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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of the types of testing accommodations used for students with disabilities and presents arguments for and against their use. It begins by discussing student participation in educational assessments and federal requirements concerning the participation of students with disabilities. The types of accommodations are then reviewed, including: (1) presentation accommodations, described as changes made to the presentation of the test or test directions such as large print versions, Braille versions, sign language translations, or reading aloud; (2) response accommodations, described as changes made to the way students respond to a test question or prompt, such as allowing a student to indicate an answer by pointing or gesturing, using a scribe to record written answers, and technological recording methods; (3) setting accommodations, described as changes to the testing environment or location, such as administering the test in small groups, individually, or even at a student's home; and (4) scheduling accommodations, described as changes in the timing or scheduling of testing such as extending the length of given time for the test to be completed and allowing testing breaks. The paper concludes with a review of arguments for and against testing accommodations. (CR)

IMPLICATIONS OF ACCOMMODATIONS IN TESTING

The Implications of Accommodations in Testing Students With Disabilities

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Abstract

As assessment becomes increasingly prevalent as a means of accountability and measurement of student achievement in today's schools, the use of testing accommodations when assessing students with disabilities and the resulting implications are issues that need careful analysis. What are the types of accommodations that can be implemented? What effects do test accommodations have on the clinical usefulness, reliability, and validity of a student's results, individually and when included in a group? Do testing accommodations for disabled students discriminate against non-disabled students by giving them unfair advantages? Or do testing accommodations "level the playing field" for students with disabilities for whom standardized tests may be difficult or even inappropriate? The author provides an overview of accommodations, their types, and arguments both for and against their use.

The Implications of Accommodations in Testing Students With Disabilities

Introduction

As educational measurement and accountability gain more public and political attention, administrators, teachers, and school psychologists need to educate themselves on the potential problematic issues surrounding student assessment. There is an increasing amount of legal litigation and professional disagreement regarding issues in psychoeducational assessment. Which students should be tested and how frequently? What assessment instruments should be used, what criteria are used to select them, and by whom are they selected? How should these test results be used and whose results should be included? Amid these and other controversial issues in assessment is the question of how students with disabilities should be assessed. Should test administrators permit test accommodations in order to provide for more "fair" testing of students with disabilities? What effects do test accommodations have on the clinical usefulness, reliability, and validity of a student's results, if any? What are the implications of testing, diagnosing, and evaluating students with disabilities in a standardized format?

Student Participation and Instrument Appropriateness

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA) requires that all students with disabilities be included in state and district-wide measures of performance. States must also provide accommodations for students who are unable to participate in large-scale tests. What is not clear is the criteria for which students with disabilities are selected for regular assessment and for which are selected for assessment with accommodations. "It is often recommended that decisions about participation in assessments…be made with the characteristics and needs of the student in mind (Thurlow, Elliott, & Ysseldyke, 1998), yet at the same time there are in all states established policies on the factors that should guide decisions about…testing" (Thurlow, House, Scott, & Ysseldyke, 2000, p. 155).

It is difficult to justify recommending a methodology of testing for a particular student according to a mandated rubric. Students who have Individualized Education Programs (IEP's), have been prescribed just that - an *individual* program for their education. Categorization of students by disability in order to determine assessment appropriateness and type is in direct conflict with the

intent of an IEP. As Kleinert et al. notes, "…that criterion [would] violate fundamental principles of due process and individualization, since individual student decisions cannot be based solely on categorical labels" (Kleinert, Haiq, Kearns, & Kennedy, 2000, p. 60).

Thus, since it seems that every student must participate, how is one to best determine the battery of tests which will provide the most accurate picture of each student's abilities? For instance, in autistic children, low scores on psychometric tests are often attributed to poorly developed basic communication skills which are needed to give appropriate responses to test items (Wodrich, 1997). A child's deficit in receptive written or oral language will greatly impact the results of an assessment, as will a child's limited or lacking expressive language capability. When considering a student for assessment, it is ideal to consider both the student's abilities and disabilities in order to select measures that will offer a true reflection of a student's capacity for learning. However, due to district and state procedures, financial considerations, and other restraints, this approach is often neither practical nor realistic. In addition, some would argue that the assessment process of special education students is flawed in its origin, since

standardized tests are generally not normed on a varied disabled student sample and therefore not thought to be reflective of an individual student with disabilities' potential.

Types of Test Accommodations

If the decision that accommodations should be used when testing a student with disabilities, what types are appropriate? Thurlow et al. (2000) devised four categories of test accommodations based upon what they observed to be most commonly implemented.

The first type are called presentation accommodations. "Presentation accommodations were defined as changes made to the presentation of the test or test directions" (Thurlow et al., 2000, p. 156). Some examples of presentation accommodations might include using large print versions, Braille versions, sign language translation, or reading aloud. Presentation accommodations were some of the most commonly implemented in individual American states when testing students with disabilities (Thurlow et al., 1997).

The second type are called response accommodations. "Response accommodations included changes made to the way students respond to a test question or prompt" (Thurlow et

al., 2000p. 156). Some examples of response accommodations include allowing a student to indicate an answer by pointing or gesturing, using a scribe to record written answers, and technological recording methods such as using a computer to respond.

The third type of accommodations are called setting accommodations. "Setting accommodations were defined as changes to the testing environment or location" (Thurlow et al., 2000, p. 156). Administering the test in small groups, individually, or even at a student's home or other location are all examples of setting accommodations.

The last type of test accommodations are called scheduling accommodations. "Scheduling accommodations included changes in the timing or scheduling of testing" (Thurlow et al., 2000, p. 156). Examples of scheduling accommodations are extending the length of given time for the test to be completed, and administering the test in segments to allow "breaks" for the student. Most notably, the Standardized Aptitude Test used for college admissions is one such test that allows scheduling accommodations for students with disabilities by extending the test time given to those students.

Thurlow et al. (1997) notes that the use of these types of accommodations varies widely from state to state,

and some are excluded almost entirely as options as deemed appropriate by individual states.

Arguments In Favor of Accommodations

The theoretical purpose of these test accommodations is to create an equitable test situation for students who, due to certain disabilities, may be at a disadvantage. Tindal et al. notes, "as states move into large-scale testing that includes students with disabilities, it is important to make appropriate accommodations" (Tindal, Heath, Hollenbeck, Almond, & Harniss, 1998, p. 448). In order to get accurate, relevant data, test accommodations must be used in order to prevent what Tindal et al. call "unrelated access skills" (p. 440) from interfering with obtaining precise data relevant to the target skill measured. Unrelated access skills are skills used when a student is required to complete a primary task, such as reading a test item, before utilizing the target skill being tested, such as critical thinking.

> "Although the use of standard administration conditions allows comparability across students, the validity of the inferences made on the basis of the outcomes (Messick, 1989) may be suspect if unrelated

access skills needed to take the test actually impede performance" (Tindal et al., p. 440).

Thus comes into play the question of the clinical usefulness of a test's results if the target skill has been impeded by an unrelated access skill. How can we measure the language comprehension of a student who has no literacy skills? Tindal et al. (1998) and others maintain that accommodations, such as reading the test items to a student, must be made in order to avoid making incorrect inferences based on inherently flawed data. This is especially significant in diagnostic evaluations, when an educational or school psychologist is attempting to diagnose a specific learning disability. The danger is that a non-reader may inadvertently receive a diagnosis of both dyslexia (for the decoding deficit) and some other disability, such as auditory processing disorder, ADD, or Asperger's syndrome, (for a comprehension deficit), when it was the unrelated access skill of poor decoding that in turn caused poor comprehension. Additionally, to further avoid this outcome, the continued use of multiple psychometric measures must be strongly emphasized.

Arguments Against Accommodations

There are arguments against testing accommodations for students with disabilities, as well as against testing students at all. "[Findings] are that assessments encourage rote and superficial learning…and that in the use of assessments the grading function is over-emphasized and the learning function underemphasized" (Black, 2000, p. 409). That aside, what aspects of accommodations might compromise the clinical usefulness of a test instrument?

Black (2000) points out that while tests and their administration protocols can be altered, there can be a concurrent decrease in validity in attempting to increase reliability. One can extend the administration time of a test, for example, thus increasing the potential reliability of the test for those students with disabilities who require more time to perform than regular education students. However, the drawback is that in the process, the test's validity, in particular its predictive validity, is compromised due to the test time skewing from the normative data sample's test time. The test results, one could argue, are still reasonably valid, but that the ability to predict performance in particular will be damaged because predictive aspects of a test are based almost entirely on the normative sample's performance.

Another difficulty with making accommodations lies with the intended use of the test data. "The most important issue that underlies much of this discussion is whether it is more psychometrically sound to base decision making on smaller numbers of students (e.g., general education students) who participate fully in a non-accommodated test or to base decisions on all students, some of whom have had some changes to the test" (Thurlow et al., 2000, p. 157). In district and state-wide performance assessments, used for the purposes of accountability, how are we to present the data in order to reflect the accommodations? Sharp and Earle (2000) note, "There are good reasons why the provision of compensation in assessment should not be allowed to `trump' the principle of validity, not least amongst which is the fact that validity is intrinsic to the concept of assessment and hence to education itself" (p. 197).

One could also argue that accommodations are or will soon be completely unnecessary due to improved and rapidly advancing test method and research. "Thanks to technology, test materials are of higher quality, the statistical analyses are more elaborate, and new tests are simply superior products" (Fewell, 2000, p. 39).

Finally, there is the problem of equity, not for the students with disabilities, but for the students without them. Sharp and Earle (2000) maintain, "If it is indeed the case that some alternative form of assessment tests identical knowledge and skills as the original, then it follows that there is no reason why all candidates should not be allowed to take it, regardless of disability" (p. 195). There is a developing public opinion that if standardized tests are to be given, that student should indeed take the test in a standardized fashion, and not award some students what Sharp and Earle (2000) call "compensatory" accommodations (p. 198). Increasing performance pressure on both students and teachers has led to controversy about the assurance of testing equality; that everyone is treated "fairly" by the tests that will judge their performance or make decisions about their academic life.

Conclusion

Assessment is becoming a more important issue in our educational system and as such, the issue of testing students with disabilities is earning more recognition. The decision to offer a student testing accommodations is not one to be taken lightly, and the benefits and

consequences must be examined in order to make an informed decision. Ultimately, our goal for psychoeducational assessment is as Fewell (2000) eloquently states:

"The process, the products, and the procedures of assessment have changed dramatically, but the goals remain essentially the same: we want to gain *valid, reliable, and useful information about children without penalizing them through the limits of our measurement system*. Further, we want information that can be translated quite easily into improved instruction and services for children with special needs" (p. 42). [italics mine]

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