

Tele-Assessment Considerations for School Psychologists in the Covid-19 Era

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Abstract

Special education laws set clear and stringent deadlines for school psychologists to complete eligibility or reevaluation assessments that are valid and comprehensive. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, these assessments primarily took place face-to-face and aligned with standardized assessment practices. School closures and virtual learning environments posed a challenge for school psychologists as they considered how to meet legal responsibilities, ethical obligations, and maintain the validity of the assessments. Guidelines for conducting psychoeducational assessments are being written at the same time school psychologists are implementing them in the field. This article summarizes the available guidelines for assessment in a virtual environment and discusses the implications for current and future school psychology practice.

Keywords: Tele-Assessment; School Psychology; Special Education; Eligibility Determination

To help mitigate the public health risks associated with the coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic, schools across the United States began closing in the spring of 2020. These widespread closures affected at least 55.1 million students, with schools in 48 states being ordered or recommended to close for the remainder of the academic year (Map, 2020). Due to the sudden nature of the crisis, school psychologists scrambled to determine how to proceed with the administration and interpretation of psychoeducational assessments.

In the immediate aftermath, the Office of Civil Rights (2020) issued guidance stating that evaluations requiring face-to-face assessments or observations would need to be delayed until schools reopened. However, as the pandemic continued, it became less feasible to delay eligibility evaluations indefinitely. School psychologists play a vital role in the process of determining if a child is eligible for special education (SPED) services. Under a prescribed timeline, they must complete all necessary assessments within the child's suspected area(s) of disability as outlined in the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* (IDEIA, 2004) and state codes. This information helps guide the case conference in determining the appropriate educational services for the child; delaying such evaluations threatens a child's access to a free and appropriate education (FAPE).

Tele-assessment has emerged as a potential solution for school psychologists to meet these legal obligations. Tele-assessment refers to the remote administration of a norm-referenced test over a high-speed internet connection (Farmer et al., 2020; Pearson Assessments, 2020). The examiner administers the test in one geographic location and the examinee completes the test in real-time, typically with the assistance of a facilitator, at a different location.

Tele-assessment helps safeguard the health of both the examiner and examinee while allowing the school psychologist to meet psychoeducational evaluation deadlines. Furthermore, according to National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2020) tele-assessment can be used to improve access to school psychological services in rural and underserved areas, even after the pandemic ends. Although there is potential gain from decreasing the constraints and barriers that are created by paper-pencil and face-to-face standardized assessments (Young, 2005), research on the validity of virtual assessment is lacking.

Therefore, policy makers, researchers, and school psychologists must adapt and accommodate at an increasingly rapid pace (Stifel et al., 2020). Imperative to the spirit of SPED laws, delaying assessment for students with disabilities—and those with a possible diagnosis—restricts access to SPED and related services in a timely fashion (Stifel et al., 2020). School psychologists must carefully consider all these challenges and consider the legal and ethical implications of tele-assessment. This article summarizes the available guidelines for conducting psychoeducational assessments in a virtual environment. Implications for future practice are discussed including the potential outlook for continued virtual assessment as the pandemic comes to an end.

History of Tele-Health

Conducting psychological services through tele-practice is not a new concept. Tele-health services have been touted as having many potential benefits such as increasing accessibility of mental health services to underserved communities, easing the pressures of face-to-face services for hesitant populations (i.e., teenagers), and facilitating ease of service delivery, among others (Hollis et al., 2017). In general, tele-health includes any service where the provider and client are not in the same physical space (NASP, 2020). Counseling services have long been adapted for delivery over the internet, and efficacy of tele-health counseling has been established for several psychiatric disorders (Kay-Lambkin et al., 2009). On the other hand, assessment of norm-referenced tests typically used in a psychoeducational evaluation, do not have a strong research base, and psychologists prefer face-to-face administration of various assessments (Rabin et al., 2014). The most notable exception would be the popularity of utilizing computers for personality assessment, and many of those have been adapted for tele-health and virtual administration. For instance, Luxton et al. (2014) developed guidelines for psychological tele-assessment long before the Covid-19 pandemic. Although they acknowledged the limitations of remotely conducting assessments that utilize manipulatives (e.g., Wechsler Scales), they reviewed the literature that supported the administration of rating scales and personality measures through tele-health services.

In the pre-pandemic world, school psychologists had some options of obtaining data without the need for a physical presence at school. For example, school psychologists could email the *Behavior Assessment System for Children, Third Edition* (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2015) to parents and teachers to aid in the psychoeducational evaluation process. Providing protocols to families and teachers in a digital format saves on paper materials that could potentially be lost in transmission through a child's backpack and allows for quicker scoring for the school psychologist. These digital administration processes were accounted for by the developers of the measures in their standardization process (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2015) contributing to the confidence of utilizing these types of measures in a valid psychoeducational evaluation.

Administration of norm-referenced assessments through digital systems is relatively new. As Zitny et al. (2012) noted, computers have been utilized to score assessments of cognitive and academic functioning over the past several decades, but they only recently have added a digital

administration component. Pearson Assessments, publishers of several popular cognitive and achievement tests used by school psychologists (e.g., Wechsler Scales, Kaufman Achievement Tests, etc.), created the Q-Interactive platform for clinicians to utilize technology in their face-to-face administration of assessments. This platform requires two iPads® for administration, one with the examiner's materials and one for the examinee's view. The examiner and examinee interact with the testing materials through the iPads® and utilize any required manipulatives in a face-to-face administration (e.g., blocks).

Although the Q-Interactive technology has been available since 2012, it is the only technology available for online test administration (Krach et al., 2020). Furthermore, computerized instruments, both those developed for computer only administration or tests adapted from paper format to digital, were not originally developed with the idea of being administered virtually. In response to school closures, Pearson (2021) proposed guidelines for administration of their tests virtually despite lack of empirical support.

Overview of Existing Guidance on Tele-Assessment

Throughout the pandemic, school psychologists have turned to various entities for guidance on tele-assessment. Professional organizations, such as the American Psychological Association (APA) and NASP (2020), have recommended using tele-assessment with extreme caution. In a statement issued by APA, Wright et al. (2020) acknowledged the paucity of research demonstrating the equivalency of in-person and remote assessment, thus urging psychologists to address the validity of the data in their reports. Similarly, NASP called on school psychologists to administer assessments “in the manner in which they were developed and validated,” (p. 2) with any adaptations being documented and based on high-quality evidence. The cautious approach assumed by APA and NASP is echoed by other professional organizations, such as state school psychology associations and SPED councils (Krach et al., 2020).

During the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, Krach et al. (2020) evaluated the guidance published by professional organizations, governmental agencies, and test publishers. They found that governmental agencies, such as the U.S. Department of Education and state education departments, took the most conservative approach, recommending that adapted tele-assessment be used with caution or not at all (Krach et al., 2020). In contrast, test publishers, such as Psychological Assessment Resources and Western Psychological Services (WPS), never discouraged the use of their products in virtual settings (Krach et al., 2020). In fact, these test publishers provided tele-assessment guidance on their websites in the form of test-specific recommendations or overall considerations for virtual assessment. Additionally, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC, 2020) suggested evaluations continue despite concerns related to validity. CEC explained it causes more harm to delay educational services compared to administering adapted assessments. The lack of consensus over adapted tele-assessment guidelines among professional organizations, governmental agencies, and test publishers underscores the dilemma school psychologists face and continue to encounter in the Covid-19 era.

Legal Considerations

As the preceding discussion illustrated, there is some confusion over the use of adapted tele-assessment. For that reason, it is crucial for school psychologists to be familiar with the applicable federal and state legislation. Throughout the pandemic, the U.S. Department of Education

continued to affirm students with disabilities' rights to FAPE in the least restrictive environment (LRE) as guaranteed by IDEIA (USDOE, 2020a). The U.S. Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, declined to seek congressional waivers to FAPE and LRE requirements as part of the *CARES Act*, stating that "there is no reason for Congress to waive any provision designed to keep students learning" (USDOE, 2020b, Para. 3). Unless a school is closed to all students, educators must continue providing SPED and related services to students with disabilities (USDOE, 2020a). Due to this, school psychologists may feel pressure to use tele-assessment to meet SPED eligibility deadlines. However, it is important to note that there is some flexibility, as the Office of Civil Rights issued a statement encouraging schools to work collaboratively with parents to reach mutually agreeable extensions (OCR of Special Education & Rehabilitative Services, 2020). Furthermore, certain states (e.g., California) have passed laws to extend SPED timelines during the pandemic. While it is outside the scope of this article to review legislation from every state, school psychologists are encouraged to familiarize themselves with the laws that pertain to them.

Potential Drawbacks to Tele-Assessment

NASP (2017) voiced concerns related to reliability and validity of tele-assessment. These concerns are valid, as there are few empirical studies establishing the reliability and validity of tele-assessments. In a study conducted by Stifel et al. (2020), a systematic review of the literature yielded only six empirical studies on the agreement between remote and in-person standardized test administrations in children and youth. Despite the small number of studies, the authors concluded that "the results generally suggested that the mode of administration did not impact examinees' performance on the tests" (p. 440). While these results are promising, caution is still warranted. In one study, significant administration effects were found on certain subtests of the *Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, Fifth Edition* (Wechsler, 2014), with remote administration yielding higher Processing Speed Index scores than in-person administration (Wright, 2020). In addition, many standardized procedures for remote administration involve a third-party facilitator, which is not feasible in the Covid-19 era. Without a trained facilitator, some subtests (e.g., Block Design) are impossible to administer.

Although test manufacturers like Pearson have recommended making substitutions on these subtests, there is limited psychometric evidence to suggest their equivalency. Finally, there are few studies on the equivalency of remote and in-person administration among children with disabilities. This is particularly troubling for school psychologists, who often conduct psychoeducational assessments to help make SPED determinations (Krach, Paskiewicz, & Monk, 2020). Tele-assessment poses various uncertainties for school psychologists when evaluating students with disabilities within the specific disability categories (Khubchandani & Thew, 2016). For instance, school psychologists must observe students in their natural school and testing environment when assessing the impact of attention on educational performance. Virtual settings compromise these natural observations. Similarly, play assessments utilized in evaluations of autism spectrum disorder cannot be administered in a virtual environment (WPS, 2021). Furthermore, school psychologists must consider the disruption the pandemic has caused on the everyday lives of society, which greatly impacted the routines of children with disabilities. Changing the format, process, and learning environment, while adding social isolation and emotional stress from a crisis, can impact the outcomes of assessments (Buchnat & Wojciechowska, 2020).

The extent to which adapted tele-assessment introduces construct-irrelevant influences raises other concerns. According to the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*, construct-irrelevant variance is defined as “the degree to which test scores are affected by processes that are extraneous to the test’s intended purpose” (AERA, APA, & NCME, 2014, p. 12). Construct-irrelevant influences can arise from the examinee, examiner, the environment, or the instrument (Farmer et al., 2020). For example, the pandemic has introduced new stressors that may cause transient emotional distress within the examinee and examiner. This could interfere with the examinee’s test scores and the examiner’s ability to administer the assessment. Examinees completing tests with elevated levels of anxiety may perform more poorly compared to when feeling relaxed (Schillinger et al., 2021). Furthermore, although psychologists are trained to administer achievement and intelligence assessments, unfamiliarity with the virtual format introduces another source of construct-irrelevant variance. Inaccurate assessment of an examinee’s skills and abilities, from score influenced by extenuating factors related to the examiner or the examinee, could result in denial of the appropriate Individualized Education Program (IEP) services.

Environmental factors also give rise to construct-irrelevant influences, as the examiner has little control over it. Although school psychologists have always battled uncontrollable environmental influences within a school (i.e., unplanned drills, schedule changes, etc.), virtual assessment introduces more potential environmental barriers. A study conducted by Brearly et al. (2017) noted the critical importance of high-speed internet connections, yet many families have limited home internet access. In addition, it is more difficult to control noise and distractions in the examinee’s environment, as family members may be working or attending school from home. Finally, the instrument itself can introduce construct-irrelevant variance, as most were normed and developed for traditional in-person administration. While “equivalency” studies are a step in the right direction, they are insufficient in demonstrating the reliability and validity of remote procedures.

Ethical Considerations

Tele-assessment poses several ethical dilemmas for school psychologists. Under NASP’s Ethical Standards, school psychologists are required to use assessment techniques that are consistent with “responsible, research-based practice” (Standard II.3.2, p. 46). As the preceding discussion illustrated, there is limited research on assessments normed on remote procedures. Tele-assessment also threatens Guiding Principle I.3, which focuses on fairness, equity, and justice. By one estimate, three million students in the United States do not have access to the internet at home (Kinnard & Dale, 2020). The digital divide poses an equity issue, as students of color and students from low-income backgrounds are disproportionately affected. Access to a reliable high-speed internet connection and expensive computer equipment is a barrier in many communities, as is limited digital literacy and familiarity. Finally, conducting assessments virtually jeopardizes privacy and confidentiality (Guiding Principle I.2) and test security (Standard II.5.1). Malware installed on the device of either the examiner or examinee could unknowingly transmit sensitive information to a third-party. The examinee could also capture and upload images of test materials without the examiner’s knowledge.

Recommendations for School Psychologists

As the pandemic continues, school psychologists face a difficult dilemma: to use tele-assessment or not use tele-assessment. There are certainly many challenges associated with tele-

assessment, including the lack of equivalency research, threats to privacy, and test security. However, the use of tele-assessment must be weighed against the alternative—delaying assessments until in-person learning resumes. This option, too, is fraught with legal and ethical implications. Although some states have issued waivers to extend deadlines, schools are not exempt from serving students with disabilities during the pandemic. Furthermore, postponing assessments is an ethical concern, because it potentially delays students from receiving special education and related services.

One proposed solution is using R.I.O. instead of R.I.O.T. to complete special education eligibility evaluations (Hass & Leung, 2020). The acronym R.I.O.T. stands for record review, interview, observation, and test. It reminds school psychologists to use a multi-method, multi-informant approach when completing comprehensive assessments. Although testing is an important component of school psychological services, Hass and Leung contend that R.I.O. (record review, interview, & observation) can be used for comprehensive assessments during the Covid-19 crisis. First, historical records (e.g., academic, health, & medical history) can provide valuable insight, especially when evaluating children for intellectual disabilities, autism, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Although they provide minimal—if any—information about the student's current functioning, record reviews “can be instrumental in establishing patterns of behavior over time that suggest the presence or absence of an academic or social-emotional problem” (Hass & Leung, 2020, p. 2).

Next, parent/teacher interviews can be used in conjunction with behavior rating scales to learn about a student's current functioning. Finally, the authors address the observation component of R.I.O. They admit that traditional classroom observations are not feasible, and observations conducted virtually would likely yield atypical results (Hass & Leung, 2020). However, data collected from observation of students in an online environment should not be disregarded. Direct interviews with students allow school psychologists to gather observational data related to mental status, aspects of behavior that are important to include in psychoeducational reports (Hass & Leung, 2020). Additionally, school psychologists can utilize video conferencing platforms to conduct parent interviews, which may provide an opportunity to observe the child in the background. Furthermore, using an additional camera set up to view the student's online workspace allows the psychologist to gather behavioral observations that can assist a case conference committee when making decisions based on a student's performance on virtual assignments.

Although the R.I.O. approach may be suitable for emotional and behavioral diagnoses, testing is often needed to diagnose conditions such as specific learning disabilities (Krach et al., 2020). When direct methods are necessary, it may be helpful to consult a decision-making guide. Krach and colleagues propose a 4-step process to help practitioners make safe and valid testing decisions. In step one, team members determine what type of data is needed to make a diagnosis/eligibility determination. Will qualitative data (i.e., interviews & observations) be sufficient, or is quantitative data (i.e., cognitive & achievement tests) also needed? Next, data collection methods must be determined. Although some assessments were designed to be administered via tele-assessment, many of the assessments school psychologists use were not (Krach et al., 2020). As a result, school psychologists may need to seek out additional training to administer adapted tele-assessments. The third step of the decision-making process is to consider the legal, ethical, and practical aspects of the data collection method selected. For example, the practitioner needs to consider if the examinee has the technological resources (e.g., computer, internet, know-how, etc.) to complete an assessment virtually (Krach et al., 2020). Finally, interpretation of the test findings occurs. School psychologists must fully explain the process of tele-assessment to the IEP team and

provide information on the implications of making modifications to standardized tests (Jameson et al., 2020). Specifically, school psychologists should acknowledge any threats to test validity and answer any questions the team members may have regarding the validity of an assessment administered virtually.

Future Outlook of Virtual Assessment

As technological advances continue to affect many aspects of life and practice, it is possible that digital and virtual test administration will continue to develop and improve. But will school psychologists want to continue to administer norm-referenced tests through a virtual platform once the pandemic is over? Although online administration of tests became a necessity for some school psychologists, the preference for online administration is questionable.

Despite the discussion of moving to virtual administration of assessment to meet eligibility deadlines, school districts across the country pivoted and found ways to allow for the continued administration of in-person testing throughout the pandemic (Corcoran, 2021); therefore, it is possible that paper-and-pencil testing will continue to dominate psychoeducational assessments.

Recent research indicated that graduate students who had training on digital platforms made them more desirable to internship sites during the pandemic (Corcoran, 2021). For instance, use of Q-Interactive on iPads® allows for school psychologists and students to maintain social distancing in an in-person testing setting. Furthermore, psychologists may be hesitant to use the technology because of the lack of independent studies addressing equivalency to the paper-and-pencil format. Krach and colleagues (2020) reported that most of the Q-Interactive equivalency studies have been conducted by Pearson themselves and have not been subject to peer review. Rabin and colleagues (2014) surveyed neuropsychologists and found that the average respondent rarely used computerized assessments when available.

Conclusion

Special education law calls for the timely completion of eligibility assessments, which presented significant challenges to school psychologists as schools moved to virtual learning at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic (Krach et al., 2021). Continued surges of the virus have prolonged the effects to schools causing additional closures or the provision of a mixture of virtual and in-person learning options; therefore, school psychologists continue to face decisions of whether or not to complete virtual assessments.

As different psychological tests have been adapted for computer administration, psychologists continue to utilize paper-and-pencil versions (Rabin et al, 2014), and school psychologists may choose to avoid the newer adaptations to virtual administration. Despite the potential of tele-assessment to expand the reach of psychoeducational assessments, it is possible that virtual assessment of norm-referenced tests would only be utilized under extenuating circumstances. For instance, school districts covering large rural areas but employing one school psychologist may utilize technology to serve students more efficiently. Future research should explore the current use of virtual assessment as the pandemic continues and address whether school psychologists plan to use virtual administration assessments when in-person assessment is possible.

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