

Deciding on Appropriate Accommodations for Students with Learning Disabilities

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What are accommodations? What purpose should they serve?

- ✓ Accommodations are adjustments in the conditions of learning or performing on tests that are appropriate or necessary, given the special needs of the student
- ✓ Accommodations should make it possible for disabled students to be effective learners in the reading/language arts curriculum
- ✓ On tests, accommodations affect “access skills,, (thus,allow students to do the task) but not “target skills,, (task/process of measurement interest)

Accommodations for assessment and instruction

- ✓ Accommodations and modifications are different
 - Modifications are substantive changes in targeted content and skills (e.g., the grade-level curriculum might be only partially appropriate for the child)
- ✓ Classroom and assessment accommodations are somewhat different;
 - Classroom accommodations make it possible for students to *learn and demonstrate their learning*; they are variable in terms of types of adjustments;
 - Assessment accommodations make it possible for students to *demonstrate their knowledge*.

Some background

- ✓ From the beginning of “mainstreaming,, classroom accommodations have been used
- ✓ Before late 1990s students with LD were “excused,, from state assessments.
 - Students were also not required to follow school’s curriculum
 - The exclusion of such students led to increases in retention, referral rates for special education
- ✓ As high stakes testing became a reality, some schools were found to exclude their poorest readers, presumably because the scores “looked better,, overall

What factors led to greater inclusion in high-stakes assessments?

- ✓ Published reports of inequities: who takes tests and what accommodations were given
- ✓ Federal laws (e.g., Educate America Act-Goals 2000; IDEA, 1997) required higher standards and more rigorous measures of achievement
 - IDEA requires explicit consideration of relevance of the general curriculum and means for including students with disabilities in tests

IDEA 1997 resulted in both positive changes and confusion

- ✓ More students with disabilities are given test accommodations. BUT STILL:--
- ✓ States vary in test accommodations permitted, frequency with which they are given, percent of students with disabilities included
- ✓ Process of making decisions about inclusion and accommodations varies by states
- ✓ Most states have guidelines, but implementation is inconsistent

Findings from a review of Kentucky state assessment (Koretz, 1997)

- ✓ Too many students received accommodations

- ✓ Accommodations were provided without regard for the disability of the student (students with mild MR and LD were given same accommodations)
 - Some accommodations were helpful for all students (e.g., reading questions or paraphrasing questions)

- ✓ In some cases a variety of accommodations were given, but scores of students who received combinations of accommodations were often “implausibly high,,

Maryland study of instructional and assessment accommodations (2001)

✓ Positive signs:

- Most students who had IEPs in specific content areas received instructional accommodations in those areas
- Students' assessment accommodations matched their instructional accommodations

✓ BUT: many students received testing accommodations that had not been received in instruction (Ysseldyke et al, 2001)

Instructional/test accommodations in MD study (Ysseldyke et al. 2001)

- ✓ 60% of students had IEPs in reading but 45% had instructional accommodations
- ✓ Most common reading test accommodations:
 - reading entire test to students and
 - reading selected sections or vocabulary
- ✓ Most common writing accommodations:
 - writing answers in test book and
 - dictating to assistant who transcribed for the student

Commonly stated concerns about test accommodations

- ✓ Are extra “burdens,, placed on students with disabilities because of the hype over test scores?
- ✓ Do test results influence students’ grade-level status? (e.g., retaining children who “fail,,)
- ✓ Have the students been adequately exposed to the curriculum? (Are we setting students up for failure?)
- ✓ Do test accommodations present the achievement of students with LD in an unrealistic light?

Common types of accommodations for students with reading problems

✓ Classroom

- More time for task completion
- Less work required
- Physical set-up (e.g., seating arrangements)
- Assistance (e.g., reading buddy, aide)

✓ Test

- Response mode
- Setting (e.g., different room)
- Timing (e.g., extended time)
- Presentation format (e.g., Braille)
- Scheduling (e.g., taking breaks)

What are the effects of improperly providing test accommodations?

✓ If accommodations aren't "valid,,:

- students with LD won't improve learning or demonstration of their knowledge
- evaluation of regular education curriculum and instruction are difficult to carry out

✓ If overly permissive:

- inflation of scores of students with LD; look "better, than they are in classroom learning

What are “valid,, accommodations?

- ✓ Those that provide a differential boost:
 - Increase performance of students with disabilities more than students without disabilities
- ✓ Those that provide intended benefit (access skills) for students with specific disabilities
 - E.g., for student with hearing impairment, written copies of oral directions

Valid and not-so-valid test accommodations? You judge--

- ✓ Reading math problems aloud to students had a positive effect for students with LD but not for general ed students (Tindal et al, 1998)
- ✓ Having students read their reading test aloud benefited students with LD but depressed scores of students without LD (Fuchs et al, 2000)
- ✓ Extended time (most frequently awarded accommodation) benefited both LD and non-LD students; so does the use of large print; same effect for math and reading (Fuchs et al, 2000)

Legitimacy of some test accommodations is still hotly debated

✓ What is your opinion?

- Problem #1: Reading math problems has been shown to be “valid,, but in some states the ability to “communicate, read and write in mathematics,, is a learning goal
- Problem # 2: Providing a scribe for a writing test is intended for students with physical disabilities but used when teachers thinks the student can tell a story better than he/she can write it

More unresolved issues about accommodations

- ✓ Should we be concerned that the number and type of “permitted,, options varies by state?
- ✓ Should we interpret scores for those with and without accommodations in the same way?
 - ✓ APA guidelines: unless an accommodation has been shown not to alter the meaning of a test, scores obtained under different conditions must be assumed to have a different meaning
- ✓ Who is best equipped to make appropriate decisions about classroom and test accommodations?
- ✓ Which students “deserve,, accommodations?

Teachers' use of classroom accommodations

- ✓ Teachers are willing to make accommodations and tend to be consistent in follow-through
- ✓ However, they tend to use the simplest accommodations, without regard for “need,,
 - For example, preferential seating, extended time, reduced work load
- ✓ Monitoring of the “effectiveness,, of accommodations is not often done
- ✓ Classroom and test accommodations may be unrelated

Problems with decisions about accommodations

- ✓ IEP teams may make decisions based on case study information without regard for evaluation of classroom performance;
- ✓ Teachers' recommendations may be considered; in one study (Fuchs et al, 2000)
 - teachers tended to award more accommodations than an objective DATA system and
 - some students awarded accommodations failed to get a “boost,, from them; whereas, others not given accommodations received a boost!

A system for improving teachers' decision-making (adapted from DeStefano et al (2001))

- ✓ STEP 1: Team members study state standards, curricular goals, and the content/task of the state assessment instrument
- ✓ STEP 2: They study the needs and capabilities of the student (e.g., read case study, interview student)
- ✓ STEP 3: They consider the extent to which the student can meet curricular goals and adjustments that need to be made to make this possible
- ✓ STEP 4: They select and link accommodations for classroom learning and test-taking

Fine points of effective decision making (con't)

- ✓ The team should evaluate the requirements of a given course and the capacity of the system to adjust to the students' needs in the classroom
- ✓ They should consider whether student can participate in some, all, or none of the state assessment
 - Select accommodations that match those used in the classroom and that have been shown to be valid
- ✓ They should monitor the progress of the student in the classroom and on classroom tests
 - Reevaluate appropriateness of test accommodations prior to subjecting the child to the rigors and pressures of standardized tests

Findings of a study of decision-making (DeStefano, 2001)

- ✓ Teachers worked together to consider the standards, curriculum, and student's current knowledge, skills, and learning needs
- ✓ Through collaborative study and discussion, teachers became more knowledgeable about accommodations for instruction and assessment
- ✓ After training, teachers showed greater confidence in their decision-making

What to strive for? Two broad goals

- ✓ A more consistent, coherent, legally defensible basis for making decisions about instructional and test accommodations than has been used in the past
- ✓ A better understanding by regular and special educators of ways to make general ed curriculum accessible to all students with special needs

Some specific goals for this school year

- ✓ Goal 1: Develop a system, a coordinated process for making decisions about students' participation in curriculum and in assessments
- ✓ Goal 2: Undertake a thorough study (by grade level and content area) of the state standards, the curricular goals, and the content/tasks of state tests
- ✓ Goal 3: Develop a method for evaluating the effectiveness of accommodations in classroom work and on standardized tests

Key points to remember

- ✓ Schools benefit when appropriate accommodations are provided to their students
 - because of the tight links between instruction and assessment and
 - because these are accompanied by reasonable expectations of students with regard to the curriculum
- ✓ Students benefit
 - when they are held to high but reasonable standards and
 - when the concept of “valid,, accommodations is put into action