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Assessment Policy and Practices: Test Accommodations for Students Without Disabilities?

Author: Pei-Ying Lin

Affiliation: University of Saskatchewan

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Introduction

Offering appropriate test accommodations (e.g., extra time, computer, scribe) to students with special needs can help these students demonstrate their knowledge and skills, increase participation rates, and ensure test validity and fairness for all students (e.g., Bolt & Thurlow, 2007; Fuchs et al., 2000; Lindstrom & Gregg, 2007). According to the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*(American Educational Research Association et al., 1999), test accommodations are defined as "any action taken in response to a determination that an individual's disability requires a departure from established testing protocol" (p. 101). The term "accommodation" is limited to changes in test administration conditions that are intended to support students with special needs in demonstrating their knowledge and skills, but do not change what the test is intended to measure. Moreover, the changes do not inflate the test results or simply help student score higher, or give unfair advantages/disadvantages to examinees. In contrast, changes that do affect what a test measures are sometimes referred to as modifications. For example, if the purpose of the test is to measure comprehension of the text, then extra time might permit the student to demonstrate his comprehension, making the test results more valid. However, allowing a student with a reading disability extra time on a test intended to measure reading speed within a certain period of time would not be appropriate.

Current literature mainly focuses on accommodations for students with special needs. Accommodations for student without disabilities are rarely discussed. In reality, students without disabilities may be permitted to use accommodations when they write large-scale assessments. Therefore, this study investigated this special group in order to fill critical gaps in both knowledge and practices in fields of special education and educational assessments.

Eligibility for Test Accommodations/Special Provisions

In Canada and the United States, large-scale assessments are increasingly used to measure students' learning outcomes and hold educators and schools accountable for student achievements (Crundwell, 2005; Klinger, DeLuca, & Miller, 2008). Students in each province or states participate in provincial/state-wide testing programs. There are a wide range of existing large-scale testing programs and it is not possible to examine all programs in one paper. As a result, this current study investigates large-scale assessments in Ontario that provides test accommodation policies for students with and without disabilities.

In Ontario, students at different grade levels were assessed by the provincial assessments developed by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO): mathematics, reading and writing assessments for Grades 3 and 6 in Primary and Junior Divisions; mathematics for

Grade 9; and literacy for Grade 10. It provided test accommodations in accordance with Ontario's policies and legislation, including the policy document, *Individual Education Plan: Standards for Development, Program Planning, and Implementation* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2000). The eligibility requirements, available accommodations, and procedures of administration for test accommodations were laid out in the guidelines developed by the EQAO. Students were eligible for the use of test accommodations and/or special provisions in specific conditions (EQAO, 2012): Students with special needs should have (a) an Individual Education Plan (IEP), and (b) typically receive these accommodations for all forms of tests, including provincial and summative (classroom) assessments.

The EQAO also provided an accommodation – called a "special provision" – for English language learners (ELL): "It is an adjustment to the setting for writing an assessment for English language learners. A special provision does not affect the validity or reliability of an assessment" (EQAO, 2012, p. 1). EQAO did not allow modifications that may change the test constructs and affect the validity and reliability of the tests (EQAO, 2012). If a student without an IEP who was enrolled in ESL/ELD programs in the early stage of English language development (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2001) and who also used accommodations for classroom assessments throughout the school year, then this student was eligible for a special provision. Furthermore, students were exempted if they were "unable to participate in an assessment even with accommodations" (EQAO, 2012, p. 1).

In addition to students with disabilities and ELL students, students with "special circumstances" were permitted to use accommodations. EQAO's administration guidelines indicated that students without an IEP who (1) had a temporary condition (e.g., hand injury) that prevented students from taking the assessments using standard testing procedures, or (2) recently arrived from another school, board, province or country may receive special permission for accommodations from the school principal (EQAO, 2006, 2012). To define the latter group of students, the guidelines stated that "the student had transferred into the school from another school board, province or country shortly before the assessment, and there was no time to develop an IEP. There was documentation to show that accommodations were necessary" (EQAO, 2006, pp. 8-9). According to this policy, reasons for permitting students without disabilities or IEPs can be varied from student to student, depending on students' needs and situations. The current study examined this policy in relation to students' characteristics in order to illustrate the profiles of this unique student group as well as discuss the potential issues associated with this policy.

Test Accommodations in Ontario's Provincial Testing Programs

Test accommodations can be classified into four major categories (e.g., Fuchs et al., 2005; National Research Council, 2004) for Grade 6 students in Junior Division: setting, timing, presentation modality and response modality (see Table 1 for greater detail, EQAO, 2006). It should be noted that timing (extended time) was not considered a test accommodation for these students because the assessments did not have time limits, whereas it was explicitly indicated in the accommodation guidelines for Grade 9 and 10 students.

Table 1

Available Accommodations for Ontario's Provincial Testing Programs- Junior Division

Major Categories	Subtypes
Setting	An individual or quiet setting
	Prompts should draw the attention of student with severe attention problems back to the assessment
Presentation Modality	o Sign language or an oral interpreter
	o Braille version
	o Large-print version
	o Coloured-paper version
	o Large-print coloured-paper version
	o Assistive technology (language only) electronic formats used with technology such as text-to-speech software
	o Audio version (compact disc) for low-vision or visually impaired students only
Response Modality	o Use of a computer or word processor
	o Assistive devices and technology used for recording responses only (e.g., a speech synthesizer, a Brailler)
	o Verbatim scribing of responses

As stated above, most studies were conducted on students with disabilities, which may not reflect the current policies and practice of test accommodations for students without disabilities or IEPs. As such, this study investigated two important questions:

1. What were the most commonly used accommodations for students without disabilities or IEPs?

2. Who used accommodations regardless of receiving special permission from the school principals?

Method

In this study, participants were Grade 6 students (N = 150,214) taking Ontario's provincial reading, writing and mathematics assessments in 2005-2006 developed and administered by the EQAO. In preparation for the analyses, the students who did not have any item data were excluded from the study, leaving 145,271 students. Among these students, there were 123,123 students (84.8%) are typically developing children and 22,148 students were identified as having

a disability or multiple disabilities (15.2%). This student population with disabilities were the students who had been formally identified by the Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) in Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). It should be noted that '*non-disabled*' students in this study refer to those who had not been officially identified as having a disability and did not receive IEPs or IPRCs.

In order to identify the most frequently used accommodations and address the first research question, cross tabulation analyses were conducted by SPSS 20.0 (IBM Corp., 2012). There are twelve subtypes of accommodations for math and reading included in the analyses: setting, prompts, sign language, braille, large print, color papers, large print on color papers, audio reading, assistive devices, scribe, computers, and assistive technology. Note that this study analyzed the data of math, reading, and writing except one accommodation, scribing, because it was not allowed for writing. After identifying the most commonly used accommodations, further analyses were conducted to examine the backgrounds of students who used this accommodation to address the second research question. The background variables are associated with EQAO's accommodation policy for students without disabilities, including whether they received special permission for this accommodation and whether they were new immigrants and/or new to the schools.

Results and Discussion

The descriptive statistics shows that three major types of accommodations were the most frequently used by non-disabled students for math, reading, and writing (N = 1,636 for math, N = 1,686 for reading, N = 1,406 for writing): (1) setting, (2) prompts, and (3) scribing accommodations (Table 2). Less than 1 percent of students used several types of accommodations, including assistive technology and devices, large print, colour paper, audio version, and sign language. None of students used Braille, large print and colour paper. As stated above, these accommodated students did not receive IEPs; however, the data suggests that some students may have a disability. For example, there were five examinees using sign language for all assessments, indicating that they were with hearing impairments. Furthermore, the results show that a majority of students used a certain type of accommodation not only for one assessment, but also for all three assessments.

The background information for students with accommodations was also reported, including the number of years the students had enrolled in the school, whether the students were born in Canada, the numbers of years the students had lived in Canada, and whether students received special permission for using accommodations in EQAO's math, reading, and writing assessments (Table 3). Among these students, about 52% of them were new to the school; approximately 55% of students were born in Canada; about 44% did not receive special permission for using accommodations.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Accommodations for Math, Reading, and Writing

	Math	**Reading**	**Writing**

Types	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Setting	740	45.2%	741	44.0%	724	51.5%
Prompts	566	34.6%	576	34.2%	560	39.8%
Scribe	253	15.5%	282	16.7%	n.a.*	n.a.*
Response: Computers	36	2.2%	55	3.3%	85	6.0%
Response: Assistive Technology	13	0.8%	4	0.2%	7	0.5%
Large Print	8	0.5%	8	0.5%	8	0.6%
Presentation: Assistive Devices	7	0.4%	7	0.4%	9	0.6%
Audio Version	7	0.4%	7	0.4%	7	0.5%
Sign Language	5	0.3%	5	0.3%	5	0.4%
Color Paper	1	0.1%	1	0.1%	1	0.1%
Large Print & Color Paper	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Braille	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Total	1636	100.0%	1686	100.0%	1406	100.0%

**Note:* n.a.= Scribe was not permitted for writing.

Table 3

Non-disabled Students with Accommodations for Math, Reading, and Writing

Non-Disabled Students	**Math**		**Reading**		**Writing**	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Years in the School						
For less than one year	495	52.7%	492	51.7%	468	53.3%
For more than one year	444	47.3%	460	48.3%	410	46.7%
Total	939	100%	952	100%	878	100%
Born in Canada						
Born outside of Canada	389	40.4%	393	40.3%	381	42.3%
Born in Canada	524	54.5%	531	54.5%	472	52.4%
Missing	49	5.1%	51	5.2%	48	5.3%
Total	962	100%	975	100%	901	100%
Stay in Canada						
Less than one year	90	23.4%	90	23.3%	90	23.9%
More than one year	294	76.6%	297	76.7%	287	76.1%
Total	384	100%	387	100%	377	100%
Permission						
Not Permitted	421	43.8%	428	43.9%	405	45%

Non-Disabled Students	Math		Reading		Writing	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Permitted	541	56.2%	547	56.1%	496	55%
Total	962	100%	975	100%	901	100%

According to EQAO's accommodation policy (EQAO, 2006), one of groups may receive accommodations: students who do not have IEPs because they are new to the school and the country, but require the use of an accommodation based on available documentations. Approximately 22% of students fell into this category, including examinees who were ELLs and recently immigrated to the country (Table 4). Although non-disabled students without IEPs may have to obtain special permission from the school principals for accommodations, many did not receive permission (Math: 43.8%; Reading: 43.9%, Writing: 45%)(Table 3). Of this group without special permission, about 65% of the students were new to the school but had stayed in the country for more than one year (Table 4). Approximately 20% of students without special permission for accommodations were new immigrants and there was not enough time to obtain IEPs (Table 4). This information suggests that there is a lack of consistency between actual test administration and policy for requesting the use of an accommodation for a student without a disability or an IEP.

Table 4

Accommodated Non-disabled Students with and without Permission

			With Permission		Without Permission			
	Stay in Canada	*Years in School*	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Total	%
Math	Less than 1 year	Less than 1 year	44	24.4	39	19.2	83	21.7
		More than 1 year	5	2.8	1	0.5	6	1.6
	More than 1 year	Less than 1 year	48	26.7	133	65.5	181	47.3
		More than 1 year	83	46.1	30	14.8	113	29.5
		Total	180	100.0	203	100.0	383	100.0
			With Permission		**Without Permission**			
	Stay in Canada	*Years in School*	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Total	%
Reading	Less than 1 year	Less than 1 year	43	24.0	40	19.2	83	21.4
		More than 1 year	6	3.4	1	0.5	7	1.8
	More than 1 year	Less than 1 year	46	25.7	135	64.9	181	46.8

		More than 1 year	84	46.9	32	15.4	116	30.0
		Total	179	100.0	208	100.0	387	100.0
			With Permission		**Without Permission**			
	Stay in Canada	*Years in School*	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Total	%
Writing	Less than 1 year	Less than 1 year	43	24.7	39	19.3	82	21.8
		More than 1 year	6	3.4	1	0.5	7	1.9
	More than 1 year	Less than 1 year	43	24.7	132	65.3	175	46.5
		More than 1 year	82	47.1	30	14.9	112	29.8
		Total	174	100.0	202	100.0	376	100.0

These results raise concerns about the accommodation policy for non-disabled students. First, non-disabled students with a "temporary condition" (EQAO, 2006) or "special circumstances" (EQAO, 2012) may use the accommodation even if they do not have any prior experience of it. The policy seems to offer flexibility to those who may need special testing arrangements. However, these accommodated students without IEPs may not be familiar with the use of accommodations (Bolt & Thurlow, 2004). Researchers suggest that accommodation policy should require previous experience with the accommodation(s) for students with disabilities (e.g., Cox, Herner, Demczyk, & Nieberding, 2006; National Research Council, 2004; Thurlow, Lazarus, Thompson, & Morse, 2005). Previous studies also pointed out the importance of familiarity of environment in testing. For example, Derr-Minneci (1990) reported that students read more words correctly when they were tested in their reading groups and assessed by their teachers than at the teacher's desk and in the office. Conversely, students made more mistakes when they were tested at the teacher's desk and in the office than in their reading groups. Based on the research evidence, the accommodation policy should consider non-disabled students' prior experience and familiarity of testing environment when determining the use of a certain accommodation.

Second, the analyses of the background information suggest that teachers were likely to provide accommodations to students who were new to the school, whereas school principals were likely to grant special permission to those students who had attended the school for more than one year. For new immigrant students, approximately half of them received permission for accommodations. This may be due to the administrative procedures for reporting new students who were allowed to use accommodations, as well as the time required for referral and formal identification.

Conclusion

Given a number of non-disabled students received accommodations, it is important to understand the reasons behind the decisions about providing accommodations to these students, especially for students without special permission. In other words, the rationale for the use of an

accommodation should be provided and validated on an individual basis (National Research Council, 2004). Providing the rationale is helpful for reducing the probability of misusing or offering inappropriate accommodations to students. Moreover, the results of this study found only half of accommodated students without IEPs received special permission from the school principals, indicating there is a gap between actual test administration and the accommodation policy for non-disabled students. Therefore, this policy should be modified to streamline the administrative procedures and close this gap.

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