

Assessment in Special Education

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

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Introduction

Introduction to Assessment for Special Education

Chapter Objectives

Upon completion of this chapter, readers will be able to:

-  Name key features of the text
 -  Describe purposes for assessment within general and special education
 -  Identify features of ethical assessment
 -  Define core assessment terminology that is relevant to varied types of assessment
-

What Is Educational Assessment?

It has been said that teachers make more decisions per minute than brain surgeons. We do not tend to promote claims without data to back them up, but this one resonates with us. In our own experiences and in our work with educators across the country, we recognize the almost-continuous flow of questions and decisions that teachers process throughout every school day. *Does this seating chart provide the optimal arrangement for keeping everyone meaningfully engaged? Can Marcus and Luis work in the same group during literacy stations today? What real-world application of the Pythagorean theorem will resonate with my second-period class? Is the same application going to connect with fourth period? Does Kayleigh need a quiet break or a firm reminder of expected behavior right now? Is this the best pacing, the best sequence, the best representation to help Kai improve decoding skills? Are all of my students understanding what I'm teaching?*

These questions, and the information-gathering activities that accompany them, are part of the assessment cycle. Assessment is often viewed as a formal and daunting process, so it may seem strange to think of these everyday classroom questions as assessment. Assessment can be formal or informal. It can feel daunting at times, though our hope is to make it less so through this text, and at other times it can feel quite intuitive. At its core, **educational assessment** is really just *the practice of intentionally gathering information for the purpose of guiding instruction*. Teachers are constantly gathering information in formal and informal ways to understand who students are, what they know, and how they are learning. *All teachers* use knowledge of student characteristics and learning to make decisions about academic, social-emotional, and behavioral support for *all learners*.

Assessment, as it relates to special education, has some added complexities. Special educators are expected to use assessment data in a diagnostic fashion to develop and evaluate specialized instruction that meets the individual needs of learners with disabilities. Additionally, special educators, as members of multidisciplinary teams, are often expected to take a leadership role in using classroom assessment data and more formal types of assessment data to make legal decisions about matters such as special education eligibility and educational placement. Further, special educators in collaboration with their general education colleagues are responsible for ensuring that diverse learners are truly able to demonstrate their knowledge through classroom assessments. The weight of these responsibilities can feel overwhelming, especially to pre-service and early-career teachers. In fact, a substantial body of research indicates that both general and special education teachers have difficulty using assessment data for decision making and lack confidence in their ability to do so (Espin et al., 2021).

The good news is that assessment doesn't have to feel overwhelming. Each of the authors of this book has extensive experience helping pre-service and practicing teachers learn how to apply assessment techniques in meaningful and practical

ways. We have designed this book as a practical guide for special educators with sections structured around three primary ways in which assessments are used in special education. We were intentional in ordering the sections of the book based on the sequence of interactions that special education teachers are likely to have with students new to their caseloads. However, we recognize that other sequencing may make sense based on different learning needs.

In the first section of the book, *Special Education Eligibility Determinations*, we focus on the comprehensive, multidisciplinary evaluation process used to determine if a student qualifies for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA). This section includes information about administering and interpreting formal assessments that guide legal decisions. We emphasize the roles and responsibilities that special educators have in the process, while also providing an overview of the assessment responsibilities held by other professionals such as school psychologists and diagnosticians. In the second section, *Progress Monitoring and Data-Based Decision Making*, we cover a set of assessment practices that special educators and other intervention providers use to monitor student progress toward individualized goals across academic and behavioral outcomes. Readers will learn about curriculum-based measurement, general outcome measures, and mastery measures as tools to guide intervention and help students maximize learning. Finally, the third section, *Classroom Assessment*, explains varied methods of assessment that can be used to evaluate learning of general education content standards in ways that are practical for teachers and accessible to all learners. Each of the three sections addresses *why* assessments are used, *how* they are implemented, and *what* the results mean. These three questions are central to developing a practical understanding of assessment. In addition, each chapter includes case studies to contextualize learning and practice activities that are grounded in real-world applications of assessment. To set the stage for our work, it is important to have a shared understanding of some foundational concepts. We ground those foundational concepts around the questions *Why*, *What*, and *How*.

Why Do We Assess and What Assessments Meet These Purposes?

By definition, all educational assessment is designed to inform instruction. The ways in which assessments inform instruction differ, and some unique forms of assessment exist within special education processes that are fairly uncommon in general education. Berman et al. (2019) identified three major purposes for assessment across educational settings. These include:

- **System Monitoring:** Measures administered for the purpose of system monitoring are designed to evaluate the overall performance of education at large. One example is the National Assessment of

Educational Progress (NAEP), a congressionally mandated assessment designed to provide information about student achievement across states (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Data from assessments like the NAEP answer the question, “Is our education system effective?” The outcomes from these types of assessments often guide education policy.

- **Accountability:** Assessments used for accountability purposes provide evidence of the effectiveness of teachers, schools, and school divisions at meeting designated learning outcomes. Most teachers (and students) are familiar with the annual accountability measures associated with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; 2015). The law requires that all students complete assessments of reading, mathematics, and science standards. Additionally, schools must assess and report English language learner proficiency; high school graduation rates; and one nonacademic outcome such as school climate, engagement, or attendance. The results of these accountability measures are intended to answer the question, “Are educators providing adequate instruction that allows all learners to meet rigorous standards?” The outcomes from these types of assessments inform allocation of educational resources (e.g., funding and staffing) and instructional planning, often at the school and/or department level.
- **Selection and Placement:** Assessments used for these purposes serve as “gatekeepers” to specific programs or services. Tests such as the American College Test (ACT) and SAT (formerly Scholastic Aptitude Test) are used to make selection decisions for college entry. In PK–12 public education, examples include the types of assessments used to determine if students qualify for intervention or extension offerings, such as programs for English language learners, gifted and talented services, and special education. The results of these assessments answer the question, “Does this student meet the criteria needed to participate in this program?”

In special education, a variety of formal and informal assessments are connected to selection and placement decisions. A very formal set of assessment procedures exists to determine if students qualify for special education services under IDEA. Frey (2019) identified four different types of assessment within special education. Each assessment practice addresses a unique purpose. However, the results are used in integrated ways to determine if students require special education and to plan for instruction or intervention.

- **Screening:** Screening measures are considered “universal.” They are administered to all students at designated times and are intended to identify students who may need individualized support to benefit from

their educational experiences (Petscher et al., 2019). Vision, hearing, and scoliosis screenings are widely used in U.S. public schools.

Academic screenings are also common. For example, screenings of foundational literacy skills are widely used in the elementary grades (National Center on Improving Literacy, 2022). Screening tools also exist to identify behavioral and social-emotional needs (National Center on Intensive Intervention, n.d.).

- **Diagnostics:** These types of assessments are used to develop deep and individualized understanding of student characteristics and academic skills in specific areas. They are used when a student is not responding as expected to instruction. The results of these measures allow teachers to identify student strengths and needs, as well as specific objectives for intervention (National Center on Intensive Intervention, n.d.). Diagnostic assessments may be formal or informal. The intelligence tests that are frequently administered as part of the special education evaluation are very formal and can be considered diagnostic (Erden et al., 2020) because they identify an individual student's areas of strength and difficulty in different aspects of cognitive processing. There are also many diagnostic assessments that help teachers understand how a student is developing specific skills in literacy, mathematics, and social-emotional domains (National Center on Intensive Intervention, n.d.). Conducting error analysis within a classroom-delivered reading test is an example of informal diagnostic assessment.
- **Monitoring Progress:** **Progress monitoring tools** are designed to *evaluate student performance and rate of growth for the purpose of determining the effectiveness of an intervention* (American Institutes for Research, n.d.). These assessments are administered frequently (e.g., weekly or every few weeks) and should be highly sensitive to change. Progress monitoring is generally a form of assessment that is unique to special educators and others who provide intervention.
- **Planning for Instruction and Intervention:** Special education teachers, like all teachers, use **formative assessments** to *determine how students are learning content that is being taught and to adjust ongoing instruction*. Similarly, special education teachers, like all teachers, use **summative assessments** to *evaluate what students have learned*.

How Do We Assess?

Assessment, regardless of the purpose or format, is a multistep process that is embedded in the cycle of instructional design and implementation, as shown in Figure I-1. The instructional cycle involves identifying learning objectives,

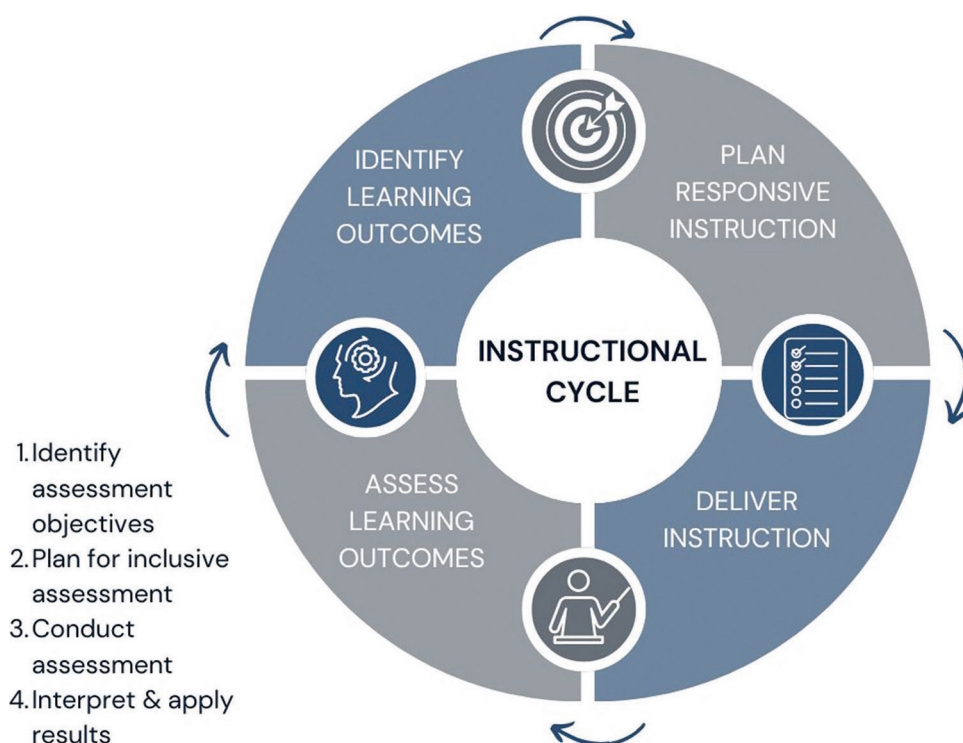


Figure I-1. The Instructional Cycle With Phases of Assessment.

planning for responsive instruction, delivering that instruction, and assessing learning outcomes. The act of assessing learning outcomes is further divided into identifying assessment objectives, planning for inclusive assessment, conducting assessment, then interpreting and applying assessment results. Each of these aspects of assessment will be addressed in the chapters of this book.

Ethical Considerations in Assessment

Discussions of how we assess are incomplete if we don't also consider legal and ethical implications. There is a long history of assessment practices being used to marginalize and discriminate against children of color, emergent bilingual or multilingual learners, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016). This is particularly true of formal assessments related to special education. Landmark legal cases such as *Diana v. State Board of Education* (1970) and *Larry P. v. Riles* (1984) provide prime examples of biased assessment practices that led to discriminatory action. In the *Diana* case, Spanish-speaking children were identified as having intellectual disabilities and placed in segregated settings after being given intelligence tests in English. In the *Larry P.* case, the United States Court

of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit found intentional acts of discrimination associated with the use of culturally biased intelligence tests, which resulted in inaccurate identification and segregated placements for Black students. Both the *Diana* and *Larry P.* cases showed evidence of disproportionate representation of minoritized students in special education and segregated placements. As much as we would like to think disproportionality is a thing of the past, it is not. Current data still reveal a disproportionately high representation of students of color in special education eligibility categories such as Emotional Disability and Intellectual Disability, along with placement in separate educational settings (Brown et al., 2019). Therefore, diligent effort must be applied to ensure that all assessment practices are equitable and responsive to the diverse strengths and needs of all learners in our schools. With that thought in mind, the following principles are integrated through the book, and we propose that they should be central to the practices of all educators engaged in all types of assessment.

All Assessment Practices Should Be Inclusive and Culturally Responsive

In response to the discriminatory practices of the past, IDEA (2004) now has several protections designed to prevent discriminatory evaluation. The law specifies that school teams must select assessment measures and administer them in ways that are not discriminatory on a racial or cultural basis. In relation to formal assessments, this means that when school professionals select an assessment to use within the evaluation process, they must ensure that each measure was developed with populations of students whose characteristics are similar to those of the student being evaluated. The law further specifies that assessments must be administered in the language and format that are most likely to accurately depict a student's knowledge and skill.

Delivering equitable assessment and instruction requires educators to move beyond just considering if measures are potentially biased and toward intentionally assessing in culturally responsive ways. This applies to both formal and informal assessment. **Culturally responsive assessment** (CRA) *involves collecting information about what students know and can do in ways that account for students' unique cultural backgrounds and experiences* (Sinharay & Johnson, 2024). Educators are ethically accountable for selecting, developing, and implementing culturally responsive classroom assessments in the same way that they are legally responsible for implementing culturally responsive formal assessments. The potential impact of classroom assessment on diverse learners cannot be minimized. Classroom assessment may "strengthen or undermine students' self-concepts, attitudes toward learning, and continued educational aspirations" (Nortvedt et al., 2020, p. 10). While there are many nuanced actions associated with culturally responsive assessment that will be elaborated in subsequent chapters, Nortvedt and colleagues identified some guiding principles that are relevant to all forms of assessment.