Assessment in Schools:
From the Perspective of Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching

Assessment is a complex, broad-based concept. It encompasses activities related to screening and identification, selection, planning, evaluation and accountability, diagnosis and more. In school practice, the overall aim is to use assessment as an aid in making decisions.

Formally defined, assessment is the process by which attributes of phenomena are *described* and *judged.* Descriptions take the form of data gathered by formal and informal measures, such as tests and observations of behavior or settings and processes such as Response to Intervention (RtI). Judgments take the form of interpretive conclusions about the meaning of data, such as whether a phenomenon is good or bad, above or below standard, pathological or not. Choices about what data to gather and exclude are guided by what judgments and decisions are to be made.

With respect to a school's efforts to address learning, behavior, and emotional concerns, the judgments may focus on the past (such as what caused a problem), the present (such as how severe a problem is and what to do about it), or the future (such as estimating how much the problem will improve as a result of what the school does).

Controversy surrounds prevailing approaches to assessment. Although some of the controversy is about the deficiencies and limitations of specific procedures, broader concerns and criticism have been directed at the way assessment is used for accountability and related policy decisions, screening and diagnosis of student problems, and its role in shaping school practice and research. Even when relatively objective assessment data are used, subsequent decisions often are extremely subjective. This is not surprising, given that most decisions involve considerations that go well beyond the availability of valid data. More often than not, complex social-political-economic value questions and biases are involved. Indeed, in some cases seemingly relevant data are ignored in order to arrive at a decision that the decision makers see as viable and beneficial.

A Cautionary Note Related to Assessing
Learning, Behavior, and Emotional Concerns

Too often, assessment in schools is shaped by the presumption that problems stem from and belong to targeted individuals. The focus mainly is on students and the problems they manifest. This inappropriately deemphasizes assessment of a student's positive attributes (e.g., strengths and interests that can play an important role in correcting problems), and it downplays assessment of external factors interfering with the student's functioning.

What should be clear is that assessment is a complex process that has significant limitations and can have detrimental consequences. Of particular concern is that prevailing approaches to assessments related to students, schools, and schooling

- contribute to misdiagnoses and miscalculations about what to do
- do not have sufficient validity to warrant large-scale investment in *first level* screening programs
- can inappropriately shape evaluation and accountability
- redefine and limit objectives for students and the nature and scope of school curricula.

Furthermore, overemphasis on assessment practices that focus on individuals hinders development of procedures for assessing the role of the environment. (As a result of the bias toward localizing problems within persons, efforts to address problems tend to be person-centered. Almost by presumption, environmental factors are exonerated as causal factors and as focal point of intervention.)

Functions

Despite major concerns about the state of the art related to assessment, each day school professionals are called upon to assess and make decisions. Exhibit 1 highlights the major purposes and functions of assessments done related to schooling and underscores the type of decisions for which such assessment may be useful.

1. Identification. Data are used to help find and label phenomena of interest. The focus may be on a person, the environment, or both, and may or may not be on problems.

2. Selection. Data are used to help make decisions about general changes in status. These usually are discussed as placement decisions, but they also encompass decisions about changes in environments. Specifically, these are decisions about the general nature and form of needed intervention (for example, educational, psychological, or medically oriented treatments; placement in a special setting; changes in the organization of a classroom or school).

3. Planning for specific change. Data are used to decide about immediate and short-term objectives and procedures for accomplishing long-term goals. Examples are specific plans or prescriptions for any given day's intervention.

4. Evaluation of Intervention. Data are used to decide intervention effectiveness based on positive and negative outcomes. Decisions are made with respect to the impact on (a) particular persons or environments or both, (b) all experiencing a specific intervention, or (c) society as a whole.

An example may help clarify the preceding points. Achievement tests are often used to assess reading performance in a given school. The number of right and wrong answers provides a description of performance on a given set of items at a given time. Based on these descriptive data, a variety of judgments are likely to be made (e.g., about specific students, about teachers, about schools). Decisions will be based on available norms and prevailing standards.

Different judgments will be made about individuals with identical scores who differ in age. Different judgments may be made about groups living in economically advantaged and disadvantaged communities and about schools serving different populations.
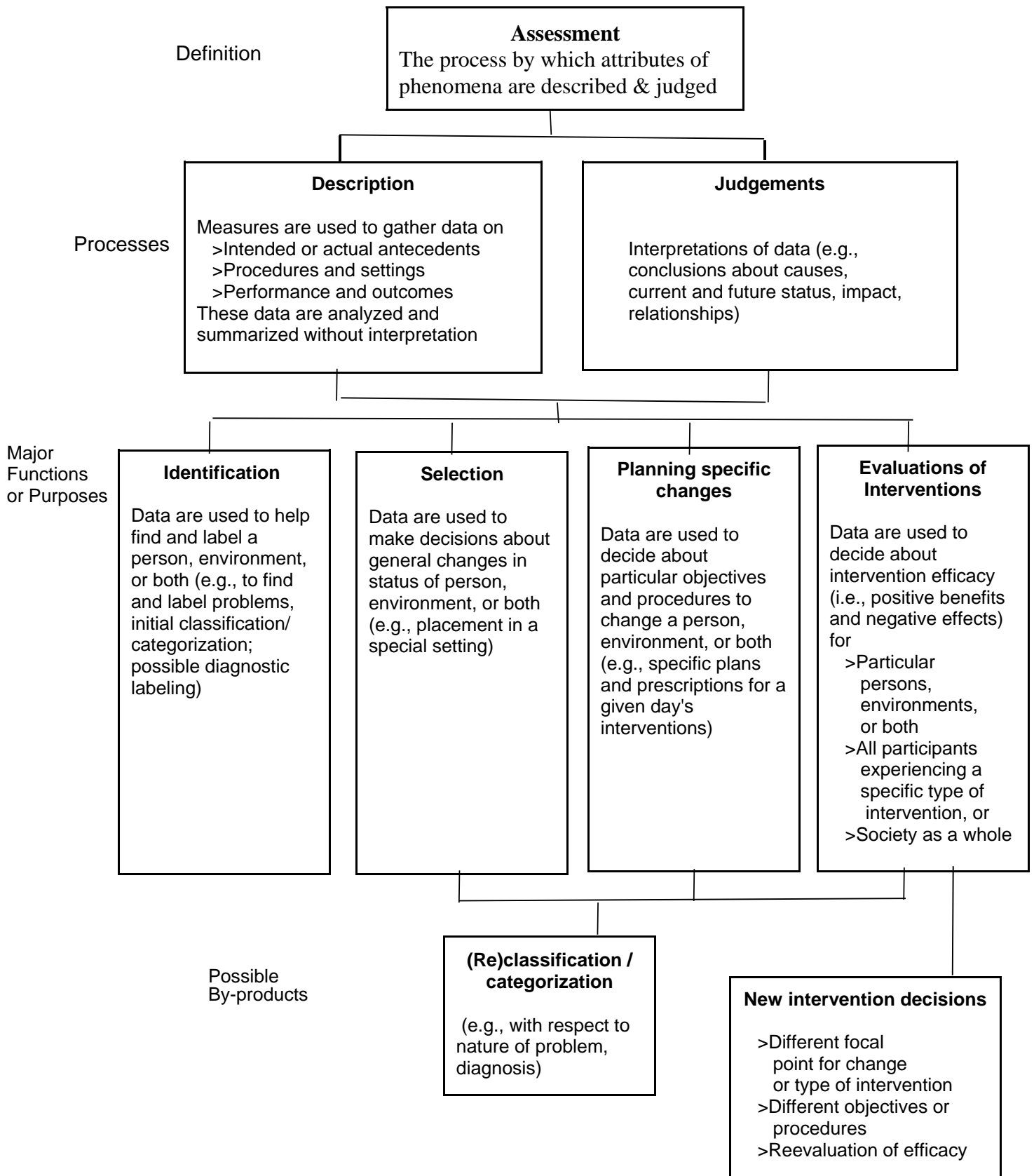
Decisions can be made about whether to assign diagnostic labels to individuals and programs judged as performing poorly. That is, an individual might be labeled as having a learning disability; a teacher or a school could be labeled as failing to be effective.

Decisions can be made about helping some students, teachers, and schools, and if so, specific plans may be formulated. At a later date, achievement test data again can be used to evaluate performance.

> *I would much rather my kids leave my class with the strength of character and courage to fight racism when they find it, than have memorized some facts about the Civil Rights Act of 1964. I'm not saying you can't have both, I'm just pointing out that only one of those things will be measured on the test — and it isn't the most important one."*
>
> Dave Burgess

Exhibit 1. Conceptualizing school assessment.

Definition

Assessment
The process by which attributes of phenomena are described & judged

Processes

Description

Measures are used to gather data on
  >Intended or actual antecedents
  >Procedures and settings
  >Performance and outcomes
These data are analyzed and summarized without interpretation

Judgements

Interpretations of data (e.g., conclusions about causes, current and future status, impact, relationships)

Major Functions or Purposes

Identification

Data are used to help find and label a person, environment, or both (e.g., to find and label problems, initial classification/ categorization; possible diagnostic labeling)

Selection

Data are used to make decisions about general changes in status of person, environment, or both (e.g., placement in a special setting)

Planning specific changes

Data are used to decide about particular objectives and procedures to change a person, environment, or both (e.g., specific plans and prescriptions for a given day's interventions)

Evaluations of Interventions

Data are used to decide about intervention efficacy (i.e., positive benefits and negative effects) for
  >Particular persons, environments, or both
  >All participants experiencing a specific type of intervention, or
  >Society as a whole

Possible By-products

(Re)classification / categorization

 (e.g., with respect to nature of problem, diagnosis)

New intervention decisions

  >Different focal point for change or type of intervention
  >Different objectives or procedures
  >Reevaluation of efficacy

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Other Factors Shaping Assessment

In addition to having four major purposes, activity related to assessment occurs in phases, and differs in terms of focus and types of procedures used (see outline and examples in Exhibit 2). As illustrated, there are a variety of options in deciding what and how to assess.

For example, the number and range of phenomena assessed may vary. Stimulus-and-response conditions may differ in terms of their complexity and whether they are simulated or natural. Variations also occur with respect to the degree procedures are (a) ambiguous and subjective, (b) standardized, (c) obtrusive, and (d) cause unintended reactions. There are also important considerations about similarities and differences between the assessor and who and what is assessed (e.g., in terms of race, cultural background, socioeconomic status, gender).

While variations in assessment practices influence both the findings and impact, there is little agreement about how school improvement should address the concerns.

Exhibit 2. Examples of the nature and scope of assessment activity.

Major phases related to assessment

A. **Preparatory decisions about what is to be assessed** (implicit or explicit rationale for assessment activity)
B. **Description** ("measurements" of specified variables and serendipitous data gathering, followed by analyses and descriptive summaries)
C. **Judgments** (interpretations)
D. **Communication and decision making with reference to assessment purposes**

Focus of assessment

A. **Focal point**
  1. Person(s) -individuals or groups
  2. Environment(s)
  3. Person-environment transactions
B. **Nature of phenomena**
  1. Problematic-nonproblematic conditions
  2. Observable-inferred
  3. Proximal-distal
  4. Historic-current-future expectations
C. **Levels**
  1. Molecular-molar analyses of persons
  2. Primary, Secondary, tertiary, contextual analysis
  3. Transaction of person-environment
D. **Areas or domains**
  1. Biological and psychological processes
  2. Motor and verbal functioning
  3. Physical environment
  4. Social environment
  5. Transaction of person-environment

Types of procedures and instruments (standardized, semistandardized, or unstandardized)

A. **Interviews and written personal reports** (responses to oral or written questions, inventories of items, etc.)
B. **Observations**
C. **Verbal and performance measures** (objective instruments such as achievement tests; instruments that have not been formally and technically standardized)
D. **Biological tests** (e.g., MRIs to assess student CNS dysfunctions, chemical analyses)
E. **Available records** and data (analyses of current or cumulated records related to person, environment, transactions; analyses of natural performances and products, such as portfolio assessment)

About Response to Intervention as an Assessment Process

Response to Intervention (RtI) was introduced with the intent of using "well-designed and well-implemented early intervention" in the regular classroom as a way to deal with a student's problems and enhance the assessment of whether more intensive and perhaps specialized assistance (and perhaps diagnosis) is required. That is, the process calls for making changes in the classroom to improve the student's learning and behavior as soon as problems are noted and using the student's response to such modifications as information for making further changes if needed.

A core concern is mobilizing unmotivated students (particularly those who have become actively disengaged from classroom instruction). If motivational considerations are not effectively addressed, there is no way to validly assess whether or not a student has a true disability or disorder. The process continues until it is evident that it cannot be resolved through classroom changes alone.

With respect to addressing students' problems, RtI overlaps ideas about "pre-referral interventions", special accommodations, and authentic assessment but is intended to be more systematically implemented with special attention to enhancing teacher capability to carry out "well-designed and well-implemented early intervention." This approach is meant to minimize inappropriate identification of students who do not need expensive special education (and avoid the many negative consequences of misidentification and misprescribing). RtI also has the potential to build teacher capacity so that similar problems are prevented in the future.

Through this sequential approach, students who have not responded sufficiently to the regular classroom interventions are supposed to receive supportive assistance designed to help them remain in the regular program. If a student's problem proves severe and disruptive, an alternative setting may be necessary on a temporary basis to provide more intensive and specialized assessments and assistance. Referral for special education assessment is made only when all this is found insufficiently effective. (It is important to emphasize that the approach must be carefully monitored to ensure specific plans for students are well-designed and implemented , and the process does not delay getting students essential interventions.)

Effective RtI requires that schools ensure (1) classroom teachers have or are learning how to implement "well-designed early intervention" in the classroom, and (2) support staff are learning how to play a role, sometimes directly in the classroom, in expanding essential intervention strategies.

By themselves, if the intervention strategies are narrowly conceived and do not address major barriers to learning and teaching, RtI is unlikely to be effective for a great many students. However, if the approach is understood to be part and parcel of a comprehensive system of classroom and schoolwide learning supports, schools will be in a position not only to address problems effectively early after their onset, but will prevent many from occurring (see resources cited at the end of this document).

Assessment is an Important Basis for Decision Making at Schools

Assessment is a profound intervention. It can be stressful on all involved; the decisions that stem from assessments can be good and bad and life-shaping.

From the perspective of addressing barriers to learning and teaching, good assessments

- focus on environmental barriers to learning and teaching before assessing students
- ensure that positive benefits outweigh costs such as negative side effects and financial burdens
- use procedures that are reliable, valid, and fair for the particular purposes and (include multiple sources of information and authentic assessment processes)

- account for motivational and developmental differences (including language, cultural, and socio-emotional differences)

- ensure appropriate safeguards for rights, privacy, and potential harm (including misdiagnoses and misprescriptions)

- identify strengths as well as current weaknesses and potential limitations

- communicate findings appropriately to all who are expected to play a role in addressing barriers to learning and teaching

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More Resources

For more information and resources related to assessment, accountability, evaluation, response to intervention, and more, see the Center's online clearinghouse Quick Finds

>*Assessment and Screening* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p1405_01.htm

>*Evaluation of Programs Addressing Barriers to Learning* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/evaluation.htm
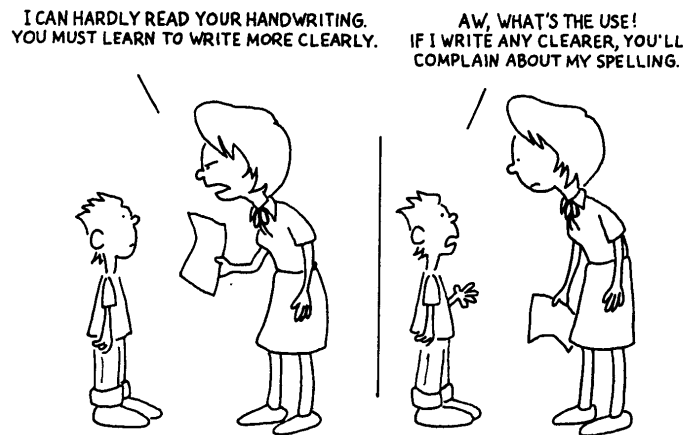
For a broader and more in-depth discussion of new directions for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students, see

>*Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*

>*Improving School Improvement*

Both these new books are available at this time as free resources.
Download at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

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AW, WHAT'S THE USE! IF I WRITE ANY CLEARER, YOU'LL COMPLAIN ABOUT MY SPELLING.

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