

Preface

Assessment Perspective in Today's Instructional Environments

Not since the passage of PL 94–142 in the mid-1970s has our educational system witnessed such a national shift in teaching and learning to meet the needs of at-risk and struggling learners as we have in response to intervention (RTI). This shift is characterized by refocusing our assessment efforts from determining “intrinsic deficits” to “quality and effectiveness” of instruction. For decades, our approach to meeting the needs of struggling learners was one of looking for intrinsic disorders to diagnose disabilities through a model that generally waited until the learner was significantly behind in academic or social-emotional development; specialized instruction (i.e., special education) then became the preferred option to best address the exhibited needs. Assessment practices over time focused on comparing students to students using standardized, norm referenced devices on a large-scale basis throughout our school systems.

For significant numbers of students who were struggling with learning, the assessment and associated educational model adhered to over the past few decades was one of refer, test, and place relative to special education. Less assessment emphasis was placed on the quality of instruction, rigorousness of implemented interventions, connection between that which was taught to that which was assessed, or relationships between student progress and teacher effectiveness. In our efforts to identify “deficits” within the learner to best understand student needs, we oftentimes neglected to evaluate the quality of instruction, effectiveness of the instruction, or to what extent students were actually learning what they were directly taught.

While inferences may have been made about these “instructional” variables, the needs of struggling learners were primarily grounded in perceived identified deficits within the student. In addition, while concerns with this type of deficit approach and model have existed for years, school systems continued to implement these practices perpetuating what has become to be known as the “wait to fail” model, where educational assistance and supplemental support are only provided after a period of significant failures occurred over extended

periods of time. This “wait to fail” model has been structured in such a way that many learners who clearly show signs of struggling in school are provided less assistance early in the process of efforts to prevent potential problems from becoming more significant.

However, with the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 and the reauthorization of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004, significant changes resulted in ways of thinking about why students struggle in school and how their needs should be best identified and subsequently addressed. Factors such as research-based curriculum, evidence-based interventions, multi-tiered instruction, highly qualified teachers, and response to intervention began to quickly sweep through our educational system. From a national perspective, Hoover, Baca, Love, and Saenz (2008) found that almost every state in the United States has or is planning to implement some form of multi-tiered response to intervention in their schools. The national shift to multi-tiered, research-based instruction is significant to assessment of struggling learners for a variety of reasons including the following:

1. Initial assessment focuses on quality of instruction and not intrinsic deficits.
2. Struggling learners are identified early in their schooling through structured screening.
3. The progress of struggling learners is assessed and monitored on a frequent, periodic basis.
4. Quick, easy to implement assessments are conducted at regular intervals using standardized procedures and valid measures.
5. Assessment data reflecting actual student progress provide the foundation for making instructional decisions.
6. Should special education be considered necessary, it will be determined only after high-quality instruction by highly qualified teachers has been implemented and corroborated.

As can be seen, the above items reflect a significant departure from the previous “wait to fail” model by focusing initially on quality of instruction, frequent assessments, charted data points to illustrate progress (or lack thereof), as well as decisions based on the direct connections between that which is taught and that which is assessed. An emphasis on three types of assessments is included in this new model: universal screening, progress monitoring, and diagnostic. Universal screening identifies struggling learners early in school, progress monitoring determines student progress over time, and diagnostic pinpoints and clarifies individual needs and suspected disabilities. *The current emphasis in our educational system is to provide multi-tiered or layered instruction that increases in intensity and duration based on assessed student progress directly resulting from classroom instruction.*

In regards to diagnostic assessment, it is important to bear in mind that this type of assessment, as we have seen its implementation over the past few

decades, is still an important component of multi-tiered instruction. However, diagnosing suspected disabilities and individual learning needs where specialized instruction may be necessary occurs after: (1) high-quality instruction in the general class curriculum has been implemented and corroborated, (2) student is provided supplemental support to assist with learning the general class curriculum, (3) progress made toward achievement is assessed at regular intervals, (4) instruction is adjusted based on progress-monitoring results, and (5) attempts to implement evidence-based instruction increasing in intensity and duration are clearly documented along with student response to that instruction. Therefore, in regards to assessment within this structure, use of effective, relevant, and evidence-based devices and practices must be implemented with the highest integrity if multi-tiered response to intervention is to succeed with all learners.