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**A Psycho-Educational Assessment for Learners with Learning Disabilities in
New Zealand**

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to analyze the determinants of psycho-educational assessment for learners with learning disabilities (LD) in New Zealand.

Methodology: The study adopted a desktop methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low-cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

Results: The results revealed that there exist conceptual and contextual gaps relating to the study on psycho-education for learners with learning disabilities in New Zealand. Preliminary empirical review reveals that main challenges in psycho-educational assessment were linked to lack of proper stakeholder collaboration and interests, inadequate funding and resources, time taken in assessment and community backgrounds of the learners.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The transformative paradigm may be used to provide a framework for research in the disability communities that is more attuned to handling diversity within, aims to build on strengths within communities, develops solidarity with other groups which are marginalized, and changes its identity politics to a socio-cultural perspective.

Keywords: *Psycho-Educational Assessment, Learning Disabilities, New Zealand, Basic Education, Specific Learning Disability (SLD).*

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INTRODUCTION

Globally, most psycho-education assessment studies have been based on examinations and grading, not on learning, even though the assessors claim that the focus of their assessments are to inform learning as outlined by White & McCloskey, Framework for the 2003 (National Assessment of Adult Literacy, 2015). The focus on funding, examination and grading, compromise the overall process of Psycho-educational assessment for learners with LD.

Psycho-educational assessments are designed to provide greater understanding of a child's cognitive, learning, behavioral or social-emotional difficulties, to make informed treatment decisions. Psycho-educational assessment uses objective, standardized measures to determine the learners' cognitive ability (i.e., intelligence), to evaluate their information processing skills (i.e., memory, attention, graphomotor coordination, processing speed, executive function, phonological processing, etc.) and academic skills. Certain tests will also aid in determining possible behaviour, social, emotional, and psychological diagnoses that could interfere with learners' education or relationships. The assessment might lead to a diagnosis or the results may necessitate more testing. The assessments are done in similar ways by all psychologists, but the choice of specific tests may differ. Usually, there is more than one psycho-educational test administered to ensure that all possible outcomes are determined or ruled out. Typically, a comprehensive report is written and a full disclosure of the results is provided to the parents by the psychologist.

The prevalence of LD globally ranges from 0.3% to 2.5% in the under 20 years of age. Moreover around 60% of children with LD are in primary schools while 40% in secondary schools and 60% of all students diagnosed with LD are boys according to the (Journal of Education and Training Studies, 2022). World education systems are everchanging in line with psycho-educational assessments of learners with LD, and hence posing the need for more professionals who meet the requirements of carrying out psycho-educational assessment for appropriate interventions to be accorded to the learners with LD who are currently facing challenges (The Gordon Commission, 2022). In the United States of America (USA) where learners with LD at every level have the probability of performing some educational tasks, most studies still point at gaps in the psycho-educational assessment process (National Research Center on Learning Disabilities, 2017).

During psycho-educational assessment interviews with parents or guardians of children with LD, feedback should not only be delivered to concerned individuals by post or in written documents but protocol should require that feedback on assessment also be provided in person with the presence of the individuals concerned (The American Educational Research Association AERA, 2021). This is imperative since such sessions provide opportunity for interpretation of the written report and other printed sources that are recommended as deemed to be more reliable forms of a back-up to the recommendations and further information by the assessor. It is critical for the interdisciplinary team to develop and to gain important information about the learner with LD to be able to encourage the learner and the parents to cope with emotional impact of a potential diagnosis and to better understand how to access educational services. Psychoeducational assessment should be focused on the special educational needs of a learner with consideration on a multidisciplinary and holistic approach. The results of the test can shape a learner's education through their entire academic career. Many parents are worried that having a psychological report

in their child's file will adversely affect their future. However, in all my years of working with private clients and in school boards, I have never heard of any negative effects of having a psychological assessment done.

The persistent challenge in reforming assessment is the prevalent lack of attention to appropriate assessment plans, placement options, appropriate legislation and or considerations of the challenges that hinder success in psychoeducational assessment (Wiggins & McTighe, 2016). In some of the European countries for instance Austria, there are no specific laws that apply to LD; however, New Zealand has LD and SLD legislations. These laws are, characteristically, related to both compulsory and higher education. When reviewing student achievement, tests form part of the assessment plan and are generally driven by policies, systems and goals. Efforts from psychoeducational assessment institutions and programs have led to the mass use of commercial psychoeducational assessment tools.

It is important that the internationally developed tests acquired from assessment organizations be revised, adapted and modified by to make them suitable for use at the local levels. When a learner has been suspected of having LD, a psycho-educational assessment can help to identify whether the disability is due to their cognitive development which may be delayed (McMillan, 2019). Learners with LD sometimes have an uneven development of skills - for example, they may have well developed spatial skills used to solve a puzzle but less developed verbal skills for giving the meaning of words (Naor & Zeidner, 2022). Lack of proper psycho-educational assessment makes learning a big challenge for learners with LD. Being aware of a learner's strengths and areas of needs means parents and teachers can give learners information and materials appropriate for their level, and they are more likely to maximize their potential (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2015).

Statement of the Problem

The New Zealand endeavors to immensely improve the education standards; however, psycho-educational assessment of learners with LD remains a challenge. Even though there are legislative aspects that address stakeholder responsibilities in the New Zealand issues such as aspects of student assessment, collaboration among teachers, parents and psycho-educational assessors in providing intensive services to learners with LD is still questionable. The educational institutions in the New Zealand that provide a friendly atmosphere for learners with LD and staffed with highly knowledgeable and skilled professionals, have substantial assessment inequalities in the assessment process. There is an extensive debate in the New Zealand on how to best proceed with providing effective psychoeducational assessment for learners with LD from different communities. Providing adequate finance for assessment and educational resources and fair disbursement of funds for learners with LD is often a challenge for many countries.

Theoretical Review

The Transformative Paradigm

This study was conceived within the transformative paradigm. The reason was that the transformative paradigm was found to be relevant to the study, since it provides a framework for research in the disability communities that is more attuned to handling diversity within (Devlin &

Pothier, 2015), aims to build on strengths within communities, develops solidarity with other groups which are marginalized, and changes its identity politics to a socio-cultural perspective.

The transformative paradigm is recognized by many education and social science researchers as having a great deal of prospect to address the processes that create and increase oppressive conditions for learners with disabilities. Mertens (2019) demonstrates that the transformative paradigm is indeed a framework of philosophical assumptions that directly engage members of diverse cultural groups with a focus on increased social justice. Hence, the paradigm provided an umbrella for the researcher in this study, since the researcher views his role as an agent to further social justice.

Critical Disability Theory

Critical Disability Theory (CDT) is one theory that is commensurate with the transformative paradigm. This study was therefore guided by the tenets of CDT which was used to identify the potential for the social conditions of students with LD. CDT was a product of scholarly work of scientists who formed the Frankfurt School. The Frankfurt School is always associated with Western Marxist social researchers and philosophers who initially worked from the Frankfurt School in Germany. These early critical theorists made extension from both Marx's analysis of the political economy of liberal capitalism and the Freudian exposition of the role of the unconscious in the formation of the human psyche to lay a proper basis of understanding of the persistent domination of late capitalism hence to proposing a means to accomplish human emancipation.

The term Critical Disability was first used in 1937 by Max Horkheimer, when he presented his „critical theory of society“ in an essay Traditional and Critical Theory. Horkheimer contrasted what he called „traditional theory“ with „critical theory, “ which he proposed as a theoretical approach to providing „an account of the social forces of domination that takes its theoretical activity to be practically connected to the object of study. Critical Disability Theory is recognized today for its provision of a vast range of both normative and descriptive bases for social inquiry, which have the practical aim of maximizing human freedom and ending the domination of some groups by others defined by class, power, race or other social construct (Devlin and Pothier, 2015).

Critical Disability Theory is based on a social model of disability, which recognizes disability not as the inevitable consequence of impairment, but as a complex socially constructed interrelationship between impairment. It is grounded on individual's response to impairment, and the social environment. It also recognizes the social disadvantage experienced by learners with LD caused by the social environment, which fails to meet the needs of people who do not match a society's expectation of „normalcy“ (Devlin and Pothier, 2015). The theory forms the conceptual and theoretical framework for understanding disability, and for determining support measures and types of responses needed to remove or reduce the limitations and barriers imposed by the society on persons with disabilities. Applied to education, critical inquiry focuses first on raising the conscious awareness of teachers about established values and beliefs that underpin their seemingly natural teacher-centred classroom roles (Taylor, 2018). Once this process is underway, critical theory is introduced, for instance; critical pedagogy, cultural inclusiveness and social justice that stimulates teachers' creative thinking about designing curricula and assessment that are more

student-centred, culturally sensitive, inquiry oriented, community-oriented and socially responsible.

Considering the implications of LD, the needs in psycho-educational assessment for learners with LD cannot be dismissed, hence, there is dire need to always respond to issues or challenges in the assessment. This helps to identify the challenges, especially those that have adverse consequences on the learner with LD. Consequently, a response with appropriate measures to address the challenges can be put in place at the right time to enable the learner with LD to participate with equality in the school and the entire community.

Empirical Review

Athiende, Pančocha, Murugami & Muthee (2020) carried out an analysis of plans and legislative influence in psycho-educational assessment for learners with learning disabilities in Brno, Czech Republic. Comprehensive psycho-educational assessment for learners with learning disabilities (LD) is a significant event for parents, psycho-educational assessors, teachers and learners. This research study aimed to analyze the determinants of psycho-educational assessment for learners with LD in the city of Brno in the Czech Republic. Psycho-educational assessment for learners with LD remains a challenge in the Czech Republic, hence, there is an extensive debate as to how to best improve psycho-educational assessment outcomes. Mixed method was used in which both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from primary and secondary sources. Quantitative data from secondary sources as well as in-depth interviews were used to investigate issues and to discover how the psycho-educational assessors and teachers thought and felt about the whole process. Interview data from parents of school-age children with LD who had psycho-educational assessments done within the past one year were crucial for the proposed study to find out their experiences with assessment process. Findings showed that the main challenges in psycho-educational assessment were linked to lack of proper stakeholder collaboration and interests, inadequate funding and resources, time taken in assessment and community backgrounds of the learners. This study recommends that the government through the Ministry of Education should address the critical challenge of funding to ensure enough resources including personnel. The education regulations need to be explicit to all stakeholders to ensure maximum degree of inclusion and access to psycho-educational services by learners with LD without discrimination.

Lindelauf, Reupert & Jacobs (2018) investigated teachers' use of psycho-educational reports in mainstream classrooms. The study investigated how teachers who support children with learning difficulties utilise psychologists' reports in their teaching practice. Previous research has examined teachers' preferences for how reports should be written, rather than how they might be used. Semi-structured, qualitative interviews with 12 teachers (seven primary, four high school and one preschool teacher) were undertaken and followed up with member checks and interrater reliability. Findings suggested that while the teachers valued the recommendations section of the report, they were also interested in other sections, particularly information about the student's background. Simultaneously, teachers used information from reports selectively in relation to their own professional knowledge and in collaboration with other stakeholders. Implications for practice and further research are discussed.

Gomaa (2016) investigated the effect of metacognitive strategy training on science process skills and science self-efficacy among first year prep students with learning disabilities. This study investigated the effect of using metacognitive strategy training on science process skills and science self-efficacy in learning disabled first year prep students. A total of 60 students identified with LD were invited to participate. The sample was randomly divided into two groups; experimental (n= 30 boys) and control (n= 30 boys). ANCOVA and Repeated Measures Analyses were employed for data analysis. Findings from this study indicated the effectiveness of the program employed in improving science process skills and science self-efficacy in the target students. On the basis of the findings, the study advocated for the effectiveness of using metacognitive strategy training on science process skills and science self-efficacy in learning disabled first year prep students.

Meteyard & Gilmore (2015) investigated psycho-educational assessment of specific learning disabilities. The study aims to report an investigation of the views and practices of 203 Australian psychologists and guidance counsellors with respect to psycho-educational assessment of students with specific learning disabilities (SLDs). Results from an online survey indicated that practitioners draw upon a wide range of theoretical perspectives when conceptualizing and identifying SLDs, including both response to intervention and IQ-achievement discrepancy models. Intelligence tests (particularly the Wechsler scales) are commonly employed, with the main stated reasons for their use being ‘traditional’ perspectives (including IQ-achievement discrepancy based definitions of SLDs), to exclude a diagnosis of intellectual disability, and to guide further assessment and intervention. In contrast, participants reported using measures of academic achievement and tests of specific cognitive deficits known to predict SLDs (e.g., phonological awareness) relatively infrequently.

Gilmore, Islam, Su & Younesian (2015) carried out a study on a global perspective on psycho-educational assessment. For psychologists in less developed countries, psycho-educational assessment is often challenging due to a lack of specialist training and a scarcity of appropriate, psychometrically robust instruments. The study focused on school psychology and psycho-educational assessment in three countries: Bangladesh, China and Iran. Despite differences in demographic and cultural features, these countries share similar issues that restrict the practice of psycho-educational assessment. We conclude that it is important for psychologists in Western countries to support professional training and testing practices in less developed countries.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a desktop methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low-cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive’s time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

RESULTS

The results were grouped into various research gap categories namely as conceptual, contextual, and geographical.

Conceptual Gaps

Studies by Athiende, Pančocha, Murugami & Muthee (2020), Lindelauf, Reupert & Jacobs (2018), Gomaa (2016), Meteyard & Gilmore (2015), Gilmore, Islam, Su & Younesian (2015) had a conceptual framework gap. The determinants of psycho-educational assessment for learners with learning disabilities (LD) in New Zealand were not established by any of the research cited. The research did not provide a clear breakdown of the determinants of psycho-educational assessment for learners with learning disabilities. Because of this, the current work aims to fill in these conceptual gaps.

Contextual and Geographical Gap.

Studies by Athiende, Pančocha, Murugami & Muthee (2020), Lindelauf, Reupert & Jacobs (2018), Gomaa (2016), Meteyard & Gilmore (2015), Gilmore, Islam, Su & Younesian (2015) had geographical gap because they weren't actually done in New Zealand. This suggests that the findings may not be applicable in New Zealand due to the fact that the methods employed in each country vary. This study was undertaken with the intention of filling that void.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Psycho-Education assessment is one of the most extensive and comprehensive ways used to inform educational placement in schools and for career development for learners with special needs. Unfortunately, the purpose of Psycho-Education assessment in most centres seems to be confused and, therefore, does not support learning. The results may assist primary school teachers but also vocational institutions, instructors, curriculum developers in the New Zealand.

Schools may use the information to develop assessment guidelines for their respective schools. The findings may also be useful to the Psycho-Education assessors and teachers on how to assess students; they could inform training to improve and enhance the quality of education for learners with LD. The training of teachers on Psycho-Education assessment is a good proposal but can only be effective if the designers of the training program know what teachers are already doing and what they are not doing well.

Moreover, the findings from this study add to the existing literature on Psycho-Education assessment practices. This study provides a different dimension to literature on psychoeducation assessment and has the potential to contribute to the development of a system of a more effective and appropriate Psycho-educational assessment processes and procedures for Learners with LD in New Zealand. The findings from this study may benefit the Psycho-educational assessment in New Zealand in the formulation of policies and guidelines for psycho-educational assessment practice and provision of resources. This study may help inform policy guidelines to enhance support from the County Governments to the EARCs. The findings may inform proper advocacy mechanisms of sensitization and mobilization of education for learners with LD at the grassroots level especially the parents and guardians and all the stakeholders involved in assessment of their learners with LD.

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