
VOCATIONAL ASSESSMENT FOR TRANSITION PLANNING: GUIDELINES FOR EDUCATORS

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Most parents and educators would generally agree that one of the primary goals of school is to prepare students for independent living in society. The school setting provides many opportunities for students to develop the academic and interpersonal skills that they will need to function as productive citizens. Unfortunately, experiences at school do not always prepare students adequately for eventual transition to their careers. Often students find themselves choosing careers in an unplanned and haphazard manner. Having a clear plan for choosing a career and making the transition from school to work is extremely important and can be developed based upon the results of a comprehensive vocational assessment. Given the clear relationship between vocational assessment and transition planning, the two processes should be conducted as one. In fact, the integration of vocational assessment and transition planning is the key to success.

Transdisciplinary Vocational Assessment

Transdisciplinary school-based vocational assessment is a comprehensive assessment conducted within a school setting where the purpose is to facilitate educational and vocational planning in order to allow a student to make a successful adjustment to work, postsecondary education, and/or community living. Assessment may include cognitive, social, affective, and other domains in which information is gathered to assist in effective career decision making. In accordance with career development theory, data are collected and made available to students, parents, and teachers who can then assist students in planning developmentally appropriate vocational goals.

School-based vocational assessment should incorporate a transdisciplinary approach that includes school and community professionals in the evaluation and assessment of the vocational and educational needs of students, especially those with disabilities. Programs should ensure that assessments are conducted with a variety of assessment techniques and at three levels: elementary, middle school/junior high, and high school. Assessment techniques might include interest and aptitude testing, interviews, rating scales, observation, and situational assessment in as naturalistic a setting as possible.

Importance of Vocational Assessment

Students continue to progress through schools expecting that jobs or careers await them upon graduation from high school. However, classes designed to enhance student skills in defined subject areas may ultimately fall short when it comes to teaching the skills necessary to obtain and maintain a satisfying job. In particular, individuals with disabilities are at especially high risk for failure or dissatisfaction with their jobs. When compared with their non-disabled peers, individuals with mild disabilities experience a higher rate of unemployment and underemployment, lower pay, and greater dissatisfaction with their job. Hence, this population of students is especially in need of vocational assessment services. Moreover, studies have shown that there is a high dropout rate among students with disabilities, and, as a result, they often do not always receive the vocational training necessary to make a smooth transition from school to work.

When studies compare special education group dropout rates with control group dropout rates, it has been consistently demonstrated that students with disabilities leave school in greater numbers than students without disabilities. Students with learning disabilities and emotional disabilities are at an especially high risk of dropping out of school, with some studies reporting dropout rates exceeding 40% and 50% for these populations, respectively.

The Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) both address vocational assessment in the schools. The Perkins Act stipulates that parents must

be informed about vocational education available for their children one year before they are eligible. The Act also requires that parents be provided with information about vocational education such as eligibility requirements and details about the programs offered. Once enrolled, students should be assessed in several areas. These areas include interests, abilities, and special needs as well as any other special services needed to assist in the transition from school to work. IDEA mandates that services aiding in the transition process be established for students with disabilities to ensure a successful transition from school to work and the community, and that plans for transition be initiated by age 14.

The process of establishing vocational assessment programs requires effective planning and a structured, team-oriented approach. In order to effectively and competently conduct a comprehensive vocational assessment, professionals need to be aware of career development theory and knowledgeable about interest and aptitude assessment as well as other empirically based vocational assessment practices. A useful reference on career development theory and interest and aptitude assessment includes Kapes and Mastie (2002).

Vocational/Career Development Theory

Vocational/career developmental theory is the basis for developing school-based vocational assessment programs, which guide educators in making developmentally appropriate recommendations for students. Vocational development theory suggests that individuals progress through stages.

The *growth and exploration stages* span the school years and are each characterized by three substages. Within the growth stage, children progress through the *fantasy* substage (ages 0–10 years) in which they use their imagination to take on different career roles, the *interest* substage (ages 11–12 years) in which they consider different careers and areas of interest, and the *capacity* substage (ages 13–14 years) in which they become aware of career demands and the academic training required of careers following high school.

The *exploration* stage consists of the tentative, transition, and trial substages. The *tentative* substage (ages 15–17 years) is a period during which the adolescent considers various career options and chooses a tentative career goal. During the *transition* substage (ages 18–21 years), an individual chooses a career and works toward acquiring the skills needed to enter into that career. The *trial* substage (ages 22–24 years) involves the attainment of a job that fits the individual's career choice.

One purpose of vocational assessment is to make certain that students are successfully progressing through these vocational developmental stages and to determine whether students require assistance in reaching the goals associated with each stage.

Although vocational assessment and transition planning may be focused upon more closely in the latter school years, it is beneficial if the process can begin as soon as students enter school, and, ideally, the process should incorporate a K–12 career development plan. Vocational assessment and transition in the early school years should encompass career exposure and educational activities geared to a level that is developmentally appropriate to younger students. For younger children it is important to emphasize the assessment and development of self-awareness, occupational awareness, and decision-making skills. Early assessment and planning also provide excellent opportunities for educators and parents to introduce nontraditional employment opportunities and thereby dispel gender bias as it relates to children's understanding of traditional and nontraditional employment roles. When students approach the middle and secondary school level, there is need for a more formalized assessment.

There are several levels of assessment in school-based vocational assessment programs. *Level one* assessments are conducted during the elementary school years and focus on the child's understanding of self, interpersonal relationships, and decision-making skills. *Level two* assessments occur in the middle school years, and focus on interests, abilities, work habits, and career maturity. *Level three* assessments are conducted in high schools to determine the training needed to attain further education or employment.

Comprehensive Vocational Assessment

A *comprehensive vocational assessment* evaluates an individual's level of functioning in several domains, including measures of psychological, social, educational, physical, and vocational abilities. In particular, vocational interests and aptitudes should be assessed. Reviewing records, conducting observations, and administering paper-and-pencil tests assist professionals in gathering relevant information in these domains. Some tests used to assess interests include the Self-Directed Search (SDS), the Strong Interest Inventory, the Career Key, and the Occupational Aptitude Survey and Interest Assessment, Second Edition (OASIS II).

Some tests used to assess aptitudes include the Differential Aptitude Test (DAT), the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), and the Occupational Aptitude Survey and Interest Assessment, Second Edition (OASIS II).

In addition, performance tests, work samples, and situational assessments are used in a comprehensive vocational assessment program. *Performance tests* focus less on language and more on an individual's ability to perform a specific task related to a job. *Work samples*, exposing the student to natural job responsibilities, consist of three phases: demonstration, training, and assessment. *Situational assessments* measure an individual's interests, abilities, and work habits in actual and contrived work environments.

Several important principles should be followed in implementing *transition services* as part of a comprehensive assessment and transition plan. Parents and teachers involved in facilitating the student's transition should consider the *developmental maturity* of the student as well as the *skills* that the student will need to use to adjust to community living and employment. The skills that should be assessed include daily living skills, personal/social skills, and occupational/vocational skills. The degree to which the student has already mastered these skills and the extent to which these skills need to be developed can be determined, in part, by the vocational assessment. Assessment information gathered in later years should be multi-level and include assessment at both the junior and senior high levels.

Planning and Program Development for Individuals and Systems

A school-based vocational assessment program is designed to meet the educational needs of all students, especially students with disabilities. Unfortunately, many school-based vocational assessment programs are not comprehensive, systematic, or effective because they have been developed without considering all factors related to program development. Development and implementation of a program should be composed of three phases: planning and development, implementation, and evaluation and improvement.

Planning and development involves several steps. First, a representative team is formed, consisting of school and community personnel likely to be involved in the assessment process or otherwise engaged in the program. Second, a needs assessment is conducted, which involves identifying school and community resources/services to include in the program as well as recognition of possible complications associated with vocational planning. Third, an assessment model should be developed that incorporates local resources and reduces possible obstacles to programming. Fourth, formal interagency agreements and action plans should be developed between school and community agencies. The purpose of these agreements is to identify which services will be provided by each agency, which students will receive services, and when services will be

initiated. Fifth, if it is necessary to secure additional funds, the team will need to find sources of financial support for the program.

The *implementation phase* should begin with the hiring of a vocational assessment program coordinator. The coordinator becomes responsible for supervising the implementation of the program and locates sites where evaluations will be conducted. In addition, this individual should develop a procedures manual, purchase necessary material, and train personnel. This person is also responsible for conducting in-service training to familiarize school and community personnel with the assessment program. The first two steps of the evaluation phase acknowledge areas of the program in need of evaluation and identify standards for the evaluation process. Then, a program evaluator is hired to conduct the evaluation. Last, the vocational assessment team plans and implements necessary improvements. Program evaluations and revisions are conducted periodically to improve program functioning.

Key components of successful vocational and transition program planning include the following:

- Personal consideration of the student's strengths, functional limitations imposed by the disability, and developmental maturity.
- Early integration of the community and partnership of agencies.
- Consideration of local employment options as they relate to students' needs (e.g., competitive, sheltered, or supportive).
- Continuity of the process through students' school careers.
- Partnership of stakeholders in students' success (e.g., parents, regular and special education teachers, school administrators, counselors and vocational specialists, community professionals, and school psychologists).

Summary

A comprehensive vocational assessment is a prerequisite for effective vocational and transition planning, particularly for students with disabilities. School-based vocational assessments should be well planned, involve both school and community agencies, and integrated within both a K–12 career planning process and a transition from school-to work planning process. Assessments should be conducted by a team of professionals, utilize a variety of assessment techniques, assess various domains of importance to independent living and vocational functioning, and be conducted at several points (elementary, middle/junior high school, high school) in a child's educational career.

Resources

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Website

International Council on Vocational Evaluation and Assessment—www.vecap.org

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and the NASP Center for Children & Families website www.naspcenter.org. Or use the direct links below to access information that can help you improve outcomes for the children and youth in your care.

About School Psychology—Downloadable brochures, FAQs, and facts about training, practice, and career choices for the profession.
www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/spsych.html

Crisis Resources—Handouts, fact sheets, and links regarding crisis prevention/intervention, coping with trauma, suicide prevention, and school safety.
www.nasponline.org/crisisresources

Culturally Competent Practice—Materials and resources promoting culturally competent assessment and intervention, minority recruitment, and issues related to cultural diversity and tolerance.
www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence

En Español—Parent handouts and materials translated into Spanish. www.naspcenter.org/espanol/

IDEA Information—Information, resources, and advocacy tools regarding IDEA policy and practical implementation.
www.nasponline.org/advocacy/IDEAinformation.html

Information for Educators—Handouts, articles, and other resources on a variety of topics.
www.naspcenter.org/teachers/teachers.html

Information for Parents—Handouts and other resources a variety of topics.
www.naspcenter.org/parents/parents.html

Links to State Associations—Easy access to state association websites.
www.nasponline.org/information/links_state_orgs.html

NASP Books & Publications Store—Review tables of contents and chapters of NASP bestsellers.
www.nasponline.org/bestsellers
Order online. www.nasponline.org/store

Position Papers—Official NASP policy positions on key issues.
www.nasponline.org/information/position_paper.html

Success in School/Skills for Life—Parent handouts that can be posted on your school's website.
www.naspcenter.org/resourcekit