

Vocational Assessment of the Special Needs Student

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Abstract

Currently the two prominent approaches to vocational assessment are curriculum based vocational assessment and vocational assessments provided outside the academic setting by Vocational Evaluation Centers. Each of these approaches in and of itself is inadequate in meeting the needs of the special student. An alternative approach combining the two is suggested. Upon combining the scientifically tested evaluation techniques of the Vocational Evaluation Centers with the indepth insight into the needs of the student, generated through years of IEP's, a comprehensive assessment of the abilities of the special needs student can be established. This comprehensive assessment would provide appropriate direction for the student, better ensuring employment success. Now is the time to incorporate the expertise of the Vocational Evaluation Centers with the insight of the education staff in order to meet the needs of the special student.

Vocational assessment techniques have been utilized by various cultures throughout history, however, the full scale development and systematic employment of these techniques is a twentieth century phenomenon. The majority of the growth and acceptance of vocational assessment techniques are confined to the United States.

The Industrial Revolution played a major role in the growth and development of vocational assessment during its earlier years. A fairly high degree of literacy was essential to the production of goods and services. Vocational assessment evolved from a society driven toward mass education and mass production.

The vocational assessment techniques that were born during the early 1900's are the foundation upon which the present Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT) was built.

Today there are a number of techniques used to vocationally assess a variety of rehabilitation clientele. Such techniques utilize a number of instruments.

Vocational assessment techniques are used to foster job placement and develop curriculum for the mentally, emotionally and/or physically handicapped individual. Some of these same vocational assessment techniques are used to assess the skills and interest of students, veterans, displaced workers, offenders and worker's compensation clients.

The process of vocational assessment encompasses different variables depending upon the agency (or agencies) assessing the individual. For the purpose of this paper vocational assessment of the special needs student moving out of the school setting will be investigated.

Nadolsky (1985) described a three level vocational assessment process that appears to be the general structure used by those vocationally assessing special needs students. This vocational assessment process includes, (a) First Level of Assessment: Screening, (b) Second Level of Assessment: Clinical, and (c) Third Level of Assessment: Vocational Evaluation. These three levels are used in the academic setting for curriculum-based vocational assessments and in the Vocational Evaluation Centers for comprehensive vocational evaluations. However, in order to appropriately assess the special needs student one would need to utilize both the academic setting and the Vocational Evaluation Center to effectively complete the three level assessment process.

Vocational Assessment

There are currently two basic approaches to the vocational assessment of the special needs student: (a) curriculum-based vocational assessment, and (b) Vocational Evaluation Centers.

There has been some controversy concerning

the interchangeability of the terms assessment and evaluation. Based upon information obtained during this investigation the term assessment will be looked upon as the whole picture while evaluation will be viewed as a large part of the same picture.

Curriculum-Based Vocational Assessment

Curriculum-based vocational assessment is usually considered to begin no later than late elementary school (Peterson, 1985) and should continue throughout the student's public school career. Information is gathered at various stages in the students school career and used to develop IEP's that facilitate career education and vocational development.

Although curriculum-based vocational assessment may be cost effective it may not be the most proficient method. There are two major problems with this method: (a) a student's vocationally relevant skills and interest may not have the opportunity to manifest themselves in the school setting, and (b) vocational assessment requires (at some point and time) vocational evaluation specialist.

Vocational Evaluation Centers

Vocational Evaluation Centers specialize in vocational assessment and vocational counseling. They offer highly trained and qualified personnel. They provide a variety of assessment tools, which include: vocational aptitude and interest test, physical skills assessment and work samples. Additionally, vocational counselors are available to assist students on a one-on-one basis with their vocational needs. On the other hand, Vocational Evaluation Centers are expensive and may be too far removed from actual instructional personnel (Peterson, 1985).

Alternative Method

Assessment is not static, and it is not an end in itself (Mori, 1982). Rather, it is a means to facilitate a connection between a person and the work world. The student's skills, interest and attitudes are evolving and changing, therefore, the assessment process must be continual.

Rather than view curriculum-based vocational assessment and the Vocational Evaluation Center as an either or approach we might visualize it as if it were a continuum. Curriculum-based vocational assessment is at the beginning and Vocational Evaluation Centers (that generate comprehensive vocational evaluations) are at the other end of the students vocational assessment.

Assuming that the screening process has been adequate and the curriculum-based vocational assessment has been effective this data along with appropriate clinical data would be passed along to the Vocational Evaluation Center as referral information.

This referral information would be reviewed by a vocational evaluator and used to develop the appropriate vocational evaluation for the student.

Vocational Evaluation

Roberts (1969) defines Vocational Evaluation as the process of assessing an individual's

physical, mental and emotional abilities, limitations and tolerances in order to predict his current and future employment potential. Roberts contends that evaluation is interdisciplinary and involves data from within and outside the rehabilitation team.

Referral Information

The Psychovocational Model of evaluation described by Gruenhagen and Mohr (1985) uses a multidisciplinary team approach which may include a variety of persons within the student's ecological system: regular and special education teachers, guidance personnel and social workers, vocational education teachers and vocational rehabilitation counselors, school psychologists, paraprofessionals, and others in the school and community setting. All of the aforementioned people, along with the parents of the student, play an integral part in the overall psychovocational evaluation. Their information provides present and past history collected through the use of formal and informal techniques.

This information should include data pertaining to medical status, psychological adjustment, social skills, educational level, vocational history, and cultural and economic factors.

Evaluation

There are three predominantly used evaluation tools/techniques that are used today: psychometric testing, work sample assessment and situational assessment.

Psychometric testing. Psychometric tests are sometimes referred to as paper and pencil tests. They often require a written response to questions. However, some psychometric tests are administered or answered orally and some require upper extremity performance.

Psychometric tests can assess physical capabilities in terms of finger and hand dexterity as well as motor coordination (Gice, 1985). Psychometric tests can also assess the personality and temperament of a person.

In general, psychometric tests are instruments used to measure educational development, intelligence, aptitudes, skills, interest patterns, physical capabilities of upper extremities and personality or temperament.

Work sample assessment. Work samples assess a variety of attributes such as learning style, work behaviors and physical capabilities. A work sample is a task that is an actual job or simulated job.

One of the major advantages of work samples is that they tend to hold the interest of clients. They also give the evaluator a chance to observe actual work behavior.

Situational assessment. What better way to test the ability to perform a job than to actually perform the job itself? A situational assessment attempts to assess a person's skill to perform all aspects of a particular job. It also verifies interest in a particular job. Additionally, it assesses work behavior in an actual site and physical capacity to handle the particular job.

Employers are not generally accepting of this type of approach, therefore, workshops (using subcontract work) are often used.

Report

It is the evaluator's responsibility to pull all the material together and make recommendations concerning further programming and/or job placement.

The evaluator's report should depict the client's performance, including his knowledge of the processes involved, ability to learn, ability to handle material, learning style, as well as reaction to supervision, peer interaction and general work behaviors.

Concluding Considerations

This paper has described two currently utilized approaches, and one alternative approach, to the vocational assessment of the special needs student. The alternative approach is a method by which the student is referred to a Vocational Evaluation Center when he is nearing the end of his school career. Specific information has been included pertaining to vocational evaluation as it relates to the Vocational Evaluation Center. Success of the alternative method is dependent upon appropriate and thorough referral information, scientifically tested evaluation techniques and properly trained evaluators.

Appropriate Information

Structuring the collection of appropriate data is the starting point for a successfully run curriculum-based vocational assessment. It is assumed that the special and vocational educators responsible for the student's day-to-day IEP planning will carry out much of the assessment activities. However, a number of significant others will sooner or later involve themselves in the process. Maintaining open channels of communication is essential to the vocational assessment process and must never be underestimated. With so many people involved in the vocational assessment of each student it becomes necessary to devise formal collection forms and to hold formal staffings on a regular basis.

Evaluation Techniques

The evaluation tools/techniques utilized by Vocational Evaluation Centers must be appropriate, as well as reliable and valid. It should be noted that the reliability and validity of a test does not necessarily indicate appropriateness. Standardized test norms represent the test performance of a specified group. These norms may or may not be comparable with the client or the client's goal.

Understanding the classification of a standardized test (e.g., intelligence test) does not prepare the evaluator to interpret the test. Wright (1980) lists three major ways in which test scores can be interpreted: the criterion-referenced method, the predictive method, and the normative method. In-depth knowledge of these methods is required of the evaluator.

The validity of work samples should be a major concern to all Vocational Evaluation Centers. A work sample can be an invaluable asset in evaluating the vocational skills, interest, aptitudes, behaviors, etc., of handicapped people (McCray, 1979). However, this is only true when the work sample is constructed in such a way as to be a representative, systematic, and reliable simulation of real work. This investigation has uncovered a substantial amount of literature indicating a great need for scientific research in this area. Situational assessment is another area in need of founded research.

Trained Evaluators

Rubin and Porter (1979) reported a summary of data, from Atlanta, indicating that in regard to diagnostic skills, both rehabilitation counselors and vocational evaluators: (a) must be capable of developing a systematic evaluation plan and of understanding and synthesizing all information obtained regarding the client in order to make recommendations for training and/or job selection; (b) must be knowledgeable of job requirements and rewards obtainable from specific occupations, and; (c) must be capable of writing useful evaluation reports on clients. Additionally, rehabilitation counselors and vocational evaluators should be encouraged to investigate current issues in vocational assessment and to appraise existing tools/techniques of the field.

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