

SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY EDUCATORS COUNCIL OF NEW YORK STATE and the
NEW YORK ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

POSITION PAPER

FLEXIBLE ASSESSMENT

Committee:

Carol S. Lidz, Psy.D. (Chair) (Touro College)

Grace Eisenstat, M.S. (Brooklyn College)

Nancy Evangelista, Ph.D. (Alfred University)

Florence Rubinson, Ph.D. (Brooklyn College)

John Stokes, Ph.D. (Pace University)

Lynne Thies, Ph.D. (President, NYASP)

Gilbert Trachtman, Ph.D. (New York University)

The School Psychology Educators Council of New York State (SPECNYS) and the New York Association of School Psychologists (NYASP) have collaborated to develop this position paper on the topic of flexible assessment. Mandates for flexible approaches to assessment increasingly appear in federal, state, and local standards across the nation. As school psychology trainers and practitioners, we wish to note the historical advocacy for such approaches within our profession, continue our support for what we have long considered a best practices in approaches to assessment, and, most importantly, detail our interpretations and recommendations regarding flexible assessment practices within the field of School Psychology. The organization of this paper begins with background discussion of the issue of flexible assessment, and moves to a statement guiding best assessment practices, progressing toward a stage model of levels of decision making, with implications for their assessment responses. Our intent is to provide guidelines for school psychologists to facilitate the realization of flexible assessment practices and to inform consumers of services provided by school psychologists about the range of best assessment practices available from the profession.

Background

As early as 1986 (Ramirez & Gloekler, estimated date), a committee of ten New York State school psychologists drafted their recommendations for what became official guidelines of the State Education Department concerning practices related to the triennial evaluation of students with handicapping conditions. The introduction to this document states that "The selection of tests must be individualized for each child. There is no predetermined battery of tests appropriate for all children (p. 4).

In response to federal special education mandates for increased relevance of assessment and increased sensitivity to individual needs and experiences of students, the New York State Department of Education issued memos addressing procedures for the implementation of psychological evaluations within the State. For example, in a 1991 memo (revised in 1995) Thomas B. Neveline wrote that "An ecological process is recommended for gathering information for the assessment. This process should include a variety of data collection methodologies and information sources. Later, in a 1992 memo, again from Neveline: "While the intent of a psychological evaluation remains the same under the revised definition,

the psychologist now has greater flexibility in determining the type and variety of tests and assessment techniques which should be used. As a result of this added flexibility, school psychologists may be able to devote more time to prevention, early intervention and follow-up contact with individual students. Later the same year, Neveland elaborated the State's position regarding psychological evaluations in the memo concerning Triennial Evaluations: "It is not intended that there be a standardized triennial assessment battery. Whether using formal tests or other assessment procedures, the purpose of all evaluations is to identify special needs and abilities of the students, so that appropriate teaching methodologies and other needed interventions can be determined" (p.1).

An example of a local response to the same issues is evident in the December 23, 1996 New York City Board of Education memo from Dov Rokeach (Assistant Superintendent, Office of Special Education Clinical Services), specifically on the topic of flexible assessment: "For all cases, the decision on what assessment methods and strategies to use should be made by the individual professional within the context of an overall assessment plan tailored to address the specific problems raised in the referral, or that become evident during the assessment." This new definition grants the school psychologist greater flexibility in deciding which evaluations and methodologies are employed" (p.1). The Board of Education then proceeded to offer a series of mandated staff development sessions for all assessment professionals, including the following elaboration in the training materials (Questions and Answers on Flexible Assessment): "Flexible assessment refers to the process of determining what source(s) of information are needed to make decisions about students. It implies that no single test or battery of tests is automatically required in all cases (sic). Flexible assessment is not a shortcut. It is a different way of gathering information about the educational needs of the student. It allows the professional to make considered choices about the best way to collect the information needed for educational decision making" (p.1).

Thus, flexible assessment emerges as a characteristic of good practice that contributes to the outcome of collection and generation of data that are relevant to the decisions to be made, appropriate to the individual(s) assessed, and related to interventions and instructional approaches that follow. As trainers and practitioners of the profession of School Psychology, we strongly support such an approach, and point out that our profession has long advocated such ideals, objectives, and practices.

Philosophy of Best Assessment Practices

Best assessment practices of school psychologists include a view of assessment that informs instruction and intervention. The psychologist, as assessor and consultant, engages in a problem solving process that proceeds to confirm and refute hypotheses that develop as a result of referral questions, decisions to be made, and issues that arise during the course of the assessment. School psychologists are committed to provision of services to children in the least restrictive environment, and include among their clients children, teachers, administrators, and families, as well as other members of the community. School psychologists, as databased problem solvers, view assessment as the data gathering aspect within a broad consultation process. Consultation may involve issues with regard to individual students, classroom practices, or system-wide concerns. Assessment procedures relate to the specific situation and do not equate with any one type of method. The assessment process proceeds with ecological and cultural awareness and sensitivity, mindful of the contexts that impinge on appropriateness of procedures administered, as well as their interpretations and resulting recommendations.

Because flexible assessment has been primarily associated with referrals of individual children, the following stage model applies to this situation. The model includes stages of the referral process and the assessment practices that relate to each stage.

Stage Model of Decision Making and Implications for Assessment Practices:

Stage 1: Prevention and Early Intervention Assistance

Students are referred to problem solving teams (called, for example, Instructional Assistance or Prereferral Teams) for the purpose of ameliorating problem identification within the context of general education, with the hope of reducing the need for consideration for special education services or placement. The focus of these collaborative problem solving teams is on problem identification and intervention for a youngster=s academic, social and behavioral needs within the regular education classroom. Team members engage in a problem solving process that examines the learner-task interactions and identifies practices that enhance or interfere with successful learning and appropriate behavior. This form of collaborative problem solving with school staff, student, and family members represents a shift away from routine application of standardized measures in favor of obtaining resources to assist children, and provision of indirect consultative services to teachers and parents.

Assessment at this stage is truly flexible since it responds to the concerns described by parents, teachers, and the student for the purpose of crafting solutions or interventions within the context of the student=s general education classroom. The process generally begins by acquiring an understanding of the student=s problem behaviors as well as environmental factors that impact on the learner=s experience. Observations across settings, interviews with stakeholders, informal assessment measures, and archival reviews are the most frequently employed assessment procedures. Informal measures such as curriculum-based assessment, work samples, task and error analysis, functional assessment, dynamic assessment, as well as assessment of the instructional environment, are possibilities for data collection. Once the relevant data are collected and analyzed, the results lead directly to determination of approaches for addressing the problems of concern. Determinations are made regarding what can be done differently to support the student=s learning. The school psychologist or other members of the problem solving team must then monitor the interventions to determine success or need for further modifications.

Collaborative problem solving has the benefit of allowing school personnel to provide an immediate response to a problem situation since a lengthy standardized battery is not necessary. The data obtained in collaborative problem solving is directly linked to instructional and/or behavioral interventions. Such data also provide information to help determine if and when referral for consideration for special education services is necessary. The entire process serves as an assessment tool with trial interventions as the primary source of information. These practices can significantly reduce the need for resource-intensive diagnostic testing for identification purposes and encourages increased problem solving within general education. Collaborative problem solving gives credence to the notion that there are many students who require assistance at some point in their educational careers without necessarily requiring provision of special education services. Finally, the process is sensitive and responsive to the needs of diverse learners.

Stage 2: Determination of Eligibility and Diagnostic Classification

When used for purposes of determining program eligibility and diagnostic classification, the psychological assessment should be carried out in the most comprehensive manner possible and must include the widest range of assessment hypotheses and plans with respect to the nature and extent of all areas of suspected disability. Comprehensive assessment does not follow a routine format or include a prescribed battery of procedures, but, rather, proceeds in a databased problem-solving manner, driven by hypotheses generated by referral issues and questions that arise during the course of the assessment. The guiding principles of comprehensive assessment include the need to determine characteristics of the child=s functioning that impinge on the child=s ability to profit from the learning experiences provided by the educational facility, and the need to consider the relationship between assessment findings and recommendations for intervention, referrals, and specialized services. This type of assessment is more stringent than the others described in this document because it must respond to and meet criteria legislated by the state and federal governments. In order to be comprehensive, the assessment must provide information that:

< Assesses all characteristics that are essential for determination that the child meets the criteria of disability according to the current state and federal guidelines;

< Identifies levels of current cognitive and educational functioning and anticipated educational and vocational needs;

< Identifies learning strengths and weaknesses and relates these to the child's ability to respond to regular and specialized instructional approaches;

< Identifies characteristics of personality, cognitive style, and behavior that may interfere with learning and that relate to the child's ability to function within the educational setting and respond to classroom management intervention and need for support services;

< Describes social adaptive behaviors that either enhance or obstruct the child's ability to profit from educational experiences and relates these to interventions and support services;

< Identifies features of the environment within both school and home that contribute to the child's educational or social-emotional difficulties, and relates these findings to interventions that reduce the negative impact of these experiences on the child's learning;

< Identifies aspects of the child's health and physical history and current functioning that may be relevant to the child's ability to learn, and relates these findings to referrals or recommendations that contribute to the child's ability to profit from educational experiences;

< Proceeds in a manner that acknowledges and respects the cultural background of the child and family and that determines the nature of disabilities in a manner that is mindful of cultural variables.

Because there will be less of an emphasis on a routine comprehensive triennial evaluation, the initial evaluation should also:

, Identify whether the current assessment is likely to be valid with respect to long term planning, and to recommend a comprehensive assessment at a later date if there are concerns about the effects of factors such as age, level of cooperation, unclear or overlapping problems, or concern about an increase in severity;

, Contribute to a long-term plan for assessing the child's responsiveness to special education interventions. Ideally, such a plan would include a description of those educational, cognitive, personality, and behavior areas that are in need of remediation, the assessment processes that will be employed to monitor responsiveness, descriptions of the most reliable indicators of success, and features that might indicate when the child is not responding appropriately, as well as a time line for making determinations about the child's responsiveness;

, Anticipate transition points that will be crucial for the child, as well as areas of evaluation that might be needed at these transition points.

Stage 3: Consultation in New Placement

Assessment occurs within the context of providing consultation to teachers, families, and support staff who are primarily concerned with monitoring the child's progress and responsiveness to the interventions generated by the assessment. The most relevant types of procedures for this type of assessment would include interviews, observations, rating scales, and curriculum-based approaches. Curriculum-based procedures might include a variety of direct assessments, as well as development of portfolios and performance-based techniques. The school psychologist as consultant can help service providers determine the most appropriate array of procedures for the specific needs of the child, and to help develop the rubrics for these procedures to facilitate the monitoring process. It is important at this stage that data collection be systematic, relevant, and sensitive to the potential changes in the child's

functioning. If the procedures developed for monitoring are successful, it is possible that little more assessment needs to occur at the time of the triennial, as much of the information for the triennial can be derived from review of the ongoing monitoring procedures.

Summary

Flexible assessment implies that there is no one procedure or model for all occasions. The assessor needs to conduct a detailed problem clarification during each referral phase to determine the questions to be answered and the decisions to be made. The data needed in order to respond to these questions and decisions will determine the assessment approaches, and will help the assessor to guard against a refer-test reflex that can result in deployment of a standard battery. Despite the fact that most referrals identify a student as having a problem, the planning of an assessment reflects the assumption that any problem occurs in response to a number of interacting factors that are embedded in multiple contexts. Therefore, hypotheses about the nature of the difficulty and proposals for solutions require exploration of multiple contexts and multiple samples of behavior. The following guidelines will aid the assessor in determining the appropriate assessment approach. Any specific assessment will involve a selection from among these possibilities, but we advocate that all assessments include thorough record review, comprehensive interviews of all stakeholders, and in-context observations of relevant behaviors. The administration of any further procedures depends upon the issues involved in the referral.

Advocacy of a flexible approach to assessment suggests that validity and reliability reside not only in the specific procedures employed, but, perhaps, even more importantly, in the assessment process itself. This requires increased concern with the outcomes of the assessment and the response of the student to the interventions resulting from the assessment. The outcome of any assessment should include a program plan that results in increased competence. Difficulties in determining reliability and validity for the assessment process can be addressed by treating the assessment as development of a contract in which all parties participate and to which all parties agree. The teacher, the parent, and the student need to participate as collaborators. The plan is a statement of what the collaborators propose will lead to improvement. As a proposal, it needs to be monitored, reevaluated, and adjusted. We recommend a trial period of ten weeks as a reasonable period of time to evaluate the adequacy of most interventions.

Guidelines for Building an Assessment

The Question	Possible Source of Information/Data
What are the concerns of those working with the student?	Interview: parent; teacher
What is the history of the referral issues and the context of the student's functioning?	Interview: parent, teacher, student File review: request reports from outside agencies
How does the student's functioning look in relation to the current contexts?	Observation, file and portfolio review; Rating scales; Parent/child interaction

	Home and classroom observation;
	Work samples; School files
To what extent is the student=s current functioning different from students of similar background and experience?	Standardized norm-based procedures; Generic cognitive surveys Specific process tests Criterion-referenced tests
To what extent has the student mastered the content of a specific curriculum domain?	Criterion-referenced; curriculum-based procedures; Task and error analysis
What learning processes and approaches appear to obstruct the student=s learning?	Standardized, norm-based process procedures; Curriculum-based assessment
What social-emotional concerns and issues obstruct the student=s learning? Interview	Social/emotional rating scales; Projective procedures; Observation;
What interventions appear to promote successful learning?	Curriculum-based dynamic assessment; Trial teaching; Observation
How responsive is the student to attempts to intervene and how much effort is required to induce change?	Curriculum-based dynamic assessment
How effective were the interventions?	Interview; Observation; Rating scales; portfolio; Curriculum-based and normed procedures.

Not all of the stages or questions are relevant for every child. Flexibility refers not only to the procedures used for an assessment, but for the questions asked and data collected as well. Flexible assessment requires collaboration among team members, with the family as active participants in the team. The child needs to be as active a participant as possible, not only as the subject of the assessment, but as a contributor to assessment decisions and recommendations that will follow, as well as to provide feedback regarding interventions that will be put in place. Some of these approaches will take more time than traditional procedures, and some, less. As team members become more comfortable and confident, the efficiency of the assessment process should increase. Assessment and evaluation should not be restricted to students who are experiencing problems in school, but should also apply to the services with which they are involved, including the assessment processes and procedures.

Bibliography*

- Bardon, J. & Bennett, V.C. (1974). *School psychology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Batsche, G.M. & Knoff, H.M. (1995). Best practices in linking assessment to intervention. In A. Thomas & J. Grimes (Eds.). *Best practices in school psychology III* (pp. 569-585). Washington, DC: National Association of School Psychologists.
- Berger, N.S. (1979). Beyond testing: A decision-making system for providing school psychological consultation. *Professional Psychology*, 10, 241-246.
- Forness, S.R. & Kavale, K.A. (1996). School psychologists= roles and functions: Integration into the regular classroom. In G. Stoner, M.R. Shinn, & H.M. Walker (Eds.). *Interventions for achievement and behavior problems* (pp. 21-36). Washington, D.C.: National Association of School Psychologists.
- Fuchs, D. (1996). Mainstream assistance teams: A prereferral intervention system for difficult to teach students. In G. Stoner, M.R. Shinn, & H.M. Walker (Eds.). *Interventions for achievement and behavior problems* (pp. 241-268). Washington, D.C.: National Association of School Psychologists.
- Graden, J.L., Casey, A., & Christenson, S.L. (1985). Implementing a prereferral intervention system: Part I. The model. *Exceptional Children*, 51, 377-384.
- Graden, J.L., Casey, A., & Christenson, S.L. (1985). Implementing a prereferral intervention system: Part II: The data. *Exceptional Children*, 51, 487-496.
- Idol, L. (1997). *Creating collaborative and inclusive schools*. Austin, TX: Eitel Press.
- Lidz, C.S. (1981). *Improving assessment of schoolchildren*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lidz, C.S. (1990). Overview of an optimal approach to early childhood assessment. *Preschool Interests*, 6, 1,3-6 (Newsletter of the Preschool Special Interest Group of NASP/APA).
- Nevelidine, T.B. (1991; 1995). *Procedures for determination of the need to administer psychological evaluations*. Albany, NY: The State Education Department, Office of Vocational and Educational Services and Individuals with Disabilities (December, 1991; September, 1995).

- Nevelndine, T.B. (1992). Change in the definition of individual psychological evaluation. Albany, NY: The State Education Department, Office of Vocational and Educational Services and Individuals with Disabilities (June, 1992).
- Nevelndine, T.B. (1995). Revisions to the requirements for the triennial evaluation of a student with a disability. Albany, NY: The State Education Department, Office of Vocational and Educational Services and Individuals with Disabilities (September, 1995).
- Peterson, D.W. & Casey, A. (1996). School psychology and the Regular Education Initiative: Meaningful change or lost opportunities. In G. Stoner, M.R. Shinn, & H.M. Walker (Eds.). Interventions for achievement and behavior problems (pp. 37-488). Washington, D.C.: National Association of School Psychologists.
- Pugach, M.C. & Johnson, L.J. (1989). Prereferral interventions: Progress, problems and challenges. *Exceptional Children*, 56, 217-226.
- Ramirez, M, & Gloeckler, L.C. (1986). The triennial evaluation of students with handicapping conditions. Albany, NY: The State Education Department, Office for Education of Children with Handicapping Conditions, Division of Program Development.
- Reschly, D.J. (1984). Assessment and decision making. In J.E. Ysseldyke (1984). *School Psychology: The state of the art*. Minneapolis, MN: National School Psychology Inservice Training Network, University of Minnesota.
- Rokeach, D. (1996). Flexible assessment: Office of Special Education Clinical Services Memorandum #14, 1996-1997 (December 23, 1996). New York: New York City Board of Education, Office of Special Education Clinical Services.
- Shapiro, M.B. (1951). An experimental approach to diagnostic psychological testing. *Journal of Mental Science*, 9, 748-764.
- Sloves, R.E., Docherty, E.M., Jr., & Schneider, K.C. (1979). A scientific problem-solving model of psychological assessment. *Professional Psychology*, 10, 28-34.
- Sundberg, N.D., Snowden, L.R., & Reynolds, W.M. (1978). Toward assessment of personal competence and incompetence in life situations. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 29, 179-221.
- Ysseldyke, J.E. (1979). Issues in psychoeducational assessment. In G.D. Phye & D.J. Reschly (Eds.). *School psychology: Perspectives and issues*. New York: Academic Press.

* This is a mixture of references for the position paper, as well as a sample of documents relevant to the historical position of school psychologists. This is not intended as a comprehensive representation of the available literature on this topic.