

How Your Child May Be Evaluated Without the Use of Tests

Schools use a variety of ways to determine the different academic, social, intellectual, behavioral, and emotional levels of children in school to help resolve issues that may be interfering in their ability to learn. Some of these measures you may be aware of which are called standardized or norm referenced tests like the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, California Tests of Basic Skills, Stanford Achievement Test, Metropolitan Achievement Test. These tests may be given to your child once or twice a year and the results are given in what we call percentiles.

If you imagine a line of 99 children with the first child having the lowest score and the 99th child having the highest score on a test, you would want to know where your child would be on that line. Percentiles go from 1-99 and should not be confused with percent which goes from 0-100. When we talk about percentiles, a percentile of 50 would place your child right in the middle of that line of 99 children. You would then be able to say that 49 children did better and 49 children did worse than your child. If your child scored at the 75th percentile where would he be on that line of 99 children? You would be able to say that 24 children did better but he did better than 74 of the children on that line. Therefore When you see scores in the paper which report a school's scores as a percentage -- "the Lincoln school ranked at the 49th percentile" -- or when you see your child's score reported that way -- "Jamal scored at the 63rd percentile" -- the test is usually a norm referenced standardized test.

Within the past few years there has been a great deal of criticism on schools that only use standardized norm referenced tests to measure children's abilities. Many experts are concerned because these tests do not measure initiative, creativity, imagination, conceptual thinking, curiosity, effort, irony, judgment, commitment, nuance, good will, ethical reflection, or a host of other valuable dispositions and attributes. As a result schools now use a combination of these standardized tests and other what we call non-standardized forms of assessment to find out a child's strengths and weaknesses in order to resolve issues that may be a problem. This ***Parent Teacher Conference Handout*** will explain many of these evaluation tools used by schools.

Ecological Assessment

Ecological assessment basically involves directly observing and assessing the child in the many environments in which he or she routinely operates. The purpose of conducting such an assessment is to probe how the different environments influence the student and his or her school performance. Where does the student manifest difficulties? Are there places where he or she appears to function appropriately? What is expected of the student academically and behaviorally in each type of environment? What differences exist in the environments where the student manifests the greatest and the least difficulty? What implications do these differences have for instructional planning?

Curriculum-Based Assessment

Curriculum-based assessment (CBA) is one type of direct evaluation. "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 peers.

Because the assessment is tied to curriculum content, it allows the teacher to match instruction to a student's current abilities and pinpoints areas where curriculum adaptations or modifications are needed. Unlike many other types of educational assessment, such as intelligence tests, CBA provides information that is immediately relevant to instructional programming. (Berdine & Meyer, 1987, p. 33) CBA also offers information about the accuracy and efficiency (speed) of performance. The latter is often overlooked when assessing a child's performance but is an important piece of information when designing intervention strategies. CBA is also useful in evaluating short-term academic progress.

Portfolio Assessment

Perhaps the most important type of assessment for the classroom teacher is the portfolio assessment. According to Paulson, Paulson and Meyer (1991 p.60), 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. For example, a portfolio of reading might include a student's test scores on teacher made tests including curriculum based assessments, work samples from daily work and homework assignments, error analyses on work and test samples, and the results of an informal reading inventory with miscues noted and analyzed (Overton, 1996, p. 250).

Authentic Assessment

Another technique used to assess classroom performance by the teacher could include the use of 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, 1997). For example, when an individual is being assessed in the area of artistic ability, typically he or she present 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.

Outcome Based Assessment

Outcome-based assessment has been developed, at least in part, to respond to concerns that education, to be meaningful, must be directly related to what educators and parents want the child to have gained in the end. 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.

Task Analysis

Task analysis is very detailed; 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, 1992, p. 14).

Taking this approach to assessment offers several advantages to the teacher. 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 (1990), 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

Task analysis is an approach to assessment that goes far beyond the need to make an eligibility or program placement decision regarding a student. It can become an integral part of classroom planning and instructional decision-making.

Learning Styles Assessment

Learning styles theory suggests that students may learn and problem solve in different ways and that some ways are more natural for them than others. When they are taught or asked to perform in ways that deviate from their natural style, they are thought to learn or 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, 1987, p. 27).

Some of the common elements that may be included here would be the way in which material is typically presented (visually, auditorily, tactilely) in the classroom, 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), and 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.