DOES THE WISC-R MEASURE VERBAL INTELLIGENCE
FOR NONENGLISH-SPEAKING CHILDREN?[1]

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Zarske, Moore, and Petersen's (1981) article that examined the factor structure of the
WISC-R for "diagnosed learning disabled" children was critiqued. These authors
concluded that the WISC-R "is an appropriate measure of general intellectual
abilities" (p.407), but the present author suggests that this conclusion does not follow
from their factor analytic data. The makeup of the sample also is questioned, and im-
plications of their findings for the practitioner are discussed.

Zarske, Moore, and Petersen (1981) present a statistical investigation of the WISC-
R's factor structure for "diagnosed learning disabled" Native American children which
has potentially damaging conclusions that are based upon misinterpretation of factor
analytic data, using a poorly identified sample. The authors assert that *learning disabled*
Navajo and Papago children comprised their sample, and yet the identification of such a
sample is not adequately presented. To say that "certified professionals" diagnosed these
children according to Arizona Conditions and Standards is not enough, especially since
these conditions could not have been legitimately employed, because the WISC-R was
administered in English to diagnose these children whose primary language was not
English. The point is not that the group is "homogeneous in terms of the nature of the
respective learning disabilities" (p.406), but, rather, that identifying children who live on
a remote reservation, who speak a language other than English, and who are culturally
very different from those children in the respective standardization samples as learning
disabled on the basis of the WISC-R and achievement test scores is a misnomer.

Even more serious is the conclusion that Zarske, et al., arrive at, because it is poten-
tially damaging to Native American and other culturally diverse children. It is clear by
Zarske, et al.'s statement, "it appears that the WISC-R is an appropriate measure of
general intellectual abilities" (p.407), that they have gone well beyond their factor
analytic findings, and show little regard for, or theoretical appreciation of, intelligence as
represented by the WISC-R. It does *not* follow that because two factors emerged in their
analysis that were similar to the factors reported by Kaufman (1975) for the WISC-R
standardization sample, that they have isolated verbal and nonverbal *intelligence*. This is
simply a logical error; if a child's primary language is not English, but one attempts to
measure intelligence via verbal (English) tasks, the confounding variable of language
precludes interpretation of performance on such items as measuring verbal intelligence.
Would we place an English-speaking child in an LD class based upon interpretation of
performance on the original Binet, which happens to be in French, and then go on to
state that the French IQ test measures intelligence in our English-speaking LD group? Of
course not!

On the basis of the data presented by Zarske, et al., a more appropriate conclusion
is that for this rather ill-defined sample of Native American children, the verbal factor
represents English language facility, rather than verbal intelligence as Wechsler concep-
tualized it. I feel it is certainly inappropriate to suggest to practitioners that a

bilingual/bicultural child's verbal IQ represents verbal intelligence. This is especially absurd given that there is evidence to suggest that randomly selected Native American children (primary language Navajo) who live on the reservation and who were not referred for psychoeducational services obtained a mean WISC-R Verbal IQ of 74 (SD=13.3), Performance IQ of 103 (SD=12.7) and Full Scale IQ of 87 (SD=11.4) (Naglieri, in preparation). As practitioners, we must recognize that language competence is an important variable that blocks measurement of verbal *intelligence* when bilingual children are administered tests like the WISC-R, rendering the Verbal Scale an estimate of English language ability.

REFERENCES

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