The Competency Based Community Assessment: A Five Step Process

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Abstract

A crucial step in the process of preparing students with disabilities for adult life is transition assessment.   Using a comprehensive assessment that is built around the student's interests, followed by assessment administration within the context of his/her community can provide special education professionals with rich data that is useful for program planning and establishing IEP goals. This article describes each step of a transitional assessment called the Competency Based Community Assessment (CBCA) which the others have found useful as a tool for creating individualized transition plans, along with program planning that is geared toward helping students with disabilities reach their full capacity in the areas of independent living, community participation and post-secondary education/employment.

The Competency Based Community Assessment: A Five Step Process

Each night before she goes to bed, twenty-one year old Jenny sets her alarm for 6:30 am so that she can wake up, eat breakfast, get dressed, catch the early bus and make it to her job on time. For the past one and a half years, Jenny has been working full time as an animal groomer at a local pet shop. At the end of her shift, Jenny gets back on the bus and heads for home where she will spend the evening preparing and enjoying a simple meal, cleaning up the dishes and then tending to any tasks in need of completion such as laundry or paying bills. After she has completed her chores, she walks over to the community center and attends either a yoga class or goes for a swim. Afterward Jenny goes back home and gets ready for the next day. Weekends are for shopping and like having fun with friends.

To some people, Jenny's life may sound rather ordinary. However to Jenny and members of her family, her life is extraordinary. Jenny is a vibrant young woman with a learning disability. Her post-school outcome is somewhat unique in comparison to many of her peers with disabilities because she is gainfully employed, is living independently and is an active participant in her community. Jenny's success can be attributed in part to her own unique talents and self-determination. However, between the ages of age 18 and 21, Jenny has been fortunate enough to receive transitional services that were geared toward preparing her to live independently, obtain and maintain desirable employment and participating fully in community activities. Jenny's transitional program may not have been possible had she not taken an appropriate transitional assessment.

The Competency Based Community Assessment

The Competency Based Community Assessment (CBCA) (Karan, DonAroma, Bruder & Roberts, 2010), a type of situational assessment (Anthony, 1994; Peters, Koller, & Holliday, 1995), is a strength-based, person-centered (Morningstar & Liss, 2008) tool that is useful for helping teachers and others, who work with 16-21 year old youth with disabilities in transition planning. The assessment generates an overview of what an individual is able to do while situated in a variety of real life, community situations (Karan et. al) and determines whether the conditions are a good match to the student's personality. The CBCA also identifies the individual's specific training needs and supports that are necessary so that he/she can perform to his/her fullest capacity within his/her own community in transitioning to adult life. There are five steps involved in the CBCA (see Table 1) that, when executed in the suggested sequence, generate important data necessary for creating meaningful transition goals and developing transitional programs that are specific to the student's individual needs.

Table 1
  Steps Involved in Conducting a Competency Based Community Assessment

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Step 1: Creating the vision
- Schedule a gathering among student, family members, school personnel and close friends.
- Discussion of the hopes, dreams and concerns about the student's future.

Step 2: Determining and prioritizing the skills to be assessed in a variety of settings
- Identifying questions and priorities
- Finding the common high priorities among the stakeholders
- Identifying settings and situations within the student's community that allow the evaluator to assess particular skills

Step 3: Familiarize the student with the evaluator and setting(s)
- Spending time with the student prior to the assessment to establish a rapport
- Creating an itinerary of the sites/settings to be visited, possibly having the student select the order of occurrence and initiating the assessment
- Visiting the places and settings to be included within the assessment

Step 4: Gathering Baseline Data on Current Levels of Functioning
- Providing the student with a task to complete
- Observing the student's level of independence in completing the task

Step 5: Increase Instruction to Determine Proximal Instruction
- Offer minimal assistance to help student perform the task
- Gradually increase supports as needed
- This step helps to pinpoint the student's specific instructional needs and levels of support needed

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Step 1: Creating a Vision
This step involves bringing together the student, family members, teachers, clinicians and anyone who is close to the student to determine the hopes, dreams as well as greatest concerns that they have for the student when they become adults. This gathering, which

is typically facilitated by the person(s) conducting the assessment (teacher, consultant, etc.), should be scheduled in a comfortable setting such as the school library, a community center or even in the student's home. The facilitator generates an open dialogue by asking the attendees to share any information they have about the student in terms of his/her strengths and interests as well as the highest expectations they have for him/her in adulthood in terms of employment, living situation, and community involvement. The information that is gathered at this meeting is used as a framework for creating a long-term plan for the student's future. See Table 2 for an example of the data that are gathered during this step.

Table 2
Example of Data Obtained from Vision Planning Session

Student's strengths:
- Intelligent
- Friendly
- Outgoing
- Curious
- Motivated
- Eager to help others

Student's Interests:
- Reading
- Bicycling
- Music
- Gardening
- Puzzles

Hopes and Dreams: Student will
- Live independently in an apartment
- Plan weekly trips to places in the community (museums, movies, etc.)
- Obtain employment at a music store
- Establish a peer group

Biggest fears or worries about the student's future
- Financially dependent upon family
- Unemployment or working in an unfulfilling job
- Health problems

Step 2: Determining and Prioritizing the Skills to Be Assessed in a Variety of Settings

Once the teacher has established a framework of what is desired for the student's future, it is time to identify the student's specific skills that need to be assessed. To do this, the student, along with family members, close friends and other school personnel must complete a series of checklists that contain items related to employment, activities of daily living and community participation. Each individual is expected to select five items

that they see as a priority for the student. Using a five point rating scale, they are asked to rate the selected items from one to five with one being of highest priority Table 3 contains a sample of some of the skills contained on the checklists.

Table 3
Checklist Items Related to Employment, Independent Living and Community Participation

Employment:
- Interacts well and is respectful of co-workers and supervisors
- Develops a workflow or routine within a task or set of tasks
- Demonstrates good problem solving skills and decision-making on the job
- Works as a member of a team
- Displays good time management skills for pacing work and taking breaks
- Is polite, respectful and helpful when dealing with the public
- Demonstrates adequate reading, writing and math skills as applicable to the setting
- Follows through on instructions
- Knows how to report hours worked/ use of time clock, special forms

Independent Living Skills:
- Manages and keeps track of his/her own money
- Establishes or follows a budget and lives within his/her means
- Uses his/her own bank account including e-banking if available
- Pays bills on time
- Attends to personal hygiene and grooming.
- Explores new leisure experiences
- Follows through on everyday tasks, commitments and responsibilities
- Demonstrates reasonable house cleaning skills
- Demonstrates reasonable safety awareness in using appliances
- Maintains good health practices in eating, sleeping and exercise routines
- Plans and makes time for spending time with friends and family

Community Participation Skills:
- Identifies services offered by the library and obtains a library card.
- Identifies services offered by the community recreational center.
- Demonstrates how to use at least three community resources, e.g., post-office, bank, library, health club, hair salon, etc.
- Accesses the community for preferred activities, goods, and services.
- Attends community functions in his/her local community.
- Plans a day trip.
- Participates in community activities with peers.
- Visits with neighbors in socially appropriate ways.
- Buys items on a shopping list at the grocery store and unpacks and appropriately stores items in the refrigerator or freezer in a timely manner upon returning home.
- Accesses medical services and makes and keeps appointments as needed
- Safely participates in the community.

Once they have completed the checklists the next step is to tally the items. The items to be assessed will be the five items on each list that received the highest amount of responses. While keeping in mind the long-term vision that was established in the first step the evaluator proceeds by determining a variety of settings and situations within the student's community that will provide real-world opportunities to assess the student's performance on each skill. It is important to carefully select activities that are typical for the student and within settings that the student is likely to encounter, as this will provide the most accurate data about the student's abilities. This is particularly true for individuals with more severe disabilities as studies have shown that members of this population experience challenges in generalizing from classroom to natural environments (Lohrmann-O'Rourke & Browder, 1998).

Step 3: Familiarize the Student With the Evaluator and Setting(s)
While transitional assessments can be administered by a variety of school professionals, a rapport between the evaluator and student must be established prior to administering the assessment. This will help by alleviating any anxieties surrounding the testing experience (Buskist & Saville 2001). If the evaluator does not already know the student there are several strategies that have been found to be useful such as spending time with the student and discussing their interests, disclosing personal information about their own life, adding on to the stories that the student tells and actively listening (Mendes, 2003). If attempts to establish a rapport are not working then the evaluator may need to consider bringing along someone who knows the student in order to alleviate any discomfort. To assist with easing anxieties about the actual assessment, the evaluator should discuss the assessment details and take the student to visit the various settings they will visit on the day of testing.

Steps 4 and 5: Gathering Baseline Data on Current Levels of Functioning and Increasing Instruction to Determine Proximal Instruction

The last two steps of the CBCA go hand in hand and are performed on the day of the assessment, in each of the different settings and for each specific task that is being examined. For purposes of *Gathering Baseline Data on Current Levels of Functioning,* the evaluator explains to the student what he/she is expected to do. After receiving the instructions, the student is then asked to complete the activity, while the evaluator merely observes and documents the student's level of independence in completing the task. If the student is not able to perform the task with complete independence, the evaluator proceeds to the last step of *Increasing Instruction to Determine Proximal Instruction,* by first providing the minimum level of supports and then increasing the support until the student can perform the task. Table 4 provides an example of the last two steps.

Table 4

**Example of Gathering Baseline Data on Current Levels of Functioning and
Increasing Instruction to Determine Proximal Instruction**

Gathering Baseline Data:
    Teacher: "Here is a recipe that I would like you to make."
    Student: "This is too hard."
    Teacher: "What is too hard, making the recipe?"
    Student: "I can't read it."

Increasing Instruction to Determine Proximal Instruction:
The teacher proceeds to assist the student by helping him sound out only the list of
ingredients, which happen to be the words that he does not know.
    Teacher: "Can you take it from here?"
    Student: "I got it."

By questioning the student about his/her response and then providing a minimal amount
of assistance, the student is able to perform the remainder of the steps with independence
and complete the recipe. Had the teacher assumed that the student could not complete the
task, based on his/her initial response and instead offered help with the cooking portion, it
may not have revealed that the student already possessed cooking skills. Furthermore,
had she not provided any support, he may have given up altogether. By gradually adding
supports, the evaluator can pinpoint more accurately the student's specific training needs.

Conclusion

Transition to adulthood is challenging for most students. However, students with
disabilities continue to fall short in terms of employment (National Organization on
Disability, 2004; Hughes, & Avoke, 2010) and independent living in comparison to their
typical peers (Deschler & Schmaker, 2006). Federal mandates state that all students with
disabilities must receive transitional planning (IDEA, 1990). Further, such planning must
begin with an appropriate transition assessment. The Competency Based Community
Assessment is a user-friendly transitional assessment that provides rich data about an
individual's current performance levels on different tasks in a variety of settings, all
within the context of the person's own community. The utilization of such a thorough
assessment sets the stage for quality transitional programming, which will ultimately
improve outcomes for students with disabilities.

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