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What Should Every Teacher Know About Assessment for Decision-Making Purposes?

The process of assessing students' special educational needs usually begins when a teacher or parent recognizes a need. Because of the complex system that has evolved in delivering special education services, students must be assessed before they are eligible for services. Students who are exceptional also are assessed as part of their daily educational programs, to determine what they already know and to keep track of their progress (Taylor, 2002). Assessment is therefore a part of each phase of the special education process. The decisions that are made using assessment information are listed in *Table 1.1*. Each of the 12 areas are discussed in the following sections.

SCREENING DECISIONS

Screening is the process of collecting data to decide whether more intensive assessment is necessary. School personnel have

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Table 1.1 Decisions Made Using Assessment Information

Screening decisions

Special help or enrichment

Referrals to intervention assistance teams

Intervention assistance

Referrals for psychoeducational evaluation

Exceptionality decisions

Special learning needs

Eligibility or entitlement

Instructional planning

Progress evaluation

Program evaluation

Accountability

neither the time nor the resources to test all students to find if they have special needs; instead they screen them.

Early Screening

Screening takes place at all levels of education. Children are screened before they enter kindergarten or first grade to determine their readiness in language, cognitive and motor development, and in social and emotional functioning. They may also be given vision and hearing tests. Once screened, a child's performance is compared to standards established by those who develop the screening tests. For example, if two-thirds of the children who took the test when it was being developed scored 300 points or better, children who score below 300 may be considered "at risk."

Test developers usually provide cutoff scores to help educators make decisions. These scores, called **norms**, are based on the

performance of those who took the test during its development. Formal statistical standards for normality and abnormality may be used, or standards may be set by a state department of education or school district.

Some students are denied school entrance if they score below a cutoff score on a screening test. (Parents are asked to hold the child back until he or she is ready to enter school.) Sometimes low scores also result in observing and monitoring the child's performance over time.

Later Screening

Screening is used throughout the school years to identify students who need extra help because their performance or progress is markedly different from "normal" or "average." Cutoff scores for this type of screening are based on the average performance of students of similar ages or grade levels. The scores of the norm group are used to decide whether or not more testing is necessary.

Screening may also be accomplished by gathering data on student performance and progress using a set of procedures that are a part of problem-solving models or Response to Intervention models. When students are shown to be performing poorly relative to their peers or when they do not make progress at the same rate as others in their class, then they are considered at risk and specific changes are made in their instructional program.

When a student's score indicates a special need, he or she may be referred for **psychoeducational assessment** (individually administered psychological and educational tests). These tests determine the specific reasons for a student's performance on a screening measure. Usually they are administered by school psychologists or other professionals working for the school district or by service providers (e.g., private clinics, hospitals).

Implicit in screening is the notion that students' difficulties may go unnoticed or worsen if not checked. For example, a student might have a hearing difficulty that interferes with her school performance. Without screening, this difficulty may not

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be recognized and may not be addressed, leading to continued low performance.

DECISIONS TO PROVIDE SPECIAL HELP OR ENRICHMENT

Performance on a screening test is only one basis for the decision to make a referral for intensive assessment and consideration for special placement. Teachers also use classroom tests, daily observations, interviews, and the data they collect as part of continuous progress monitoring to decide whether a student is in need of special assistance. All of these data are part of the assessment process. Providing special assistance does not necessarily mean providing special education services. Rather, as a “first line of defense,” most teachers give special help to students who experience difficulty. This help may be in the form of tutoring, a study buddy, or adaptation of classroom materials and instruction. The help may be **remedial** (designed to correct a deficit or difficulty), **compensatory** (designed to make up for a disability), or **enriching** (designed to enhance classroom activities).

REFERRAL TO AN INTERVENTION ASSISTANCE TEAM

When a student does not make satisfactory progress, even with special help, the teacher may seek assistance from an **intervention assistance team (IAT)**. This team is usually made up of general education teachers who help one another come up with ways to assist students who are having difficulties. The IAT (sometimes called a teacher assistance team, mainstream assistance team, or schoolwide assistance team) works together to solve problems. To determine whether to seek the IAT’s assistance, a teacher collects information as part of routine instruction/assessment, as well as from monitoring the success of his or her own efforts to provide special help.

DECISIONS TO PROVIDE INTERVENTION ASSISTANCE

The interventions developed and put in place by intervention assistance teams are typically called **prereferral interventions** (or intervention assistance) because they occur before formal referral for child study. At the time we wrote this book, prereferral interventions were required in two-thirds of states. The prereferral intervention process has been put in place in states and local school districts in an effort to reduce referrals for testing and prevent overidentification of students for special education services. Prereferral interventions were instituted because many of the difficulties for which students were being referred could be alleviated by adjusting classroom instruction and environments. The purpose of prereferral interventions is twofold:

Alleviate learning difficulties.

Document the techniques that do and do not improve student outcomes.

For example, Pennsylvania has a special project, called the Instructional Support Team Project, to address the misclassification of students as disabled. It is designed to intervene early in students' experiences of difficulty. The members of the IST may gather data through observations, interviews, and/or tests. When they do so, they are engaging in **formal assessment**.

In efforts like the Instructional Support Team Project, team members receive formal training in assessment. The interventions suggested by these teams may involve remediation, compensation, or enrichment.

DECISIONS TO REFER FOR EVALUATION

When a student fails to make satisfactory progress, even with the help of an intervention assistance team, the student may be referred for formal psychoeducational evaluation. Referral usually is a relatively formal process involving the completion of a

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referral form and a formal request for a **child-study team** of professionals to decide whether a student's learning needs are sufficient to require special education services. This team is usually called a child-study team; although in some states and districts within states, these teams go by other names (e.g., IEP team or special education eligibility team). The child-study team typically includes:

General education teachers

Special education teachers

One or more administrators

The student's parent(s)

Related services personnel (school psychologist, nurse, social worker, or counselor)

Child-study teams make two basic kinds of decisions:

1. Exceptionality decisions (whether or not the child is disabled or gifted)
2. Verification of special learning needs

EXCEPTIONALITY DECISIONS

A child-study team makes exceptionality decisions when they determine whether a student meets the criteria for being declared eligible for special education services, as specified by the state in which the student lives. If, for example, the student must have an IQ (intelligence quotient) below 70 as well as deficits in adaptive behavior in order to be identified as having mental retardation, then the child-study team administers tests to see if the student meets the requirements. If the requirements are met, the team officially assigns a disability name. Teams decide whether students are blind, deaf, mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, learning disabled, and so forth. Teams also decide whether students are gifted and talented. They are required to gather assessment information. It is illegal to base exceptionality decisions on a single test.

DECISIONS ABOUT SPECIAL LEARNING NEEDS

Child-study teams also decide whether students have special learning needs. For example, for a student who is blind, they may document that without instruction in braille, the student will experience academic difficulties. The team makes formal statements about the special learning needs of the student and the specific needs that require special education assistance. Study teams rely on the data and documentation they receive from prereferral interventions with individual students. For a more in-depth look at the process IATs use to develop prereferral interventions, see the Bringing Learning to Life sidebar, "Collaborative Intervention Planning."

Bringing Learning to Life: Collaborative Intervention Planning

The intervention assistance team (IAT) at Madison Elementary School meets regularly to develop prereferral interventions for students. The team is comprised of general classroom teachers and the special education resource teacher. They work together to develop interventions for students. In planning interventions, the team members use assessment information gained through observations, student interviews, teacher interviews, and student work. Team members go through the following steps in the collaborative planning process:

1. A teacher or teachers describe the concerns they have for the student. In doing so, they differentiate clearly between the student's actual performance and the kind of performance they want the student to demonstrate.

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2. Team members share information on how instruction currently is planned, managed, delivered, and evaluated for the student. They report the results obtained using *The Functional Assessment of Academic Behavior (FAAB)* (Ysseldyke & Christenson, 2002), a system used to gather information about the student's instructional needs in the context of classroom and home environments.
3. Team members arrive at consensus about a student's instructional needs.
4. Team members then use *FAAB* to describe home support for activities taking place in the student's instructional program.
5. Team members identify ways to involve the student's parent(s) or guardian(s) and invite their assistance.
6. Team members brainstorm ideas and options for the intervention. All ideas are permitted, and their merits and limitations are not discussed.
7. The team selects appropriate intervention(s).
8. Team members share resources and discuss ways they can work together to implement the selected intervention(s).

DECISIONS ABOUT ELIGIBILITY OR ENTITLEMENT

After the child-study team has specified a student's exceptional-ity and special learning needs, the team can declare the student to be *eligible* for (or *entitled to*) special education services. For the student to be eligible, the team must find *both*:

1. Exceptionality
2. Special learning needs

If these two conditions are met, the team will move on to develop an **individualized education plan (IEP)**, a process that requires decisions about instructional planning.

INSTRUCTIONAL PLANNING DECISIONS

General education teachers are able to take a standard curriculum and plan instruction around it. Although curriculums vary from district to district—largely as a function of the values of the particular community and school—they are appropriate for most students at a given age or grade level. However, when students need special help to benefit from a standard curriculum, school personnel must gather data to plan special programs.

Three kinds of decisions are made in instructional planning:

1. Deciding what to teach
2. Deciding how to teach it
3. Communicating realistic expectations

Deciding *what* to teach is a content decision, usually made on the basis of a systematic analysis of the skills that students do and do not have. Scores on tests and other information help teachers decide whether students have specific skills. Teachers also use information gathered from observations and interviews to decide what to teach.

Teachers obtain information about *how* to teach by trying a variety of methods and then monitoring students' progress toward instructional goals.

Teachers communicate realistic expectations by letting students know precisely what they are expected to do (the instructional goals) and the consequences of meeting or not meeting the goals.

PROGRESS EVALUATION DECISIONS

Teachers collect assessment information to decide whether their students are making progress. They may give unit tests, or they

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may have students keep portfolios of their work. They also rely on their observations of individual students' behavior, as well as their more subjective feelings and impressions of each student's work.

The best way to evaluate individual student progress is to measure whether students have mastered a sample of a large number of the skills being taught. This allows teachers to measure the extent to which students have mastered content and to chart their progress toward meeting instructional objectives.

PROGRAM EVALUATION DECISIONS

Educators collect assessment data in order to evaluate specific programs and determine how effective the curriculum is in meeting the goals and objectives of the school. School personnel typically use this information for schoolwide curriculum planning. For example, a school may compare two approaches to teaching in a content area by:

1. Giving tests at the beginning of the year
2. Teaching two comparable groups in two different ways
3. Giving tests at the end of the year

By comparing students' performances before and after, the school is able to evaluate the effectiveness of the two competing approaches.

Large-Scale Program Evaluation

The process of assessing educational programs can be complex if a large number of students is involved and if the criteria for making decisions are written in statistical terms. For example, an evaluation of two instructional programs might involve gathering data from hundreds of students and comparing their performances using statistical tests. Program costs, teacher and student opinions, and the nature of each program's goals and

objectives versus those of the curriculum might be compared to determine which program is more effective. This kind of large-scale evaluation probably would be undertaken by a group of administrators working for a school district.

Teachers' Own Evaluations

Program evaluations can be much less formal. When a teacher wants to know how effective the instructional method is that she is using, she does her own evaluation. For example, recently a teacher wanted to know if having students complete activities in their basal readers was as effective as having them use language experience activities. She compared students' written products using both methods and concluded that their language experience stories were better.

ACCOUNTABILITY DECISIONS

Public schools have come under increasing criticism in the past 20 years. In 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education issued a report, called *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, in which it raised concerns about education and the accomplishments of students. Increasingly, parents want reports on how students are faring at the schools to which they send their children, legislators want to know how schools are performing, and policymakers want data on the educational performance of the nation's youth. School personnel regularly administer tests to students, assess portfolios or performance, and issue reports on the achievement of the students in their schools. This information is then used to determine **accountability**—the extent to which particular schools, administrators, or teachers should be held responsible for students' performance. The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) includes the expectation that students will be assessed every year. School districts must report annually to their respective State Departments of Education, and State Departments of Education must report annually to the U.S. Department of Education on the performance and progress of all of their students.