Making Accommodations Work for Students in the Special Education Setting

James H. VanSciver
Virginia A. Conover

A Feature Article Published in

TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus

Making Accommodations Work for Students in the Special Education Setting

James H. VanSciver
Virginia A. Conover

Abstract

With the pressure of No Child Left Behind and state-ordered accountability initiatives building, local educators' angst with the challenges of documenting improvement on the part of special education students, as a function of their performance on high stakes content assessments, continues to grow. One major tool used to identify academic needs and provide support is the Individual Education Plan, a model bolstered through the selection of accommodations particular to the individual student. How are those accommodations identified? What proof might be provided that they have been implemented successfully? And where is the data that might suggest that they be continued on the student's IEP? Using data to identify, monitor, and evaluate the use of accommodations for individual special education students is a must if educators are to verify that those students are making progress academically. However, the system which is implemented to achieve this must be least intrusive for those who will use it so that it doesn't suffer from reduced implementation fidelity.

How are the accommodations listed on a student's Individual Education Plan identified, sustained, and evaluated?

That's a question of which all educators involved in the special education process should be aware.

As increased attention is being placed, through *No Child Left Behind*, on the academic success of students identified (and the schools they attend) as needing support in public school settings and, as the new focus on how students are selected for that support as a result of the Response to Intervention (RTI) process intensifies, educators should be looking more closely at the selection and use of accommodations for students identified for special education.

The enactment of *No Child Left Behind* means that most special education students are required to participate in standardized assessments that are on the same grade level as students without disabilities. *IDEA* (Individual with Disabilities Education Act) has provided some guidelines on providing accommodations for testing that do help level the playing field for some special education students; however, a large number of these students continue to fall behind their peers on state test scores.

Most research in special education academic accommodations has focused on the differential benefit of accommodations, especially in the area of testing, leading to "a better understanding of the practical applications of accommodations," while "reliable systems are not in place to ensure that appropriate accommodations are being assigned and that these accommodations are consistently being applied to classroom instruction and assessments" (Ketterlin-Geller, Alonzo, J. Braun-Monegan, and Tindal, 2007, p.195). Ketterlin-Geller, et al. also found the variation in IEP team member qualifications for making accommodations decisions creates confusion and inconsistency in the delivery of accommodation services for special education students, "calling into question the trustworthiness and reliability of accommodation decisions that are listed on the IEP" (p.196). Research has also shown much inconsistency in teachers' knowledge and assignment of accommodations at IEP meetings. In 2001, Fuchs and Fuchs (as cited in Ketterlin-Geller, et al.) were able to show over-identification of accommodations for students for reading and mathematics testing, while students, when participating in the testing experience, did not "differentially benefit" from the assigned accommodations. Teacher judgment was shown to often be subjective, which influenced their abilities to make appropriate decisions regarding accommodations (p.196).

Fuchs, Fuchs, Easton, Hamlet, and

> **Research has shown inconsistency in teachers' knowledge and assignment of accommodations.**

Karns (2000) reported that on computations and problem-solving questions, "Teachers erred by over-identifying accommodations. Specifically, teachers granted accommodations to large numbers of students with learning disabilities who failed to profit from those accommodations more than would be expected among non-disabled students" (p. 83).

This inconsistency and confusion regarding assignment and delivery of accommodations to students may be due, in part, to teachers' inexperience with measurement methods. Elliot (2007) states that "educators are very capable of making participation deci-

sions and are knowledgeable about the instructional needs of their students, but are often challenged to make accommodations decisions that lead to "good" (i.e., valid) test scores" (p. 9). Campbell and Evans (2000) found that "pre-service teachers' attention to the fundamental, yet abstract concepts of reliability and validity were generally absent" (p. 354). It is this lack of training for teachers in the area of documentation that may influence the effectiveness of their delivery of accommodations and lead to less than beneficial assignments of accommodations for use in the classroom and in testing situations.

No Child Left Behind has changed the role of teachers. Babkie and Provost (2004) found that it is now the responsibility of teachers to utilize "data driven interventions" in the classroom for students showing signs of struggling academically. Secondary level special education teachers often teach in inclusion settings where they must demonstrate adequate yearly progress on grade reports, yearly high stakes testing, and IEP goals and objectives, for their students (p. 261). Teachers must also decide which method of documentation will best meet their needs for keeping track of data needed to track the use of interventions. Elliott and Marquart (2004) mention the *Assessment Accommodations Checklist (AAC)* (Elliott, Kratochwill, and Schulte, 1999) as "a tool for educators to use in planning and documenting the accommodations used with students with disabilities" (p. 355). This method of documentation of accommodations allows for 67 accommodations to be checked off as utilized, with space to add more. Usually, the *AAC* is used for planning purposes on the part of teachers (Elliott and Marquart, 2004).

The Response to Intervention initiative that is gaining popularity as a vehicle to better support students' mathematics and reading proficiency in public schools may soften the negative impact of teachers' lack of experience in dealing with the identification of student-specific accommodations. Through the three-tiered RTI process, students move from one level to the next as a function of their success at the assigned initial level. The determination of whether the student remains in the RTI process, continues at the original designated level, or moves up or down, depends upon the student's response to a variety of interventions directed at that individual student. As a student moves from Tier I, through Tier II, to Tier III, the interventions become more and more intense. If students are determined to have not achieved success upon reaching the end of this process, they are next considered as candidates for a special education program. The process through which they would have already passed would be very helpful to an IEP team considering potential accommodations for these students in the special education setting.

Failure to pay more than cursory attention to the accommodations selection component of the special education services delivery model could lead to those academic supports being more disabling than enabling for students. If students come to understand that their directions and assessments will always be read aloud, why would they need to learn how to read? If a well-meaning teacher always provides redirections for work, why must the students worry about developing organizational skills?

This thinking leads the reader quickly to the questions, "How are those accommodations selected; how are they delivered; how are they evaluated?" The answers to these interrogatories will enrich the conversation of the IEP meetings as well as enhance the services provided to students needing special services.

Let's take them one at a time. First, how are accommodations selected for a student's IEP? In the fast-paced world of public education, in which teachers and support personnel are eager to move from one meeting to the next, or return to the classroom, are the accommodations merely the result of the casual observations of one or two teachers? If a member of the IEP committee asked the individual recommending those accommodations to *quantify* those recommendations, could it be done? Would there be sufficient data to support the idea that a student would need to have 14 accommodations on a routine basis?

Ketterlin-Geller, et al. (2007) reported that, in spite of progress in understanding uses of academic accommodations made in a classroom, a deficit of strategies remains for

> **Standard means of tracking students' needs for and use of specific accommodations are crucial when making decisions for students with identified academic benefits.**

tracking appropriate assignment and application of such accommodations. Fuchs and Fuchs (as cited in Ketterlin-Geller, et al.) purport that decisions about instructional and testing accommodations may be obtained from sketchy or unreliable information such as; "a) teacher's prior experience, b) parent preference, c) ease of providing the accommodation, and d) inferences about student performance" (page 196). Standard means of tracking students' needs for and use of specific accommodations are crucial when making decisions for students with identified academic deficits.

Who is keeping the data and how is it being collected for each individual student? These supports, in fact, are supposed to be *individualized*.

As the paperwork evolves into classroom practices, how are those accommodations meted out in the teaming classroom? As the special education teacher and the classroom teacher meet to plan the activities for each day, is there conversation about the accommodations needed for each student? Do all special education students have the same accommodations? If so, that would surely reduce the *individualized* focus of those supports. Do both teachers take the time to provide the identified accommodations to *individual* students?

Wallace, Blasé, Fixsen, and Naoom (2008) discern between three degrees of implementation. It is of paramount importance that special educators understand these differences to determine at what level the implementation of accommodations for their students falls. "What is 'implementation?'" the authors ask. "Implementation is defined as a specified set of activities designed to put into practice an activity or program of known dimensions. Implementation is not an event. It is a mission-oriented process involving multiple decisions, well-organized actions, and real-time corrections" (p.12).

Paper implementation is simply the adoption of policies and procedures, "with the adoption of an innovation as the rationale for the policies and procedures" (Wallace, et al. 2008, p. 12). Unfortunately, implementation usually stops there. One estimate is that 80-90% of the person-to-person innovations in business stop at paper implementation (Rogers, 2002). Westphal, Gulati, and Shortell (1997) found in their survey of business that, "If organizations can minimize evaluation and inspection of their internal op-

erations by external constituents through adoption alone, they may neglect implementation altogether, decoupling operational routines from formally adopted programs" (p. 371).

If educators look only at written IEP language and fail to consider the application of those accommodations in the classroom, can they expect a better implementation rate than noted by Rogers?

The second degree of implementation is *process implementation* during which individuals put new operating procedures in place to conduct training workshops, provide supervision, and change information reporting forms, with the adoption of the innovation as the rational for the procedures. To the casual onlooker, activities related to the innovation are occurring; events are being counted; and innovation-related language has been adopted. "The problem is that not much of what goes on is functionally related to the new practice. Training (such as professional development days for teachers) might consist of merely didactic orientation to the new practice or program, supervision might be un-related to and uninformed by what was taught in training, information might be collected and stored without affecting decision making, and the terms used in the new innovation-related language may be devoid of operational meaning and impact. It is clear that the trappings of evidence-based practices and programs plus lip service do not equal putting innovations into practice with benefits to students, schools, and communities" (Wallace, et al. 2008, p. 15).

At this level, in the special education setting, the professional development has been provided, IEP meetings are completed, and accommodations identified, but student improvement remains stymied.

Performance implementation is the final degree. This means putting innovations in place in such a way that the identified core intervention components are used with good effect for consumers (Paine, Bellamy and Wilcox, 1984). It appears that implementation that produces actual benefits to students, schools, and communities, requires more careful and thoughtful efforts.

As does the implementation of accommodations in the special education setting. Special educators and their supervisors must realize *performance implementation* if their students are to benefit from their time in school and their participation in diverse activities and programs. They must identify the few critical accommodations their students need, constantly use them with their students, and consistently measure those accommodations' impact on students' gains.

Ketterlin-Geller, et al. (2007) further question whether the identified accommodations are being provided on a consistent basis. Special education student achievement depends on accommodations being implemented on a regular basis. Inconsistent or inappropriate identification of accommodations for students can distract from, or hinder students' academic success. Documentation of services provided can positively influence accommodation decisions by IEP teams and can have an effect on classroom interventions and practices.

What is the process for the evaluation of those accommodations for *each* student? Creating a matrix on which students' names are on one axis and the available accommodations are on the other, placing a check mark in the cells indicating which accommodations are due which students, and sharing that matrix with both teachers, who will carry it through the duration of the class, will increase

the likelihood that the necessary accommodations are delivered as planned.

How do teachers maintain records of the effectiveness and use of selected accommodations and use those records to quantify sustainability of appropriate accommodations? One method, perhaps the most useful of all, is to listen to students about how they feel they learn best. Allowing a student to express his or her own opinions of which accommodations are truly effective for learning, or assessment, can help teachers evaluate the usefulness of certain accommodations assigned to a student and can also enable a student to feel ownership of his or her own education, thereby increasing the likelihood of the student reaching full academic potential (Thurlow, Thompson, Walz, and Shin, as cited in Luke and Schwartz, 2007).

Going a step further, making check points each time an accommodation is offered, and determining if the student was in need of it, will produce data with which the teacher can make crucial recommendations during the next IEP review meeting. If extra time, for example, is offered 37 times but only utilized thrice by the student, one would have to question the value of continuing to carry that accommodation on the IEP. Having the data to support that suggestion will greatly enhance the decision-making process.

Actual documentation of accommodations provided to students on a daily basis in a typical inclusion classroom does require "more" from the special education teacher. It is a concept often met with resistance from special educators who feel they are already overly burdened with paperwork. Documentation conjures images of time-consuming "busy" work that may actually detract teachers from the business of instruction. Yet, the process does not have to be cumbersome, or even overly time-consuming. A well-

designed, user-friendly form for recording daily accommodations can streamline this activity to the point that it becomes unobtrusive and almost reflexive in nature. The data obtained from the daily documentation can then be summarized simply by counting the accommodations actually utilized by the student during a specific time period during a school year.

This process of documentation of academic accommodations was performed, in April and May of 2009, by twelve teachers in a rural school district in Delaware, as part of a dissertation study conducted by a doctoral student of Wilmington University and co-author of this article. The twelve participants in this study were middle and high school special education inclusion teachers. Each teacher maintained records of each accommodation, or intervention, given to three special education students on his or her caseload, for a four-and-a-half week period, which constituted one half of a school grading period. The form given to the participants included a column for checking the effectiveness of an accommodation given, as well as columns for tally marks to record each time an accommodation was used. At the close of the documentation period, eleven (one participant was unable to attend the session) of the twelve participants met for a focus group session to discuss their perceptions of the documentation process (Conover, 2009).

Upon analysis of the responses from the teachers regarding the process of keeping track of the services they provided, it was evident that the teachers did recognize benefits to having a consistent record of the interventions they do with their students. Several participants shared that it was helpful to have a record showing which accommodations "worked" for their students and which accommodations did not seem to benefit the

students at all. The general consensus of the group was that having a consistent record of accommodations made in the classroom could, indeed, be valuable when making accommodations decisions for a student at an IEP meeting (Conover, 2009).

Another point to consider is the number of students in the class and the expectation that one or two teachers will have the time to deliver the accommodations as they were intended during the class period. In reality, is it reasonable to expect that these educators have the capacity to deliver on potentially a dozen different accommodations with ten to twelve students? Whether the accommodation is *frequent checks for understanding* or *assistance with organization*, the reality is that appropriately providing these supports will take time, much more than exists during the normal span of a class period.

What is the impact of the accommodations being delivered? Is the student now demonstrating a higher level of participation in the class? Does the student demonstrate a higher level of confidence with a particular concept through the completion of tasks at a higher success rate?

It is likely that too little attention is paid to the identification of accommodations provided for students in special education settings. It is also very likely that insufficient thought is given to the success of their use. What results is a paper process that does very little to positively impact the individual student's classroom behavior or academic performance.

This is unfortunate because it does not have to be like this, particularly in this new culture of data-based decision-making.

Can't we envision an IEP process in which the stakeholders enter into data-based discussion, using information gained through reliable processes, to identify supports

for students, accommodations that will be enacted and measured to determine their effectiveness? Wouldn't that be much better than the climate in which now many teachers and students languish, classrooms in which students appear to be busy, but do not realize their potential, and schools that fail to produce for those students experiences that will adequately prepare them for their future?

IEP teams must determine whether students need certain accommodations in the classroom or in testing situations. The individual strengths and needs of students must be considered for the teams to make appropriate recommendations for those students. The teams must know what works best for the students to help them achieve academically and be active participants in their own learning (Thurlow, Thompson, Walz, & Shin, as cited in Luke and Schwartz, 2007). Documentation of services provided over a long period of time to students in inclusion classrooms can be a valuable tool for determining what will enable those students to benefit on the most consistent basis possible.

Special education is coming under increased scrutiny; the national accountability movement is requiring that all decisions be data-based. Using a system in which accommodations are developed, sustained, and evaluated as the result of a quantification system will both verify the need for the accommodations and enhance the academic success of the students receiving those supports.

What a special place that would be. We could call it *special* education.

References

Babkie, A.M. & Provost, M.C. (2004, May). Teachers as researchers. *Intervention in School and Clinic,* 39(5), 260-268.

Campbell, C., & Evans, J.A. (2000). Investi gations of preservice teachers' class-room assessment practices during student teaching. *The Journal of Educational Research,* 93, 350-355.

Conover, V.A. (2009). *Perceptions of special education teachers regarding documentation of individual special education student academic accommodations within secondary classrooms in an identified rural public school district in sussex county, delaware.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Wilmington University, Georgetown.

Elliott, S.N. (2007) Selecting and using test ing accommodations to facilitate meaningful participation of all students in state and district assessments. In L. Cook &C. Cahalan (Eds.) *Large-Scale Assessment and Accommodations: What Works?* (pp. 1-9). Princeton, NJ: ETS.

Elliott, S.N., Kratochwill, T.R., & Schulte, A.G. (1999). *The Assessment Accommodations Checklist.* Monterey, CA: CTB/McGraw-Hill.

Elliott, S.N., & Marquart, A.M. (2004). Ex tended time as a testing accommodations: Its effects and perceived consequences. *Exceptional Children,* 70(3), 349-367.

Fuchs, L.S., Fuchs, D., Eaton, S.B., Hamlet, C. L., & Karns, M. (2000) Supplementing teacher judgments of mathematics test accommodations with objective data sources. *School Psychology Review,* 29, 66-85.

Ketterlin-Geller, L.R., Alonzo, J., Braun-Monegan, J. & Tindal, G. (2007). Recommendations for accommodations: implications of (in)consistency. *Remedial and Special Education,* 28(4) p. 194-205.

Luke, S.D., & Schwartz, A. (2007). Assess ment and accommodations. *Evidence for Education,* 2(1), 1-12.

Paine, S.C., Bellamy, G.T., & Wilcox, B.L. (Eds.), (1984). *Human services that work: from innovation to standard practice.* Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Rogers, R.W. (2002). White paper-the power of realization. Retrieved from http://www.ddiworld.com/research/pulications.asp.

Salend, S.J. (2008). Determining appropriate testing accommodations. *Council for Exceptional Children, 40(4), 14-22.*

Wallace, F., Blasé, K. Fixsen, D., & Naoom, S. (2008). *Implementing the findings of research: Bridging the gap between knowledge and practice.* Alexandria, Virginia: Educational Research Service.

Westphal, J.D., Gulati, R., & Shortell, S.M. (1997). Customization or conformity? An institutional and network

TECPlus

perspective on the content and con-
sequences of TQM adoption. *Admin-
istrative Science Quarterly*, 42(2),

366-394.

About the Authors:

Dr. James H. VanSciver is Interim Principal at Mace's Lane Middle School in Cambridge, Maryland and an adjunct professor in the graduate programs at Delaware State University (Delaware), Salisbury University (Maryland), University of Maryland - Eastern Shore (Maryland), and Wilmington University (Delaware).

Dr. Virginia Ann Conover is a special education teacher at Seaford Middle School in Seaford Delaware.

TEGPlus