

An Overview of Culturally and Linguistically Competent Assessment Practices

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Given recent changes in Arizona policies regarding the assessment and education of English Language Learners, it is important to review legal and ethical guidelines for the evaluation of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students. To illustrate, the most recent NASP Principals for Professional Ethics (2010) state “School psychologists pursue awareness and knowledge of how diversity factors may influence child development, behavior, and school learning. In conducting psychological, educational, or behavioral evaluations or in providing interventions, therapy, counseling, or consultation services, the school psychologist takes into account individual characteristics...(Standard I.3.2).” Furthermore, IDEA 2004 states “Each local educational agency shall ensure that—(A) assessments and other evaluation materials used to assess a child under this section—(i) are selected and administered so as not to be discriminatory on a racial or cultural basis; (ii) are provided and administered in the language and form most likely to yield accurate information on what the child knows and can do academically, developmentally, and functionally, unless it is not feasible to so provide or administer; (iii) are used for purposes for which the assessment or measures are valid and reliable; (iv) are administered by trained and knowledgeable personnel; and (v) are administered in accordance with any instructions provided by the producer of such assessments”.

It is beyond the scope of this article to be comprehensive on this topic. The reader is referred to such publications as *Best Practices in the Special Education Assessment of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) Students* (Alvarado, 2006); *Culturally Competent Assessment of English Language Learners for Special Education Services* (Blatchley & Lau, 2010); *Assessing Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students: A Practical Guide* (Rhodes, Ochoa, & Ortiz, 2005).

Best practices in culturally competent assessment follow these guidelines. Pre-referral practices should utilize a multidisciplinary team of individuals comprised of professionals competent in relevant cultural and linguistic variables, the parent, and an interpreter (if needed). Referral information should be comprehensive, and include languages spoken in the home, languages spoken by the child; thorough educational history, cultural/lifestyle information, history of language programming (e. g., bilingual; ESL), parental concerns; length of time in the USA, etc. Prior to referral (per OCR mandates) the CLD child’s language proficiency must be assessed in English and the native language, in the areas of oral language, reading, and writing. Arizona currently only requires the Arizona English Language Learner Assessment (AZELLA) for English Language Learners. However, best practice guidelines, IDEA 2004, and OCR mandates are more comprehensive, and should be followed for CLD students referred for special education testing. Research suggests that best practice is to use parallel oral language tests (Alvarado, 2006), but this is not feasible with the AZELLA. Therefore, other native language tests such as the IPT, LAS, and BSM are available. At best, these assessments should be viewed as screenings, as their psychometric properties are tenuous. Data regarding academic performance and response to interventions should use norms comparing the child to similar CLD students. In other words, is the CLD student achieving significantly below other CLD students with similar levels of education, socioeconomic status, language spoken in the home, language proficiency, etc?

Based on this data, the multidisciplinary team should form a hypothesis as to whether the CLD child’s learning differences are primarily due to cultural/linguistic variable, or to a true learning problem. If the answer is the former, then additional interventions targeted to English Language Learners should be implemented, and progress monitored. If the answer is the latter, then it should be determined whether a bilingual evaluator or interpreter is needed. Alvarado (2006) presented various options through which to proceed to assist in this decision. At Level 1, a trained bilingual evaluator, fluent in the student’s native language, using evaluation materials in at least two languages is utilized (best practice). At Level 2, a bilingual evaluator fluent in the

student's native language, but using modified evaluation materials, or tests with norming populations not representative of the student's background is utilized. At Level 3, an English-speaking evaluator is assisted by a trained bilingual evaluator (co-evaluation), using standardized evaluation materials. At Level 4, an English-speaking evaluator, assisted by a trained interpreter, using modified evaluation materials, or tests with norming populations not representative of the student's background is utilized. At Level 5, for students whose language is other than English or Spanish, and there is no bilingual evaluator fluent in that student's language, only non-verbal intelligence measures are used.

Assessment of cognitive functioning should be conducted in the student's most dominant language, or a combination of English and the native language, and should include assessment of multiple intelligences (Flanagan, Ortiz, & Alfonso, 2007). Tests of verbal reasoning, such as the BVAT, are able to assess the simultaneous processing of English and the native language, and are more culturally/linguistically appropriate than tests administered monolingually. Limiting an evaluation to non-verbal measures can result in under-identifying language-based processing deficits, but are the best alternative when a bilingual evaluator is not feasible. Per Arizona law, assessment of adaptive behavior must be administered to the parent in the native language. School psychologists must understand that adaptive behavioral expectations vary from culture to culture, and interpret results accordingly (Blatchley & Lau, 2010).

Academic assessment varies according to the CLD child's educational experiences. For example, if the child has received any academic instruction in the native language, academic achievement in the native language should at the very least, be screened to make sure the child shows academic delays in both English and the native language. García, Lawton, & Diniz de Figueiredo (2010) reported that 85% of the CLD students in Arizona speak Spanish. Academic achievement tests in Spanish, such as the Bateria-III Pruebas de aprovechamiento, are available with a parallel form in English. Because norm-referenced achievement tests do not adequately represent CLD populations, it is also important to gather curriculum-based measures, using local norms comparing the CLD student to students of similar backgrounds (Blatchley & Lau, 2010).

Social emotional assessment must take into consideration cultural and linguistic variables common to CLD students. The following characteristics are often shared between children with emotional disabilities and CLD students: Differences in personal space, eye gaze, response time, body language, vocal pitch and intensity, poor attention span, and conversational rules. Therefore, multidimensional sources of data should be gathered, especially in-depth parent interviews. Some behavioral rating scales, such as the BASC-2 are available in Spanish. In addition, some projective tests, such as the Holtzman Inkblot Test and the Tell-Me-a-Story (TEMAS) are normed on minority populations, and have been shown to be more reliable and valid for those populations (Caterino, 1990).

Finally, once the evaluation has been completed, ethical standards and IDEA 2004 require that test results cannot be interpreted in isolation, particularly with CLD students. Any deviation of test administration must be documented. In addition, the multidisciplinary evaluation team must consider and document environmental, cultural, and economic factors that may be contributing to the student's behavior and learning (Alvarado, 2006).

Summary of Culturally Competent Assessment Practices:

Pre-Referral

Multidisciplinary involvement, including professionals competent in language acquisition
Parent interview, with interpreter, if needed
Thorough review of records,
Documentation of variety of research-based interventions; local norms; compare to other ELL's
Language proficiency testing in English and the native language

Evaluation

Determine need for bilingual evaluator/interpreter

Tailor assessment tools to child's needs, match norms as closely as possible to CLD student

Use a multiple intelligences model to assess cognitive ability

Use direct and indirect assessments

Acknowledge limitations of test instruments

Some common questions posed to bilingual school psychologists are listed below, and are addressed using a question/answer format:

Q

How long should we wait before evaluating a CLD student for special education services?

A

This is a complicated question that depends on many factors. In general, when assessing for a Specific Learning Disability, the extant literature on second language acquisition suggests that two to three years of English language exposure is required to acquire basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS), a skill that is context-embedded, or relies on gestures, feedback, and situational cues. In contrast, approximately five to seven years is required to acquire cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP), which is context-reduced, or relies on linguistic cues to establish meaning, often without visual cues (McLaughlin, 1990). CLD students, especially those in non-bilingual programs, must acquire English BICS while concurrently acquiring academic skills in English reading, writing, and math. Most bilingual evaluators agree that a CLD student should have at least two years of English instruction prior to referral for a Specific Learning Disability. Clearly, when considering other categories of eligibility such as intellectual disability, emotional disability, hearing/vision impairments, etc., it is not necessary to wait two years for a student to acquire BICS before evaluating for special education services. Other factors that must be considered in the evaluation process include level of acculturation, amount of academic instruction in the native language, how the student compares to other CLD students with similar levels of instruction, length of time in the USA, beginning language proficiency, etc.

Q

Can't I just give a WISC-IV or SB5, since they provide both verbal and nonverbal factors?

A

There are two issues raised by this question. First, IDEA 2004 states that children be assessed in their native language unless it is clearly unfeasible to do so. One of the mistakes made by school professionals is to assume that because the CLD student is able to converse with them in English, and/or tested in the proficient range on measures of language proficiency, that the student can be assessed in English. This practice not only discounts the effect of CALP on performance on these tests, but also ignores cultural influences on performance. The second issue is related to the high degree of linguistic and cultural loading of the WISC-IV, WAIS-III, SB5, etc. For example, even on "nonverbal subtests" such as Block Design, a child must have a high receptive understanding of English (CALP) in order to understand the requirements of the task. Therefore, for a CLD child, tests that are highly linguistically loaded (e.g., verbal reasoning tasks) "degenerate in unknown degrees into tests of English language proficiency" (Figueroa, 1990a, p. 93), and therefore measure language proficiency more so than cognitive ability.

Q

The CLD student scored proficient on the AZELLA Listening and Speaking sections and the teacher says that the student speaks English fluently. Can I test the student in English?

A

The AZELLA is primarily a test of BICS, especially the Listening and Speaking sections. As stated above, just because a CLD student is able to carry on a conversation in English does not mean that the child has a comparable level of acculturation or can understand the demands of standardized tests normed primarily on English-speaking students. Furthermore, groups such as AERA, APA, and NCME agree that relying on a single test measure for significant educational decisions is inappropriate (Eugene Garcia, Kerry Lawton, & Eduardo H. Diniz de Figueiredo, 2010). Best practice in assessment of language proficiency suggests that the CLD student's language proficiency be assessed in both English and the native language. This practice is upheld by federal entities such as OCR, and is necessary to determine the dominant language and need for a bilingual evaluation. If it is determined that English is the dominant language, and it is not possible to access a bilingual evaluator, then the CLD student may be assessed in English, as long as tests that are low on cultural and linguistic loading (e.g., UNIT, Leiter-R) are included, and cultural and linguistic implications are included in the administration and interpretation of test results.

Q

By waiting two years for the CLD student to acquire BICS, are we denying services to that student?

A

One issue raised by this question is whether the CLD student has received appropriate interventions. *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) established that "it is not enough to provide the same education to children who are different; opportunity for one group may mean a denial of opportunity for another". *Lau v. Nichols* made clear that equality is not synonymous with sameness. CLD students must be provided with appropriate pedagogy, whether that includes bilingual programming or Content-based ESL strategies. A second issue relates to prereferral considerations and subsequent evidence-based interventions. Ideally, prereferral teams should be viewed as a valuable resource by school personnel. These teams should be comprised of individuals who understand cultural and linguistic influences on learning, as well as development of first and second language acquisition. This early intervention process assists with distinguishing a learning disability from linguistic/cultural effects

Q

What issues should be considered for CLD students where the RTI model is used?

A

RTI is a promising approach with children of all backgrounds, and has the potential for effectiveness with CLD students. The foundation of this approach should be culturally responsive, quality instruction with on-going progress monitoring within the general education classroom. If school personnel are not properly trained in culturally and linguistically competent educational practices, RTI could lead to greater disproportionality of CLD children in special education programs (Brown, 2008). To avoid this, in addition to culturally and linguistically competent practice, local norms for CLD students should be developed. Local norms should consider length of time in the USA, previous instruction in the native language, language models in the home, etc. Moreover, an effective RTI model utilizes a multidisciplinary approach, including culturally/linguistically competent professionals, and a focus on peer-reviewed, evidence-based practice (Brown, 2008).