CULTURALLY COMPETENT ASSESSMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS: STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOL PERSONNEL

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Culturally competent assessment has been increasingly highlighted in the education and psychology literature and in preservice and inservice training. Gaining knowledge and skills in this area is imperative and ethically necessary because of federal mandates and the increasing diversity of our country's public school students.

For school personnel, culturally competent assessment requires the integration of culturally sensitive attitudes, knowledge, and skills into their consultations, intervention strategies, and evaluation practices.

Challenges to Acquiring Cultural Competence

Culturally competent assessment is a difficult area in which to gain knowledge and skills because of the complexity of the core concepts of culture and language. For example, there are a variety of definitions of culture and related terms such as race and ethnicity. Another challenge in the study of cultural competence is that the literature on the subject focuses on a variety of issues related to individuals, groups, culture, or language. Moreover, the assessment issues are further complicated by the heterogeneity of culturally and linguistically diverse students, particularly those classified as English Language Learners (ELLs). ELLs include non-English or limited English proficient students. Another significant issue is the limitations of common psychoeducational assessment strategies and tools (e.g., standardized testing).

Despite the complexity, the literature in this area has expanded to such a level that some frameworks, guiding principles, and strategies for working with culturally and linguistically diverse students have been proposed. Typically, these frameworks, principles, and strategies focus on expanding school personnel's knowledge in the following areas: (a) the culture of the self or individual, diverse groups, and the schools; (b) policies, legislation, litigation, and ethical issues; (c) academic, therapeutic, and consultative interventions; and (d) non-discriminatory assessment practices.

Addressing each of these areas across all the possible cultural groups, pre-referral situations, referral questions, and assessment scenarios is not possible within the scope of a handout. Instead, five possible actions all school personnel can take to conduct culturally competent assessments are offered. Specifically, the suggestions focus on the individual psychoeducational evaluations of students who are ELLs or who reside in homes where English is not the native language. All actions taken by an evaluation specialist, including consultations and interventions before, during, and after a referral, are collectively defined as the *evaluation process* throughout this handout. Moreover, it is assumed that the evaluation specialist is part of a team of professionals who will review, reflect, and make recommendations based on information gleaned from all the actions suggested.

All of the actions presented are mechanisms that will aide the evaluation specialist in data collection, choice of assessment strategies, filtering of information for interpreting assessment results, and generating intervention strategies. The rationale for the actions and some possible resources are also presented.

Define the Reality of Your Community's Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

While a national perspective is important, it is more important to understand the reality of your community in terms of cultural and linguistic diversity. Today, it is evident that all states have demonstrated an increase in cultural and linguistic diversity. However, states and communities differ in

terms of their experience with diversity. Some states have longer histories as high-diversity states, while others have recently experienced exponential growth. Moreover, growth in diversity may be uneven across a state. The diversity demographics and community history influence the type of programs and services available for ELLs, as well as the availability of professionals to staff or assist those programs. The emergence and availability of community leaders representing a cultural group is also a function of the community's profile. School personnel should identify what cultural groups are represented in their community. It is also important to know that programs serving ELLs differ in their titles, length, entry criteria, exit criteria, instructional strategies, and required teacher qualifications.

Some examples of program titles and by default student labels are English as a Second Language (ESL), English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), English Language Acquisition (ELA), and bilingual education. Also, while two communities (or possibly two schools in the same community) may have the same label for a program and their students, the actual instructional model and strategies may be different. For example, one ESOL program may use a pull-out model while another may use a self-contained classroom model.

To define your community's reality, contact state and local level professionals employed by the government (including the state Department of Education), social service agencies, universities, school districts, and specific schools. Obtain information from these individuals regarding the demographic data for your state and community, available programs (obtain specific titles), types of services, program criteria, service providers, and community leaders who are currently in place to address ELLs in your community.

Establish a Pool of Consultants or Evaluation Assistants

Proactive efforts. After school personnel identify the possible cultural groups and languages represented at their school site(s), a pool of people who can assist before and throughout the evaluation process should also be identified. They can be identified through the sources noted above or by asking caregivers for referrals. In addition, there are many translation and interpreter services provided by individuals and agencies that can be contacted through the Internet. By being proactive, when the need arises the professionals responsible for conducting the evaluations can do so efficiently, ethically, and effectively.

Types of consultants/assistants. Three types of potential consultants or evaluation assistants include:

(a) *cultural brokers,* individuals who can provide you with insight into the specific cultural or linguistic group or who can provide a target student or family with information regarding the mainstream culture and language of your community; (b) *interpreters,* individuals who possess native-like proficiency in the target language and English; and (c) *translators,* individuals who possess native written language proficiency in the target language and English and can provide word-for-word (or word approximations) translations. Experts in the field of culturally competent assessment agree that consulting a cultural broker is an appropriate element of the evaluation process. However, experts vary in their viewpoints regarding the circumstances during which it is appropriate to use an interpreter.

Issues using interpreters and translations. Most experts agree that children should not be used as interpreters because of the sensitive nature of information transmitted between adults or between children and adults. However, experts vary in terms of which adult interpreter functions are the most technically and ethically appropriate. For example, there is concern regarding the use of family members or family friends because of sensitivity issues, as well as possible violations of confidentiality. Thus, while interpreters may be needed in all the stages of the evaluation process, the issue to consider is *who* is the most appropriate interpreter, *when* to use the interpreter, and *how* to utilize the information provided by the interpreter.

On-the-spot translations of standardized tests are considered inappropriate by experts. Alternative assessment strategies such as the use of standardized nonverbal cognitive and translated tests (when available in the target language) are recommended. However, because of the limitations of standardized tests, other assessment strategies such as curriculum-based as-sessments, test-teach-test, and performance monitoring over time should also be conducted (see "Resources").

Debriefing sessions with consultants and evaluation assistants after assessment or consultation sessions are recommended. Additionally, all information gathered during the assessment process with consultants or evaluation assistants should be appropriately noted and used cautiously.

Selecting consultants and assistants. Potential evaluation assistants or consultant candidates should be contacted and provided with information regarding the evaluation process, including pertinent information regarding laws, ethical issues, the purpose of the assessment, and the importance of standardized procedures for particular measures. If the individual or agency can serve in one or more of the roles listed, then

an interview should be conducted. During the interview information such as the personal history of the individual related to the target language or culture should be obtained, as well as his or her qualifications in terms of oral and written language proficiency in English and other language(s).

You may also need to seek out colleagues who have as part of their employment roles or training the evaluation of ELLs. These colleagues can provide insights they have gleaned by experience or recommend assessment strategies for a specific cultural or language group. When searching for such colleagues, contact other school districts (possibly those with a higher number of students with the same language or culture as the student being evaluated). Many multilingual school psychologists are listed in the *Directory of Bilingual School Psychologists,* published by the National Association of School Psychologists (see "Resources").

Expand Knowledge of English and Second Language Acquisition

Assessment professionals need to obtain or expand their knowledge of (a) the acquisition of English as a first or as an additional language; (b) other world languages; and (c) how language proficiency, dominance, and preference are assessed and established. With over 750,000 words, many of which are borrowed from other languages and represent rule exceptions or irregularities, standard American English (SAE) is a complex language. Knowledge regarding the English language will assist the evaluation specialist in interpreting results in terms of the effect of English language acquisition. For example, analysis of results can reveal language errors that may be a function of developmentally appropriate language stages. The similarities between SAE and the student's native language(s) should also be researched and considered during data analysis and interpretation of results.

Consult specialists. Consult other school personnel with expertise in English grammar and structure (these vary from state to state and district to district), as well as English language acquisition, to obtain or expand your knowledge of this area. In addition, these persons can assist you during the interpretation of results. School personnel who can assist you in this process include teachers of ELLs (e.g., ESL, ESOL or bilingual education teachers), speech/language pathologists, reading specialist, reading teachers, and English teachers. If your school district does not have some of these specialists (e.g., ESOL teacher), consider contacting adjoining districts or the state's Department of Education for a referral. Consider also professional development sessions, college courses, readings, and

Internet resources that address the linguistic aspects of English and other world languages.

Language assessments. An important part of the evaluation process is establishing if there is a need for a language assessment and what languages need to be assessed. Language evaluations should include assessments of speaking, reading, and writing abilities. When conducting a language assessment with evaluation assistants and/or language professionals (e.g., ESOL teacher, speech/language pathologist), some areas that need to be addressed include the student's language: (a) history (ages and stages of all languages that are spoken and heard), (b) dominance (the language for which the student has the most proficiency), and (c) preference (the language the student prefers to speak).

Expand Knowledge of Instructional Strategies for ELLs

As with any educational content area, there are a variety of instructional strategies for teaching ELLs. Knowledge of these instructional strategies will allow you to obtain more useful information from previous school records and school personnel working with the student. Strategies are not necessarily reflected by the type of program that is providing the service. For example, the student may have received or may be receiving English grammar and structure information *separate from* the content area or may be receiving language instruction *through* content areas.

Moreover, it is important to note that considerable debate exists among experts in this area regarding the most appropriate strategies and these must be weighed carefully based on the student's level of English proficiency and the available resources. This type of knowledge will assist members of the school team working with ELLs in generating and evaluating interventions.

Plan for Expansion of the Typical Evaluation Process

Given the complexities of culturally competent assessments of ELLs, it is imperative that the evaluation specialist plan for an expansion of the evaluation process used in the typical evaluations of students for whom language and/or cultural issues are not a differentiating factor. While school personnel responsible for the individual evaluations of students should already possess many of the skills required for the assessment of ELLs, there usually is a need to expand those skills.

Allow more time. Your evaluation strategy should be expanded by factoring in the need for more time than

would be spent on the typical evaluation. There are several reasons for the increased time allotment. First, planning for and assessing language skills will require additional time. Second, a review of all historical data available about the student is necessary. Seeking background information will facilitate the interpretation of results from interventions and assessments. Consideration should be given to conducting a chronological history from birth to present, including school attendance (changes, actual number of days of attendance, types of schooling experiences), family structure, household changes and moves, and medical/developmental histories. Conducting a thorough history necessitates consultations with significant adults in the home and the school. This may require evaluation assistants and consultants. Third, you need to allow time to conduct additional procedures.

Include alternative procedures. You may need to expand your assessment strategies to include authentic, alternative, and nonverbal assessment strategies. For example, you may need to use a teach-test-teach strategy, engage in testing of limits on standardized tests, conduct some form of curriculum-based assessment, and learn measures that are new to you. Obtaining information on testing strategies that are unfamiliar can be accomplished by readings, direct training, or self-tutorials. If the actual expansion of assessment strategies proves difficult owing to the demands of the average workday, consider building in practice in small increments. Aspects of a new strategy (e.g., one subtest from a nonverbal measure) could be built into the evaluations of several native English speaking students prior to attempting them with ELLs.

Include additional interpretation questions. The expansion of your assessment strategy should include additional interpretation questions. In general, consider what role language, culture, and social history factors play in the obtained results and observations of the ELL. Another consideration is adding a language domain section to the traditional assessment report. Moreover, it should be the goal of the evaluation specialist to conclude that any disabilities identified are not solely attributable to language acquisition and/or cultural issues. This does not negate the possibility that a disability is exacerbated or compounded by the language or culture issues.

Resources

Adger, C. T., Snow, C. E., & Christian, D. (Eds.) (2002). *What teachers need to know about language.* Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. ISBN: 1-887744-75-4.

National Association of School Psychologists. (2000). *Directory of bilingual school psychologists.* Bethesda, MD: Author. Available: *www.nasponline.org/store*

National Association of School Psychologists. (2003). *Portraits of the children: Culturally competent assessment* (CD-ROM and video). Bethesda, MD: Author. Available: *www.nasponline.org/store*

National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs & ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics. (2001). *Online directory of ESL resources.* Available: *www.cal.org/ericll/ncbe/esldiectory*

Roseberry-McKibben, C. (2002). *Multicultural students with special language needs: Practical strategies for assessment and intervention* (2nd ed.). Oceanside, CA: Academic Communication Associates. ISBN: 1-57503-091-8.

Websites

Bilingual Psychological and Educational Assessment Support Center (CUNY Graduate Programs in School Psychology)— *http://forbin.qc.edu/ECP/bilingualcenter/index.html*

Center for Applied Linguistics—*www.cal.org*

ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics— *www.cal.org/ericll*

National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE)— *www.nabe.org*

National Association of School Psychologists, Culturally Competent Practice— *www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence*

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