
Career Assessment and Transition through
School to Adult Life

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Abstract

As special education in public school emphasizes functional curricula related to work, home, and community skills for students beginning at a young age, assessment is needed that will assist in developing functional Individual Education Programs (I.E.P.'s) for students. Career assessment describes a K-adult process of assessment that includes three major phases: curriculum-based career assessment (CBCA), vocational assessment for vocational education, and career assessment for transition from school to adult life. Career assessment includes both curriculum and program-based assessment of student progress and more formal assessment procedures such as vocational evaluation. This article describes career assessment and its use in transition through school to adult life.

Assessment practices in special education are undergoing changes as the direction of special education curriculum is altered and improved methods of assessment are developed. Career assessment is a comprehensive assessment framework that incorporates traditional academic assessment of students into an assessment process that focuses on present and future functioning of students in functional work, home, community, and leisure settings. It is a developmental process that begins in elementary school and continues through adulthood that provides an on-going, student-centered monitoring of skills, interests, and values related to functioning in work, home, and community. This article is written to provide an overview of career assessment.

Career Assessment and Special Education

Career assessment is associated with a radical change in special education. Traditionally, special education has focussed primarily on teaching developmental skills related to the academic curriculum of the school. In a functional special education curriculum, however, instruction and services specifically address participation of special students in work, home, community, and leisure activities beginning at a young age. Functional special education provides community-based instruction that enhances the quality of life and community participation of students in the present while simultaneously preparing students effectively for functioning as adult community members. Life-centered career education (Brolin, 1987) and functional special education curricula (Brown, Bellamy, and Sontag, 1971; Falvey, 1986; Wilcox and Bellamy, 1982; and Wilcox and Bellamy, 1987) have provided curriculum models for such a process. Functional special education has included functional instruction in regular education classes as a method of teaching academic subjects (Brolin, 1987), community-based special education, functional instruction in classrooms and the school by special education teachers (Falvey, 1986), community-based vocational training programs (Moon, Goodall, Barcus, and

Brooke, 1986), and coordination between special education, vocational education, and community agencies. (Sarkees, 1985). With functional, community-based special education all students will be better equipped to enter the adult world. Without it, some students, particularly those with the most severe disabilities, may unnecessarily fail to develop minimal community skills at all as they graduate from school (Wilcox and Bellamy, 1987).

Career assessment may be viewed as the assessment component of functional special education. However, career assessment is not an "add-on" component for the "career education program". Rather, career assessment provides a structure for a totally new way of looking at students and planning their educational programs that includes traditional academic assessment and a specific focus on student skills, interests, and special needs related to functioning in work, home, and community situations (Sitlington, Brolin, Clark, and Vacanti, 1985).

Functional Individualized Education Plans

A major purpose of career assessment is to provide the data base for developing functional Individualized Education Plans for special students. Peterson, Burnham, and Funderberg (1987) developed a planning procedure composed of a long-range plan and yearly instructional and services plan. In the long-range plan, parents and professionals together identify long-range goals related to work, home, community, and leisure and specify anticipated services or programs that will assist a student in meeting goals. The yearly plan includes the components required of all Individualized Education Plans. However, the yearly plan will include goals, objectives, and instruction and related services that specifically addresses work, home, community, and leisure activities as well as academic skills. Additionally, the functional I.E.P. also includes an addendum related to parent participation in helping the student learn and participate in functional activities.

Constructs of Career Assessment

As assessment is conducted and functional I.E.P.'s are developed, professionals must select constructs that will be most helpful in the assessment and planning process. Two primary approaches have been taken in the literature: (1) functional skills; and (2) specific environment. These approaches are related and can be used together. However, each uses a very different approach to assessment and planning. In the functional skills approach, skills are identified that are needed for successful functioning in a variety of community settings, and students are assessed in relation to these skills. The strength of this approach is that a consistent assessment framework is provided that can be used with all students. Brolin (1987) and Halpern, Lehmann, Irvin, and Hevey (1982) have developed functional skill and characteristic profiles for assessment and planning purposes.

In the specific environment approach, specific situations of interest are identified, analyzed, and students are assessed and trained in the actual environments. Falvey (1986) and others (Brown, et al, 1971; Wilcox and Bellamy, 1987) have advocated community-based special education and others have advocated community-based vocational training (Moon, et al, 1987) using such an approach.

Career Assessment Methods

Activities in functional special education curricula are considered functional when the content is practical and immediately useable in work, home, community, or leisure situations and the setting for instruction is in the "real world"--or a very close simulation (Brown, et al, 1971; Falvey, 1986; Peterson, et al, 1987). Likewise, career assessment will primarily use functional, community-based methods that are based primarily on systematic observations of student interests, skills, and special needs in functional settings performing functional tasks (Nadolsky, 1981; Vocational Evaluation and Work Adjustment Association, 1975); criterion-referenced (Cobb and Larkin, 1986; Dunn,

1976; Peterson, 1986); based on task analysis, ecological analysis, or related techniques (Cobb and Larkin, 1985; Browder, 1987). Effective career assessment also involves the student in a process of exploration, self-assessment, and decision-making regarding their lives.

Methods that fit these criteria include: use of functional checklists and rating scales to organize observations in functional community, work, and home settings (Cobb and Larkin, 1986; Halpern, et al, 1982); performance and work samples in which students perform activities specifically for assessment purposes in real world settings or close simulations of real world activities (Moon, Goodall, Barcus, and Brooke, 1986; Vocational Evaluation and Work Adjustment Association; 1975); use of precision-teaching and related techniques to determine best learning methods of students via instructional trials on functional tasks (McCray, 1982); checklists and interest surveys completed by both students and parents, sometimes via semi-structured interviews (Cobb and Larkin, 1986). Career assessment can also include more formal assessment via functional skill and knowledge tests, vocational interest surveys, vocational exploration inventories, and related techniques. Experiential techniques that involve student in work, home, and community activities are most effective since assessment is combined with exploration and opportunities for personal decision-making (Sitlington, et al, 1985).

Organizing Career Assessment

Career assessment must be effectively organized so that various individuals associated with the career assessment process have clearly defined roles, and the needs of various agencies and professionals are met by the career assessment process. This will help prevent duplication of assessment across agencies. Career assessment must minimally meet the legal and bureaucratic needs of special education, vocational education, vocational rehabilitation, developmental disabilities agencies, and programs funded

via the Job Training Partnership Act (J.T.P.A.). To do this, a variety of assessment components must be available and procedures must be developed to efficiently and effectively share assessment results across grade levels as the student proceeds through the school curriculum and across agency lines. Inter-agency agreements, release forms, and other procedures must be developed to facilitate appropriate sharing of information while maintaining proper confidentiality (Ballantyne, 1985). Career assessment and planning is a longitudinal process and involves an on-going cycle of assessment as part of instruction that is used as the basis for a new or revised I.E.P. More "formal" assessment processes are implemented as deemed useful.

From other perspectives, it may be helpful to think of assessment related to a specific program as involving the following components: (1) assessment for entry into the program; (2) progress and process assessment during the program; (3) and assessment of student skills at the end of the program (outcome assessment) (Cobb and Larkin, 1986). This is especially important for special programs that have special entry requirements like vocational education programs, vocational training in rehabilitation facilities, supported employment programs, etc.

Career assessment may minimally include the following major assessment components: (1) curriculum-based career assessment (K-12); (2) vocational assessment for vocational education; (3) vocational assessment for transition from school to adult life. Each of these is briefly discussed below.

Curriculum-based Career Assessment (CBCA) for Functional Special Education CBCA primarily involves on-going assessment and documentation of student interests, skills, and special needs as an integral part of implementing functional special education curricula, as described above, primarily by special education teachers with the assistance of support personnel

(school psychologists, consultants, counselors) and regular education teachers. At the elementary level, this may include input from parents and systematic observations by teachers (Sitlington, et al, 1985). For instance, one school district (Peterson, Burnham, and Funderberg, 1987) is using a rating scale based on Broolin's (1987) life competencies developed as part of the Life-Centered Career Education Curriculum (LCCE). Browder (1987) has described a process for conducting curriculum-based assessment as part of functional, community-based special education for students with more severe disabilities.

Vocational Assessment for Vocational Education The Carl Perkins Vocational Education Act requires an assessment of the interests, abilities, and special needs of handicapped and disadvantaged students relative to success in the vocational education program. Vocational assessment should be considered a component of the overall career assessment process. Peterson (1986) has proposed a multi-level approach to vocational assessment of students for vocational education and alternative vocational training programs as part of a comprehensive transition process. In this approach, vocational assessment prior to entry into vocational education could involve: (1) screening based on CBCA as described above and rating forms completed by special education teachers that would be based on skills important in vocational education classes (Reynolds, Johnson, Jay, Gilmore, and Gates, 1976); (2) vocational assessment based in the vocational classroom via interviews with the vocational teacher, observation of classes, and performance samples based on the vocational curriculum (Peterson, Brown, and Leconte, 1987). This process would often be coordinated by a vocational counselor or individual designated specifically to provide support services for special students in vocational education (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 1985). (3) Finally, comprehensive vocational evaluation may

be implemented if information provided above is not sufficient. Vocational evaluation involves a more formal, intensive program of vocational assessment, counseling, and exploration that uses work, real or simulated, as the focal point of assessment and exploration (LeConte, 1985; Vocational Evaluation and Work Adjustment Association, 1975). Such programs in vocational education are staffed by a Vocational Evaluation Specialist who administers and coordinates the process. The methods used above may also be implemented as part of comprehensive vocational evaluation process coordinated by a vocational evaluation specialist (Dick, 1987; LeConte, 1985).

Vocational assessment should also be implemented during the vocational education program to monitor progress of the student and deal with problems in instruction, learning, and effectiveness of support services and curriculum adaptations being provided in the vocational program (Brown, 1986; Cobb and Larkin, 1986). Additionally, student skills, interests, and special needs related to subsequent job placement or additional vocational training should be assessed and documented upon completion of the vocational program. Stodden and Ianacone (1986) have developed simple procedures for use in some vocational classes for this purpose.

Career Assessment for Transition The overall purpose of career assessment is to facilitate transition from school to adult life. However, in the secondary years, specific attention must be paid to identifying student needs related to work, home, and community functioning and identifying service agencies and transition processes that may be needed to facilitate this transition. Career assessment will be used to identify the "service path" needed by students in each of the major domain of work, home, and community. As described by Will (1984), these may include needs for no special services, time-limited assistance and services, and on-going support and

services. Career assessment will also identify present skills, interests, and needs of students and agencies or services that may provide services. Community agencies important in transition may especially include vocational rehabilitation, rehabilitation facilities, mental health centers, and developmental disabilities programs. Finally, career assessment may also assist in establishing eligibility for services of specific agencies and provide a basis for the joint development of plans between schools and community agencies during the last 2-3 years of school (Ballantyne, 1985).

Career assessment for transition may utilize information available from all the assessment processes described above. In addition, "program-based assessment" may also provide additional information. Program-based assessment is much like assessment for vocational education in that previous CBCA, vocational assessment, and vocational evaluation may be used as a data base to indicate whether entry into a specific program is appropriate and what the skills, interests, and special needs of the student may be. In many cases, previous assessment may be sufficient so that additional formal assessment is not necessary or is minimized. However, additional assessment related specifically to that program may be conducted and/or included as part of a comprehensive vocational evaluation or related formal assessment process. Community programs in the work domain might include work adjustment in rehabilitation facilities, supported employment programs, job placement assistance, on-the-job training via J.T.P.A., etc. In the home and community domains, programs might include independent living programs, residential services as part of a mental health center, community support programs for students with mental illness, etc. Student progress assessment in such programs also is conducted via systematic observational methods and outcome assessment of student interests, skills, and needs is documented upon the completion of each program.

Personnel Roles in Career Assessment

Career assessment, as described above, is multi-faceted and involves an inter-agency team approach in assessment, planning, and delivery of services across the developmental years (K-adult). Career assessment is implemented as an integral component of the service delivery process. Professionals must be designated for the following roles to implement the career assessment process:

Design and coordination of the total career assessment process (K-adult).

School psychologists in many cases may be most appropriate for this role. However, assistance may be obtained from other individuals who have training and experience in vocational assessment and evaluation. Vocational evaluation specialists may be especially helpful. Specific responsibilities include: design of the system, selection of instruments, development of recording formats, preparing guidelines for use of career assessment information to develop functional I.E.P.'s, and consulting with and training teachers and other staff in the process, etc. (Peterson, et al, 1987).

A number of individuals may fill coordination roles of specific aspects of the process. For instance, vocational counselors or support personnel may coordinate vocational assessment for vocational education; vocational evaluation specialists may also perform this function as well as coordinating vocational assessment for entry into a variety of community programs.

Implementation of CBCA and program-based assessment. This role falls primarily to special education teachers and trainers/counselors in specific community programs. Responsibilities include: on-going assessment and documentation via observations; facilitating input from the student and parents; and using assessment information in developing functional I.E.P.'s. For secondary teachers, joint planning and assessment with vocational teachers, vocational rehabilitation counselors, and others will be important (Browder, 1987; Sitlington, et al, 1985).

Coordinating and implementing vocational assessment for vocational education

A vocational counselor, special needs support professional, or vocational evaluation specialist most often will coordinate vocational assessment for vocational education (Peterson, 1986). Vocational evaluation specialists in schools will coordinate the vocational evaluation process and may provide valuable assistance in designing the vocational assessment process. However, special and vocational education teachers will also be involved in filling out rating forms, observing students, conducting performance sample assessment, and monitoring student progress in the program (Cobb and Larkin, 1986; LeConte, 1985).

Coordinating and implementing career assessment for transition

An individual should be designated to coordinate the transition process for students. Additionally, a specific individual should be designated to coordinate and design the overall assessment process. This individual will vary depending upon local situations but could involve: the transition coordinator; school psychologist; or vocational evaluation specialist. It is critical that one individual from the school design and coordinate this process with community agencies to facilitate effective assessment and efficient referrals that minimize duplication of assessment processes. Individuals must also be available to implement actual assessment activities as described above.

The basic roles described here are critical to facilitate effective preparation of students for functioning in adult life. However, they involve very different approaches to assessment than that traditionally used in public schools; further, the community-wide, inter-agency focus described involves a much broader focus related to assessment and planning processes.

Personnel training and qualifications

Training and education in conducting career and vocational assessment has not typically been included in preparation programs for school personnel in special education, school psychology, or vocational education. However, training in effective career assessment processes and techniques is critical. Initially, inservice will be the primary method of improving professional skills in career assessment. However, increasingly courses in career and vocational assessment of special students are being included in university programs (Peterson, 1986b). Such training needs to be incorporated into the programs for special educators, school psychologists, and vocational education support service personnel.

Graduate programs in vocational evaluation are available throughout the country at a limited number of universities for specialists who will conduct and coordinate vocational evaluation. Appropriate certification is an important issue for vocational evaluation specialists in school settings. Presently, most states do not have certification procedures for vocational evaluation specialists that are related directly to their jobs though a few states have made efforts in this direction. Consequently, part of the process of implementing a total model of career assessment will include development of appropriate state certification for vocational evaluation specialists. Such certification should have provisions for individuals from related fields such as school psychology and special education who may wish to obtain training and employment as vocational evaluation specialists (Peterson, 1985).

Conclusion

Career assessment provides a framework by which special education, vocational education, and community agencies may provide much more effective services for preparing special students for community participating than has been the case in the past. Its focus is much less on eligibility determination than on

assessment for program planning, placement, and progress monitoring for community living. Career assessment provides a new framework for viewing assessment as the basis for relevant, meaningful educational and habilitative services for handicapped students. This article has described a framework for career assessment that may assist school psychologists, administrators, community agency personnel, and others in developing a community-wide, interagency process of career assessment that will assist students in preparing for and participating in work, home, and community activities.

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