

Practical and Theoretical Considerations for Assessment Of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students

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INTRODUCTION

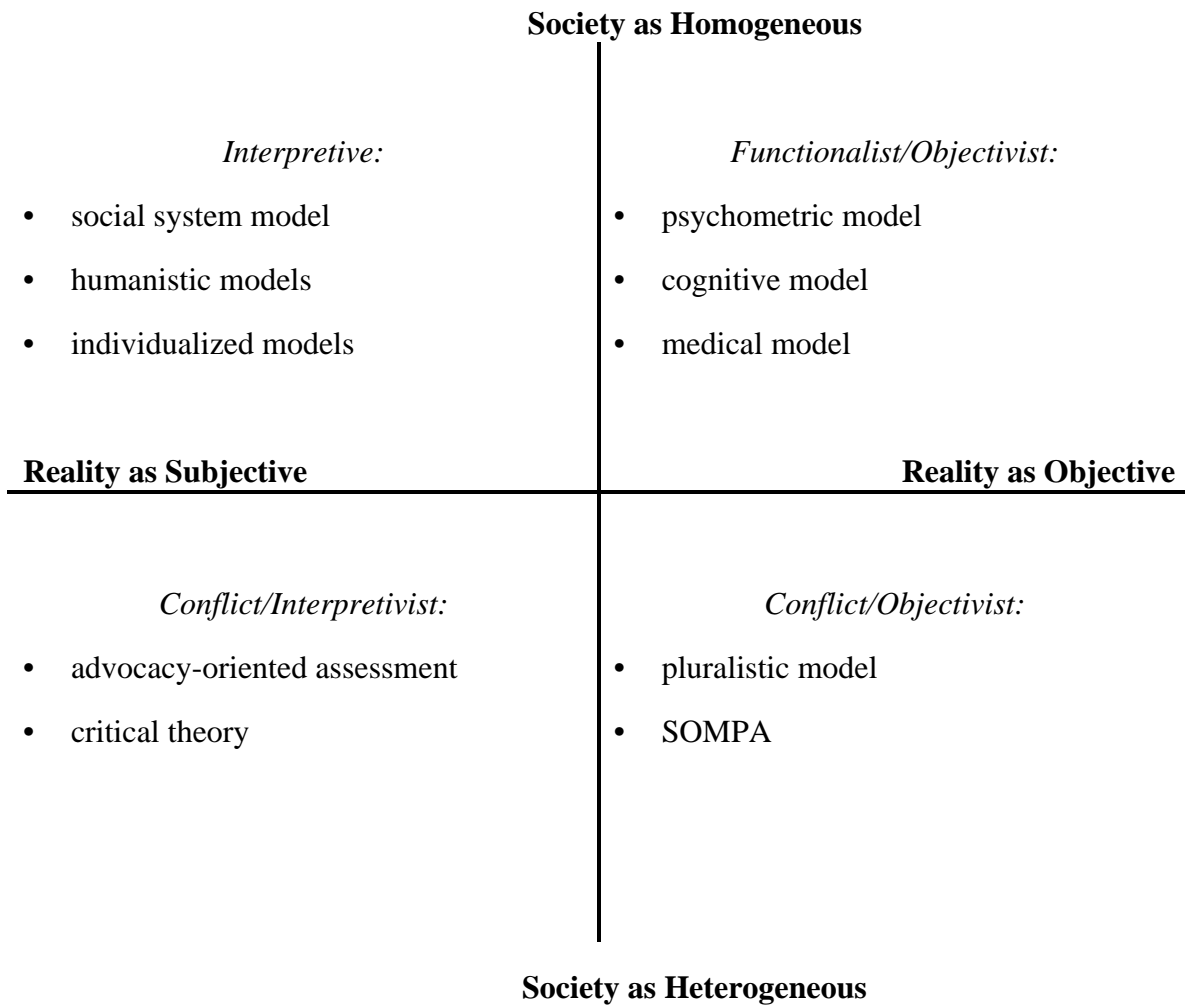
Before engaging in any sort of assessment process, it is crucial that the purpose for that assessment be clearly understood. If we approach special education evaluations as primarily a process for determining what a child “has” or what his/her problem is, then we most likely will do a poor job of considering any contributing factors outside of the student. There can be different purposes and different audiences for assessment at various points in a student’s academic career. For example, most students participate in group achievement testing. The purposes for this type of testing can be varied - indicating student progress in relation to grade level peers, reporting progress of a school as a whole to the district, or serving as a gate keeping mechanism for gifted and talented programs. Whether or not we agree with these common purposes of this type of assessment, the bottom line for all assessments should be to provide information that will help improve the instruction of our children and youth.

OVERVIEW: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

When we attempt assessment reform, changes on both philosophical and practical levels will need to be considered. These changes have different procedural implications at levels of the individual classroom, school building, and the district, and it is important that personnel at all levels understand the underlying rationales for state of the art best practices.

PHILOSOPHICAL PRINCIPLES

Mercer and Rueda (Mercer & Rueda, 1991; Mercer, 1992) have developed a framework for describing assessment paradigms and theoretical models in special education that allows us to compare and contrast various models based on their underlying assumptions. This framework locates various models along the axes of the assumed nature of reality and nature of society. This framework is depicted below (adapted from Mercer & Rueda, 1991).



Most current assessment practices are based on the medical and psychometric models, which assume that (1) diagnosed disabilities are an objective, knowable reality, and (2) society is homogeneous. Given the current controversy about the nature of learning disabilities as a socially constructed phenomenon that cannot be isolated solely within the individual and the reality of our diverse, heterogeneous society, these assumptions are clearly no longer tenable (de Valenzuela & Cervantes, in press). Mercer (1992) critiques the psychometric and medical models in the following manner:

“Where the psychomedical model sees “mental retardation” as an objective empirical fact, the social system model sees it as a social construction. Because the definition of “mental retardation” is

socially negotiated, it not only varies from society to society but changes over time. Where the psychomedical model sees “mental retardation” as a disability that one “has,” the interpretive model sees it as a status that one holds as a result of a variety of social contingencies. A person can be “retarded” in one group and not in another. Retardation is a social enactment.” (p. 25)

This perspective is in keeping with the Presidential Commission on Mental Retardation report entitled *The Six-Hour Retarded Child* (PCMR, 1969).

More recently, other ways of viewing and assessing disabilities have been developed. Cummins’ (1986) *Framework for Empowering Minority Students* is an example of this shift in perspective. According to Cummins (p. 21) “the central tenet of the framework is that students from ‘dominated’ societal groups are ‘empowered’ or ‘disabled’ as a direct result of their interactions with educators in the schools.” The influence of institutionalized social structures and intergroup status and power relations are seen as crucial factors influencing the academic success of CLD students. Out of this framework has come the idea of “advocacy oriented” assessment, which requires a critical examination of the traditional role of assessments and the influence of social and educational contexts on the academic performance of the student.

Related to this idea of advocacy-oriented assessment is the “ecological” assessment paradigm which locates the student within multiple layers of social contexts and evaluates the effects of these influences on student performance. This model draws from the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979). According to Vazquez Nuttall (1992), ecological assessment “includes the different settings, factors, agencies, and people who need to be considered when designing a reliable, valid, and useful evaluation and service plan” (p. 5).

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The literature has been consistent with calls for assessment reform over the last two decades, with some early recognition of the inappropriateness of standardized assessments used with CLD students as far back as the 1930’s (Sanchez, 1932; Sanchez, 1934). Considering the philosophical shifts discussed above, individuals advocating valid and appropriate assessment practices will need to:

1. consider multiple factors that could be contributing to the student’s apparent difficulties;

2. consider the student within the larger contexts of the classroom, school, family and community;
3. involve multiple individuals in the assessment process;
4. use multiple assessment measures and techniques;
5. assess the student's performance in various contexts, such as the classroom, playground, in self-selected peer groups, and at home;
6. integrate assessment and instruction; and
7. reserve the consideration that the problem lies within the student as the very last possibility.

CLASSROOM LEVEL

The general educator and/or parent are typically the individuals responsible for initiating referrals for special education evaluations. Therefore, it is crucial that classroom teachers and parents ensure that a thorough assessment of the classroom and home environments has been undertaken prior to referring a student (Maheady et al., 1983). Educators and parents can ask themselves the following 10 questions:

1. Have several cycles of PEP (prereferral intervention) been attempted prior to making the referral?
2. Have the student's family members been included as partners in implementing curricular changes that are based on information they have provided?
3. How has the student's unique cultural and experiential background been incorporated into instruction?
4. Has the student's language instruction, in English and/or in the native language, been sufficiently consistent, comprehensive, and comprehensible to rule out an instructional failing?
5. How has the student's language and literacy development been supported?
6. Is the teaching style in the classroom overly skill-based or "un"-whole language?
7. How has the curriculum been modified to fit this student's needs?
8. What informal assessment measures have been used in the classroom to better tailor the curriculum to this student's needs?
9. Who else has been consulted and collaborated with to engage in a problem-solving process?

10. How certain are you that the student's needs cannot be met by additional assistance of a support team?

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

When a student has been referred for special education evaluation, general educators and parents need to consider the following factors as possible reasons for poor academic achievement:

- A. Whether sufficient adaptation of the general curriculum has been attempted;
- B. The student's language background and/or level of acculturation (Collier, 1988);
- C. Previous academic experiences;
- D. Possible outside influencing factors, such as recent changes in social circumstances; and
- E. Cultural differences between the home and school environments.

ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUES

There is considerable recognition in the literature that assessment procedures must take into consideration the multiple possible contextual factors that can influence students' academic performance (see for example, Norby, Thurlow, Christenson & Ysseldyke, 1990; Ysseldyke & Thurlow, 1984). Additionally, given the lack of validity of standardized tests for use with CLD students that is well-documented in the literature, it is not recommended that the results of such instruments be used to classify these students as requiring special education services. According to Valdés and Figueroa (1994, p. 203) "standardized tests should not be used in any aspect of a decision-making process with bilingual students." Therefore, a combination of alternative assessment procedures, which involve the participation of multiple individuals, including the student's classroom teacher and family members, and which consider the student's performance under several different contexts, is recommended. The following assessment measures/techniques are among those that can be used:

- curriculum-based assessment
- criterion-referenced measures
- interviews
- review of records
- observations

- “testing to the limits” (using systematic modification of published tests in a non-standardized manner to compare of the effectiveness of different modifications)
- dynamic assessment (test-teach-retest)
- spontaneous (non-elicited) language samples
- analytic teaching
- narrative analysis
- rating scales
- work samples
- portfolios

SCHOOL LEVEL

School level personnel, including administrators, support staff, and auxiliary specialists, can also ask several questions regarding the effectiveness of established and implemented assessment procedures.

They should ask and respond to the following questions:

1. Are prereferral interventions being attempted vigorously or simply as surface compliance?
2. Are students’ families involved in problem-solving from the start of the process and viewed as equal contributors?
3. Is there a true atmosphere of collaboration during prereferral activities and the assessment process?
4. Are trained and competent interpreters provided for family members and during the PEP and assessment activities?
5. Are interpreters trained and knowledgeable about the assessment process with CLD students?
6. Are bilingual specialists consulted prior to referral for special education assessment?
7. Has the appropriate documentation, such as home language surveys, been collected and maintained?
8. Have individuals involved in the instruction and assessment of CLD students received training regarding the effects of second language acquisition on learning and academic achievement.
9. How are general educators supported in efforts to accommodate greater student diversity in the classroom?
10. Through what concrete means does the administration facilitate and support collaborative activities?

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

When assessing culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students, school level personnel need to consider the following:

- Whether a true culture of collaboration exists within the school, or whether consultation is seen as a hoop to jump through in the process of “staffing” a student into special education;
- Whether teams function as action research, problem-solving groups that include and value the input from general educators, para professionals, and parents, to the same extent as that from administrators and auxiliary specialists;
- Whether factors, other than the presence or absence of a disability, are considered when there is recognition of poor academic achievement;
- Whether family and community members are actively involved in all facets of students’ education;
- Whether there is real administrator support for prevention of disabilities, collaboration, family and community involvement, and the use of alternative assessment paradigms; and
- Whether there is wide-spread reliance on alternative assessment procedures and professional judgment rather than on the results of standardized tests.

DISTRICT LEVEL

PERSONNEL PREPARATION

Districts can play a key role in identifying, training and providing personnel to fulfill specialized roles in assessment. It is imperative that all school personnel involved in the assessment of CLD students be knowledgeable about the opportunities and outcomes of first and second language acquisition and linguistic differences on academic performance, including during assessment contexts. García (1992) recommends that staff development promote collaboration across disciplines and between agencies, such as state and local education programs, institutions of higher education (IHEs) and intermediate education agencies. When interpreters are used, Scribner (1993) recommends they possess the following core competencies: “proficiency in the native language and in English, an understanding of cultural diversity, knowledge and understanding of special education services and terms, including assessment policy and procedures, and knowledge of ethical/professional behaviors” (p. 3).

RESOURCES

In addition to providing training, school districts must serve as clearinghouses and coordinators of specialized services. Districts should develop a plan for identifying and training individuals who can perform the following functions, including, but not limited to:

1. bilingual assessment,
2. information collection and dispersal regarding first and second language acquisition and cultural and linguistic diversity,
3. interpretation/translation, and
4. staff development/continuing education in areas of need.

SUPPORT FOR ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT WITHIN THE SPECIAL EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Special education administrators must actively support an assessment paradigm that is founded on contextualized observations and measures, multiple input, and use of multiple measures. Without this support, implementation will be difficult, if not impossible. Specific guidelines and provisions for use of alternative assessment measures must be stated clearly in district documents. The special education administration should explicitly state when standardized test scores are inappropriate and what procedures assessment personnel should undertake to provide for a valid assessment process.

STATE LEVEL

In the United States, State Departments of Education typically function as monitors, ensuring compliance with state and federal legislation and guidelines. Many states also provide professional guidance and technical assistance in the implementation of educational practices. An example is the IST model (Pennsylvania), described in Baca, de Valenzuela, and Garcia (1996). To ensure that districts receive the information necessary for determining whether their assessment programs are appropriately identifying students to receive special education services, Robertson, Kushner, Starks and Drescher (1994, p. 9) have made the following recommendations:

- enrollment data in all states be gathered by race/ethnicity as well as language status, for each disability category;

- these data be used to explore disproportionate representation;
- districts be formally notified when enrollment is disproportionate;
- formal follow-up procedures be in place to examine referral, assessment and placement procedures in districts with disproportionate representation;
- justification for disproportionate representation must be provided if it is believed to reflect local differences in prevalence.

SUMMARY

In summary, changes in the overall mission, goals, objectives, and procedures will be required from the level of the classroom through the state if reform in assessment is to occur. Teachers must be supported by administrators, who in turn must be supported by proactive policies and practices at the district and state level. Change is possible, as demonstrated by documented results of model programs, however, a more consistent implementation of best practices as outlined in this document is required to remedy the persistent use of inappropriate and harmful assessment strategies.

These guidelines will assist individuals, schools and districts in achieving compliance with the letter of the law. However, equity, through quality services and academic excellence, is a higher standard that all those involved in the education of CLD learners should adopt. Mere compliance with minimal standards should not be acceptable to anyone who is concerned about the future of our students and our nation.

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