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Toward Equity in School-Based Assessment: Incorporating Collaborative/Therapeutic Techniques to Redistribute Power

Alea R. Holman, Stephanie D'Costa, & Laura Janowitch

ABSTRACT

Psychoeducational assessment has been used as a tool to sort children into academic tracks based on children's presumed capabilities. Historically, such tracking was based on measures that sought to legitimize racist assumptions about the capabilities of children of color. Despite legal mandates and changes to practice intended to correct these injustices, children of color continue to be disproportionately sorted into less rigorous academic tracks largely based on assessment results. This article draws from the collaborative/therapeutic assessment model to propose how these techniques can increase equity and fairness in school-based assessments through shared power in the assessment relationship. We assert that a collaborative/therapeutic approach can contribute to children's and families' positive experience of assessment, and we encourage further research on these techniques to determine how they may contribute to more equitable school outcomes. We conclude with a rationale for how these techniques advance the goals of school psychology.

IMPACT STATEMENT

This paper significantly contributes to correcting the pervasive problems that exist in how school psychologists conduct psychoeducational assessments, particularly with children and families of color. Considering that the school psychology profession is overwhelmingly White, and that racial disproportionality in special education referrals and placements is an entrenched injustice in the field, there is an urgent need for the inclusion of new techniques to more fairly assess and serve children and families of color. The collaborative/therapeutic assessment techniques described here offer concrete ways for school psychologists to work toward the ideals put forth in NASP's School Psychology Unified Antiracism Statement and Call to Action.

KEYWORDS Equity, collaborative/therapeutic assessment, school-based assessment

HISTORY OF SCHOOL-BASED ASSESSMENTS

The field of school psychology was born from the need to assess children and determine the best learning environments in which they would succeed (Farrell, 2010). This early testing framework was built on the medical model of assessment that focused on diagnostic

classification rather than intervention (Farrell, 2010). In 1975, the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act led to the requirement that all children, regardless of disability, needed to have access to public educational institutions (US Department of Education, 2010). The role of school psychologist shifted beyond identifying the presence of a disability to becoming a gatekeeper for students to receive special education services.

Across the nation, school psychologists continue to report that their primary role is conducting evaluations for special education (McNamara et al., 2019). Within this role, school psychologists have a responsibility to understand why they continue to see children of color overrepresented in special education and underrepresented in gifted programs (Conchas et al., 2019). Under the auspices of trying to help children, assessments and other policies have historically perpetuated unequal treatment for our most vulnerable students, and that pattern continues in present-day (Skiba et al., 2008). In fact, these practices have recreated the segregated hierarchies that were supposed to be addressed under Brown vs. Board of Education (Green et al., 2005).

The notion of “intelligence” is paramount to categorizing students’ abilities and determining the need for services. Intelligence has historically been seen as a universal, general ability critical to educational and future worker success (White, 2006). However, these early constructs of intelligence were defined from a Eurocentric perspective that valued logic, reasoning, and efficiency (Kwate, 2001).

Early educational psychologists held racist and classist beliefs that influenced their creation and use of intelligence (IQ) tests (Blanton, 2000). In the U.S., Lewis Terman, a leader in the eugenics movement, popularized the use of IQ tests in the determination of people’s abilities. Terman asserted that the racial and class disparities apparent in IQ scores served as proof that people of color and with low SES were differentially suited for educational and employment opportunities (Blanton, 2000).

Despite these problematic roots, school psychologists have utilized norm referenced psychological tests (NRPTs), outgrowths of Terman’s initial IQ test, as the bedrock of determining eligibility for services. Yet, there have been some important shifts away from this practice. Critiques of the use of NRPTs include their limited use in developing interventions, challenges in comparing scores across different NRPTs, and the lack of awareness from special education teams that NRPTs are just a snapshot of behavior and not absolute “truth” (Brown-Chidsey, 2005). As the field has grown over time, the addition of multiple sources of information (e.g., input from parents, students, and teachers) and multiple methods of data collection (e.g., standardized tests, rating scales, interviews, and observations) have become usual practice in assessment (Ysseldyke et al., 2006). Moreover, additional frameworks have been introduced.

For example, an ecological assessment framework considers the interaction between students and their learning environment (Welch, 1994), contextualizing students’ strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, dynamic assessments aid assessors in understanding an individual’s learning process and what supports are needed for the individual to perform at their full capacity (Lidz, 1997). Beyond just assessing for knowledge and skills, dynamic assessment offers a test–teach–retest approach that provides students with an opportunity to demonstrate their learning capacity and allows assessors to determine what strategies best support students’

learning. Further, a strengths-based assessment framework argues that looking at a child's strengths will increase motivation, provide a comprehensive picture of the child, and lead to specific recommendations (Climie & Henley, 2016). All of these nontraditional assessment frameworks increase the social validity of the assessment process for parents, students, and teachers (Cox, 2006; Lawrence & Cahill, 2014).

EQUITY IN SCHOOL-BASED ASSESSMENT

While the use of each of these frameworks offers insight into crafting more equitable assessment practices, more is needed to address the modern-day impact of racial/ethnic disparities in the profession given the racist histories of psychological assessment (Winston, 2020). We argue that the field of school psychology requires a mindset shift to interrogate the ways in which the field continues to perpetuate injustice, including inequitable distributions of power and privilege in the assessment process. An ideological stance as the “expert” feeds into our status as gate-keepers to special education and further isolates children and families of color.

Additionally, biased attitudes that devalue students' and families' expertise and input negatively affect how school practitioners understand and respond to students' challenges, and restrict students and families from equitable participation in decision-making (Harry & Klingner, 2014; Skiba et al., 2008; Voulgarides, 2018).

As gatekeepers for special education, this can be particularly problematic considering that school psychologists do not reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of students in K–12 education. The most recent NASP membership survey from 2015 found that about 87% of school psychologists identified as White, (Walcott & Hyson, 2018), whereas White students make up 48% of public elementary and secondary school students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Despite trends toward more people of color in the field (Walcott & Hyson, 2018), racial and ethnic disparities between school psychologists and the children they serve have persisted. With such different racialized lived experiences from students, the profession must be intently attuned to how implicit and explicit biases regarding expectations of students' capabilities can influence decision-making. Research on biases in education make clear that, despite good intentions, White school staff engage in racialized deficit thinking (Sabnis, 2016) and make racially biased decisions that discriminate against students of color (Valencia, 2010). One major way that bias operates in school decision-making is the tendency for school staff to overlook the important knowledge that students and families have to contribute to students' educational growth (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Harry, 2008). These oppressive slights are recognized and deeply felt by families, particularly families of color, and they have led to profound rifts in trust between families and schools (McCarthy Foubert, 2019; Posey-Maddox et al., 2021; Yull et al., 2018). Such rifts are exacerbated by the reality that psychological testing traditionally sought to prove the intellectual inferiority of people of color (Blanton, 2000). These historical and contemporary realities are major concerns for school psychology practice that require rectification.

Psychoeducational assessments are often the basis of educational decision-making (Newell & Coffee, 2013). The overreliance on the use of NRPTs calls into question the

assumption that scores represent an objective truth about students' capabilities. In our discussion of equitable assessment, we acknowledge that assessors must strive to select tests that are appropriately designed and normed for the student being assessed (Ortiz, 2008). However, it is outside the scope of this paper to make recommendations about evaluating psychometric properties of tests. Instead, we are advocating for a mindset shift in how school psychologists approach the process of assessment (Newell & Coffee, 2013).

We assert that the assessment process needs to be both therapeutic and collaborative in order to increase equity. Social justice in school psychology "involves ensuring the protection of educational rights and opportunities for all children through culturally responsive nondiscriminatory practice, advocacy, and the engagement and promotion of equity at the individual and systems level" (Graybill et al., 2018, p. 80). In the school psychology literature, equity has been included as a component of social justice (Biddanda et al., 2019; Graybill et al., 2018; Jenkins et al., 2018). As an aspect of social justice, educational equity has been defined as "when educational policies, practices, interactions, and resources are representative of, constructed by, and responsive to all people so that each individual has access to, meaningfully participates in, and has positive outcomes from high-quality learning experiences, regardless of individual characteristics and group memberships" (Skelton, 2017). The concept of equity is multifaceted, including not only a fair distribution of material resources, but also fair participation in educational decision-making (Graybill et al., 2018).

In this paper, we are focused on increasing equity through the disruption of power differentials among key stakeholders in the assessment process, including equitably valuing student and parent input (Rogers & O'Bryon, 2008). An important acknowledgement in this process is that more collaborative and therapeutic approaches to assessment are necessary as we move towards equitable practices, but are insufficient in actualizing the structural changes that are needed to address resource allocations. These approaches, in and of themselves, do not create the power to improve conditions for minoritized children and families. Practitioners need to be conscientious of their roles as advocates to push for systemic changes at the local, state, and federal policy levels. However, policy and structural changes can often feel distal in relationship to the daily experiences of our roles as school psychologists. Utilizing personal agency towards shifting assessment framing and practices must be done in conjunction with our engagement in policy and resource reallocation.

In response to calls for increased attention to how social justice is realistically applied in school psychology practice (Nastasi, 2008; Rogers & O'Bryon, 2008), we offer specific collaborative/therapeutic assessment (c/ta) techniques to work towards sharing power with students and parents throughout the assessment process. We propose that c/ta techniques move school psychologists closer to ensuring equitable distributions of decision-making power among key stakeholders, especially students and caregivers. Ortiz (2008) explained:

"Collaborative assessment, where members of an assessment team (including parents) work together and where information is shared and decisions rendered jointly, significantly improves the likelihood of success of any and all nondiscriminatory efforts" (p. 9). Moreover, this process can help to improve the validity of assessment results by decreasing students' and families' guardedness and increasing their willingness to share important information during the process. This approach reimagines the purposes and potential of the assessment process to empower students and families of color.

THERAPEUTIC ASSESSMENT: A CLINICAL MODEL

Therapeutic Assessment (TA) is an approach to clinical psychological assessment coined by Stephen Finn, PhD, and is built on the work of Constance Fischer, PhD, Len Handler, PhD, and Caroline Purves, PhD (Finn, 2007). The TA child assessment model is a semistructured approach in which there are efforts to minimize the power differential between the child, the caregivers, and the assessor to build a collaborative team with the intention of relieving some of the child's challenges (Finn & Tonsager, 2002). This goal is achieved through structured modifications to the traditional assessment process that invite caregivers and other stakeholders into the process (see Table 1 as supplemental material). They include having caregivers codefine the goals of the assessment and observe the testing sessions to identify and address the child's and family's challenges in real time. Such a collaborative process utilizes everyone's perspective in the interpretation and meaning-making of the data. Finally, a jargon-free summary of the findings and recommendations are offered to families in ways that are accessible and useful (Tharinger et al., 2011). Through these steps, the assessment aims to shift the caregiver's understanding of the child in a way that strengthens the relationship, decreases problematic dynamics, and identifies additional resources (Tharinger et al., 2009).

Research suggests that adult clients who participate in TAs feel more satisfied with the assessment process (Lance & Krishnamurthy, 2003), have greater alliance with the assessor (Hilsenroth & Cromer, 2007), and have decreased symptomatology (Newman & Greenway, 1997).

Table 1. How Does Therapeutic collaborative Assessment Differ From Traditional Assessment?

	Traditional Assessment	Therapeutic & collaborative Assessment
Purpose	To determine significance of academic challenges and recommend eligibility; test-oriented.	To build a shared understanding of what is happening between the student, teachers, family, and other support members in order to shift the narrative and promote change in school; student-oriented.
who does it?	"objective" information is gathered by an "expert."	The assessor, student, teachers, family, and other supports come together to determine the reasons for the assessment, what is significant, and how it connects to school.

how is it done?	Standardized data is compared to normative samples.	Data are “empathy magnifiers” and looked at in context to help understand what is happening in school.
Feedback?	clinician unilaterally presents what they have gathered from the test data.	Findings are presented as a means to having a conversation amongst the entire team about what would be most helpful to the student at this time.

Furthermore, a meta-analysis by Poston and Hanson (2010) demonstrated that this approach provides more long-term therapeutic benefits for clients. Research with children shows high treatment accessibility and positive child outcomes in reports from both parents and children (Tharinger et al., 2009). Adolescents who engage in a therapeutic assessment are more likely to continue to engage in ongoing treatment than those who had a traditional assessment (Ougrin et al., 2012).

Whereas the formal TA model (Finn, 2007) was developed for clinical settings, we suggest techniques that acknowledge the unique challenges of working within school systems. Most often, school psychologists are not afforded the time and resources to apply the full TA model to their psychoeducational assessments given that they are often burdened with heavy caseloads, ever-expanding job responsibilities, and fast-paced demands (Weir, 2012). Considering the professional time restraints, we build on the work of Tharinger et al. (2011) to offer suggestions for how school psychologists can creatively utilize collaborative and therapeutic techniques in school-based assessments. Below we outline ways to make assessments more collaborative and therapeutic, with specific attention to serving the needs of students of color who are disproportionately referred and qualified for special education services (Conchas et al., 2019). We first describe the shift of mindset where the assessor takes off their “expert” hat and recognizes the immense expertise that children and their families have to contribute to the assessment and its interpretation (Macdonald & Hobza, 2016). Second, we discuss how this approach can specifically benefit students and families of color. Next, we detail techniques to incorporate at each stage, including the introduction, task administration, interpretation, feedback, and IEP processes. We conclude with exploring how these techniques can advance the goals of school psychology practice. A case study is provided as supplemental material to illustrate this process. This approach seeks to shift how children, families, teachers, and support staff, particularly historically marginalized individuals, experience the school-based assessment process, with the goal of helping them to feel genuinely understood, valued, and respected.

SHIFTING OUR MINDSET: MODIFICATIONS TO THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

At their core, collaborative and therapeutic assessments are built on a set of principles that can be applied flexibly to any setting: collaboration, respect, humility, compassion, openness, and

curiosity (Finn, 2009). With those ideals as the foundation, the assessment process can shift from a routine mandate at worst, to a short-term intervention at best. Students, and those that work with them, can gain deeper insights into the specific challenges and have increased focus and motivation to tackle them head on. Below we will discuss how shifting the power allocated to the psychologist can facilitate a more meaningful assessment process.

SETTING THE FRAME: SHARING POWER TO INCREASE EQUITY

Psychologists hold a great deal of power in schools. An important shift toward more equitable practices is to recognize that power is inherent to the assessment process (Estrada, 2018). By providing transparency about the process, enlisting students and families as collaborators, and honoring their knowledge, school psychologists can deliberately share that power (Estrada, 2018). Further, cultivation of a culturally humble attitude is crucial, including recognition of one's own competence boundaries and acknowledgment that one can never truly understand the historical and cultural experience of another (Pade, 2018). Using the c/ta model, there is a shift in the way people involved in the process are viewed, with less emphasis on school psychologists as the sole expert contributing to the interpretation of assessment results. In order to facilitate shared power, psychologists might self-disclose more in the process and allow students, families, and school staff to ask them questions in order to facilitate a more authentic connection and level playing field (Dana, 2005).

In clinical TA (Finn, 2007), the challenges a child is facing are seen within the context of their family, and thus the family plays an essential role in the assessment process. In schools, there are many more individuals who are involved in the student's experience. These people have a deep and lived understanding of students' unique experiences, cultures, and environments. The students and the people who know them well, such as their teachers, families, coaches, and paraprofessionals, serve as informational experts (Estrada, 2018). The psychologist, well-trained in making sense of test data, is seen as the expert on the measures (Finn, 2007). Together, with everyone's unique expertise, the team collaborates to develop the most accurate narrative of the student's school experience, resulting in a more useful tool in working with the student. The intention of sharing power and recognizing each team member's expertise works to fight against the hierarchy of roles and identities that can often perpetuate problematic assumptions, biases, and judgments that exist in more traditional assessment. School psychologists, therefore, no longer have the pressure of being the sole person making meaning of the data. Instead, they occupy the role of synthesizing information that the other team members have helped to clarify and interpret.

Further, the test measures themselves are seen as tools to enhance an understanding of a student's experience, not revelatory of an objective truth. Finn and Tonsager (1997) refer to testing measures as "empathy magnifiers," allowing assessors to more accurately understand the experience of another—not necessarily conclusive in and of themselves. This helps to protect the individual from being defined by measures, particularly given their racist roots (Blanton, 2000), while also providing some means through which the assessor can gain a deeper understanding of the student. The data from a measure can give information, but that information holds no weight until it is interpreted through the lens of the student's individual

experience and context, as will be demonstrated in the accompanying case study. This essential step builds a bridge from the assessment to the student's lived experience and makes the findings useful for all involved (Macdonald & Hobza, 2016).

Rather than focusing on identifying a label, assessments become more about finding a shared language and understanding of that student's unique experience. With a shift in priorities, the end result of the assessment is not to fit a student into the best category, but to give the student and their support team an opportunity to learn more about the student's challenges and see opportunities to make changes.

A student having their challenging learning experiences reflected in a nonjudgmental, supportive environment, and then receiving information to help shift those experiences, is in itself a therapeutic intervention (Tharinger et al., 2011). This short-term therapeutic approach to more deeply understanding one's learning disability through an assessment has the power to increase academic self-esteem and self-concept (Heyman, 1990). Clinical therapeutic assessments have been shown to reduce clients' experiences of shame related to their challenges (Kamphuis & Finn, 2019). Research has also shown that shame can be in direct conflict to learning (Monroe, 2008; Oades-Sese et al., 2014). Through this shift in mind-set there is potential to increase learning by lessening one's shame about learning challenges. If the assessment process itself is done in a collaborative way where the student is able to come to learn about their disability through a nonjudgmental explorative space, rather than being told about their label by an authority figure, there is potential to shift how the student tolerates frustration, responds to not knowing something, and is able to sit in the vulnerability of learning.

BENEFITS OF C/TA FOR STUDENTS AND FAMILIES OF COLOR

Though c/ta techniques by themselves are not sufficient to ensure equitable outcomes, using these approaches help to guide the assessor's ability to foster trust, empower children and families who have been marginalized, and confer therapeutic benefit to them.

In a review of evidence that c/ta can be a culturally responsive intervention, with specific utility when the assessor's culture differs from the client, Martin (2018) argued that "TA works to avoid stereotyping. We stay close to the client's experiences and the meaning of those experiences to the client, thus reducing stereotype-based assumptions" (p. 290). Two case studies presented by Rosenberg et al. (2012) illustrate the effectiveness of c/ta in cross-cultural assessment in a community mental health clinic. Each case involved a White woman assessor working with a child of color, including a 13-year-old Mexican American girl and a 15-year-old African American boy. In both cases, the assessors' c/ta orientation toward establishing a therapeutic alliance, building relationship, acknowledging differences between the assessor and child, and being transparent about the assessment process and findings facilitated powerful experiences of "cocreated meaning" and mutual understanding between the assessor and child. As the case studies detail, through their intentional building of rapport and intimacy with their clients, the assessors were able to "bridge the gap" between the cultural divide and resolve the clients' mistrust. Guided by the principles of c/ta, these assessors helped clients feel listened to and understood, which contributed to the children's willingness to provide honest disclosure and to give their optimal performance on the tasks (Rosenberg et al., 2012).

Another example of the benefits of c/ta to children and families of color, particularly in a school setting, comes from Tharinger's (2019) description of a case at a Native American school where she served as the school psychologist. Tharinger described her c/ta-informed assessment of Henry, a 7-year-old, 2nd grade boy who was experiencing significant academic and emotional difficulties. These challenges were evident in his kindergarten and 1st grade years, which resulted in the school retaining him in 1st grade. However, during the first month of his retention, his behavior deteriorated, including "meltdowns." His mother insisted that he be moved to 2nd grade, and subsequently, his meltdowns resolved, though he continued to struggle academically and to shut down when frustrated. Tharinger, a White woman, detailed c/ta's utility in bridging cultural differences and "repairing the empathic failure Henry (and his mother) had experienced" when he was temporarily retained (p. 13). To do this, she employed c/ta principles such as compassion, kindness, and transparency to attend to Henry's past hurts. She explicitly acknowledged the trauma of being retained and the resultant difficulty with trusting the school, and she offered reassurance that he would be staying in the 2nd grade. Furthermore, she provided feedback to Henry's mother and teacher throughout the process, not just at the final meeting, which supported their increased understanding of and compassion for Henry's challenges. Tharinger (2019) noted that, "The teacher's increased motivation, empathy and warmth toward Henry enhanced her investment in him and seemed to carry over to his peers responding more positively to him in the classroom" (p. 15).

In each of these examples, the assessor was clear that, without implementing c/ta, the cultural dissonance and mistrust between the assessor and child would have impeded the crucial task of information gathering. With c/ta, the assessors were able to build relationships, increase trust, cocreate meaning, and affect positive change for the children of color they assessed.

C/TA TECHNIQUES

This section details three pivotal ways that school psychologists can consider incorporating c/ta techniques into the beginning, middle, and end of their assessment process to make it a stand-alone intervention. First, we describe the benefits of engaging students, parents, and teachers in the process of developing assessment questions that may be additional to the referral question(s). Next, we discuss ways to maintain a collaborative stance during testing administration and interpretation. Lastly, we describe how to approach assessment feedback and IEP meetings using c/ta values and techniques.

Developing Referral/Assessment Questions

Clinical interviews are an important way to bring c/ta to the assessment process. Engaging the student and those that know the student best (i.e., parents, teachers, coaches, paraprofessionals, etc.) in initial conversations is critical to develop more accurate findings and to make the assessment experience an intervention (Tharinger et al., 2011). Moreover, by developing a shared language of the current concerns, interviewing helps the assessor know where to focus on helping the team, helps the student and team feel understood and therefore

more available to take in new information, and engages the student and their team in the assessment process.

In order to facilitate a culturally humble, collaborative interview process, there are two main ways to structure these conversations in order to retrieve the most fruitful information. First, it is essential to explicitly acknowledge the social and cultural pressures the student might be facing and ask how these factors impact them in school (Jones, 2009). These questions should be asked of each of the collaborators in the process—the student, family, teachers, etc. To pretend the school experience is located in a racial and cultural vacuum will not only vastly limit the psychologist's understanding of the student, but will also perpetuate the power of oppressive systems by keeping socio-cultural experiences in the shadows (Lingras, 2021).

Second, the school psychologist should explore what specific questions the teacher, student, parent, etc. have about the student, as is done in traditional TA (Tharinger et al., 2011). Most often, students are referred for assessment by school staff and/or parents with the following questions posed as the main referral questions: "What are the student's strengths and weaknesses?" "Do they qualify for special education, and if so, under what eligibility category?" "What accommodations, modifications, or other services are needed for their educational and social/emotional benefit?" However, students, parents, and teachers may have more personalized questions that would benefit from exploration in the assessment process, and the assessor should seek to identify these deeper questions and make them a focus of the assessment. Examples might include: "Why does my child hate school?" "Why can't I remember my times tables?" "What can I do to help her stay in her seat during class?" and, "Why does he always sit by himself during recess?" Sometimes coaching is needed to come up with questions, either by giving examples and/or being realistic with what can be answered in the assessment. It is not uncommon that individuals, particularly children, do not have referral questions. When that is the case, it is important to be transparent with the student about the purpose and focus of the assessment (if only to answer the standard questions) and for the tone to be set that the student's voice is a valuable part of the process.

For the psychologist, the development of personalized assessment questions helps guide the assessment and provides data that may not have been offered up otherwise. The verbiage and schemas illustrated in the language of stakeholders' referral questions can guide the psychologist's thinking about what should be investigated and provide a shared, accessible language with which to discuss the challenges. Additionally, having conversations to clarify personalized assessment questions helps the student and their team to invest in the process, often resulting in more accurate results. With increased engagement, they will be more likely to share additional information, put forth their best effort, and engage in the process with curiosity (Finn, 2007). They may also feel more trusting that the assessor truly wants to know and help them, and therefore be more open to recommendations at the end. Moreover, these conversations provide opportunities to notice and monitor any assumptions and biases being made about a student based on their demographic identities, (e.g., their eligibility status, their behavioral record, their cultural/ethnic identities, etc.). These dialogues are essential to hold practitioners accountable to our own potential blind spots. This is in contrast to the more typical assessment process, which can often feel compulsory at best, or punitive at worst. In traditional assessment, students and families might experience that the findings are exclusively negative and focused on problems within the child, further ostracizing children who may already be

stigmatized due to their race/ethnicity (Osterholm et al., 2007). If the assessment is framed around personalized questions, it invites the student (and those that work with them) to participate as a coinvestigator rather than as a subject of study.

Maintaining a Collaborative Stance During Administration

Every time a psychological assessment tool (e.g., WISC, BASC, WJ, projective drawings, etc.) is administered, there is potential for deeper understanding, but also potential for more disconnection (Finn, 2007). When a child who hates math is administered a math measure, for example, the experience of testing often has one of two polarizing effects. The child could struggle, feel embarrassed, and become despondent and disengaged. Alternatively, the child could struggle, but then feel seen, understood, and validated. The following strategies for administration are suggestions to elicit the latter response.

Transparency is key to maintaining a collaborative stance during the process of administering assessment measures. By being explicit with students about why certain tasks are being used, we can foster greater trust and engagement (Dana, 2005; Estrada, 2018). This includes taking time to introduce each measure, and if possible, how it relates to specific assessment questions. For example, prior to giving the WISC, one could say, “this measure looks at different aspects of how your brain works including memory, so we can try to understand why it is hard for you to remember your multiplication facts like you talked about.” A simple statement such as this can clarify the task, invest the student to try their best, and put their anxiety at ease. Moreover, such transparency minimizes the power differential between the assessor and the student (Estrada, 2018). Rather than holding all of the information, the assessor openly acknowledges that they are making use of tools to collaboratively try to learn more about the student.

Starting with measures that have higher face validity can further garner trust (Finn, 2007). As the testing begins, students will likely feel more at ease completing tasks that clearly relate to their assessment questions (Finn, 2007). For example, if the student noted concerns about remembering math facts, starting testing with math achievement subtests signals to the student that the answer to their question is important. Once you have proven that you are keeping your word to try to help school feel a little easier, the student will likely be more willing to honestly and fully engage in measures that seem less directly related to their questions. Furthermore, when the measure is complete, it can be invaluable to engage the student in conversation about their testing experience and how it connects to their lived experiences outside of the testing environment. Engaging in this extended inquiry can provide a contextual understanding of the problem and help to elucidate how emotional dynamics and cultural experiences might be impacting the student’s difficulties.

If a student is disengaged or “noncompliant,” the behavior is seen as communication of important testing findings rather than something that needs to be corrected. In this shift of mindset, the purpose of the assessment is not to complete the measures to obtain a score, but instead to use the measure as an empathy magnifier to more deeply understand what is happening for the student in that moment (Finn, 2007). In those moments, the examiner can pause the task and take a moment to nonjudgmentally reflect on what might be going on for the student. Perhaps the task is too difficult or frustrating, or perhaps something else is going on in

the student's life. This is a unique opportunity to gain deeper insight into the interface between academic and emotional challenges. We recommend that psychologists sincerely ask the student to acknowledge their experience in these challenging moments—with even a head shake or nod. With younger or less verbal children, it can be helpful to make note of these moments and ask those that know them best, such as caregivers, to help interpret what might have been going on in that moment.

Borrowing from dynamic assessment, another helpful way of engaging in c/ta is to administer each measure in a standardized way and then test the limits (Leak, 2019), or use extended inquiry (Aschieri & Smith, 2012) to reveal more insight into the child's functioning. As an example of testing the limits, the student might be given a standardized reading comprehension test, and then given it again to see if reading it twice improved the student's understanding. While that second score is not standardized, it gives opportunities to try out specific accommodations in real-time to see if they actually benefit the student in the classroom. Such intervention-specific information is key to recommendations for how teachers can best support the student's learning.

Providing Feedback

Finally, perhaps one of the most important ideas in the c/ta process is that feedback is an ongoing conversation (Tharinger, Finn, Hersh, et al., 2008), not simply a presentation of “objective” findings at the IEP meeting. While perhaps the most time-intensive part of the process, it is essential to talk with the student and their team members to connect the data with the student's lived experiences (Finn, 2007). These conversations enable us to make our assessment data and resultant recommendations most useful because we can more deeply and accurately understand the nuance and complexity of each student's experience (Macdonald & Hobza, 2016). Ideally these conversations occur individually and prior to the IEP meeting so that the psychologist can ensure that everyone's perspective is considered (Gentry, 2017). It is through these conversations that the assessment findings can be put to use in a concrete, therapeutic way. Without eliciting this expertise, school psychologists are interpreting information without context, increasing the potential influence of unconscious biases.

IEP Meeting

With this more collaborative approach to feedback, the tone of the IEP meeting differs in c/ta as compared to traditional assessment. Rather than the school psychologist holding the role of expert who reads excerpts of the (often quite jargony) report at the meeting, the psychologist facilitates a conversation, guided by the assessment questions, with everyone at the table. The psychologist synthesizes and summarizes everyone's perspectives on the findings, contributing to a more useful, engaging, and empowering IEP meeting (Gentry, 2017).

Moreover, in order to make this process more equitable and student-centered, it is essential that the voice of the student is heard in the meeting. Students who participate in their IEP meetings are more likely to self-advocate in the classroom, understand their services and supports, be invested in their learning and educational progress, and work towards achieving their IEP goals (Gentry, 2017). The role that the student plays in the meeting can vary based on age, ability, and comfort, however even a small role can have a substantial impact. If able, a

younger student may be invited to introduce everyone in the meeting and/or explain the purpose of the meeting. As appropriate, students could participate more fully in the meeting by reviewing their strengths and challenges in the classroom, sharing their progress towards IEP goals, discussing upcoming goals, and asking questions (Gentry, 2017).

The use of technology can also facilitate students' participation in IEP meetings. For example, it might help students feel more comfortable if they have a prepared presentation to share what strategies help them most. For students who are apprehensive about speaking in front of the major adults in their life, it might be more reasonable for students to prerecord a message that could be played at the meeting. Therefore, students are able to share and participate without the pressures of doing it in real-time. Regardless of the degree of participation, students should be encouraged to contribute to their IEP meeting to reap the substantial benefits of increased self-knowledge and self-advocacy (Gentry, 2010).

Written Summary

Finally, it is important for the student, caregivers, and educational team to have something accessible to reference about the conclusions and next steps. Whereas teachers and caregivers usually receive a copy of the IEP and the assessment report, these documents are often complex with useful information for intervention planning buried within the pages, or not included at all (Hass & Carriere, 2014). As a conclusion to a c/ta process, students and/or other team members benefit from receiving a written document, outside of the formal report, that summarizes the key takeaways. This can take form in many ways, including PowerPoint presentations with bulleted lists of the main findings, or a simple graphic for an easy reference about the student's strengths and needs. Following the more traditional TA model, it may be appropriate to provide written, personalized feedback letters to students and/or caregivers that summarize the findings while also creating space to hold the emotional stress that these findings might elicit (Tharinger, Finn, Hersh, et al., 2008). These letters allow the psychologist to contextualize the findings, preempt potential grief or overwhelm, and speak directly to the student's experience (Tharinger, Finn, Hersh, et al., 2008).

Whereas a letter might be the best format for an adolescent, younger students may be more appreciative of a story or fable that describes their struggles in a way that normalizes and validates their experience without overwhelming them (Tharinger, Finn, Wilkinson, et al., 2008). In these stories, psychologists are encouraged to use characters that are of interest to, or are particularly representative of, the student's experience (Tharinger, Finn, Wilkinson, et al., 2008; Tharinger & Pilgrim, 2012). Whatever the format, the goal is to create a narrative that reflects both the student's strengths and challenges in a developmentally appropriate way. If finding time to write a personalized story for a student seems daunting, psychologists may consider finding a children's book to share with the student that at least partially mirrors the student's experience. Such a personalized touch at the conclusion of the assessment reinforces the therapeutic nature of the process, helping the client to feel understood and respected (Tharinger & Pilgrim, 2012).

IMPLICATIONS FOR C/TA TECHNIQUES TO ADVANCE THE GOALS OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY PRACTICE

In an examination of the Professional Standards of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, [2020](#)), including the Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services (NASP Practice Model) and the Principles of Professional Ethics, it is clear that techniques derived from c/ta are supportive of the responsibilities expected of school psychologists. Specifically, the potential benefits of c/ta techniques to promote positive behavior and mental health, support diverse learners, and strengthen family–school partnerships enable school psychologists to not just aspire to these goals, but to actually meet them in daily service delivery.

Most often, school-based assessment has solely been an information-gathering endeavor to determine eligibility for special education and inform recommendations (Benson et al., [2019](#)). However, reenvisioning it as an intervention in and of itself opens a wide array of possibilities for the benefits of this process. Of all the practices school psychologists are tasked with, they spend most of their time conducting psychoeducational evaluations (McNamara et al., [2019](#)), including 29% of the average work week spent writing individualized assessment reports (Benson et al., [2019](#)). In light of the considerable time school psychologists spend on assessment, it behooves the field to consider how to make the most of this personalized time with students and families.

With the integration of c/ta techniques, psychoeducational assessments are prime opportunities to help empower students and families. The benefits of using c/ta techniques are especially crucial in light of the long history of school-based assessment being a tool used to define students (and families) by their challenges and weaknesses, leading to distorted pictures of students' capabilities (Harry & Klingner, [2014](#)). These misrepresentations have resulted in life-long consequences for students who, through the oppressive lens of “the expert,” have been minimized as only being defined by their disabilities (Garda, [2005](#); Harry & Klingner, [2014](#)).

Such experiences have been particularly detrimental to students and families of color, resulting in inaccurate eligibility decisions and educational placements (Losen & Welner, 2001; Raj, 2016), as well as missed opportunities for gifted identification (Peters et al., [2019](#)). When students are misplaced in learning environments, this leads them on a track that may severely limit their educational and career opportunities going forward. Given such experiences, it is not surprising that families of color report strong feelings of mistrust toward schools (Hill, [2018](#)), and are sometimes reluctant to agree to or engage in the assessment process (Brandon & Brown, [2009](#); Harry & Ocasio-Stoutenburg, [2020](#)).

As a step toward equity, we assert that by genuinely bringing children and families into the process as collaborative partners and experts on their own lives, rather than as subjects to be examined, there can be a shift in the experience and function of psychoeducational assessments. By engaging both children and their caregivers in the development of the questions for assessment, the interpretation of assessment data through collaboration, and the formulation of meaningful feedback, school psychologists can strengthen families' trust and willingness to engage in the process. By fostering increased child and family engagement, the c/ta approach benefits the school-based assessment process by helping to: (a) explicitly honor

the dignity of students and families throughout the process, (b) garner more accurate information about students' academic and behavioral functioning, and (c) better illuminate the influences of context on children's functioning.

When school psychologists empower families through an appreciation of their expertise, and humble themselves to honor the wisdom in others, we can move closer toward the goal of meeting the needs of students, families, and school communities. The fields of education and psychology have identified that social–emotional wellness is predicated on people having their humanity respected and their sense of belongingness fulfilled (e.g., Osterman, 2000). The techniques outlined in this article, when used by assessors who embrace an attitude of cultural and professional humility, are intended to bring the field of school psychology closer to its ideals and to mitigate the ways that assessment has historically harmed those it was intended to help. As school psychologists reimagine assessment from this perspective, not only will students and families benefit, but school psychologists will also experience a refreshing shift in their experience as assessors. By sharing power with students and families and engaging them as collaborators throughout the process, school psychologists get to carry out assessment as a socially just endeavor that empowers those who are often disempowered through societal institutions.

AREAS OF FUTURE RESEARCH

There is a growing body of literature charting the benefits of c/ta techniques to children's and families' experiences of the assessment process, including healing and transformation post-assessment (e.g., Gentry, 2010; Mercer et al., 2016; Smith & Handler, 2009; Tharinger et al., 2007, 2009, Tharinger & Pilgrim, 2012; Tharinger & Pilgrim, 2012). Yet, most of this work has been limited to studies in out-patient settings. Thus far, there has been relatively minimal attention to the usefulness of c/ta techniques in school-based assessment. Notable exceptions include the innovative work of Deborah Tharinger and colleagues who have examined how c/ta techniques contribute to therapeutic change and improved family–school connections in schools through case examples (Tharinger et al., 2011). Building on Tharinger's work, we have identified several lines of research that will strengthen the field's understanding of how best to apply c/ta techniques in schools and to garner evidence of the wide-ranging benefits of such practices.

A major research contribution would be an examination of what types of questions students and parents identify when given the opportunity to state their authentic, personal concerns. A collection of common types of questions could aid school psychologists in engaging students and parents with formulating their own questions outside of the standard referral questions. Additionally, case studies of school psychologists implementing c/ta techniques would provide helpful blueprints for other practitioners seeking guidance on using these tools.

In terms of understanding the impact of personalized feedback after an assessment, additional research is needed to understand if and how families' knowledge, empathy, and practices change as a result of receiving therapeutically-informed explanations of the child's strengths and challenges. Such outcomes research could also be investigated among teachers and other service providers after they receive feedback from an assessment guided by c/ta

principles. For example, researchers could examine teachers' reactions to assessment reports that utilized c/ta techniques as compared to traditional assessment reports.

Moreover, it is strongly recommended that schools begin to examine how satisfied parents and students are with their assessment experiences. There is a dearth of assessment satisfaction research in the field (Smith et al., 2007), especially as it concerns the experiences of students, families, and teachers in school-based assessment. Considering that the primary purposes of traditional psychoeducational assessment are to help students by way of guiding interventions, schools will benefit from knowing the degree to which the primary stakeholders of these evaluations actually feel like they have gained insight and guidance to support students moving forward. Such satisfaction research could also shed light on ways in which families of color may be having differential experiences with school-based assessments, thereby highlighting specific areas for schools to target as they aim to be culturally-responsive and to build connections and trust with families.

Finally, research is needed to compare the impact of c/ta to traditional assessment in school settings to determine if this different approach does indeed improve stakeholders' engagement, experience, and utility of assessment. As researchers and schools gather more evidence of the effectiveness of c/ta techniques, hopefully graduate training programs and practitioners will be inspired to integrate these techniques in their daily practice to optimally and equitably serve all students.

Finally, while this model offers the potential for reducing biases and deficit-thinking in educational decision-making by uplifting the voices of those who are often marginalized, the implementation of c/ta techniques do not necessarily eliminate the potential for prejudiced views to impact assessments. More theoretical and empirical support is needed to identify how, if at all, the use of c/ta helps to reduce bias and deficit-thinking among school staff.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Though we assert that the proposed changes in mindset and practice move the field closer to equity, we readily acknowledge that the implementation of c/ta techniques does not address the root causes of harm that educational systems inflict upon families of color. Educational systems and structures continue to be oppressive despite efforts to make assessment more collaborative and therapeutic. For equity in education, change needs to happen on every level, including "policies, practices, interactions and resources" (Skelton, 2017). Our proposed techniques only address change at the levels of practices and interactions.

Despite the limitations of this model, we feel strongly that c/ta moves the field toward equity by empowering practitioners to make realistic, on-the-ground changes in their practice that support families' equal participation in the educational decision-making process, as IDEA mandates. Though this model does not result in better funding for under-resourced schools, it has the potential to disrupt the tendency for children and families of color to be ignored or disregarded. We believe there is value in making increased space for marginalized children and families to express their concerns and needs, and for these concerns to be listened to with sincerity.

With the proposed shift in mindset and use of c/ta techniques, we hope to encourage practitioners to prioritize and honor the voices of children and families, particularly those who

are pervasively underserved, under-resourced, and underappreciated. By approaching the assessment process as an intervention, this focused time with families can potentially be more meaningful and impactful. Reimagining assessment in this way is an important step for practitioners to be agents of change toward more equitable practices.

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We have no known conflicts of interest to acknowledge.

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Laura Janowitch is White, Jewish, queer cisgender woman who is a Clinical Child Psychologist and a special education teacher in California. She has an interest in bringing a more inclusive process to the assessment process, particularly educational assessment. She has worked in numerous settings with children experiencing poverty, homelessness, and discrimination. She currently works at WestCoast Children's Clinic, a community mental health agency that primarily works with children with foster care involvement. She has a small assessment private practice as well.