

Assessment

Illinois Reading Council Journal

*Standardized
Tests*

IRAP

Portfolios

*Interest
Inventory*

*Criterion
Reference
Tests*

*Informal
Tests*

Evaluation

Addressing the Perceived Issue of Over-identification of Students Receiving Special Services

Eleanor Anderson-Jackson

Throughout the United States, districts are facing the challenge of educating those students who are not quite considered the "norm." Unfortunately, a pattern has developed which suggests the need for special placement if a student has a special problem.

A number of procedures used to identify, assess, and place students into special programs are racially, culturally, religiously, and/or sex-biased. Attempts have been made through legislation like Title VI's, Section 504's, Title IX's, Handicapped Children Acts, IDEA's and ADA's to correct some of the inequities that exist in American public education and the work force. We must recognize that change can be mandated. In the meantime, disproportionate numbers of placements of minorities have occurred. The diagnostic placement process is more complex and more serious than the recognition being given to it over the years.

Educators are approaching solutions to the "at-risk problems" of academic failure, drug and substance abuse,

teen pregnancy and parenthood, and suicide from different perspectives. Assessment and placement in special programs has been a popular option. As a result, students are being inappropriately placed in special settings. Frequently members of such groups as African Americans and Hispanics are over-represented in special programs.

The goals outlined in "Education 2000" do suggest that educators will have to assist with breaking the mold that will address the social issues perpetuating part of the educational problems. The family structure is changing. No longer can we depend on the "Ozzie and Harriet" mentality of educating our youth. The demographics of the United States have changed drastically since "those days." Educators have to accept the challenge to educate all the children, or we will soon become a nation of "special education/special needs" students, based upon results on standardized assessments that use outdated norms.

The Sandia Report, a government funded report by the scientists of the

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Sandia National Laboratories in Albuquerque, made several observations. For example, the average scores of every minority group on the SAT examination have been going up for 15 years. However, minority youth continue to lag behind their white peers. This can be attributed to or correlated with the school setting rather than race or ethnicity. With that I suggest, differences are differences, not deficits. Let us begin to treat them as such.

Current testing often does not address this issue. Yes, students take the Illinois state assessment annually, but how often are the student outcome measures used to adjust and improve instruction? Notice the turn around time it takes to receive results. When did you receive the results of the assessment taken, and what did you do with the results? Does the teacher who administered the assessment use the results? Does the teacher for next year use the results? Or, is it used for the school report card to sell real estate (that is, to show others how well or how poorly we have performed)? In short, the assessment results need to serve the needs of administrators, teachers, parents, and students.

One way to avoid or eliminate as much of the bias as possible is by using multiple sources for data collection prior to the decision for placement. Portfolios have become the most effective way to address this issue in recent years. Portfolios

can include tests (intelligence, aptitude, and adaptive behavior), inventories, and checklists that use observational data to help multidisciplinary staffing teams make better decisions. The use of a variety of measures that work together can be incorporated into the current methods of collecting data for determining the instructional needs of individual students.

In an ideal school setting, the professional support staff is utilized to promote successful schooling to help educators, particularly teachers, develop students' positive self image, interpersonal relationships to improve their capacity, and strengthen their abilities to meet the social and academic challenges of our society. Assessment programs and instruments need to be adapted just as education and the world is adapting to the technological, cultural, and social changes.

Schools must rise to the challenge of meeting the needs of more foreign-born students. Special educators' responsibilities should include helping regular educators learn to deal with differences and recognize that communication is a function of socio-cultural factors. Staff will have to be prepared to deal with people from other cultures. Attitudinal changes will be made through staff development and inservice training. This effort will assist in eliminating some of the instances of over-identification of students with differences.

Closing Thoughts

Despite the best intentions, incomplete, or inappropriate assessment results are used to recommend and over-identify students in special programs. I would encourage educators to use a variety of assessment methods (i.e., formal and informal tests, criterion reference and teacher-made, norm referenced test, and performance/portfolio assessments) before considering isolation from peers as the viable option for educating youth.

The goal of assessment should include accommodating individual differences to enhance student performance. The bottom line is we need to worry more about attitude and not aptitude. With proper motivation, all children can learn and be successful.

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Eleanor Anderson-Jackson is the Assistant Superintendent of North Chicago Public Schools.

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