

# Response to McGill and Busse, “When Theory Trumps Science: A Critique of the PSW Model for SLD Identification”

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**Abstract** The California Association of School Psychologists (CASP) responds to a critique of the Association’s Position Paper: Specific Learning Disabilities and Patterns of Strengths and Weaknesses (2014, March. Available: <http://casponline.org/about-casp/publications/>) by McGill and Busse. The CASP offers corrections to McGill and Busse’s three critiques and clarifies the Association position that the assessment of students suspected of having a Specific Learning Disability involves a comprehensive evaluation that provides information regarding both environmental factors that include data on instruction and interventions as well as within-child factors such as response to intervention and the student’s pattern of academic and specific cognitive strengths and weaknesses.

**Keywords** Pattern of strengths and weaknesses · Specific learning disabilities · CASP position paper

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Readers are encouraged to read the CASP Position Paper in this edition of *Contemporary School Psychology* for an understanding of the issues defined in the McGill and Busse article to which this response is addressed.

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## Introduction

McGill and Busse (2016), in a critique of a position paper authored and approved by members of the Board of Directors of the California Association of School Psychologists (CASP), *Specific Learning Disabilities and Patterns of Strengths and Weaknesses* (March, 2014) discuss what they view as three faulty “core assumptions about the validity and clinical utility” of the pattern of strengths and weaknesses (PSW) model articulated in the CASP Position Paper. The three critical assumptions identified by McGill and Busse are:

1. Diagnostic validity of the (PSW) model has been established.
2. Cognitive profile analysis is reliable and valid.
3. PSW methods have adequate treatment utility.

Though McGill and Busse have identified these as core assumptions of the PSW model, they are not the core assumptions of the CASP Position Paper. CASP’s core assumptions included:

1. “Within a comprehensive approach it is important to *first document* (a) provision of high quality instruction and intervention and (b) the student’s response to that instruction” (p. 3).
2. “Integrate information from multiple sources in order to understand the whole child” (p. 4).
3. “CASP supports the use of a comprehensive approach that incorporates data from previous instruction and intervention” (p. 2).

The CASP Board acknowledges that there is much controversy around how best to identify students with specific learning disability (SLD). Well-thought-out arguments and

research findings have been brought forth to support multiple views on this issue. It is hoped that research and scholarly debate around this topic will ultimately lead to better practice. CASP and the authors of the Position Paper wish to respond to four issues raised by the McGill and Busse article.

### Accuracy of McGill and Busse's Critique of the CASP Position Paper

The first concern with the McGill and Busse critique is lack of fidelity to the actual position paper. Statements were abbreviated or taken out of context and thus do not accurately represent the positions on PSW advanced in the CASP paper. While selectively quoting from the CASP Position Paper provided talking points for their arguments, this approach is misleading to readers of the critique. For example, McGill and Busse quote a sentence from the CASP Position Paper using ellipses, which alters the statement by removing both a key argument for PSW and also the context. McGill and Busse quote the CASP statement as follows: "Christo and Jones (2014) stated that the PSW approach '*provides the information essential to...make a determination that a student has a specific learning disability.*'". The CASP statement actually reads:

CASP supports the use of a *comprehensive approach that incorporates data from response to previous instruction and intervention* (MTSS) occurring prior to referral for special education and assessment identifying a student's strengths and weaknesses across performance in achievement and cognitive processing (PSW). A comprehensive evaluation provides an IEP team with the information regarding both environmental (instruction/intervention) and within learner attributes (responses and cognitive processing). This approach provides the information essential to (a) make a determination that a student has a specific learning disability (b) document the need for special education services and (c) provide information important in instruction and intervention design (italics added) (p. 2).

The meaning of this paragraph has been distorted by selective quoting. CASP as well as the lead authors for the Position Paper have been actively involved in promoting early evidence-based interventions for all students experiencing learning challenges, and acknowledge the critical importance of the use of data from the student's response to instruction and intervention as well as other data sources.

### Diagnostic Validity of the PSW Model

The CASP Position Paper does not claim diagnostic validity of the PSW model, but rather states that a comprehensive evaluation of students suspected of having SLD is warranted. The

CASP Position Paper supports the inclusion of cognitive data as part of a comprehensive approach to evaluating a student for SLD. This is a position supported by numerous researchers (e.g., Berninger 2006; Compton et al. 2012; Hale et al. 2013; Reynolds and Shaywitz 2009). It is important to repeat that the comprehensive approach advocated in the CASP Position Paper includes multiple sources of data in addition to cognitive assessment: e.g., "Indeed, PSW is defined as "a student's strengths and weaknesses *across achievement* and cognitive processing" (p. 2). The quote above from the CASP Position Paper reflects the position of the organization.

The CASP Board intentionally chose the term "comprehensive assessment" to broadly include data from the cognitive assessment and also academic and behavioral information. The term "comprehensive assessment" includes all information gathered during the assessment process including non-standardized data from the general education setting, review of records, observations, and interviews.

In addition, the closing paragraph of the Position Paper supports the critical role of school psychologists in the evaluation process for far more than cognitive testing. The closing paragraph states, "They are uniquely qualified to integrate information from multiple sources in order to understand the 'whole' child. CASP continues to support ongoing efforts to assure that school psychologists are equipped to play this critical role in evaluation and provision of supports for students with learning disabilities" (p. 4).

### Cognitive Profile Analysis is Reliable and Valid

There is support in the literature for using a student's pattern of performance on psychological processes as part of SLD determination. Multiple studies have identified psychological processing profiles unique to students with specific academic weaknesses (see Hale et al. 2016 for further citations). In the area of reading, numerous studies have linked deficits in phonological processing to problems in the development of basic reading skills (e.g., Snowling 2001; Torgesen 2000). Deficits in rapid naming have also been shown to correlate with reading problems beyond that predicted by phonological processing (Compton 2000; Manis et al. 2000). Likewise, specific cognitive processes have been identified as associated with math learning difficulties (Fuchs et al. 2010; Geary et al. 2007). Further support for looking at cognitive profiles was provided by Morris et al. (1998) who demonstrated different subtypes related to different reading problems and Fuchs et al. (2010) who demonstrated differences in the cognitive profiles of students who had math calculation deficits compared to those who had deficiency in word problems. Students with specific calculation deficits had weakness in attention and processing speed with adequate language processing while those with deficits in word problems had weakness in language processing.

Compton et al. (2012) analyzed the cognitive and academic profiles of fifth graders identified with SLD in reading and math. They found “results generally provide support for the specificity hypothesis, in which the unexpected underachievement associated with LD is conceptualized in terms of distinct *patterns of cognitive and academic strengths and weaknesses*” (italics added) (p. 90). Johnson, Humphrey, Mellard, Woods, and Swanson (2010) performed a meta-analysis of 32 studies that included cognitive processing information regarding students identified with SLD. Based on their analysis of differences in cognitive processing profiles of students with LD, “inclusion of cognitive processing measures as part of SLD identification is warranted” (p. 15).

The requirement to perform “cognitive profile analysis” in terms of identifying an area of psychological processing weakness has been a part of practice for California IEP teams since well before IDEA 2004. The CASP Position Paper acknowledges alternative approaches to evaluating a student’s psychological functioning *without* the use of traditional cognitive assessments. For example, the Paper refers to the Best Practices Model for the Alternative Assessment of African Americans for Special Education, developed by the Diagnostic Center, Northern California (DCN) that “follows a pattern of strengths and weaknesses model in determining SLD *without the use of cognitive assessment*” (p. 4).

Finally, it is also important to note that the Position Paper does not suggest that decisions regarding eligibility should be made purely on the basis of a student’s cognitive profile. Analysis of data from multiple sources is necessary to understand “why” a student is having difficulty learning. This process includes progress monitoring of evidence-based interventions to understand the student’s response to instruction and interventions. School psychologists are “critical to the evaluation process and to the design of education programs.... They are uniquely qualified to integrate information from multiple sources in order to understand the ‘whole’ child” (p. 4).

### PSW Methods Have Adequate Treatment Utility

McGill and Busse erroneously conclude that information derived from consideration of a student’s cognitive strengths and weaknesses implies “the presence of an aptitude-treatment-interaction (ATI)” The CASP Position Paper does not suggest this. In fact, the Paper states, “Proponents of identifying a pattern of strengths and weaknesses are working to bring the science of learning to the identification of learning disability and the development of interventions” (p. 4).

It is curious as to why the authors claim that this one sentence in the CASP Position Paper would imply an aptitude-treatment-interaction (ATI), as this term is absent from the Position Paper. In a recent *NASP Communiqué* article, Burns (2016) reviewed the controversy of ATI, concluding, “direct measures of the relevant skills provide more useful data for

intervention design than do measures of cognitive processing” (p. 28). As noted above, information from a comprehensive assessment includes direct measures of relevant academic skills using multiple data sources. Other researchers provide numerous resources to assist assessment teams in using the data from a comprehensive assessment to make decisions about interventions and accommodations (e.g., Hale et al. 2013; Feifer 2013; Flanagan et al. 2013; Hale et al. 2010a, b; Mascolo, Alfonso, and Flanagan 2014). The CASP Board has not taken a position on ATI, nor was it the intent of the Position Paper to imply that it has.

Currently in California, three approaches are allowed for the identification of a student with a specific learning disability: (a) a “severe discrepancy between intellectual ability and achievement” (5 CCR § 3030 [b] [10] [B]); (b) the “pupil does not make sufficient progress to meet age or state-approved grade level standards... when using a process based on the pupil’s response to scientific, research-based intervention” (5 CCR § 3030 [b] [10] [C] [2] [i]); or (c) “the pupil exhibits a pattern of strengths and weaknesses in performance, achievement, or both relative to age, State-approved standards or intellectual development...” (5 CCR § 3030 [b] [10] [C] [2] [ii]) (California Department of Education 2014). The CASP Position Paper is based on a conservative approach to SLD identification using the most defensible model currently available. It is not the intent of this response to discuss concerns with the ability-achievement discrepancy model or with an approach using only a student’s response to instruction (Reynolds and Shaywitz 2009; Tran et al. 2011). Readers are referred to sources referenced for further discussion of these topics.

McGill and Busse do not identify which of the three models defined under CA 5 CCR they deem most appropriate for SLD identification. Thus, the authors leave school psychology practitioners and special educators with no recommendations for current practice.

CASP encourages ongoing research and debate around the issue of how to reliably and validly identify students as having a specific learning disability. This debate can and should be carried out in a professional and respectful manner, without distortion. Readers are encouraged to review the CASP Position Paper in this issue of *Contemporary School Psychology* for clarity on the scope and intent of the Position Paper. Readers are also referred to Daniel, Breaux, and Frey (2010) for a comparison of the PSW model and the ability-achievement discrepancy model.

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