Chapter 7 - Methods of Assessment Options Available to the Multidisciplinary Team

A-What is a comprehensive assessment?

The assessment of a student for a suspected disability should be considered a very serious process. This is a process that will determine the educational direction of a student and thereby change many factors in his/her life. The purpose of a multidisciplinary approach is to make sure that the student is provided with the most comprehensive assessment by a variety of professionals who will evaluate the child on many levels. Once the team has all the paperwork, as previously mentioned, they will begin this process. The team must by law, keep in mind the required components of a comprehensive assessment.

Under Federal law (Amendments to IDEA, 2004), no single procedure is used as the sole criterion for determining an appropriate educational program for a child. Further, the child must be assessed in all areas related to the suspected disability, including where appropriate, health, vision, hearing, social and emotional status, general intelligence, academic performance, communicative status, and motor abilities.

According to Pierangelo & Giuliani, In light of the above mandates, a comprehensive assessment should normally include many the following:

- An individual psychological evaluation including general intelligence, instructional needs, learning strengths and weaknesses, and social emotional dynamics
- A thorough social history based upon interviews with parents and student
- A thorough academic history with interviews or reports from past teachers
- A physical examination including specific assessments that relate to vision, hearing, and health
- A classroom observation of the student in his or her current educational setting
- An appropriate educational evaluation specifically pinpointing the areas of deficit or suspected disability including, but not limited to, educational achievement, academic needs, learning strengths and weaknesses, and vocational assessments
- A functional behavioral assessment to describe the relationship between a skill or performance problem and variables that contribute to its occurrence. The purpose of a functional behavioral assessment is to gather broad and specific information in order to better understand the specific reasons for the student’s problem behavior
- A bilingual assessment for student's with limited English proficiency
- Auditory and visual discrimination tests
- Assessment of classroom performance
- Speech and language evaluations when appropriate
- Physical and/or occupational evaluations when indicated
- Interviewing the student and significant others in his or her life
- Examining school records and past evaluation results
• Using information from checklists completed by parents, teachers, or the student
• Evaluating curriculum requirements and options
• Evaluating the student's type and rate of learning during trial teaching periods
• Evaluating which skills have been and not been mastered, and in what order unmastered
  skills need to be taught
• Collecting ratings on teacher attitude towards students with disabilities, peer acceptance,
  and classroom climate.

B- Norm-referenced testing

The team has a variety of methods of assessment from which to choose when doing a
comprehensive assessment. While these may change from case to case, the available methods
may include:

Norm-Referenced Tests: Norm-referenced tests compare a person's score against the scores of a
group of people who have already taken the same exam, called the "norming group." When you
see scores in the paper which report a school's scores as a percentage -- "the Marshall school
ranked at the 49th percentile" -- or when you see your child's score reported that way -- "Jane
scored at the 63rd percentile" -- the test is usually a norm-referenced tests. Norm-referenced tests
are designed to "rank-order" test takers -- that is, to compare students' scores

All norm-referenced tests include standardized procedures. Standardization refers to structuring
test materials, administration procedures, scoring methods, and techniques for interpreting results
(Venn). Standardized tests have detailed procedures for administration, timing, and scoring, and
interpretation procedures that must be followed precisely to obtain valid and reliable results.
Standardized tests are very much a part of the education scene. Most of us have taken many such
tests in our lifetime. There is a wide variety of standardized tests available to assess different
skill areas. In the field of special education, these include intelligence tests, math, reading,
spelling and writing tests, perceptual tests and many others. The fact is, standardized tests are a
tremendous source of information when assessing a child.

C- Informal Assessment Methods Available to the MDT?

"Informal" is used here to indicate techniques that can easily be incorporated into classroom
routines and learning activities. Informal assessment techniques can be used at anytime without
interfering with instructional time. Their results are indicative of the student's performance on
the skill or subject of interest. Unlike standardized tests, they are not intended to provide a
comparison to a broader group beyond the students in the local project. Several types of informal
assessment methods include:

D-Criterion-Referenced Tests

Criterion-Referenced Tests: Criterion referenced tests (CRTs) are scored according to some
standard, or criterion, that the teacher, school, or test publisher decides represents an acceptable
level of mastery. An example of a criterion- referenced test might be a teacher-made reading test
where there are 20 words to be read and where the teacher has defined an "acceptable level of
mastery" as 16 correct (or 80%). These tests, sometimes called content-referenced tests, are
concerned with the mastery of specific, defined skills; the student’s performance on the test indicates whether or not he or she has mastered those skills. Examples of criterion referenced questions would be:

*Does Mary correctly read the word “family”?
*Does Benjamin do 6th grade math computation problems with 85% accuracy?
*Did John get 90% of the questions correct on the science exam?*

### E-Ecological Assessment: Ecological assessment

This type of assessment involves directly observing and assessing the child in the many environments in which he or she routinely operates. This is usually accomplished by the psychologist, social worker, or special education teacher. The purpose of conducting such an assessment is to evaluate how the different environments influence the student and his or her school performance. Critical questions to ask in an ecological assessment include:

*Is there a difference as to how the child functions in a structured (classroom) versus a non-structured setting (playground)?
*What behavioral characteristics does the child exhibit in a variety of settings?
*What is the child’s social interaction and level of social skills?
*What differences exist in the environments where the student manifests the greatest and the least difficulty?*

According to Overton, when doing an ecological assessment it analyzes a “student’s total learning environment.” A thorough ecological assessment should include the following:

1. interaction between students, teachers, and others in the classroom and in other school environments
2. presentation of materials and ideas
3. selection and use of materials for instruction
4. physical arrangement and environment of the classroom or target setting
5. students’ interactions in other environments

For the professionals doing the Ecological assessment, many variables must be taken into consideration since these factors could affect the observer’s decision on normal versus abnormal behavior. These can include:

1. the culture and beliefs of the child
2. the teacher’s teaching style
3. the way time is used in the classroom
4. academic, behavioral, and social expectations within the learning environment
5. the overall tone of the class (Bigge & Stump).

An ecological assessment involves numerous aspects of the student’s life to get a detailed picture of his or her situation.
F-Curriculum Based Assessment (CBA) and Measurement (CBM)

Direct assessment of academic skills is one alternative that has recently gained in popularity. While there are a number of direct assessment models that exist (Shapiro), they are similar in that they all suggest that assessment needs to be directly tied to instructional curriculum.

Curriculum-based assessment (CBA) is one type of direct evaluation. CBA is defined as a data collection procedure that is a direct measure of a student’s progress within a curriculum, with the data serving as a basis for confirmation of adequate and expected progress as well as determination that effective teaching and learning is occurring (King-Sears).

"Tests" of performance in this case come directly from the curriculum. For example, a child may be asked to read from his or her reading book for one minute. Information about the accuracy and the speed of reading can then be obtained and compared with other students in the class, building, or district. CBA is quick and offers specific information about how a student may differ from his or her peers.

Curriculum Based Measurement: (CBM) is an assessment method which involves timing tasks and then charting performance. CBM is most concerned with fluency. This means that we are looking at the rate at which a student is able to perform a given task. After assessing the speed at which the student performs the task, we then chart performance over time so that we can clearly see on a graph the student’s progress (or decline) from the initial performance to the goal point. An example of curriculum based measurement would be to examine the number of words correctly read from a book in five minutes and then continually charting the student’s progress over the course of the school year with the goal being set at a predetermined number of 150 words.

G-Portfolio Assessment

Perhaps the most important type of assessment for the classroom teacher is the portfolio assessment. According to Paulson, Paulson and Meyer, a portfolio is “a purposeful collection of student works that exhibits the student’s efforts, progress, and achievement in one or more areas.” The collection must include student participation in selecting contents, the criteria for selection, the criteria for judging merit, and evidence of student self-reflection. A portfolio collection contains work samples, permanent products and test results from a variety of instruments and measures.

Batzle (cited in Bigge & Stump) identifies three general types of portfolios:

1. **Working portfolio**-Teacher, student, and parents all contribute to the portfolio. Both works-in-progress and final product pieces are included.
2. **Showcase portfolio**-The portfolio houses only the student’s best work and generally does not include works-in-progress. The student manages the portfolio and decides what to place in it.
3. **Record keeping or teacher portfolio**-The portfolio houses student test papers and work samples maintained by the teacher. It contains work not selected by the student for inclusion in the showcase portfolio.
When portfolios are used in the classroom, they allow teachers to assess student progress more closely over time, aid teachers and parents in communicating about student’s performance, assist in program evaluation efforts, and provide a means through which students can actively participate with their teachers in the assessment process (Hart).

**H-AUTHENTIC/NATURALISTIC/PERFORMANCE-BASED ASSESSMENT**

Another technique that falls under informal assessments is *authentic assessment*. This is a performance based assessment technique that involves the application of knowledge to real life activities, real world settings or a simulation of such a setting using real life, real world activities (Taylor). For example, when an individual is being assessed in the area of artistic ability, typically he or she presents art work and is evaluated according to various criteria; it is not simply the person’s knowledge of art, the materials, artists or the history.

Authentic assessment is sometimes referred to as naturalistic *based assessment or performance based assessment*. The terms can be used interchangeably. In each of these assessment methods there are common characteristics. These include (Herman et al.cited in Bigge & Stump):

- Ask students to perform, create, produce or do something
- Tap higher-level thinking and problem solving skills
- Use tasks that represent meaningful instructional activities
- Invoke real-world applications
- People, not machines, do the scoring, using human judgment
- Require new instructional and assessment roles for teachers

This category of assessment is up and coming, and as such, an agreement on the appropriate terminology to describe this new type of assessment is still to come.

**I-TASK ANALYSIS: TASK ANALYSIS**

Task Analysis is a very detailed process; it involves breaking down a particular task into the basic sequential steps, component parts, or skills necessary to accomplish the task. The degree to which a task is broken down into steps depends upon the student in question; "it is only necessary to break the task down finely enough so that the student can succeed at each step" (Wallace, Larsen, & Elksnin).

There are many advantages for the teacher when using this approach. For one, the process identifies what is necessary for accomplishing a particular task. It also tells the teacher whether or not the student can do the task, which part or skill causes the student to falter, and the order in which skills must be taught to help the student learn to perform the task.

According to Bigge, task analysis is a process that can be used to guide the decisions made regarding:

- What to teach next
• Where students encounter problems when they are attempting but are not able to complete a task
• The steps necessary to complete an entire task
• What adaptations can be made to help the student accomplish a task
• Options for those students for whom learning a task is not a possible goal

J-Outcome-Based Assessment

Outcome-based assessment involves considering, teaching, and evaluating the skills that are important in real-life situations. Learning such skills will result in the student becoming an effective adult. Assessment, from this point of view, starts by identifying what outcomes are desired for the student (e.g., being able to use public transportation). In steps similar to what is used with task analysis, the team then determines what competencies are necessary for the outcomes to take place (e.g., the steps or subskills the student needs to have mastered in order to achieve the outcome desired) and identifies which subskills the student has mastered and which he or she still needs to learn. The instruction that is needed can then be pinpointed and undertaken.

K-Learning Styles Assessment

Learning styles theory is another widely used informal assessment method. It suggests that all students learn better under different variables, called learning styles. This specific learning style, when present, allows them to perform better in the classroom. He or she may learn and problem solve in different ways and that some ways are more natural for them than others. When a student is taken out of their preferred learning style they may perform less well. A learning style assessment, then, would attempt to determine those elements that impact on a child's learning and "ought to be an integral part of the individualized prescriptive process all special education teachers use for instructing pupils" (Berdine & Meyer).

Some of the common elements that may be included here would be:

• the way in which material is typically presented (visually, auditorily, tactiley) in the classroom
• the time of day the material is presented
• the type or method or response i.e. vocal, motoric
• the environmental conditions of the classroom (hot, cold, noisy, light, dark), the child's personality characteristics
• the expectations for success that are held by the child and others, the response the child receives while engaging in the learning process (e.g., praise or criticism)
• the type of thinking the child generally utilizes in solving problems (e.g., trial and error, analyzing).

Identifying the factors that positively impact the child's learning may be very valuable in developing effective intervention strategies.
Concluding Remarks

Try to remember that assessment is a very complex process that needs to be conducted by a multi-disciplinary team of trained professionals and involve both formal and informal methods of collecting information about the student. While the multidisciplinary team may choose to administer a series of tests to the student, by law, assessment must involve much more than standardized tests. Interviews of all key participants in the student's education and observations of student behaviors in the classroom or in other sites should be included as well.

A thorough and comprehensive assessment of a child can greatly enhance his or her educational experience. The assessment process has many steps and needs to be appropriately done. Furthermore, no one individual makes all of the decisions for a child’s classification, it is done by a multidisciplinary team.