

https://dspace.org/

Practitioners' perceptions on the value of cognitive assessment measures within the South African context

Radebe, Nomsa Palesa

2016

https://hdl.handle.net/10539/26016

Radebe, Nomsa Palesa, Practitioner's perceptions on the value of cognitive assessment measures within the South African context, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, https://hdl.handle.net/10539/26016

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

Key
Researcher = NPR
Participant 4 = CM

Appendix G

Transcript of Educational Psychologist

Date: 27 July 2016
Interview #4 - Interviewer: N. Palesa Radebe
- Interviewee: Participant 4 (C.M.)

NPR: So for purposes of recording, it is the 27th of July 2016 and I'm with CM, Educational Psychologist. Thank you so much for the time and I completely understand there is so much going on in the private practice.

CM: Sure, it's a pleasure.

NPR: As I had said in terms of the information sheet, I'm looking at cognitive assessment as well as its use and value in the South African context. You find that we are using a lot of assessments that are not meant for us. So I'm trying to understand from your point of view…

CM: Absolutely. Sure

(Interview begins)

NPR: …is it good, is it bad; what is your perception? Just to start off, what is your understanding of cognitive assessment?

CM: Sure… I mean cognitive assessment in terms of when we use them; we're looking to see the intellectual capability of children. We're looking at the cognitive capacity and innate ability depending on the measure used. We're looking at verbal and non-verbal or in the case of the WISC, we're looking at the processing speed and the working memory as well. So to kind of get a general understanding of where the child is at and just to see and to get a better understanding of what's going on in them.

NPR: And you find that more often than not that people tend to speak about the snapshot- for instance the IQ as opposed to … and people just don't like that word.

CM: I deal with the assessment of parents, I try to avoid the word "IQ" it sounds very damning almost and that's how it is and will forever be the score. Although we know it doesn't change drastically over a lifetime and it has negative connotations. So I do refer to it more as cognitive functioning and make it very well known to the parents of the different sections that come into it. Where the strengths and weaknesses lie as opposed to it just being this one "yes or no" "good or bad" score –you got a variety of facets that make it up. Yeah definitely and you avoid using the IQ with the negative connotations.

NPR: Yeah like what you said it's very …

CM: Yeah absolutely

NPR: I don't know about you but …. Practicing at the moment you find a lot of parents saying "Just give me a number"

CM: Yes, exactly

NPR: How do you manage that and have explained that it's not a very broad ….

CM: Certainly with that I try to at all cost avoid giving a number. If anything I'll give a range. So obviously you're average or below average or superior or whatever the idea is. Because I think a lot of the time parents don't have an understanding of the sorts of ins and outs of what that number means and what I've often found is they will refer to online assessments where the child is getting 140 something suddenly now they're so confused at the score of 100 doesn't make sense. So I avoid the number but do try to give the range or try and give a sort of – I often try to show the bell-curve to try and show kind of try and show where they are; where their child is in comparison to others. It's more for children who are scoring lower that this is necessary. Parents find it easier to accept when it's a higher score when things are ok. But when it's a lower score or borderline or cognitively impaired that the difficulty comes in.

NPR: How do you manage the idea of "average"? Because I think a lot of people think that average is 60% and kind of associate it to the "schooling" system.

CM: As much as I can, I try and explain that the test is sort of normed against everyone… whatever the child is- the child is 7 years 9 months, I say that the average we're looking at is for all the children who are of 7 years 9 months. We're looking at a direct comparison of that age group and that explaining the scores are so where they are falling is where they should be for their age. Anything to the left of that if you are looking at a graph will be below average; anything to the right will be above average. So I try to move it away in general move the cognitive assessment idea of the cognitive score away from relating to academics because even though obviously the scores will show themselves in the way that the child is performing at school, it's not direct. So verbal could be very high in the IQ but very low at school because of whatever. So I try to move it away from it being directly linked and that a high score in one means a high score in another. Again and explain that the average in one is not an average in another necessary.

NPR: Do you find that they take that well?

CM: They do seem to. I think they seem to understand that a bit better. I think certainly if it is easy to explain if there is a reason for why the child might be doing poorly but their scores are really high. You know they do take it quite well because they feel like there's a bit of hope. Whereas if it's a reverse, they're doing badly in school and you got a report back with low scores it is a lot harder; because it brings with it a lot of alternative recommendations in terms of schooling.

NPR: And you find that more likely than not if that's the case then it's considered a diagnosis of some sort of SLD?

CM: Potentially, yes. Absolutely; so depending on what it is, there's such a variety. Scores are low, not always. Sometimes I would have noticed in the assessment that the child is severely or significantly distracted the whole time. So then I think: "Is it a fair assumption to say that because their scores are low they need a specialised environment?"… because maybe it's actually purely a concentration thing; they could be remedied and in two years time they could be reassessed and it's found that they are fine. But most often there are recommendations that need to come around lot of the time of schooling and remediation.

NPR: So in having now understood in the way that you understand it. What are the assessments that you use?

CM: In my private practice I use the WISC predominately and the WAIS. So I do assessments for older teens and adults I do the WAIS. I don't at this stage have access to the WPPSI so I would use the JSAIS in that situation. During our internship we used the SSAIS a lot, so I have exposure to all of those. I do move away generally from the SSIAS if I can help it because I don't know if it's as concise as the WISC, but I do have it and I own them. So I do use them if need be or if I feel like it or if I can't have immediate access to the WISC. So those are the main….I suppose the Bender although it's not completely cognitive I add that in the battery as well.

NPR: In terms of the SSAIS you said it's not completely comprehensive; how do you then deal with for instance a child who comes in, let's say a context where we have the JSAIS and the SSAIS, and SA normed we know that it looks at our population which is awesome, but it's so old. And you have the WISC; not normed but hey, we have the 5 now…how…

CM: So out of date…ja, ja. I absolutely agree with you; the reason why I'm drawn to the WISC, even though it's not normed for South Africa is because of the … as I said to you earlier, look at the working memory and the processing speed as well. So I kind of feel like it covers a bit more but I am very aware of the fact that it isn't normed here and there are quite a few questions that are confusing but at the same time … I think it's the JSAIS, one of the pictures … you say a word and the child has to select which picture and there's a word sort of like "abyss" instead of "cliff" and I'm like: "I don't even know what that word is". So even that is archaic in the sense that it's from the 80s when it was last revised and our children today, it's completely different. I think with the missing part one in the SSAIS, it's a picture of a letter that's missing a stamp of an address- no one sends letters anymore so they both have their flaws. Obviously the SSIAS is normed here so it makes a difference but is it normed for today's population? Or is normed from the 80s population which are very different. As I said I do choose to go with the WISC more.

NPR: I think that what I'm getting is the lesser of two evils. Because you find that although the WISC, although it is updated again, it's not for this population but the SSAIS is not for our generation.

CM: I think when I look at the WISC it's definitely more on an informal level of me just observing, there are a lot of questions in there that are appropriate. So yes it's not normed but the questions are OK for our kids they are some that are a bit foreign, it's just the fact that it's not normed. We now have the WAIS, the South African WAIS, so we got there at least with

WAIS but it's the WISC that now we would need to … once we get there we would … that would be our best bet I imagine.

NPR: Just in terms of how things have evolved up 'til now, I would assume that back in the day; because of the differences that we had given our history… cognitively if you measured one individual from one population compared to another, there would be vast differences. Now, as you've said, modern children we're all kind of streamlined. Are you seeing differences and what are the differences?

CM: I think one of the major differences that comes up specifically in our contexts is language. So a lot of the children I have assessed previously English is not their first language; be it Afrikaans, Sotho, Zulu, Xhosa and the difficulty is that I am not fluent in any of those languages. If I were able to have access to the Afrikaans or Zulu version of the test it would be unfair for me to test them based on that because I'm not fluent to get their responses would not be OK. So that's one of the biggest things, where there is … it's unfair… it's an unfair testing practice in that it's been a thing that's been on my agenda from when I started studying that I'm trying to get a fair assessment practice within the country but 7, 6 years down the line and I'm not there yet because it's so hard because it's so impossible, we also don't have that many psychologists who are able to be sort of be versatile across the languages. So that is one of the major things. And I think that certainly sort of exposure to stimulation; if you're looking at disadvantaged children, children who haven't had parents who have sort of done activities with them, sat with them doing it, there's a big difference in comparison to children who have had exposure to a lot of information and a lot of stimuli; they know how to do puzzles. So often I don't know necessarily, if it's your innate ability that if this child is just doing badly at a puzzle because cognitively that is a weakness of theirs or if it's because they have never seen a puzzle or how to do it; what do you expect me to do. Those are the main two things more commonly met with then you have other issues where…maybe not so much language but verbally the kids are shy or they're anxious or they're hyperactive and that obviously brings a barrier into the process as well.

NPR: How then would you access a child in typical sense with whom you can't necessarily converse with?

CM: It's hard and know in certain parts of the clinics and the rest of the … like two hospitals in Johannesburg they often use other measures like the Raven's to do that for kids who are nonverbal because otherwise it is completely unfair. I would still, in my capacity, like I said I don't have access to a lot of those tests; I would still do most of the assessment that I could, obviously interpreting the result; where there is a child that isn't communicating or add into the report if they were anxious, if they needed to coaxed... The younger kids they are devastated when their mom and dad leaves and it takes a while to get them to sort of be comfortable. So it would be a case for me personally interpreting the portion and taking into account those parts. If I am assessing a child I'll get hold of the parents when we chat before and say, if your child takes medication, please make sure they are on it on the day; because so many parents arrive and they didn't take the medication. And part of it is maybe a lack of understanding on the parents' part. Maybe they feel like maybe we want them to see the child in their 'true' nature… and I'm like this is why they're on medication; to get them to that

potential. So assessments are hard in the case where children have not taken medication when they should or when the parents are sending the child this sort of decision-maker; whether they need it; that you know teachers have reported XYZ and that they probably do. So it is tricky but obviously you can't sort of force it ahead of time.

NPR: It's funny you said because the first assessments that we had to do; me and my partner… the mom didn't give her child her Ritalin, and we asked why and she said "I thought you guys wanted to see how bad she can be" that's not the point. We're not trying to cut your daughter down at all. And you see the vast difference from day 1 and day 2 where she was then focused and fully capable; it's heartbreaking.

CM: Absolutely and in that case I think that the child is lucky in the sense that the mom has put them on medication and the heartbreaking part for me is the children where the parents refuse and you can see the potential that they have and you can see why they're doing poorly in school, the result are as they are and that the parents just have their myths about medication, it makes it hard.

NPR: I'm sure that, that's a definite factor that you can bring into the process, that the parents are in denial.

CM: Yes, 100%, they are.

NPR: But apart from the language, lack of exposure, medication and parents; what are the other factors that come into your deciding which assessment - if at all an assessment - and so on and so forth?

CM: Often it's parents who are taking the initiative in teaching, in referring the child … so I'll get a bit of background information from the parents. So that sort of guides me for what they are looking for. Generally though, the child is coming for an assessment, no matter what age they are. Unless it's purely for an emotional assessment; even then I think we need to consider all options … I always do a cognitive assessment, so I will always do the WISC or the SSAIS… so that's sort of the standard in my battery. And then it will depend on what they're coming for. If they're coming for a lack of concession for their exams– I have a certain battery. If they're coming for school readiness … it will be a case of adding a couple of special activities. If they're just coming for a psycho education assessment to go to a new school or a new psychiatrist, it will be a case of academics but a cognitive assessment will always form part of the battery that I choose to do.

NPR: So what I'm getting is that for you the main factor is "what is the purpose of our intervention?".

CM: Yes, what are we doing here, but then what also happens is that there will be times when during the assessment, I'll pick up on something so if it's the case of maybe looking in and I notice that the child is presenting some sort of dyslexic symptoms then there are a couple of assessments that can be done just to look a bit deeper. Think of it as surface battery and then whatever their reason for the referral is what tests will be brought in for them. But yes, "what

are we doing? Why are we doing this?" sort of informs my decision of which assessments to do.

NPR: And do you find that you have to vary them quite a bit if a child is showing a lot of things because at the end of the day you've got a limited amount of time. So if the child is showing different things do you find that you have to kind of …

CM: Generally the battery is sort of initially does seem to suffice so for the most part…yes but as I've said there will be a few…but generally it feels like what I'm setting out to do, which battery I need to do, and now and then there will be a little extra of the Wepman, or something like that to add in; but it feels like it gets everything done. There have been one or two times where I have been interpreting my results at home, writing the report and I think there's something that I missed, there's something that doesn't feel right and I have done this once or twice where I have phoned the parents and said: "Look, there's one more thing that I want to add, would it be OK if we met for 30 minutes". They are more than happy to do that most of the time because they want the best and they don't see it as an oversight; more as a case of there's a bit of thought going in. But generally, the battery as choosing from the out seems to work.

NPR: How do you feel about the notion of using fully informal assessments in comparison to the standardised? Is it a good or bad idea?

CM: I think there's room for informal assessments. There's definitely space for it, I don't think it's effective as the only informal assessment just because of what we've already discussed with the norms and some tests not being *normed* here. But you can't get a good understanding, a child could be really prepped really well by their parents ahead of time or have their spelling known out; and when you test them on spelling they going to perform really high but you need something to base your results on, so no. But at the same time when I think of informal testing, I've placed background information, I've placed it as part of the informal because I do think that it has to inform the results; so we can get an understanding of how things work and unearth whatever can help us better understand whatever is going on. But no I think it's a bad idea to do it fully.

NPR: A lot of people keep saying that it's a bit of a 'ying and a yang'. Of the ones that you do, which ones do you find give you the most information? Granted it's a lot of interpretative, very subjective?

CM: What we used to do when we were in varsity was informal writing and found that, that was quite difficult to interpret because again it didn't feel like we had a baseline to work from. Whereas now--.. So the WIAT has a written component and a very structured kind of marking system which is helpful so I nowadays will rather use that although I still did find it effective, it's not that it wasn't effective to test a child's writing but again it was sort of difficult because we didn't always have the baseline of how to compare; where this child kind of fits. Sure they could be doing OK but in comparison to others are they doing OK?

NPR: Are there any other, because you just spoke to written expression.

CM: Not really, that's all in terms of the informal unless I'm missing them; so unless you want to give suggests and I will say whether I've used them or not.

NRP: (laughs anxiously) It's so elementary, I don't no if I can… (laughs).

CM: No, I think (laughs encouragingly) no, not at all.

NPR: The ones that I do tend to use are those ones. (silence as researcher thinks) It's those more than anything

CM: Ja. So it's those and we did spelling and math…

NPR: Oh, I don't know. Would the Schonells be considered informals?

CM: So the Schonell test are not (goes quiet as participant thinks)--. It's got a marking. (researcher agrees, saying "yes"). It feels less formal than the ones that are completely normed against hundreds and thousands of children but it's still got a scoring. With those I used to use it quite often, now what I end up using is the WIAT. It's got a huge academic side, it literally looks at many areas, I don't do all of them but it covers everything.

NRP: We've spoken a bit about cognitive assessment; I'm just wondering what is your idea or feel about the SA climate with regards to cognitive assessments? Are we there? Are we lagging? Do we need something?

CM: We're lagging a bit. As I said to you, because I do feel that the WISC does an overall good job and WAIS South African version, we are lagging with the rest. We are lagging in general with … but I also try to think at the same; are we lagging? Is it because we have 11 / 12 official languages in the country, is it just really difficult to produce assessments that are going to cater for everyone? I firmly believe that we should; I firmly believe that the tests should be changing not the children should be assessed in the different languages. And that's my feeling of schooling as well, the fact that children should be able to be taught in their home language from start to finish and we are not there yet. It's a problem that's bigger than just the assessments; so we are lagging but we have to take into account the fact that we have a very complex society and education in general is something that needs work. I think there's room for improvement. I don't know if the SSAIS can be revised; if we could take it one as a project I think it can really be beneficial and something that would be helpful. I know there's a Zulu SSAIS and a Xhosa cognitive assessment, it's not exactly that but again it's not very widely used and also we're looking at we need to find a psychologist who speaks … and within a school you have a broad variety. So we are sort of there but we don't have enough kind of scope and human resources.

NRP: You were speaking of the Zulu versions. The language--. The Zulu in there is in-depth, very CORE.

CM: You see, so I can't even read Zulu to help it but then are you saying that it doesn't feel fair?

NRP: Yes like you were saying about the SSAIS and how they used words that are not at all … it's like deep, ancestral …

CM: So again we're coming back to that it's not for today so that's why we need revision of all of them; the whole lot.

NRP: So it comes back to the feasibility like you were saying. And you mentioned the education system, it always seems to come back to the poor education system. I'm just wondering, considering we need to move there and we're getting their slowly, looking at the education system at the moment, they teach you through rote learning; they teach you that it is important that you know how to list is and that's perfect. But the way modern society is set up, you don't need to think for yourself. How are we then--. What hope do we have in terms of cognitive assessment? How do you think we can utilise cognitive assessment which kind of requires the educational system to shift but it's not working, at practice and life?

CM: With rote learning, it's kind of the hardest things I've come across in the education. In the fact that children have limited ability to abstract their thinking; I did it in university. Where they said this will be in the exam and so you sit and you just learn. Sure as we grow up, we have the ability to conceptualise things and I think it's because our jobs require it; it doesn't help children in the slightest and then again you end up looking at maybe the bit of the unfairness in certain parts of the cognitive assessments that are looking at that abstract reasoning; and well if a child is not taught abstract reasoning and are just taught things verbatim then this is very difficult. So that would be the ideal, abstract reasoning is a skill that we all should have. I know in therapy with children they are very one-track minded, they aren't able to think out the box. Abstract reasoning is a skill yet our education system isn't teaching that. My mom is a teacher and she uses the example from years ago when she was teaching observation where the teacher had a picture of a fish on the wall, and the teacher said, "This is a fish" and the children said "this is fish, this is a fin"…they're not learning the fish, what the function is; they're literally just learning and that's one type of fish and it's not even a real looking fish, so when they see a fish in the sea and it's totally different. But that was many years ago. So that needs to change and it's huge, it's policies…

NPR: It's beyond our scope of reach…

CM: Beyond, and sometimes I feel so hopeless about it every time because you think: "If this could change, this could change". So much could change but we are really far behind with that and we are in a bad place and it's difficult to see you come out of that. … Our children need to be taught in their home language and it feels too unfair. Especially in my research, in my Honours about 13% of the country speaks English and 70 something people in the country speak Zulu yet every university and every school insists on English being your first language, and it's just as unfair. So that's policy, that's Apartheid, that sort of came with it. It's far away but it's not impossible. Then when we go back to cognitive assessment, it affects everything. It's a snowball, massive avalanche.

NPR: Having spoken about cognitive assessments how appropriate do you think they are with the recommendations and interventions that you then utilise considering all the differentiation we have discussed so far?

CM: I think that they certainly do provide insight into what's going on. It can't be used in isolation we look and we see that the processing speed is slow; I've been doing a lot of assessments for extra time and that's something that helps. We can see, ok they're taking long but you have to combine that with a lot of other assessments in order to make that recommendation. The same, for your sort of working memory and verbal and non-verbal stuff. So they are exceptionally helpful and I do think that they help form the recommendations but not in isolation. I don't think you can just do —. I know in the government hospitals where resources are limited and load is high, they do only do a cognitive assessment. So for them it is their sort of filtering out then they will send the child to have an educational assessment; that's their sort of screening I think which is still helpful but for me in my sort of private practice capacity or at a school, they need to be used with other stuff in order for it to make just a bit more sense. It might be a case that they're slow in processing of numerical information yet their writing is really quick or whatever the case might be. So useful to inform recommendations, but not on their own.

NPR: If you would find yourself in a situation where you can only have access to one, would you still run the WISC?

CM: Yes, absolutely.

NPR: You're a proud sponsor…

CM: Yes I am, and I think because I can see the differences in the fact that it's more modern. The fact that it is modern outweighs the fact that the SSAIS is normed in South Africa. Because I think that--. The SSAIS was normed here, or if it was current, I'd go with it 100%. But it's because it's so outdated that it still doesn't't feel relevant anyway.

NPR: You also mentioned earlier on when we were speaking about the lagging and how cognitive assessments within SA …what is then your idea of … or how do you feel about us using more information processing as the KABC or the CAS in comparison to the WISC?

CM: To be honest I haven't administered either of those, I know what they are about but I haven't administered either of them. One of my colleagues when I was at my previous schools, she used to do the CAS in place of the cognitive assessment because we were working … I don't know if it's because… but we were working in a remedial school so as I said I don't admittedly know enough about either of those but that was something that she chose to do instead of the WISC because of the nature of the kids she was working with; I'm not too sure. I don't think that a cognitive like an IQ test like the WISC is the be all-and end all, I think there is an openness but admittedly I don't know enough to fully answer you.

NPR: We know that information processing are based on how a child has been understanding and how they move on from that. And where we have the WISC as we said that's very "fit into the box" and move on with it. So when you are dealing with a child that has an SLD I would assume, on personal opinion, that information processing is probably the best. How would your feel about that?

CM: It's a good question; it's nice to think about it. I haven't really considered it in that situation, and so I have been sort of one track because I've had exposure I kind of just go for it. But I do think it could be useful, it could be something like you said that could be better. I need to think about it, I definitely do think it's something to think about.

NPR: My thinking around it is how the contexts inform so much… it says and it tells …which is why we do the emotionals to start off with. So if we understand if a child makes sense just in terms of assimilation and accommodation.

CM: Good point.

NPR: I don't think anybody would be deemed SLD right away.

CM: Ya, I think you make a really good point. It does, it takes away that …

NPR: the deficits…

CM: absolutely. I like that, it's definitely something to think about.

NPR: a lot of people aren't aware of the KABC'S so to engage with it at all …

C: Yeah I haven't used that or the CAS. When we were at a university in Johannesburg we weren't taught it or exposed to it. I don't know if it wasn't a thing then or just within the variety … we used I think the WISC 3 even. I'm not that old but we didn't. I think it was probably something that wasn't relevant at the time.

NPR: I think we just recently just got the 5. Many of us haven't even been exposed to it, so …

CM: Ya, that's pretty cool though.

NPR: You'd enjoy it. I haven't also really engaged with the KABC that much but from what I heard it's helpful; very non-verbal.

CM: Yes, which again I think is very helpful for that sort of situation as well as it eliminates…. Well not eliminates but it certainly limits the language barriers side of things. Obviously there still has to be an understanding … the child still has to understand what's required of them. It's less of a verbal side of things and more of a…Ja that makes sense.

NPR: That's pretty much it though; that was so straight forward. Thank you so much.