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# Challenges in Classifying Students with Emotional Disturbance: Perspectives of Appraisal Professionals

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## ABSTRACT

*This qualitative study examines the perspectives and assumptions of the appraisal professionals who are involved in and responsible for the evaluation of students with behavioral concerns. Appraisal professionals employed in two school districts participated in this study. Interviews were analyzed according to emergent themes that suggested two major assumptions of the participants. The first assumption involved the relationship between students' social location and the condition known as Emotional Disturbance. The second assumption focused on systemic or institutional issues of classification. Implications for appraisal professionals and limitations are also discussed.*

## INTRODUCTION

The educational label or classification of Emotional Disturbance (ED) is often assigned to students who exhibit behaviors that significantly deviate from the norm of the school population. Many researchers claim that the language found in the ED definition (explicated in detail below) leaves substantial room for professional judgment (Erford, Balcom, & Moore-Thomas, 2007; Gresham, 2007; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Kauffman, Mock, & Simpson, 2007). This leaves the ED classification open to the interpretations, perspectives and inclinations of the professionals making these decisions. Furthermore, these interpretations, perspectives and inclinations are mediated by such factors as the students' social location (e.g. race, culture, gender, etc.). For example, in 2006, while African Americans comprised roughly 15% of students aged 6-21 in the United States, they represented nearly 29% of those identified as ED. Conversely, European Americans made up 61% of the general student population aged 6-21, but only 57% of those identified as ED (Data Accountability Center, 2006). This means that African Americans were two times more likely to be classified as ED than their European American counterparts.

Such disparities are troubling since an ED classification not only affects students' short- and long-range educational programming, but is also associated with high rates of absenteeism, high dropout rates, poor academic functioning, poor job performances (Bradley, Doolittle, & Bartolotta, 2008; Scanlon & Mellard, 2002; Wagner, Cameto, & Newman, 2003), as well as involvement in the juvenile justice system (Zabel & Nigro, 1999).

In view of the fact that this classification can have such dire consequences, the process used by professionals to classify a student with the label of "Emotional Disturbance" warrants careful examination. Furthermore, Skrtic (1991) exhorts professionals to critically examine the assumptions that undergird both their own and institutional practices. This exploratory study illuminates the perspectives and underlying assumptions of Louisiana Pupil Appraisal Professionals (i.e., educational diagnosticians, certified school psychologists, and qualified school social workers) as they engage in the complicated process of identifying students with emotional disturbance, from the pre-referral stage to eligibility determination.

#### DEFINITION OF AND IDENTIFICATION PROCESS FOR EMOTIONAL DISTURBANCE

The definition of Emotional Disturbance found in the federal regulations of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* (U.S. Department of Education, 2004) reads as follows:

...a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance:

- (A) An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.
- (B) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.
- (C) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.
- (D) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.
- (E) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

The Louisiana Department of Education Pupil Appraisal Handbook (2000) mirrors the definition of the federal regulations for Emotional

Disturbance and specifies the procedural criteria to qualify a student for the classification of Emotional Disturbance. Typically, the process begins with a referral to the School Building Level Committee (SBLC), a decision-making committee minimally comprised of a parent, administrator, and teacher, who first offer recommendations to the classroom teacher. After two to six weeks, the committee reconvenes to discuss the results of the recommendations. They then make further proposals, such as additional interventions or an individual evaluation for special education eligibility. If the committee recommends an individual evaluation, the appointment of an Evaluation Coordinator (School Psychologist, Educational Diagnostician, or School Social Worker) takes place. The Evaluation Coordinator is responsible for serving as an assessor, ensuring that team members complete specific assessment components, and orchestrating the participation of parent(s) and multidisciplinary team members at the final Eligibility Determination meeting.

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RELEVANT LITERATURE

Evidence in the literature reveals numerous factors that Pupil Appraisal (PA) Professionals must navigate during the course of the identification process when deliberating whether or not to label a student with ED. In addition to the student behavior and social location (namely, race) examples given previously, gender has also been shown to be a factor PA professionals must navigate as well as teachers, parents, administrators, ED stigma and subsequent treatment of ED classified students and, most relevant to this study, the professionals' own philosophical perspective.

Research has shown that gender may affect the decision-making process of PA Professionals. The majority of students classified with ED are male (Coutinho, Oswald, Best, & Forness, 2002; Harry & Klingner, 2006). Some PA Professionals have difficulty classifying females with ED, particularly those who appear withdrawn (Zahn-Waxler, 1993), as they worry about placing them in classes with aggressive males.

Numerous factors related to the school environment such as teachers, parents and administrators also influence decisions made in the identification process. At the forefront of the process is the student's teacher who, according to regulations, has a responsibility to refer a student suspected of having exceptionality (Louisiana Department of Education, 2000). Donovan & Cross (2002) describe two principles that guide teacher referrals: relativity (i.e., how different is the student's behavior from the other students in the class) and tolerance (i.e., what is the threshold of the particular teacher's level of tolerance). However, there are some teachers who choose not to refer because of their internal motivation to find ways to work with the student (Schwartz, Wolfe, & Cassar, 1997). Other teachers do not hesitate to refer. They hope the student will

get needed help in a specialized program, or they simply want the student out of their classrooms (Murray & Myers, 1998). Thus, PA Professionals recognize that only those students who are referred become eligible for this classification and that those who are not referred elude this identification process and remain in the general education setting.

Parents, who are “crucial to all meetings in which decisions are being made,” also experience ambivalence (Louisiana Department of Education, 2000, p. 9). Some parents choose to begin the referral process themselves. Often times, these parents may feel unable to cope with their child’s behavior problems and seek help (Kline, Simpson, Blesz, Myles & Carter, 2001). Conversely, some parents adamantly oppose a referral for special education services because of the stigma associated with a label (Crowell, 1993), or because they see the ED label as a reflection on their parenting skills (Mickelson, 2000). Once again, PA Professionals recognize the obvious; a referral must take place in order for the student to be identified and that not all students with similar behavior problems even begin the referral process.

Administrators, a negative ED stigma and subsequent treatment of ED diagnosed students also enter into the classification equation. Although there are professionals who argue that there are positive aspects of ED labels such as individualized programming, counseling, and accommodations designed to enhance academic performance in classrooms (Kauffman, 1999), educators and lay people alike often view the actual classification of Emotional Disturbance as negative (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Some general and special education teachers treat students with these labels differently (Stinnett, Bull, Koonce, & Aldridge, 1999). Other PA professionals are concerned that teachers in these ED programs too often lack the certifications or specialized training to manage such populations (Smith, 1997). Additionally, they note that administrators often place students in more restrictive settings such as self-contained classrooms or special schools (Lane, Wehby, Little, & Cooley, 2005) without the necessary related services such as school counseling (LaPoint, 2000).

The philosophical orientation of the PA Professional provides another dimension in the process of identification. Skrtic (1991) admonishes educators to critically analyze their practices, reveal underlying assumptions, and consider how these beliefs contribute to the existing problems in education. This reflective process can be accomplished by a method he refers to as critical examination. This requires the individual “to look behind special education, as a way to question, and thus bring a sense of crisis to, the unquestioned assumptions that ground the professional practices and discourses of the field of special education,” (Skrtic, 1991, p. 28).

Skrtic uses three dominant orientations to deconstruct or analyze special education: objectivism, subjectivism, and critical pragmatism. He describes an objectivist as one who sees reality as definable, objective, and having universal characteristics. The methods used to investigate reality are those associated

with empirical science (e.g., data, neutral observers, quantifiable descriptors). Conversely, the subjective tradition views reality as subjective and created through an individual's interaction with the environment. Knowledge of reality, according to this tradition, continually evolves and is best understood from the perspective of a person in a particular place in time. Methods of investigation used in the subjective realm are often qualitative in nature and seek to describe ways people construct their reality (Ferguson & Ferguson, 1995). The third tradition according to Skrtic (1991) is critical pragmatism. This tradition denies the existence of an objective reality. Rather, reality is based on the values of the powerful and influential members of society. Individuals' realities are limited by their conditioning and history. Knowledge of reality is gained by examining the myths, values, behavior and language learned by mass culture (Shor & Freire, 1987) and by continually questioning the economic and social forces that keep these existing values, practices, or institutions in place (Skrtic, 1991). Methods such as critical reflection (i.e., an analysis of professional practices) and action research (i.e., on-going research intended to shape practice) are methods used to uncover the forces in society that influence values, practices, and institutions.

Coleman, Sanders, and Cross (1997) use similar traditions but different terms (i.e., empirical-analytical, interpretive, transformative) to study the "modes of inquiry" and tacit assumptions of PA Professionals when identifying students with an exceptionality. PA Professionals from an empirical-analytic mode claim that an exceptionality is definable and measurable and believe standardized instruments can be used to identify these students. This perspective emphasizes accuracy in the identification process and, as a result, vigilance in the development of better instruments to reduce errors.

PA Professionals who operate from the interpretative mode of inquiry understand that practices, including evaluations, are not static and can vary according to change in circumstances and/or participants (e.g., measurement is determined by local school district). Methods used to identify students are not limited to formal measurements and may include portfolios, observations, and informal tests.

The third mode of inquiry presented by Coleman et al. (1997) is termed transformative. Knowledge, according to this view, is "embedded in a cultural matrix of values" (p. 107). That is, our way of knowing and investigating is wrapped up in power relationships that involve struggles over such things as gender, race, social class and culture. The influential individuals in society determine the parameters of what is acceptable, and they marginalize those who fall outside the dominant way of thinking. Therefore, under a transformative paradigm, standardized tests would not be appropriate in an evaluation process since the nature of standardization depends on characteristics that have been valued by the dominant society and reinforced over time.

The purpose of this exploratory investigation focuses on the perspectives

and ensuing philosophical assumptions of PA Professionals involved in the identification process for students with ED. More specifically, it concentrates on the critical pragmatic theory posited by Skrtic (1991) and the transformative mode of inquiry described by Coleman et al. (1997). Both perspectives require careful examination of the struggles involved in such areas as gender, race, social class, and culture. This work examines such struggles as it probes the perspectives and underlying assumptions of PA Professionals during the identification process for students with behavioral problems.

## METHOD

### *Site*

The basis of site selection for this study was convenience due to proximity and the interest of district administrators. Two school districts in Louisiana comprised the pool from which the sample was drawn, an urban district and a rural district. The urban school district approximated 60,000 students and 70 PA Professionals and the rural 10,000 students and 25 PA Professionals (Louisiana Department of Education, 2001).

### *Participants*

Participant selection, purposeful in nature, involved specific PA Professionals: school psychologists, educational diagnosticians, and social workers. Recruiting efforts involved a deliberate attempt at an equal distribution (4 professionals) from each of these PA disciplines for a total of 12 PA professionals. Since, the study involved decisions made at both the pre-referral meeting of the SBLC and the Eligibility Determination meeting (described on page 3), targeted participants involved those who actively participated at both of these key decision points.

Volunteers were solicited from both school districts. Since the urban district had nearly three times as many professionals as the rural district, this same ratio was preserved in the sample. Therefore, three specialists from each profession (school psychologist, educational diagnostician, and social worker) were included from the urban district whereas only one person from each of the three disciplines represented the rural school district.

### *Interviews*

Interviews offered the possibility of generating the tacit knowledge of PA Professionals grappling with the complexities of classifying students with emotional disturbance (Borlund, 1990). Weiss (1994) suggests that interviews are an effective method to gain the perspectives of participants on their own

terms. The interviews for this study provided an opportunity to gain a more detailed view of the complexities of the process as well as a more in-depth examination of the perspectives of the PA Professionals than would have been possible with a quantitative study. Interviews provided the researcher with the opportunity to probe for richer descriptions, explain queries confusing to the informant, and return to the participants for clarification and/or additional information.

The principal investigator used a semi-structured interview format (Rubin & Rubin, 1995), and conducted all interviews of appraisal professionals. The interview questions (see Appendix A) focused on opinions of issues surrounding referrals and evaluations within the identification process. Interviews lasted between approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Following each interview, participants received summaries of their interview for verification. Additionally, ten of the professionals agreed to participate in follow-up interviews for further clarification and elaboration.

### *Data Analysis*

According to Miles & Huberman (1994), data analysis involves data reduction, data displays, and conclusion drawing. The data reduction phase revolved around analyzing verbatim transcriptions and identifying meaningful units or codes found in the words and actions of the participants in the study as they related to the research question. Later, an examination of these passages or data chunks occurred in order to determine even more distinct patterns/themes as a base for larger categories of meaning. The principal investigator for this study conducted the analysis of the data. Two educational researchers, skilled in qualitative methodology, assisted in the visual analysis of data and the identification of patterns/themes that emerged during the first interview, the eighth interview, and finally at the completion of the data analysis.

A visual display of the data developed according to three broad themes: student, environment, and system. Furthermore, a division for each theme evolved into the two key points of decision: SBLC and Eligibility Determination. Passages from transcripts were cut and pasted on charts under each of these key decision points and tagged according to the specific discipline headings: educational diagnostician, school psychologist, and social worker. This visual display assisted in drawing conclusions and identifying the underlying assumptions suggested by participants' comments.

Janesick (1998) emphasizes the importance of data triangulation. He suggests that triangulation can be accomplished using a variety of data sources, that is, multiple participants with varying points of view. This study used this strategy of triangulation as the 12 participants confirmed and/or contradicted what others said.



## RESULTS

Interviews with PA professionals about the process of classification of ED revealed two broad areas that PA professionals grapple with. First, PA professionals struggle with and make assumptions about how ED classification relates to the social location of the student. For example, they considered how economic parameters, gender, race, and community culture relates to an ED classification. Second, PA professionals struggle with systemic or institutional issues of classification. For instance, some PA professionals entertained the idea that the special education system may actually be doing a disservice to students.

### *ED and Social Location*

Several PA Professionals made assumptions or reflected on the relationship between socioeconomic class and ED. One respondent stated, “Poor folks are just not prepared to help the child.” P1<sup>1</sup> presented a different lens by which to examine socioeconomic factors related to the identification process:

The one thing that you see is poverty. If people have money, their kids don’t go to public schools except for [Magnet Schools]. Children of parents who work two or three jobs do not receive a lot of supervision and do not have access to things wealthier children might have. However, students with serious behavior problems in Magnet Schools have never been classified because they have never been referred.

When asked why this was the case, P1 replied that no student at that Magnet School would ever be considered for ED. Rather, as P1 elaborates, the teacher would just tolerate the student or:

... the parent would get private therapy. It is socioeconomic. People who have money do not put their kids in public schools. If they need services, they are able to go to a private psychiatrist and do not become part of the public system...and in a mental health center, those files are kept away from other

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<sup>1</sup>To give the reader some sense of who is speaking, codes and numbers are assigned according to professions and the order in which they were interviewed. For example, “P” represents school psychologists; “E” represents educational diagnosticians, and “S” represents social workers. And P1 represents the first school psychologist interviewed; P2 the second school psychologist, and so on.

people...an upper middle class [family]..would never put up with the questions that we ask. They wouldn't answer you or they'd tell you, "It's just none of your business." Everything is kept within the family unit. Whereas, with the students we deal with, the parents don't have any choice. Either you come to SBLC and deal with the situation or else. There is no way middle class parents would sit there and answer questions. They'd just call their lawyer.

This psychologist implied that there is a perception that confidential information in the public schools is not always kept confidential. When asked if the evaluation would stop at that point P1 replied: "It wouldn't have started to begin with. In upper-middle-class schools it would not happen. [Parents in public school] are used to being asked a lot of questions about their private life."

P1 revealed a number of assumptions regarding socioeconomic class. First, financially-able families send their children to private or magnet schools. Second, when schools complain about students' behaviors, families in these schools send them for private therapy. And finally, parents who enjoy a more powerful and influential status enjoy more privacy. Conversely, parents of children in public school feel pressured into sharing personal information and are not always afforded privacy.

Four PA Professionals acknowledged the role gender played in the identification process. P2 linked the way society socialized children and the identification of ED:

Gender differences in our society are just learned. Boys are pushed to be more aggressive than girls. And aggression is what gets kids in ED classes. It's what draws people's attention: "You're hitting, Johnny" as opposed to Suzie's just sitting in the corner quiet, not saying anything. She may be severely depressed, but she's not drawing attention to herself.

S2 talked about the experiential evidence indicating the higher incidence of boys identified with Emotional Disturbance as compared to girls in her particular school district. She adamantly stated her concern regarding educators who often view boys' behavior as "bad" instead of simply developmentally appropriate for youngsters at certain ages. She emphasized that, "Boys are viewed as problems more so than girls. I think boys' behavior is different than girls, not worse."

And finally, two respondents addressed another dimension of gender in the identification process: the possibility of a problem with the relationship

between the female teacher and male student. E2 discussed possible conflicts in these gender relationships and reported, "The teachers referring are usually female... There may be problems with boys relating to their female teacher and vice versa." E3 suggested that female teachers relate better to girls because they share certain "gendered" characteristics, "Most teachers are female and might relate better to children who are female."

One respondent in particular, P4, presented a conscious awareness of the disparity that exists when cultures collide, that is, when behaviors acceptable and even adaptable in a student's community setting conflict with those in the school setting. She described a dilemma that she often faced:

It is difficult, because what is acceptable behavior in the home and neighborhood is definitely not acceptable here. Students have to learn that different situations have different behavioral expectations. You can curse or fight where it is a matter of survival. If they didn't mouth off or were not bullies to some respect, they might get eaten alive in their home environment. But when they bring those behaviors here [to school], it is not acceptable.... I think that a lot of behavioral problems are learned. Kids learn to mouth off and demonstrate inappropriate behaviors. They have trouble changing the expectations from home to school to community. So whenever I have an ED kid these days, I am not quick to make judgments.

According to P4, the implicit values of the home/community culture become embedded in the youngster. However, this only presents a problem if the values of the home/community culture conflict with the values of the school culture in which the individual inevitably operates.

One respondent, S3, expressed an opinion regarding how issues of race affect the identification process. She admitted that she was still in the early stages of wrestling with the issue that perception of performance may be affected by race:

It seemed to me the timing for special ed. and the timing for integration...there seemed to be some correlation there. I really haven't done the research, but ...remembering what school was like for me... when black kids were put in white schools they were considered unable to perform. They were told they couldn't perform. This is what I'm feeling...what I'm seeing, and sharing with other people.

### *ED and the System*

Participants provided a variety of standard responses to the question, “What do you see as your role as a PA Professional?” Their answers varied: “evaluating children, determining if they’re in need of special education services”; “to help determine a disability”; “to move a child who is not able to perform in a regular setting, and to figure out why, and see what assistance can be provided”; “to try to weed out those who may look like they need it but really don’t”; “to help this student who needs help, but has no other avenues”; and to “put kids in special ed but also keep them out.” Some respondents had deeper reflections on this matter. For example, S3 admitted she questioned her role in perpetuating a faulty system:

You know, statewide, nationwide, we’re not doing a good job for our children with special needs... My role when I came in, I thought, was going to be helping. Now, I’m not sure if I’m not just contributing to the problem...the child is not going to get his needs met...that’s where I am in terms of what am I doing here. Am I helping or am I hurting? That’s my own professional dilemma.

S3 scrutinized her role relative to the larger special education system.

PA professionals noted that the priorities of administrators directly affect the way a system operates. They noted that behavior problems might be prevented if administrators allocated sufficient funds to reduce class size and provided needed resources for teachers and students. Five PA Professionals in particular discussed central office administrators’ role in teacher frustration, low tolerance for student differences, and eventual referral of students for special education services. S3 sided with the teachers, “I really don’t fault the [general education] teachers. The class sizes are large, and they’ve got three or four kids who are awfully difficult to manage.” E1 empathized with a teacher frustrated by a student with behavior problems by echoing her frustration, “I’ve got 30 kids....” P2 pointed out:

Teachers have a number of students they are dealing with, without enough support. I don’t blame them for looking at it like, “I have to get this student out of here” instead of trying to redirect the behavior--because teachers don’t have the resources they need to do that. That’s why we get the numbers of students that we get for behavioral concerns through SBLC.

S1 cited the need for resources that might prevent behavior problems from escalating:

We can say this is what needs to be done, but the resources are not there to help us accomplish these goals. The priorities are skewed...There's just not enough resources to provide the therapy to help a child work through problems.

E4 articulated a reason for the variations in percentages of students identified with Emotional Disturbance among School Parishes (Districts) within the state. According to her, it was because "...the resources in some places are lacking. Because we know different school parishes, and even schools, have different resources."

These PA Professionals discussed how the priorities of administrators shape the day-to-day operations in schools and the subsequent consequences for teachers and students. They acknowledge power relationships where the priorities and values of an influential group dominate. They believe that people who hold values contrary to the dominant group become ostracized or marginalized.

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

I can say this from experience... If you put three of us [psychologists] together, you will probably get three different opinions or three different perceptions about the degree of the problem. There are kids I know that I didn't qualify that another psychologist would have...It depends on the combination of the team and the evidence that is gathered.

P3 made the assumption that everyone knew of the subjectivity involved in both the diagnostic process used by psychiatrists and the identification process used by pupil appraisal:

If you look at that [*The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV*] it's sometimes ambiguous. It's all up to interpretation. If you look at a psychiatric evaluation, you can look at five different ones of the same kid, and you're going to come up with five different pictures because the evaluator is different. The kid's the same, but who[ever] sees him is going to write up a different report. Now there

might be some commonality, but we're dealing with something we can't measure. We're dealing with a kid's mind and emotions and everything that makes up that kid, and you can't measure that stuff. You can't take it out and look at it, tweak it, and put it back in. So, you know it's subjective.

E3 discussed the difficulties created by an identification process that uses more subjective measures (e.g., rating scales, interviews):

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

Two PA Professionals discussed how biases influence the course of the identification and placement processes. S4 discussed how a person's position on inclusion impacts decisions:

Are they looking just to pull children into special ed. because they think that is the best way to serve them? Or do they feel they could be better maintained in a regular education class as much as possible?

S3 reflected on her own inclinations:

We have our own biases, no matter how objective you try to be. And sometimes it's hard to separate the biases in the decisions you make. I remember when I was first interviewed, and I was asked the question, "How would you handle the situation if ...you looked at the child in one way, and your team members wanted to go another way? What would you do in that situation?" My immediate response was that I couldn't even imagine that situation because I would think if you're looking at the facts, the preponderance of the data...that's the way you make your decisions. [Now] It's difficult to just look at the facts because you do have to deal with yourself, and hopefully, you're aware when your biases are interfering with

making a decision that's in the best interest of the child.

These five PA Professionals revealed the impact of personal opinions, biases, and assumptions on the identification process. However, PA Professionals also realized that decisions are made as a team, and, therefore, those relationships needed to be examined as well.

The Transformative Perspective involves uncovering the power relationships that exist in society, and, for the purposes of this study, in the educational system. Participants provided evidence that PA Professionals ponder the power relationships involved in the process of assigning the label of Emotional Disturbance to students. Some PA Professionals recognized the role society played in this process, and they pointed to issues related to economics, gender, and culture. Other participants recognized the relationship between the identification of students and the perspectives and assumptions of individuals within the special education system.

## DISCUSSION

The Transformative Perspective serves as a critique of the status quo. Those who adopt this perspective see society as flawed and aim to transform it in some way. For them reality is not objective but rather:

“...knowledge of the world is embedded in a cultural matrix of values. All inquiry and human behavior is locked into a web of power relationships grounded in struggles around gender, race, social class, and other culturally and economically determined parameters.”  
(Coleman et. al., 1997, p.107)

Therefore, the first step toward the transformation of a social system is an analysis of the power relationships within that system.

P1 discussed specific social class influences with respect to the selection of schools, the likelihood of exposure to a special education identification system, and the ways students and parents are treated. This participant emphasized that people with privilege are able use their resources to keep their children out of the system; whereas, parents with less-privilege are often undermined by the system, perceived as lacking time, resources and/or the ability to advocate for their child. As a result, these children often received the label of Emotional Disturbance.

PA Professionals, P1, E2, E3, and S2 spoke about how society socialized boys and girls differently. According to these participants, females in authority, often socialized to value compliance, might have less tolerance for assertive and aggressive students, who are, for the most part, male. Consequently, they

believe that boys are more often referred and identified with the classification of Emotional Disturbance.

Two PA Professionals uncovered clashes that exist when cultures collide. P4 recognized the mismatch that often exists between the school and community cultures: acceptable behavior in the community may be vastly different than acceptable behaviors at school. S3 questioned whether an increase in the special education population occurred following racial integration of schools.

PA Professionals also revealed a power relationship involving “economically determined parameters,” both within and outside the school system. According to P2, E4, and S3, administrators, who receive limited funding from federal, state and local governments, do not ascribe priority importance to strategies that could reduce behavior problems such as class size reduction, counseling programs, and sufficient resources and support for teachers.

### *Role as a PA Professional*

All 12 of the PA Professionals delineated their roles as appraisal specialists. They spoke mainly of their job responsibilities which included: evaluating students to determine disabilities, identifying those children in need of help or special education services, or culling out students who did not belong in special education. They took their responsibilities seriously and used terms and phrases such as “cautious,” “agonizes,” “take it seriously,” “don’t like to classify kids” and “a last resort.” S3 even questioned whether her role as an appraisal specialist did not, in fact, contribute to the perpetuation of an existing ineffective special education system.

Five PA Professionals, P3, P4, E3, S3, and S4 acknowledged the subjectivity inherent in the identification process. P3 recognized this subjectivity in the psychiatric profession as well. S3 stressed the importance of recognizing personal biases and how these biases influenced decisions made during the identification process at both SBLC and Eligibility Determination.

### *Impediments to critical analysis*

The PA Professionals did not elaborate on the process of critically examining their professional practices. A number of reasons exist as explanation. A first reason might be one suggested by Mercer (1973) who believed that professionals, immersed in the system, are often oblivious of the need for such an examination, “...because diagnosticians themselves have usually internalized the values of the core culture; they tend to accept these values as given...” (p. 14). Therefore, the possibility exists that PA Professionals simply incorporate these values as tacit assumptions.

Tomlinson (1996) provides a second possible reason that relates to professional indoctrination:



Each professional group has its own ‘culture of professionalism’ (Larson, 1977), which includes specialized training, its own esoteric language, and its own claims to expert practice. Each professional expects their judgments to be accepted and respected by the clients - children and parents – and by other professionals. An overarching ideology, or generalized belief, that unites all the professionals, is that whatever they do they will be acting ‘in the best interests of the child’. (p.177)

She suggests that professionals are supposed to be experts. Any indication of uncertainty in their practices may reflect poorly on them as professionals and their professional organization. Sarason (1990) posits a similar question: “Can we challenge what the system is doing for students with EBD if we primarily gain our professional identities as influential members within such a system?” (p.35).

### *Reflections on the Transformative Perspective*

PA Professionals do play a role in perpetuating the special education system because they conduct the evaluations designed to place students in special education instructional programs. How they see their role in this process is dependent on any number or combination of factors. It is essential that professionals examine their place in the existing “web of power relationships.” This critical self-examination will serve as a way of “remaking ourselves as we think, act, write, read, and talk more about ourselves and our practices and discourses” (Skrtic, 1991, p.29).

### LIMITATIONS

Several limitations are apparent for this exploratory study. The first limitation involves the area from which the participants were drawn. In one of the school districts, approximately 30% of students attended parochial and private schools (Louisiana Department of Education, 2006) as compared to 11% nationwide (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Nonpublic schools, as a whole, tend to serve students with disabilities less frequently than the public schools. This fact might assist in understanding comments made by some of the PA Professionals.

The authors are aware that only the perspectives of a small group of PA Professionals who volunteered are represented in this study. However, the intent of most qualitative studies is not generalizability. Rather it is to “...delineate the processes and social interactions that can result in various social phenomena.”

(Harry et al, 2009, p.167).

And finally, researching the actual evaluation documents might have served as an additional data source in the area of triangulation. These reports could be analyzed for specifics such as: aspects in the evaluation that influence the eligibility determination as well as descriptions of the student, classroom environment, home environment, and teacher – student interaction.

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