



## Chapter 3

# Assessment

## Chapter 3 Assessment

**Issue I.** Assessors/evaluators should have knowledge of the impact of deafblindness on learning and have the expertise to select, administer and interpret a variety of assessment approaches and data.

**Issue II.** Assessors/evaluators should understand and use a variety of communication forms. They should have the ability to interpret and respond to students' forms, reasons and meanings of communication.

**Issue III.** Assessment and evaluation of students who are deafblind should be a collaborative, comprehensive, and ongoing process that includes authentic assessments.

**Issue IV.** Assessments and evaluations should occur across a variety of natural environments (home, community, school) to determine students' functional abilities (communication, self-care, vision and hearing, orientation and mobility).

**Issue V.** Evaluation of literacy and numeracy abilities should be included in the assessment process.

**Issue VI.** Assessors/evaluators should actively involve families in the assessment process, and give consideration to family cultures and values.

**Issue VII.** Assessment/evaluation should lead to ongoing planning and implementation of the individualized education program.

## Introduction

Assessments/evaluations serve many purposes within the educational system. They are required to determine eligibility for services, to measure academic achievement, to develop the individualized education program (IEP) and to assess progress in meeting the goals of the plan.

The assessment of students who are deafblind is challenging. There are no standardized tests specifically designed for deafblindness. The reason is that there is no typical student who is deafblind who can serve as the norm upon which to base assessment or evaluation tools. Often, students have varying degrees of sensory losses and additional cognitive, physical and emotional challenges. Each of these factors and their combined impact must be carefully considered, and the student should be assessed in a holistic way.

Typical assessments of students with other disabilities use pictures, verbal instruction, visual imitation, and auditory recall. These assessments are seldom appropriate for students who are deafblind. A student who cannot see, or see well, and who does not understand what to expect is unlikely to perform well on a test (Miles & Riggio, 1999, p. 96).

Assessments of students who are deafblind should combine and synthesize information about communication, vision and hearing, cognitive and motor abilities, and family priorities. This requires unique and creative skills on the part of the assessment team members. They must understand the impact that deafblindness has on students' development; they must understand and be able to use the communication forms that are appropriate for students who are deafblind; and they must be willing to work as cohesive teams on which members share information that will result in a fair appraisal of students' abilities, challenges, and priorities for instruction.

It is essential that assessments of students who are deafblind be comprehensive and ongoing, with adequate input from team members and most importantly, from families.

## Issues and Practices

**Issue I. Assessors/evaluators should have knowledge of the impact of deafblindness on learning and have the expertise to select, administer, and interpret a variety of assessment approaches and data.**

Combined vision and hearing losses, regardless of degree, impact access to information and people. Assessors should understand the impact of combined losses on individual students. These combined sensory impairments remain the primary disability for students, even when

additional disabilities exist. Students who are deafblind are often misdiagnosed and placed in inappropriate programs because assessors who do not have knowledge of deafblindness focus on more obvious disabilities, such as physical or cognitive impairments.

Professionals should select the appropriate assessment strategies for individual students, understanding that they range from those who have multiple disabilities to those who are functioning at grade level. The assessor must have sufficient knowledge of the diversity of students who are deafblind, as well as of the diversity of assessment options, to ensure that a comprehensive assessment is done. For example, a student functioning at grade level can participate in standardized testing, while a student with significant multiple disabilities will require many different strategies. A student who is deafblind may have complex medical needs, and the assessor should understand the impact of his/her physical needs and his/her attention span issues on the assessment process.

**Issue II. Assessors/evaluators should understand and use a variety of communication forms. They should have the ability to interpret and respond to students' forms, reasons and meanings of communication.**

Evaluating the communication abilities of students who are deafblind is the core of the assessment process. Students who are deafblind have different abilities, varying degrees of vision and hearing losses, diverse social experiences, different learning styles, and/or additional disabilities.

The majority of people who are deafblind have tremendous difficulty learning to be effective communicators. Their access to people is often limited, so they are cut off from what people are saying, doing, and feeling, and from what is happening around them. Although most students have some remaining vision and hearing, their access to people and information may be confused and distorted.

The ability to communicate allows people to connect with others and to establish meaningful relationships. Communication is the gateway to accessing educational curricula. Developing students' receptive and expressive communication abilities is the key to enhancing their quality of life. It is essential that anyone who assesses communication become a competent partner with the student who is deafblind. The assessor should establish a trusting relationship and incorporate an interactive, conversational approach.

The assessment process should include communication and interaction between students and others, such as family members, peers, and teachers. This interactive, conversational approach is necessary not only to determine the students' current functioning abilities but also to challenge and motivate them to perform at higher levels (Miles & Riggio, 1999, p. 96; Nelson, van Dijk,

McDonnell, & Thompson, 2002, p. 109).

Students should have opportunities to initiate, and the assessors should follow students' interests or topics of conversation (Miles & Riggio, 1999, p. 97, Nafstad & Rodbroe, 1999, p. 49, McLetchie & Riggio, 1997, p. 11). In addition, assessors should observe the people and partners with whom students prefer to interact. These partners may be family members or peers, and should not be limited to the adults on students' teams.

Assessing communication is a dynamic, interactive process, which can involve multiple strategies and instruments. The major characteristics of all communication are fourfold: the forms students and partners use for expressive and receptive communication, the reasons or functions of communication; the content or meaning of communication; and the context of communication (McLetchie & Riggio, 1997, p. 15, Nelson et al., 2002, p. 102).

### **Issue III. Assessment and evaluation of students who are deafblind should be a collaborative, comprehensive, and ongoing process that includes authentic assessments.**

Formal assessments are “standardized, norm-referenced tests, which are designed to compare the performance of one individual to that of a normative group” (Choate & Evans, 1992, p. 7). Currently, there are no formal assessments that are standardized for students with deafblindness. While some standardized assessments can be used in part when evaluating students who are deafblind, these tests are not designed or normed for these students, and great caution should be taken when interpreting their results.

Professionals should have expertise in the administration of an array of assessment approaches that are appropriate for students who are deafblind. Informal approaches to psychological evaluation of students who are deafblind in natural contexts and situations are most often the most appropriate methods to use (Mar & Goehl, 2002, p. 4). Informal assessment refers to a situation in which there can be some variation in the way the test is administered and there can be some subjectivity in the way the test performance is interpreted. Structured, informal assessments include observation, curriculum-based assessments, interviews, portfolio assessments, and person-centered assessments among other types (Sacks & Silberman, 1998, p. 92). Well-planned, informal assessments are invaluable to understanding the strengths and needs of students who are deafblind.

Ecological assessments are informal assessments used to look at the strengths and needs of students to determine which adaptations, supports, or accommodations are required for them to be successful in varying environments. (Haring & Romer, 1995, p. 289; Orelove, Sobsey, &

Silberman, 2004, p. 534).

Under the current educational reform legislation, the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), statewide assessments are mandated for all students. Most often, alternate assessments are used to meet this mandate for students who are unable to participate in a general state assessment, with or without accommodations. In general there are three approaches to alternate assessments:

- *Portfolios*: Student portfolios are a purposeful and systematic collection of student work that is evaluated and measured against predetermined scoring criteria. Portfolios have multiple pieces of evidence, collected over time, and content is determined by teachers and/or the state.
- *Performance Events*: These assessments are direct measures of a skill, usually in a one-on-one situation. These can range from highly structured one-on-one assessments similar to traditional pencil and paper tests to a more flexible approach that can be adapted to student needs.
- *Checklists*: This method relies on teachers to remember and record whether students are able to carry out certain activities. Reported scores are usually based on the number of skills students are able to successfully perform. (National Alternate Assessment Center, 2006)

Many states use portfolio assessment as their method of alternate assessment for students with disabilities (Thompson & Thurow, 2001, p. 16). Although portfolio assessments may not be perfectly reliable, they may be the most appropriate for students who are deafblind. They provide the evaluator with a comprehensive and personal appraisal of students' abilities. (DeCaluwe, McLetchie, Peters, Luiselli, & Mason, 2004, p. 3).

#### **Issue IV. Assessments and evaluations should occur across a variety of natural environments (home, community, school) to determine students' functional abilities (communication, self-care, vision and hearing, orientation and mobility).**

For students who are deafblind, new places and people can be frightening and confusing. Observing and interacting with students in real-life settings provide a great deal of functional information. Students who are deafblind rely on context to understand what is expected of them. Asking students who are deafblind to perform a skill in settings other than real life removes the contextual cues they rely on to make sense of the task. Artificial environments such as testing rooms may not give accurate information, especially when students have complex disabilities (Nelson et al., 2002, p. 97).

Clinical assessments often address discrete areas of functioning (e.g., ophthalmological, audiological, orthopedic, low vision, physical health) and are often conducted in a specialized

environment designed for that purpose. Clinical assessments may be very helpful in determining specific needs for therapy or for the prescription of medical treatment or aids and devices.

A functional assessment is different from a clinical assessment in that the assessor considers how the student functions with familiar people in familiar environments. Functional assessment occurs for a longer period of time over several sessions. Although clinical assessments are also necessary, functional assessments look at ways in which students are able to use communication, vision, hearing, problem solving, and motor abilities in everyday situations, within everyday environments –familiar people, places, and things, and their interactions (Mar, 2002; Orelove et al., 2004, p. 505). It is necessary to have ongoing communication interactions during functional activities with people.

Functional assessments are both student-centered and family-centered. The assessors select activities and environments in which students can demonstrate their competence to the best of their abilities. They focus on the students' present and future needs. Functional assessment should focus on the following areas of student learning:

- communication,
- functional vision,
- functional hearing,
- academics,
- social competence,
- daily living skills,
- leisure and recreation,
- technology,
- motor skills,
- orientation and mobility,
- vocational skills and interests.

Functional assessments provide a true picture of the student's capabilities and are the foundation from which to determine educational priorities and to design instruction.

**Issue V. Evaluation of literacy and numeracy abilities should be included in the assessment process.**

### *Emergent Literacy and Literacy*

Reading and writing are symbolic systems that allow people to receive and send information. Reading is based on language, and language is based on concepts developed from interaction with people and the environment. Part of that interaction is spoken language to share ideas about the environment and to name objects. (Miles, 2005, p. 2; Huebner, Prickett, Welch, & Joffe, 1995, p. 296). Written forms of communication are learned only after much exposure to the environment and to language that attaches meaning to environmental concepts.

All students with deafblindness must be exposed to a literacy-rich environment and must have their literacy abilities assessed. Students who are deafblind may be able to see regular-sized print with magnification, large print or read braille, and become capable readers.

When thinking about literacy as it relates to students who are deafblind, it is important to expand conventional definitions of reading and writing to include emergent literacy experiences (Miles, 2005, p. 2). When evaluating the literacy skills of students who are deafblind, things other than student's abilities to read print or braille may be observed. For example, the student with deafblindness who uses a calendar box schedule system reads his/her schedule for the day by touching each object symbol in a left-to-right sequence. This is an emerging literacy skill that allows him/her to gather information and anticipate the events of the day. The student's ability to recognize these objects as symbols of activities demonstrates early literacy skills. The student's ability to sequence items from left to right demonstrates another early literacy skill that can be evaluated using an object or picture calendar system.

Assessors must consider the amount of exposure that students have had to words in print or braille that are accessible. Likewise, they must consider the amount of exposure the student has had to language that is accessible. For example, labeling objects and pictures with printed words and braille gives a student access to different levels of symbols, from concrete to abstract, that develop literacy. The assessor should observe the student's current level of ability, while at the same time exposing him/her to higher levels as necessary to encourage development and to evaluate the student's ability to move to increasingly symbolic forms.

The following questions address some of the basic skills that should be considered when assessing the early literacy skills of the student who is deafblind.

- How does the student demonstrate interest in and awareness of the environment?
- How does the student demonstrate recognition of familiar things in the environment?
- Is the student able to learn the names of objects in the environment?
- Is the student able to name actions in the environment?
- Does the student comment on activities that occur?

- Does the student recognize an object as a symbol of an activity?
- Does the student recognize a picture or partial object as a symbol of an activity?
- What exposure does the student have to written language (print or braille)?
- What exposure does the student have to story-time, experience books, or journal activities?
- Does the student have opportunities to write or draw in various ways?
- Does the student have and use a daily calendar? A weekly calendar? A monthly calendar? A yearly calendar?

### ***Numeracy***

Early experiences of using concrete objects for counting are important for all learners, including those who are deafblind. Students require many opportunities to learn these skills in everyday environments (e.g., pairing shoes, buying items from a store or vending machine). These experiences are the foundations for numeracy. With effective teaching, some students who are deafblind can develop basic math, and others can access and understand college-level math concepts.

### **Issue VI. Assessors/evaluators should actively involve families in the assessment process and give consideration to family cultures and values.**

Federal law requires the inclusion of family in all aspects of the assessment and program-planning process. Assessors must encourage active involvement by family members of students who are deafblind. They are the source of meaningful information about their child that will become valuable resources to assessment teams. For example, family members identify and give meaning to the idiosyncratic, nonlinguistic communication used by their children.

The approach of person-centered planning encourages parents and caregivers to be key players in all aspects of assessing and planning programs for students who are deafblind. It provides a structure to obtain important information about children as individuals and about family values and culture (Mount, 1992, p. 2). Assessment and evaluation should always be accomplished through a partnership of parents and professionals. Families and caregivers should have direct access to deafblind specialists on teams. (See chapter 1.)

### **Issue VII. Assessment/evaluation should lead to ongoing planning and implementation of the individualized education program.**

Often, students who are deafblind are identified as “multiply disabled” or “severely disabled”

on the IEP. It is critical that IEPs clearly identify students as deafblind to highlight the need for specialized practices that will meet their unique educational needs (Reiman & Johnson, 1992, p. 68).

The student is the most important member of the team and should be involved to the maximum extent possible in decision making. Professionals should interpret the information from multiple assessments and collaborate with the students' teams to use assessment results and recommendations when developing an individualized education program. An assessment plan, competently implemented, will lead to developing quality services for the student.

## References

Bruce, S. (2005). The impact of congenital deafblindness on the struggle to symbolism. *International Journal of Disability, Development, and Education*, 52, 233-251.

Choate, J. S., & Evans, S. S. (1992). Authentic assessment of special learners: Problem or promise? *Preventing School Failure*, 37, 6-9.

Haring, N. G., & Romer, L. T. (Eds.) (1995). *Welcoming students who are deaf-blind into typical classrooms: Facilitating school participation, learning, and friendships*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Huebner, K., Prickett, J., Welch, T. R., & Joffe, E. (Eds.). (1995). *Hand in hand: Essentials of communication and orientation and mobility for your students who are deaf-blind*. New York: AFB Press

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, Pub. L. No. 108-446, 20 U.S.C. § 300.320 (2004).

Kleinert, H., & Kearns, J. F. (2001). *Alternate assessment: Measuring outcomes and supports for students with disabilities*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Kleinert, H., Haig, J., Kearns, J. F., & Kennedy, S. (2000). Alternate assessments: Lessons learned and roads to be taken. *Exceptional Children*, 67, 51-66.

Mar, H., & Goehl, K. (2002). PHASES: Psychologists helping to assess students' educational strengths. *Deaf-Blind Perspectives*, 10(1), 1-4.

McLetchie, B., & Riggio, M. (1997). *Competencies for teachers of learners who are deafblind*. Watertown, MA: Perkins School for the Blind.

Miles, B. (2005). *Literacy for persons who are deaf-blind* [Fact sheet]. Monmouth, OR: National Consortium on Deaf-Blindness.

Miles, B., & Riggio, M. (Eds.). (1999). *Remarkable conversations: A guide to developing meaningful communication with children and young adults who are deafblind*. Watertown, MA: Perkins School for the Blind.

Mount, B. (1992). *Person-centered planning: Finding directions for change using personal futures planning*. New York: Graphic Futures.

Nafstad, A., & Rodbroe, I. (1999). *Co-creating communication: Perspectives on diagnostic education for individuals who are congenitally deafblind and individuals whose impairments may have similar effects*. Dronninglund, Denmark: Forlaget Nord-Press.

Nelson, C., van Dijk, J., McDonnell, A., & Thompson, K. (2002). A framework for understanding young children with severe multiple disabilities: The van Dijk approach to assessment. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 27, 97-111.

Orelove, F. P., Sobsey, D., & Silberman, R. K. (Eds.) (2004). *Educating children with multiple disabilities: A collaborative approach*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Sacks, S. Z., & Silberman, S. K. (Eds.). (1998). *Educating students who have visual impairments with other disabilities*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Stremel, K. (2000). *Communication interactions: It takes two*. Monmouth, OR: DB-Link.

Thompson, S., & Thurlow, M. (2001). *2001 state special education outcomes: A report on state activities at the beginning of a new decade*. Minneapolis, MN: National Center on Educational Outcomes.

Zatta, M. (2003). *Is there a relationship between teacher experience and training and student scores on the MCAS Alternate Assessment?* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA.

