

VOCATIONAL ASSESSMENT AS AN AID IN THE TRANSITIONING PROCESS:  
A PRACTITIONER'S POINT OF VIEW

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to focus on the critical issues of implementing a Vocational Assessment program within the public school setting and the use of Vocational Assessment in moving special needs students through a three-stage Vocational Transition Model.

One of the major problems confronting individuals with a handicap, whether it be congenital or the result of an illness or injury, is the development of a sense of self worth so closely associated with involvement in the world of work.

"Between 50% to 80% of working age adults, who report a disability are jobless" (Will, 1984).

The percentages become even more devastating when looking at the jobless rates for handicapped youths between the ages of 16 to 21. Within this group 67% of those students reporting a disability, are unemployed. These percentages become even more shocking when considering recent legislative mandates, such as Public Law 94-142. Public Law 94-142 guarantees the right to a free and appropriate education to all children with handicaps. One of the underlying assumptions of what is meant by appropriate is that this education will lead to a productive life after high school.

In an effort to address these high unemployment rates and to make education more appropriate for each student, emphasis has been placed on what is referred to as "transitioning". Madeleine Will, Assistant Secretary of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (1985) defines transition as an "outcome oriented process encompassing a broad array of services and experiences that lead to employment". Transition is also defined as a bridge that connects adequate preparation at the secondary level with the wide array of services available in the community. The Special Task Force on Transition (Will, 1984), comprised of representatives from the Office of Special Education Programs, the Rehabilitation Services Administration, and the National Institute of Handicap Research, views transition as this bridge linking sound preparation at the secondary level with secure opportunities and services in the community. Wehman, Kregel and Barcus (1985) define transition as a process that moves a student through three stages:

Stage 1 - School instruction, which reflects such concepts as functionalized curriculum, integrated school services, and community based instruction;

Stage 2 - Planning for the transitioning process; and

Stage 3 - Placement into meaningful employment.

The remainder of this paper will focus on the critical issues of implementing a vocational assessment program within the public school setting, and the use of vocational assessment in moving the student through Wehman, Kregel and Barcus' three stage model of vocational transitioning.

Vocational Assessment information is needed in the school setting for two primary purposes:

1. Placement of special needs students in realistic and appropriate vocational programs and
2. Sharing of relevant information with vocational instructors and support staff that will assist them in providing successful vocational education services to the students with special needs (Peterson, 1985).

There are several important issues that should be considered prior to implementing vocational assessment within a school system. Some of the more important issues are:

- \* How and when vocational assessment should be used?
- \* How can it be incorporated into current services available?
- \* How should the results be used?
- \* What are the most valid and cost effective methods?
- \* Who should be involved and what are their roles?
- \* Who should coordinate and be responsible for the vocational assessment?
- \* How are the fees going to be generated for vocational assessment services?

To ensure an effective vocational assessment several criteria should be utilized. These criteria include:

- \* Reflect competencies required in vocational training programs and on jobs.
- \* Involve an interdisciplinary team approach.
- \* Generate appropriate recommendations for curriculum modifications.
- \* Make maximum use of existing school resources.
- \* Be competency and experience based.
- \* Utilize informal input, such as teacher reports, school psychologist evaluations, and family concerns.
- \* Use on a regular, yearly basis to develop the Individual Education Plan (IEP).

Initially, vocational assessment should be used to make recommendations in the IEP that can assist in developing a long term plan. By this it is meant that vocational

assessment is implemented early in a student's education program so that a functionalized curriculum can be developed that is realistically oriented and based on the minimal competencies that are required to participate in future vocational programs available through the school. According to Wehman, Kregel and Barcus (1985) this early emphasis on a functionalized curriculum will allow the student to make gains in both vocational skills and in job related skill areas. This will result in the student having a better potential of being employed or becoming employed.

As the student progresses through this functionalized curriculum and as the IEP requires updating, a curriculum-based vocational assessment should be utilized on a yearly basis. According to Peterson (1985), a curriculum-based vocational assessment is a more informal, less intensive process of vocational assessment in which development of student prevocational skills, career awareness, and vocational skills are monitored from elementary school through adulthood. Curriculum-based vocational assessment uses existing assessment data, such as teacher and counselor observations, parent and student interviews, and basic vocational testing that may include vocational interest, aptitude, and awareness testing.

The use of a curriculum-based vocational assessment results in maximum use of resources already available within the school system, reduces the amount of time a student is pulled from the classroom for a formal vocational evaluation, and reduces the financial burden of an expensive formal vocational evaluation.

The yearly use of a curriculum-based vocational assessment helps ensure the continuation of a functionalized curriculum by placing the student in the least restrictive vocational environment and by allowing the student to avail themselves of a variety of programs as their non-handicapped peers do. This allows for what Wehman, Kregel and Barcus (1985) refer to as integrated school services and community based instruction. By integrated school services, they mean exposure to non-handicapped peers and community based instruction allows the student to practice skills in "real" situations.

As students enter Stage 2 of Wehman, Kregel and Barcus' model, planning for the transitioning process, it is important to review what the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (1984) considers transitioning services. They group transitioning services into three broad classes. These classes are:

1. Generic Services
2. Time-Limited Services
3. On-Going Services

Generic or no special services are those already available within the community without using special disability services (ie...Job Service, Employment Agencies). Time-Limited services are of a temporary nature and are provided by such community based agencies as Vocational Rehabilitation and the Job Training Partnership Act. On-Going services have been lacking, are requiring fundamental change in current policy and practice and are geared at the hard-to-place disabled person. Such initiatives as Work Stations in Industry and Sheltered Enclaves are designed with these concerns in mind.

It is during the second stage that the students, parents and school personnel begin to think about the possible enrollment in specific vocational education and work experience programs. At this point, a vocational evaluation should be completed. A vocational evaluation is a comprehensive, formal and intensive type of assessment that uses work, real or simulated, as the focal point for vocational assessment or exploration (Brolin, 1982). The results of the vocational evaluation can be used to develop a formal transition plan. This plan will delineate the transition services the student will require at the secondary level prior to graduation and the appropriate adult services that will allow for a smooth transition to a work status. These transition plans should incorporate such concepts as comprehensiveness and individualization and should allow for parental input. Comprehensive from the point of view that the student will be leaving the very structured and secure environment of the school and moving into an adult world that is extremely complex both with respect to the skills and behaviors required as well as the wide array of community services available. It should be individualized so that the student will be adequately prepared to utilize the specific services they need to become employed. Parental input is necessary because for many special needs students, their ultimate participation in vocational programs at the adult level is directly related to the knowledge the parent possesses regarding these services.

Vocational assessment becomes extremely crucial at the point of graduation, when the student enters stage 3 of Wehman, Kregel and Barcus' model, which is placement into meaningful employment. At this time, vocational evaluation results should reflect specifically what type of transitioning

services are going to be required after the student leaves high school. For those students requiring either time-limited and on-going services, the vocational evaluation can provide detailed information regarding local, state and federal agencies that can provide them with these vocationally oriented programs, such as work adjustment training, job training and supported employment. Also, vocational evaluation results can make direct recommendations regarding the various employment outcomes available, such as sheltered enclaves, competitive employment and specialized industrial training. At this time, a useful vocational evaluation can be incorporated into any individualized written rehabilitation plans that must be completed at the adult level. Also, hopefully it will shorten the length of time from graduation to the day of entry into an adult program or work status.

Before concluding, it seems important to overview some of the underlying assumptions we have regarding personnel responsible for delivering assessment services. First, the individual should be a highly skilled professional knowledgeable in testing, behavioral observation, and test interpretation. Secondly, this professional should be constantly updating their information regarding local job opportunities and resources within the school and community. Lastly, in order for transitioning to work effectively, the person charged with generating vocational assessment results and recommendations needs to become an integral member of the student's IEP team.

In conclusion, employment is a necessary aspect of human life and an understood outcome of education for all youth graduating at the secondary level. It was the intent of this paper to demonstrate how vocational assessment services can assist school personnel in transitioning students from school to work in an effective and efficient fashion. It is important to remember that vocational assessment is only an aid to the transitioning process. What is most important for us as professionals charged with the actual implementation of transitioning is to attempt to institutionalize the transitioning process into our programs and service delivery systems.

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