

Chapter 1

Introduction to Assessment

Although children with disabilities have unique differences, the reality is that they may share many common features and characteristics. In particular, students with disabilities normally require some form of special education services. Before making a determination about special services offered to students with disabilities, a complete and comprehensive evaluation must be done (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2006a).

According to the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (1999), assessment in educational settings serves five primary purposes:

- *Screening and identification:* To screen children and identify those who may be experiencing delays or learning problems
- *Eligibility and diagnosis:* To determine whether a child has a disability and is eligible for special education services and to diagnose the specific nature of the student's problems or disability
- *IEP development and placement:* To provide detailed information so that an individualized education program (IEP) may be developed and appropriate decisions may be made about the child's educational placement
- *Instructional planning:* To develop and plan instruction appropriate to the child's special needs
- *Evaluation:* To evaluate student progress

❖ Defining Assessment

Often special educators mistakenly use the terms *assessment* and *testing* interchangeably. Although these terms may appear to be synonymous, they are not. Testing is just one part of the assessment process (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2006a). Assessment in special education involves gathering information about a student's strengths and needs in all areas of concern (Friend & Bursuck, 2006). A comprehensive assessment completed by school professionals may address any aspect of a student's educational functioning (Huefner, 2000).

❖ Purpose of Assessment

Following a referral for a suspected disability of a child and with written parental or guardian permission, an individual evaluation is conducted. This means that both formal and informal types of assessment will be given. The results of these comprehensive assessment measures will help determine the most practical educational goals and objectives for the student. Furthermore, this assessment will assist, among other information, in determining the least restrictive educational setting (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2006a).

Assessment plays a critical role in the determination of six important decisions (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2006a):

- *Evaluation decisions:* Information collected in the assessment process can provide detailed information on a student's strengths, weaknesses, and overall progress.
- *Diagnostic decisions:* Information collected in the assessment process can provide detailed information on the specific nature of the student's problems or disability.
- *Eligibility decisions:* Information collected in the assessment process can provide detailed information of whether a child is eligible for special education services.
- *IEP decisions:* Information collected in the assessment process can provide detailed information so that an IEP may be developed.
- *Educational placement decisions:* Information collected in the assessment process can provide detailed information so that appropriate decisions may be made about the child's educational placement.
- *Instructional planning decisions:* Information collected in the assessment process is critical in planning instruction appropriate to the child's special social, academic, physical, and management needs.

❖ Classifications Under IDEA 2004

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004), Public Law (P.L.) 108-446, is the federal law that protects those in special education. Under IDEA 2004, there are thirteen separate categories of disabilities. Children are eligible to receive special education services and supports if they meet the eligibility requirements for at least one of the disabling conditions listed in P.L. 108-446 and if it is determined that they are in need of special education services (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2006a).

IDEA 2004 states that the purpose of IDEA is:

- (1) (A) to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living;
- (B) to ensure that the rights of children with disabilities and parents of such children are protected; and
- (C) to assist States, localities, educational service agencies, and Federal agencies to provide for the education of all children with disabilities;
- (2) to assist States in the implementation of a statewide, comprehensive, coordinated, multidisciplinary, interagency system of early intervention services for infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families;
- (3) to ensure that educators and parents have the necessary tools to improve educational results for children with disabilities by supporting system improvement activities; coordinated research and personnel preparation; coordinated technical assistance, dissemination, and support; and technology development and media services; and
- (4) to assess, and ensure the effectiveness of, efforts to educate children with disabilities . . .

Under IDEA 2004, C.F.R. Section 300.8, the term *child with a disability* means a child evaluated in accordance with Sections 300.304–300.311 as having mental retardation, a hearing impairment including deafness, a speech or language impairment, a visual impairment including blindness, serious emotional disturbance (hereafter referred to as emotional disturbance), an orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, an other health impairment, a specific learning disability, deaf-blindness, or multiple disabilities, and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services.

The definitions of disabling conditions under IDEA 2004 are listed below:

- *Autism*: A developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age three, that adversely affects a child's educational performance. Other characteristics often associated with autism are engagement in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, resistance to environmental change or change in daily routines, and unusual responses to sensory experiences. The term does not apply if a child's educational performance is adversely affected because the child has an emotional disturbance.
- *Deafness*: A hearing impairment that is so severe that the child is impaired in processing linguistic information through hearing, with or without amplification, that adversely affects a child's educational performance.
- *Deaf-Blindness*: Concomitant hearing and visual impairments, the combination of which causes such severe communication and other developmental and educational problems that they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for children with deafness or children with blindness.
- *Emotional Disturbance*: A condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance: (A) An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors. (B) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers. (C) Inappropriate types of behaviors or feelings under normal circumstances. (D) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression. (E) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems. (ii) The term includes schizophrenia. The term does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance.
- *Hearing Impairment*: An impairment in hearing, whether permanent or fluctuating, that adversely affects a child's performance but that is not included under the definition of deafness in this section.
- *Mental Retardation*: Significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period, that adversely affects a child's performance.
- *Multiple Disabilities*: Concomitant impairments (such as mental retardation–blindness, mental retardation–orthopedic impairment, etc.) the combination of which causes such severe educational problems that the problems cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for one of the impairments. The term does not include deaf-blindness.
- *Orthopedic Impairment*: A severe orthopedic impairment that adversely affects a child's educational performance. The term includes impairments caused by congenital anomaly (e.g., club foot, absence of some member), impairments caused by disease (e.g., poliomyelitis, bone tuberculosis), and impairments from other causes (e.g., cerebral palsy, amputations, and fractures or burns that cause contractures).
- *Other Health Impairment*: Having limited strength, vitality, or alertness due to chronic or acute health problems, such as a heart condition, tuberculosis, rheumatic fever,

nephritis, asthma, sickle cell anemia, hemophilia, epilepsy, lead poisoning, leukemia, or diabetes, that adversely affects a child's educational performance.

- *Specific Learning Disability*: A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. Such term includes conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. Such term does not include such learning problem that is primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities; of mental retardation; of emotional disturbance; or of environmental, cultural or economic disadvantage.

Under IDEA 2004, when determining whether a child has a specific disability, a local education agency shall not be required to take into consideration whether a child has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability.

- *Speech or Language Impairment*: A communication disorder such as stuttering, impaired articulation, a language impairment, or a voice impairment that adversely affects a child's educational performance.
- *Traumatic Brain Injury*: An acquired injury to the brain caused by an external physical force, resulting in total or partial functional disability or psychosocial impairment or both, and that adversely affects a child's educational performance. The term applies to open or closed head injuries resulting in impairments in one or more areas, such as cognition; language; memory; attention; reasoning; abstract thinking; judgment; problem solving; sensory, perceptual, and motor abilities; psychosocial behavior; physical functions; information processing; and speech. The term does not apply to brain injuries that are congenital or degenerative or to brain injuries induced by birth trauma.
- *Visual Impairment*: An impairment in vision that, even with correction, adversely affects a child's educational performance. The term includes both partial and sight blindness.

❖ How Students Are Identified for Assessment

There are normally three ways in which a student may be identified for assessment of a suspected disability (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2006a):

1. School personnel may suspect the presence of a learning or behavior problem and ask the student's parents for permission to evaluate the student individually. This may have resulted from a student's scoring far below his or her peers on some type of screening measure and thereby alerting the school to the possibility of a problem.
2. The child's teacher or teachers may observe serious symptoms in academic, social, emotional, or physical areas in the classroom that create concern.
3. The child's parents may notice or suspect symptoms that may need attention and bring their concerns to the attention of the school personnel.

❖ General Evaluation Provisions Under IDEA 2004

Under IDEA 2004, all evaluations must abide by the following requirements:

1. A child must be evaluated in all areas related to the suspected disability, including, if appropriate, health, vision, hearing, social and emotional functioning, general intelligence, academic performance, communicative status, and motor abilities. In addition, the evaluation must be sufficiently comprehensive to identify all of the child's special education and related services needs, whether or not they are commonly linked to the disability category in which the child is classified.

2. No single assessment procedure may be used as the sole criterion for determining whether a child has a disability and for determining an appropriate educational program for the child.
3. Evaluation materials must be technically sound and may assess the relative contribution of cognitive and behavioral factors, in addition to physical and developmental factors.
4. Evaluation materials and procedures must be appropriate to determine the nature and extent of a learning impairment and directly assist in identifying areas of educational need.
5. Evaluation materials and procedures must be validated for the specific purpose for which they are to be used.
6. Evaluation of a child who may have limited English proficiency should assess the child's proficiency in English as well as the child's native language to distinguish language proficiency from disability needs.
7. Evaluation materials and procedures used to assess a child with limited English proficiency must be selected and administered to ensure they measure a potential disability and need for special education rather than English language skills.
8. Evaluation materials and procedures must be provided in the language that most likely will yield accurate information on what the child knows and can do academically and functionally.

The native language of the child is that language normally used by the child in the home and learning environment.

For individuals with deafness, blindness, or no written language, it is the mode of communication normally used, such as sign language, Braille, or oral communication.

A determination of "not feasible" is made when after reasonable effort, an individual cannot be located who is capable and willing at a reasonable cost to communicate in the child's primary language or communicate in the child's most frequent mode of communication.

If a district determines that it is not feasible to conduct the evaluation in the child's primary language or other mode of communication, it must document its reasons and describe the alternatives used. Even when it is not feasible to assess the child in his or her native language or mode of communication, the group of qualified professionals and a parent of the child must still obtain and consider accurate and reliable information that will enable them to make an informed decision as to whether the child has a disability and the effects of the disability on the child's educational achievement.

9. Evaluation materials and procedures must be administered in adherence with the developer's instructions and by appropriately trained personnel. If an assessment is not conducted under standard conditions (pertaining, for example, to the qualifications of the test administrator or the method of test administration), this must be noted in the evaluation report.
10. All materials and procedures used for assessing and identifying children with disabilities must be selected and administered so as not to be biased in terms of race, gender, culture, or socioeconomic status.
11. Tests must be selected and administered so as best to ensure that when a test is administered to a child with impaired sensory, manual, or speaking skills, the test results accurately reflect the child's aptitude or achievement level, or whatever other factors the test purports to measure, rather than reflecting the child's impaired sensory, manual, or speaking skills (unless those skills are the factors that the test purports to measure).
12. Tests and other evaluation materials include those tailored to assess specific areas of educational need (including current classroom-based assessments and observations of

the teacher and related service providers, physical condition, social or cultural background, information provided by the parents, and adaptive behavior), and not merely those that are designed to provide a single general intelligence quotient.

13. Information obtained from all of these sources, including evaluations and information provided by the parents, must be documented and carefully considered.
14. A child shall not be determined to have a disability if the determinant factor is a lack of explicit and systematic instruction in essential components of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency, including oral reading skills, and reading comprehension strategies), a lack of instruction in math, or limited English proficiency.

❖ **Individuals Involved in the Assessment Process**

Under IDEA 2004, an evaluation of a child with a suspected disability must be made by a multidisciplinary team or groups of persons including at least one teacher or specialist with knowledge in the area of the suspected disability. These professionals must use a variety of assessment tools and strategies to gather relevant functional and developmental information, including information provided by the parent, that will assist in determining whether a child has a disability as defined under federal law.

The members of the multidisciplinary team often include the following:

- Parents
- At least one regular education teacher of the child if he or she is, or may be, participating in the regular education environment
- At least one of the child's special education teachers or special education providers
- A representative of the public agency who is qualified to provide or supervise the provision of special education and who knows about the general curriculum (that is, the curriculum used by nondisabled students) and about available resources
- An individual who can interpret the instructional implications of the evaluation results
- Other individuals (invited at the parents' discretion or the discretion of the public agency) who have special knowledge or expertise regarding the child
- Representatives from any other agency that may be responsible for paying for or providing transition services (if the child is sixteen years old or, if appropriate, younger and will be planning for life after high school)
- The child, if appropriate (if transition services needs or transition services will be considered, the student must be invited to be part of the evaluation group)
- Other qualified professionals, as appropriate

❖ **Components of a Comprehensive Assessment**

An evaluation for special education should always be conducted on an individual basis. When completed, it is a comprehensive assessment of the child's abilities. According to the law, the comprehensive assessment on any child with a suspected disability must include assessment on every possible area of suspicion. This includes, where appropriate, evaluating a child's:

- Health
- Vision
- Hearing
- Social and emotional status
- General intelligence

- Academic performance
- Communicative status and motor abilities

The evaluation must be sufficiently comprehensive to identify all of the child's special education and related services needs, whether or not commonly linked to the disability category in which the child has been classified. Assessment tools and strategies that provide relevant information that directly assists persons in determining the educational needs of the child must be provided (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2006a).

❖ Conclusion

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. Special educators have a professional responsibility to understand the laws, steps, and various assessment measures and procedures used in the special education process (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2006a).

