

# Chapter 17

## Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners

### 17.1 Overview

The degree of cultural and linguistic diversity in this country is large. Approximately 8 % of school aged children in the USA are limited in English proficiency (LEP) and would be considered English Language Learners (ELL). The heterogeneity among LEP is remarkable with over 400 different languages of which nearly three quarters speaks some dialect of Spanish (Rhodes, Ochoa, & Ortiz, 2005). The problem of accurately assessing culturally and linguistically diverse individuals has haunted the practice of psychological assessment within the USA for over a century and well before the infamous *Larry P v. Riles* case. The Larry P case led to the decade's long avoidance of IQ tests in the state of California with African-American students. However, the misattribution of individual traits has plagued the field since at least the turn of the twentieth century. Woodworth, a prominent personality scale author, categorized various groups of Europeans according to stereotyped characteristics. For instance, Woodworth (1916) noted that Europeans who were blonde generally fared better in most endeavors in life. He also how those of a Slavic origin were prone to patience and humbleness while those from western Europe were haughty and aggressive. Continuing through the first and second World Wars, the IQ testing movement described Mediterranean and eastern European cultures as having inferior intellectual capacity while Scandinavian and northern European countries were thought to have superior intellect (Kamphaus, 2005). Of course, IQ tests during those periods were sufficiently culturally bound and biased to lead to misrepresentation of vast cultural groups. This legacy persisted through the early 1970s when IQ tests were judged to be biased against minority groups such as African-Americans to the extent that such tests where no longer permitted for use with such groups in the state of California.

## 17.2 Psychoeducational Assessment Considerations

Contemporary psychometrics has resolved many of these concerns, but even contemporary instruments may continue to suffer from a degree of bias as the instruments are constructed and therefore encapsulated within a distinct cultural context. Most assessment instruments used in the USA and Canada are constructed within a distinct cultural milieu and normed entirely in English. As a result, there may be linguistic and cultural confounds that render these instruments less valid and reliable for the purpose of assessment of individuals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The problems with such instruments are not resolved with the use of interpreters, the translation of the instrument into the child's native language, or with the use of instruments that claim to be culturally free (e.g., UNIT). This represents an improvement upon the blanket use of an instrument without regard for linguistic or cultural heritage, but problems still persist.

Accordingly, Rhodes et al. (2005) contend that conclusions derived from many psychoeducational assessments are based on approaches that may be haphazard and biased because they do not account for cultural and linguistic factors within the assessment process. There are three factors that need to be considered because they have been found to bias the assessment process (Rhodes et al. 2005):

1. The cultural content that is embedded within a given instrument.
2. The linguistic demands imposed by the assessment instrument.
3. The lack of, or poor, representation within the normative sample of individuals from diverse backgrounds.

For instance, research shows that even nonverbal instruments such as the UNIT may not be language free (e.g., DeThorne & Watkins, 2006). This chapter does not capture all of the demands of assessment with linguistically and culturally diverse children. There are resources for more in-depth discussion (e.g., Clinton, 2014; Rhodes et al., 2005). This section's discussion is only intended to highlight the critical need for competency when evaluating a child with LEP or from a diverse cultural background and to offer generalized guidance for the psychoeducational assessment process.

### 17.2.1 General Concepts

The following generalized guidance is offered with the understanding that it is incumbent upon all school psychologists to undergo training in the assessment of students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

*Translations, Translators, and Interpreters.* The availability of trained translators and interpreters is a problem faced by school districts throughout the USA. When hiring an interpreter (for orally provided information) or a translator (for written information) the individual should be fluent in English and the student's native language. The individual should also receive training in educational and psychological

terminology. The nuances of the assessment process will need to be discussed with the translator/interpreter. For instance, the individual should avoid a dual relationship (i.e., being a relative of the child being evaluated) and should not become emotionally involved in the outcome. The requirement to assiduously adhere to standardized assessment (e.g., no coaching, no hints, follow standardized directions) should be conveyed to the interpreter. The translator and interpreter should also be able to maintain confidentiality. When the psychologist and other school personnel speak, these individuals should address the caregiver and not the interpreter. The use of translators and interpreters may seem like a panacea for assessment bias, but it still carries problems. Written or oral translations miss linguistic and cultural nuance and the resulting evaluation results may not accurately represent the child's abilities. Translations of English-normed instruments may yield a norm referenced score that may not be valid and reliable depending upon the degree of congruency between the student's native language and English. But the information furnished by the instrument may be of value so it is important to weigh the limitations with the information that may be ascertained from the instrument. Similarly, translators and interpreters must be trained in educational and psychological terminology as well as the nuances of standardized assessment. A translator and interpreter should be used with parents when discussing the psychoeducational assessment process, informed consent, limits to confidentiality, the completed report and the IEP.

*Use of Nonverbal Assessment Instruments.* Although nonverbal instruments such as the UNIT may be furnish a degree of language free assessment, they still are culturally bound and linguistically loaded (DeThorne & Watkins, 2006; Swisher, Plante, & Lowell, 1994). These limitations must be recognized when evaluating students. Still, they may well represent the best way to date to obtain a norm-referenced account of nonverbal intellectual capacity.

*Assess the Role of Language.* Extensive background information on the student's language history, primary language, and language preference must be explored. As the child enters school age and begins extensive exposure to English, the child may begin to lose primary language skills. Thus, assessment in the child's primary language, while well intended, may give an inaccurate portrait of the child's functioning.

*Use a variety of functional assessment instruments in addition to norm referenced instruments.* This may include performance-based measures, curriculum-based measures, portfolios, and observational data. As mentioned, norm-referenced instruments may lack sufficient reliability and validity so additional sources of data should be referenced when making a decision about a child's functioning.

*Entertain the possibility that a child has a disability.* The evaluation team may conclude that a child has a learning, behavioral, or intellectual ability but only after ruling out language and cultural factors. When arriving at a classification of a disability, the methods and procedures that are used should measure whether the child has a disability rather than the child's English language skill. IDEA includes this provision to protect children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds from receiving an inaccurate classification. As an example, a child's

cultural background may impact his or her behavior or response set in a way that is not readily understood by teachers or other school personnel. Or a child from a linguistically diverse background may not understand directions, words on a test, or idiomatic expressions and may incorrectly answer the question. Accordingly, the child may mistakenly appear to have a leaning or intellectual disability or to have a hearing or communication problem. After ruling out cultural and linguistic factors it will be important to entertain the possibility that a child from a linguistically or culturally diverse background has a disability.

### ***17.2.2 Nondiscriminatory Assessment of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students***

The two major classification systems (e.g., IDEA and DSM) used to classify children both require the assessment of linguistic and cultural factors before arriving at a classification decision. When considering a student for special education eligibility, IDEA established the following guidelines that apply to culturally and linguistically diverse students and those who are proficient English speakers from the dominant culture.

#### **Evaluation Procedures**

*“... (c) Other evaluation procedures. Each public agency must ensure that—*

- (1) Assessments and other evaluation materials used to assess a child under this part—*
  - i. Are selected and administered so as not to be discriminatory on a racial or cultural basis;*
  - ii. Are provided and administered in the child’s native language or other mode of communication and in the form most likely to yield accurate information on what the child knows and can do academically, developmentally, and functionally, unless it is clearly not feasible to so provide or administer...”*

34 CFR § 300.304 Evaluation procedures, (c) (1) (i) (ii)

### ***17.2.3 Additional Considerations***

When contemplating a classification the psychologist will need to consider several factors. This includes ascertaining whether the problems exist in the student’s first language, whether the problems persist across settings (e.g., home, school, classroom), and whether the student is learning at the same rate of other children with LEP. Other considerations include whether the student has learned to read in his or her native language and whether any cultural considerations are impacting progress.

### 17.3 Conclusion

Consideration of cultural and linguistic factors is necessary to avoid misclassification. Psychologists will need additional training and consultation in this area and should be mindful of the limits to their competency. The field has made strides in the assessment of culturally and linguistically diverse students but must remain vigilant about evidence-based practices. This chapter furnishes a generalized overview of psychoeducational assessment issues. The reader is directed to additional, specialized resources on this topic.

### References

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