

The Implications of Ignoring the Cultural and Linguistic Needs of Children With Disabilities During Psychological Assessment: A Critical Analysis

Stanley Makuvaza

University of Zimbabwe

stanmakuvaza@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study explored the implications of leaving out the cultural and linguistic perspectives of children with disabilities during psychological assessment. Psychological assessment plays a pivotal role in identifying the needs of children with disabilities. However, traditional assessment tools often fail to account for cultural and linguistic diversity, which can negatively impact diagnostic accuracy and appropriateness of intervention. This article aimed to critically analyse the implications of ignoring the cultural and linguistic needs of children with disabilities during assessment through a comprehensive review of the literature. By examining existing literature, case studies, and expert opinions, the article aimed to promote awareness and understanding of the significance of cultural and linguistic considerations in psychological assessment, ultimately advocating for more inclusive and equitable practices.

Keywords: disabilities; psychological assessment; linguistic diversity; cultural diversity; standardised tests



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Background to the Study

The use of psychological assessment has been gaining traction among the black population in Zimbabwe, albeit at a slow pace. However, it is worth noting that the majority of psychological activities in the country have historically been centred on the white population, with a few exceptions of black individuals who have gained knowledge of the importance of psychological intervention. Standardised tests have been a common feature in most psychological testing activities, but these tests are often developed and normed on monolingual English speakers from Western cultures and socio-economic backgrounds, which may lack representation from other countries (Suzuki et al. 2008). This raises concerns about the validity and reliability of assessment outcomes when administered to culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) children, particularly those with disabilities.

In Zimbabwe, psychologists often rely on standardised tests to inform their assessment opinions, without considering the child's indigenous knowledge systems. However, research has shown that disregarding cultural and linguistic diversity during assessment can negatively impact CLD children with disabilities (Dana 2005). Therefore, it is crucial for psychologists to be aware of the potential biases in standardised tests and to adopt culturally responsive practices that acknowledge and value indigenous knowledge systems.

In order to better understand the growing popularity of psychological assessment in Zimbabwe, it would be beneficial to review more material and compare how other African or indigenous settings have addressed similar challenges. Additionally, exploring the link between disability and indigenous languages can help unpack the linguistic and cultural factors that influence disability. In the Western context, linguistic and cultural factors have been found to play a significant role in disability assessments. For example, research has shown that language proficiency can impact assessment outcomes, and that cultural background can also influence how disabilities are perceived and addressed. However, it is important to note that these findings may not be generalised to non-Western contexts, and that there is a need for more research on the unique challenges faced by CLD children with disabilities in indigenous settings.

Statement of the Problem

The present study aimed to critically analyse the implications of ignoring the cultural and linguistic needs of children with disabilities during psychological assessment. Specifically, it aimed to explore how failing to address these needs may impact the accuracy and validity of psychological assessments, potentially leading to misdiagnosis, inadequate interventions, and limited understanding of the individual's cognitive and emotional functioning. By examining the existing literature and gathering empirical evidence, this study aimed to shed light on the importance of incorporating cultural and linguistic considerations in the assessment process, ultimately advocating for more

inclusive and culturally sensitive practices in psychological assessment for children with disabilities.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to critically analyse the implications of disregarding the cultural and linguistic needs of children with disabilities during psychological assessment, with the aim of advocating for more inclusive and culturally sensitive practices in the field.

Research Questions

1. How does neglecting cultural and linguistic factors in psychological assessment impact the accuracy of diagnosis and intervention planning for children with disabilities?
2. What are the psychosocial consequences of neglecting cultural and linguistic needs in the assessment of children with disabilities?
3. What strategies promote culturally sensitive and linguistically appropriate assessment practices for children with disabilities?

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT). Proposed by Bandura in 1986, the SCT emphasises the reciprocal interaction between cognitive processes, behaviour, and the environment (Bandura 1986). This theory highlights the importance of considering social and cultural factors in understanding human behaviour and development. It suggests that individuals learn through observation and imitation of others, and that their behaviour is influenced by their cognitive processes, such as perceptions, beliefs, and expectations.

The SCT helps to explain how the cultural and linguistic needs of children with disabilities play a crucial role in their psychological assessment. By acknowledging the cultural and linguistic contexts in which these children live, psychologists can better understand their unique needs, experiences, and challenges during the assessment process. For example, cultural factors such as language barriers, cultural norms, and beliefs can significantly impact the validity and reliability of psychological assessments (Brislin et al. 1973). Failure to consider these factors may lead to misinterpretation of assessment results, misdiagnosis, and inappropriate interventions for children with disabilities. Additionally, the SCT emphasises the role of observational learning and modelling. Children with disabilities often observe and learn from their social environment, including their cultural and linguistic contexts. By considering these factors during assessment, psychologists can better understand how cultural and

linguistic influences shape the cognitive processes, behaviour, and development of children with disabilities. The SCT provides a suitable theoretical framework for this study. By incorporating this theory, one can explore the reciprocal interaction between cultural and linguistic factors, cognitive processes, behaviour, and the assessment process, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of this important issue.

Literature Review

Neglecting cultural and linguistic factors in psychological assessment can have significant implications for the accuracy of diagnosis and intervention planning for children with disabilities. Cultural and linguistic factors play a crucial role in shaping an individual's experiences, world-view, and communication style. By overlooking these factors, there is a risk of misinterpreting behaviours or symptoms as indicative of a disability or disorder when they may be culturally or linguistically influenced expressions of normative behaviour. This can lead to misdiagnosis, inappropriate interventions, and ineffective treatment outcomes for children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. According to a literature review conducted by Lopez et al. (2019), research has consistently shown that cultural and linguistic factors significantly impact the assessment process for children with disabilities. The authors highlight that cultural bias in assessment measures and tools, as well as language barriers, can result in inaccurate diagnoses and inappropriate treatment recommendations. They emphasise the importance of integrating cultural and linguistic factors into the assessment process to ensure accurate diagnosis and effective intervention planning for diverse populations of children with disabilities. Neglecting cultural and linguistic factors in psychological assessment can compromise the accuracy of diagnosis and intervention planning for children with disabilities. It is crucial for researchers and practitioners to consider these factors to avoid misdiagnosis and ensure culturally appropriate and effective interventions for all children.

The absence of cultural and linguistic needs in the assessment of children with disabilities can have significant psychosocial consequences for these children. Research has shown that failure to consider cultural and linguistic diversity in assessment can result in misidentification, misclassification, and inappropriate interventions (Lum 2012). This can lead to a lack of trust and rapport between the child and the assessor, and ultimately to inadequate support and resources for the child (Hall 2012). Studies have also found that culturally and linguistically appropriate assessments can help to identify and address the unique strengths and needs of children with disabilities, leading to more effective interventions and better outcomes (Aguilar and Rios 2015; Calderón 2015). Furthermore, neglecting cultural and linguistic needs in assessment can perpetuate systemic inequalities and reify oppressive structures (Gay 2017). In summary, considering cultural and linguistic diversity in the assessment of children with disabilities is essential for ensuring that these children receive the appropriate support and resources they need to thrive.

Assessing children with disabilities in a culturally sensitive and linguistically appropriate manner is crucial to ensure accurate identification and support of their needs. Research suggests that traditional assessment tools may not be suitable for children from diverse cultural backgrounds, and that linguistic and cultural barriers can impact assessment results (Hamers and Pijl 2013; Koro-Ljungberg 2016). To address this, strategies such as using culturally and linguistically diverse assessment tools, incorporating interpreters and translators, and involving family members and community leaders in the assessment process can help promote culturally sensitive and linguistically appropriate practices (Korostenskaja 2014; Salisbury 2016). Additionally, using alternative assessment methods, such as play-based assessments, can be more effective in identifying the unique needs of children with disabilities from diverse cultural backgrounds (Hallett 2014). Careful consideration of these strategies can help ensure that assessment practices are fair and equitable for all children, regardless of their cultural or linguistic background.

Methodology

The present study adopted a qualitative research approach and used a phenomenological research design. The target population consisted of educational psychologists, parents of children with disabilities, and specialist teachers. Convenience sampling was employed to select participants who met the inclusion criteria. The sample ($n = 30$) comprised five educational psychologists, 10 parents, and 15 specialist teachers. Data collection involved conducting face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions with the participants. These methods provided an opportunity to gather rich, in-depth insights into their experiences and perspectives regarding the cultural and linguistic needs of children with disabilities during psychological assessment. Thematic analysis was applied to analyse the collected data. This approach involved identifying patterns, themes, and meanings within the data, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the implications and potential consequences of neglecting cultural and linguistic needs in the assessment process. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, a pilot study was conducted prior to the main data collection phase. This allowed for refinement of the data collection instruments and ensured that the questions were clear and relevant to the research objectives. Ethical principles were rigorously adhered to in order to safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and steps were taken to anonymise and securely store the data to ensure confidentiality throughout the study.

Presentation of Findings

How Does Neglecting Cultural and Linguistic Factors in Psychological Assessment Impact the Accuracy of Diagnosis and Intervention Planning for Children With Disabilities?

In one of the interviews, a participant stated as follows:

Neglecting cultural and linguistic factors can lead to misinterpreting behaviour and symptoms. Each culture has unique beliefs and norms that influence how disabilities are understood. Ignoring cultural context can result in misdiagnosis or underdiagnosis, as symptoms aligned with cultural norms may be mistaken as pathology in a different culture.

Cultural competence in assessment and diagnosis is crucial to avoid misinterpretation and misdiagnosis. Cultural beliefs and norms shape the expression of disabilities, and symptoms aligned with one culture may be misunderstood in another. Without considering the cultural context, professionals may misjudge behaviours, leading to inappropriate diagnoses or treatments. To accurately interpret behaviours and address biases, it is essential to understand cultural norms, values, and beliefs. By prioritising cultural competence, professionals can provide respectful and effective services to individuals from diverse backgrounds.

Another participant shared the following perspective:

As a parent of a child with a disability, I have seen how cultural and linguistic factors impact assessment and intervention. Not considering cultural and linguistic factors in the assessment can lead to misunderstandings and inappropriate interventions.

This finding highlights the crucial role of cultural and linguistic factors in the assessment and intervention of children with disabilities. Without proper consideration of these factors, assessments may be misleading or inaccurate, leading to inappropriate interventions that fail to address the child's unique needs. This can result in a lack of effective communication and understanding between the child, their family, and the professionals involved in their care. For example, a child's communication style or behaviour may be misinterpreted owing to cultural or linguistic differences, leading to misunderstandings and misdiagnoses.

A psychologist who participated in this study shared the following:

Cultural and linguistic factors can impact diagnosis and intervention planning for children with disabilities. Non-English speaking children may have difficulty communicating with their assessors, leading to misdiagnosis or misunderstanding. Cultural differences in communication styles and social norms can also lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretations. Considering cultural and linguistic factors in assessment is essential for accurate understanding and intervention.

This statement highlights the significance of considering cultural and linguistic factors in the assessment of and intervention planning for children with disabilities. Non-English speaking children may face difficulties in communicating with their assessors, which can result in misdiagnosis or misunderstanding. Additionally, cultural differences in communication styles and social norms can lead to misinterpretations. Therefore, it is crucial to take into account the child's cultural and linguistic background during the assessment process to ensure accurate understanding and effective intervention. This

requires a culturally responsive approach that values diversity and promotes inclusion, and it is essential for professionals to be aware of their own biases and cultural assumptions to avoid misinterpretations. By considering cultural and linguistic factors, professionals can better understand the child's needs and develop appropriate interventions that are tailored to their unique circumstances.

What Are the Psychosocial Consequences of Neglecting Cultural and Linguistic Needs in the Assessment of Children With Disabilities?

The study found that there are psychological consequences when psychologists neglect the cultural and linguistic needs of a child with disabilities. Some of the impacts were captured in the interviews and focus group discussion that were conducted during the study. A participant made the following statement during a focus group discussion:

Assessments that do not consider linguistic diversity may not accurately capture the child's language abilities and may result in a misidentification of language impairment. This can have serious consequences for the child's academic and social development.

The participant's statement highlights the critical importance of considering linguistic diversity in assessments of the language abilities of children with disabilities. Failure to do so can result in inaccurate assessments and misidentification of language impairment, which can have serious consequences for the child's academic and social development. This suggests that cultural and linguistic diversity must be taken into account when evaluating children's language skills, and that assessments should be tailored to the child's individual background and experiences. The participant's input emphasises the need for psychologists and educators to be aware of the potential impact of linguistic diversity on language development and to adapt their assessments and interventions accordingly. By doing so, they can ensure that children from diverse linguistic backgrounds receive the support and resources they need to succeed academically and socially.

Another participant shared the following:

Neglecting cultural and linguistic needs in the assessment of children with disabilities can lead to misdiagnosis and inappropriate interventions, which can further exacerbate the child's difficulties and create a sense of hopelessness for the child and their family.

The statement highlights the critical importance of considering cultural and linguistic needs in the assessment of children with disabilities. Neglecting these needs can have detrimental effects on the accuracy of diagnosis and the appropriateness of interventions. When cultural and linguistic factors are overlooked, there is a higher risk of misdiagnosing a child's condition, which can lead to ineffective or even harmful interventions. Additionally, the lack of cultural and linguistic sensitivity can create a sense of hopelessness for the child and their family, as they may feel misunderstood and overlooked. It is crucial for professionals to take into account the unique cultural and

linguistic backgrounds of children with disabilities to ensure accurate assessment and provide appropriate support and interventions.

Cultural and linguistic diversity can impact the way children with disabilities express themselves and communicate their needs. If assessments do not take this into account, it may lead to a failure to identify and address the child's needs, and may result in inadequate support and services.

What Strategies Promote Culturally Sensitive and Linguistically Appropriate Assessment Practices for Children With Disabilities?

Five key implications of ignoring cultural and linguistic needs during assessment of children with disabilities emerged from the data:

1. Inaccurate diagnosis because local knowledge about the child is ignored by the psychologist.
2. Inappropriate interventions being suggested since wrong information is used in proffering the course of action.
3. Perpetuation of stereotypes simply because standardised tests project children with intellectual challenges as behaving in a certain manner.
4. Lowered achievement and self-esteem as the standardised tests recommend that the child with disabilities engage in activities which they do not normally do at home.
5. Distanced family intervention since these tests are taken by children with disabilities through writing. No parents can be involved in this manner.

Standardised tests presume that all children are socialised in the American culture, hence they do not have instructions meant for children with disabilities who are alien to the culture (Rhodes et al. 2005). This position ignores the reality of cultural and linguistic diversity among disabled populations who did not grow up in America (Skiba et al. 2016). Evidently, standardised tests do not prioritise the cultural and linguistic needs of the test taker but the test developer. Children with disabilities from other countries have different cultural socialisation experiences other than what test developers expect based on norming groups. Factors like family dynamics, communication styles, and child-rearing practices vary significantly cross-culturally in ways not accounted for in standardised formats and scoring (Lo 2015). Ultimately, the objectivity of the test administration falls by the wayside because the absence of the test taker's cultural and linguistic needs negatively compromise the outcome of the psychological assessment. Also, this threatens validity and fairness for culturally and linguistically diverse children with disabilities. Performance may be disadvantaged not because of ability but lack of familiarity with the test's underlying cultural assumptions (Sotelo-Dynega et al. 2013). Relying solely on scores for diagnoses or special education

eligibility determinations risks being invalid or biased for children with disabilities (Alvidrez and Weinstein 1999).

Standardised tests assume that all children with disabilities can learn in ways which are similar to the American curriculum (Harris et al. 2009). This assumption has failed to recognise cultural diversity in learning (Hyladyna and Downing 2004). Standardised tests have not been moderated to suit the conditions of children from other continents. For CLD children, test items, construct, and English language administration can diminish their true abilities and produce erroneous results (Valdes and Figueroa 1994). There is a significant variation in educational experiences and styles across cultures that standardised assessments do not account for (Gonzalez 2005). It goes without saying that any psychological assessment that is devoid of the test taker's educational experience and styles cannot make a significant impact. It should take cognisance of factors which help undersatnd the child with disabilities. For example, children with disabilities from Asian countries may be accustomed to rote memorisation as opposed to open thinking (Ngo and Lee 2002). It follows that children with disabilities will not make an impact if they are asked to write a test premised on open thinking. These are issues which test developers need to take cognisance of before they impose these tests on test takers outside the American borders

Further, the situation of children who do not use English as their official language are conflicted in taking such assessments tests (Cottrell and Barret 2017). The standard tests do not take cognisance of children outside America. Without accounting for environmental and experiential factors unique to their cultures, and languages, appropriate support is less likely to be determined or provided (Ford 2012). It is not easy to draw up a conclusion using inappropriate information about children with disabilities (Ortiz 2018). Also, standardised tests are presumed to provide objective assessments of children with disabilities. However, this fails to consider the additional barriers faced by children with disabilities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Kettler et al. 2016). Tests are always normed on non-disabled populations and conducted solely in the majority language, neglecting the impact of disabilities on performance (Abedi and Gandara 2006). This practice compromises the outcome of the assessment endeavour. The assessment effort cannot be objective when some crucial information is not incorporated in the assessment process.

Relatedly, using test scores to judge school quality presumes that all learners have equal opportunities. But scores on culturally and linguistically diverse children with disabilities frequently underestimate bias issues such as uneven accessibility support and lack accomodation familiarity (Kopriva and Che 2016). The way the test is designed and questions are asked is inherently biased and do not show how disability impacts performance. Issues of uneven support are also prevalent in psychological accesssments involving standardised tests. The level of support provided to address disabilities like extra time and assistive devices is inconsistent and may not sufficiently meet individual needs. Last but not least, children with disabilities may experience lack

of accommodation familiarity. Children with disabilities from non-dominant cultures or languages may not have adequate opportunities to practise or learn self-advocacy prior to the high stakes test environment. All these factors work against children with disabilities simply because their culture and linguistic needs have been ignored prior to the assessment.

Discussion

The present findings corroborate prior research highlighting the shortcomings of a “one-size-fits-all” framework to psychological assessment that disregards critical diversity factors (Fiorello 2006). A significant limitation of the “one-size-fits-all” model is the questionable validity when applied to culturally and linguistically diverse populations. There is no “one-size-fits-all” model in psychological assessment. Some children with disabilities are disadvantaged since there are no international norms which apply to all people in the world. Standardised tests uphold the norms and values of the people in the culture in which the test was developed. Current standardised tests tend to uphold American norms and values since most standardised tests were developed there. Standardised tests are developed and normed on Western and affluent samples, failing to consider the impact of variables like accumulation of experiences.

By not adapting standardised measures or interpretation for the cultural and linguistic strengths and experiences of CLD children, their disability-related challenges are less accurately distinguished from issues related to language proficiency or acculturation. This hinders equitable identification and treatment, and may even violate professional ethical principles of non-discrimination in practice (Flanagan 2013). Future directions point towards diversifying norming samples, translation of tools into other languages, culturally valid adaptations or replacements, and training to raise psychologist awareness of cultural biases that can infiltrate clinical judgment (Klingner 2006).

Previous studies indicate that it is problematic to assume that all children with disabilities learn similarly according to mainstream American curricular standards and approaches. A growing body of literature emphasises the need for culturally responsive practices that acknowledge learning diversity. In fact, assessments tests must be designed in such a way that they prioritise the test taker’s linguistic and cultural needs in order for them to be effective and objective. Several studies have found that curricula and pedagogy normed primarily on white, middle class populations can fail to appropriately assess children with disabilities from other cultural and linguistic background (Klinger et al. 2005). Similarly, disability definitions and individual education programmes (IEP) goals normed on dominant cultural values may not fully consider alternative expressions of developmental milestones for ethnic or linguistic minority groups (Harry 1992). Over-representations of children with disabilities in restrictive settings has been linked to such standardised constructs of ability (Artiles et al. 2010). The outcome of the psychological assesment is bound to miss the target. An assessment cannot be accurate as long as it uses the wrong variables. Standardised tests

premise their effectiveness on constructs. These constructs may not be reliable because of how they have been crafted.

Previous studies have shown that the use of a single dominant language for testing threatens construct and predictive validity for measuring academic achievements versus language abilities (Abedi and Gandara 2006). The chances are that a child whose language is not English is poised to perform badly. Children who speak English will undoubtedly perform better simply because they understand the language better. More inclusive assessment incorporating native language support as an accommodation promotes equitable, valid evaluation of diverse populations.

Children have equal opportunities to learn as envisaged by the administration of standardised tests. Research findings indicate that children from different backgrounds do not have truly equal opportunities to learn within standardised systems that assume cultural homogeneity. Numerous studies have shown that marginalised populations remain disproportionately represented even after controlling for disability type (Sullivan and Bal 2013).

Conclusion

Ignoring the cultural and linguistic realities of CLD children during psychological assessment for disabilities can have damaging implications. Accurate diagnosis, suitable intervention, achievement motivation, counteracting of stereotypes, and engaged family participation are critically compromised when diversity factors are not accounted for. Adherence to standardised testing alone perpetuates inequity. Concerted efforts must be made across research and practice to eradicate bias and insensitivity towards cultural and linguistic diversity through culturally responsive assessment frameworks.

Recommendations

Based on the research literature discussed, the following six recommendations for improving testing practices and educational opportunities in a more equitable, culturally-responsive manner are put forward:

1. Provide accommodations and supports that make assessments accessible for CLD learners by incorporating native language components, cultural context clues, and reducing language load.
2. Train educators in culturally-sustaining practices like anti-bias curriculum development, restorative discipline approaches, and affirmative identity formation to counter systemic barriers and biases impeding opportunities.
3. Integrate community input and knowledge holders in decision-making regarding children with disabilities' evaluation, placement, instruction, and school climate to ensure cultural validity and representation.

4. Disaggregate data to monitor disproportionate placement trends, inequitable discipline practices, and curricular representation gaps impacting vulnerable populations.
5. Transition towards holistic, authentically performance-based assessment beyond standardised testing that more accurately captures cultural learning variations and non-academic strengths.
6. Foster learning environments in which all children with disabilities see themselves and their home cultures equally respected and integrated into curricula to promote engagement, well-being, and achievement through identity-affirming pedagogy.

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