

## GETTING SCHOOLED

Welcome to Getting Schooled, a regular feature article penned by members of the PAA School Psychology Committee!

Drs. Barva and Piercey have continued to explore the Psycho-Educational Assessment topic started in our last feature, *Revitalizing the Psycho-Educational Process*. This article focuses on the levels of tests and the corresponding competences of professionals that use them to gather information regarding a student's learning profile. The utilization of both the College of Alberta Psychologists' and Alberta Education's documents to discuss this topic provides the reader with essential information that can be used to inform practice.

*Professionalism and Psycho-Educational Assessment* is a feature to share with our education colleagues as school districts develop an inclusive education system.

R. Coranne Johnson, PhD., R. Psych.  
Chair, PAA School Psychology Committee

## PROFESSIONALISM AND PSYCHO-EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT

**Charlene J. Barva, Ph.D., R. Psych. &  
David Piercey, Ph.D., R. Psych.**

### **The Assessment**

The school psychologist is an integral and important member of a school district's student learning team. School psychologists receive a broad science-practitioner education in the areas of foundations of learning, behaviour and individual differences, research methodology, and program evaluation. When students experience school problems, whether at the elementary, high school, or college level, one must carefully examine all aspects of the learning or social-emotional-behavioural issue. A psychological-educational assessment is frequently part of this process.

Such assessments attempt to measure the various workings of the brain and the "self," (e.g., cognitive abilities, academic and social-emotional functioning) which affect how we learn and function in school and life. The purpose of the assessment can be to identify a learning disability, determine the degree of cognitive impairment, identify strengths and areas of challenge, assess giftedness, or may serve as a part of an overall problem-solving process.

A key component of the assessment is a measure of intellectual or learning potential (IQ). This provides some idea of how well one could expect a person to function in situations ranging from basic social interactions to academic study. Cognitive processing measures (e.g., working memory, speed, attention, organization, visual-spatial skills) can help to clarify underlying deficits that may contribute to learning problems. Educational achievement (reading, writing, math) is also measured, using standardized and non-standardized tests. A comparison can then be made between a person's learning potential, or IQ, and their academic achievement. This comparison is

only an estimate or prediction, but it may help to inform decisions about the student's academic program, and may facilitate problem-solving at school. Social-emotional testing provides information regarding a student's mental health, emotional well-being, interpersonal skills, and other factors that may be influencing the student's behavior and social-emotional functioning within the school environment. Information obtained during a psycho-educational assessment is used to plan student-specific instructional and behavioural interventions, and to set realistic, attainable goals. The psycho-educational assessment, along with information from numerous sources and other professionals, contributes to a further understanding of the whole child. Effective diagnosis also requires ruling out other possible explanations for a student's difficulties.

### **The Authority to Assess**

School psychologists providing specialized assessments on children and students in Alberta schools should be reasonably familiar with two documents from Alberta Education that pertain to the testing of children, and outline standards that school districts are expected to follow. These are *Standards for Special Education (2004)*, available on-line at [http://www.education.alberta.ca/media/511387/specialed\\_stds2004.pdf](http://www.education.alberta.ca/media/511387/specialed_stds2004.pdf) and *Standards for Psycho-educational Assessment Monograph (1994)*, which is only available in print from the Learning Resource Centre, as Product # 281163 at a cost of \$4.00/copy.

Of immediate interest in *Standards for Psycho-educational Assessment* are the "Standards of Competence: Levels of Tests and Qualifications", which outlines the qualifications of those who are permitted to administer tests, and which separates a range of psycho-educational assessment instruments into either "Level A Tests", "Level B Tests", or "Level C Tests".

**Level A tests** are those instruments that do not require any formal training in testing and measurement, and include a variety of teacher-administered instruments like the Canadian Test of Basic Skills, the Canadian Achievement Test, the Canadian Cognitive Abilities Test, and the Gates- McGinitie Reading Tests. These tests are usually multiple-choice, group administered, easy to score, and are not expected to be used for diagnostic purposes.

**Level B tests** are those instruments that require some more specialized and formal training in tests and measurement, but not necessarily at the graduate level. Such tests include the Woodcock Johnson Tests of Achievement, the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test, and the Kauffman Test of Educational Achievement. These tests generally are individually administered achievement tests, used to determine age- or grade-equivalents, and guide educational programming.

**Level C tests** are those instruments that require specialized graduate training in testing and measurement, and with a minimum of a Master's degree in special education, educational psychology, or the equivalent. In fact, Alberta Education has always expected those administering and interpreting Level C tests to be eligible for registration with the College of Alberta Psychologists (CAP), and most school districts expect professionals hired for Level C testing to be registered with CAP. Instruments include the various intelligence scales, personality measures, adaptive behavior scales, and other inventories used for diagnostic and programming purposes.

Although psychologists do not have exclusive scope of practice in Level C tests, our profession is the one that routinely uses Level C (and Level B) tests in our practice. As well, psychologists are most likely to meet the publishers' requirements for the purchase and use of Level C (and B) tests, and more likely to satisfy all reasonable expectations when challenged on competency grounds. However, psychologists do need to be careful in representing their skills in Level C (and B) testing, since not all psychologists have the specialized graduate training or expertise to meet expectations of Alberta Education or test publishers, and may be vulnerable to having their competency challenged in litigious or other contentious circumstances.

### **Being Professional about Assessment**

Despite Alberta Education's explicit Standards of Competency, there are still examples of Level C testing being conducted in school districts by under-trained individuals, and outside the supervision of duly-qualified psychologists. This is unfortunate, as it leads to the mistaken impression that others can effectively do this work, it downgrades the contribution that our profession, and school psychology, makes to the educational enterprise, and ultimately jeopardizes the students it is supposed to serve.

Level B tests are a different matter. Some individuals (and professional groups) are fully qualified to administer and interpret these tests, and to provide advice to teachers about suitable programming options. One example is Reading Specialists (recognized by their specialist council of the Alberta Teacher's Association), who have graduate education (usually an M.Ed.) in Reading, and clinical coursework that focuses on diagnostic skills in reading fluency and reading comprehension, and other learning difficulties.

The other Alberta Education document, *Standards for Special Education*, outlines expectations for all those involved in the assessment of children and students, including: using qualified professionals to conduct specialized assessment, obtaining written informed parental/guardian consent, maintaining parental involvement in decision-making, controlling access to and security of records, and developing Individual Program Plans (IPP's) using the results of specialized assessment.

Much of the information contained in the *Standards for Special Education* is familiar to school psychologists, as it is seen to mirror aspects of our professional Code of Ethics, our Standards of Practice, and other professional guidelines from our College. However, not all personnel in school districts are aware of these *Standards*, let alone of the requirements in our Code of Ethics or Standards of Practice, and may consequently expect us to provide services that contravene how we are otherwise expected to act as members of a self-regulated profession. As a result, school psychologists need to be diligent, whether in an employment or other contractual relationship with school districts, to ensure that the school district and its representatives understand the professional ethics, standards, and guidelines under which we operate. As well, we need to advocate more strongly for greater utilization of our skills beyond just testing and diagnosing for special needs eligibility and coding, and towards our increased participation in consultation/collaboration, and program planning and evaluation.

### **Summary Comments**

A psycho-educational assessment is a multi-faceted process that involves the assessment of a student's cognitive abilities, processing skills, social-emotional, and

academic functioning skills. A range of different assessment tools can be used in the assessment process, and the tools - along with the qualifications of the people administering these different measures - are described by Alberta Education in the document *Standards for Psycho-educational Assessment*. Of considerable importance are the Level C tests, which involve the use of formal, psychodiagnostic procedures that require a considerable degree of training, expertise, and continual upgrading of knowledge. Psychological tests and procedures, like level C tests, utilized in an assessment are scientific and research-based tools. In the hands of inexperienced, unsupervised, or unqualified individuals, there is potential for serious consequences such as misdiagnosis and improper interpretation of assessment data. This could lead to either ineffective or harmful interventions. There are a number of academic tests that require lesser training and can be comfortably and competently administered by resource teachers and guidance counsellors. Level A assessment is an example of this. Level B tests require more training and expertise and should not be utilized by individuals without the proper skills and training described in the Alberta Education document.

The results of a psycho-educational assessment should offer teachers valuable direction for immediate interventions with students, as well as provide substantial collateral information to inform programming. School psychologists, with their specialized training in assessment and psychometrics, can be helpful on a consultative basis, assisting resource teachers and guidance counsellors in interpreting scores on various standardized academic tests. However, school psychologists need to maintain professional practice standards when conducting psycho-educational assessments and ensure competency and good judgment at all times.

### **References**

Alberta Education. (1994). *Standards of psycho-educational assessment*. Edmonton, AB: Alberta Education, Special Education Branch.

Alberta Learning. (2004). *Standards for special education, amended June 2004*. Edmonton, AB: Alberta Learning, Special Programs Branch.