CHAPTER 1

Overview of the School Function Assessment

The *School Function Assessment* (SFA) is used to measure a student's performance of functional tasks that support his or her participation in the academic and social aspects of an elementary school program (grades K–6). It was designed to facilitate collaborative program planning for students with a variety of disabling conditions.

The instrument is a judgment-based (questionnaire) assessment that is completed by one or more school professionals who know the student well and have observed his or her typical performance on the school-related tasks and activities being assessed. Items have been written in measurable, behavioral terms that can be used directly in the student's Individual Educational Plan (IEP).

The SFA is comprised of three parts:

Part I Participation is used to examine the student's level of participation in six major school activity settings: regular or special education classroom, playground or recess, transportation to and from school, bathroom and toileting activities, transitions to and from class, and mealtime or snack time.

Part II Task Supports is used to examine the supports currently provided to the student when he or she performs school-related functional tasks that are required to participate effectively in an educational program. Two types of task supports are examined separately: assistance (adult help) and adaptations (modifications to the environment or program, such as specialized equipment or adapted materials).

Part III Activity Performance is used to examine the student's performance of specific school-related functional activities. Each scale includes a comprehensive set of activities that share a common functional demand such as moving around the classroom and the school, using school materials, interacting with others, following school rules, and communicating needs. Each set of activities is used to examine in detail one of the tasks addressed globally in Part II.

Introduction

Educational assessment typically is initiated when a student has difficulty meeting expectations for academic performance. There are many standardized tests and procedures that can be used to identify a student's academic strengths and limitations, as well as his or her competence in domains that contribute to academic achievement, such as language and cognition. However, school professionals recognize that effective school performance also depends on a student's ability to perform a variety of functional tasks that enable him or her to participate in the various learning activities of the school day. These functional tasks are often referred to as *nonacademic* tasks. Students with disabilities often have difficulty meeting

performance expectations on these tasks because of limitations resulting from their physical or cognitive impairments. Therefore, performance on nonacademic tasks needs to be included in an assessment of a student's educational difficulties. In many situations, efforts to minimize or compensate for these functional limitations may be a central focus of the student's special education program (AOTA, 1997).

There are two common purposes of an educational assessment. The first purpose is to determine a student's eligibility for special education services according to criteria established by state regulations and by the *Individuals With Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) (Public Law 102–119, enacted in 1991, reauthorized in 1997). These criteria generally involve evidence that a student is performing substantially below expectations in one or more academic areas and that he or she meets criteria for the presence of one or more of the disabling conditions specified in IDEA. The assessments typically used for this purpose are norm-referenced, standardized tests, including intelligence tests, academic skills tests, and adaptive behavior measures.

The second purpose of an educational assessment is to obtain information needed to develop an individualized education program that addresses the student's specific needs. Norm-referenced tests can be used in this process to identify general areas of strength and weakness. However, the results are not well-suited to guide program planning because they do not provide enough information about the student's specific skills. For example, results of an intellectual assessment or adaptive behavior assessment can help to define how far below age-level a student is performing. However, they do not convey precisely which of the important skills needed during the school day the student has mastered and which he or she has not, nor do they help to identify the most appropriate objectives to address in the student's educational program to remediate the delay (Garwood, 1982).

Skill inventories or criterion-referenced skill assessments are often better suited to program planning (Reschly, 1987, 1990). However, few instruments of this type have been available to assess nonacademic or functional skills. Typically, the skills required to perform these tasks have been assessed informally through observations, checklists, and other locally-developed instruments. As more and more students with disabilities are included in regular education settings, there is an increasing need for a standardized instrument to guide assessment and program planning more systematically. The SFA was designed for this purpose.

What Is School Function?

In the context of this assessment, *school function* refers to a student's ability to perform important functional activities that support or enable participation in the academic and related social aspects of an educational program. These functional activities are referred to as the nonacademic aspects of a school program and differ significantly from academic activities. Academic activities refer to classroom and homework assignments that reflect the curriculum for a particular grade and whose primary purpose is to increase mastery of content areas, including language arts, mathematics, and science. Participating in and performing the curriculum-related activities assumes a certain baseline performance of functional skills, including manipulating books and tools for writing, responding to questions about the curriculum material, requesting information or assistance, moving about the classroom and school, addressing personal needs appropriately as they arise, and interacting with peers during learning tasks. Although functional skills are frequently targeted for direct instruction, the instruction is designed to support mastery of the academic program. For example, a student with a movement disorder may be given some direct training in holding a pen or pencil correctly, so that he or she can complete written assignments as expected for academic performance at his or her grade level.

Advantages of Using the SFA Instead of Adaptive Behavior Measures

Users may ask when they should consider using the SFA rather than currently available measures of adaptive behavior since their content appears to overlap. There are important differences between these measures, particularly in their purpose. Most of the commonly used adaptive behavior instruments are discriminative instruments. Discriminative instruments can be used to examine the student's overall performance compared to his or her peers in areas of personal independence (the ability to care for oneself in a manner commensurate with age and cultural expectations) and social responsibility (the ability to meet societal expectations regarding behavioral norms and self-sufficiency). The results from discriminative instruments provide some information regarding areas of strength and weakness across the domains sampled, (e.g., communication, personal care). This information usually is based on composite score comparisons that do not provide the detailed information needed to set specific goals for a student. Another limitation of most adaptive behavior assessments is that they do not enable you to examine the functional behaviors most affected by physical impairments, such as changing position, traveling distances, or handling various school tools, nor do they help clarify whether and to what extent features of the student's physical and social environment may affect his or her activity performance. For these reasons, adaptive behavior assessments may not be well suited for program planning in an educational environment.

The SFA, in addition to examining the same content as most adaptive behavior assessments, can be used to guide individual program planning and evaluation by providing specific information about the student's functional strengths and limitations. The SFA provides separate measures of the student's current level of participation in school settings, performance of functional activities, and the supports he or she needs to perform these functional tasks. The content of the SFA enables you to examine all relevant areas of elementary school function with particular attention to areas that are especially challenging for students with physical or sensory impairments.

The SFA is criterion referenced rather than norm referenced. The scales enable you to measure the student's functional performance relative to the overall continuum of function. In addition, criterion cut-off scores are provided that can be used to establish that the student is performing below grade expectations, as needed to determine eligibility for special services.

Rationale for the SFA

Under IDEA, students with disabilities are entitled to an appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services to meet individual needs in the least restrictive environment possible. The law addresses two major concerns: (1) removing barriers that limit students with disabilities from participating in appropriate educational programs, and (2) ensuring that educational programming and support services are effective. The SFA addresses both of these issues by assessing the student's level of participation in six different school contexts and his or her performance of functional activities integral to the school program.

When a student is identified as having special needs or is referred for evaluation of special needs, the collaborative planning team—including regular and special education teachers, parents, and related services personnel such as physical, occupational, or speech therapists—is charged with determining the specific individualized goals that will guide the student's educational program. To identify the student's needs and, later, to evaluate whether the

educational program facilitated the student in achieving the goals, the team needs measures that are congruent with the focus of special education and that were designed for program planning and evaluation.

The SFA was designed to assist in the initial assessment of student needs and to evaluate the outcomes of services provided, according to the guidelines of the federal legislation. Features of the instrument target the unique needs of the special education assessment process.

Conceptual Model of the SFA

Many existing assessment instruments are based on the skill profiles of typical students in regular education. As a result, these instruments may not represent adequately the challenges typically faced by students with disabilities. For example, they may not examine the nonacademic activities that frequently pose challenges to students with disabilities, or may not cover the full range of functional skill acquisition—from very early attempts through full mastery. In contrast, the SFA was constructed with the needs and special situations of students with disabilities in mind.

In the model of function underlying the design of the SFA, *function* is recognized as a very complex construct that can be defined at many different levels, from global to specific. Each level addresses an important aspect of function, from a broad focus on quality of life or participation in the mainstream environment, to the ability to perform specific, necessary activities. Although the different aspects of function are interrelated, each aspect captures information that is unique. To understand an individual student's overall school function, a multi-faceted assessment that considers each of the relevant aspects is needed.

Many features from models of function and of the disablement process found in current special education and rehabilitation literature are used in the model for the SFA. The four different levels of the model are presented below in "top-down" order, from global to specific. The first three levels directly examine facets of function and are addressed in the SFA. The fourth level examines abilities underlying functional performance rather than function itself. Level four is not addressed in the SFA (Brown, Branston, Hamre-Nietupski, Pumpian, Certo, & Gurenwald, 1979; Trombly, 1993; NCMRR, 1993; Coster & Haley, 1992; WHO, 1980).

> **Level I Social Participation** The degree to which the student can access and actively participate in the opportunities and roles open to others of the same age, culture, etc., or the degree to which the student experiences limitations due to barriers such as discriminatory policies, stigmatizing attitudes, or limited access to opportunities related to his or her disabling condition.
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> **Level II Task Performance** The extent to which the student is able to complete tasks that are a necessary or desired aspect of cultural and age-expected roles. A task is defined as a set of related activities that share a common functional focus or goal.
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> **Level III Activity Performance** The student's ability to complete discrete functional activities that are necessary or valued components of his or her daily tasks.
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> **Level IV Basic Structures and Processes** The level of development or intactness of basic physical, sensory, social, and cognitive processes that underlie functional performance. *(This level of the model is addressed by such traditional measures as IQ tests, motor development scales, and tests of perceptual functions.)*

Several important features of this model were considered during the development of the SFA.

Each level focuses on a different aspect of function

Because each level of the model has a different focus, several different assessment questions were asked to obtain the relevant information. Current knowledge is limited about the relationship between performing discrete activities, such as grasping a pencil or remembering brief instructions, and the ability to complete more complex routines that are frequently demanded in school. Therefore, findings from examination of one level cannot be extrapolated to other levels. For example, you cannot assume that a student will not be able to participate in instructional activities simply because he or she is unable to use some of the tools typically involved with those activities. The student who cannot write legibly with a pencil may be able to complete his or her social studies assignments successfully using dictation or a computer. Figure 1.1 summarizes the four levels of the model, the relevant assessment question for each level, and the SFA scale that addresses each level.

Functional performance reflects both individual and contextual factors

From the current perspective, dysfunction or disability results when there is a mismatch between the demands of a particular environment and the student's ability to meet those demands. Therefore, limitations identified during an assessment of function should not be interpreted as problems within the individual student. For example, if a student who uses a wheelchair cannot move around the classroom, the problem may reflect the student's lack of skill maneuvering the wheelchair, the arrangement of the furniture that limits freedom of movement, or it may reflect some combination of these factors. Changes in both the environment and in the student's skills may change his or her functional performance.

Functional performance is context specific

A student's performance in one context will not necessarily be the same as in another context. A student's social interactions may be very different in the structured environment of the classroom compared to the less-structured environment of the playground. The definition of function may even differ from context to context. For example, the ability to write legibly with a pen or pencil is an important aspect of classroom function, but it is irrelevant to overall function in the cafeteria. Assessment instruments developed to measure function must reflect the demands of the specific context for which they were intended.

Function is defined primarily by the outcome of performance rather than by the methods used

A variety of methods may be used to accomplish important school tasks and activities. A student may move about the classroom by walking, using a wheelchair, or using crutches. The focus for assessing a student's ability to function in his or her classroom environment is whether the student's movement is adequate for classroom purposes, such as retrieving materials needed for work, moving to different activity stations, or participating fully in all aspects of the classroom activity. Items included on instruments designed to measure a student's ability to function must be worded carefully to ensure that the student can use a variety of methods to accomplish the specified performance.

Level of Function/Disablement	Assessment Questions
Social Participation **Social Role Performance** (Societal Disadvantage)	To what extent is the student included in or restricted from participating in the activities and opportunities typically expected of or available to a student of this age and culture? ***SFA Scale:*** *Participation*
Task Performance (Disability)	To what extent is the student currently meeting expectations for performing important (complex) tasks expected of his/her same age peers in this culture and context? ***SFA Scales:*** *Task Supports Assistance; Adaptations*
Activity Performance (Functional Limitations)	What are the student's current strengths and limitations in performing specific activities required to accomplish the major tasks expected of or desired by him/her? ***SFA Scale:*** *Activity performance*
Basic Structures and Processes (Impairment)	What is the status (intactness; developmental level) of the basic processes or components necessary for the performance of daily tasks and activities?

Figure 1.1 Conceptual Framework for Functional Assessment

Summary of the Features of the SFA

Design based on current models of function and special education legislation
The SFA is based on a multi-level model of functional performance. The instrument also reflects the focus of current legislation on achieving full participation of students with disabilities in the typical activities and environments of their peers, and the requirement that related services (e.g., occupational or physical therapy) provided in school must be tied to identification of an educationally-relevant outcome (AOTA, 1997).

Content reflects the functional requirements of elementary school environments
The items on the SFA focus on behaviors that have clear functional relevance in the elementary school environment. In addition to classroom requirements, the SFA addresses functional activities of the full array of environments typical of most elementary schools, including those of the cafeteria, transportation, transitions, bathroom, and playground.

Items are applicable to students with a wide variety of special needs
Field testing involved a large, heterogeneous group of students with varying types of disabilities to ensure that wording of each item was appropriate for all students (e.g., each item focused on the adequacy of performance, not the method employed). Individual ratings for each scale were written to apply to students with disabilities across the full range of elementary school grades (kindergarten through grade six).

Judgment-based format
The judgment-based format enables users to obtain information about the student's typical performance as observed by those who work with him or her regularly in school. Information gathered in this manner provides a more valid profile of the student's functional capabilities on which to base educational programming decisions than measuring performance on a single occasion.

Transdisciplinary focus and language
The items on the SFA were written using common language to support effective sharing of information among all individuals involved in a student's educational program. Completing the entire assessment typically requires input from several individuals with varying backgrounds (e.g., teachers, aides, related service providers) which facilitates sharing differing perspectives across disciplines and roles.

Criterion-referenced scales designed to measure meaningful functional change
Criterion scores obtained for each part of the instrument indicate the student's current place on the functional continuum, rather than the "distance from the norm." The criterion scores describe the extent of the student's participation in school activities, the need for assistance and adaptations in the school environment, and his or her current repertoire of educationally-relevant functional skills.

In each part of the instrument, most of the ratings describe degrees of limitation that are clearly outside the range of variation expected of same age/grade peers, that is, performance at the "lower" end of the normal distribution. The ratings do not distinguish degrees of functional performance within the typical range. Each rating represents a meaningful difference in a student's needs or performance. For example, a change from rating 1 to rating 2 on an Activity Performance item indicates that the student now is able to make some meaningful contribution to performing that activity, whereas previously he or she did not perform any aspect of the activity.

Separate scales describe the student's functional profile in specific performance areas
Activity Performance (Part III) consists of many scales, each of which has a single major functional focus, such as moving around the school, eating and drinking, using school materials, or behaving in a safe manner. This organization ensures that important areas of strength or limitation within a specific functional performance area can be easily identified and can be used to develop an appropriate educational program for the student. This feature is especially useful when the student exhibits a variable pattern of functional limitations within a broad domain.