instruction since kindergarten, would this

standard score be high enough to place them above the -1.75 . SD mark?" While the answer varies, the question helps guide our dialogue when we consider other assessment data in determining eligibility of SLD services. We consider the child's grade level, their range of cognitive abilities and any scatter that is present among the cognitive subtests. We look closely at the errors made on the achievement tests – is there any transference of skills occurring between the two languages with reading or writing? What have past teacher reports and observations indicated about the child's ability, achievement and rate of progress?

At the conclusion of an evaluation, we have found that the other assessment data usually support the achievement test scores. The assessment data that we rely on to complete a full evaluation are work samples in French and/or English, feedback from a FOL/Success Center teacher, observations, conversations with the teacher and family, as well as questionnaires that address academic underachievement and information processing skills.

Noted gaps in our decision-making process and comprehensive assessment practices

This school's CST is made up largely of monolingual English speakers, with little to no background in French or immersion education, except for our experience working in the immersion program. Beyond two of the CST French classroom teachers, there is no rich knowledge of immersion education, especially regarding implications concerning

assessment issues. A case in point is that the importance and complexity of noting an information processing condition as part of meeting SLD criteria, did not specifically surface as an issue in any of the initial interviews. This is surprising given the overlap of concerns that surface with processing information through language while learning a second language. Information processing concerns were embedded in other closely related questions, but this general oversight possibly reflects a lack of awareness of the complexity of processing a second language and its impact on learning and assessment results. Second language programs, such as immersion schools, need to be sensitive to this information by providing training and support for a monolingual staff. Close dialogue with bilingual people who are knowledgeable about second language acquisition and immersion education is necessary for special services teams, in particular, in order to be more accurate with assessment procedures and interpretation of assessment outcomes.

Another gap in this school's process is tied to its limited use of information in discerning SLD criteria. This study has made efforts to draw some comparisons between immersion language learners and English Language Learners (ELL). In that context, it was realized that in making the determination for SLD special education services, we only use the SLD forms provided by the state. As assessors, we should also consider using forms provided by the state for ELL evaluation purposes that might address parallel issues in assessment practices in the immersion setting. For example, within the ELL Companion to Reducing Bias in Special Education Evaluation (MN Educational

Services, 2002), various assessment tools are recommended for ELL special education evaluations. One of these forms (Student Oral Language Observation Matrix – SOLOM) could provide additional student information that is currently not being reflected in this school’s current practices. The purpose of the SOLOM (Appendix K) “is an informal rating tool that has proven a useful guide for teacher judgment of oral language proficiency as observed in a school setting. It can be used to determine English acquisition phase, diagnose student needs, and record the progress of individuals and groups. Some success has been reported in using the SOLOM to rate languages other than English” (p.143). This tool could provide additional data for noting an information processing condition.

Perhaps a similar immersion companion document needs to be created at the state level that would address the unique variables present when determining eligibility of special education services for underachieving immersion students.

So many variables to consider

As a result of the individual/focus group interviews with CST members, an inevitable finding surfaced around the difficulty that is experienced by all when we try to discern if a child’s academic difficulties are a result of inattention, a language processing condition, immaturity, lack of effort, developmental delays, anxiety, second language learning, a combination of these, or a learning disability, to name a few possibilities. This case study does not provide an answer to this question; yet, in the act of weighing all

these variables there is more assurance that we are being thorough in our decision-making process. As Baca (1998) suggests in assessing culturally and linguistically diverse students, our assessments should reflect a holistic perspective of the student's abilities, development, experiences and history.

How do these variables play upon one another and how does the immersion environment magnify or cloud a concern? These questions possibly shed light on why this school has very few referrals at the kindergarten level. Because of the second language environment, academic referrals in the early grades are accompanied with a sense that we may be acting prematurely. Therefore, we consider how a child may need more time to adjust to school and/or the uniqueness of a second language learning environment. We try to surmise if the child is possibly in a period of cognitive disorganization where he or she hasn't mastered his/her native language but is trying to acquire the skills necessary to succeed in a second language; it's simply not coming as quickly as expected and may come later.

We try to find answers to whether or not the concern is dependent on limited exposure to activities rich in language and literacy experiences outside the school environment, a genetic history of learning disabilities in the family, inattention, weak language processing skills, lower cognitive abilities or perhaps a negative attitude about having to speak and understand a different language throughout the course of the day. It is important for us to remember that motivation, personality and attitude can have a

significant influence on foreign language learning and therefore, testing for learning disabilities does not always provide the help that is necessary (Cloud, 1994; Demers, 1994; Mannavarayan, 2002).

Other variables in this process are our emotions and intuitions as parents and educators. These are not to be overlooked, but on the contrary, trusted and considered reliable (Mannavarayan, 2002). Although Mannavarayan's thought here is more closely connected with determining whether or not a child should transfer to an English setting, she balances the results of standardized tests with the perspectives of the concerned and caring adults involved, as we must when determining eligibility of special education services. She states, "(We) are better able than standardized tests to interpret a child's deficiencies and lack of school progress...being more familiar with the child's life and school performance, (we) can be of invaluable assistance in trying to make sense of the child's distress signals" (p.52). With this understanding, our practice of sometimes making a judgement call when determining eligibility of special education services is substantiated. The immersion setting pushes us to weigh the experiences and perspectives of those closest to the child with the other variables. We dig a little deeper given the uncertainty of how the second language impacts the student's behavior and achievement in school.

Finding some clarity in it all stems from communication with the parents, a wide variety of educational specialists, observations of the child in a variety of settings,

viewing work samples in both languages and proceeding with caution. Gleaning additional insights from a speech/language pathologist student observation or a student interview with the social worker is also insightful. As in the earlier phases of the decision-making process, comprehensive input helps guide our discussions when discerning if the child's problems are environmental, developmental or related to neuropsychological functioning. Initially, they help us determine if an assessment is appropriate; in the end, this information helps us determine eligibility of SLD special education services.

Commonalities among students qualifying for SLD special education services

There is a realization when discussing the findings of this case study that much of the information is applicable to any school setting, not just a second language immersion program. The same holds true for the commonalities evident in many of the students who have previously qualified for SLD special education services in this school. Students are experiencing feelings of low self-esteem and stress. They often rely heavily upon their peers for academic support and are disorganized. Homework demands become increasingly overwhelming because of the amount of time it takes for them to complete it. Low academic performance over a period of time, even with consistent remedial support, is our biggest red flag. In the immersion setting, we look for this severe underachievement to be present in both languages because limitation in the child's native

language will hinder his/her ability to acquire a second language as well (Mannavarayan, 2002).

In the primary grades in the immersion program, we discover with these same students that any early exposure to reading in English at home has not transferred over to reading in the second language at school. These students struggle to retain common sight words in either language and are unknowing of basic sound/symbol relationships, a concrete example of a language processing weakness. In support of these observations, Mabbott (1994) also concurs, “Language features that are obvious to most students (like letter/sound correspondence) may not be clear to students with learning problems” (p.349). Likewise, their auditory short-term memory makes it difficult for them to process information for particular tasks. In regards then to second language learning, these students can’t distinguish nor find meaning in the different sounds of words and phrases they hear (Mannavarayan, 2002). Consequently, attending, following and remembering directions are expectations that too often exceed these students capabilities in the context of learning a foreign language (Mannavarayan, 2002).

There are also those students whose frustrations are similar to those just stated, but occur more as a result of a visual perceptual disability. We find that while these students are also non-readers, they are not inhibited to use the second language when expected and do so with relative ease. In fact, many of the students who have qualified for SLD services as a result of visual perceptual difficulties, show strengths with their

verbal skills, as evidenced by their frequent participation in the French classroom and above average results on the verbal subtests of the IQ test.

Study Limitations

This case study is limited because it focused on one program only. Findings are not generalizable. Elementary immersion schools with a different student population will not be adequately informed about the complexity of issues that (can) arise in this decision-making process. For example, this study is limited in its ability to inform other schools that have a greater population of students qualifying for speech/language services for the purpose of addressing a significant language-processing condition. The speech/language pathologist was not interviewed for his/her role within the process. In retrospect, this would have added an important perspective given the necessity for noting an information processing condition when labeling a student with a Specific Learning Disability. In an effort to provide a brief explanation of this decision, however, it has not been feasible for either of the speech/language pathologists who share this part-time position to regularly attend CST meetings during the time in which this study was carried out. Also, there are few students who are found to necessitate a full language assessment on a yearly basis at this school. Furthermore, a language processing condition is just one of several issues to be weighed in this study when determining eligibility of SLD special education services.

Another limitation to this study is that only two parents were interviewed whose children qualified for SLD special education services. Additional interviews with parents who participated in the decision-making process but whose children did not qualify for special education services would have highlighted another dimension for this study.

Finally, member checks were limited to the one individual/focus group interview, with the exception of the school psychologist. Opportunity for a brief follow-up interview would have allowed for additional clarification and insight into this decision-making process when determining eligibility of SLD special education services within the immersion setting.

Implications for Practice and Further Research

The aim of this case study was to reflect the understandings of the CST and comprehensive assessment practices to identify immersion language learners with learning difficulties.

Compare and contrast with other immersion programs

It would be of interest to compare and contrast these results with other recommended procedures and practices from language immersion programs to help modify this case study's current school processes. How does our approach differ from other immersion programs in the Midwest? Although the ten phases this school follows

seems to be meeting the needs of its student population, how could the process be improved upon given the gaps in the process discussed earlier?

Refining the process

It is hoped that all immersion schools have Child Study Teams, but the reality may not be so; therein lies the difficulty of accurately diagnosing second language learners, or rather foreign language learners in the immersion context, with learning disabilities. Even if such teams are in place, are there established procedures and assessment tools to guide them and will there be consistent follow-through on the part of the staff? It can only be hoped that school districts will make this process a priority with each building staff and provide the necessary training and time for teachers to become effective problem solvers in their efforts to advocate for and instruct second language learners appropriately. In the case of this school's CST, recommending appropriate instructional strategies, managing time constraints and delegating responsibilities among all CST members were areas of particular concern.

To address these concerns the school principal and social worker proposed changes to the current forms being used in this process. The prereferral form could have an action plan statement that would record who will do what and when. Even though notes are taken on these points, having it be on the form itself would allow for it to be copied to the teacher so he/she could visually see what has been outlined. This may help focus this part of our discussion. When a student is monitored at a further date,

the teacher would bring this form back to the CST to facilitate the dialogue about how the plans have worked. Additionally, to bring forth more participation from all CST members, the bi-monthly meeting agenda could note if the student concerns were academic or behavioral/social. There could also be a space where team members could jot down ideas if they are familiar with the student or type of concern. With a built in, intentional question for team members to respond to, CST members may come to the table a little more prepared and contribute more meaningfully to the dialogue. See Appendix L for revised versions of these referral forms.

Building a better knowledge base for prereferral interventions and ways to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of their more diverse learners is a common area of concern, as felt by this case study's CST members. Even more specificity is essential. In general, assessors and immersion educators will benefit the children they work with if they understand the characteristics of second language acquisition, such as transfer, interference, cognition and metacognition, and how these characteristics affect the learning process for learning disabled students (Demers, 1997). Further dialogue in this setting would reveal if there is a need for such additional training among the staff.

Picking up where we left off

Another area for further study would be to continue where this study ends. A different case study could focus on those students who have qualified for SLD special

education services and continue in the immersion program. This could document the on-going dialogue that occurs with teachers and families over several years. What do parents perceive as the stumbling blocks and benefits of their child acquiring a second language in an immersion setting at the elementary level? How many of our special education students continue with the program through fifth grade? Another source of beneficial information for inquiring special education parents would be a study that shows the rate and amount of progress learning disabled students make with their English skills from year to year. District or state standardized tests could be the venue for these data.

About those who transfer

At what grade level do most transfers to an English program occur? What has experience shown as to the best time to make a transfer to an English setting? How have students done once they have left the immersion program? Has the need for their special education services continued or were their difficulties possibly more of a result of the immersion setting? Within this case study, it was explained why the role of the speech/language pathologist has minimal involvement with the school's CST and SLD comprehensive assessment practices. Of interest, however, is that those few students whose assessed receptive and /or expressive language abilities qualify them for special education services with the speech/language pathologist have often been cases in which a transfer has ultimately occurred. Not in all cases, but generally

speaking, these students have struggled the most in the second language environment. Continued research and staff training regarding the needs and potentials of these students in the immersion setting seems appropriate.

Beyond elementary school and the SLD label

Of all the students that qualify for special education services, how many continue on to the extended French immersion program in the middle school? What are their frustrations and successes? Continuing with this theme, more study could be completed addressing the decision-making process in the immersion setting for students who are in need of emotional/behavioral, other health disability, and as just suggested, speech/language special education services. The questions that the interviewees of this case study grappled with would most certainly surface again, but be targeted at a different categorical label.

Here again are some examples of questions that have initially made it difficult to discern the child's greatest area of need. One teacher in this study commented on the variance in the students' ability to speak the French language. Why do some students in the intermediate grades continue to struggle with the simplest of grammatical phrases? Why do some refuse to speak the language at all? As one teacher asked, "Why can't he organize all of the different structures and words coming at him and put that in an organized fashion in his head?" So we surmise that something is interfering in their ability to communicate, but what? Is it the result of anxiety, the

French language, other emotional factors, or language processing weaknesses?

Another case in point is of a child fidgeting in class for an ongoing period of time and this behavior is interfering with their academic progress – it may well be because she does not understand what is going on. Why doesn't she understand? Is this an issue of inattention, immaturity, anxiety, the French language, and/or weak receptive language skills? The same questions we raise about a child with a possible learning disability arise in the midst of other student referrals – many of whom are eventually assessed and determined eligible for special education services under a different categorical label.

When we consider all the variables that help us determine the necessity of a comprehensive assessment or eligibility of special education services, we consider the student in the immersion context, the rigor of the program and of our district, and the expectations that have been placed on kids. Further study in any one of the aforementioned areas would help immersion school teams wade through the decision-making process with more confidence and accuracy, and as a result, better meet the unique needs of its dual language learners.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: SLD Eligibility Criteria

Appendix B: Possible Factors Influencing Student Performance in French Immersion

Appendix C: Interview Format

Appendix D: Pre-referral form

Appendix E: Strategies for Diverse Learners in the Foreign Language Classroom

Appendix F: Adaptations for Students (Information Processing: Specially Designed
Instruction & Adaptations)

Appendix G: Teacher Questionnaire

Appendix H: Home/Family Questionnaire (Information Processing: Assessment)

Appendix I: Teacher Questionnaire (Information Processing: Assessment)

Appendix J: Analysis of Student Performance (Information Processing: Assessment)

Appendix K: Instructions for Using the Student Oral Language Observation Matrix
(SOLOM) and student form

Appendix L: Child Study Team Information Forms (referring teacher, specialist and
follow-up)

Appendix M: Parent Letter for Consent

Appendix N: CST Letter for Consent

Appendix O: Letters of Permission

APPENDIX C: Interview Format

Description of Participant:

(principal, psychologist, three general education teachers, social worker, nurse,
FOL/Success Center coordinator, parents)

Introduction remarks:

I would like to dialogue with you about your perceptions regarding the process we
use at our school to determine whether or not a child should qualify for SLD special
education services. I am working towards completion of my MA in ESL at Hamline

University. I'm gathering data from this interview and several others in efforts to address the decision-making process we utilize in our immersion environment.

Please keep in mind our unique environment as an immersion school when you share your feedback with me. This is the focus of this case study project. This research is in response to a lack of information from schools such as ours regarding this type of decision-making process. My hope is to thoroughly document what we do here, while keeping in mind what immersion, foreign language and ELL research says about children learning in a dual language environment.

The following questions were asked of each school staff interviewee at the beginning of the interview.

- ❖ What is your position at this immersion school?
- ❖ How long have you filled this position?
- ❖ What other working experience do you have in the field of education?
- ❖ What is your age and ethnic background?
- ❖ Briefly describe any second language experience you have, as well as experience with immersion education.
- ❖ How long have you been a member of this school's CST?
- ❖ Have you been involved with similar committees in previous jobs? If so, briefly describe.

The following questions were asked of both focus groups and the psychologist in an attempt to clarify and interpret together these school processes.

- ❖ Think back on our experiences as members of the CST. Please describe the decision-making process that is followed for a child who is referred to CST for academic/learning concerns.
- ❖ How would you describe the CST's purpose in the school as a known support system for teachers and parents?
- ❖ What are the benefits of this current process?

- ❖ What are the challenges to this process?
- ❖ In the current position you hold within this school, is there additional information that could be included in the CST process that would be helpful to you?
- ❖ Elaborate on your perspective in your current role as a CST member about the most challenging issues regarding the determination of needs of an academically at-risk student in a second language immersion setting.
- ❖ If applicable, as a member of the multidisciplinary team who determines appropriate special education services for children in an immersion setting, what are your greatest concerns regarding this decision-making process?

Additional questions asked of the school psychologist.

- ❖ What information has been helpful in guiding the school's CST process?
- ❖ As an evaluator in a formal assessment, how do you perceive balancing multiple roles – parent/teacher/student - throughout this process given the immersion setting?
- ❖ As the member of the multidisciplinary team who administers the cognitive ability tests, what do you keep in mind as you score and interpret the results and as you share these data with other team members, given the fact that the child has been educated in an immersion school?

- ❖ Please brainstorm with me the decision-making process you perceive to be followed that begins with a referral to CST and ends with a decision to provide special education services.
- ❖ What do you find to be the most challenging aspect of your role as psychologist in the immersion setting?
- ❖ What commonalities do you find among the students who have qualified for SLD services? How do these commonalities influence your decision making when determining eligibility for special education services with current students?

Questions asked of the Foundations of Learning/Success Center lead teacher.

- ❖ Please outline the steps the district takes in deciding whether or not a child qualifies for FOL services.
- ❖ Are there any modifications to this process given the immersion setting? What makes our FOL services different from a non-immersion elementary school?
- ❖ How do you perceive your role as FOL lead teacher aligning with the CST process in this school?
- ❖ Describe for me your experience with CST based on a student who has been referred to this team for academic/learning concerns.
- ❖ Would you like to see any changes?

- ❖ What do you think is working well in regards to your opportunity for input in the CST process?

Questions asked of parents.

- ❖ What is your ethnic/cultural background?
- ❖ Why did you choose an immersion school setting for your child?
- ❖ Explain, if any, your experience with the French language, or learning a second language. Did these experiences lead you to our school? Why?
- ❖ How long has your child been a student at our school?
- ❖ Is there any other exposure you had with this program or another immersion school? (i.e., other children, relatives or friends that have been taught in an immersion program)
- ❖ Based on your experience as a parent of a child receiving SLD special education services, what is your perception regarding the process used by the school's CST in determining the need for a special education assessment in an immersion setting?
- ❖ Describe for me your experience with our school's CST process.
- ❖ Please describe your feelings about this process and the CST's determination.
- ❖ In the process of determining the nature of the support services needed for your child, was removing your child from the immersion school considered an option? Why or why not?

- ❖ As a member of the multidisciplinary team who determines appropriate special education services for your child in an immersion setting, what are your greatest concerns regarding this decision-making process? How were they addressed?
- ❖ How did you feel about the information you received regarding the differences of educating a special education student in an immersion versus a non-immersion program?

APPENDIX F: Adaptations for Students

Storage

- provide frequent review/repetitions
- provide cumulative reviews
- provide redirections
- provide supplementary instruction
- provide prompting with clues/hints
- connect new information to prior knowledge
- present two to three multiple choices
- provide framework
- use multidisciplinary presentations
- allow reading of texts aloud
- allow verbalizations

Organization

- provide graphic organizers
- post assignments
- write concise clear directions
- ask probing questions
- set daily routine
- color code folders/overhead/print
- organizational systems
- provide check-offs for activities
- provide time frame for long term assignments with interim dates
- post materials list
- use small, sequential steps
- write clearly
- reduce visual distractions
- use study guides
- modify format
- use advance organizers
- provide abundant models, samples

Acquisition

- provide parallel curricula/text
- use set routines
- differentiate assignments for pupils
- provide intermittent tutoring
- provide both oral and written directions
- show a model of expected end product
- allow a finger counting strategy
- provide copy of lecture notes
- use visualization with verbalizations
- label object
- allow use of calculator/math grid in instruction/testing
- provide frequent breaks in instruction
- use frequent modeling
- provide print outline of videos
- ask focused questions
- highlight texts/study guides
- allow a designated notetaker
- use multi modality materials
- foster visual imagery
- use large print
- talk through letter formation
- use cooperative learning
- allow computer assisted reading, math, language

Retrieval

- allow use of calculator/math grid
- allow double time for testing
- provide repetition
- use oral interviews
- alert pupil to change in math operations
- write alternative tests for easy retrieval
- provide word banks with tests
- allow use of scribe
- use visual and motor with oral presentations
- provide oral tests
- provide extended time for response
- give cues
- provide time frames for assignments
- have pupil repeat directions
- ask graduated questions
- eliminate timed tests
- decrease type/amount of homework

Expression

- allow pupil to write on test
- allow pupil to tape record answers
- allow open book tests
- double space tests
- use oral interviews
- provide story element training
- coach letter formation
- use collaborative practice
- color base on writing paper
- decrease amount/type of homework
- eliminate bubble answer sheets
- allow use of calculator
- allow use of notes/cards
- review correct answers
- align test responses vertically
- emphasize written legibility
- allow skipping every other line
- accept computer generated projects
- allow a scribe to write for a pupil
- shorten assignments based on key concepts
- allow special pens/paper/pencils for written work

Manipulation

- review correct answers (feedback)
- individualized instruction
- group pupils by cross-ability
- teach summarizing by providing key points
- use K-W-L strategy
- correct homework together
- feedback on homework
- guided practice
- use 4MAT philosophy
- help form mental pictures
- use problem integration
- define length of desired response (3-5 sentences)

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