GOING DEEP:
The WJ III and Cross-Battery Assessment

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The arrival of the Woodcock-Johnson Cognitive Abilities Test—Third Edition (WJ-III) has been a breath of fresh air. There has been a great deal written about it in this publication (Special Collections WJ III at **www.updc.org/library/speducator/**). Truly it is a call to examine our assessment practices, refine where needed, and even change if necessary. As we strive to more accurately assess whether a student has a specific learning disability or not, our harried schedules can often leave us with a quick glance at the discrepancy results for our answer, almost forgetting the federal/state definition of a specific learning disability. *A specific learning disability is a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations.*

Assessing the basic psychological processes identified in the WJ-III are critical in understanding a student, for they are directly related to learning. For example, for a student with a disorder in Comprehension-Knowledge, and the teacher implements direct instruction, using analogies or similes to explain a concept, this student may get lost. For a student with a disorder in Fluid Reasoning, he/she will have enormous difficulties trying to figure out how to attack a novel problem and determining the steps that should be taken to logically address it. The student who is taught something one day, but cannot remember it the next, probably has a weakness in the basic psychological process of Long-Term Retrieval. The WJ-III Cognitive has quantified these essential learning processes which has helped clarify the vague concept of a specific learning disability as a "disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes..."

Now that you have spent the hours administering and scoring the WJ-III, entered all of the raw data into the computer and are glancing over the printout, what do you do? The first step is to remember that the data obtained from the WJ-III is either "broad area scores", such as Long-Term

Retrieval or Short-Term Memory, or "narrow area scores", such as the Numbers Reversed subtest or Visual-Auditory Learning subtest. Researchers Dr.'s Flanagan, McGrew and Ortiz have suggested that the proper interpretation of basic psychological processes is to use the broad area scores, and not individual subset (narrow) scores. However, in order to have a valid broad area score the following must be met: 1) there must be at least two different narrow subtests in each broad area and 2) the intra-area scores must be within a reasonable range of each other. If, for example, the two subtests (narrow measures) of Short-Term Memory, and the standard scores recorded were 105 and 69, respectively, then the broad Short-Term Memory score of 87 would not be an accurate assessment of short-term memory, because the two subtest scores are too discrepant. In this case, the examiner should administer another measure, and, interpret the results.

Dr. Flanagan has proposed that all narrow area (subtest) scores span a confidence range of 7 points on either side of the actual standard score and that in order for a broad measure to be valid, the narrow measure scores should overlap. That is to say, if the confidence band of one narrow measure overlaps the confidence band of another measure, then you have a valid broad measure. The contrary then is also true, if the narrow measure confidence bands do not overlap, then you do not have a valid broad measure and further testing is required to determine what the score discrepancy is about. Here is where Dr.'s Flanagan, McGrew and Ortiz throw test allegiance out the window—and propose a "Cross-Battery Assessment." Their proposal for consideration is that in order to make a valid interpretation of a broad psychological process, an examiner may need to administer a subtest or two from another instrument. If the examiner decided to administer the Vocabulary and Information subtests from the WISC and include those results in the WJ III profile, then interpretable data should emerge.

Now that you have interpretable data, how do you determine which scores, if any, demonstrate a weakness in a basic psychological process? Again Dr. Flanagan has suggested that we evaluate broad area scores based on their normative **and** relative status. A normative weakness is any standard score below 85, one standard deviation below the mean. A relative weakness is any broad area score that is more than 15 points below the mean of the seven processing scores. Evaluating scores in this light helps differentiate a disability from a student performing where expected. Let's say that a student has a GIA (General Intellectual Ability) standard score of 125 (superior range) and processing scores ranging from a high of 139 to a low of 101. The average of these seven scores may be 118, revealing a relative weakness in the processing area that recorded a standard score of 101 (since 101 is 17-points below the average of 118), yet that score falls within the average range, failing to indicate a need for specialized instruction, or in other words a disability. Another scenario is a student with a GIA score of 106 and processing scores ranging from 114 to 79. If the mean of all of this student's processing scores is 98, then the score of 79 is both a relative weakness (19-points below the average score), and also a normative weakness (more than one standard deviation below the mean); this certainly meets the definition of, "A disorder in a basic psychological process involved in learning and manifesting itself in an imperfect ability to achieve."

In the years that I have been assessing students for learning disabilities I have always been concerned that the information I received from the Wechsler scales (WISC, WAIS) did not measure many basic psychological processes. It provided excellent information about Comprehension Knowledge, Visual-Spatial Thinking, and Processing Speed; and it also provided a glimpse at Short-Term Memory. However, Long-Term Retrieval, Fluid Reasoning, and Auditory Processing are not measured, and Short-Term Memory is not fully assessed. Initially after learning about Cattell, Horn, and Carrol's theory of intelligence (foundation of the WJ III) and seeing how well it fits the model for identifying speficic learning disabilities, I was determined to administer the WISC and supplement it with WJ III subtests. Now, after experiencing the utility of the WJ-III, I am first administering the WJ-III test and supplementing with other instruments when needed to obtain valid broad processing results. Assessing students using this evaluation method has not only solidified eligibility determination, but has also confirmed parent and teacher concerns related to their observations of a student's academic performance, and allows for implementing educational interventions that are practical and beneficial to the student. ■

Further discussion of cross-battery assessment can be found at: www.iapsych.com/cbhome.htm