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Making Assessment Equitable for Learners on an Alternate Curriculum

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Charlie is a 13-year-old African American male in the 8th grade who receives special education services as a student with autism and intellectual disability. He was first diagnosed with developmental delay at the age of 3 and began early intervention services through the local district. He was diagnosed with autism at age 6 during his kindergarten year, and later diagnosed with an intellectual disability in the 3rd grade at age 9. Charlie communicates mostly through Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), a method of communicating where the student chooses the appropriate picture to give to a conversation partner as a form of requesting or informing (e.g., student hands teacher the pizza picture to say "I want pizza"). He also communicates using facial expressions, and gestures (e.g., pointing). Charlie's verbal communication isn't easily understood by strangers, but he is able to express his desires to family members, classroom staff, and classmates. He receives his instruction in a special day class for students with extensive support needs and works on an alternate curriculum that focuses on adaptive life skills, functional math, reading, and communication skills.

Charlie has a 3-year review coming up to determine if he still qualifies for special education services, and if so, what services and types of supports will be necessary to support his educational needs. Additionally, Charlie is due for an individualized transition plan (ITP) to identify his goals for life after high school. Charlie's special education teacher, Ms. Hernandez, wants to do her part to provide an accurate report of Charlie's skills, preferences, and needs. With this purpose in mind, what things should Ms. Hernandez be sure to consider? Who should Ms. Hernandez consult or work with to achieve the goal? How should she proceed in order to ensure an equitable and just assessment process that focuses on Charlie's growth?

Students on Alternate Curriculum

For students like Charlie with extensive support needs, who cannot access the Common Core standards without significant modifications, an Alternate Curriculum teaches functional academics, social skills, life skills, and vocational skills in the classroom and other environments where the skills are necessary (e.g., community-based instruction). Functional academics include reading and math skills that will assist a

person with disabilities in their lifelong functioning, such as reading basic community signs (e.g., stop, caution, etc.) or counting objects (e.g., counting up to 100). Students on alternate curriculum require extensive support in academic and adaptive skills instruction, such as repeated, explicit instruction, lessons and tasks broken down into smaller steps, and opportunities to practice the skills in the real contexts and environments where they will be needed.

Determination of who is placed on an alternate curriculum is made by the individualized education program (IEP) team. Charlie's team decided alternate curriculum would be best due to his need to gain adaptive skills such as taking care of himself (e.g., choosing and dressing in appropriate clothing), learning how to perform simple math (e.g., count 20 items), and gaining functional communication (e.g., using PECs to order in a restaurant). Although Charlie's particular needs may differ from those of another student with disabilities, all students with disabilities are covered under Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015). Their progress must be monitored; they must have rigorous standards; they must be included in annual testing; their performance must be included in school accountability reports. This is how the law ensures student success.

But what does this mean for Ms. Hernandez? How is she supposed to monitor Charlie's progress on the Alternate Curriculum? How can she be sure her students show progress on annual state tests? How can she ensure that Charlie's individual growth and skill mastery is highlighted whether he makes gains on state tests or not?

Assessment that Promotes Student Growth

Ms. Hernandez knows that Charlie has made great gains this year, but she is afraid that his performance on annual tests might not reveal his current skill set. In 6th grade, Charlie earned a 649 on his English Language Arts (ELA) California Alternate Assessment score report, placing him at level 2 with foundational understanding of core concepts. In 7th grade, Charlie's score improved over 100 points, with him earning a score of 757 in ELA. However, this score still places Charlie at level 2, despite his tremendous growth. *What can Ms. Hernandez do to highlight Charlie's growth, when state tests show that he has not advanced his level of understanding of the core concepts?* Through ongoing assessment that is embedded in daily instruction, Ms. Hernandez can begin to collect an array of information and data to highlight Charlie's individual growth over the year. Continuous embedded assessment of skills allows the teacher to capture the often small, subtle changes in learning and skills development that occur for students on Alternate Curriculum.

Assessment tools used to measure individual student growth include both formal and informal assessment measures. Formal measures that are criterion-referenced (e.g., Brigance Comprehensive Inventory of Basic Skills) are useful for determining student performance on particular skills, and can help guide instruction by indicating which skills a student has yet to master. For example, Ms. Hernandez administered Brigance CIBS as part of several assessments given to Charlie for his upcoming triennial report. Through the assessment, she learned that Charlie can use the calculator to compute two 3-digit numbers when doing addition or subtraction (321 + 352 = 673), but he could not correctly compute 3 times 5 with the same calculator (3 x 5 = 15). This let Ms. Hernandez know that she could likely move on to multiplication, explicitly teaching Charlie how to locate the multiplication symbol not only on his calculator, but with any available calculator Charlie may use (e.g., smart phone calculator).

Another formal assessment measure Ms. Hernandez would want to consider is a transition assessment for Charlie's individualized transition plan, or ITP. For students with minimal verbal language and limited intellectual functioning, pictorial or picture assessments can help identify student interests. The Picture Interest Career Survey (PICS) is such an assessment. On this survey, students are shown a field of three pictures depicting different careers or professions. Results from the assessment will indicate different occupational clusters where the student showed interest.

Ms. Hernandez can also use assessment tools that are more informal, but still closely aligned to the Alternate Curriculum. Informal tools include ecological inventories, curriculum-based assessments, student portfolios, teacher-made tests, and observations. For instance, Ms. Hernandez may want to share Charlie's ELA portfolio, where he created a word tree of new vocabulary learned in ELA class. She could also graph the results from his curriculum-based assessments that he takes each week in the Unique Learning System (ULS), the alternate curriculum his district has chosen to use for students with extensive support needs. Teacher made-tests can also capture valuable assessment data because they are sensitive to subtle student growth or small changes in student performance. This is particularly true when the teacher conducts a task analysis where a larger task is broken into smaller discrete steps for instruction. A sample task analysis might require seven steps to washing hands: turn on water, wet hands, add soap, rub hands (front and back), rinse hands, turn off water, dry hands. The teacher then provides direct instruction and assesses each step of the task. Observations are another effective assessment tool to use when working with students on an alternate curriculum. Instead of placing a demand task on a student in a contrived, non-natural context or situation, observations are a natural, authentic way to look for evidence of student learning. If Charlie is learning money value, Ms. Hernandez can assess his ability to choose the $5 bill in the classroom, but a more natural setting for the assessment of this skill would be observing during community-based instruction if Charlie hands over the $5 bill to the cashier instead of handing over the $1 bill. Lastly, Ms. Hernandez might want to conduct an ecological inventory, interviewing important people in the Charlie's life and observing his performance in various contexts (e.g., home, school, community, leisure, etc.), to determine the skills Charlie will need for future life functioning. Through knowledge of the different tools of assessment and ongoing, embedded monitoring of student progress, Ms. Hernandez can focus on formative assessment that is focused on Charlie's individual growth and can help guide instruction that is aligned to a standards-based curriculum.

Now that Ms. Hernandez has gathered results from informal tests and other alternative assessments, she wants to make sure her assessment is complete. She has Charlie's formal standardized results from prior annual state tests; she has this year's data on curriculum-based assessments; she has data sheets completed by her instructional aides on the amount of support they provide to Charlie on a daily basis; she has a student portfolio. But is this enough data? Is Ms. Hernandez accomplishing her goal of providing an equitable assessment process for Charlie? How can she get Charlie the extensive supports he needs to ensure his continued growth and success?

Assessment that Promotes Equity

In order for assessment to be equitable, one must start with a working definition of equity. Equity is a societal value or belief whereby a person receives what he needs in order to bring out his full potential. If assessment is to bring out someone's full potential, it should be comprehensive, covering multiple

content or skills areas from multiple sources. For Charlie's comprehensive assessment, Ms. Hernandez should be prepared to report on Charlie's functional academics, social-emotional skills, independent living skills, vocational skills, and community/leisure skills. Additional assessment reports from the school psychologist, licensed speech therapist, school nurse, and adapted physical education will complete the comprehensive assessment.

Ms. Hernandez will also want to include the family's perspective in a comprehensive, equitable assessment. Charlie lives with his mother, grandmother, and two other siblings, an older sister who serves as a third caregiver behind his mother and grandmother, and his young brother who helps Charlie with his homework. For all students in special education, we must actively seek parental engagement and input on a child's individualized educational program. This mandate becomes that much more important for students who will require extensive supports throughout life. IEP teams must collaborate with families to determine family goals and priorities, identify family values, strengths and resources, and learn about student functioning outside of the school setting (e.g., home, community), identifying which skills have been met, which skills should be prioritized, and where the skills are needed most. Interviews with family members, other school- and community-based providers, and the students themselves, whenever possible, can yield valuable information about a student's strengths and potential. As described previously, ecological inventories allow for careful mapping and matching of environments and needs, and collaboration with key team members to identify student strengths and skills needed to reach one's full potential.

Besides ensuring a comprehensive assessment that covers different domains, gathers input from different informants, and draws on family and student strengths, interests, and priorities, Ms. Hernandez should also consider the accommodations and modifications necessary for Charlie to perform best. Students with extensive support needs may require test items to be read aloud, or an alternate response option if they are unable to write their response on a typical paper and pencil test. In an equitable assessment, the student gets the required accommodations and modifications to bring out his/her/their full potential, and the needs of English language learners (ELLs) and students with significant communication difficulties are considered. Equitable assessment requires the teacher to accommodate a student by reading a passage to the student who is being assessed on reading comprehension, particularly when the student struggles with reading fluency. Equitable assessment requires the job coach to use picture images to teach the step-by-step instructions to complete a vocational task. Equitable assessment requires ELL students to be assessed in their primary language, particularly when the student demonstrates greater understanding in their primary language. Lastly, equitable assessment for students with significant communication needs requires individualization of the student's assessment to allow for varied response types, including verbal, gestural, or using some type of augmentative or alternative communication device (AAC; e.g., Picture Exchange System, DynaVox). Through comprehensive, strengths-based assessment that honors the accommodations and modifications necessary for a student with extensive support needs to be successful, schools can ensure equitable assessments for students learning on an alternate curriculum.

Ms. Hernandez works with Charlie's mother and grandmother to learn about Charlie's activities at home and in the community. Through her interviews with the family, Ms. Hernandez learns a great deal about Charlie including his interest in music (his younger brother teaches him current popular tunes on the keyboard in the home), and his responsibilities at home and at church (Charlie makes the family's dinner

plates at home, and serves food after church in the pantry once a month). Results from the PICS transition assessment revealed a high interest in the food service industry, which is supported by the information Ms. Hernandez learned from her interview with Charlie's family, and through Ms. Hernandez's data sheets from independent living instruction. Charlie does quite well on his food preparation task analysis sheets where he usually completes 8 or more of the 10 steps without assistance from staff. With multiple sources of data confirming the same results, Ms. Hernandez can be assured that her assessment of Charlie will identify his strengths, preferences, interests, and needs.

Assessment that Promotes Justice

The final consideration Ms. Hernandez should think about for Charlie's equitable assessment centers around the concept of justice. Promoting justice in assessment involves an adherence to principles and values that align with best practices for working with students with disabilities and their families. These best practices include fair, respectful, and just treatment of students throughout the assessment and evaluation process. Several entities exist to provide ethical and professional guidance on assessing students in fair and just ways. Organizations such as the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP; www.nasponline.org), the American Psychological Association (APA; www.apa.org), the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA; www.asha.org), and four other professional organizations collaborated to create The Code of Fair Testing Practices (www.apa.org/science/programs/testing/fair-testing.pdf) to provide ethical guidance on the fair and valid use of comprehensive assessment practices, including who is authorized to administer and interpret test scores, informing parents and students about the purposes of assessment, and other best practices.

Another source of guidance on providing just assessment to students with disabilities are the *high leverage practices* (HLPs) identified by the Council of Exceptional Children (CEC; https://www.cec.sped.org) and the CEEDAR Center (Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability and Reform, www.ceedar.education.ufl.edu; McLeskey et al., 2017). The 22 HLPs identify practices of effective special education teachers, and cover four main areas: collaboration, instruction, social/emotional/behavioral, and assessment. Three of the 22 HLPs address assessment, highlighting aspects of comprehensive assessments for students with disabilities, including ongoing monitoring, understanding student strengths, collaboration with families and other providers, and more.

To learn more about the specific needs of students with significant communication needs, the National Joint Committee for the Communication Needs of Persons with Severe Disabilities (NJC; https://www.asha.org/NJC), a group comprised of nine professional organizations, created the Communication Bill of Rights to guide accommodations for the speech and communication needs of persons with severe disabilities. Accommodations and recommendations for just assessment practices for students with severe disabilities include the use of dynamic assessments that assess student learning and accounts for the relationship between the student and the teacher, and ecological inventories as recommended earlier (Brady et al., 2016).

Ms. Hernandez displays a great deal of respect in all her interactions with Charlie and his family. She is considerate of the family's efforts and involvement and remains open to learning about Charlie's life outside of school. Ms. Hernandez is a member of several professional organizations dedicated to individuals with disabilities, and regularly attends professional conferences and workshops. She

continues to learn about ongoing progress monitoring, how to collect and analyze data, culturally responsive teaching, assistive technology and more. Ms. Hernandez realizes that her responsibility to Charlie and all her students is to conduct ethical assessments that are respectful and fair.

Recommendations for the Field

As we push towards educational policy and practice that supports the inclusion of students with disabilities in school accountability systems, we must be careful to do so in a way that promotes equitable and ethical assessment practices for our students with the most extensive support needs who are learning on an alternate curriculum. The push to include these students in accountability systems requires support from school leaders and administrators to provide resources, training, and opportunities for teachers of students on alternate curriculum to collaborate with other professionals. School leaders must acquire the appropriate assessment tools and provide proper training on how to administer them. Lastly, school leaders and administrators can work with special education teachers to adapt school data systems to the particular needs of students on alternate curriculum, and highlight these systems during professional developments, instructing others how to develop systems to track individual student performance data in the classrooms.

For teachers like Ms. Hernandez who support students on an Alternate Curriculum, the way to ensure equitable and just assessments that promote student growth is to become knowledgeable of proper assessment procedures. Teachers must be advocates for their students, and also self-advocate for what is needed to support the students, such as the proper assessment and curricular materials. Effective teachers remain lifelong learners, joining professional organizations, learning new efficient data collection and analysis with technology, and requesting training and additional opportunities to learn such as attending conferences, and observing other teachers or administrations of assessments. Lastly, effective teachers who concern themselves with equity and justice in educational practice, should choose assessment practices and considerations that honor the cultural diversity and strengths of students and their families. For students on Alternate Curriculum, the field needs assessment practices that are comprehensive, on-going, formative, and carefully selected to identify student growth and strengths. It should align with the vision of educational reforms to more fully include students with disabilities in school accountability measures, while also honoring the individualized extensive educational support needs of various students on Alternate Curriculum.

About the Author

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