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Classroom Observations: A Comprehensive Approach in SLD Evaluation

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Abstract

Nearly half of all students receiving special education services are identified as students with a specific learning disability (SLD; National Center for Learning Disabilities [NCLD], 2014). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires evaluation teams to analyze multiple data to determine if a student qualifies for special education services. In accordance with the federal law, a student must be observed in the regular classroom setting, and a description of the relationship between the behavior and academic functioning must be noted in a written Full and Individual Evaluation (FIE) report. Discussed in this article are recommendations and practical strategies related to conducting and documenting classroom observations that may be used by educational diagnosticians and other assessment professionals in an SLD evaluation.

Keywords: Specific Learning Disability, SLD, learning disabilities, evaluation, classroom observation

Classroom Observations: A Comprehensive Approach in SLD Evaluation

Specific learning disability (SLD) is by far the largest category of disabilities within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): nearly half (45%) of all students receiving special education services are served under this category (IDEA, 2004; NCLD). IDEA defines a specific learning disability as “a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations” (IDEA, 2004). Students with SLD tend to exhibit deficits in one or more academic domains (e.g., basic reading, math problem solving, written expression, etc.). In addition, students with SLD often experience social and behavioral difficulties including social skills deficits, impulsivity, hyperactivity, attention problems, memory deficits, perceptual difficulties, behavioral problems, and issues with self-confidence (Rotatori, Obiakor, & Bakken, 2013). While not all students with SLD will exhibit these characteristics, most professionals agree that the primary characteristics of students with SLD are deficits in academic performance (Gargiulo & Bouck, 2017). In understanding the complexities of students characteristics, it is imperative that the assessment and documentation procedures lead to an accurate disability determination and appropriate delineation of effective programming “tailored to the unique needs of the student and situated in the context of school” (Mitchem & Richards, 2003, p. 111).

Identification of an SLD, like any other disability under IDEA, is not based on a single criterion. Instead, the evaluation process must include a variety of assessment tools and strategies. Steps schools must take to determine if a student meets criteria for an SLD are as follows: (a) determination of failure to meet age or grade-level standards; (b) determination of inadequate response to scientifically based instruction; (c) demonstration of a pattern of strengths

and weaknesses within cognitive and academic achievement domains; (d) rule out lack of appropriate instruction; and (e) rule out influence of other factors (i.e., vision, hearing, intellectual disability, emotional disturbance, cultural and environmental factors, and limited English proficiency; IDEA, 2004; Learning Disabilities Association of America [LDA], 2018).

The evaluation team gathers multiple data related to the student's medical and family background, history of academic performance and learning difficulties, educational and psychological assessments, observation, interviews, and other relevant data to gain an understanding of the student's academic strengths and weaknesses within the classroom.

Among other data sources included in the evaluation process, classroom observations provide important information for examining student achievement and responsiveness to instruction. Proper data collection and documentation is not only necessary but critical when it comes to the development of a Full and Individual Evaluation (FIE) report for an SLD evaluation. This encompasses all necessary components of an FIE, including classroom observations. The aim of this article is to provide educational diagnosticians with recommendations and practical tools for conducting and documenting direct classroom observations for the purpose of an SLD evaluation. These recommendations and tools may also be useful for other assessment specialists and school professionals responsible for classroom observations.

Classroom Observation

A classroom observation is a required part of the assessment of a student and plays a critical role in evaluating and recommending identification of an SLD. While many student attributes can be identified through testing procedures, a skillful observer can often detect important student characteristics and behaviors in the classroom setting (Lerner & Johns, 2008).

The federal law requires a written report that includes a description of relevant behavior noted during classroom observations and the relationship between the behavior and student academic functioning (IDEA, 2004). At least one evaluation team member (other than the student's regular teacher) must observe the student's academic performance in the regular classroom setting. In the case of a preschool child, a team member will observe the child in an environment that is appropriate for the child's age.

Informal Classroom Observation

An informal classroom observation of student behavior can corroborate findings reported in other sources of data (e.g., testing measures, teacher reports, etc.). Many professionals believe the most relevant method to gaining instructional programming information can be obtained through direct classroom observation (Wilson, 1987). The information is relevant because it can reflect a student's daily performance on important academic tasks. In addition, the obtained information is immediate (i.e., informs how the students is doing on the day of the observation) and objective (i.e., can be openly observed; Wilson, 1987). An informal classroom observation is also one of the most common and simplest ways to record student behavior (Wilson & Reschly, 1996). However, since an informal classroom observation tends to be general and nonspecific, particular details can be lost or not identified in the process. Some professional organizations (i.e., Texas Professional Educational Diagnostician [TPED]) offer a template and charts that may be used in an SLD evaluation, including a general classroom observation form. Many districts also provide guidelines for documenting classroom observation data. However, the fields of research and practice both have little to offer when it comes to practical classroom observation tools that can be easily and effectively utilized in the evaluation process. Therefore, a detailed set

of procedures and a carefully designed form will assist the observer with capturing all required elements.

Classroom Observation Guidelines

Classroom observations provide information about a student's behavior in school and how the behavior affects academic performance (Lerner & Johns, 2008). A student's behavior in the classroom is situationally specific and differs from behavior during formal assessment (Sattler, 2008). The typical method for informal classroom observation in an SLD evaluation is a direct observation and a narrative recording of observed student behaviors. In this process, the following factors must be considered: (a) observer; (b) narrative; (c) location, (d) time; (e) duration; (f) frequency; and (g) behavior.

Observer. Who should act as an observer? While, the law does not prohibit a special education teacher from conducting classroom observations for an SLD evaluation, we recommend that an educational diagnostician collect these data for the evaluation team. An educational diagnostician is a highly trained evaluation specialist with classroom teaching experience making them the most qualified professional on the evaluation team to record accurate classroom observation data and how it relates to a student's academic performance. That teaching experience gives the educational diagnostician a unique ability to better understand a teacher's point of view, student performance expectations, as well as classroom dynamics. Since educational diagnosticians do not routinely work with students in a classroom setting, steps should be taken to reduce the *reactivity effect*, the effect of an observer on the observed individual (Skinner, Dittmer, & Howell, 2000). The following are suggested methods that can be used to reduce the reactivity effect: (a) having the observer enter the room prior to the student,

(b) providing a vague explanation for the presence of the observer, and (c) decreasing the conspicuousness of the observer (Skinner et al., 2000).

Narrative. What is the procedure for recording observations? The first recommendation is to check own biases and value judgments at the door. The observer must collect objective data and report what was seen and heard. It is recommended observers record data as accurately as possible by providing a detailed description of a student's exact behavior utilizing exact words and quantifiable data (Sattler, 2008). Next, the observer must be attentive to details and distinguish one behavior from another (Sattler, 1992). Finally, observers should avoid making assumptions or trying to interpret their observations. Classroom observation data should be sufficient to describe the instructional process, classroom environment, and student engagement. See Figure 1 for recommendations when recording classroom observations.

<INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE>

Location. Where should the observations take place? When collecting informal classroom observation data, the observer enters a classroom and records the most salient description of a student's behaviors as they occur. For an SLD evaluation, these observation data must be collected in a general education setting - the student's most natural environment. Collecting information in the environment in which it is a concern will maximize the validity of obtained data (Taylor, 2009). Observations across different classes can be especially valuable. For example, if reading is an area of concern, it might be helpful to observe the student not only in his Reading or English class, but also in his Social Studies class, or other core academic class with multiple opportunities for reading. It is also critical to capture physical attributes of the classroom (e.g., seating arrangement, lighting, noise level, and where the student is seated) that have a direct effect on student behavior (Sattler, 1992).

Time. When is the best time to conduct observations? The observer should apply personal professional expertise in deciding when to carry out observations. However, it is important to make sure an observation takes place during a period of instruction. Other things to consider include fire drills, teacher absences, and special events (e.g., parties) all of which may have a direct effect on the student's classroom behavior (Sattler, 1992). It is advisable to consult the referring teacher to determine if there is a specific time during the day, or during a particular instructional time when the behaviors are different (Sattler, 1992). While classroom observations may take place at different times of the day, different days of the week, and during different academic activities, it is recommended the observation take place during the instructional time that is most problematic for the student (e.g., a student with weaknesses in math calculation should be observed during a math or science class). This will give the observer a better understanding of how the student responds to the teacher and the instructional content.

Duration. How long should an observation last? A brief 10-15 minutes observation may not yield usable data as many behaviors, especially infrequent behaviors, may not have a chance to present themselves. Additionally, observers should keep in mind that specific activities may be especially positive or stressful for the student. Thus, it is best to observe a student for the entire instructional period if possible. This will provide the observer with an opportunity to survey and document behaviors during the student's arrival to class, delivery of direct instruction, and independent or group work.

Frequency. How many observations are necessary? Each classroom has its own attributes that lead to a difference in behavior (Sattler, 2008); therefore, it would be especially useful to conduct more than one classroom observation, particularly when conducting an initial evaluation within the SLD evaluation framework. Repeated observations may give the observer a

clearer picture of a student's behavior, rather than a one-time snapshot. In addition, repeated observations help to rule out "bad" days or times: some days during the week or times during the day might be more stressful for the student.

Behavior. What does the student behavior look like? The primary purpose of an observation is to determine the relationship between behavior and a student's academic performance. Therefore, all observation data collected and presented should be in the context of academic performance, recorded objectively, and distinguishable from other behaviors. Thus, observed behaviors "must be defined in objective, clear, and complete terms" (Sattler, 1992, p. 473). When describing a student's classroom behavior during academic tasks, the observer should record data on the accuracy, amount, and completion rates of the student academic performance (i.e., was the student able to correctly answer a question, did the student begin work right away or did he take 10 minutes to find a pencil, etc.). Additionally, student interactions should be noted; this includes appropriate or inappropriate interactions with other students and the classroom teacher. Finally, the observer should not only thoroughly document the nature of student behavior, but the sequence of events that occurred during the observation session as well.

Data Collection Form

Federal law requires a number of considerations in the process of evaluating students for an SLD. IDEA requires that information obtained from all of sources of data is documented and carefully considered (IDEA, 2004). Educational diagnosticians often are tasked with finding appropriate tools and strategies to ensure careful documentation of observation data. A data collection form allows for structured and accurate recording of student behavior within a particular setting and time frame. We recommend keeping the recording system as simple as

possible to ensure maximized efficiency and accuracy of recorded information. See Figure 2 for a sample of a direct classroom observation form.

<INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE>

Data Collection Example

Simple gathering and reporting of data is only a part of the task. The educational diagnostician must also analyze and synthesize the information they collected. The final step in this data-driven documentation process is writing a classroom observation report that will add to the comprehensive assessment data and assist the evaluation team in making eligibility and programming recommendations. A classroom observation narrative “should read like a short story, telling what, when, and how the behavior of concern occurred and what features of the environment served to increase or decrease the behavior” (Sattler, 1992, p. 478). We suggest to break information up instead of having one big block of narrative. The educational diagnostician must also ensure the classroom observation report, as any part of an FIE, is understandable to all readers. Therefore, the educational diagnostician should use every day descriptive language in all their observation reports (Sattler, 2008). For readability, the report should be proofread and edited. Figure 3 depicts a sample of a classroom observation report for an FIE.

<INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE>

Conclusion

SLD is the most prevalent disability category in the United States represented by 2.4 million students in the public school sector (NCLD, 2014). Identification of an SLD is based on a variety of sources, including direct classroom observations. A direct observation is a critical component of comprehensive evaluations of student performance in classroom settings and requires careful data collection. Discussed in this article are recommendations that will assist

educational diagnosticians and other assessment professionals with conducting and documenting direct classroom observations for the purpose of an SLD evaluation. A practitioner-friendly form, supported by examples, will promote structured recording of data and assist with capturing and reporting important elements of student behavior.

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Examples of Observations	
Not Recommended	Recommended
Student is frustrated with a difficult math task.	Student refused to initiate the task. When asked by the teacher to begin work, student replied “ I don ’t understand”, then pushed the paper off his desk.
Student’s classmates do not like him.	When the class was asked to find a partner for a project, student was unable to do so. No classmates were observed to ask him and those he asked indicated they had a partner, or refused to work with him.
Student’s expressive language skills are limited.	During the entire observation, the student remained quiet and did not initiate any conversations.
Student was observed during her resource reading class.	Student was observed during her language arts class in the general education setting.
Student’s teacher reports she tries very hard in class, but is not always successful. Parents report student struggles with her homework.	This information should be included in the teacher/parent comments/information section. It should not be included in an observation.
Rapport was easily established. Student was compliant and worked hard during formal assessment.	This is an observation during testing and should be included in the testing section.

Figure 1. Examples of Observations.

Direct Classroom Observation Form	
Student Name:	School:
Date:	Teacher/Subject:
Time:	Observer:
Student seating arrangement	
<i>Where is the student seated in relation to the teacher and/or instruction. Does the student arrive to class prior to the bell? Does the student appear to be organized and prepared for class (i.e., have his/her materials needed for class)? Does the student stay in his/her assigned seat or move around the classroom? How often does the student get out of his/her seat?</i>	
Lesson/Activities	
<i>Describe the lesson/activities of the class during the observation session (direct instruction, independent seat work, small group work). Can the student work independently? Does the student require addition assistance from the teacher or peers? What is the day's work assignment? Is it to be completed that day or to be turned in for homework? It is a continuation of another assignment? Does the student complete all tasks in their entirety?</i>	
Student behavior	
<i>Does the student demonstrate attentiveness? How much time is spent on-task and/or off-task? Does the student follow the teacher's directions immediately? If not, how long does it take the student to begin working on assigned task? Does the student work quietly, or are they talking out? Does the student ask for help when needed? How does the student respond to help/redirection? Does the student require addition assistance from the teacher or peers?</i>	
Anecdotal comments/observations	
<i>Any other items or details that were noted during this observation? Are there any other academic or performance level concerns?</i>	

Figure 2. Direct Classroom Observation Form.

Classroom Observation

Alyssa was observed in her English class on November 15th, 2018 by Octavia Jones, MEd, Educational Diagnostician. The observation lasted for 50 minutes.

Alyssa was observed to arrive to class prior to the bell ringing and taking her assigned seat. The ELA class had approximately 27 students with the seating arranged in groups of four desks. Alyssa's seat was located in the middle, front of the class, nearest where the teacher delivers instruction. She was observed to visit quietly with her group-mates for a short time. A warm-up was projected on the overhead asking students to make corrections on a sentence prompt. Alyssa was observed removing materials needed for the day's class and opening up a folder marked ELA. She was then observed to quietly begin writing in the folder. Once the tardy bell rang, the teacher let the class know they were going to discuss the warm-up after she takes attendance. After attendance had been taken, the teacher began discussing the warm-up with the class. Alyssa was not observed to participate in the discussion; however, she was observed taking notes in her folder.

Once the class finished the warm-up, the teacher introduced the day's assignment. The class was to begin working on developing an outline for an expository essay. The teacher projected the prompt and began discussion with the class. Alyssa was observed to attend to the discussion and taking notes, but she did not participate in the discussion. At one point the teacher asked Alyssa a question regarding the prompt; however, Alyssa was not able to correctly answer. Once the class was given instructions to begin working on the outline, Alyssa was observed working in her folder. The teacher went over to Alyssa and asked if she understood the assignment. Alyssa did not respond, the teacher then re-worded the assignment and discussed different ways to approach the assignment. She and Alyssa then discussed the outline and what was needed for the day's assignment. When the teacher walked away to help another student, Alyssa was observed to sit quietly, looked at what she had written, and then visited a few minutes with her group-mates. After approximately 10 minutes, Alyssa asked to go to the restroom. The teacher gave her a pass to leave. Alyssa was out of the class for approximately 15 minutes and then returned quietly to her seat. At that point, the teacher informed the students they had 5 more minutes of class and gave instructions on homework. The students were asked to continue to work on the outline and to finish it at home. Alyssa was observed attending to the teacher and taking notes. She then packed up her materials and visited with her group-mates while waiting for the bell to ring.

Alyssa also was observed in her English class on November 16th, 2018 by Octavia Jones, MEd, Educational Diagnostician. The observation lasted for 20 minutes.

Alyssa was observed to arrive to class prior to the bell ringing and taking her assigned seat. A warm-up was projected on the overhead asking students to make corrections on a new sentence prompt. Alyssa was observed removing materials needed for the day's class and opening up her folder marked ELA. She was then observed to visit with her group-mates and quietly began writing in the folder. Once the tardy bell rang and attendance was taken, the teacher discussed the sentence with the students. Alyssa was observed writing in her folder and attending to the discussion; she did not add to the discussion. Once the warm-up was

completed, the teacher asked the students to take out their essay outline that was to be completed for homework. The teacher then went to each student to check their work. When the teacher checked Alyssa's work, she noted that Alyssa had not added to her outline since their discussion the previous day. Alyssa reported she had forgotten to take her homework home. The teacher let Alyssa know she needed to complete the assignment during the day's class. When the teacher moved to another student, Alyssa was observed to visit with her group-mates for a few minutes and then began working in her folder.

Figure 3. Classroom Observation Sample.