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Bridging Policy and Practice: Gaps in Child Psychological Assessment Systems in Sri Lanka

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Abstract: Child mental health evaluation is essential for early detection, intervention, and prevention of psychological difficulties. In Sri Lanka, although child and adolescent mental health is increasingly recognized as a public health priority, the absence of a standardized, culturally sensitive, and comprehensive psychological assessment framework remains a major policy limitation. This study critically examines national and system-level gaps in child psychological assessment through an analysis of policy frameworks, institutional structures, and current practices. Using a qualitative policy analysis approach, the study draws on national policy documents, institutional reports, and recent literature (2021 - 2026). The findings highlight several interconnected challenges, including the lack of a national framework, over-reliance on hospital-based models, weak integration with the education system, shortage of trained professionals, absence of culturally validated tools, fragmented data systems, and limited attention to vulnerable populations. The study proposes a multi-level model integrating school-based assessments, culturally adapted tools, and centralized monitoring mechanisms.

Keywords: Child psychological assessment, policy gaps, school-based mental health, mental health systems, early identification and intervention

1. Introduction

Mental health in children and adolescents has become a worldwide public health concern, and it has been estimated that about 13–20 percent of children and adolescents worldwide have diagnosable mental health disorders (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023). Notably, a considerable percentage of these disorders start to affect individuals prior to the age of 14, but they go unnoticed and untreated, especially in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (Patel et al., 2022). Structural inequalities, limitations in access to services, and socio-economic vulnerabilities also contribute to the increased burden of mental health issues among children in such contexts. As a lower-middle-income nation experiencing rapid socio-economic transition, Sri Lanka faces numerous global challenges as well as country-specific contextual dynamics.

The combination of post-conflict recovery, prolonged economic difficulties, and continuous changes in the education system defines the Sri Lankan context. These factors have led to the augmentation of psychosocial strain in children and adolescents, affecting their emotional, behavioural, and cognitive development. For example, the economic crisis has heightened household stress, and the competitive nature of the academic environment has contributed to rising performance-related anxiety in students. Empirical evidence shows an increase in the rates of depression, anxiety, and behavioural complications among schoolchildren in Sri Lanka, and the systematic identification of these problems and the mechanisms of their prevention is urgently required (Rajapakshe, 2023; Mudunna, 2026). Although these trends are present, many of the affected children still go undetected because there are no established and accessible systems of psychological assessment.

Psychological assessment is one of the foundations of successful mental health care, as it is the cornerstone in identifying mental health issues at an early age, diagnosing mental disorders, planning interventions, and tracking developmental progress. Psychometrically, assessment allows the identification of mental health issues with the help of reliable and valid tools, whereas ecologically, it allows one to understand the child in the context of the wider social and environmental picture (Achenbach and Rescorla, 2021; Tudge et al., 2022). Modern models focus on multi-informant and multi-method designs, which combine information from teachers, parents, and children themselves. These

methods are especially significant in school environments, where the indications of psychological problems tend to appear early.

The world has seen a paradigm shift from clinic-based mental health services to prevention-oriented assessment systems that are community- and school-based. Screening programmes are increasingly viewed as a highly important tool in early identification, since schools are the most suitable location due to their accessibility and constant contact with children (Fazel et al., 2023; Reinke et al., 2022). Through such systems, emotional and behavioural issues are detected early, stigma towards mental health services is reduced, and timely interventions are made. Nevertheless, these systems are yet to be implemented in LMICs because of policy, resource, and infrastructural barriers.

Psychological assessment practices in Sri Lanka are also described as being fragmented, inconsistent, and reactive in nature. Mental health services are mostly centralised in hospital settings, where the assessment process is often carried out only after serious symptoms have developed. This model restricts the chances of early diagnosis and prevention, especially among children in rural and underserved regions (Hettiarachchi, 2021). Moreover, the education system, though considered an important environment in child development, lacks an organised method of integrating psychological assessment into educational practice. School counsellors and teachers tend to rely on their subjective opinions instead of standardised tools, which can lead to under-identification or misidentification of psychological problems.

Whereas Sri Lanka has developed several national policies surrounding child health, education, and wellbeing, these frameworks lack the structure of psychological assessment systems. The current policies are more inclined to focus on overall wellbeing, physical health, and curative care, and focus less on early screening, standardised assessment tools, and integrated service delivery models. This creates a substantial discrepancy between policy intentions and practice, leading to lost chances of early identification and support.

In addition, the absence of culturally tested assessment instruments makes the situation even worse. Most of the psychological tools applied in Sri Lanka have been adopted from Western contexts without proper validation for the local culture and language. This raises questions about their reliability, validity, and suitability in reflecting

the lived experiences of Sri Lankan children. Together with the lack of trained professionals and poor data systems, these issues point to the necessity of a thoroughly developed and contextually grounded approach to psychological assessment.

Based on these shortcomings, it is urgent to take a critical look at the current policy framework and identify gaps that prevent the formation of efficient child psychological assessment systems. To fill these gaps, policy change is necessary, alongside providing assessment practices in schools, building culturally responsive tools, and empowering institutions.

Thus, this paper seeks to critically examine the policy gaps in child psychological assessment at the national level in Sri Lanka, with reference to structural, systemic, and implementation-level challenges. In addition, the study offers an elaborate framework for establishing a standardised, school-based psychological assessment system that is aligned with international best practices and sensitive to local realities. In doing so, this study contributes to policy discussion as well as to practical efforts to enhance child mental health outcomes in Sri Lanka and in other LMICs.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Child Psychological Assessment

There are several theoretical traditions on which child psychological assessment is based. The psychometric theory is one of the fundamental bases of measurement, emphasising the importance of reliability, validity, standardisation, and objectivity (DeVellis and Thorpe, 2022). In this view, psychological assessment instruments must demonstrate internal consistency, construct validity, and cross-cultural applicability to guarantee accurate diagnosis of mental health conditions. Without such rigour, assessment results may lead to misdiagnosis or under-identification of psychological problems.

To supplement psychometric methods, a more comprehensive perspective on child development is offered by ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Tudge et al., 2022), which places the child within the context of various interacting systems such as family, school, and community, allowing development to be considered through the prism of socio-cultural context. This perspective reminds us that psychological evaluation should not focus solely on individual-level characteristics

but should also include environmental factors such as parenting styles, school climate, and socio-economic status. Ecological approaches are especially applicable in the Sri Lankan context, where cultural norms, family structure, and educational expectations have a significant influence on children's behaviour.

Moreover, constructivist theories, especially those of Piaget and Vygotsky, emphasise the active involvement of children in the process of constructing knowledge and meaning. These theories contribute to the adoption of formative and process-oriented assessment methods, in which it is important to understand the thinking processes, social interactions, and learning experiences of the child. The notion of the Zone of Proximal Development developed by Vygotsky underscores the significance of determining not only existing skills but also future progress with the help of a teacher.

Modern models incorporate these theoretical views into multi-method and multi-informant assessment systems that combine quantitative measures with qualitative observations and reports from teachers, parents, and children (Achenbach and Rescorla, 2021). These combined strategies are regarded as best practice in the evaluation of child psychology, especially in school settings.

2.2 Global Trends in Child Psychological Assessment

In recent years, child psychological assessment has changed considerably, moving beyond clinical, diagnosis-based models towards preventive, school-based, and community-oriented approaches. This shift reflects an increased understanding that early detection of mental health issues is essential to successful intervention and improved long-term outcomes (Fazel et al., 2023).

The adoption of school-based mental health screening systems is one of the most notable global trends. Schools are gaining popularity as a non-stigmatising and convenient setting to identify psychological difficulties, as they are involved with children on a regular basis. Empirical research shows that school-based screening can contribute to a significant increase in the rate of early detection and to the reduction of long-term mental health issues (Reinke et al., 2022).

Another significant development is the adoption of multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), which combine assessment and intervention at multiple levels, such as universal screening, targeted intervention for at-risk

students, and intensive intervention for severe cases. This model enables adequate allocation of resources and the provision of children with appropriate levels of care relating to their needs (Sugai and Horner, 2021).

Moreover, culturally responsive assessment practices have received more focus. Studies on cross-cultural psychology point out that cultural settings shape psychological constructs and behavioural manifestations, and that assessment instruments should be tailored and validated for different groups of people (Van de Vijver and Leung, 2021). Technological developments have also played a part in the field, with digital and AI-based assessment tools emerging that allow mass screening and real-time data collection. Nevertheless, their implementation in low- and middle-income nations remains limited due to infrastructural and resource constraints.

Despite these global innovations, the literature consistently notes that low- and middle-income countries face substantial challenges in implementing comprehensive psychological assessment systems, including insufficient resources, an untrained workforce, and weak policy frameworks (Patel et al., 2022).

2.3 Child Mental Health and Assessment in Sri Lanka

The child mental health situation in Sri Lanka reflects both global trends and local issues. According to empirical studies, the prevalence of emotional and behavioural issues in children is rising, including anxiety, depression, and conduct disorders (Rajapakshe, 2023). The causes of these problems are diverse and may include academic stress, family problems, poverty, and adverse experiences.

However, psychological assessment services are limited. Mental health services are highly centralised in cities and tertiary care hospitals, which leads to unequal access for different regions (Hettiarachchi, 2021). Moreover, the conduct of systematic assessment is limited by the lack of specialists such as child psychologists and psychiatrists.

Studies also show that assessment practices in Sri Lanka are highly informal and inconsistent, especially in schools. Educators often make judgements based on observation rather than using standardised tools, which leads to subjective and sometimes biased assessments (Mudunna, 2026). The lack of access to validated instruments and training in psychological assessment only exacerbates this problem.

The lack of culturally adapted assessment instruments is another major problem. Most of the instruments available in Sri Lanka are based on the Western context and do not provide sufficient representation of local cultural norms, linguistic peculiarities, and behavioural expressions (De Silva et al., 2022). This questions the validity and reliability of assessment outcomes and underscores the necessity of contextually adequate tools.

2.4 Policy Context and Gaps

Sri Lanka has made significant efforts to formulate policies on child health and wellbeing, such as the National Health Policy (2016–2025), the National Strategic Plan on Child Health (2018–2025), and early childhood development policies. These frameworks focus on enhancing health service accessibility, wellbeing, and institutional coordination (Ministry of Health, 2023).

Nevertheless, when these policies are critically reviewed, several structural constraints emerge in relation to psychological assessment of children. First, there is no clear emphasis on assessment systems, since the policies are based on general wellbeing and treatment-related services rather than organised assessment methods. Second, there are no nationally standardised tools and operational guidelines, leading to inconsistency in practices across institutions. Third, poor cross-sector integration, especially across health, education, and social services, narrows successful implementation and coordination. Lastly, policies do not show enough focus on preventive practice, with more focus placed on treatment rather than early diagnosis. All these gaps reflect the necessity of more detailed and coordinated policy that addresses psychological assessment as an essential part of child mental health systems.

2.5 Conceptual Gap in Existing Literature

Although the literature on child mental health in Sri Lanka has yielded important information on the topic, there is a notable gap concerning the specific subject of psychological assessment systems and policy frameworks. The majority of research is inclined to prioritise prevalence and the clinical nature of mental health disorders, analysis of service delivery issues, and the emphasis on mental health outcomes. Nonetheless, little focus has been directed at the development of standardised assessment systems, the integration of assessment into education systems, or policy-level analysis of assessment practices.

This is especially significant since psychological assessment lies at the centre of intervention strategy development, resource distribution, and policy-making. In the absence of valid and systematic evaluation systems, it is difficult to determine needs, track progress, and judge the effectiveness of programmes. Such a gap therefore needs to be addressed in order to reinforce research and practice on child mental health.

2.6 Research Gap

The literature suggests that psychological assessment is a vital element of an efficient child mental health system, and that global trends favour school-based, preventive, and culturally responsive strategies. Nonetheless, Sri Lanka still struggles with issues such as a lack of resources, the absence of standardised tools, and ineffective policy frameworks. Although awareness of these concerns has been increasing, no intensive study has been conducted to explore policy gaps in the child psychological assessment system in the Sri Lankan context.

Hence, this paper fills this gap by leveraging a systematic policy analysis, examining structural and implementation-level challenges, and proposing a standardised, school-based assessment framework. In this way, it contributes to academic knowledge as well as to policy development initiatives to enhance child psychological assessment systems.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The proposed study uses a qualitative policy analysis design to critically analyse gaps in national policy on child psychological assessment in Sri Lanka. Qualitative policy analysis is particularly suitable for exploring complex systems where a number of actors, institutions, and contextual dynamics interact to affect policy formulation and execution (Gilson et al., 2022). This design is capable of exploring the content of policy, its assumptions, and implementation dynamics in depth, unlike purely quantitative methods.

This research is informed by the interpretive and critical analytical schools of thought, which aim not merely to describe current policies but also to analyse how effective, coherent, and responsive they are to prevailing demands in child psychological assessment. This is

aligned with modern health and education policy research, which focuses on both the form and substance of policy (Walt and Gilson, 1994; updated applications in Gilson et al., 2022). Moreover, the research is guided by a multi-level analytical framework according to which policy gaps at the policy, system, and practice levels are analysed, enabling a complete picture of how various aspects of the system manifest policy gaps.

3.2 Data Sources and Selection Criteria

In this research, the authors have made use of various secondary information sources, such as national policy documents, peer-reviewed literature, and international reports. The policy documents were chosen based on their relevance to child health, education, and mental health care in Sri Lanka. These include such major national frameworks as the National Health Policy (2016–2025), the National Strategic Plan on Child Health (2018–2025), the National Mental Health Policy, early childhood development policies, and corresponding Ministry of Education circulars and guidelines.

Besides policy documents, recent peer-reviewed literature published between 2021 and 2026 was also considered to ensure that the analysis is grounded in recent trends and evidence. The sources were accessed through large academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, and Google Scholar. The inclusion criteria centred on studies involving child mental health, psychological assessment, and policy, with particular attention to studies related to Sri Lanka or other low- and middle-income countries.

In order to offer a global outlook and comparative standards, reports from international bodies such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the World Bank were also included in the study. These materials provided useful information about international best practices and policy frameworks.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

The form of data collection was a systematic review of documents. The keywords used to find relevant documents and scholarly articles included, but were not limited to, “child psychological assessment Sri Lanka”, “child mental health policy LMIC”, “school-based mental health assessment”, and “policy gaps in mental health systems”. The relevant, credible, and recent documents

were then filtered down from the identified set. Preference was placed on peer-reviewed publications and official policy documents to ensure that the data sources were reliable and valid.

3.4 Data Analysis

The study uses thematic analysis to identify and interpret policy gaps in child psychological assessment. The analysis was carried out in a structured manner using a modified version of Braun and Clarke (2021), as well as policy analysis paradigms. First, the entire set of selected documents was perused carefully to develop familiarity with their content, goals, and scope. Then, relevant data segments were systematically coded and organised in terms of recurring themes connected to assessment systems, policy provisions, and implementation challenges.

The initial codes were then classified into broader thematic categories reflecting various forms of policy gaps. The themes were grouped into three analytic levels: policy level, system level, and practice level. Lastly, the identified themes were interpreted according to theoretical frameworks and international best practices, with particular focus on inconsistencies between policy and practice, structural barriers, and contextual factors. This process facilitated an in-depth and systemic insight into the issues of child psychological assessment in Sri Lanka.

3.4.1 Policy–System–Practice Model

In order to increase analytical rigour, this paper uses the Policy–System–Practice (PSP) framework, which conceptualises the existence of gaps at three interconnected levels. The policy level defines the direction and priorities of psychological assessment systems. Institutional capacity, human resources, and infrastructure are factors at the system level that determine the manner in which such policies are operationalised. At the practice level, policy is implemented in schools, health care, and community settings.

This framework allows the issue to be analysed from a holistic perspective, showing how policy-level constraints are converted into system-level vulnerabilities and practice-level obstacles, thus providing a full picture of how psychological assessment systems work.

3.4.2 Ensuring Trustworthiness and Rigour

A number of strategies were used to enhance the quality and credibility of the study. Credibility was achieved by incorporating various data sources, such as policy documents, empirical studies, and international reports, and by cross-validating findings across sources. Reliability was ensured by transparently documenting the data collection and analysis processes and by applying predefined analytical frameworks.

Confirmability was ensured by basing interpretations on factual evidence rather than subjective assumptions, whereas transferability was facilitated by drawing on global literature that allows comparison with other low- and middle-income contexts. Together, these measures make the findings robust, reliable, and analytically sound.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

This paper relies entirely on secondary data, drawing on published literature and policy documents that are publicly accessible. Consequently, no human subjects were involved, and there was no need for ethical consent. Nevertheless, ethical principles of research were carefully observed throughout the study through proper representation of data, avoidance of misinterpretation, and academic integrity in the use and citation of sources.

3.6 Limitations of the Methodology

Despite its advantages, there are some limitations associated with this methodological approach. The use of secondary data limits access to real-time information on policy implementation and may not represent the complexity of practices on the ground. In addition, policy documents may contain an idealised depiction of systems rather than reality. The lack of primary data, such as interviews with policymakers and practitioners, also restricts contextual insight.

Nevertheless, these limitations are addressed by the inclusion of recent empirical research and various sources of data, which together provide a more extensive and holistic view of the research problem.

3.7 Justification of Methodological Approach

The selected methodological approach is suitable for this study, as it makes it possible to examine policy structures in depth and to capture multi-level system dynamics. It is congruent with international best practice in policy research, especially research aimed at identifying structural gaps and proposing system-level changes. Since the systems of child psychological assessment are complex, this approach offers a sound framework for

analysing both policy intent and the challenges of its implementation.

4. Findings

4.1 Overview of Findings

The critical review of national policy documents, institutional frameworks, and current empirical sources demonstrates that child psychological assessment in Sri Lanka is systemically fragmented, non-standardised, and only weakly integrated across sectors. Such challenges are not confined to single layers within the system but appear at various layers, including policy, institutional capability, and operational practice.

On the whole, the results suggest that psychological assessment practices remain largely reactive, institutionally discontinuous, and non-uniform, rather than being integrated within a more comprehensive, proactive, and coordinated model. To ensure clarity in the analysis, the findings are categorised into four interconnected domains: policy-level gaps, system-level gaps, practice-level gaps, and cultural and contextual gaps. All these areas contribute to the ineffectiveness and inequity of child psychological assessment systems in Sri Lanka.

4.2 Policy-Level Gaps

4.2.1 Absence of a Standardised National Assessment Framework

One of the key findings of this research is that there is no nationally accepted framework for child psychological evaluation. Although different policies recognise the relevance of child wellbeing, they fail to offer concrete direction on how psychological assessment is supposed to take place in an orderly manner. Specifically, there are no nationally approved assessment tools, standardised screening processes, or well-structured assessment procedures.

Consequently, institutions such as schools, hospitals, and child protection agencies adopt different and uncoordinated approaches, resulting in gaps in identification and intervention procedures. The absence of standardisation weakens the comparability of assessment results and restricts the possibility of tracking child mental health trends at the national level.

4.2.2 Limited Emphasis on Preventive and Early Assessment

Another important policy gap is that current frameworks do not focus on preventive and early psychological assessment. Current policies are mostly focused on treatment and rehabilitation, with little attention paid to mechanisms of early detection. Very little exists to suggest that there are any organised policy guidelines or mandates on routine psychological screening procedures, in schools, early identification programmes, or ongoing monitoring of child development processes.

Such a reactive orientation postpones intervention until psychological issues are more complicated, which makes support mechanisms less efficient and increases long-term risks to children. The lack of preventive strategies indicates a serious gap in ensuring that policy frameworks are in line with current practices in child mental health.

4.2.3 Weak Cross-Sector Policy Integration

The findings also highlight the absence of coordinated policy integration across key sectors, namely health, education, and child protection services. Policies typically operate within sectoral boundaries, with little coordination or exchange of information.

For instance, education policies lack specific procedures for the practice of psychological assessment in the classroom, and health policies do not effectively utilise schools as access points for assessment. Similarly, child protection services display low levels of coordination with the two sectors. This fragmentation results in inefficiencies, duplicated efforts, and gaps in service delivery, which are particularly pronounced for children who require multi-sectoral services.

4.3 System-Level Gaps

4.3.1 Over-Reliance on Hospital-Based Assessment Models

At the system level, psychological assessment services are highly concentrated in hospital and clinical settings, reflecting a centralised and specialist-driven system. Although these services are important, their accessibility is limited and this restricts the coverage of assessment systems, especially among children living in rural and underserved regions.

This centralised design contributes to delays in receiving assessment services, geographical barriers, and an overwhelming burden on specialised mental health facilities. This limitation is further compounded by the absence of community- and school-based assessment

systems that could create more opportunities for early diagnosis and intervention.

4.3.2 Shortage of Trained Mental Health Professionals

The current paper reveals a prominent shortage of professionals trained in psychological assessment, including child psychologists, psychiatrists, and school counsellors. This workforce constraint limits the ability to introduce large-scale assessment programmes and restricts services, particularly beyond urban centres.

In addition, the shortage of specialised training in psychological assessment compounds this problem, leaving a discrepancy between policy expectations and the capacity to deliver. This lack of staff competence is a major challenge to the formation of an efficient and sustainable assessment system.

4.3.3 Fragmented and Underdeveloped Data Systems

Another significant system-level gap is the lack of integrated data and monitoring systems for child psychological assessment. At present, no national database is in place to systematically organise assessment outcomes, monitor the prevalence of psychological problems, or determine the effectiveness of treatment.

Current data collection practices are disjointed and discontinuous, with activities usually limited to individual institutions without any national coordination. This absence of credible and integrated information restricts the capacity of policymakers to make evidence-based decisions and to design more targeted and responsive interventions.

4.4 Practice-Level Gaps

4.4.1 Informal and Subjective Assessment Practices

Psychological assessment is often carried out informally and subjectively at the practice level, especially in schools. School staff and teachers tend to make judgements based on their observations rather than on standardised testing instruments. Although these observations may offer some valuable information, the lack of systematic assessment procedures makes identification practices variable across schools, decision-making prone to bias, and consistency lacking.

These constraints raise doubts about the accuracy and authenticity of assessment results, which ultimately affects the accuracy of identification and the success of subsequent interventions.

4.4.2 Lack of Standardised and Validated Tools in Schools

According to the findings, schools do not appear to have access to validated and standardised psychological assessment instruments. Even where tools are available, they are not always utilised or incorporated into routine practices.

In most cases, the available tools have not been adapted to the local environment, are not available in both Sinhala and Tamil, and have not been tested with Sri Lankan populations. These limitations reduce their efficacy and may result in inappropriate or incomplete evaluation, further compromising the credibility of assessment practices.

4.4.3 Limited Training and Professional Competence

The lack of training of teachers and school counsellors is a major challenge to ensuring successful psychological assessment. Most teachers are unfamiliar with the principles of assessment, the administration and interpretation of assessment tools, and clear knowledge of referral procedures.

This professional incompetence contributes to the under-identification of psychological problems and to poor linkages between assessment and intervention. Professional capacity should therefore be enhanced to improve the effectiveness of assessment practices.

4.4.4 Weak Referral and Support Mechanisms

Although psychological problems are sometimes identified, referral pathways have been found to be unclear and ineffective. The lack of coordination between schools and mental health services results in delays in obtaining professional support, loss of continuity, and poor follow-up systems.

These issues underscore the necessity of a more integrated and systematic referral system that supports timely intervention and continuity of care.

4.5 Cultural and Contextual Gaps

4.5.1 Lack of Culturally Validated Assessment Tools

The research shows that there is a heavy dependence on psychological assessment tools developed in the West, which may not be reliable measures within the socio-cultural setting of Sri Lanka. Without adequate cultural adaptation and validation, these tools may fail to capture culturally specific manifestations of behaviour and emotion.

This raises significant issues of cultural validity, interpretive accuracy, and the relevance of assessment outcomes. The development of culturally responsive instruments is therefore important for enhancing the validity and contextual relevance of psychological evaluation.

4.5.2 Language and Contextual Barriers

Sri Lanka has a bilingual situation, which presents another challenge for psychological assessment. A great number of tools have not been successfully translated into Sinhala and Tamil, leading to misunderstanding of assessment items, discrepancies in responses, and a decrease in the reliability of findings. Moreover, family dynamics, discipline, and social expectations are cultural aspects that shape the expression and interpretation of psychological problems. These contextual aspects demonstrate the necessity of assessment methods that are sensitive to linguistic and cultural diversity.

4.6 Summary of Findings

To summarise, the results indicate that child psychological assessment in Sri Lanka is constrained by interrelated gaps at several levels. Policy-level constraints relate to uncoordinated structures, low focus on prevention, and inadequate sectoral integration. System-level challenges include centralised models of service, workforce shortages, and fragmented data systems. Informal assessment techniques, the absence of validated instruments, and inadequate professional training undermine assessment at the practice level. Furthermore, cultural and linguistic factors influence the validity and suitability of assessment practices.

Taken together, these results point to the fact that the challenge is not isolated but systemic in nature, and that multi-level and multi-faceted reforms are necessary to build an efficient, equitable, and contextually appropriate psychological assessment system.

5. Discussion

5.1 Overview of Key Findings

This research found multi-level policy gaps in child psychological assessment in Sri Lanka, occurring at the policy, system, and practice levels. The results indicate that although Sri Lanka has developed a number of policies addressing child health and wellbeing, these frameworks fail to facilitate the formulation of a preventive, standardised, and comprehensive system of

psychological assessment. Rather, existing practice remains highly disjointed, reactive, and reliant on clinical settings. The results can be compared with broader evidence from low- and middle-income countries, where mental health systems tend to be underdeveloped and poorly integrated across sectors (Patel et al., 2022). However, the Sri Lankan context presents particular challenges such as post-conflict recovery, economic instability, and difficulties within the education system, which further increase the necessity of implementing systematic and accessible assessment mechanisms.

5.2 Policy-Level Gaps: Absence of a Coherent Assessment Framework

The most significant gap detected at the policy level is the lack of a nationally standardised framework for child psychological assessment. Although current policies focus on overall wellbeing and service delivery, they do not offer clear and operational guidelines on systematic screening, the application of validated assessment tools, and the integration of assessment practices across sectors. This lack of specificity leads to inconsistencies in implementation and weak accountability mechanisms. In policy analysis terms, this represents a design gap in which policy objectives lack well-defined operational strategies (Gilson et al., 2022).

Moreover, the results have shown that national policy priorities are not fully aligned with new international directions. Although modern mental health models focus on early detection and preventive strategies, Sri Lankan policies remain treatment-based. This suggests that recent developments in child mental health and psychological assessment have not been fully integrated into policy development, which limits the efficiency of current systems (Fazel et al., 2023).

5.3 System-Level Gaps: Structural and Resource Constraints

At the system level, the paper identifies major constraints in institutional capacity, human resources, and infrastructure. The centralised, specialist-led model is not particularly responsive to the needs of mass child mental health, as evidenced by over-reliance on hospital-based services. This model is restrictive, especially for children in rural and underserved communities, slows down the recognition of psychological issues, and imposes an extra burden on specialised services. These results align with global evidence showing that mental health systems in low- and middle-income countries are often constrained

by the lack of resources and insufficient personnel (Patel et al., 2022).

Moreover, the shortage of trained specialists such as child psychologists and counsellors substantially limits the scope of assessment practice. This represents a critical capacity gap, in which policy intentions cannot be efficiently translated into practice owing to inadequate human resources. Another concern is the lack of integrated data systems, which restricts the ability to track trends, measure interventions, and inform policy decisions. In the absence of quality and coordinated data, formulating evidence-based strategies or allocating resources effectively becomes problematic.

5.4 Practice-Level Gaps: Fragmentation and Subjectivity

At the practice level, psychological assessment in Sri Lanka is fragmented and subjective. In most school settings, educators rely more on observational judgement than on standardised assessment instruments, leading to inconsistency in identification and referral processes. From a psychometric point of view, this raises concerns about both the reliability and validity of assessment practices. The lack of uniform tools undermines the validity of assessment outcomes and can result in under-identification or over-identification of psychological problems.

Furthermore, these issues are compounded by the absence of formal training in psychological assessment. School counsellors and teachers may not have the relevant knowledge and skills required to identify, evaluate, and interpret psychological problems, which represents a major gap in professional competence. This limitation reduces the success of early detection efforts and weakens the link between assessment and intervention.

5.5 Cultural and Contextual Challenges in Assessment

The availability of culturally validated assessment tools is one of the major findings of this study. The instruments currently used in Sri Lanka are based on Western contexts and may not align with local cultural norms, values, and expressions of behaviour. This problem can be interpreted in terms of cross-cultural psychology, which emphasises that psychological constructs are rooted in cultural contexts (Van de Vijver and Leung, 2021). Without proper cultural adaptation and validation, assessment tools may produce biased or misleading results.

Within the Sri Lankan setting, child behaviour and its interpretation are heavily influenced by linguistic diversity, particularly the use of Sinhala and Tamil, as well as family structures and social norms. Consequently, the development of culturally responsive and contextually appropriate assessment tools is essential to ensure accurate and meaningful evaluation.

5.6 Policy–Practice Disconnect: Implementation Challenges

Another important finding of the study is the disconnect between policy and practice, whereby existing policies are not effectively translated into implementation. The causes of this gap can be linked to a number of interconnected factors, including the existence of incoherent implementation guidelines, the absence of effective coordination across sectors, and weak monitoring and evaluation systems. In governance terms, this reflects broader problems in policy execution and institutional alignment. Policies can be well-intended, but without proper execution and accountability, their impact is limited.

5.7 Implications for School-Based Assessment Systems

One of the most relevant implications of this study is the necessity to incorporate psychological assessment into the education system, especially through school-based models. Schools offer a unique and practical setting for early identification, since they interact with children on a regular basis. The proposed three-tier model is in line with international best practices, as it includes universal screening, targeted assessment of at-risk groups, and specialised clinical intervention for severe cases. The model promotes an inclusive and preventive approach, reduces dependence on hospital-based services, and encourages timely intervention.

Moreover, the combination of psychological assessment with School-Based Assessment (SBA) systems can also increase the validity of teacher judgement and help to assess student development in a more holistic way. This is particularly relevant in the Sri Lankan context, where SBA already forms an integral part of the education system.

5.8 Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to the literature by incorporating various theoretical perspectives into a single analytical framework. Psychometric theory emphasises the use of standardised and reliable assessment instruments, while

ecological systems theory highlights the effects of environmental and contextual conditions on child development. In addition, policy analysis frameworks provide insights into structural and implementation-level gaps. The synthesis of these approaches enables the study to offer an in-depth understanding of psychological assessment systems that extends beyond traditional clinical practice.

5.9 Practical and Policy Implications

The results have significant implications for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. Policymakers need to develop national guidelines on psychological assessment and emphasise early identification and prevention mechanisms. For the education sector, integrating assessment into school systems and strengthening the training of teachers and counsellors are crucial measures. Researchers should develop culturally relevant assessment measures and conduct longitudinal research to gain a clearer insight into child mental health development.

5.10 Contribution to LMIC Contexts

Although this study is focused on Sri Lanka, the findings have broader implications for other low- and middle-income nations facing similar problems. The identified gaps and the proposed school-based model are important contributions to policy development and system strengthening in similar contexts, as part of the global effort to enhance child mental health systems.

5.11 Summary of Discussion

In conclusion, the current state of child psychological assessment in Sri Lanka is constrained by policy, system, and practice challenges that are interconnected with one another. Policy-level design, system-level capacity, and inconsistencies in practice are all barriers to building a successful assessment system. This necessitates a multi-level and integrated strategy of policy reform, system strengthening, and practice enhancement to address these challenges.

5.12 Contribution to Knowledge

This research makes three major contributions to the discipline. First, it provides a theoretical contribution by combining psychometric, ecological, and policy analysis perspectives into a single framework for understanding psychological assessment systems. Second, it makes a methodological contribution through the use of a multi-level policy analysis approach grounded in qualitative

analysis. Third, it contributes at the policy level by proposing a viable and contextually applicable school-based assessment model for Sri Lanka and other low- and middle-income nations.

6. Implications

6.1 Policy Implications

The findings of this study have considerable implications for national-level policy formulation and reform in Sri Lanka. Most importantly, there is a pressing necessity to develop a unified and comprehensive national system of child psychological assessment. Such a system should explicitly define how standardised assessment tools and procedures are used, offer clear guidelines on screening, identification, and referral processes, and articulate the roles and responsibilities of the various sectors involved. Such a framework would foster uniformity, fairness, and accountability in assessment practices across schools, health-care facilities, and child protection services. Further, it would enable systematic tracking of mental health trends among children and aid evidence-based policymaking.

In addition, policymakers should shift from the dominant reactive and treatment-based approach to a preventive and early intervention model. This requires incorporating psychological assessment into routine child health and education systems, especially through systematic and frequent screening programmes. Timely detection of psychological challenges not only enhances individual development but also reduces the long-term social and economic impact of untreated mental illnesses. As such, a preventive strategy should be adopted in developing a more effective and sustainable mental health system.

A further implication is the importance of enhancing cross-sector integration. Successful psychological assessment systems require cooperation among key sectors, such as the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education, and child protection and social services. Currently, the lack of coordination leads to disjointed service provision and gaps in service delivery. Formalising cooperative structures, including inter-ministerial task forces, integrated referral systems, shared data platforms, and joint planning programmes, can help ensure that children receive holistic and comprehensive care.

In addition, policy reform should focus on capacity building and ensuring proper allocation of resources to

facilitate the adoption of assessment systems. This includes investment in training and professional development of mental health personnel, the expansion of school counselling services, and improved infrastructure to assess, manage, and coordinate services. Even a good policy framework is unlikely to be implemented effectively in the absence of adequate human, financial, and institutional resources.

6.2 Practice Implications

The findings at the practice level suggest that a paradigm shift is necessary in the way psychological assessment is conducted in school and community settings. The significance of psychological assessment in the normal school life of a child is grounded in the rationale and feasibility of implementing early identification and intervention methods because of the central role schools play in children's daily lives. Schools provide a stable and consistent setting in which behavioural and emotional changes can be followed over an extended period, making them a crucial point of entry for systematic assessment.

One implication is the necessity of enhancing teacher capacity with regard to psychological assessment. Teachers are often the first to observe behavioural, emotional, and learning patterns of students, but most of them have not been trained on how to recognise and address psychological issues. Professional development programmes must therefore focus on developing basic competencies in identifying early warning signs, using standardised screening tools, interpreting assessment outcomes, and applying appropriate referral procedures. Strengthening teacher capacity in such areas could greatly support early detection and minimise reliance on subjective and unreliable evaluations.

In addition, it is necessary to implement systems of structured school-based psychological screening. Screening, carried out at key developmental milestones or annually, can aid in the early identification of at-risk students before issues escalate. To make these systems effective, they would need to be underpinned by established tools, operational guidelines, and ethical safeguards that ensure consistency and reliability.

Schools must also have clear referral and support systems in place so that identified students can receive interventions in a timely and appropriate manner. This means creating effective pathways for referring students to skilled mental health professionals, enhancing

cooperation between schools and health-care organisations, and introducing follow-up mechanisms that monitor students' progress. Such formal systems are necessary in order to ensure continuity of care and enhanced effectiveness of interventions.

Lastly, multi-stakeholder engagement should also be encouraged in order to support effective practices of psychological assessment. Cooperation between teachers, parents, school counsellors, and health-care professionals will allow for a more comprehensive understanding of children's needs and facilitate organised intervention activities. This methodology aligns with ecological views of child development, which highlight the impact of various environmental systems on children's wellbeing.

6.3 Research Implications

This paper also outlines several key avenues of research that are important for the future development of child psychological assessment systems in Sri Lanka. The development and validation of culturally responsive psychological assessment tools is one of the key priorities. Owing to the weaknesses of existing Western-based measures, it is necessary to develop instruments that reflect local cultural norms and values, linguistic diversity in Sinhala and Tamil, and properly capture context-specific behavioural manifestations. These instruments will need to be subjected to thorough psychometric analyses to determine their reliability, validity, and contextual suitability.

Another important research implication is that longitudinal studies should be carried out to investigate the effects of child mental health over time. Such studies are able to provide valuable insight into developmental pathways, the efficacy of early interventions, and the long-term effectiveness of assessment systems. Such evidence is vital in guiding policy and practice, as it helps stakeholders identify trends of change and assess the sustainability of interventions.

Moreover, the adoption of school-based assessment models needs to be examined in the future through pilot studies and intervention trials. Such research may help to pinpoint successful practices, implementation challenges, and contextual factors of success. These dynamics are critical to understand in order to scale up assessment systems and ensure their sustainability over time.

In addition, mixed-methods research that combines quantitative data with qualitative information obtained from key stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and policymakers, is also necessary. These methods can provide a deeper picture of assessment practices through the use of both empirical research and contextual experiences.

Lastly, comparative research across low- and middle-income countries can add to international knowledge of child psychological assessment systems. The similarities and differences in contexts allow researchers to identify best practices and develop frameworks that are both general and context-specific, and that can be adapted to fit different settings.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Conclusion Related to Objective 1: Policy Analysis

This paper has shown that the current policy frameworks in Sri Lanka, despite acknowledging the importance of child wellbeing and mental health, lack an adequate basis for effective psychological assessment systems. The absence of a national framework, weak focus on prevention strategies, and ineffective cross-sector integration represent critical policy gaps. Such constraints make it difficult to develop coherent and consistent assessment practices and ultimately reduce the effectiveness of mental health services for children.

7.2 Conclusion Related to Objective 2: System and Practice Gaps

The analysis also shows that the implementation of psychological assessment systems is heavily limited by structural, institutional, and practice-level challenges. Factors such as over-reliance on hospital-based services, a shortage of trained professionals, and inadequate integration of data systems restrict accessibility and effectiveness. Informal and subjective modes of assessment at the practice level, coupled with low levels of training and poor referral systems, decrease the reliability and effectiveness of identification processes. These results point to the necessity of implementing system-wide reforms that address both capacity and implementation.

7.3 Conclusion Related to Objective 3: Early Identification and Intervention

The study emphasises the critical role of improving early identification and intervention by developing psychological assessment systems within schools. By incorporating assessment into learning environments and adopting multi-level systems, early identification can be enhanced and timely assistance can be delivered to children with psychological challenges. These methods not only improve individual outcomes but also lead to broader educational and social benefits.

7.4 Final Concluding Statement

To sum up, this paper offers a critical examination of gaps in policy-, system-, and practice-level aspects of child psychological assessment in Sri Lanka. To address these challenges, a multi-level and coordinated response is required, involving policy frameworks that are aligned with capacity for implementation at the system and practice levels. By creating standardised, culturally responsive, and school-based assessment systems, Sri Lanka can take significant steps in enhancing early identification and intervention, leading ultimately to improved mental health and wellbeing of children.

8. Limitations of the Study

Although this research has notable strengths, several limitations must be considered when interpreting the results. These constraints are mainly associated with data sources, methodology, and the scope of the research.

First, this paper is based solely on secondary sources of information, such as national policy documents, institutional reports, and published literature. Although these sources are of great value for understanding policy frameworks and system-level structures, they may not be able to reflect the complexity of real-world implementation. Policy documents tend to provide idealised representations of systems and may not capture the real-world problems, informal procedures, or contextual differences that can exist on the ground. Consequently, a gap can exist between the policies discussed in this research and the practices of practitioners and stakeholders.

Second, the research does not include primary information from major stakeholders, such as teachers, school counsellors, policymakers, and mental health professionals. The lack of stakeholder perspectives restricts the possibility of understanding interpretation, implementation, and experience of policy practices. For

example, teachers' capacity insights, institutional constraints, and implementation barriers would have helped to view the identified gaps in a more detailed way. The empirical aspect of the findings can be enhanced by the inclusion of qualitative interviews or surveys in future research.

Third, a qualitative policy analysis approach is used in the analysis, which is appropriate for identifying structural and systemic gaps but does not allow the prevalence and extent of these problems to be measured quantitatively. The results thus focus on trends and themes rather than statistical generalizations. Future research can complement this methodology with quantitative studies, including large-scale surveys or analyses of assessment data, to develop a more extensive view of child psychological assessment systems.

Fourth, policy documents are not always updated or relevant to the latest events, especially in the context of a rapidly changing environment, such as the present-day Sri Lankan economic and social arena. This may affect the accuracy of conclusions about the effectiveness and implementation of policies. Regular changes in policies and the use of real-time information would increase the topicality of analysis.

Fifth, the results of this research are limited to Sri Lanka, which has unique socio-cultural, economic, and institutional conditions. Although some of the insights can be extrapolated to other low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), care should be taken when applying the findings to other settings with different policy environments and resources.

Lastly, the paper is more of a policy and system-level analysis, in that it does not explore individual-level psychological outcomes. Consequently, it does not directly determine the effectiveness of current assessment practices in terms of child mental health outcomes. Future studies should consider the connection between policy analysis and outcome-based research to gain a clearer insight into the efficiency of assessment systems.

8.1 Future Research Directions

Based on these limitations, the following suggestions are proposed for future research. First, research involving primary data collection through interviews, focus groups, and surveys would offer more information regarding stakeholder experiences and implementation difficulties. Second, longitudinal research should be conducted in

order to investigate the effects of psychological assessment systems on child development and mental health outcomes over the long term. Third, cross-country and cross-regional research would help to identify best practices and contextual factors that determine successful implementation.

Further studies should also be conducted on the development and validation of culturally relevant psychological assessment instruments, to ensure that they are reliable, valid, and relevant to context. Lastly, mixed-method techniques combining policy analysis with empirical research would be a more effective way of understanding the complexity of child psychological assessment systems.

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