

## STUDENT ASSESSMENT

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### Introduction

The matter of student assessment can be very confusing, very tedious, and sometimes a venture in futility if one is not certain why the assessment is being performed. According to Salvia & Yssledyke (1995), "Assessment is the process of collecting data for the purpose of making decisions about students" (p. 5). Testing, on the other hand, is defined as "administering a particular set of questions to an individual or group of individuals in order to obtain a score. That score is the end product of testing" (Salvia and Yssledyke, 1995, p. 5). Student assessment, therefore, involves more than just testing an individual to receive a score. It involves examining those scores along with other information in order to develop specific objectives that will assist a student with his education program.

All too often we are guilty of testing students in order to obtain a score that is entered into a grade book for the purpose of recording a grade on a report card. Every year thousands of young people sit for hours taking the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT) or the California Achievement Test (CAT), yet little is done with the information provided by these tests. The scores are used to see how our students compare to students in public schools and/or how our students compare to students in schools within our association. How frequently, though, do we look at these test results to truly determine if there are students who need additional testing in order to identify specific problems?

When one is collecting data in order to develop specific objectives for students, the information gleaned from a standardized achievement test is not sufficient to make accurate decisions. In addition to the standard scores, percentile ranks, and grade level scores that these tests provide, one should take into consideration other information such as cognitive ability levels, skills mastered, deficit skill areas, behavioral information, samples of schoolwork, and medical information. Once this information is collected one can make more accurate decisions and meet the needs of the student more effectively.

This article focuses on the purposes for testing and recommends assessment instruments that can be used in a traditional school setting. The specific tests

mentioned are by no means all the tests that are available. They are, however, the ones more commonly used. Certain tests do require special

training so that the test will be administered correctly and the results interpreted accurately. The investment in providing this training will equip administrators and teachers with valuable insights as to the strengths and weaknesses of students.

### Assessment Instruments

To select the appropriate assessment instrument, you must know your objective. Answering the following questions will help you make these decisions.

#### 1. Is the objective to screen students to determine the existence of a problem?

If the objective is to screen for problems, a group-administered achievement test like the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT) and/or the California Achievement Test (CAT) is best used for this purpose. Granted, this is not the primary purpose of these tests; however, results will reveal areas of strength and weakness. Indications that further testing may be necessary would include below average reading scores (which will affect all areas); below average scores in one or two areas such as math or language; poor scores in study skills and/or organizational skills; and scores that do not accurately reflect the student's performance in the classroom. The cause of the weaknesses will not be evident, but the fact that weaknesses are present indicates a need for further investigation.

Caution needs to be exercised when administering and interpreting the results of certain tests. For students with disabilities, testing practices run the risk of being unfair unless modifications are made in the administration of the tests. A student with reading disabilities or with processing speed problems, for example, may score well below his true ability levels if the test is taken under the same conditions as his nondisabled peers.

## 2. Is the objective to determine student's level of intelligence?

It is extremely important to know the ability levels of a student. A student may do quite well in one or two academic areas, and the assumption is made that the child is capable of performing all tasks at that same level. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Ability levels may differ significantly among academic areas. The following are the four most commonly used tests of general intelligence:

- Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale—IV
- Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery—Tests of Cognitive Abilities
- Slosson Intelligence Test—Revised
- Wechsler Scales
  - Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children—III (WISC—III)
  - Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence (WPPSI)
  - Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS).

The WISC-III has subtests grouped to produce verbal and performance IQ scores. This is noteworthy in that if a significant discrepancy (15 points) exists between the two scores it is highly possible that a specific learning disability exists. For example, if a student's verbal IQ score is 85 and his performance IQ score is 106, a significant discrepancy (21 points) exists between the two scores. In this situation, the student's strengths lie in areas that are nonverbal. The child may be artistic, musically inclined, and may work very well with hands-on projects. He may have great difficulty, however, in the areas of reading, spelling, math, and oral and written expression. Because of the student's strengths in the nonverbal areas, his struggles in the verbal areas may be misconstrued as laziness or apathy, when in reality the student's abilities in those areas are somewhat limited.

In spite of claims made by some test developers who state that no formal training is necessary to administer certain intelligence tests, Salvia and Yssledyke (1995) caution against those claims. These authors maintain that only licensed or certified psychologists who have been specifically trained in the test's administration, scoring, and interpretation should use such tests.

With this caution in mind, it may be necessary to refer a student suspected of having

disabilities to a qualified diagnostician. If one is attempting to determine a student's eligibility for special education, the referral for an evaluation is usually made after several interventions to solve the child's problem have been attempted. When the student does not make satisfactory progress even after receiving special help, a formal assessment performed by a qualified evaluator is recommended.

## 3. Is the objective to determine the student's functioning level?

Any number of achievement tests will provide this information. Group administered, norm-referenced achievement tests such as the two mentioned earlier are probably the more commonly used tests in the typical school environment. Norm-referenced tests compare an individual's performance to the performance of his or her peers. The emphasis is on how well the person compares with his peers in particular areas rather than on the degree to which the content of an area is mastered (Salvia & Yssledyke, 1995). But again, the group administered tests may not accurately reflect true functioning levels of disabled students because of the demands placed on them during the testing process.

The following are the four most commonly used individually administered, norm-referenced achievement tests:

- Wechsler Individual Achievement Test (WIAT)
- Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery—Tests of Achievement
- Peabody Individual Achievement-Revised (PIAT-R)
- Wide Range Achievement Test-3 (WRAT-3)

These tests are appropriate for evaluating students with suspected disabilities. Many of the test items on these instruments are read to the student and the student is able to provide verbal responses, which the evaluator records. This is especially beneficial for a student with a reading disability. It is not necessary for him to struggle with reading through an entire test answering questions that are actually related to his reading ability. Time constraints on group administered achievement tests and subtests are not present on many of the individually administered tests, thus allowing the student more time to respond to the test items. The use of an individually administered, norm-referenced test is also more appropriate when making classification decisions.

The achievement tests listed earlier provide grade levels for multiple subject areas. There are individually administered, norm-referenced tests that provide grade levels as well as diagnostic information for specific subject areas. The Durrell Analysis of Reading Difficulty, the Gray Oral Reading Test–3, and the Woodcock Reading Mastery Tests–Revised provide grade levels and diagnostic information for a variety of reading skills. The Key Math–Revised provides the same for math skills.

An advantage of individually administered tests is the information that is gleaned from the student during the testing process. Rather than relying exclusively on the scores from specific skills tests to assess those skills, the evaluator should also look at qualitative information obtained during testing, such as interest level, attention level, and mood, etc.

**4. Is the objective to determine whether the child has mastered certain skills so that one can plan instruction?**

For evaluation of specific skill mastery, a criterion-referenced test should be used. In this situation the teacher's main concern is not how the student compares with another student but what particular skills the student has mastered. Letter recognition and letter sounds must be mastered before blends and one-to-one correspondence, and number recognition must be mastered before any form of math calculation. Knowing what skills have been mastered is vitally important when it comes to planning instruction for a student. If one is interested in using a reading or math test to plan instruction for a student, the most precise and helpful information will be obtained from a test that is criterion-referenced and individually administered. Tests used for this purpose are the Brigance Diagnostic Comprehensive Inventory of Basic Skills, the Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test, and the Diagnostic Mathematics Inventory/ Mathematics System.

Many of these tests that are useful for students with learning disabilities are also appropriate

for assessing the needs of the mentally disabled. In addition to academic testing, however, adaptive behavior skills must also be assessed. One of the major reasons for assessing adaptive behavior in the schools is that federal regulations require documentation of difficulties in adaptive behavior for the classification of mental retardation.

"Adaptive behavior scales determine a child's ability to function independently in routine, day-to-day life skills such as eating, dressing, social skills, self direction and so on" (Sutton & Sutton, 1997, p. 55). The information collected is not collected from the individual himself but from an interview with a third party. The ideal respondent to interview about a student's adaptive behavior is a person who is familiar with the student, who has seen the student in most contexts, and who will be truthful and objective about how well the student is able to perform the skills being evaluated. Such scales include the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scale and the AAMR Adaptive Behavior Scale–School–Second Revision.

**Conclusion**

To effectively assist a student in his academic program, one must do more than merely test his knowledge. Knowing a student's abilities and how he is functioning according to those abilities will assist us in establishing realistic goals and expectations for the student. Assuming that because a student can perform well in one area, he should be able to perform well in other areas is a disservice to young people who struggle academically. Providing teachers or staff members with appropriate materials and professional training in the area of assessment will enhance the effectiveness of teachers as they deal with disabled and as well as nondisabled students in their classrooms.

**References**

Salvia, J., & Ysseldyke, J. E. (1995). *Assessment*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Sutton, J. P., & Sutton, C. J. (1997). *Strategies for Struggling Learners*. Simpsonville, SC: Exceptional Diagnostics.