**CELF-4: Potential for Bias Against Speakers of African American English**

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**Abstract**

The CELF-4 is skewed to over-identify African American English speaking (AAE) children as language disordered. It is widely used to establish eligibility for language services, and placement in the special education system. Bias is most apparent in assessment of syntactic, semantic and morphological skills, all possible reflections of language environment, rather than language disorder. Disproportionately low SES and parental education levels among African American children are also predictive of lower test scores, while not necessarily indicating language impairment.

**Problems with use of standardized tests in diverse populations**

- Problems with standardized and norm-referenced tests have been identified based on cultural and linguistic diversity. In addition to linguistic and dialectal mismatches, these include content bias, and disproportionate representation in normative samples.
- Test stimuli and procedures are based on white mainstream school practices and standards. They assume exposure to similar concepts, vocabulary and literacy experiences across cultural groups.
- Cultural lack of familiarity with the question-answer format or with the model of providing labels for objects and rehearsing words in the parent-guided interactive manner of the mainstream may also skew results.
- Population samples used to establish norms for standardized tests may reflect the current national balance of cultural and linguistic population groups, however this may not in fact serve any of these groups. As long as a single cut-off score on a single test is applied to all groups, no group can be accurately assessed.
- Laing and Kamhi (2003) suggest that bias might be eliminated by developing assessment instruments for each group. This however does not take into account the diverse nature of diversity — in reality, cultural and linguistically diverse groups are not clearly definable — they are infinitely diverse.
- Broad potential for bias has been found with respect to both socioeconomic level and cultural background. African American children disproportionately reflect low socioeconomic status and fewer years of parental education. Both of these factors have been shown to be reflected in lower standardized test scores, but do not necessarily indicate language impairment (Gh. Kaiser, M. & Henschel, 2008).

**Vocabulary:** Misleading indicator of language disorder on CELF-4

- Vocabulary is strongly influenced by language environment, and cannot reliably indicate language disorder in children from non-mainstream language environments (Huaqing Qi, Kaiser, Milan, & Hancock, 2006).
- Cultural difference has also been found to significantly impact children’s performance on tests of vocabulary (Huaqing Qi, Spicer, & Boyle, 2001; Pelto & Quain, 1997).
- Both the Receptive and Expressive Word Classes subtests of the CELF-4 depend in part upon vocabulary size and content.
- Like the Formulated Sentences subtest, scores on these subtests also contribute to the Core Language Score used to identify language disorder (right box).

**Examples:** (From CELF-4 Receptive and Expressive Word Classes subtests)

- In the ages 5-7 section, words such as *lobster, seahorse, clothesline and garage* might not be familiar to the urban AAE child.
- In sections for ages 8-21, some of the words tested later in the test (on the receptive side) clearly require mastery of higher level vocabulary. Examples include *figurative, affirming, assimilate, and zealous*.
- And on the expressive side, it is equally unlikely that an examinee will be able to correctly describe relations between those unfamiliar words, further impacting his language score.

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