Chapter 1
Purpose of Psychoeducational Assessment and Report Writing

1.1 Definition and Purpose of Psychoeducational Assessment

It is important to define psychoeduational assessment and distinguish it from psychological assessment. The term psychoeducational assessment may be defined as a type of assessment that is used to understand an individual's cognitive, academic, social, emotional, behavioral, communicative, and adaptive functioning within an educational setting. Psychoeducational assessment may extend downward to the preschool age time period or upward to the college and adult time period. The majority of psychoeducational assessments are conducted on the kindergarten to grade 12 populations. Psychoeducational assessment addresses whether the child is eligible for services and what those services might look like in a school setting. It places primary emphasis upon impairment that occurs in the educational setting rather than in environments outside of the educational context that is customary in clinical classification. Psychoeducational assessment frequently involves an evaluation of a child's learning and academic needs. However, it can also include the evaluation of intellectual, behavioral, social, emotional, communication, and adaptive areas if those areas are suspected to adversely impact educational functioning. As a result, individuals conducting psychoeducational evaluations must have a thorough understanding of what may be considered clinical conditions. This includes but is not limited to autism spectrum disorders, schizophrenia, Attention-Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), disorders of mood (e.g., anxiety, depression, bipolar), disorders of conduct, and medical conditions that may come to bear on educational functioning. Keep in mind, however, that IDEA, not DSM, drives classification decisions in U.S. schools so respective state special education classification categories should be referenced.

Psychoeducational assessment is distinguished from psychological assessment by its narrower scope and focus on an individual's (i.e., children's) functioning in an educational setting. Psychological assessment is broader and may address questions of custody in divorce proceedings, fitness to stand trial, qualification for social

security benefits, or qualification for additional support and services under a diagnosis of intellectual disability. Psychoeducational assessment deals primarily with educationally based classification and services. The vast majority of psychoeducational assessments are conducted on primary school (K to 12) populations although psychoeducational evaluations may also be conducted in university settings. Within the USA, questions typically addressed include whether a child qualifies for additional support under a specific IDEA classification and what school-based accommodations and services are appropriate. The focus is on how the suspected disability impacts the child's educational functioning within a school setting and what recommendations are appropriate to support the child's educational functioning.

1.2   Who Conducts Psychoeducational Assessments?

Although precise data is unavailable, it is likely safe to assume that psychologists working in the schools conduct the vast majority of psychoeducational evaluations. These psychologists (i.e., masters, Ed.S., or doctoral level) are employed by the school district and receive their school psychologist certification most commonly through a state department of education. The school psychologist may also be a licensed psychologist who can "hang up a shingle" and work in private practice. However, in most states with few exceptions (e.g., Wyoming) only certified school psychologists may be employed by a school district for purpose of completing a psychoeducational evaluation.

Licensed psychologists working in private practice may also be involved in the completion of psychoeducational reports. Many times parents seeking questions about their child's functioning may wish to obtain an outside opinion. In these instances, and for a cost, the outside psychologist may be able to devote the time and energy to completing a thorough evaluation. Of course, the parent should be warned that the outside psychological/psychoeducational evaluation must be considered, but need not be accepted, by the receiving school district. The outside psychoeducational evaluation may provide valuable information but it sometimes lacks alignment with the customs and nuances of psychoeducational evaluations written by psychologists in the schools. This may limit the utility of such evaluations for classification and educational planning within the school.

For graduate students in clinical child psychology who may wish to pursue a private psychoeducational evaluation practice this book will be useful. At times, a parent or legal guardian may wish to challenge the results of the school-based evaluation. When this occurs, the legal guardian is permitted to obtain an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE). An IEE is generally high stakes and anxiety-evoking because it could involve a due process hearing or litigation. However, if psychologists follow the guidance within this book then the potential due process hearing is likely to be less contentious because assessment will be comprehensive and the subsequent report thorough, well-organized, and of high quality.

1.3   Psychoeducational Versus Psychological Assessment and Report Writing

Psychoeducational assessment and report writing has areas of overlap and distinction from psychological assessment report writing.

Similarities

- Assesses most domains of functioning including cognitive, academic, social, emotional, behavioral, and adaptive functioning.
- The report structure and format are similar.
- The approach to conceptualizing and classifying/diagnosing is data-driven and evidenced based.
- Uses many of the same norm-referenced assessment instruments.

Differences

- Psychoeducational assessment may not fully present the results of an evaluation of family functioning because of concerns over family privacy issues. A psychological assessment may evaluate family functioning more fully.
- The bulk of psychoeducational assessments occur within the kindergarten to grade 12 time period. Psychological assessment spans the life span from infant to geriatric.
- To determine a classification, psychoeducational assessment primarily determines whether there has been an adverse impact on children's educational functioning whereas psychological assessment will investigate for an impact on social, vocational, and relational functioning.
- Psychoeducational assessment generally stays away from personality assessment and projective measures (e.g., Rorschach). Psychological assessment will investigate more fully personality dimensions and may utilize projective measures.
- Psychological assessment encompasses forensic evaluation including child custody, child welfare, criminal cases, and other forensic matters.
- Psychological assessment usually involves a licensed psychologist. In the US school setting, psychoeducational assessment may be conducted by master's level or educational specialist (Ed.S.) practitioners.
- Psychoeducational assessment includes observations of children in vivo (i.e., in the classroom or school setting) whereas psychological assessment generally uses a clinic-based assessment setting observation.
- Psychological assessment may provide interview results from a wider range of individuals (i.e., collateral contacts). Psychoeducational assessment generally only gathers interview data on students, parents, teachers, teacher's aides, and professionals who provide direct support to the child.
- In the USA, psychological assessment utilizes the DSM or ICD to make classification decisions whereas psychoeducational assessment uses IDEA for classification decisions. The DSM is used in Canada for both psychological and psychoeducational assessment.

1.4   Feedback Conference

Students learning how to furnish feedback to parents/legal guardians regarding a psychoeducational assessment are best served by a structured framework. The provision of feedback requires practice to improve in this area. The purpose of the feedback conference is to convey the report's contents and conclusion in as clear and concise manner as possible. As close to the beginning of a report conference as possible, it is important to furnish a summary of your classification conclusion (i.e., whether the child was found eligible for special education support). Otherwise, the parent or caregiver may anxiously anticipate this discussion and may not hear anything that is discussed until you present your opinion on classification.

Of course, the assumption that the process will unfold as planned is naïve. The oral feedback session will generally unfold smoothly, but there are times when it will not. For instance, let's take the example of an oral feedback session preceding an IEP meeting that did not go as planned. Sometimes parents will appear unexpectedly with a special education advocate who will raise questions about the report and its conclusions. (This should not be misconstrued to suggest that the presence of a special education advocate automatically makes the meeting contentious). This may feel unnerving for even the most veteran psychologist but it need not be if the psychologist assumes a collaborative approach. To assist with the provision of oral feedback, the chapter on oral reporting will offer guidance for various feedback scenarios. This includes the unexpected response, the caregiver who may be in denial, and the appreciative caregiver.

1.5   Conclusion

The practice of psychoeducational assessment and report writing is complex and draws upon multiple skill sets to arrive at a quality written report. The process of psychoeducational assessment and report writing are intertwined and serve the purpose of understanding a child's specific intellectual, academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs. Additional details on the practice of psychoeducational assessment and report writing will be discussed throughout this book.