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**Risks of Bias and Methods of Solution
in the Educational assessment of
Learning Problems in a Multicultural
Society**

Long Abstract

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I. Introduction

Research Title

Risks of Bias and Methods of Solution in the Educational assessment of Learning Problems in a Multicultural Society

Research Focus

When encountering a student with difficulties, the question arises whether the student has learning problems. Therefore, the student is referred to educational assessment, seeking to map the mechanisms underlying the learning grounds of the basic skills. In case the assessment reaffirms the assumption, treatment begins (whether in the educational framework as part of the integration lessons, or privately). Treatment includes remedial teaching, guidance in the learning framework and guidance and supporting the parents.

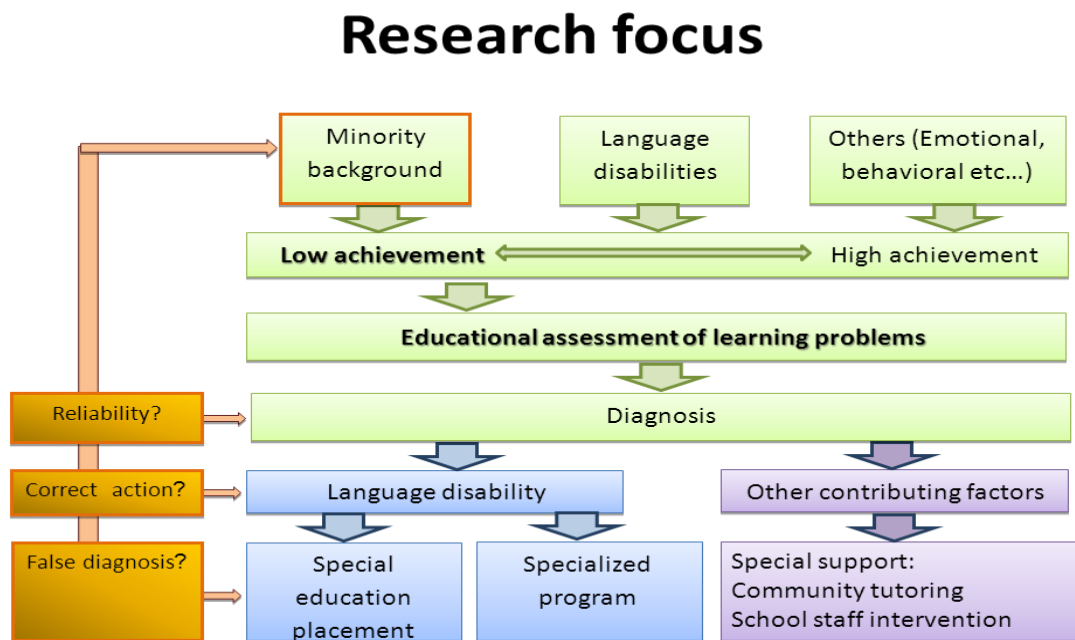
However, attention must be paid to the fact that the assessment, according to which a student is determined to have learning problems (not once does the diagnosis define a specific problem) consists of tools which are based on the culture, on habits and general knowledge as accepted in the general population. These tools are not broad enough to include cultural elements of unique populations. This is mostly expressed in the part engaging in language, a domain where differences in language, lifestyle and general knowledge are most prominent. Thus, it is possible that the results of an assessment may point to strengths and weaknesses in an unreliable manner, and the diagnosis may be based on the wrong grounds. Such an assessment may unreliably point to strengths and impairments, and diagnose learning problems on the wrong grounds. Such a diagnosis can entail improper treatment, thus damaging the realization of the assessed child's ability to acquire an education and knowledge in comparison with children with unimpaired abilities.

This charged issue is of great significance for me, both on the professional and personal-private levels. In the course of my professional work, I encounter children with learning problems at various junctions of their learning process: as an educational assessor (in my own private clinic) and as a remedial teacher (an integration teacher on behalf of the Ministry of Education, or in my private clinic). On the level of the system as a whole, I am involved in the treatment process as a

pedagogical instructor of special education student-teachers in their practical experience.

At the same time, in my personal life, my family and I belong to the “HABAD” community (an orthodox Jewish community). My children are enrolled in the community’s educational system, and I also teach in the system. At this junction, I am personally aware of the processes which students with learning problems in this educational stream undergo, and I have the ability to compare them to the process of most of the country’s population. Like in any other education system, children with learning problems in the “HABAD” schools also manifest learning gaps expressed in their level of achievements. Nevertheless, when examining the issue in depth, and assessing it, the difficulty mentioned above arises: the accepted assessment tools examining the language domain, performance gaps of students in the orthodox stream, and the reason for that is not only a learning problem, but also different cultural knowledge and lifestyle. This point led me to my Ph.D. research.

Figure 1 below present the research focus:



General Research Goal

To develop a culture-congruent perception of spoken and written language problem assessment, adjusted to the population of assessed students and their culture.

Specific Objectives

1. To examine assessors' perceptions pertaining to
 - a. Limitations of spoken and written language problem assessment adjusted to culture.
 - b. Possible solutions for overcoming the limitations of the assessment tool.
2. To develop a culture-congruent spoken and written language problem assessment model.

Clarification of the Gap in Knowledge Addressed by the Research

The issue of cultural influence was indeed discussed as early as the first years of the Twentieth Century, when immigrants to the U.S. were required to take inter-cultural tests, except those were intelligence tests. Psychologists used them to compare populations from different cultures (Garth, 1931; Klineberg, 1935; Mern, 1940; Anastasi, 1985).

The issue became “charged” when a group of high-middle-class “whites” scored higher as a result of better understanding of the test’s context (Helmes, 1992), whereas the “blacks” felt inferior (Jensen, 1980).

To fix the wrongs, they tried to develop tests that were free of culture-related parameters. However, the new product did not provide an answer – whether because there was still a gap or the test lost its initial validity. Hence, they reached a state of creating “culture-fair” tests, although these tests, too, were not equally valid for all groups in the target populations (Anastasi, 1985).

The situation was different when specific tests for minority groups were examined, as assessors were required to be familiar with the social ties which were relevant for a specific group and express them. This was done while analyzing performance and performance taxonomies (McCormick, Jeanneret and Meacham, 1972; Pearlman, 1980; Fleishman, 1975; Fleishman and Quaintance, 1984).

Nevertheless, these tests were intelligence tests.

As for assessing learning disabilities, especially in the Israeli education system – the Israeli education system is well aware of the problems of assessing learners' populations from different cultures and sectors in society. Breznitz and Yamin (2008) listed groups in Israeli society which require special approaches when developing assessment tools, among them – immigrant students (from the CIS, Ethiopia and so on), students of the Arab sector and those of the Jewish-orthodox sector, for the reason there is a gap in their knowledge of the language and the culture on which the assessments rely. Similarly, Bigman (2004) pointed to the fact that the multi-cultural nature of students in the education system in Israel influences the background which they carry with them to the encounter with the text, so that lacks in previous knowledge may be expressed in comprehension difficulties. Therefore, she suggested the use of Informal Reading Inventory, which is based on the use of texts from the curriculum for the preparation of the assessment tasks according to the needs of the teaching program (Lipson and Wixon, 1991).

Still, so far no research has been found to cope with the problem of the various language assessment tools in Israel as a multi-cultural society.

Key words: Learning difficulties, educational assessment of learning problems, culture congruent assessment, multicultural society, risks of bias and methods, assessors of learning problems

II. Theoretical Perspectives

II.1. Conceptual Framework

According to Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (1996), the conceptual framework of research defines the research field, and in fact, the theoretical space where the research is conducted. The current research engages in the perceptions of Israeli assessors regarding the risks of educational assessment of learning problems among minority students and solutions to overcome them.

The research aims are to examine assessors' perceptions pertaining to the risks of bias in the educational assessment of learning problems in a multicultural society, and possible solutions for overcoming them.

Based on these insights, the general research goal is to develop a culture-congruent perception of spoken and written language assessment of learning problems, adjusted to the population of assessed students and their culture.

II.2. Details of Basic Theories

The grounds upon which the research developed consist of two theories from two interacting fields: (1) the field of society in general and multicultural society with minority groups in particular; (2) the field of learning in the social-cultural contexts and processes of mediation in learning.

From the perspective of social theory, the research relies upon Bourdieu's theory (1986), which refers to the background of the individual in society as a source of power, referred to as "cultural capital", which resembles economic capital, though symbolic. Bourdieu used the term "Habitus" to describe the individual's thinking pattern and personal knowledge, which is assimilated in the implicit transfer of cultural heritage and finds expression in stabilizing the dominant group's status and marginalizing minority groups.

From the perspective of learning in the social-cultural context, the research relies upon Vygotsky's theory (1978), which points to the differences between two routes in which cognitive development occurs: the route of direct "spontaneous" learning and the social-cultural route, through interaction with a mediator. The mediator provides adjusted support, or "scaffolding" to the learner, thus intervening in the child's problem solving process so as to advance him or her beyond his or her proximal zone of development. At the same time, the research is supported by Feuerstein's theory (1979), which refers to mediated learning and emphasizes the role of the mediator as a figure that organizes and changes the sources of stimuli and provides meaning to mediation based on the knowledge he or she intends to impart to the learner.

Below are details of the concepts which derive from the above theories which underpin the conceptual framework of this research.

II.2.1. Society and Culture

Culture is a complex, which includes knowledge, beliefs, artworks, law, morality, customs and other skills and habits acquired by people in society (Tylor, 1871). However, this cultural formation is a dynamic process in which individual identity design and development of the person's attitude to the world originates from the historical heritage that creates meaning, which is, in turn, conveyed and taught through symbols used in social interaction (Geertz, 1973). These symbols constitute culture's means of conveying its messages and a way of ensuring its presence in the society environment.

- **Multiculturalism and Minority groups**

A society which includes an elitist class and classes under it is a stratified society. Cultural minority groups are inferior on the hierarchical scale, and therefore are not always able to shield their diversity and uniqueness and express them. Moreover, since their group lacks power, minorities suffer from discrimination and exclusion in many societies (Ogbu, 1991). This hurts them on several levels - the right to equality, the democratic process and the realization of their identity source. Shemer (2009), finds that the primary expression of a society with multiple cultures is diversity, multiple ways of life existing side by side. Coping with diversity is accompanied by tension which develops in the encounter with that which is different and unfamiliar, which sometimes constitutes a threat which might develop into rejection

- **Learning Processes**

Modern society is a literate society. In order to integrate into society, the individual must know how to develop knowledge and to exhaust the potential embodied in him (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2003). the individual is required to display skilled use of various types of information in order to make decisions, solve problems and raise new questions and directions of thinking (ALA, 1989). These processes which are based on fact, thinking, learning and communications between people, are conducted by means of language. The realization of this goal is imposed within an educational framework. For this purpose, the school environment provides students with a wide array of reading and writing experiences, and creates access to spoken and written texts in various fields of knowledge and for various social needs.

- **Learning in a Multicultural Environment**

Today, awareness is growing that the process of learning - acquisition of knowledge, its processing and production, is a process based on the culture to which the student is affiliated. In the research field surprise is revealed as to the teaching style in schools, how much it is focused on students affiliated to the mainstream, versus the need to adjust teaching to the cultural variance of minority populations (McIntyre, 1996). Thus the understanding also prevails that patterns of thinking of the dominant group in society, the ways of behavior and attributing meaning to conventions are mostly based on generalized assumptions which "do not cast doubt on them" (Triandis, 1996), and that situations exist in which these assumptions are accepted in society as something universal, without examining their cultural basis.

II.2.2. Students with Learning Difficulties

Students who have learning difficulties are often absent from school and are characterized by behavior and discipline problems. Learning difficulties start with many of them already at junior school, and thus educational gaps and "hidden detachment" that are created at school intensify from one year to the next (Cohen-Nevot, 2000). The ongoing sequence of failure causes these students to have a false subjective perception according to which their ability to reach achievements is low. The perception develops as a process during the years where failures accumulate. Each additional failure reinforces the awareness of being "unsuccessful", and this perception spreads from the student to his environment - teaching staff, class mates, parents etc. Thus a dead-end cycle is created increasing despair and lack of motivation among the student, his or her parents and teachers.

- **Students with Learning Problems**

Students with learning problems display great difficulty in a number of central fields: (1) In the cognitive field, these difficulties are expressed as language difficulties as well as attention and concentration problems, in sensory perceptions, in interpersonal interaction, memory, time and space orientation etc. (2) In the behavioral field, the problem is expressed as restlessness, impulsiveness, perseveration, slow performance, difficulty in adhering to laws and rules etc. A significant difficulty was observed also

in the field of acquired skills such as reading, writing, spelling, written expression and mathematics. Similarly, this is also expressed in the field of social emotional adjustment such as emotional reactions to difficulty and repeated failure, and difficulties in social skills which are part of the syndrome itself (for example, limitations in understanding clues in interpersonal communications, difficulties and an inability to adjust to new situations, inability to delay gratification etc.).

- **Minority Students**

Children learning at school in a language which is not their mother tongue experience more difficulties than their peers who were born and grew up in that country. The difficulties they experience are not those of understanding or mental difficulties, but linguistic difficulties. That is, the process of acquisition of L2 depends on various environmental factors, which differ from interpersonal differences in acquisition whose source is internal and are not connected to the cognitive processes of the learner himself. For example, educational framework factors such of allocation of resources, adjusting teaching methods, and the language of teaching influence the academic performance of minority students (Solomonik, 2010).

- **Assessment of Learning Problems**

In progressive states, the education system is required by law to identify students with the special needs, to provide them with intervention processes based on professional, effective and efficient knowledge. Therefore, the first goal of the assessment in the framework of the education system is to examine if the characteristics and functioning of the student meet the criterion identifying him or her as entitled to special education according to the definition in law. In addition, the assessment examines the type and intensity of support the student needs, in order to make recommendations as to suitable educational institutions which will answer these needs. Moreover, the assessment helps in the planning of a therapeutic-educational intervention program for a multidisciplinary team, together with the other professional and educational assessments.

- **Educational Assessment of Learning Problems for Minority Students**

According to the medical model that had been acceptable until last decades of the 20th Century, the approach of dealing with students with learning problems in a

multicultural society completely ignored a variety of environmental factors, including acclimatization and linguistic development, previous knowledge and learning skills of students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Ortiz & Yates, 1983; Padilla & Borsato, 2007). The discrepancies between the background underlying the standard assessments and the backgrounds of students from minority groups creates a situation where instead of identifying the capabilities and difficulties of the assessed individuals, the assessments reflects the inherent inequality in society in general and the education system in particular.

Adjusting the assessments does not only mean changing their contents according to cultural concepts. Such an approach is based on a curriculum and functional assessment, and is intended less for classification and placement purposes but rather for shaping and assessing involvement. Direct information which does not derive from the needs of the classification allows for constructing a direct assessment of the current educational needs and generates involvements that may increase educational opportunities.

- **Learning Problems Assessors**

A learning problems assessor is a special education teacher trained to diagnose learning skills in students who experience difficulties, and to explain the gap in function based on abilities and difficulties in cognitive processes. The assessor's role is to make the educational assessment of learning problems to clarify the way the basic learning skills cause difficulties in achievements. According the assessment the assessor creates a personal work program for the student, which guides his or her work with the disabled student in order to improve his or her reading and writing abilities. The work program also serves other teachers who teach the student, as well as the parents and other professionals (NBPTS - National Board for Professional Teaching Standards).

- **Assessors of Learning Problems in a Multicultural Society**

Different patterns of cultural similarities and differences common in the intercultural constellation in educational contexts indicate that both the educational system's culture and the personal inclinations of the staff and students in minority groups can influence processes of assessment and treatment (Ingraham, 2000). Moreover, the

importance of the assessor's language skills is emphasized, in communicating with the student in the latter's mother tongue (Ortiz & Flanagan, 2002).

The figure below presents a visual model of the conceptual framework of the researched phenomenon.

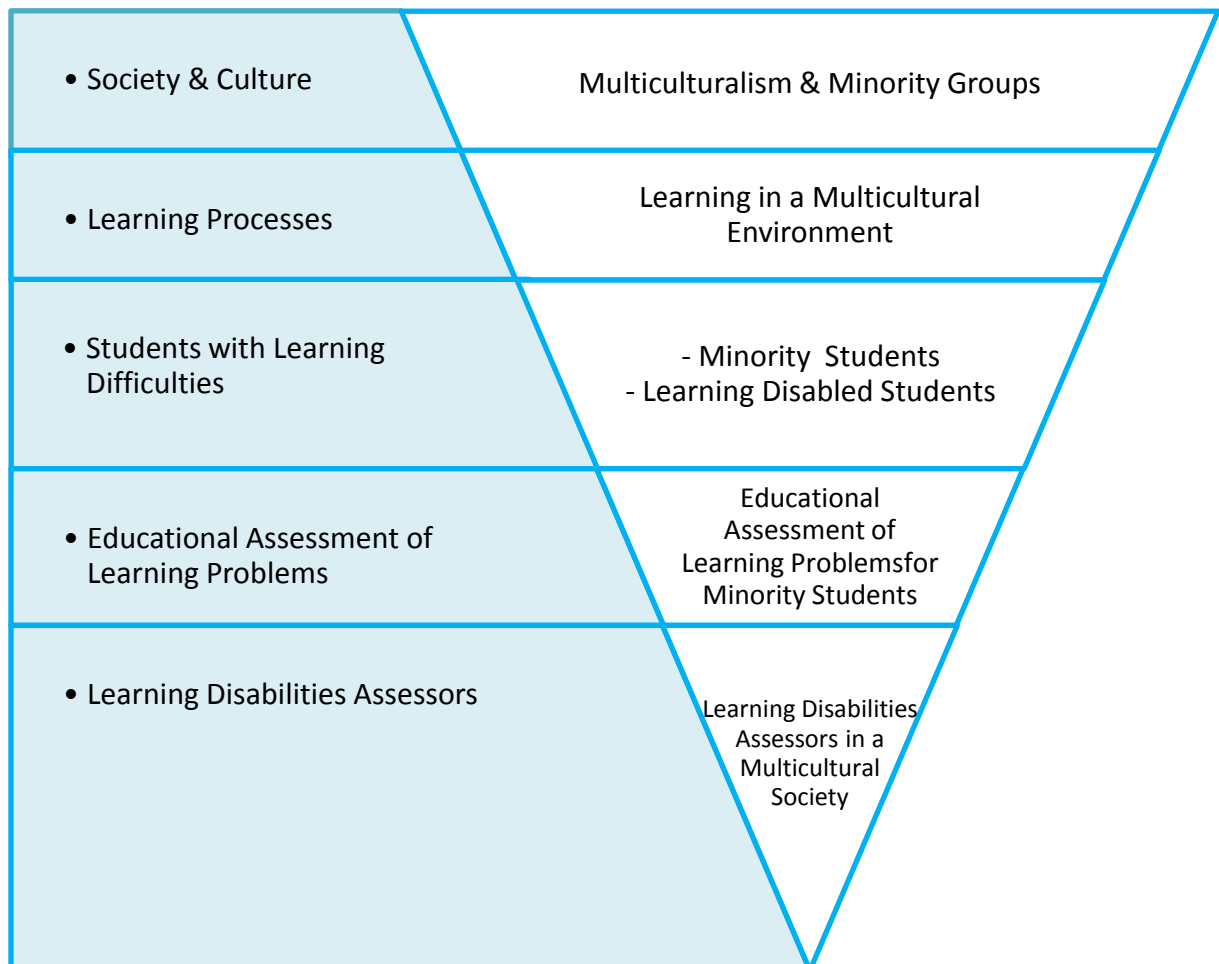


Figure 2: Visual Model of the conceptual Framework of the Research

The model depicts the process of concentrating the issues of the researched phenomenon, starting with the broad grounds discussing the domain of society, where each stage has a different focus, until reaching the research focus – educational assessors of learning problems in a multicultural society. The main part of this model is presented in a "funnel" representing the concentration of issues as expressed in a multicultural society. The right side reflects the same issues as they are characterized by a traditional social approach, regarding individuals in society as having similar features, regardless of the gaps in the backgrounds from which they come.

III. Methodology

General Research Goal

To develop a culture-congruent perception of spoken and written language problem assessment, adjusted to the population of assessed students and their culture.

Specific Objectives

1. To examine assessors' perceptions pertaining to
 - a. Limitations of spoken and written language problem assessment adjusted to culture.
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Hypotheses

Differences will be found in the assessors' perceptions based on their background variables – age, gender and cultural background with regard to:

- A. The limitations of the assessment tool;
- B. The proposed solutions with regard to the assessment tool.

III.1. Research Strategy

This research will be conducted in the mixed methods approach as defined by Creswell et. al. (2008):

A mixed method study involves the collection or analysis of both quantitative and/or qualitative data in a single study in which the data are collected concurrently or sequentially, are given a priority, and involve the integration of the data at one or more stages in the process of research. The core meaning of mixed methods is to invite multiple mental models into the same inquiry space for purposes of respectful conversation, dialogue and learning one from the other, towards a collective generation of better understanding of the phenomena being studied. (Greene, 2007).

The justification for choosing this approach is development: consecutive use of data which will be obtained via one method for the planning and development of the next stage, in research to be conducted via the second method. The combination of

methods will also be used for providing more details, clarifications and interpretation of data collected via another method (Greene, Caraveli & Graham, 1989).

III.2. Research Design

Creswell et. al. (2003) (42--) distinguish the integrated strategy between concurrent research designs and sequential ones, and define different integration models:

- Using qualitative methods to develop quantitative measures;
- Using quantitative methods to add to the qualitative research;
- Using qualitative methods to help explain quantitative findings;
- Using qualitative and quantitative methods at the same time and equally.

This research will make use of stage design – the quantitative methods will be used as an addition to the qualitative research. This design will allow for methodological triangulation, which promotes research quality due to completeness and confirmation, via mutual support of data from a variety of sources and perspectives (Golafshani, 2003; Massey, 1999).

The first stage consisted of qualitative research seeking to examine the problems of the language assessment tools prevailing in the Israeli education system in terms of culture and lifestyle.

The second stage consisted of quantitative research to examine the perceptions of assessors regarding culture-based principles in language assessment tools. This stage was based on the first stage so as to overcome the latter's limitations. The qualitative information obtained in the first stage was converted into items in a closed-ended questionnaire, thus quantifying the themes which were presented via descriptive statistics.

III.2.1. The First Stage

According to the qualitative approach, understanding the life of human society derives from the investigation of individuals interpreting their routine life and attributing meaning to it. Society research has to do with the connections between these interpretations and the daily situations where human life occurs. Social life can be understood from the perspectives of the participants (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1989).

This approach constitutes the grounds for this research, seeking to examine bias in the field of education based on social-cultural background, being a domain deriving from the interpretations of the individuals in it. Hence, this approach governed the first, qualitative stage of the research.

III.2.2. Data Collection

Data collection is a process which consists of a series of interdependent actions seeking to obtain valuable information to answer the developing research questions (Shkedi, 2003).

Data collection at this stage was done via two research tools:

- **Documentary analysis**, whereby the source of information is the didactic assessments – the assessment tools examining the language domain with Israeli school aged students.

Use of this research tool provides a picture which is not influenced by the opinions or experiences of the researcher who has developed them. Most of the data can be obtained from the research, through which the voice of the developer is heard, so that the researcher in the current study can steer the process according to her views and needs. Nonetheless, dissociation from the assessment developer may be a disadvantage if certain domains are not exhausted. For this reason, the findings will be expanded by use of additional research tools, which will constitute a triangulation of the data.

An additional advantage of assessments as a source of information lies in the notion that they can be continually re-observed and reanalyzed within a new framework. Assessment of the assessment tools will be examined according to their significance (Scott, 1990) – to what extent and how are the items in each tool culture-dependent.

Content analysis of the assessment tools will constitute the grounds for the development of the interview as an additional research tool, as follows.

- **Semi-structured in-depth interviews**. The interview is one of the most common ways used in the attempt to understand human beings (Fontana and Frey, 2000 p. 645). The goal of in-depth interviews is not to get answers for questions or examine hypotheses; rather, its roots lie in the desire to understand other people's experiences and the meaning they attribute to

those experiences. The interview provides access to the cultural contexts of people's behavior, and so it provides the researchers with ways to understand the meanings of that behavior.

The interview provides access to the cultural contexts of people's behavior, and therefore it provides researchers with a way to understand the meaning of this behavior (Seidman, 1991).

A semi-structured in-depth interview is characterized by consisting of both open-ended and structured questions. It is customary to start the interview with an open-ended question seeking to get a general description of the phenomenon, and continue with more specific questions focusing on the researched topic (Rudestam and Newton, 2001).

The semi-structured interview, as a methodological tool, suits this research, engaging in the issue of the problem of assessment of students with different cultural-social backgrounds, as the researcher will be able to respond to the primary data while creating new questions which might influence the data collection ways (Strauss and Corbin, 1994).

The interviews will be recorded and transcribed, so that the text will be as accurate as possible, to assure analysis reliability (Seidman, 1991; Stake, 1995).

Outline of the interview

- Standard diagnosis procedure
- The linguistic diagnosis tools in the diagnosis
- Informal tools in the diagnosis
- Difficulties in evaluating unique groups in the population
- Methods of solution in coping with the difficulties
- The goal of the didactic diagnosis, the "credo" of the interviewer

III.2.3. Research Population

Qualitative research cannot be based on the same number of participants as the quantitative research, and hence, it does not use random sampling, but rather purpose sampling focusing on the selection of participants who best represent the population from which they were chosen (Shkedi, 2003). Ten interviews were conducted with ten

educational assessors, some of whom work with specific culture groups while others work with children from the general Israeli population.

To meet the needs of the research goals, assessors were defined according to their work with students who meet the following pre-determined criteria:

- Age group: Grades 1 – 6 (primary school);
- Difficulty domain: reading. The reason for that lies in the fact that the primary school years are the years when normative students make the transition from the stage of acquiring reading to the stage of skilled reading.
- Belonging to a specific cultural-social group: students from Ethiopian and Russian origins and students from the orthodox sector. Indeed there are other specific groups in Israeli society, but the research goal does not apply to them, whether due to permanent use of a language of mutual intelligibility (Literary Arabic and spoken Arabic which are two different languages), or due to social definitions which does not depend on a different culture (such as children from economically deprived backgrounds).

The following table depicts the research population.

Table 1: Research population profile

	The nickname of the tester	Gender	The tester's belonging to a group in the population	Years of experience	Work framework	The framework gives an answer to students belonging to a group in the population					Diagnoses also in a private way beyond the framework
						General	Ethiopian origin	Russian origin	Caucasian origin	Orthodox	
1.	Rinat	F	General	4	Educational institution under boarding school conditions	+	+	+	+		+
2.	Perla	F	General	5	Private institute	+	+	+	+	+	
3.	Yeela	F	General	12	Educational institution under boarding school conditions	+	+	+	+		+
4.	Zippora	F	General	17	Public learning center	+	+	+	+		
5.	Irit	F	General	20	Public learning center	+	+	+	+		+
6.	Roni	F	General	20	Public learning center	+	+	+	+		
7.	Nava	F	General	30	Private institute	+	+	+	+	+	
8.	Sima	F	Russian origin	10	Public learning center	+	+	+	+	+	
9.	Tova	F	Orthodox	4	Privately					+	
10.	Irit	F	Orthodox	5	Private institute	+	+	+	+	+	
11.	Hanan	M	Orthodox	6	Privately	+		+		+	
12.	Shoshana	F	Orthodox	10	Public learning center	+				+	+
13.	Aviva	F	Orthodox	13	Educational institution under boarding school conditions	+	+	+	+		+
14.	Naama	F	Orthodox	18	Public learning center	+				+	+
15.	Hagit	F	Orthodox	20	Public learning center	+				+	+

III.2.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis seeks to attribute meaning, to interpret and to generalize the researched phenomenon (Gibton, 2001). This is done by dividing the text into significance units while identifying repeating categories and themes (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This is a cyclic and dynamic process, which requires creativity and insight, as different

stages may develop simultaneously, and it is possible that one has to go back to an earlier stage.

The data analysis process in this research mostly follows Strauss and Corbin's layout (1990). This is a process of reading the text sentence by sentence, marking similar passages, defining categories, searching for categories, re-reading the text, changing categories, connecting categories – up to the stage of final categories.

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) define this strategy as inductive analysis, whereby the scope of analysis enables the researcher to start to understand the patterns of the researched empiric world (Patton, 1990). At the same time, the data obtained from both research stages will be cross-referenced so as to reach a more profound level of interpretation (Fetterman, 1989).

III.3. The Second Stage

The goal of quantitative research is to reach generalizations which are independent of context and phrase reasons for educational phenomena in a valid and reliable manner. This enables the researcher to determine reasons which will lead to practical meanings for society as a result of the research (Carr, 1994).

In this research, applying the quantitative method in the second stage will allow for the reaffirmation of subjective experiences, which cannot be normally investigated via statistical methods.

III.3.1. Data Collection

Based on the information and analysis of the first, qualitative research stage, hypotheses pertaining to the perceptions of the assessors regarding didactic assessment tools adjusted to culture and lifestyle will be phrased. A closed-ended questionnaire will be devised which will include statements regarding perceptions pertaining to this issue according to the categories defined in the content analysis.

The questionnaire will be administered to a population of assessors according to the defined criteria, but at a higher rate (some 50 questionnaires)

III.3.2. Data Analysis

Data analysis at this research stage is statistical and helps develop a new perception regarding culturally and life-style adjusted flexible assessment tools. Findings were validated by an appropriate experiment structure and the internal validity measure was examined via alpha coefficient.

III.4. Researcher's Role

In both approaches – the qualitative and the quantitative – there is significance to the role of the researcher in the process:

The researcher as an entity that is separated from the entities constituting the research subjects (Smith, 1983; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004), or alternately, the researcher arrives at the research field with personal “luggage” of experience and knowledge, expresses his or her voice, but is aware of the implications and is at a constant state of reflection (Smith, 1983; Short, 1993).

In this research, my occupation as an educational assessor and a teacher of students with learning disabilities, as well as the population with whom I work (“HABAD” – an orthodox Jewish sector), took me to a place where my sensitivity to the issue is enhanced. On the other hand, knowledge and experience constitute an additional advantage both in the data collection stage – by establishing mutual connections with the participants, and in the analysis and interpretation stage. These properties, seemingly, would not enable me to take a purely external stance regarding the issue of the problems of the assessment tools, even in the quantitative stage of the research. Hence, during the research, in the data collection process, and the stage of addressing the quality of the data and their analysis, I was required to give ample attention to the way in which I sound my voice, so as not to damage the research validity.

III.5. Validity

In qualitative research, validity is determined according to the reality as it is perceived by the researched population and the reality attributed to them. Therefore, attention must be paid to making comprehensive interpretations of the researched reality, which will be reaffirmed by the participants (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper and Allen, 1993).

Mishler (1990) claims the main criterion for assessing validity is the extent to which researchers can rely on the terms, the methods and the conclusions of the research as

grounds for their theories and studies. Hence, the researcher's goal is to detail and clarify the data analysis method, the explanations and interpretation methods while maintaining the chain of evidence for each research step. The chain of evidence consists of data items in their various forms' from the raw data stage to the various analysis stages to the final findings and conclusions (Yin, 1981; Huberman and Miles, 1994).

The internal validity of this research is maintained with the adherence to the chain of evidence, both on the level of repeated examinations on the part of the researcher – to check how loyal the researcher is to the data obtained (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) and on the level of the researcher's ability to consult colleagues, sometimes as a part of the research design, by presenting the data (Riesman, 1993; Merriam, 1985; Merrick, 1999).

Accordingly, the chain of evidence in this research was strictly observed: the research tools will be analyzed, interviews – recorded' recorded texts – transcribed, categories developed ending in the development of the close-ended questionnaire, parallel to the documentation of developments and interpretations. At the same time, the final report would include information about the context, relevant interviewee's quotations and over conceptual discussion. Such a description would enable the researcher as well as other readers evaluate the interpretation and see if it is reasonable and if there is a logical connection between the different components.

The part based on the quantitative approach would be evaluated via alpha coefficients of internal consistency.

III.6. Generalizability

A study is judged by its ability to project its results to other contexts and participants (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Data are defined according to a certain context, but a detailed description of the researched environment allows for the use of the findings in other contexts, while examining their applicability (Erlanson, Harris, Skipper and Allen, 1983). According to this approach, the role of proving generalizability is that of those who wish to apply, not the researcher's (Lincoln and Guba, 1989). Nonetheless, the researcher has the obligation to support this process by providing a rich description of the researched case. In this way, those who wish to apply the research

would have enough information to evaluate the suitability of the researched situation and the situation to which they seek to attribute the findings (Firestone, 1993).

As mentioned before, the research report would include details of the data and their analysis, and of the process of interpretation. As well, enhancing the generalizability of the research finding derives from the quantitative part of the research, where the themes (developed via qualitative analysis) would be quantified and a connection between research variables would be established.

III.7. Reliability

Reliability, in its traditional sense means the ability to repeat the research and reach the same results. In other words, reliability is the extent to which a research process yields the same answers every time and everywhere it is conducted (Shkedi, 2003). In qualitative research, the approach that lack of findings' stability can be attributed not only to mistakes, but also to genuine changes in reality. Therefore, the goal is not to demonstrate lack of diversity, but rather to track this diversity (Guba, 1981).

To examine the research reliability, the researcher has to allow for an external examination of the way in which the research was conducted, which is achieved by documenting the research process (Erlanson, Harris, Skipper and Allen, 1993).

As mentioned before, the research process is documented in full with complete sharing of the analysis and interpretation process. This will enable the readers to go through the different research stages and assess its reliability according to their judgment (Shkedi, 2003). Furthermore, throughout the research stages, the researcher will consult the research mentor as well as colleagues in order to get other opinions regarding the data collection process and interpreting the data (Shkedi, 2003).

Reliability is also enhanced via triangulation of the research methods (qualitative and quantitative), and using a variety of data collection tools (documentary analysis, interviews and questionnaires) (Pope and Mays, 2000).

III.8. Ethical Considerations

Ethics is defined as the theory of morale, values and conduct. The moral value of human behavior lies in the guiding rules and the principles underlying it (Shweika, 1997). Ethics in qualitative research engages in the search for principles which ought to define proper qualitative researcher behavior (Dusknick and Sabar Ben-Yehoshua, 2001).

There are a few main types of ethics in qualitative research, marking the researcher's way:

Informed consent – the participant's agreement to participate in the research, after the researcher has provided relevant information about the research, and the participant is made aware of the implications of his or her participation (Birenboim, 1993). Informed consent is central in research ethics and is addressed in the law (dusknick and Sabar Ben-Yehoshua, 2001).

Privacy and anonymity – the researcher has to guarantee confidentiality of the personal information provided by the participants and informants' anonymity (Birenboim, 1993).

Reciprocity and partnership – qualitative research is based on the researcher's ability to create a relationship with the participants, based on trust, openness and reciprocity (Sabar Ben-Yehoshua, 2001). Qualitative research encourages expansions and focusing on the interpersonal relationships between researcher and participant.

Deception – it is forbidden to deceive the participants to reach the research goals (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

Accuracy – using data that is as accurate as possible. Distorting information or using unreliable materials is forbidden and unethical.

IV. Findings

IV.1. Qualitative Findings

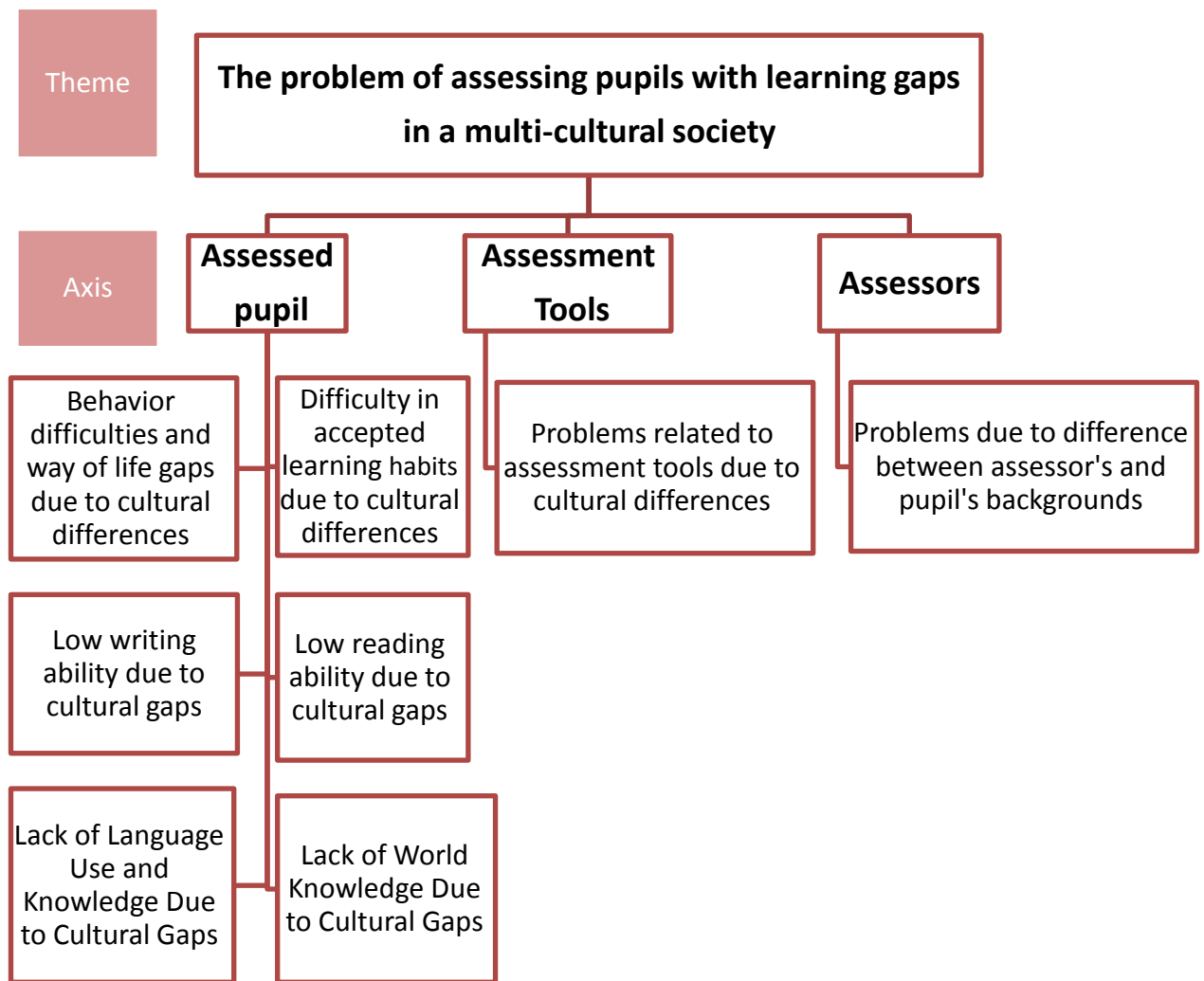
The findings section presents two themes which have emerged from the content analysis of the interviewee's statements.

Theme No. 1: Risk of Bias Factors / Variables in Assessing Students with Educational Gaps in a Multicultural Society

Eight categories were assigned to this theme, according to the following distribution: six categories were assigned to the assessed-student axis, one category to the tool axis, and one to the assessor's axis. Some categories were divided into sub affiliation-categories.

The categories are presented in the figure below:

Figure 3: Theme No. 1 and its Categories

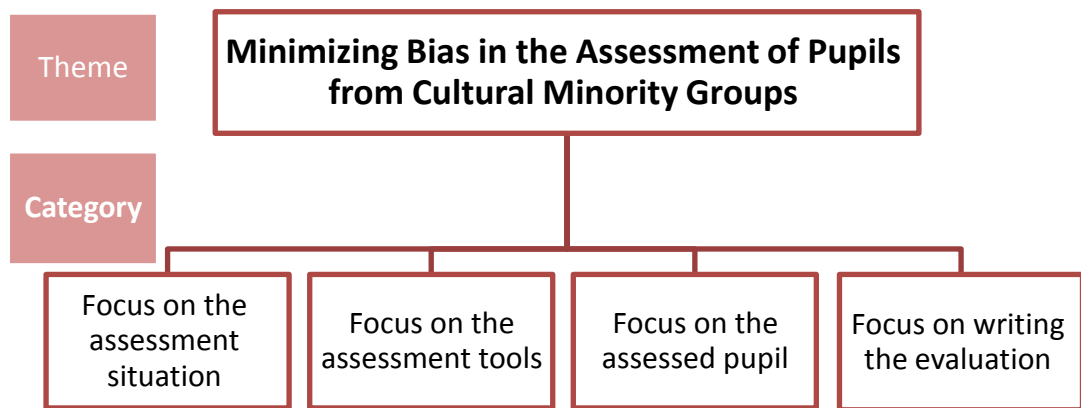


This theme revealed the assessment was perceived as a culture dependent process. This is emphasized by the fact the assessors operate in a multicultural society, and sometimes have to assess minority group students. The assessors pointed to the assessment being unreliable in such situations. Examination of the categories associated with this theme reveals three axes: the assessed student's axis, the assessment tool axis and the assessor axis, and points at cultural gaps constitute a major factor in the bias of identifying the source of difficulties experienced by students with gaps in the education system.

Theme No. 2: Steps Taken to Minimize Bias in the Assessment of Students from Cultural Minority Groups

Four Categories were assigned to this Theme: Focus on an assessment situation, focus on the assessment tools, focus on the assessed student, and focus on writing the evaluation. The Theme and its four categories are presented in the following figure.

Figure 3: Theme No 3 and its categories



This theme reveals that assessors find solutions for minimizing the bias in the educational assessment of minority students, as part of perceiving the goal of assessment and awareness of its being culture-dependent. The assessors have presented methods of solution used by them in the attempt to minimize the bias in educational assessment of minority students. Examination of the categories associated with this theme points at the characteristics of methods of solution used by the assessors according to the focus to which they are attributed: the assessment situation focus, the assessment tools focus, the written report focus and the assessed pupil focus.

IV.2. Quantitative Findings

IV.2.1. Descriptive Statistics

- **Assessors' Evaluation of the Limitations of Assessing Learning problems– The Risk of bias of Assessing Students from Minority Groups**

At the second stage of the study, the assessors were asked to evaluate the level of risk of bias which might damage minority group students due to erroneous assessment. The means and standard deviations are presented in Table 2 in a descending order (from the highest to the lowest).

Presentation of the general picture of risk of bias of assessing learning problems among students from minority groups according to the assessors, two clusters can be identified with an essentially homogeneous distribution:

- Categories (phenomena) that were scored high with scores between 6.45 and 7.3 (meaning the level of risk of bias is high: "Insufficient Language Use and Knowledge Due to Cultural Gaps" which received the highest score Mean - 7.22) followed by "Problems due to difference between assessor's and student's backgrounds" (Mean - 6.92). "Low reading ability due to cultural gaps" (Mean 6.8) and "Problems related to assessment tools due to cultural differences" (Mean - 6.45).
- Categories that were scored low (meaning items are perceived as constituting less risk of bias). This cluster includes two categories which scored very low with similar scores: "Low writing ability due to cultural gaps" which was found to be the lowest risk of bias (Mean - 4.63) and "Difficulty in accepted learning habits due to cultural differences" (Mean - 4.71). These are followed at some gap by the category of "Lack of World Knowledge Due to Cultural Gaps" (Mean 4.92).

These findings pertain to the components of the process of diagnosing learning disabilities: the diagnosed student, the assessor and the assessment tools. Assessors considered both assessment tools and assessors to be factors that could significantly distort the results of minority students' assessment. As for diagnosed student, there were various evaluations based on characteristics of functioning: the minority student's linguistic level (spoken and written language) is considered to constitute a

risk of bias in determining a diagnosis. This means that for a student from a minority group whose development of reading level do not meet the expected level, it is difficult to conduct differential assessment between learning problems resulting from difficulties in cognitive processes and normative steps in acquiring an additional language.

In contrast, the world knowledge which the minority student brings with him or her as well as his or her learning habits are not evaluated as posing difficulties for differential assessment between the learning problem and cultural influence.

An interesting finding is that of the perception of the student's writing ability as the least risk of bias in identifying the source of the gap, since this skill is a component in the function of written language. In other words, assessors believe that unlike reading it is easy to conduct a differential assessment between learning problem and cultural influence when there is a gap in writing in an additional language.

The standard deviations reveal the participants' level of agreement regarding the level of each category's risk of bias. A comparison of the categories reveals that only in three of them is the level of agreement higher than in the others. Two of these categories belong with characteristics which make it easier for assessors to identify the source of the gap, and are not characterized as characteristics that may distort the minority students' assessment: the category of "Learning Habits Difficulty Due to Cultural Differences" (Mean – 1.82) and "Lack of World Knowledge Due to Cultural Gaps" (Mean – 1.94). In the "Insufficient Language Use and Knowledge Due to Cultural Gap" category, the level of agreement was found to be medium (Mean – 2.02), where the category is of the highest level of risk of bias in diagnosing learning problems of minority students. In other words, there is more uniformity in the assessors' perceptions regarding the most extreme characteristics or the least extreme ones.

In contrast, the category "A Low Writing Ability Due to Cultural Gaps" (S.D. 3.15) was found to be extreme (the lowest risk of bias level, which means it was found to be clear in making a diagnosis), but at the same time, the level of the assessors' agreement regarding this perception is very low (S.D. 3.15). This lack of agreement can be related to the assessors' attitude to the whole complex of language skills: speaking, reading and writing. In each of the sub-skills, the level of agreement differs from a medium level (speaking – S.D. 2.02), through a low level of agreement (reading – S.D. 2.82) and a very low level of agreement (writing).

Table 2: The risk of bias of assessing students from minority groups: means and standard deviations

Limitation of Assessing Learning Problems	Mean	S.D
Language gaps due to cultural gaps	7.22	2.02
Problems due to difference between assessor's and student's backgrounds	6.92	2.74
Low reading ability due to cultural gaps	6.80	2.82
Setting assessment norms suited to the culture of the dominant population	6.45	2.46
Lack of world knowledge due to cultural gaps	4.92	1.94
learning habits difficulty due to cultural differences	4.71	1.82
Low writing ability due to cultural gaps	4.63	3.15

- **Assessors' Evaluations of Solutions for the Limitations of Assessing Learning Problems- Comparison of Steps Taken to Minimize Bias in the Assessment of Students from Minority Groups**

To characterize the limitations regarding assessment of learning problems in a multicultural society, assessors were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of solutions for minimizing the problems in assessment. The means and standard deviations are presented in Table 3 in a descending order (from the highest to the lowest).

Presentation of the overall picture of the effectiveness of solutions reveals a relatively homogeneous distribution with similar scores (6.81 – 7.90), where within the range the intensity of evaluation is graded by categories: the "Assessor's Focus on the Assessment Tools" category and the "Assessor's Focus in Writing the Assessment Evaluation" category were evaluated as **highly effective** (Means: 7.9 and 7.72 respectively). "Focus on the Assessed Student" category was evaluated at **medium levels of effectiveness** (Mean 7.33), and the "Focus on the Assessment Situation" category was evaluated as **low in terms of effectiveness** (Mean – 6.81).

Examination of the level of the assessor's agreement regarding the level of effectiveness of solutions reveals a standard deviation range between 1.38 and 1.63 and indicates a medium level of agreement regarding each of the categories.

Table 3: Effectiveness of Solutions for the Limitations of Assessing Learning problems- Comparison of Steps Taken to Minimize Bias in the Assessment – Means and Standard Deviations

Solutions	Mean	S.D
Assessor's focus on the assessment tools	7.90	1.43
Assessor's focus in writing the assessment evaluation	7.72	1.63
Assessor's focus on the assessed student	7.33	1.38
Assessor's focus on the assessment situation	6.81	1.55

IV.3. Hypothesis Testing

IV.3.1. The Assessors' Perceptions of the Risk of Bias in the Educational Assessment of Learning Problems vis-à-vis their Background Variables

Most of the analyses show high similarity among assessments despite the differences among assessors, both in background variables on a personal level and in their work variables. It can be said that these findings indicate a strong assessment of the risk of bias, as although the assessors differ in many parameters, in terms of the assessment of the dependent variable – the limitations of the assessment – they are all quite similar. It appears that all participants were in agreement regarding this issue.

Although the analyses are not significant, meaning there are no significant differences among the assessors, there are several dividing variables in which the differences between the groups is greater and more significant compared to variables for which the difference is small, and show no actual differences between the groups.

In the "Degree" variable a significant difference was found in the assessors' perception of the limitations of the assessment tools: Those with a B.A degree perceive the limitation as less severe (mean 5.03), compared with those with PhD degrees who perceive it as more severe (mean 6.80), with those with M.A degrees evaluating the limitation as medium level (mean 5.83). This indicates a graded perception of the limitations' intensity, ranging from relatively low scores given by assessors with BA degrees, medium scores from MA's, and a relatively high score by assessors with PhD. In addition, we can see that the distribution among those with BA

degrees is high, meaning there are significant differences among the various assessors in the group. Conversely, for women the standard deviation is significantly lower, indicating a very high degree of agreement.

Other significant differences were found regarding the variable "Groups in the population with which the assessors work" While assessors who assess students from only one population group evaluate the limitations of the assessment tools as more severe (mean 6.25), assessors who work with students from different population groups perceive these limitation as less severe. Indeed, when examining the assessors' perceptions of the severity of the limitations it seems there is no difference between assessors working with two or three groups from the target population (mean 5.47), and those working with four different groups (mean 5.56).

Additionally, the variable "Assessors from groups in the population" shows further differences, with assessors of Russian origin evaluating the limitations more severely (mean 6.62) than those belonging to the general population (mean 5.89). However, assessors belonging to the religious population are more lenient in their evaluation of the severity of the limitations in assessments (mean 5.13). Furthermore, it appears that among assessors from the Russian-born population the standard deviation is significantly lower, which indicates a high degree of agreement. However, among the assessors from the religious population the score range is high, meaning there are significant differences among the assessors in this group.

The findings are presented in Table 4:

Table 4: Comparison between assessed populations when assessing problems

Variable	Distribution	No.	Mean	S. D.	Test Value
Gender	Male	4	5.35	2.96	-0.58
	Female	46	5.87	1.57	
Age	30-39	12	5.71	1.52	0.31
	40-49	15	5.61	2.02	
	+50	23	6.03	1.57	
Degree	BA	10	5.03	2.43	2.53
	MA	30	5.83	1.53	
	PhD	8	6.80	0.66	
Seniority	1-5	9	5.65	1.28	0.06
	6-10	23	5.87	1.95	
	+11	18	5.86	1.56	
Assessment Groups	General + Minorities	26	5.57	1.67	0.52
	Minorities only	6	5.82	2.52	
	General population only	17	6.11	1.39	
Reference Group	General population	34	5.89	1.49	1.16
	Russian population	3	6.62	0.73	
	Religious population	10	5.13	2.44	
<u>No. of Assessment Groups</u>	One group	19	6.25	1.42	1.17
	Two to three groups	21	5.47	1.83	
	Four groups and over	9	5.56	1.79	
Type of Employment	Independent	16	5.91	1.81	0.20
	Employee	9	5.43	2.08	
	Employee + independent	20	5.89	1.45	
	Other	5	5.99	1.79	

* P <0.05 ** p <0.01 *** p <0.001

- **The Assessors' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Methods of Solutions for the Risk of Bias in the Educational Assessment of Learning Problems vis-à-vis their Background Variables**

This section presents analyses of the differences among assessors with different characteristics when assessing the level of effectiveness of steps taken to overcome the risk of bias in diagnosing learning problems among minority group students.

The findings show the differences in assessing the extent of the risk of bias of phenomena in the educational assessment of learning problems for minority students, based on the assessors' variables according to the different distributions are presented in Table 5 below. The table presents the results of t tests for independent samples and one-way variance analysis (ANOVA) that were used to test the hypothesis regarding the differences in assessors' assessments using various cross sections.

None of the analyses was significant. Moreover, it can be said that most of the analyses show high similarity among assessments despite the differences among assessors, both in background variables on a personal level and in their work variables. It can be said that these findings indicate a strong assessment of the risk of bias, as although the assessors differ in many parameters, in terms of the assessment of the dependent variable – the limitations of the assessment – they are all quite similar. It appears that all participants were in agreement regarding this issue.

Although the analyses are not significant, meaning there are no significant differences among the assessors, there are several dividing variables in which the differences between the groups is greater and more significant compared to variables for which the difference is small, and show no actual differences between the groups.

In the "place of work" variable a significant difference was found in the assessors' evaluation of the effectiveness of the methods of solution: Those who are not self-employed perceive the methods of solution as less effective (mean 6.95), compared with the rest (those who assess privately, those who are both employed and assess privately, and others) perceive them as more effective (means 7.93, 7.91, and 7.72 respectively). In addition, the standard deviation are low with both the assessors who are employed and those who are self-employed, meaning the level of agreement is

very high. In contrast, other groups of assessors show high standard deviations indicating a great variety of their opinions.

The "Age" variable also shows a significant difference in the assessment of the solution methods: younger assessors perceive the methods of solution as less effective (mean 7.26), while older assessors perceive them to be more effective (mean 7.96). In between, middle-aged assessors evaluated the effectiveness of solutions as medium. This allows us to identify a graded perception of the effectiveness of solutions, ranging from relatively low scores given by younger assessors and respectively higher scores by older assessors. In addition, in the older group the standard deviation is low, meaning the degree of agreement in their evaluations is high. In contrast, the other younger groups show higher standard deviations, indicating a broader range of evaluations of the effectiveness of the methods of solution.

The findings are presented in Table 5

Table 5: Comparison of solutions

Variable	Distribution	No.	Average	S. D.	Test Value
Gender	Male	4	6.76	2.17	-0.96
	Female	46	7.81	1.02	
Age	30-39	12	7.26	1.14	1.50
	40-49	15	7.75	1.39	
	+50	23	7.96	0.94	
Degree	BA	10	7.63	1.63	0.14
	MA	30	7.74	1.00	
	PhD	8	7.92	1.08	
Seniority	1-5	9	7.54	0.91	0.42
	6-10	23	7.65	1.35	
	+11	18	7.92	0.99	
Assessment Groups	Minorities in general +	26	7.90	1.01	1.19
	Only minorities	6	7.13	1.79	
	Only a general	17	7.61	1.08	
Reference Group	General population	34	7.81	1.01	0.70
	Russian population "	3	7.99	0.96	
	Religious population	10	7.34	1.68	
No. of assessment groups	One group	19	7.59	1.04	1.03
	Two to three groups	21	7.59	1.26	

	Four groups and over	9	8.20	1.10	
Type of employment	Independent	16	7.91	1.18	1.82
	Employee	9	6.95	1.68	
	Employee + independent	20	7.93	0.64	
	Other	5	7.72	1.25	

* P <0.05 ** p <0.01 *** p <0.001

V. Conclusions

V.1. The Perceptions of Assessors Regarding the Risks of Bias in Assessment and Solutions to Overcome Them

The present research engaged in the perceptions of Israeli assessors regarding the risks of educational assessment of learning problems among minority students and solutions to overcome them. Israeli assessors pointed to problematic phenomena in assessing these students because of the similarity shown in the discrepancy in their educational performance owing to different cultural backgrounds or learning problems. In their evaluation of the extent of the problems that arise in assessment itself and skills being tested, the assessors emphasized the high risk of error in the differential diagnosis, classifying the student from a different cultural background as having learning problems. They noted the serious implications of a procedure, which may lead to the unjustified referral of students to special education, thus increasing unequal opportunities for these students in society. This has implications not only in school and higher education, but also widens the gaps in social and economic areas.

The assessors' evaluation of the extent of the problematic assessment phenomena is expressed on three axes on which the assessment situation is based: the student axis, the assessor axis and the assessment axis. It can be stated that their evaluation reflects a situation in which an assessor interacts with a student using an assessment tool.

From a student's perspective, the assessors emphasized the seriousness of the gaps in spoken and written language, owing to the high demand for these skills in the assessment process, so that a discrepancy which results from differences in cultural background can lead to an erroneous diagnosis of a learning problem. On the other hand, they regarded graphomotor gaps to be less problematic, since the risk of an erroneous diagnosis is rather low. Gaps in the domains of world knowledge and learning habits were also regarded as less problematic by the assessors, as the assessment process is culturally sensitive, allowing assessors to understand students' behavior and interpret their responses correctly.

The assessors' evaluation of the problematic phenomena was based on the student's skills as tested during the assessment. The assessors indicated that some skills included in the assessment are more problematic than others. Gaps in skills, which are considered to be problematic, are those which affect a minority student's ability to

progress and reach the required level of functioning in the educational framework. However, it appears that the diversity in the characteristics of the work of assessors in a multi-cultural society is reflected in their low degree of agreement regarding these assessments, since each assessor evaluates the extent of the problems in accordance with his/her experience.

From the assessor's perspective, the assessors pointed to the limitations of an assessor coming from a different culture, especially when he/she belongs to the mainstream culture. There is a danger that this may influence an assessor's interpretation of a student's performance on the one hand, and damage his/her confidence in his or her own abilities on the other. This evaluation is based on the evaluation of specific characteristics of an assessor who assesses in a multi-cultural society. The assessors emphasized the importance of an assessor's knowledge, skill and experience and how lacking these factors can lead to an erroneous diagnosis.

From the perspective of the assessment tool, the assessors pointed to the limitations of tests standardized according to norms based on the dominant population, so that a gap in function does not reflect a student's individual abilities, but rather a cultural gap between the minority population and the dominant group. From here, the assessors emphasized that it is problematic to attribute a minority pupil's performance to norms that are not customized for him, thus potentially leading to an erroneous diagnosis of a student as having learning problems.

From examining the perceptions of assessors with regard to the phenomena of the risks in diagnoses of learning problems for students from minority groups, we obtain a picture of an assessment situation that is consistent with standard (static) assessment for checking, classifying and labeling students as having learning problems. The assessors emphasized three aspects of the risks of this type of assessment for students in a multi-cultural society – the student, the assessor, and the assessment tool, with a danger of an incorrect diagnosis when it comes to gaps stemming from cultural differences.

Beyond examining the perception of assessors regarding the risks in assessing learning problems, the present research examined assessors' perceptions regarding methods of solution which minimize the risks of an erroneous differential diagnosis for a student from a minority group who displays gaps in his/her academic

performance. The assessors' evaluations of the effectiveness of the methods of solution reflect the situation of mediated learning, where a student interacts with an assessment tool, with an assessor serving as an intermediary who adjusts stimuli so that the student can engage with it.

Assessors perceived the methods of solution to be more effective when there was greater assessor involvement in the interaction, perhaps one can say when the assessor was more dynamic. Thus, mediation focused on the assessment tool itself was considered the most effective whilst mediation focused on students was less effective and mediation focused on the situation was considered to be the least effective. However, it is important to note that we are not discussing large gaps, so that in general each method of solution was perceived to be effective in minimizing the risk of an incorrect diagnosis for a student from a minority group. Furthermore, it seems that this is a 'shared vision of education', which is expressed as a high level of agreement among assessors in evaluating the degree of effectiveness.

The assessors' attitudes towards the degree of effectiveness of the methods of solution reflect that they perceive them to be a response to the risks of assessment. Regarding each one of the "partners" in the dynamic process (student, assessment tool and assessor), one can see a correlation between the effectiveness of the methods of solution in minimizing risks of an incorrect diagnosis and the quality of the response given to the problematic phenomena in the corresponding dimension

That is, when examining the assessors' perceptions of the effectiveness of the methods of solution in order to overcome the challenges of diagnosing learning problems for students from a minority group, a picture is obtained of a mediated learning situation in which the potential ability of a student who displays gaps in his/her level of functioning is realized. In this situation an assessor has a crucial role as a mediator who adjusts stimuli for students, so that they will be able to understand it and deal with the assessment tools. Evaluating the effectiveness of the methods of solution is in accordance with the response that the assessors give to the corresponding problematic phenomena, in minimizing the risk of incorrect diagnosis.

It is interesting that the evaluation of the levels of challenge on the one hand, and the effectiveness of the solutions on the other hand, is very similar in most of the assessors' evaluations despite differences in their background and work variables. This means that the evaluation is not dependent on the characteristics of the assessor, but on the matter itself. This strengthens the evaluation of the limitations of phenomena in the assessment and the effectiveness of the methods of solution.

However, near statistically significant differences among assessors in a number of dividing variables enable the identification of two types of assessors: (1) static assessors who perceive assessment as a diagnostic tool and focus on disabilities and deficiencies. (2) In contrast, mediating assessors take responsibility for the learning process which leads to a change in students through stimuli and the assessor himself, and act as social agents capable of making a difference. The disparity between the two types of assessors reflects a difference in the self-efficacy of teachers resulting from working in an environment of changing reality: teachers who feel their professional identity is at risk, and develop methods of defense based on what is known and fixed, as opposed to teachers with a coherent professional identity who cope with the changes by taking responsibility for promoting students, through implementation of innovation-based methods.

In other words, it is possible to depict two types of assessor profiles: the static assessor type that refers to those who become confused by diversity in the student population, and the mediator assessor type that refers to those who use environmental changes as a lever for innovative implementation, while taking responsibility for the promotion of students, including those coming from different cultural backgrounds.

V.2. The Culturally Congruent Assessment Model

The perceptions of assessors who assess in a culturally diverse environment regarding the diagnosis of learning problems reflect their professional identity. This identity is a characterization that develops as a dynamic process, which creates a crisis pattern in a situation of difficulty in adapting to changes, and leads to a growth pattern in a situation of empowerment of self-efficacy. Assessors who have difficulty in adapting to a changing environment see themselves as static assessors, who focus on diagnosing disabilities and defects. Their mistaken approach applies developmental

norms across all cultures, thus intensifying the gaps of those from different cultures in society. In contrast, assessors who see themselves as mediators come to realize the potential ability of those from different cultures in society, and they become social agents to close the gaps and promote correct social behavior.

Understanding the source of the static assessors' fixation is vital in a society where the processes reflect the dynamics of a changing reality. Being professionals with a significant social role, who may operate incorrectly, carries a heavy toll in enhancing equality and/or increasing gaps. Repairing the misconception requires an understanding of its source. Thus, understanding that a professional identity is a characterization that is constantly being built and is driven by changes, and that the response of static assessors to changes is expressed as a threat to their professional identity allows us to examine ways to create change. In other words, tools are required which will serve as "scaffolding" for these assessors to deal with the changing environment in a constructive way.

At the same time, awareness of the importance of perceiving assessors' identity as mediators, by identifying the profile of the types whose sense of self-efficacy is strengthened in response to changes, enables us to give them structured tools that will empower their abilities as professionals in a key role in society; In this way, they will provide a genuine response to "others" in society, and promote a more just and enlightened society.

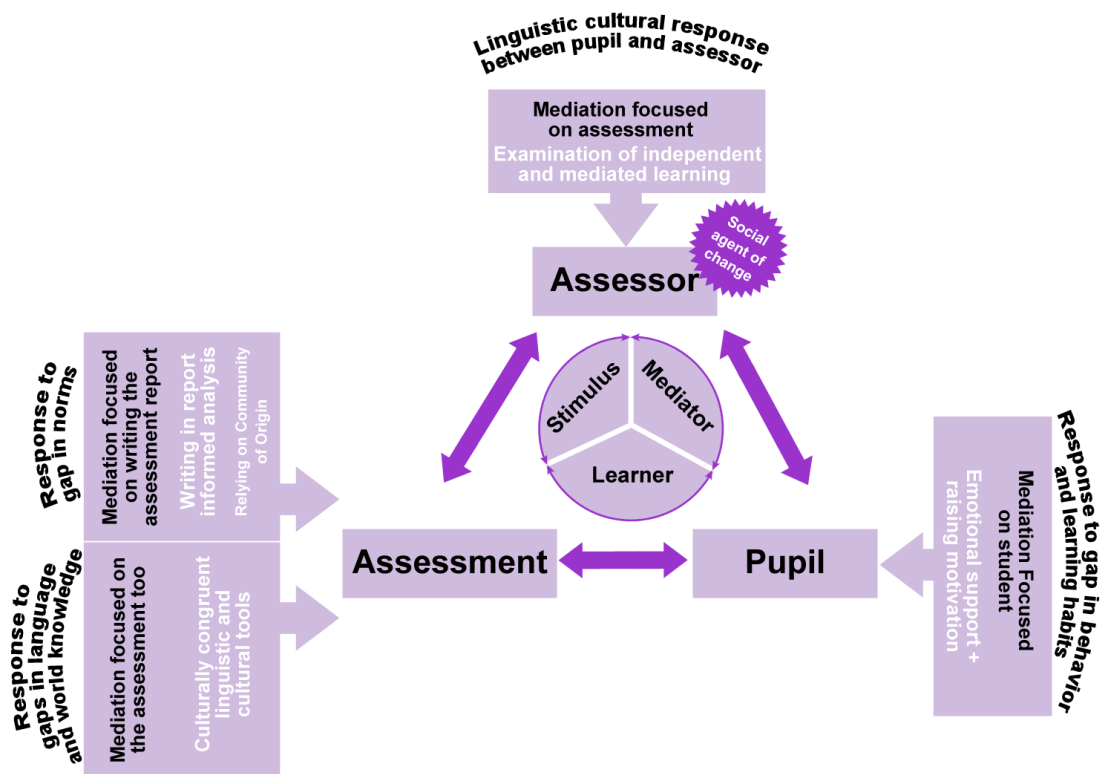
The culturally congruent assessment model opens with these insights. The starting point of the model is a situation of mediated learning in which students, stimuli and mediators are partners who have integrated interaction between them. In culturally congruent assessment, an assessor plays the role of mediator who enables a student to engage with the assessment in a manner that is appropriate for him/her. The suitability is based on principles of mediation, which constitute a response to the constraints of assessment resulting from gaps that students have owing to different cultural backgrounds: mediation principles focused on the assessment situation, the student, and the assessment.

Placing the principles of mediation vis-a-vis the problematic phenomena of assessment emphasizes the importance of the methods of solution and the basis of their structure, whenever the distortion that requires a solution can be understood.

Moreover, presenting the problematic phenomena of assessment sharpens the mistaken process of ignoring students' different cultural backgrounds, and considering their functioning as conforming to the developmental norms of the dominant society.

Out of the three partners in the interaction, the model indicates the crucial role of the assessor. Carrying out an assessment according to these principles is an expression of his/her responsibility for students' progress and for realizing their potential abilities. The significance of the role of the assessor as a mediator is based on Vygotsky's theory on the one hand – the role of intervention in a child's methods of solution, with the goal of advancing him/her beyond his/her current area of proximal development, and also on his successor Feuerstein – the need to organize and change sources of stimuli and provide meaning to mediation based on what message an assessor wants to convey to a learner. Placing the assessor in this light strengthens his/her role in advancing equal opportunities in society.

Figure 1: Culturally congruent Assessment Mode



Thus the research into assessors' perceptions of the risks of bias in the assessment of learning problems for students from minority groups and methods of solution to overcome these risks sharpens the key role of these professionals in a multi-cultural society. The research provides methods of solution based on principles of mediation, which constitute a true answer for minority students, and enables them to discover their abilities beyond the gaps that are displayed due to different cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the research points out the characteristics of assessors who are able to apply these methods. The significance of mediating assessors and understanding the principles of mediation is emphasized, in contrast to the characteristics of assessors who are fixated on methods of assessment for a homogeneous population, thereby intensifying the problematic assessment of students with gaps due to different cultural backgrounds.

V.3. Practical Consequences

The current research has practical consequences in a few areas, the first being applying the principles of mediation in assessing students from minority groups in order to achieve a fair and reliable assessment. In order to do so, i.e. to expose assessors to this method of working, one must include the topic of assessment for minority pupils in training programs for assessors and seminars for practicing assessors. It is particularly important to impart this knowledge and these skills to assessors who are working in places where there is a high percentage of minority groups. Furthermore, training and education programs should emphasize the empowerment of the assessors or future assessors as educational figures who want to realize the potential of potentially excluded members of society, including students from minority groups. It should be noted that therapists in related fields (such as speech therapists, psychologists) can also apply some of these practices.

The results of the research that distinguishes "static assessors" from "mediating assessors" are significant for key personnel in the Ministry of Education. Defining a profile of assessors who tend to make incorrect diagnoses because of difficulties in coping with changes raises a question of the need for guidelines for practicing assessors or, at least, a period of supervised internship after completing a training course. Guidance and support will allow assessors who have difficulty in coping to be identified, and they should be directed to processes of (professional) empowerment

and identity formation. There should be ways of supporting and strengthening their development in this area, such as support groups or therapeutic workshops.

At the same time, key personnel in the Ministry of Education must raise awareness of reasons for excessive referrals of pupils from minority groups to special education programs. The conclusions of this study points to the need to define an acceptable assessment procedure for minority students as a basis for such decisions. Thus, results of assessments that are not conducted according to required criteria cannot be grounds for referral.

Another group for whom the current study has practical consequences is developers of assessment tools or those who translate existing assessment tools. It is important to strengthen their awareness of the problems that arise from developing tools suited only to a dominant population, or translating assessments without relating them to the norms of the population for whom they are used. Assessment tools based on principles of mediation in accordance with a chosen model constitute a fair answer for minority pupils.

It should be noted that the practical consequences have been adapted to the Israeli reality, which is where the research took place. However, the consequences can be implemented in any multicultural society, since cultural diversity is part of the reality of educational frameworks, which have to deal with the learning gaps for students who come from different backgrounds.

V.4. Recommendations for Further Research

The insights gained from this study led to the development of an assessment model adapted to a specific culture. Continued research is important to examine the effectiveness of the model, and this would be done by testing whether the assessment of learning problems among minority students conducted according to the principles of the model indeed yields an improved assessment process.

Beyond establishing the research and developing the direction of correct and reliable assessment of learning problems, it is important to develop two additional directions for further research: that of reducing the gaps among students from minority groups and that of assessors of learning problems.

Regarding under-achieving students from minority groups, it is important to examine the consequences of the model on treatment methods. For example, developing a work program according to the results of a culturally congruent assessment, and examining the influence of the program on reducing the learning gaps for these students. Another possibility is to check the realization of the potential of students from minority groups who are being treated in accordance with the principles of the model.

With regard to the approach of educational assessors of learning problems, there is room for research that will examine the relationship between assessors' perceptions of identity and assessment procedures used for students from minority groups, as well as the effect of strengthening perceptions of identity on improving assessment procedures.

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