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Revista Puertorriqueña de Psicología  
Volumen 7, 1991

COGNITIVE ASSESSMENT OF MINORITY CHILDREN: NEW VISIONS AND PROMISES

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The presentation approaches the cognitive assessment of minority children giving special attention to the situation in Puerto Rico. The problem is discussed within the analysis of the social function of psychological assessment. The authors make a brief presentation of the social and epistemological tensions psychological assessment has created and from which new alternatives have developed. Among the alternatives, Dynamic Assessment is emphasized. It is suggested that the cognitive assessment of minority children debate reflects the maturity of the discipline. It is concluded that the future requires a commitment to create the conditions of a liberating praxis which may generate visions which could lead us to know better and make fairer decisions.

Addressing our topic is not an easy task. This is so because of the controversies which have surrounded the assessment of minority children. The announcement of new visions is within the eye of the beholder. From this perspective, then it is necessary to make explicit the lens through which we are looking at our problem.

For the purpose of our discussion we have to situate the development of cognitive assessment of minority children within its social history. We can start by answering the question of what is the social function of cognitive assessment. The traditional role of school psychologist has been assessment. This role is best understood acknowledging that schools are one of the ideological apparatus "par excellence" (Althusser, 1971). Within this context, school psychologist contribute to what Apple and Weiss (1984) refer to as the accumulation, legitimation and production function. The school functions as an apparatus to produce the working force for the advancement of the industrial society within the capitalistic mode of production (Bowles, 1976). The accumulation function separates those who "can" from those who "cannot" reproduce the knowledge and the skills required for the industrial world. At this point the testing tradition contributes with techniques, based on

the concept of intelligence, which according to Benedito (1975) have the following utility within the positivistic science tradition:

- a) Compare in order to determine similarities with the normal or average person.
- b) Compare to classify in order to establish a real function hierarchy between the individuals of a society.
- c) Compare and classify to select the best and separate the unfit.
- d) Classify and select in order to predict the future behavior in a determined situation.

The term intelligence is hegemonic and useful for the social function just described. Etymologically, intelligence comes from the Latin "inteligere" which means to select; to select the good grain from the bad (Benedito, 1975).

The legitimization function refers to the justification of the functional hierarchy between individuals, which itself is the reproduction of the diverse classes within our society. Testing within the school experience is based on the liberal assumption of an universal and equal opportunity development (Benedito, 1975; Sewell, 1987). Given this assumption, whatever differences are observed

with what is referred to as a "precise and objective instrument" are due to individual differences. The individual as a theoretical construct is hegemonic within the psychology discipline (Braunstein, 1975; Martín Baró, 1985). It is considered the scientific explanation which justifies differences.

The production function refers to differentiation in the job market. The classification and selection leads us to best predict the success of the job market.

As time passed, the over-representation of minority children in special classes for mentally retarded as the result of this process of classification and selection became evident (Manni, Winnikur & Kelley, 1984). They were thought not capable of competing within the mainstream, therefore were excluded and placed in special programs. The chances to compete in the job market were remote and the right to have success in life became violated. This was the motive of litigation such as the Larry P. VS. Riles (1986) case.

Various attempts to explain differences became the basis for an extensive debate among psychologists. There was the overextended nature-nature debate. Variables such as bilingualism, cognitive styles (Kagan, 1970), social culture (Mercer, 1979) were recognized as affecting intellectual performance. These variables were then attempted to be controlled with statistical procedures.

But perhaps the central issue concerning the over-representation of minority children in special classes is the fact that, from its inception in America, intelligence testing incorporated a political philosophy which questioned the inherent ability of minorities to achieve excellence in education and the work place (Sewell, 1987). Thus all the focus on statistical psychometric properties might be a prerequisite for its valid use historically and currently. Inequity in educational opportunity suggests the need to be concerned about the ideological underpinning in which testing is embedded.

As sociocultural factors were strongly implicated in test performance of black and hispanic children, over-representation was then attributed to the psychologists incompetent use of tests. This has been the position of psychologists in Puerto Rico who suggest the need for the practitioner to be knowledgeable of the children's cultural background (Herrans, 1979).

The controversies have continued and, with them,

epistemological and social tensions have surfaced with intensity. The epistemological status of the statistical model was shaken and became fragile giving way to ideological explanations (Benedito, 1975; Sewell, 1987). On the other hand, testing practices became cautious. Placing the problem on incompetent psychologist questions the objectivity and technical advancement of the tests. In essence questioning their validity.

These tensions have been confronted by psychology as well as science in general. It would be naive and unfair to imply that the ideological practices are exclusive to testing or assessment. It is extensive to all scientific and professional endeavor. The extension of this debate is beyond the purpose of this paper.

These tensions have generated the quest for new paradigms and professional practices. In this sense our discipline reflects growth and maturity. It is within this context that we wish to talk about new visions and promises.

Assessment will be among us for a long time within the traditional framework, although some alternatives have been advanced. At this moment our efforts are geared towards making more fair decisions.

In Puerto Rico, the use of intelligence tests from the United States and without norms or adaptation has been the practice. This has been so for the majority of tests utilized with children. Currently there has been a successful attempt to adapt and create norms for the WISC-R. Other efforts are the attention to other parameters such as behavioral and school interactions. This is the topic of our colleagues at this table.

Another alternative has been the attention placed on methods such as Dynamic Assessment (Baez, 1988; Miranda, 1988). This method promises a departure from the positivistic science where normalization is the basic foundation of assessment. Dynamic Assessment is developed within a social historical perspective.

Dynamic Assessment focuses on cognition (Feuerstein, 1979), which, as Riviere (1984) suggests, can be referred to as the act or faculty of knowing. Cognitive assessment is, then, becoming aware of the social instances which capacitate the person to reproduce knowledge. It is oriented towards the knowledgeable subject which is both biological and social, a totality which thinks, feels and acts. Predominance is placed on the social historical

construction of cognition. This was the theoretical framework of researchers such as Vygotsky (1978), Luria (1975), Bernstein (Richelle, 1984), among others. Cognition is modifiable as the result of the person's social history.

Social experience such as learning in its formal and informal expressions create a cognitive framework from which the person perceives and organizes its reality. Cognitive ability is not conceptualized as stable or a completed process. It is conceived as a dynamic process between the person and its social media (Feuerstein, 1979). It recognizes that the social media is not uniform or universal and that the possibility to confront the different tasks of the human society requires a learning process which is not available to all classes.

As an assessment method, attention is placed on cognitive modifiability (Feuerstein, 1979). Cognitive modifiability refers to the change of cognitive abilities as the result of a learning experience. It is observed through the social experience of learning, therefore the assessment structure varies from the traditional format. Dynamic Assessment provides the person with a session of mediated learning referred to as training. Feuerstein (1979) defines mediated learning as an interactional process between the developing human organism and the adult with experience which intercedes with the child focusing, selecting and nurturing contexts and habits of appropriate learning. Assessment is structured within a pre test-training-post test paradigm. Under this condition, it is intended to observe cognitive modifiability and detect limitations with the purpose of elaborating educational alternatives. The assumption here is that certain cognitive conditions have to be present in order for the person to benefit from formal education. These conditions are developed through mediated learning.

Our work in Puerto Rico with Dynamic Assessment has shown the benefit of this method in detecting cognitive strengths in children who otherwise are classified as retarded when using standardized tests. Our practice has been to use it as part of the assessment battery in order to make fairer decisions. It also provides us with information with respect to how the child thinks, feels and acts upon the problem he/she approaches. This information permits us to develop educational recommendations.

Another aspect which is not generally attended in the

literature is the examinee-examiner relationship. Dynamic Assessment acknowledges and creates a dialoguing relationship. During the training session, an attempt is made to reduce the gap between the examiner and examinee which traditionally places knowledge and power in the former's position. The purpose is to recognize the examinee as a subject capable of reproducing and producing knowledge. This has important implications for the teacher-student relationship in the school context.

Dynamic Assessment is promising as it provides an alternative to make fairer intervention in the assessment of capabilities. It focuses on the social transactions and this provides a chance to alter the social media with the possibility of generating a better chance for the success of our children. Vygotsky (1978) had proposed to make it possible for the child to go beyond his present level of development to achieve higher ground and eventually new consciousness.

At present the major promise and challenge Dynamic Assessment has is to work more emphatically on its theoretical formulations in order to strengthen its epistemological status. They have been developed from a different scientific framework where the social subject, relativism, dialectical relationships, pluralism among other constructs are important assumptions. This theoretical work is essential in order to avoid ideological explanations. It must depart from the deficit model which it has fallen into. Another important challenge for Dynamic Assessment is to strengthen its empirical support of the educational interventions it suggests.

Although we have referred to minority children in our discussion, there is still the question of for whom and what purpose is it necessary to speak within this classification. The act and faculty to know and to discern goes beyond the ethnicity discussed in this paper.

The future requires relearning, autocriticism and a shift of paradigm on our behalf. The struggles of our discipline have given us the strength, knowledge, maturity and power to face the future with hope. Major struggles still awaits us, particularly for the new visions. It is worth the time and effort as we trust to commit ourselves to create the conditions for a liberating praxis. It is our responsibility to generate the visions and promises of knowing better.

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