



Name: Sofie

Age: 13;6

**Written evaluation component of “Disorder, Difference, or Gap?:
A School-Age Disability Evaluation” by Dr. Catherine Crowley**

Background History

Family History

Sofie is a very attractive and genuinely charming girl, who easily establishes connections with people. She lives with adopted parents, her biological 11-year-old sister, who is also adopted, and her 7-year-old brother who is in the process of being adopted. She came to her adopted family 2.5 years ago.

From birth through 7 years old, Sofie lived with her mother and maternal grandfather in the nearby large city. For purposes of this evaluation, the details will be left out, but there were such significant issues in the family that Sofie and her sister and brother were removed from the home 6 years ago and spent 4 years in various foster homes and also living with her maternal great grandmother and then maternal grandfather, before being adopted by this family 2 ½ years ago.

Her current adoptive parents both have Ph.Ds. and are professors at universities. The mother, who was present during this evaluation, works in a private university in New York City and commutes back and forth to their home in Western Massachusetts. Her other mother teaches at a university near their home. Sofie and her family sometimes visit New York City and stay in her mother's faculty housing apartment there but their primary residence is in Western Massachusetts.

Sofie and her adoptive family live in a lovely one family house in a semi-rural community in a community that is overwhelmingly Caucasian, non-Hispanic mainstream American middle class and school-oriented. However, prior to moving with her adoptive parents Sofie lived in a predominantly Latino/a and African American community.

Critical Questions

Because the adoptive parents have only known Sofie for 2 ½ years, the mother interviewed could not answer many of the Critical Questions. According to reports the adopted parents received from social services, Sofie's mother left school in 10th grade; her father graduated from high school. She could not comment on Sofie's developmental milestones or medical history or her biological family's history of academic or language problems. She did say that Sofie is not clumsy but very graceful and coordinated.

As for significant changes in the family structure, obviously there have been great and challenging changes as described in this section. In the past 2 ½ years that Sofie has been with her adoptive family. The most significant change has been the introduction of her younger brother into her adoptive family.



Sofie's mother indicated that she has significant concerns about Sofie's language processing skills and her receptive and expressive language. She is concerned that Sofie does not use many three-syllable words and whether or not she is able to learn SAE for the "job world".

Prior Schooling

Sofie has been to many different schools. When she started school she lived with her mother and her school attendance was sporadic. After kindergarten she attended first, second, and half of third grade at a different school. She then went to another school for the second half of third grade and the first half of fourth grade. Sofie went to a different school for the rest of fourth grade. Sofie had attended four different schools by the time she finished fourth grade.

In the fifth grade, Sofie started living with her adoptive parents and she attended a nearby school with a student body with many African American and Latino students. The parents, however, were not happy with the school curriculum that emphasized rote learning with vocabulary-based science and social studies. They took her out of that school and enrolled Sofie in her current school when she began sixth grade. At the time of this interview, Sofie was finishing seventh grade and would remain in that school for one more year as it ends at eighth grade.

Prior Disability Evaluations

In the fall of 2013 Sofie's adoptive parents arranged for a private series of evaluations: a neuropsychological evaluation and a speech-language evaluation. These were primarily score-based evaluations with virtually no understanding or awareness of the impact of Sofie's cultural or linguistic background on her performance throughout those evaluations.

These evaluations, however, provide an insight into Sofie's speech-language skills 18 months ago. Her performance on the day of this evaluation demonstrates that she is a girl who is has gone through rapid language learning of the dialect of her new school, home, and community. She has also acquired a much deeper semantic knowledge. The results of this evaluation in comparison to the ones from 18 months ago reveal that Sofie is a girl with language gaps that she is rapidly filling. To state it another way, there is a remarkable and significant difference between Sofie's language skills as assessed 18 months ago, where the evaluators did not consider prior dialect/language or cultural background or the impact of the instability of her home and academic experiences, and her current language skills. Her current performance, which only assessed SAE, indicates that Sofie is a girl who is rapidly filling up cultural, linguistic, and academic gaps, and not a girl with a disability.

How the prior evaluations support this conclusion will be illustrated by weaving the support from these unsophisticated evaluation results into the language section of this evaluation.

Teacher interview/Academic Achievement

Based on the teacher interview, a review of Sofie's portfolio, and observation of the school and classroom, Sofie is in an extraordinary school. This assessment is made as a school that provides targeted support to address Sofie's individual academic needs and gaps and as a school that follows the "best practices" of quality classroom instruction. One example of such excellence is the school-wide approach to developing metacognitive thinking skills. On every classroom wall are



diagrams that illustrate ways of approaching a problem such as considering part-whole, cause-effect, categorization, etc.

Sofie is in the 7th grade. She began in this school in the Fall of 2014, meaning that she is just about to complete two full school years in this school. Prior to this school, Sofie was in a charter school nearby with racial and ethnic diversity much more similar to Sofie's own, but one that academically did not provide Sofie with the knowledge and skills needed to close Sofie's academic and linguistic gaps.

A review of Sofie's performance on the statewide English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics tests revealed that she continues to have significant academic difficulties. Her ELA scores for 2012 and 2013 were in the "Warning" range where students demonstrate a "minimal understanding of subject matter and do not solve problems" (the family exempted Sofie from the 2014 ELA testing). Sofie's math scores for 2012-2014 are at the low end of the "Needs Improvement" range where students demonstrate a "partial understanding of subject matter and solve some simple problems."

As part of this evaluation, Sofie's "Humanities" teacher, Ms. Beth Adel, was interviewed. Ms. Adel teaches Sofie and all her fellow 7th graders English and Social Studies. They have two periods each day with Ms. Adel. She described an integrated curriculum with students learning the same content with an English Language Arts focus in English class, and a social studies/history focus in that class.

Ms. Adel is obviously a gifted and reflective teacher who knows Sofie quite well. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, Ms. Adel provided extremely reliable information about Sofie as she taught for several years in the same community schools in the inner city where Sofie lived with her biological family and likely several of her foster families during those four years. As a result, Ms. Adel with her 14 years plus of teaching experience could provide expert clinical judgment based on Sofie's academic progress over the past academic year and on how Sofie compares to students from a similar cultural and linguistic background before Sofie came to her new school and her adoptive family. Ms. Adel described most of the students in the school as those from homes that might have "graduate school conversations" over dinner. Sofie did not have those opportunities until September 2014 when she began at this school.

Ms. Adel described Sofie as a hard worker who wants to improve fast. "She's a really hard worker. She wants to do well. She wants to improve fast. She's willing to push herself to improve fast, and I've seen her hard work pay off. She has taken some really big leaps this year...She loves the community so she's very connected with group work. So, if there's a point that is confusing for her, she can really extract it from the group. She can identify the problem, she can figure it out with the group. She never isolates herself, she never pretends to understand, which is what some other students do – they put up a good front and they try to work by themselves, but they're really stuck. And, she doesn't try to do that." When asked to give specifics on how Sofie has improved, Ms. Adel said, "I'm seeing that she understands more reading by the type of questions that she's asking. She's asking really insightful questions, she can make connections between different texts, which is one strategy that really good readers are doing. So, I'm seeing those strategies emerge from her. I'm seeing her being able to picture a text that she couldn't do in September." Ms. Adel went further to describe a student who has made "So much fast progress" overall and "great strides in writing."



While Sofie's progress has been swift, Ms. Adel indicated that in her first year in the school, as a 6th grader, Sofie was less willing to say when she did not understand something. Ms. Adel described it as needing time to "orient and land" and to learn how to access the support that is available to her. Ms. Adel also noted that one of Sofie's greatest weaknesses is her vocabulary and comprehension of academic content, something confirmed by Sofie's mother.

In 7th grade, Ms. Adel describes a student that has "staked her claim." Sofie now asks, "What does that mean?" rather than remain confused or not know the meaning of a word. It does make sense that it took Sofie a year to feel that she could.

When asked whether Ms. Adel felt that Sofie had a disability or a gap, she indicated that from her perspective Sofie appeared to have gaps that had to be filled. She said she did not know for certain, but she did not see a disability as she worked with Sofie and saw how quickly those gaps were being filled.

The Speech-Language Pathology Assistant (SLPA) who works with Sofie two sessions a week primarily on vocabulary skills also felt that Sofie has gaps and not a disability. This SLPA quoted Sofie as saying, "People use words here that I don't understand." This statement shows Sofie's metalinguistic understanding of language and her gaps that need to be filled.

Sofie currently receives additional support services including reading comprehension pull-out sessions four times a week for 45 minutes each time with 3 individually and 1 time in a group of 3. The reading teacher is new to the school and is substituting for the regular reading teacher who is on maternity leave. She also receives language support from the school SLPA two times a week.

Language Background and Use

This section is based on Sofie's recollections and her adoptive mother's best understanding of Sofie's language and dialect acquisitional history.

From birth until she was 7, Sofie reportedly heard Puerto Rican Spanish, Puerto Rican English, African American English, and Standard American English. Sofie herself said that her biological family spoke both English and Spanish. Sofie went to school in the nearby large city, where her peers also spoke those languages and dialects. She and her sister were placed in homes where the families were Puerto Rican and depending on the foster family spoke SAE, Puerto Rican English, Puerto Rican Spanish, and African American English.

When Sofie and her sister came to live with her adoptive family, the only dialect her parents spoke was Standard American English (SAE). Her mother believes that a significant amount of African American English and Puerto Rican English and Puerto Rican Spanish was spoken at school by Sofie's peers and teachers in her fourth grade school. At Sofie's current school, SAE is the dialect of her teachers and peers.

During the parent interview the mother expressed concern about Sofie's language skills both expressively and receptively. Her mother said that in the past she had corrected Sofie's language. But Sofie told her mother she did not want to be corrected in order to "Talk White" (as the mother



calls it) and asked that her mother not correct her speech. Her mother said that she stopped correcting Sofie's speech but continues to do so with the sister and now the younger brother.

During this evaluation, Sofie spoke only SAE with no code switching to AAE or PRE. Her mother noted that in the home, Sofie's speech is now no different with her siblings than it is with her adoptive parents.

Midway through the evaluation, this evaluator spoke Spanish, but Sofie did not respond even to some simple Spanish. This might be because she has had such significant loss in Spanish or that she was not comfortable or did not anticipate Spanish from the evaluator on in the school setting.

Based on the language acquisitional history, it is likely that Sofie spoke a lot of Spanish with her biological family and has lost a good deal of her Spanish. Without a complete language acquisitional history beyond 2 ½ years ago, it is difficult to determine how much Spanish Sofie spoke in the past to see the amount of loss and whether she stopped being exposed to Spanish when she left her biological home at 7 or whether she had significant exposure in the foster homes.

Nonetheless, based on the information gathered and the clinical interactions with Sofie, she appears to be a fluent speaker of SAE, and likely has gone through significant language loss in Spanish and most recently in Spanish-influenced English and African American English. Sofie's rapid acquisition of SAE in the 1 ½ years she has been at the new school indicates a strong facility to acquire language and to understand metalinguistics.

Evaluation

Assessment Materials

- Teacher Interview
- Parent Interview
- SLAM materials
- Review of Statewide Test Results
- Prior Evaluations
- Portfolio Review
- Various Language Samples, including narrative and academic language elicitation
- CELF-5 Nonstandard administration of tests
- Clinical Observations

Hearing

According to her mother, Sofie has not had a full audiological evaluation. She did have a hearing screening at the pediatrician's office using headphones that she passed. It was suggested that Sofie have a full audiological evaluation to rule out any hearing loss simply to ensure that any comprehension issues are unrelated to hearing loss.



Oral Peripheral Mechanism and Feeding

All parameters within normal limits.

Voice/ Fluency

All parameters within normal limits.

Articulation and Intelligibility

Sofie demonstrated adult acquisition of all speech sounds for SAE indicating no delay in the development. During the evaluation she did not use the phonological system of any dialects of English other than SAE.

Receptive/ Expressive Language

Sofie demonstrated an age appropriate ability to follow a line of questions and integrate and organize her thoughts and express them with SAE grammar. (She has been on the subway as the family spends some time in NYC at her mother's faculty housing there.)

["What happened?"] There was probably a big crowd and he didn't get out so then his foot got stuck. ["Did this ever happen to you?"] Almost. When we were going back to the apartment, it happened to my mom because she was swiping it the wrong way. ["What would you do if this happened to you?"] I would probably start yelling. I know it would hurt.

As can be seen by the language sample directly above, Sofie has acquired all the features of SAE. She uses modal and conditional tenses ("I would probably" and "It would hurt"), SAE noun-verb agreement ("we were"), use of copula and auxiliary be form ("there was" and "she was swiping", and complex sentences including causation and temporal elements ("when", "so then", "because", and "I know [that]").

Sofie also displayed the ability to compare and contrast and make inferences. For example, when asked to compare the city where she used to live with her current bucolic home, Sofie said "Well, in Springfield, there was more mixed people. Like, there was more Black and Latinos and Latina people, and here in Hampton, it's mostly just white people. But, it's also very quiet. Like, Hampton is not really a place where there's a whole lot of robberies and thieves. It's a peaceful town that's like a corner of a house – no one would think to go there and look. In Springfield, people don't really clean as much. It's kind of dirty, there's not really many fields. It's mostly just houses and dirt and littering all over. It kind of reminds me of New York...Springfield has a lot of hip-hop and pop dance moves and music and people. I heard music all the time in Springfield. Here, there's not really that much music, but the music here is mostly jazz and smooth music...I miss the other music, but now I get to listen to what songs I want."

Improvements in Performance based on Evaluation Reviews

Sofie's parents sent her for private evaluations 18 months before this evaluation, that is, when she had just begun at her current, excellent school. In the psychological evaluation, Sofie's did poorly in vocabulary and comprehension. On the speech-language evaluation Sofie's scores were weakest



on the “Recalling Sentences” subtest of the CELF-4, where she was found to have a scaled score of 4 and a percentile rank of 2 (the evaluator provided no confidence intervals for any of the scores). It was especially based on Sofie’s performance on the Recalling Sentences subtest that the evaluator said that Sofie had “significantly disordered language” and concluded that Sofie has a “severe language impairment.”

During this evaluation, Sofie was given the Recalling Sentences subtest of the CELF-5. Her scores had improved quite significantly. She received a scaled score of 8, or 7 to 9 with a confidence interval of 95%. This means that her language skills have improved very significantly and are now in the low average to average range. One major problem with the first evaluation is that the evaluator did not even consider whether Sofie was comfortable with the dialect used in the evaluation. When the first evaluation was done, Sofie was just a month or two in a school where only SAE was spoken. The problem in her performance in the earlier evaluation was primarily that the evaluator understood that she was not evaluating disorder, but rather where Sofie had been exposed to SAE, which at that time she had minimal exposure.

The other receptive language subtest that Sofie did poorly in the prior speech-language evaluation was the CELF-4 subtest, Concepts and Directions. This subtest was not administered as it was significantly revamped in the CELF-5 and a poor test of receptive skills and instead assesses understanding concepts, which are a vocabulary-based.

On the Word Classes subtest of the CELF-5, Sofie demonstrated good problem-solving and inferencing skills in Word Classes. For example, she connected smooth/rough, search/quest, longitude/latitude, enthusiastic/eager, and occupied/vacant. All of the wrong answers were due to her lack of vocabulary, not an inability to make inferences and problem solve. For example, she did not know the words prosperous, memoir, essential, renovate, caricature, parched, arid, or assimilate. Sofie does have weaknesses in vocabulary and the content validity problems in this subtest are that it becomes a thinly veiled vocabulary test at the higher levels. Even with the vocabulary issue, Sofie performed at the average level.

In both the prior and the current speech-language evaluations, the Word Definitions subtest of the CELF-4 and CELF-5 were administered. This subtest is an important one for Sofie because it assesses semantic knowledge, not the ability to label items as does a traditional vocabulary test. In the prior speech-language evaluation, Sofie received a scaled score of 8, which is low average. In the current speech-language evaluation, Sofie’s scaled score was a 10, with a 95% confidence range from 8 to 12 indicating performance well within the average range.

Her performance in the Word Definitions shows strong linguistic and problem solving skills. For example, she described “treaty” as “A treaty is like a contract”; a “souvenir” as “something to remember where you were, something precious to someone who got it”; a “committee” as “a whole group of people in deciding what to do”; a “negotiation” as “trying to work something out”; a “decade” as “a very long time”; and “award” as “you achieved in something, a reward, you get an award to show your effort.” Her mother indicated that the family works together building vocabulary for Sofie and her sister at breakfast and there is a big focus in school as well.



Disorder vs. Gap

The question of whether Sofie has a language disorder or a gap in vocabulary and academic language is critical. If she has a gap, then the approach is to provide her with a rich and robust environment within which she can acquire vocabulary and learn the academic language registers which will allow her to fill those gaps and build on that success academically. If she has a language disorder, then Sofie's academics will focus on addressing the disability and building accommodations and modifications.

Based on the information gathered during this evaluation, Sofie appears to have academic and linguistic gaps not a language disability. Perhaps foremost is her ability to acquire all the features of SAE in the 18 months she has been exposed to it. During the evaluation she only spoke in SAE indicating an ability to acquire morphology and syntax, pragmatic language, and semantics, and a metalinguistic and sociolinguistic skills in how and when to use that dialect.

Some of the descriptions by her mother also strongly point to age appropriate language skills. Her mother described Sofie as having "wolf ears" meaning she can hear and understand what her parents are saying even when her parents and Sofie are on different floors of the house, and when her parents do not want to be heard by the Sofie and her siblings.

Another indication of at least adequate language skills is an ability to understand humor quickly because this requires processing language quickly and making inferences and understanding language-based relationships. During the evaluation this happened several times including when she defined mustard as "green and yellowy". This evaluator said, "You probably need to check how old the mustard is in your refrigerator" and Sofie immediately understood what the evaluator meant and the humor.

As final evidence that Sofie has at least age appropriate language skills, her mother said that Sofie watches television shows with characters that develop over time, and with ongoing and involved plots such as *Glee* when it was popular and currently the show *Sync*. When asked how she, the mother, knows that Sofie understands the characters dilemmas and relationships and the interweaving plots, the mother said she will ask Sofie what is going on with the plot and with various characters and Sofie tells her mother what is going on.

Some of the data gathered during the parent interview raised some concerns. For example, her mother raised the concern was that Sofie does not remember what she has been told. For example, if her parents tell her and her siblings that they have something planned for the next day, when it is time to leave for the event, Sofie will say that she was never told and will be upset. This is an outlier to all the other data collected during this evaluation. It is quite possible that due to the trauma of her earlier life, Sofie will hear and understand the information but be either resistant to incorporating it or unwilling due to ongoing trauma or unwillingness to participate. However, given the overwhelming evidence otherwise, this is unlikely evidence of a language disorder. It is also quite possible that her parents' view of Sofie's skills was negatively affected by the first speech-language evaluation's incorrect finding the Sofie has a "severe language disorder".



Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions:

In sum, Sofie's performance in the current speech-language evaluation indicated age appropriate language skills in receptive and expressive language. Her prior speech-language evaluator failed to take into consideration the fact that she was just in the process of acquiring SAE—the dialect of the CELF, and was in significant language loss of Spanish, African-American English, and Spanish-influenced English. As a result, the conclusions made by the prior evaluator are more indicative of that evaluator's lack of the requisite knowledge and skills to do a quality evaluation. The fact that Sofie has improved her language skills so significantly point to the fact that she is a girl with gaps and not a language disorder.

In addition to her weak vocabulary skills, that are now developing, Sofie also has difficulty in the comprehension of texts. According to the teachers and her adoptive mother, Sofie can read texts, but she has trouble with comprehension. It is likely there are two main reasons for this. First, she comes from a background where she was not exposed to many "Tier 2" or "Tier 3" vocabulary words (Hart & Risley, 1995). Tier 2 words are words that are likely to appear frequently in a wide variety of texts and in written and oral academic language. Tier 3 words are low frequency, context-specific vocabulary. With her family and school she is in the process of acquiring that vocabulary and is doing so at a fairly rapid pace. But her vocabulary skills continue to need ongoing support and development. Secondly, she comes from a background where she was not exposed to academic registers, with is more abstract, less context-embedded, with more specific vocabulary. Given her family background and that she moved from school to school in lower socioeconomic areas, Sofie is still in the process of acquiring the academic language registers that will give her the skills needed to perform well in the classroom and on the statewide tests.

Recommendations:

1. Sofie has gaps in language especially in the acquisition of labeling of Tier 3 vocabulary and in the acquisition of academic language registers.
2. Sofie does not have a language disorder or disability. Prior identification of this was simply a lack of knowledge and skills of that speech-language evaluator who failed to distinguish a language disorder from a language difference and/or lack of prior exposure.
3. Sofie is in an extraordinary school. She needs ongoing help to acquire vocabulary and the academic language register that she is in the process of acquiring.
4. Sofie might benefit from incorporation into the curriculum of the Word Generation or SERP program that builds vocabulary and academic language.
5. Encourage her parents to continue to build vocabulary and introduce structured conversations and discussions on both sides of important issues.



6. Allow Sofie to use whatever dialect she is comfortable with her sister and brother at home. She clearly demonstrated that she has the linguistic skills to quickly acquire SAE—the English of the classroom, her school peers, and her adoptive parents. She has also the metalinguistic and sociolinguistic skills to know when to use SAE as demonstrated by her use of that dialect throughout this evaluation. But it is important to use an additive model, that is where she can use the other dialects she and her siblings speak and that the additive model is affirmed by her parents. This will help her understand that she does not have to “become White” when she “speaks White”, and that she can maintain her personal identity and express herself using her rich linguistic and cultural experiences.
7. Focus on the development of Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary words within academic contexts.
8. Focus on the comprehension skills by responding to questions seeing the main idea, recollection of basic facts, making meaningful predictions, and making reasonable inferences.

References

Hart, B., & Risley, T. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Baltimore: P.H. Brookes.