An Inefficient Approach to Eligibility Determination

Adriana, who recently turned 4 years old, was referred for testing based on parental concerns about her development and classroom performance. On March 1, professionals unfamiliar to Adriana administered multiple standardized and norm-referenced eligibility assessments. She was removed from her daily classroom setting and asked to perform discrete and non-functional tasks. Based on the eligibility assessments, Adriana was found eligible for special educational services.

By April, Adriana started her special education program with an individualized education program (IEP) containing goals and objectives created from the information obtained from the March eligibility assessments. When her new teachers implemented interventions to address the IEP goals and objectives, they discovered Adriana had already mastered many of the skills, and that other areas of Adriana’s learning and development were not addressed in her IEP. The teachers administered additional assessment (i.e., curriculum-based assessment), conducted another meeting with Adriana’s IEP team (including her parent(s)/family), rewrote individualized goals and objectives, and refocused their intervention efforts to help Adriana meet her learning and developmental needs.

The Problem

More than 6 million students between the ages of 3 and 21 received special educational services during the 2002–2003 school year (U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, 2005). Preschool children who qualify for early childhood special education (ECSE) programs are served under Section 619 of Part B of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004; Pub. L. No. 108-446). With so many young people like Adriana who are assessed and found eligible for ECSE, it is of paramount importance that service delivery systems operate with efficiency. Unfortunately, ECSE systems are challenged by the content and flow of information gathered during the eligibility determination process.

Students are often tested with a battery of standardized, norm-referenced assessments intended to determine if they are eligible for special educational services. When a student is found eligible, further testing is usually needed to determine specific supports and services. In the case of Adriana, she was tested multiple times for different purposes (i.e., once for eligibility and again later to gather information for programmatic use). The reason for administering additional assessment beyond the eligibility assessment is because the items from most standardized, norm-referenced assessments lack authenticity and functionality needed for program planning and would be difficult to operationalize into the development of meaningful educational goals or instructional content.

Professionals need information from eligibility assessments they can use to develop quality goals and intervention content. The flow of information collected to determine eligibility for services is often fragmented and disconnected. A common scenario is that an assessment
professional collects information that is transferred to other professionals who were not part of the eligibility determination assessment process. The information collected at the time of eligibility is later transferred to subsequent areas of an individual program that may include goal development, intervention, and evaluation. The professionals using the eligibility assessment information (e.g., classroom teacher and related specialist) may have different training and disciplinary affiliation that could create challenges when transferring and interpreting assessment information.

Data collected from eligibility assessments need to be useful and connected across all areas of service delivery. The content and flow of information have enormous implications for practice. Professionals are challenged because they lack functional information needed to create useful goals and objectives, implement effective interventions, and evaluate program effectiveness. The information derived from the eligibility assessment process should inform programmatic components of a service delivery system; and, therefore, the flow of data should be seamless. A curriculum-based assessment (CBA) approach offers a solution. This article presents a definition of a CBA approach, an explanation of a linked service delivery system and describes the role of using a CBA for eligibility determination nested in a linked service delivery system.

**Alternative Approach**

**Curriculum-Based Assessment**

Professionals are finding traditional approaches to determining eligibility for IDEA special services to be limited by the tools of the trade. Traditional tools, like standardized norm-referenced assessments, are able to provide quantitative information to inform eligibility decisions; however, they are difficult to translate into programmatic components. An alternative to only using traditional tools is the use of CBA when conducting eligibility assessments.

Most CBAs designed for younger children are criterion-referenced and combine assessment and curriculum. In addition to content areas (e.g., literacy, mathematics, etc.), an ECSE CBA covers multiple developmental areas such as adaptive, cognitive, communication, fine motor, gross motor, and social. The field of ECSE has several commercially available CBAs that include, but are not limited to, the Assessment, Evaluation, and Programming System (AEPS; Bricker, 2002), The Carolina Curriculum for Preschoolers with Special Needs (Johnson-Martin, Hacker, & Attermeier, 2004), and the Hawaii Early Learning Profile (HELP; Parks et al., 1994) to name a few. See **LINKing Assessment and Early Intervention** by Bagnato, Neisworth, and Munson (1997) for a comprehensive list of ECSE CBAs. Parents and family members can provide input using CBA tools (i.e., AEPS Family Report). ECSE professionals could use CBA for corroborating information needed for eligibility determination (Bricker, Yovanoff, Capt, & Allen, 2003). Using a CBA to corroborate eligibility decisions has at least two advantages.

- The items from most standardized, norm-referenced assessments lack authenticity and functionality needed for program planning.

One advantage of using a CBA to corroborate eligibility decisions is items from CBAs are functional and can be easily translated into programmatic efforts. Functional items are those that promote a learner to become independent in his or her environment. For example, during the eligibility assessment when presented with traditional assessment items, Adriana may have been asked to place a peg in a pegboard to test her fine motor skills (e.g., pincer grasp and eye–hand coordination). Alternatively, a CBA may be used to examine fine motor skills, but the focus would be on how she uses fine motor skills to navigate her environment and perform tasks necessary for independence during daily routines and activities. Rather than using materials that may be unfamiliar to Adriana to test the item, a practitioner may observe items from the CBA during snack time to see if Adriana could pick up pretzel sticks and raisins from her plate. Functional skills are easily mapped onto daily routines and activities.

Another advantage of using CBA for eligibility determination is that it provides baseline information that can be used to evaluate individualized programs at later times. For example, Adriana’s assessment team could use a CBA when conducting the eligibility assessment in March for the Time 1 baseline data (initial assessment), use the information to develop goals and intervention, and then follow up in June to collect Time 2 data (evaluation). The June data would then be compared to her baseline performance, and her team would make decisions (e.g., to modify goals and/or intervention, to modify intervention strategies, etc.) based on her progress across all areas of development. Therefore, the information collected at the time of eligibility would serve as a comparison and could be used developmentally, rather than only to make a decision of whether or not Adriana was eligible for services. The flow of information from the CBA could be used across all areas of service delivery to provide a smooth transfer of information. The use of longitudinal data is a key component in a linked service delivery system.

**Linked Service Delivery System**

A linked system approach directly connects assessment with program goals, intervention, and evaluation. Bricker (2002) has defined a linked system as comprised of four interrelated components that are dependent on one another. The linked system components are (a) assessment, (b) goal development, (c) intervention, and (d) evaluation. Each component is linked to the next with evaluation linking back around to the assessment, goal development, and intervention components (see Figure 1 shaded boxes; Bricker, 2002; Pretti-Frontczak, 2002; Pretti-Frontczak & Bricker, 2004).

Assessment. The first component in a linked system is assessment, which can...
Figure 1. A Linked Service Delivery System

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**Assessments for Adriana**

Adriana’s parents contacted the local ECSE agency because they noticed her cognitive, social, and communication skills seemed to differ from that of her peers. A screening assessment called the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (Bricker & Squires, 1999; Squires, Bricker, & Potter, 1999) was given to her parents to provide information across multiple areas of Adriana’s learning and development. There were 30 items on the tool. It took her parents about 15 minutes to complete.

The results from the screening assessment indicated further testing was needed. Next, the ECSE agency arranged for an eligibility assessment to determine if Adriana could benefit from ECSE services (Section 619, Part B of IDEA 2004). The team decided to include both a standardized, norm-referenced assessment (e.g., Stanford Binet; Terman & Merrill, 1973) and an early childhood curriculum-based assessment (e.g., AEPS). Results from the eligibility assessment determined Adriana was eligible for ECSE.

**Goal Development.** The second component of a linked system is the development of goals and objectives. Based on the results from the eligibility assessment, the IEP team identifies goals and objectives. In a linked system approach, the student’s individual goals tie directly into intervention. Goals become the basis for intervention.

**Developing Goals/Objectives for Adriana**

After the eligibility assessment, the team interpreted and summarized information from the CBA (i.e., the AEPS). Present levels of development were noted from the CBA items Adriana had already mastered. Goals were identified from emerging skills and those not yet observed. The team prioritized short- and long-term objectives from the CBA results.

**Intervention.** The third component of a linked system is intervention. The intervention component includes the planning process, strategies, activities, and implementation to address goals and objectives (Macy & Bricker, 2006; Pretti-Frontczak & Bricker, 2004). Interventions are created from eligibility assessment and goals for the student. In a linked system, interventions are based directly on information gathered through programmatic assessment efforts.

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*If a CBA was used for the initial eligibility assessment, the team could jump directly to developing goals and objectives without having to administer a programmatic assessment.

be comprised of screening assessments, eligibility assessments, and programmatic assessments. A screening assessment is a brief measure used to determine if further in-depth assessment is needed. Early childhood screening measures can be completed by professionals and/or parents and are intended to give a snapshot of children’s skills across different areas of development (e.g., social and cognitive). An eligibility assessment provides a comprehensive examination used to determine if a child is eligible for early childhood special education services. A programmatic assessment produces information that can be used to develop operational and measurable goals, provide a basis for intervention efforts, and provide baseline data needed to evaluate program efficacy. In a linked system approach, the assessment provides functional and developmentally appropriate information for goal development, intervention, and evaluation.
The team planned intervention strategies (e.g., embedding, constant time delay, high probability sequencing, etc.) and activities that could help Adriana achieve her developmental and educational goals. The team used the curriculum from the AEPS to address goals/objectives.

Evaluation. The fourth component of a linked system is evaluation. Evaluation is ongoing and necessary to monitor the student’s progress and the overall effectiveness of the program (Bagnato et al., 1997; Bricker, 2002; Pretti-Frontczak & Bricker, 2004). In a linked system, the evaluation component is designed to connect to the other three components (assessment, goal development, and intervention).

**Evaluating Adriana’s Program**
Adriana’s performance was monitored and ongoing data were collected. The AEPS CBA was re-administered on a 3- to 4-month interval. The team routinely analyzed and interpreted data, which were summarized and used to make decisions about her program. Intervention and goals/objectives were modified and/or changed in response to the program evaluation.

**Using a CBA in a Linked Service Delivery System for Eligibility Determination**
The eligibility assessment process involves information gathering and important decision making. If a student is determined to be eligible for services, functional and authentic assessment information should be used to develop IEP goals and objectives, intervention, and evaluation (Guralnick, 2005; Macy, Bricker, & Squires, 2005). In order to use resources more effectively, focused efforts should be directed toward linking eligibility assessment with programmatic components of a linked system.

ECSE professionals are increasingly using CBA to corroborate eligibility decisions (Bricker, Yovanoff et al., 2003; Macy et al., 2005). A CBA allows for the comparison of one’s performance against him/herself rather than comparisons made to a peer group. For example, when Adriana was assessed with the CBA, information related to her performance for Time 1 (baseline assessment) and again later at Time 2 (evaluation) provided longitudinal data that could be used by her team to monitor her progress. By using a CBA when determining eligibility, the content and flow of information can be addressed.

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Meaningful authentic and functional content is generated when a CBA is administered as one of the eligibility assessments. Authentic information is learned about a person by observing him or her interacting in day-to-day routines and activities (Losardo & Notari-Syverson, 2001). Functional information includes real-life skills a person uses to navigate through his or her daily environment.

Additionally, the flow of information is improved because data derived from the CBA can be used directly in the development of IEP goals, as well as intervention and evaluation. By using a CBA during the eligibility assessment, resources can be used more efficiently because links can be made to programmatic efforts. Students, professionals, and service delivery systems will benefit from an eligibility assessment approach that incorporates the use of CBA across the linked system.

Benefits to Students and Their Families. Students will benefit from an eligibility determination process where a CBA is used because they will enter their program with authentic and functional information that will lead to the development of tailored learning and developmental goals, objectives, and interventions (Guralnick, 2005). Students and families will not be burdened by additional assessments at program entry. From the start of their program, students can begin to have their special needs addressed.

Benefits to Professionals. Professionals benefit from a linked eligibility assessment approach because from the time a student enters their classroom/program, they will have information needed for (a) developing meaningful goals/objectives, (b) creating effective interventions, and (c) evaluating program efficacy (Pretti-Frontczak, Kowalski, & Brown, 2002). Professionals can save time by not having to administer additional assessments once a student starts their program. The approach can provide professionals with assessment information that is relatively easy to understand and interpret because it is a system they may already be using in their practice. In addition, the linked eligibility assessment will provide a systematic structure for planning, implementing, and monitoring intervention efforts (Pretti-Frontczak, 2002).

Benefits to Service Delivery System. A system of service delivery benefits from the use of CBA for eligibility determination because CBA resources will be managed more efficiently by saving time on administering eligibility assessments. Refocused efforts could be made toward improving systemwide outcomes (Guralnick, 2005). In addition, a possible decrease in unnecessary referrals may result from using a CBA for eligibility (McNamara & Hollinger, 2003). For additional resources on using a CBA, see Figure 2.

**Conclusion**
Service delivery systems need to operate with efficiency in order to best serve the needs of students (Losardo & Notari-Syverson, 2001; Macy et al., 2005). Unfortunately, current service delivery systems are limited because of the flow and content of information obtained during the eligibility process. Using a CBA in a linked service delivery system can help eliminate these problems while benefiting the student, the professional, and the service delivery system. CBA can be used to create functional goals that will be used in programmatic efforts and provides professionals with baseline data to determine the progress a student is making and the overall effi-
CBA can be used to create functional goals that will be used in programmatic efforts and provides professionals with baseline data to determine the progress a student is making and the overall efficiency of their program.

References


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Figure 2. Eligibility Assessment Resources

Periodicals


Books


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