

GETTING SCHOOLED

Welcome to the second feature of Getting Schooled!

The Canadian Psychology Association (2007) has delineated the practice of school psychology into five levels of intervention: direct and indirect student-focused intervention, school-wide and district-wide intervention and research. Within this framework, school psychology literature identifies school psychologists' roles in terms of consultation, prevention, program planning, mental health care, advocacy, capacity building and assessment. Drs. Zwiers and Crawford have articulated in the following feature how school psychologists can re-examine the why and how of the psycho-educational assessment process and explored the task of assessment within the broader range of school psychology services.

Enjoy the Read!

R. Coranne Johnson, Ph.D., R.Psych.
Chair, PAA School Psychology Committee

REVITALIZING THE PSYCHO-EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT PROCESS

by **Shawn Crawford, Ph.D., R. Psych. &
Michael Zwiers, Ph.D., R. Psych.**

As school psychologists, we can be referred numerous students for assessments each year, making the logistics of keeping up with a demanding workload daunting. One of the biggest challenges is ensuring that the assessment process is purposeful and meaningful for everyone involved. This statement may seem to be a truism, but research has suggested that there is considerable variability in "consumer satisfaction" with respect to assessments and the reports generated by school psychologists (Brenner, 2003; Lichtenberger et al, 2004). If educators, parents and students do not find our services meaningful, our role in the education system could become obsolete. Reassessments can be particularly challenging, as these referrals are often generated to maintain compliance with the policies and standards of the relevant education ministry. As Deno (2005) suggests, if we consider schooling as "intervention," then psycho-educational assessments become an integral strategy within that intervention, or more of a living process that guides the actions of students, parents, and educators. This article offers an approach to assessment that can bring new energy to the assessment process and subsequent interventions. This is particularly relevant in light of changes coming to public education in Alberta through the **Action on Inclusion** initiative.

Involving all Stakeholders

One of the keys to a purposeful and successful psycho-educational assessment is that it responds directly to referral questions. To be effective, the referral questions need to be meaningful, but meaningful for whom? "*The individual being assessed*" is the obvious answer, but in most assessments of youth in educational systems, there are multiple perspectives, and potentially multiple questions, goals and desires. The key stakeholders include parents, teachers, educational assistants, and school administration. In addition, there is our own voice as a professional who hears the presenting concerns and raises questions related to the psychological processes underlying them. As Brown-Chidsey and Steege (2005) point out, with these different perspectives, making the referral question(s) clear and unambiguous can clarify for all stakeholders the specific issues being investigated by the school psychologist.

The Student's Voice

One of the purposes of an assessment should be to create an opportunity for students to communicate their concerns – and feel heard. How many times have we heard a student state or suggest that others just don't understand him or her? Implicit in such statements is that the student has some understanding of his or her strengths and needs that is difficult to articulate or objectively demonstrate to others. Hearing the student's perspective, including using their language in the assessment report, can help the youth to find a voice within the assessment process. Asking the student about their strengths, challenges, and desired areas for improvement will facilitate the articulation of their voice and hopefully spark their engagement in the process. How many times have we heard a student say that they were never informed about assessment findings or recommendations? Explaining assessment results directly to the student in language that he or she can understand can help the student to understand and articulate their own strengths and needs. Have we empowered students with an understanding of their learning profile and then asked them where they think interventions should focus? The assessment process may be valuable as a tool for facilitating self-acceptance and self-advocacy.

Answering Questions: A New Look

Sometimes questions can be answered by providing an accurate diagnosis, but a diagnosis is typically only one piece of most referrals. Once the question of "*What?*" has been answered, then we need to answer the question: "*What next?*" An appropriate assessment process can accomplish this by maintaining an emphasis on the *practical relevance* of the assessment results to a student's learning and school life.

After clarifying our questions, we need to design and implement a process for answering those questions. However, to make the process meaningful, it is critical to match the instruments and methods to the questions (Brenner, 2003) and the situation. Does a standard one-size-fits-all assessment battery make the most effective use of our time and skills? Is it necessary to administer an entire cognitive or academic test battery? Often, meaningful results can be gleaned from key subtests across a number of measures e.g., if a student is struggling with reading, is the problem with phonological processing, working memory, fluency, visual processing, or comprehension?

In the psycho-educational assessment process, moving beyond formal standardized assessment to dynamic assessment, trial teaching, or use of adaptive technology can help to clarify more precisely where the student's problems are, while identifying potential solutions. For example, does a student's written expression improve if they are given *additional time to brainstorm* about the topic, *look at a picture*, *talk to someone* about the topic, or *dictate their thoughts* to a scribe? Can the outcome of the psycho-educational assessment process link directly to effective intervention strategies? Involving teachers and Learning Coaches in the process of determining effective intervention strategies generally increases their ownership of the implementation stage.

Providing Meaningful Feedback and Recommendations

Feedback is a process that includes reviewing the questions, the assessment approach, and the answers that were discovered while working with the student and the key stakeholders. A feedback session should help the key stakeholders to better understand the student and his or her strengths and weaknesses, as well as strategies and accommodations that are likely to be

effective, along with those that will likely not be helpful, or ones that are not palatable to the student.

A key to communicating assessment results is to put the assessment process into context. This can be done by reviewing the reason(s) for the assessment and clarifying everyone's specific concerns and desires. Further, framing the assessment as part of the process of assisting the student, and not just a product in and of itself, can be helpful. Having everyone at the table, including educators, parents and, where possible, the student, can promote rich discussion and sharing of ideas and strategies. In the end, we want everyone involved in the assessment process to feel like they were an important member of the team and that they received something useful from the process. As results are being communicated, it can also be valuable to check the relevance of the results with stakeholders through questions such as, "How do these results fit with your perceptions?" or "Are there any surprises?" Finally, focusing on strengths of students can also be an energizing component of sharing results, but one that is often not emphasized in a systematic way (Brenner, 2003). Looking at areas of strength can provide not only a sense of hope and encouragement, but also point to directions for intervention.

Follow-up after the Assessment

Often, when school psychologists review the assessment results it marks the completion of their involvement with a student and family. However, as mentioned above, it should be the beginning, or the continuation of a broader spectrum of school psychology services that support the student. These services can involve implementing the strategies and recommendations offered, reviewing the outcomes based on success and ongoing feedback from the stakeholders, followed by revising interventions and accommodations. The school psychologist can continue to be supportive by role-modeling strategies, problem solving with stakeholders as issues arise, participating in future meetings to update progress, or conducting additional assessment as necessary. In this way the contributions of the assessment become one aspect of a wider range of services a school psychologist can provide.

In light of new information and research regarding best practices in school psychology, as well as the changing roles for school psychologists in our province, we should always be striving to ensure that our assessments continue to reflect the most valuable and relevant information for students, parents and educators.

References

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TIPS:

- Talk to all key individuals: student, parents, educators to discover what questions or concerns they have. Find out what they have tried, what helped, and what didn't. If something was not effective, do they know why?
- Develop an individualized assessment process that answers the questions asked.
- Make the assessment relevant by conducting targeted assessment that moves beyond standardized tests to include trial teaching, accommodations, and assistive technology.
- Include everyone in the feedback process. Review the questions, the assessment approach, and the answers that you discovered while working with the student and the learning team.
- Focus on the strengths of the student and consider those when creating and offering recommendations.