

Is School Psychology Training and Continuing Professional Development Sufficient to Support Specific Learning Disability Identification in Urban Schools?

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Abstract: This case study investigated urban school psychologists' experiences with graduate-level training and continuing professional development (CPD) experiences and how training impacts how urban school psychologists make sense of the specific learning disabilities (SLD) identification process. While school psychologists receive extensive training, this study found graduate-level training and CPD opportunities do not provide sufficient theoretical and practical learning opportunities for school psychologists to make sense of the SLD identification process. Seven school psychologists from six urban districts participated in this study and completed a brief demographic questionnaire and two semi-structured interviews. Data analysis revealed themes regarding knowledge and experiences that participants obtained through graduate-level training and CPD that they use during the SLD identification process as well as challenges related to their training and CPD engagement. These findings highlight the need for changes to graduate-level school psychology training programs, individual school psychology courses, and available CPD opportunities to improve the quality of available training related to special education law, SLD identification, multicultural competence, and practical experiences.

Keywords: school psychology training, school psychology professional development, urban education, specific learning disability, special education

School psychologists play an integral role in assessing special needs and recommending academic intervention for their students. Teachers and administrators rely on these professionals' expertise to implement special education policy and maintain compliance. In an urban environment where various systemic factors complicate the SLD identification process and compliance to special education law, school psychologists face the greatest challenges.

School psychologists primarily gain their knowledge from graduate training programs and continued professional development (CPD), and programs have made changes to accommodate evolving special education law and school psychology professional organization guidance; however, there are a number of areas in training that need improvement (Barrett et al., 2015; Decker et al., 2013; Lockwood et al., 2020; Maki & Adams, 2018; Newell & Looser, 2017). Without thorough and consistent training and guidance, school psychologists cannot serve their communities to the best of their abilities or make accurate and consistent SLD determinations (Boynton Hauerwas et al., 2013; Cottrell & Barrett, 2016; Maki et al., 2015) which has consequences for their students and team members. In this study, participant responses indicated that existing training fails to educate practitioners sufficiently in several crucial areas: special education law, specific learning disability (SLD) identification practices, cultural competence, and the practical application of theory. This article outlines why the identification of SLDs is so challenging for urban school psychologists and recommends several solutions to be implemented by

graduate-level training programs, by individual trainers of school psychologists, and by organizations providing CPD to school psychologists.

Specific Learning Disabilities and Multidisciplinary Teams

Students identified with SLD make up the largest group of students who receive special education services in the United States (Cottrell & Barrett, 2016). Approximately 14% of public school students receive special education services and around a third of those students qualified under SLD (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004 (IDEA, 2004), students eligible under the category of SLD have "a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations..." Multidisciplinary teams (MDTs), which are mandated by law to apply this definition, are comprised of parents and professionals with different areas of expertise. MDTs are used to increase the reliability of identification and ensure that all stakeholders can provide input (Cottrell & Barrett, 2016). With SLD occurring so frequently in relation to other disability categories, MDTs often must determine whether students qualify for special education services, whether they meet the definition of a student with SLD or another disability category, and how to address their unique needs. These critical decisions drive the services that students will receive for years to come.

While a collaborative team approach is used for SLD identification, school psychologists' decisions are given significant weight. They are positioned within this

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leadership role because they participate in graduate-level training to develop a unique skillset in a wide variety of areas related to both psychology and education (NASP, 2014). Their specialized training enables them most often to be the disability identification expert of the MDT (NASP, 2010). Therefore, school psychologists are key members in the evaluation and identification of SLD, and a significant amount of their professional time is spent applying policy to make special education decisions (Barrett et al., 2015).

Although school psychologists have extensive training and maintain the role of the SLD identification expert on their MDTs, they often have to rely on clinical reasoning and their own case conceptualization in the process of identifying students with SLD. Clinical reasoning is the set of decision-making processes that leads to diagnosis and ultimately directs treatment (Vertue & Haig, 2008). School psychologists must use their reasoning skills throughout all facets of the evaluation process, including the referral process, gathering and analyzing data, and decision-making (Wilcox & Schroeder, 2015). However, their decision-making process is vulnerable to training and professional experiences. While school psychologists apply clinical reasoning to solve real-life problems, the way school psychologists think and behave can be problematic at times, just as it is with any other group of people (Andrews & Syeda, 2017). Thinking errors, such as misapplying heuristics and cognitive biases, could impact the SLD identification process (Wilcox & Schroeder, 2015). Furthermore, there are often external factors, such as policy guidance and training practices, which can also impact school psychologists' experiences with applying policy.

SLD in Special Education Law

Changes in special education law helped shape school psychology training over time. Starting in the mid-1960s, lawmakers initially crafted federal laws that encouraged schools to provide special education through various forms of grant funding (Elementary and Secondary Education Act Amendment, 1966; Education of the Handicapped Act, 1970). It was not until the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EAHCA, 1975) that law moved past grant funding and explicitly required that all children with disabilities be identified, diagnosed, and provided special education services within their least restrictive environment (LRE) at public expense (Fagan & Wise, 2007). In 1977, SLD was legally defined and eligibility criteria were provided under EAHCA. The definition of SLD has changed very little since that time.

While the definition of SLD has largely remained the same, the most recent iteration of federal special education law (IDEA, 2004) significantly changed the methods with

which MDTs could identify students with SLD. From the mid-seventies until the most recent reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, SLD was exclusively identified using the Ability-Achievement Discrepancy Model (Kavale & Flanagan, 2007), where MDTs had to determine if students demonstrated a significant difference between cognitive ability and academic achievement scores (Cottrell & Barrett, 2016). While it remains one of the legally allowable models, IDEA (2004) now also allows for the use of Response to Intervention (RTI) or Patterns of Strengths and Weaknesses (PSW) to identify students with SLDs. As states and school districts subsequently adopted policy reflecting these changes, the expectation of school psychologists' knowledge also changed, shaping their graduate-level training and CPD needs.

National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) Graduate Training Guidance

While many school psychologists use NASP's resources, such as publications and presentations, to improve their individual practices, NASP is also highly influential in graduate-level training programs. Most importantly, it provides program approval or accreditation for graduate programs based on its Standards for Graduate Preparation of School Psychologists (NASP, 2020a). They require programs to comply with five program standards for approval/accreditation: "(a) program context and structure, (b) content knowledge, (c) supervised field experiences, (d) performance-based program assessment and accountability, and (e) program support and resources" (NASP, 2020a). These five standards are intended to ensure that students are learning skills related to NASP's practice model, which influences the domains covered in NASP approved/accredited graduate programs. In this way, NASP directly drives curricular decisions at the university level.

SLD in School Psychology Graduate Training Programs

While intensive, graduate-level training shaped by special education law and NASP should lead to appropriate special education eligibility determinations (NASP 2014), school psychologists still may not obtain sufficient skills needed to make an appropriate SLD eligibility determination (Barrett et al., 2015). In fact, studies have presented concerns that training programs do not focus on evidence-based assessment practices (Decker et al., 2013). and often do not provide courses specifically on SLD identification methods, choosing to incorporate that information into portions of other courses (Barrett et al., 2015). This is complicated by the fact that the field has not reached a consensus about which SLD identification method should be used in practice (Benson et al., 2020).

Often, school psychologists have often not received training in all three identification methods (Maki & Adams, 2018), therefore, their practices are limited by their training experiences. This disjointed training, in addition to varying state (Boynton Hauerwas et al., 2013; Maki et al., 2015) and district (Cottrell & Barrett, 2016) policies, contributes to inconsistencies in SLD determinations from one MDT to another. These inconsistencies not only lead to variations in how students are identified between states but also how students are being identified by different districts in the same state (Lockwood et al., 2021).

Cognitive assessment training is an integral part of school psychologists' graduate education, with most courses focusing on test administration, scoring protocols, and report writing to assess students' skills (Lockwood & Farmer, 2020). However, the emphasis on effective assessment administration and use builds lower-level skills rather than higher-level skills like integrating results and aligning results to recommendations for accommodations and intervention (Bumpus et al., 2020). Additionally, many school psychologists do not have sufficient training in administering cognitive assessments digitally, which is becoming common in practice, and most training programs do not require practice with tablet-based assessment (Lockwood & Farmer, 2020; Miller et al., 2021) or computer- or web-based scoring (Lockwood & Farmer, 2020). Graduate training not keeping up with technological changes in the field leaves trainees at a disadvantage once they start practicing in fast-paced, modern environments that require technical know-how. Moreover, while most professors of cognitive assessment courses (91%) report considering the validity of assessments across diverse populations when planning their courses (Lockwood & Farmer, 2020), an analysis of syllabi showed that 25% did not mention the assessment of culturally diverse students at all (Miller et al., 2021). This study also indicated that 17% of courses covered this topic at the beginning of the semester/quarter, while 56% covered topics related to diversity at the end (Miller et al., 2021). Most cognitive assessment courses are missing the opportunity to present this topic early to promote critical thinking through a multicultural lens throughout the course (Miller et al., 2021). Multicultural competence related to cognitive assessment of diverse students is important, but it is only one facet of the necessary overall multicultural competence within the profession.

Another key aspect lacking in school psychologist training programs is knowledge regarding diverse groups and how best to make SLD identifications in an urban environment. Multicultural training is essential to making and applying SLD decisions in urban schools and school psychology students find an emphasis on multiculturalism

throughout their training program an important part in preparing them to work in urban environments (Miranda et al., 2014). Specifically, they value engaging in socially just practices through their coursework, practical experiences, assignments, and interactions with their classmates and faculty to support their work with urban populations (Miranda et al., 2014). When students are provided a multicultural course that covers topics specific to school psychology, they demonstrate significantly higher levels of awareness and understanding of other ethnic groups' experiences and a higher desire to advocate for others (Vega et al., 2018). Despite the benefits of multicultural training, school psychologists working in urban settings are often not adequately prepared to work with their student population. Within their sample, Newell & Looser (2017) found that only 62% of school psychologists working in urban settings reported completing multicultural coursework. Approximately 48% of participants indicated that they had little to no training in providing school psychology services to linguistic minorities, 62% indicated that they had little to no training in providing services to students of color, and 82% indicated that they had little to no training in servicing low-income students. It is shocking that so few urban school psychologists have the training to appropriately interact with and support the diverse student body they work with daily in their schools when approximately a quarter of school psychologists practice in urban settings (Curtis et al., 2012; McNamara et al., 2019).

Students in urban schools face many systemic challenges related to racism, poverty, and economic marginalization that impact their lives, which makes appropriate training all the more essential. Many urban students experience residential mobility and nonattendance (Parke & Kanyongo, 2012), disproportional punishment (Peguero, et al., 2021), and prolonged stress and trauma (Blitz et al., 2020). These barriers can contribute to difficulties developing academic language (Washington et al., 2018), academic achievement (Herbers et al., 2012; Voight et al., 2020), and social/emotional (Anil et al., 2011) skills that support positive school outcomes. MDTs are responsible to rule out "environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage" as being a primary cause for learning problems (Ohio Department of Education [ODE], 2014); this makes the task of SLD identification particularly difficult when students in urban schools face many environmental factors that negatively impact learning. School psychologists must understand challenges the students in urban environments face, how to integrate evidence-based practices when working with diverse student populations, and how to provide educational access and opportunity to the students they serve. Current training is lacking in all these areas,

leaving school psychologists unprepared to provide the best possible services in urban environments.

While NASP (2018) has provided guidance for the supervision of trainees, the literature presents concerns regarding supervision within school psychology training, which has been weaker when compared to other mental health fields (Harvey & Struzziero, 2008). NASP (2018) highly recommends that licensed/certified school psychologists acting as supervisors not only have knowledge of various domains of school psychology but also receive formal training in supervision; however, only a relatively small portion of school psychologists receive that kind of specialized training (Cochrane, Salyers, & Ding, 2010) and many supervisors rely on informal consultation with others in the field to gain an understanding of supervision (Ward, 2001). Practicum and internships offer supported practice to school psychology students. Both offer supervisors the opportunity to teach students about clinical reasoning and practical strategies to address thinking errors that can occur within practice (Wilcox & Schroeder, 2015). However, these important topics seldom receive sufficient focus during practical training experiences leaving trainees inadequately aware of how their own thought processes can influence their professional decision-making. Professors do provide supplemental supervision during practicum and internship, but school psychologists have indicated a need for greater collaboration between university training programs and urban schools to better support school psychologists working in that environment (Lindberg, 2016).

CPD for School Psychologists

Beyond graduate-level training, school psychologists are required to earn continuing education credits throughout their careers to maintain their certification/licensure. Because NASP also offers a National School Psychology Certification, it provides several CPD guidelines that allow for a variety of CPD categories, including “workshops, conferences, in-service training; college and university coursework; delivering and preparing training and in-service activities; research and publications; supervision or mentorship of graduate or early career professional; supervised or mentored experiences; program planning/evaluation; self-study; or professional organization leadership” (NASP, 2020b). In addition to recommendations from NASP (2020b) regarding CPD, educational boards within the state provide specific requirements for certification/license renewal. Because of NASP’s recommendations in conjunction with state board requirements, many school psychologists view CPD not only as a professional obligation but also an ethical one (Armistead, 2008; Armistead & Smallwood, 2011; Armistead et al., 2013).

Various studies have looked at school psychologists’ top areas of CPD engagement, which include: RTI; academic screening and progress monitoring; behavioral, academic, and social/emotional intervention; standardized psychoeducational assessment; and consultation problem-solving (Curtis et al., 2008; Armistead et al., 2013). In addition to learning about recent CPD practices, Armistead et al. (2013) also studied what school psychologists perceived as areas of need for CPD. Relatively large groups of respondents indicated that RTI (47.2%), behavioral intervention (45.9%), social/emotional intervention (45.5%), and academic intervention (42.9%) were high areas of need.

While school psychologists frequently engage in various CPD to satisfy their legal and ethical professional obligations, they report several barriers to engaging in CPD, including the cost of travel and registration (84%), heavy workload (80%), family obligations (46%), and difficulty receiving paid leave (38%) (Armistead et al., 2013). Further, some researchers have posed questions about what types of training have the most meaningful outcomes for professionals. Neimeyer, et al. (2012) found that school psychologists in their study perceived self-directed learning, peer consultation, and formal continuing education to be most helpful in improving their competencies. Despite these preferences, there is significant research indicating that attending traditional presentations does not lead to changes in professional practices (Andersen & Dorfman, 2016; Babeva & Davison, 2017; Washburn et al., 2019).

School psychologists play an essential role in providing expertise and implementing special education policy within their MDTs. Training and CPD are two areas that provide school psychologists with experiences and knowledge that they will internalize and apply to make sense of SLD identification practices. While training has changed over time to reflect evolving special education law and school psychology professional organization guidance, there are areas in which school psychologists are not sufficiently prepared for the important position they occupy in schools. Issues with training are magnified when working in urban schools, where various systemic factors further complicate the SLD identification process. Concerns about the rigor of graduate preparation (Maki, 2018) and limited meaningful CPD opportunities impact accurate and consistent SLD identification decisions, which negatively impacts MDTs during their decision-making process.

Purpose

As part of a larger case study examining school psychologists’ experiences of identifying SLD in urban schools, participants answered questions about their

training experiences. This article focuses on psychologists' graduate-level training and CPD experiences to illustrate the existing knowledge that urban school psychologists draw from during SLD identification. This research was conducted to recognize various mechanisms within the participants' training and CPD that influence their practice and what additional support through training might help facilitate the identification process.

Method

Given the complex nature of special education policy, its interpretation, and its implementation, a qualitative approach was used due to its flexible research design that supports interaction between researcher and participant (Hays & Singh, 2012). Specifically, an instrumental case study methodology was chosen. This allowed researchers to investigate "bound systems" (Stake, 2000, p. 436), which have "boundaries of time, place, and other delineations" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 44) to "provide insight into an issue" (Stake, 1998, p. 88). In this study, the case was considered school psychologists working in public urban schools in a Northeast Ohio county. The use of the case study approach allowed for a systematic and rigorous inquiry. The study used specific parameters in participant sampling, data collection, and analysis allowing for an examination of the problem.

A social constructivism lens was applied to this case study. Its unique ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological beliefs informed the study's methodology. Most significantly, researchers using social constructivism believe that there are multiple realities that depend upon individuals' experiences of the phenomenon, and knowledge is co-constructed between the research and participants. Social constructivism often involves collaboration between the researcher and participants, providing participants the opportunity to review data analysis and elevate the understanding of prominent ideas from their interviews. Results are reported in a more literacy style when using a social constructivist paradigm (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, sense-making (Spillane, 2006; Spillane et al., 2002), a cognitive framework that focuses on how individuals make sense of policy implementation, was applied as a theoretical framework for this study. This article focuses on training and CPD, which provides school psychologists with experiences and knowledge, to illuminate their influence on how school psychologists make sense of the SLD identification process. All research was conducted with the Institutional Review Board's formal approval.

Participants and Context

A case study methodology was used to examine the training and CPD experiences of school psychologists

working in urban schools in Northeast Ohio. The Ohio Department of Education (ODE) provides a classification of school districts by type based on demographic and geographic characteristics (ODE, 2019). Based on ODE's typology descriptions, those schools coded as 7 (Urban-High Student Poverty and Average Student Population) and 8 (Urban-Very High Student Poverty & Very Large Student Population) were included. To ensure that each school psychologist had the opportunity to gain ample prior experience and knowledge about SLD identification, participants had at least 5 years of professional experience. Every school psychologist working in an urban school district in a large county in Northeast Ohio was sent a recruitment email. Efforts were made to include participants with diverse experiences, but ultimately this study included those who consented to participate. Participants included five white (71.4%) and two black (28.6%) school psychologists. Five participants (71.4%) were female and two (28.6%) were male. On average, participants had been practicing as school psychologists for 12.7 years (range: 5-31). Four participants (57.1%) had been practicing for 5-9 years, one (14.3%) for 10-14 years, one (14.3%) for 20-24 years, and one (14.3%) for 30-34 years. These school psychologists practiced in 6 different schools within the county. The population was similar to the makeup of NASP, with larger groups of white (85.9%) and female (87.3%) members (Goforth et al., 2021).

Demographic information was collected regarding participants' training experiences. In terms of level of education, one (14.3%) had a master's degree, five (71.4%) had a specialist-level degree, and one (14.3%) had a doctorate. All participants attended NASP-approved training programs and all but one earned their degree from universities in Ohio. Four (57.1%) completed their school psychology practicum experience in an urban setting, three (42.9%) in a suburban setting, and none (0%) in a rural setting. For their school psychology internship, four (57.1%) completed it in an urban setting, four (57.1%) in a suburban setting, and none (0%) in a rural setting, with one participant interning in both a suburban and urban setting. Table 1 provides a breakdown of participants' training experiences.

Table 1

Breakdown of Participants' Training Experiences

Participant	Education Level	Practicum	Internship
1	Specialist	Suburban	Suburban
2	Specialist	Suburban	Urban+Suburban
3	Specialist	Urban	Urban
4	Doctoral	Urban	Urban
5	Masters	Urban	Urban

6	Specialist	Urban	Suburban
7	Specialist	Suburban	Suburban

Researcher’s Role

In using a social constructivist case study approach, the researcher’s role was to co-construct meaning with the participants to better understand the training and CPD experiences of school psychologists working in urban public schools. Because meaning is co-constructed, it is important to consider the positionality of the researcher, which is as a school psychologist who has experience working in urban public schools and private practice settings. Additionally, the researcher maintains personal and professional networks with educators across settings. In all qualitative research, but perhaps even more so when asking participants to actively construct meaning, reciprocity, trust, and rapport are essential in eliciting participation and information that accurately reflects the participants’ experiences. These components were reflected in the methodology of this study, seen below.

Data Collection

Participants completed a brief demographic survey at the start of the study. The vast majority of data was collected through two subsequent semi-structured interviews, which were each approximately 60 minutes in length. Memos were utilized by the researcher as a form of data collection after each interview. University training program plans of study and professional organization guidance documents related to school psychologist training and professional development were collected for triangulation to clarify meaning and reduce potential misinterpretation (Stake, 2008).

Data Analysis

Audio recordings from the first semi-structured interviews were transcribed and reviewed for accuracy. At that time, participants were provided a copy to review before their next meeting. The researcher also began identifying initial codes from the first interviews. At the second interview, participants were invited to provide reflections from the first interview, asked to review the initial codes found by the researcher, and asked follow-up questions to gain additional details about what they had previously shared.

In keeping with the case study approach, this study employed within-case analysis and cross-case analysis. While the analysis offered some elements of phenomenological study (the discovery and description of “the meaning and essence of participants’ experiences, or knowledge, as it appears to consciousness” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 50), the attention to the theoretical frame of sense-making is more in keeping with the case study

approach. In this way, this article examined factors that impact school psychologists’ experiences as sense-makers of SLD policy implementation.

Initially, each interview was individually coded. Some codes emerged in vivo, with the exact language or phrasing from the participants being used, allowing the study to remain true to the participants’ experiences (Galletta, 2013). As the analysis process progressed, codes were related to other codes to form categories. After reviewing the data and recategorizing as appropriate, these categories were synthesized into more meaningful themes.

As themes emerged, peer debriefing with a school psychologist outside of the study occurred to ensure a good fit between the data collected and the interpretation. Additionally, an auditor reviewed the data analysis to ensure it was systematic and rigorous. Using in vivo coding, tracing codes, memos, peer debriefing, and auditing all improved trustworthiness and helped ensure that participants’ experiences were being accurately represented.

Additionally, this study triangulated other data sources to support the findings (Hays & Singh, 2012), aiding in the trustworthiness of the interpretation of the data. Triangulation was achieved by collecting data from school psychology university training program plans of study and SLD-related CPD opportunities provided through regional and state professional organizations. This data was analyzed to “clarify meaning” (Stake, 2008, p. 148) and gain a deeper understanding of training courses and CPD offerings that participants referred to during their interviews, adding to the understanding needed to provide thick description of participants’ experiences. Results are reported below to aid readers in ascertaining if the research is transferable to their setting.

Results

In the context of this study, school psychologists are considered sense-makers of the SLD identification process. Their experiences, knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes (Spillane, 2004) get organized into schemas. The organization of various prior knowledge and experiences impacts the way school psychologists interpret policy information. Several themes and subthemes related to the idea of school psychologists as sense-makers during the SLD identification process emerged from the study. These themes focused on the participants’ graduate training and CPD.

Table 2
Themes from Interview Data

Theme/Subtheme	Theme Names
1	Prepared for the Profession “But Not All the Stuff”

- 1.1 Need for More Special Education Law Training
- 1.2 Received Little Training Specific to SLD Identification
- 1.3 Lack of Attention to Multicultural Competence in Training
- 1.4 Practical Experience Not Sufficient to Meet Professional Demands
- 2 Professional Development: “Everything Sounds Good When You See It on paper”
- 2.1 Issues with Current Professional Development Opportunities
- 2.2 What School Psychologists Consider Worthwhile in Professional Development
- 2.3 School Psychologists’ Paths to Develop Themselves Professionally

Theme One: Prepared for the Profession “But Not All of the Stuff”

...I felt very prepared going in for some of the stuff. But not all of the stuff. – Participant 2

As part of the interview process, participants were asked about their graduate-level training to learn about how they draw on those experiences as sense-makers during the SLD identification process. Several participants directly expressed that they did not feel prepared when they stepped into the field as professional school psychologists. They also provided information about different areas of their training that are essential to the SLD identification process, including courses on special education law, SLD identification, cultural competence, and practical experiences. While talking about those topics, the participants shared their experiences and areas that could be improved to make them feel better prepared for the profession.

Subtheme 1.1: Need for More Special Education Law Training

Overall, most participants shared that they had some exposure to special education law, though not dedicated courses. This often took place within the context of other courses. Participant 3 stated: “*We had classes where we definitely talked about it [special education law] and the paperwork and the timelines...but I don’t think I had a specific course dedicated to that.*”

While many participants reported that they did not have a course dedicated to special education law, some expressed concern about the legal information that they obtained from their coursework. Even when participants took special education law courses, the objectives were unclear and not necessarily relevant to the practice of school psychology. For example, when asked to describe what their course

was like, Participant 6 shared, “*I mean, not so great,*” and described that the courses related to special education law were either an introductory special education course for teachers or only focused on compliance with paperwork timelines. Participant 5 indicated that they did not attend any courses that focused on special education law at all.

Subtheme 1.2: Received Little Training Specific to SLD Identification

Participants were also asked about coursework related specifically to SLD identification. Most participants reported having no specific courses related to SLD identification. When asked whether they took a course focused on SLD identification, several participants indicated that they did not.

The other participants indicated that while they did not have a course that primarily focused on SLD identification, they did discuss SLD identification within some other courses. As noted by Participant 3, “*[W]e talked about it in the testing [courses] but, we didn’t have a specific class dedicated to that but, we talked about what it looks like, what you have to do, the process.*” Participant 5 shared that discussions about SLD took place within a course that covered the various disability categories, saying, “*We didn’t have one that specifically addressed SLD, it went through all the different categories, but I know we did spend two weeks on that talking about using the different testing and then looking at the discrepancy model.*” Participant 7 also indicated that they did not have a course dedicated to SLD identification, but some components related to SLD identification were discussed in other courses. They stated, “*I don’t feel like there was a course specifically focused on that... But I would say like the RTI process, time was spent there, which is related, is looking at the category of SLD.*”

Participant 1 expressed that they primarily learned about the inconsistency of SLD identification in practice during their coursework:

There wasn’t a course that was an SLD course, but we certainly talked about SLD, and most of what was discussed in those courses was primarily, it’s the “Wild West”... Everyone’s doing their own thing. There’s a general idea of what you should be doing, but the actual implementation of that theory differed depending on the district.

Subtheme 1.3: Lack of Attention to Multicultural Competence in Training

Participants were also asked about their training related to cultural competence, both directly associated with the SLD identification process and more generally within the field of education. Several of the participants who were trained longer ago indicated that they did not feel that they

were trained well in this area. When asked to talk about how their training program addressed cultural competence related to SLD identification, Participant 5 responded: “*Oh, it didn’t [laughs]...No, it didn’t.*” Participant 4 elaborated, saying:

I don’t think [it was covered] very well because at the time, being how many years ago it was....And they were just coming into this idea of, I mean, there were a lot of lawsuits at the time about kids going into, particularly cognitive disability programs, that were African American and had different cultural backgrounds. So all that was just starting...[A]ll those lawsuits were just like happening right there. So we were taught at the time to be really cautious when we were looking at different cultures...But we weren’t really given a lot more than that.

Many more tenured participants experienced gaps in their training related to multicultural competence because it is a relatively newer professional focus in the field of school psychology.

While Participant 3 was trained more recently, they also indicated that they did not attend a multicultural course during graduate school, although there was some discussion of it within other courses. They shared, “*I know we had discussions about it...It would be little things here or there as far as what you need to look for. What do you need to make sure that you’re doing or not doing...*”

Other participants who completed their training more recently indicated that they did not attend a course on multicultural competence related to SLD identification but did have a course that was more generally related to multicultural competence. Participant 1 stated, “*I don’t know if we talked a whole lot about cultural competence and SLD classification. I think that’s an interesting question. Especially given the forms we’re required to use for classifying students in the State of Ohio specifically.*” Participant 1 shared that cultural competence was a particularly important topic given that the Evaluation Team Report (ETR) form includes “cultural factors” as an exclusionary factor. When asked if they had coursework generally related to multicultural competence, Participant 1 responded:

We had a multicultural class, but it didn’t really focus on school psychology because it was a class with multiple disciplines. They were all like adjacent to like school counseling or education in general, but they didn’t really focus on SLD in any respect.

Participant 6 also shared that their experience was similar in that they did have a multicultural course, but it did not directly apply to special education decision-making. They said, “*We did have one class on diversity, but I don’t even recall how that connected to SLD, it was just diversity in general...[I]t was more about...privilege in general.*”

Participant 7 shared that they experienced discussions in other courses that helped them gain an understanding that assessments may be culturally biased, but they noted that cultural sensitivity in school psychology was not directly taught within those courses:

I would say that there was [talk about] the importance of being intentional with being culturally competent, but I don’t necessarily feel like there was like direct instruction and time spent on what assessments to give... I feel like I walked away with the understanding that there are certain IQ tests that are...culturally biased because of the vocabulary, the experiences that different demographics might not experience. But I don’t feel like there was a course that was specifically driven [by that].

Subtheme 1.4: Practical Experience Not Sufficient to Meet Professional Demands

Practical experiences through graduate-level training programs are important in allowing students to put theory to practice. Feelings of preparedness reported by participants varied depending on the perceived quality of their practical opportunities. Participant 7 shared that they still look to their practicum experiences as an exemplar of what they would like to do in their current district. They said, “*[T]he district that I did practicum in, they had a really good RTI set up...So like, even now when I think about assisting my district, I often look back...*”

Not all participants reported such positive experiences. Participant 5 shared, “*I basically did not get that great of an internship experience. It was more like this is my caseload, these are my re-evaluations, and you go do them...So I don’t feel like I got a variety of training.*”

Other participants shared that even though they did not have a negative experience per se, they did not feel entirely prepared for their professional role upon graduation. Participant 2 said: “*I felt very prepared going in for some of the stuff. But not all of the stuff. ‘Cause they don’t teach you how to prepare for the people interaction part of it that you normally do.*” Participant 2 later went on to say, “*I think they prepare you as much as you can to do the paperwork part of it, but they don’t really necessarily always prepare you for the factors and things that are going to come up.*” They felt that once they entered the profession, there were a lot of things they “*had to learn along the way*” (Participant 2).

Participant 7 also indicated that while their internship provided some positive experiences, it did not prepare them for the caseload they experienced as a school psychologist. They said, “*I didn’t feel prepared for what happened to me, caseload wise- when I got into the field.*”

Throughout this theme, participants expressed that they felt underprepared by their graduate-level training in areas important to the SLD identification process, including

courses on special education law, SLD identification, cultural competence, and practical experiences. While they did have exposure to these topics, they did not feel that prepared for “*all of the stuff*” that would be important to them once they joined the field as school psychologists.

Theme Two: Professional Development: “Everything Sounds Good When You See It on Paper.”

I would say, that everything sounds good when you see it on paper and then 15 minutes into it, you realize that this is not exactly what I thought. And they're going to talk about 90% of what's not interesting to me and 10% about what do I do about it. - Participant 3

Participants shared about their experiences with professional development during their interviews, which provided insight into how their continuing education might influence their sense-making of the SLD identification process. They described professional development opportunities they have access to, what they would consider worthwhile in professional development, and alternatives they have sought to supplement traditional professional development activities.

Subtheme 2.1: Issues with Current Professional Development Opportunities

Participants shared their experiences and views on professional development opportunities. They attend presentations and webinars both to earn credit for license renewal and to gain new knowledge and skills within the field of school psychology. Overall, participants shared that while many presentations seem promising, they were not beneficial. Presentations often did not cover topics listed in the description or did not provide practical applications.

Participant 2 shared that they find descriptions of professional development interesting, but often feel like they were misled once they attend the presentations, stating, “...they kind of mislead you with the title, and then you're kind of like, this is not what this title was about.” They reiterated this thought in their second interview, providing an example of a professional development presentation that purportedly would cover ETR writing:

... And you're like, Oh! Finally! I'm going to go and I'm going to learn how to fill out this page...And then you sit there and they're like, well, we're really not going to talk about the ETR. And they talk about it for 10 minutes and then they go off to something different [laughs]...So it doesn't really help... And then when you ask the question of like, “Well would this be correct?” And their response is “Well, we can't tell you that” [laughs]. Then it's kind of like, so what was the point of me coming to do this?

Participant 3 echoed this sentiment:

I would say that everything sounds good when you see it on paper and then 15 minutes into it, you realize that this is not exactly what I thought. And they're going

to talk about 90% of what's not interesting to me and 10% about what do I do about it.

Participant 3 went on to provide greater detail in their second interview about how they are “*not getting a lot out of*” professional development experiences:

[T]hey talk about all this background, which a lot of times the psychs already had that background knowledge. And then we get to the last ten minutes where they kind of throw some stuff in that you might actually use...[T]hey're doing all the introduction forever, and then we never get to the part of well, what am I going to do?

Participant 6 also provided several examples of presentations they have attended through local and national professional organizations. They felt that one directly related to SLD was interesting, but left them with more questions, saying, “*I felt like I was more confused after than before that.*” Further, they provided some examples of local presentations that did not meet their expectations based on the presentation’s description. They said, “*I would find the law presentations probably to be the most helpful, except for that last one that [I] went to [laughs] where they didn't even talk about special ed law...*”

Participants also shared about presentations provided within their districts. Participant 5 shared that topics presented at the district level were “*of little to no interest to school psychologists and intervention specialists.*” Participant 7 also shared about professional development at the district level, saying, “*I don't think that, even as a district, like when we have psych meetings, we don't really dig into... discussions of SLD.*”

Subtheme 2.2: What School Psychologists Consider Worthwhile in Professional Development

Participants had recommendations about what they would like to see presented related to SLD identification, despite concerns about current offerings. They often prefer presentations that are practical and directly related to tasks that MDTs are completing daily. Directly related to practicality, Participant 2 said, “*I feel like if you're not really telling me about a specific intervention or you're not providing me with specifics on how to make my practice better, then that's where the problem is.*” They went on to share that any recommendations provided at presentations should be realistically feasible to implement in a school setting. Participant 2 noted, “*Definitely more practical interventions that teachers can use*” and critiqued much PD as offering strategies that don't accommodate the demands of their role and are “*not even doable with the amount of stuff that you want [educators] to do.*”

Related to the idea of practical presentations that are highly meaningful to the field, Participant 5 introduced the idea of “*going back to basics*” in training. For example,

while they expressed disinterest in their district’s current professional development offerings, they felt that if the district addressed the “*foundations of special education*” like the evaluation process, understanding disability categories, and proper data collection, then that would address a lot of the schools’ needs, and the types of uninteresting topics that they currently have would not be necessary. Participant 6 echoed the sentiment that focusing on special education basics in professional development opportunities would be helpful:

So going over the basics in special ed law and keeping up to date...Not the most interesting, but the most helpful, I feel. And then that kind of like an a-ha moment where we’re like, “Well, we’re all doing different things, so we should probably get on the same page” [laughs].

Participants provided information about specific topics that they felt would be beneficial to them. Directly related to school psychology, Participant 7 expressed the need to have more information about the different SLD identification models: “[T]he models, I think having more information on the models [to] kind of figure out what would work best for your specific district.” Additionally, Participant 7 shared that they would be interested in attending professional development opportunities that specifically addressed academic interventions in reading, writing, and mathematics. Participant 7 also indicated the need to get into the specific details “*breaking down*” different areas of SLD to learn about underpinning skills for each area.

Additionally, participants shared the need for legal updates and training. Participant 3 indicated that most legal updates they participate in were not focused on SLD identification, even though it is a high-incidence category and warrants examination. This would help school psychologists stay up to date with how the district “*want[s] it done based on the court rulings lately*” (Participant 3).

While there is a need for professional development related to legal updates, the way legal updates currently take place can provoke anxiety in school psychologists. Some participants expressed that they were completing evaluations in a way that they felt was reflective of the law, but then they would attend a legal update and be told that many common practices were things that the presenter did not recommend. Participant 3 shared:

The legal updates are terrifying because [you feel like] everything you’re doing is wrong. But I think it’d be good to find out what are we supposed to write, what kind of things get people in trouble for, and what kinds of things should you not write...I don’t think we get enough good examples.

They later went on to share that some of the stress related to this kind of training may be due to how they are typically set up. They shared that most legal updates they attend are

presented by a lawyer who “*scare[s] you to death about everything that you’re doing.*” However, they feel that if school psychologists were involved in legal presentations, that it could be beneficial to the group: “*I think having psychologists talk about things that got them in trouble or that worked, I think that’d be an interesting idea. Some kind of panel ... with people who are doing your job... I think it’s good for us to learn from each other.*” They also shared that they felt that having better access to recent legal cases, perhaps through a monthly email from the state organization, could help keep school psychologists apprised of shifts in legal findings.

In addition to gaining skills and knowledge related to school psychology, Participant 7 shared that they felt that “*having a training specific to urban populations*” would also be beneficial as a practitioner. This may indicate that there is a need not only to gain training about assessment, intervention, and special education law but also to learn about those topics from an urban lens to better serve the population with whom they work.

Beyond learning practical skills to apply within the urban education setting, Participant 1 felt that professional development that addressed systems-level issues would have a positive impact on factors related to SLD identification:

What sorts of trainings would [I] like to see in the future?...Working on systems-level change in districts. How to get administrators to change what they’re doing based on what you know and see as being best for kids. So if we’re going to help kids with SLD... I think a lot of what we’re doing at the systems-level isn’t necessarily what’s best for kids. So, yeah, I would love to see more training from professional associations on how to do systems-level change in your district.

In addition to working with administrators to improve SLD identification practices, Participant 7 expressed interest in CPD opportunities that focus on “*ways to train and incorporate your team*” to support more meaningful understanding and collaboration during the SLD identification process.

Subtheme 2.3: School Psychologists’ Paths to Develop Themselves Professionally

Partially because they are concerned with current professional development presentations being offered, and partially because of their drive to learn more about areas that impact themselves, their team, and their students, many participants seek out alternative sources of information. This included attending webinars and self-study through reading books and other online materials.

Participants often sought training experiences outside of their professional organizations to supplement their understanding of SLD, both related to assessment and

intervention. For example, Participant 5 shared that they traveled to a neighboring state to attend a conference presented by a well-known researcher of SLD-related topics. When participants are unable to spend the time or money to travel to in-person conferences, they seek webinar professional development opportunities from organizations outside the field of school psychology. Participant 7 shared that this was one of the best ways to get helpful information to improve their practice.

Participants also conducted self-study regarding SLD by reading books and online materials. Participant 6 shared that they often used the internet when they needed additional information or guidance about a particular question. Participant 5 shared that they frequently reviewed other districts' websites to find information about the SLD intervention and evaluation processes, sharing, *"I spend a lot of time looking at other school districts and what information they have for their learning disabilities. A lot of districts in Ohio will put [RTI information] online..."* Participant 5 also frequented other websites that provide information on evidence-based interventions. They found the most helpful sites about interventions yielded from universities researching RTI.

Not only do participants frequent formal websites to gather information about SLD identification, but they also read blogs and social media groups for school psychologists. Participant 2 shared, *"I read a lot of blogs and online social media groups to see what's going on or what people's opinions [are]."* These informal sites add to their understanding of the SLD identification process in ways that more formal sources might not because the information comes from other school psychologists who practice within their same field and conduct similar job responsibilities.

Discussion

In this article, school psychologists shared their training and CPD experiences related to SLD identification and how they use that information to make sense of the SLD identification process. Spillane (2004, p. 76) indicates that *"experiences, knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes"* impact how individuals personally make sense of policy. Themes One and Two were aspects related to school psychologists' knowledge and experiences that form the schemas through which they make sense of the SLD identification process. These themes focused on participants' experiences with graduate-level training as well as subsequent CPD. Participants shared that, though they did receive intensive training for their profession, they were not prepared for *"all of the stuff"* that they would need to function as effective school psychologists. They expressed a need for additional, specialized training in special education

law, SLD identification, and multicultural competence. Additionally, they expressed the need for practical experiences that were reflective of real-life professional expectations under high-quality supervision. Participants also shared the desire to continue their learning related to SLD through CPD. This desire to gain new knowledge, skills, and experiences shows that school psychologists view themselves as agents capable of change; however, many organizational systems present barriers to obtaining competency in areas that they feel are essential to SLD identification. While they shared many barriers to identifying SLD within their graduate training programs and CPD opportunities, they also highlighted ways to improve training to better support psychologists in making these important determinations. By examining both areas of need and recommendations made by participants, we can clearly see several implications for school psychology training programs at the systems-level, individual instructors providing training within those systems, and organizations that provide CPD to school psychologists.

Implications for School Psychology Training Programs

Participants indicated a need for enhanced graduate-level training to improve their ability to make sense of the SLD identification process. Many of their concerns could be alleviated by making systems-level changes to address the root cause of barriers that participants reported. Participants expressed the need for additional, explicit instruction related to special education law, with in-depth training of SLD identification. Additionally, participants felt that universities should strengthen training regarding multicultural competence. While participants attended some courses related to diversity, they expressed the need for a more explicit understanding of cultural competence related specifically to the field of school psychology. Though important, it is not enough to appreciate the experiences of different groups of people; school psychologists also need a thorough understanding of cultural concerns related to special education and assessment practices that impact their students.

Department chairs of school psychology training programs should evaluate their current course offering to determine whether course objectives actually relate to the field, whether course objectives can be modified to address student needs more directly, or whether unhelpful courses need to be replaced by new courses that explicitly cover special education law, identification practices, and multicultural cultural competence as it relates to school psychology. Finally, those running school psychology training programs need to provide superior practical experiences to their students. This includes carefully

vetting potential school psychologist supervisors and their districts to ensure that students will be placed in a setting where they can be supported, have access to a variety of experiences, and learn best practices within a real-life setting. It also means that programs must provide training opportunities to supervisors so that they can improve their competency in providing quality supervision to school psychology trainees. Additionally, programs should create deeper ties with field placement organizations to provide their students and their supervisors with greater support to create worthwhile practical experiences. This support would be reciprocal; while universities can provide support to supervisors and their districts, the supervisors can provide instructors with insider knowledge of urban districts and what could be better addressed in training to meet the needs of school psychologists, their team, and their students within those districts. These large-scale changes are needed to better prepare school psychology students for the complex environments of urban school systems.

Implications for Trainers of School Psychologists

While it is essential to make systems-level changes, trainers of school psychologists will continue to work in imperfect organizations. However, individual trainers can use their autonomy as course instructors to better prepare their students to make sense of the SLD identification process. By understanding reported gaps in school psychologists' education, instructors can intentionally include those areas within related courses that they teach. For example, instructors teaching an ethics course could dedicate additional time to special education law and how that intersects with ethical practices. They could also structure their class to foster discussions about how school psychology practices impact low-income and economically marginalized (LIEM) and racially diverse populations. Instructors teaching about assessment administration could present research about various assessment tools, best practices for assessing various disability categories, and assessments that are most appropriate for diverse groups of students. Those teaching multicultural courses can provide space to discuss multicultural concerns particularly related to school psychology practices. Instructors need to review their courses to identify opportunities where they can directly address special education law, identification practices, and multicultural competence within their current courses. Additionally, they should also provide their students with the chance to provide feedback about whether course content is adding to their understanding and skills needed in the field. This could be accomplished by encouraging open discussions with their students about these topics, using anonymous polls at regular intervals

throughout the course, or end-of-course assessments that can be used in planning future courses.

Trainers of school psychologists are also uniquely positioned to advocate for change within programs. Not only can they supplement their own courses to address their students' needs, but they should also cultivate relationships with their program directors to share their concerns about available course content and potential solutions based on information that they have obtained from their students.

Implications for Organizations Providing CPD to School Psychologists

Even if graduate training programs make substantial changes to improve school psychologists' understanding and skills, it is important to address CPD opportunities, as they allow school psychologists to stay in touch with current research and best practices. These courses keep practitioners' skills up to date and should also address any areas that might not have been adequately covered in the school psychologists' training program. While necessary for everyone in the profession, this is particularly important for those trained over a decade ago when certain research and evidence for different SLD identification models and assessment practices may not have been available. Based on data provided by participants, there are many improvements that CPD providers can make to improve the training they offer.

First, organizations offering CPD, such as professional organizations, State Support Teams (SSTs), and universities, should ensure that a clear description of the professional development content is provided and that presenters take care to meet the course objectives. These organizations should hold presenters accountable to present material that closely relates to the description at a level of intensity appropriate to school psychologists' experience and skillsets. Participants often shared that they do not find many of the presentations they currently attend to be worthwhile. If training is geared towards school psychologists, presenters should have an understanding of school psychologists' familiarity with the topic and begin at that baseline to increase their knowledge; most participants do not need a basic review, but rather an in-depth presentation that provides additional understanding of their practice.

Related to SLD identification, many participants expressed an interest in learning more about the theoretical underpinnings of learning reading, writing, math, and language to gain expertise in theory and practice. Participants also would like additional professional development in appropriate assessment tools that add to the comprehensive understanding of students' skills, as well as intervention strategies that they can incorporate

into their recommendations and bring back to their team for immediate use.

Additionally, participants presented a need for frequent professional development opportunities related to special education law. Many do not feel that they currently have access to helpful legal updates. Further, several participants reported that legal presentations that are available often lead them to feel that, as a profession, they are practicing differently from one another and differently from the presenter's recommendations. This can make them feel like what they are doing is "wrong." While typical legal updates may invoke stress, it is an important topic that can add to school psychologists' understanding of SLD identification. There is a disconnect because most legal update presenters are not school psychologists and their presentation style, while a good fit for their field, is not adapted to align with the field of school psychology. Changing the structure to focus on improving MDT's skills, reviewing best practices, and including school psychologists in the presentations would better meet school psychologists' needs.

Not only can organizations incorporate these areas of interest into their own training, but they can also publicize high-quality training related to SLD identification that are presented by other organizations. This would provide school psychologists with resources about vetted professional development opportunities beyond those provided within their professional organization. Furthermore, organizations can survey their members to learn about professional development preferences and use the results to drive their planning of events. All of these recommended changes would improve school psychologist preparation and CPD, supporting appropriate and consistent SLD eligibility determinations within urban districts.

Many of the recommendations provided above seem like minimal expectations for professional presentations; however, it is important to highlight that most participants showed dissatisfaction with even these basic points within their CPD experiences. Research shows that traditional presentations are not sufficient in changing professional practices (Andersen & Dorfman, 2016; Babeva & Davison, 2017; Washburn et al., 2019). Therefore, not only do CPD providers need to address school psychologists' basic concerns, but they also need to advance how we provide CPD. This includes ensuring that CPD presentation topics are better aligned with science-based practices and that we move away from attendance-based presentations to interactive experiences that focus on competency-based learning (Washburn et al., 2019).

Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations to this study. For example, even though the SLD identification process uses a team

approach, only school psychologists were identified as participants. Results were based on the school psychologist perspective, which may vary from that of other team members.

This study focused on how urban school psychologists make sense of SLD identification and the knowledge they draw on during that process. Experiences, knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes (Spillane, 2004) all impact policy implementation made by individual team members. However, interview questions focused on professional experience, knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes rather than personal ones. Participants were not asked about their upbringing, current personal life, or their own biases as people or educators.

Research subjectivity is another limitation of this study. All qualitative researchers have a unique positionality. In this social constructivist case study, the researcher was a school psychologist with experience working in urban school environments. While this may be beneficial in some ways, it can also cause challenges to the study. For example, participants may have assumed that the researcher had more background knowledge than they did and potentially not provide as much explanation as they would to someone outside of the field.

Finally, qualitative research is not generalizable. This case study provided information from a small number of school psychologists working in urban school districts in the same Northeast Ohio county. Those working with school psychologists from similar settings may find commonalities that could transfer to their organizations and could benefit from recommendations that they feel are applicable to their own situation. However, findings are not generalizable to all urban school districts within the county or beyond.

Future Research

There are many opportunities to advance our understanding of SLD identification training and CPD through future research. This case study focused on school psychologists' experiences; however, SLD identification in public schools is a team effort. Future research should focus on how other MDT members' training and CPD impact how they make sense of SLD identification. This is especially important given the concerns that school psychologists, who are often viewed as identification experts, reported. It is likely that other MDT members have additional concerns and recommendations not reported by school psychologists. Furthermore, future studies should consider the experiences of school psychologists and other MDT members in additional settings (rural, small town, and suburban) to learn whether their needs in identifying SLD in different settings have been met through their training, whether concerns presented are universal

regardless of district type, and whether working with specific demographics necessitates different knowledge and skills. Finally, various methodologies, including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods designs, should be developed to further examine themes found within this study as well as be applied to future research focusing on other team members in various locations.

Conclusion

While the goal of public education is to provide students with what they will need to achieve positive future outcomes, inequities for students in urban settings are exacerbated by policies and structures we have created within our educational system. As a society, we need to seriously examine and address many systemic problems that students in urban education face, like racism, poverty, and socioeconomic marginalization. We also need to address systemic problems within the field of school psychology. We often assume that various components of the SLD identification process are being carried out well. Knowledge and skills needed to identify SLD and provide appropriate services are presumed to be available, but often they are not, and this negatively shapes student outcomes. One of the first steps that we can take is improving school psychology training and CPD to ensure that school psychologists can make sense of and appropriately apply special education policy within their school environment. Until those foundational issues with training are addressed, MDTs within urban districts will continue to struggle with identifying and meeting the needs of exceptional learners.

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