

Practice Guidelines for the Assessment of the African American Child

CSHA Task Force on the Assessment of the African American Child

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BACKGROUND

Larry P. v. Riles (1979) is a case that was filed against the state of California by African American parents who argued that the administration of culturally biased standardized intelligence tests resulted in the disproportionate identification of African American children as mentally retarded and inappropriate placement in special education classes for the Educable Mentally Retarded (EMR).

The CDE is also obligated to prohibit the administration of IQ tests which have not been validated for the purpose of identifying African American children as mentally retarded or which have not been reviewed for evidence of racial and cultural bias by the Federal Court of Appeals.

Although the original ruling applies to the use of standardized IQ tests with African American children, many standardized speech and language tests also fall under the Larry P. mandate because they directly or indirectly purport to measure IQ and their construct validity is partially or fully determined through correlations with other IQ tests.

There are numerous issues that need to be taken into account when evaluating the speech and language performance of African American children on standardized tests that are primarily normed on children from differing racial and ethnic backgrounds.

These differences can lead to various forms of test bias during the testing process including: a) situational, b) format, c) value, and d) linguistic bias. Test bias is most likely to occur when using tests or other assessment procedures that have been primarily normed on or developed for use with non African American child populations. Test bias can also occur when testing AAE child speakers but using tests that are based on theories and models of SAE grammar, phonology or language developmental.

PRACTICE GUIDELINES

Step #1: Review tests for possible test bias influences

- a) Determine whether the test was primarily standardized on African American children and/or AAE child speakers
- b) Look for information on the performance of African American/AAE child sub-groups within the standardization sample
- c) Examine test items, picture stimuli, test administration procedures and/or instructions that appear to contain possible bias

Step #2: Review tests for compliance with Larry P.

- a) Important questions to ask:
 - Is the test standardized and does it purport to measure intelligence (cognition, mental ability or aptitude)?
 - Are the test results reported in the form of IQ or mental age?
 - Does the evidence of the construct validity of the test rely on correlations with IQ tests?

- b) How to answer questions:
 - Review the test manual for a description of its purpose
 - Determine whether the test generates IQ or mental age equivalents
 - Look at the test manual for information on how content/construct validity was established
 - Look at other sources of test validity (e.g., are correlations established between the test and standardized IQ assessment tools?)

Step #3: Use alternative assessment procedures when standardized tests are determined to be invalid or inappropriate

- a) Parent and teacher report
- b) Observations of peer interactions
- c) Language sample
- d) Criterion-referenced testing procedures
- e) Dynamic assessment procedures

Step #4: If standardized tests are used:

- a) Reword test instructions
- b) Increase the number of practice items
- c) Continue to test beyond the ceiling
- d) Record a child's entire response
- e) Use alternative scoring

Step #5: When examining and analyzing data:

- a) Look for evidence of dialect markers that can't be confused with normal developmental or disorder influences
- b) Look for evidence of dialect use patterns that do not represent normal patterns of AAE or SAE dialect use
- c) Focus on the more universal aspects of language development for identifying patterns of possible disorder
- d) Look at case history information for evidence of obvious medical or health risk concerns

Step 6: Report findings from testing in a least biased fashion:

- a) Provide a comprehensive overview of the child's language strength and weaknesses
- b) Include information from the case history on the child's overall developmental and health history
- c) Report any test modifications made during the assessment process
- d) Avoid reporting normative test scores
- e) When using standardized tests, include a cautionary statement concerning the reliability and/or validity of test results
- f) Identify linguistic productions possibly related to dialect influences
- g) Describe possible language differences using non-deficit terminology

COMMON PROBLEMS OF CURRENTLY AVAILABLE STANDARDIZED TESTS

At present, there are several standardized speech and language assessment tools that violate the Larry P. court ruling or that contain some form of test bias which make them inappropriate for use with some African American children. Some of the common problems of these tests are as follows:

- a) There are no tests, to date, that have been primarily standardized on African American or AAE child speakers. For most tests, African American children make up only a small percentage of the

test's standardization sample (e.g., 12-15% of the sample). This means that tests continue to be primarily standardized on children from other cultural backgrounds.

b) Few tests provide important demographic information on the characteristics of their African American sample (e.g., family income, parental education, dialect status). This makes it difficult to evaluate whether the African American children participating in the sample match the backgrounds of African American test takers.

c) Most tests contain some form of cultural, linguistic or format bias.

d) Although few tests are explicitly described as tests of cognitive or intellectual ability, test developers often allude to the relationship between cognition and language. In some cases, developers consider their test to serve as an indirect measure of cognition.

e) Many of the speech and language tests currently available in the field of speech-language pathology have construct and/or other forms of validity established through correlations with other standardized tests.

IMPORTANT CDE/IDEA REGULATIONS AND GUIDELINES

In addition to being familiar with the CDE's restrictions against the use of standardized tests in light of Larry P., SLPs need to also be aware of current CDE and IDEA regulations pertaining to the assessment of children from diverse backgrounds. Specifically, CDE guidelines assert that:

a) Whenever "standardized tests are considered to be invalid for the specific pupil, the expected language performance level shall be determined by alternative means" (CDE, 1989, p. 69). Alternative means of assessment should be used whenever there is a professional concern about the validity of a test [5 CCR 3030(c)(B)(4), 5 CCR 3030(j)(2)(B)];

b) Nondiscriminatory techniques, methods and materials should be used for ethnic and culturally diverse children [5 CCR 3022, Education Code (EC) 56320 (a)];

c) Assessment personnel must be competent and appropriately trained to administer and interpret test results and, when necessary, be knowledgeable of and sensitive to the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of students [5 CCR 3023; EC 56320(b) (3), 56322; 56324]

d) When an assessment has been completed, a written report must be developed which addresses any effects of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantages, where appropriate [EC 56327]; and

e) When appropriate, the IEP should contain linguistically appropriate goals, objectives, programs, and services [5 CCR 3001(s); EC 56345].

The potential problems of using standardized tests and recommendations for increased use of other forms of assessment are also addressed by federal regulations under IDEA (1999, 34 C.F.R. Part 300). A review of these regulations reveals that IDEA regulations:

- 1) Mandate that no single criteria be used for making eligibility determinations [Section 300.532(f)];
- 2) Emphasize the importance of using multiple sources for determining a child's eligibility for special education services (e.g., information provided by the parent, teacher, and information obtained from classroom-based assessments and observations) [Sections 300.532(b), 300.533 (a)(1) (i, ii, iii); 300.535(a)(1)];

- 3) States that tests and other evaluation materials used to assess any child must be:
 - a) selected and administered so as not to be discriminatory on a racial or cultural basis, b) be administered in a child's native language, c) measure the extent to which a child demonstrates a true disability rather than a child's level of language proficiency in English [Sections 300.532(a) (1) (i), 300. 532(a) (1) (ii), and 300.532(a) (2)];
- 4) Specifies that any standardized tests given to a child be validated for the specific purpose for which they are used, and administered by personnel who are trained and knowledgeable. In addition, evaluation procedures must include those tailored to assess specific areas of educational need and not merely to provide a single general intelligence quotient. Finally, when tests are given under non-standardized conditions, a description of how the test administration varied be included in the final evaluation report [Sections 300.532 (c) (1) (i, ii,) 300.532(2), 300.532(2)(d)]; and
- 5) Stresses that no child is eligible for special education services if the determinate factor for eligibility is lack of instruction in reading, math or limited English proficiency [Section 300.534 (b) (1) (i, ii)].

CLOSING/SUMMARY

In summary, it is the responsibility of speech, language, and hearing professionals to ensure that African American children are appropriately evaluated in light of the current CDE Larry P. mandate and IDEA regulations. CSHA members are encouraged to familiarize themselves with issues related to Larry P. ad the assessment of African American children and all children from diverse cultural and language backgrounds including: the history of Larry P. and the intelligence testing of minority children, cognitive referencing and implications for testing African American children, relevant CDE and IDEA guidelines regarding the assessment of children from diverse backgrounds, sources of test bias and the most appropriate methods for minimizing test bias, alternative assessment and report writing, and best practices for distinguishing difference from disorder. In addition, administrators have an obligation to be informed and to make that all members of their professional staff are informed about each of the following.