The Benefits and Administration of Alternate Assessments

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Alternate assessments are given to eligible students who are unable to perform proficiently on regular state assessments because of their disability. These alternate assessments have similar materials as standard assessments but are presented in a way that children with disabilities are able to access the material. The language in the assessment is made simpler and children have to memorize less content in order to perform successfully. According to final regulations in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2007, students with disabilities must have access to tests that allow them to demonstrate proficiency on tests (Elliot, 2010). Students with disabilities must be included in the school’s accountability systems. This access can be manifested through changing the setting, scheduling, presentation format, or response format. This paper will discuss how these changes give students with disabilities an equal chance to demonstrate their knowledge while providing teachers with knowledge about students’ strengths and weaknesses in order to guide instruction.

The Modification of Assessments
Modifications to standard assessments make them accessible to students with disabilities. When assessments are altered by changing the layout, however, by making passages shorter, and adding picture support, the reliability of the results may be questioned. It may not always be clear if the test actually measured the skills that were supposed to be measured or if the student’s scores were because of the modification of the test itself. In a study by Elliot (2010) researchers wanted to know how students with and without disabilities performed on both modified and unmodified tests. The tests used were already found to be reliable and the modified tests assessed the same skills. Students with disabilities performed significantly better when more
white space was added to the page, distractors were lessened, and test questions had reading support. The researchers concluded that modified tests are helpful to students with disabilities as long as those that construct the modified are trained in how to do so. The test questions still need to be aligned with the original materials.

One way to illustrate proficiency is through the Alternate Assessment based on Modified Achievement Standards (AA-MAS) or the Alternate Assessment based on Alternate Achievement Standards (AA-AAS). Students who qualify for the AA-AAS have severe cognitive disabilities that prevent them from performing well on multiple-choice assessments. Students who qualify for the AA-MAS can make progress in school but take longer than average to acquire the necessary skills to make progress on a general assessment (Elliot, 2010).

**Eligible Population**

A small percentage of students throughout all of the disability categories qualify to take alternate assessments. Of all special education students, only 14% of these students qualify to take alternate assessments. These students are under the disability categories of mental retardation, autism, and multiple disabilities. Often, these students have difficulty in expressive and receptive communication. As a result, they often utilize augmentative and alternative communication devices. Most of these students communicate using pictures, signs, gestures, or objects. Some students may even need help with motor tasks. These students may need additional time to acquire skills and to generalize and maintain the skills (Kearns, 2011).

A study by Kearns, Towles-Reeves, Kleinert, Kleinert, & Thomas (2011) sought to determine the characteristics of students who take alternative assessments. The researchers sampled from 7 states across the United States. The majority of the students were under the IDEA categories of mental retardation, autism and multiple disabilities. Students had a wide range of receptive and expressive language abilities. Most students communicated with symbols, oral speech and could follow one and two-step directions. The next group of students communicated with symbols, pictures, signs, and objects as well as oral speech. These students required additional cues in order to follow directions. The final group of students used facial expressions, cries, and body movements to communicate. These outputs had to be interpreted
by listeners and observers. The latter two groups had such severe
developmental delays that they had extreme difficulty acquiring reading and
mathematical skills. Only 50% of these students were able to access an
alternate assessment (Kearns et. al, 2011).

**Screening Process**
The purpose of a study by Kettler (2011) was to find a reliable screening
process that would find the small percentage of students that would qualify to
take an AA-MAS. Previous studies used reading and mathematics probes,
performance/skill deficit assessments, and a re-administration of an initial
probe to sample target skills. Using these probes only 57% of students
thought to have an issue accessing a standard assessment actually did.
Another predictor of success is the Brief Academic Competence Evaluation
System (BACESS). This system is based on a list that teachers provided of
contains students that struggle in reading, mathematics, language arts, or
social behavior (Kettler, 2011). The teacher evaluates a class within a
timeframe of 90 minutes. This screener was not an accurate predictor, with
only 57% of students who actually needed the modified assessment identified
(Kettler, 2011).

A more accurate way of screening students who will need a modified
assessment is the Computer-Based Alternate Assessment Screening test (C-
BAAS). This test has multiple choice items that are comparable to those
found on a state assessment. This computer assessment was created to
measure the academic achievement of students that will not meet proficiency
within one year in the classroom. The results of the study indicate that the C-
BAAS and other computer tests can validly predict the outcomes of general
assessments. With the results of the C-BAAS, teachers, assessors and IEP
teams can use disability status and quality of instruction to determine a
specific assessment to use with students that qualify for an alternate
assessment. Further research can reveal the appropriateness of the use of the
C-BAAS in other states and the use of larger samples should be considered in
order to get more accurate results (Kettler, 2011).

**AA-AAS Participation**
The IEP team essentially determines whether or not a child will need to
participate in an alternate assessment (Musson, 2010). It is important that all
states follow particular guidelines to determine if students are eligible for alternate assessments. If states and individuals do not follow guidelines and have strict criteria, students who should be taking the alternate assessment may not be seen to qualify and students who should not be taking the alternate assessment may be seen to qualify which would threaten the validity of the alternate assessment.

Participation guidelines of states were analyzed to determine the criteria for administering students the AA-AAS. Most states did not consider IQ or have a specific IQ cutoff for determination of eligibility. Furthermore, states did not mention consideration of the disability categories of mental retardation or autism. However, when considering eligibility for the AA-AAS, most states used terms such as significant cognitive impairment or significant cognitive disability (Kettler, Elliott, Beddow, Compton, McGrath, et al., 2010). Also, the IEP team was mentioned to be a major contributor in whether or not a student was eligible to take the AA-AAS. According to the U. S. Department of Education, federal policy states that IQ level and disability category could not be considered in determining whether or not a student would be eligible to take an alternate assessment. However, a small percentage of states, 14% did include IQ level or existing disability category as part of their criteria. Some states also mentioned that the eligible students would be using an alternate curriculum or working towards a certificate of completion as opposed to a diploma (Musson, Thomas, Towles-Reeves, & Kearns, 2010). This study was limited in that it didn’t utilize the states current standards, but rather standards that were used in 2007. Further research should examine results based on current standards of eligibility.

**Improving Educational Outcomes**
In a study by Hager and Slocum (2011) researchers reported a variety of ways to approach the alternate assessment. Twenty-three states reported the use of portfolios or bodies of evidence. Fifteen states reported the use of a checklist. Four states analyzed IEPs. Five states required a performance assessment or a local selection of an assessment and three states were developing or still revising their alternate assessment approach. No matter what approach is taken in selecting an alternate assessment, the results must meet federal reporting guidelines. In addition to meeting federal reporting guidelines, the results of the assessment should guide curriculum and
approaches to teaching in the classroom.

The main purpose of administering assessments is to improve outcomes for students. As a result of the scores received from assessments, teachers should be able to gain data to support future lesson planning and support progress monitoring. Before assessments are given, teachers should meet with members of the IEP team to select assessment tasks for students as well as progress monitoring that will lead to success on the assessment that is given to students at the end of the year. Because of the significance of end of the year assessments, teachers may even pay closer attention to progress monitoring, which would ensure greater success.

**Other Exceptional Students**

Of the population of students receiving special education services in the United States of America, 72,000 of these students are identified as deaf or hard of hearing (Cawthon, 2011). These students have hearing loss that ranges from mild to profound. Educational agencies that serve these students are obligated to remain accountable by administering assessments that measure students' academic gains. When developing assessments for these students, their diverse communication backgrounds need to be taken into account (Cawthon, 2011).

In the study by Cawthon (2011), the researchers sought to find how teachers decided upon a particular mode of assessment for students who were deaf or hard of hearing. Researchers presented participants with scenarios and asked for their input as to how they would approach the situation in the scenario. They then collected information from their responses for the study. The first condition includes a situation in which students were two or five grades below grade level in math or reading. Another scenario included students whose primary mode of communication was American Sign Language (ASL). The majority of participants agreed that assessments should vary based on the skill level of students. Participants also concluded that the communication mode that students use in the classroom should be the communication mode in which the assessment is administered to the students (Cawthon, 2011).

**Student Input**
There is a small population of students eligible to take the AA-MAS. A team of educators developed a multiple-choice alternate assessment and wanted to know the thought constructs of students as they approach the assessments. Items on the assessment were modified with language simplified, bolded key terms in language, and elimination of the fourth distractor in a field of four multiple choice answers. Students’ input on the assessments was gathered from a think-aloud cognitive lab in which students spoke aloud their thought processes while they took the assessment. Another mode of gathering student input was by administering a posttest questionnaire that collected students’ perceptions of the items on the assessment (Roach, Beddow, Kurz, & Kettler & Elliott, 2010).

When provided with visuals and other graphics as modification, 67% of students with disabilities felt that visuals were helpful in supporting the answering of questions related to reading passages. Students without disabilities did not feel that the extra support made the assessment any easier. A large majority of students with and without disabilities felt that the use of visuals in the mathematics portion of the assessment was helpful. A large portion of students from both categories felt that adding bolded vocabulary to a passage made the reading easier. No students with disabilities believed that taking away one distractor in a multiple-choice field made answering questions easier. However, students without disabilities (67%) felt that the elimination of one wrong answer made the assessment easier (Roach et.al., 2010). As a result of this study, researchers were able to obtain the knowledge that leads them to believe that the modifications that are put into place with regards to assessments are perceived as useful by students that need them and can be helpful to provide accurate information as to the progress that students are making academically.

**Relating Common Core Standards**

Special education teachers can apply common core standards to their approaches to assessment. The third standard of individual learning differences can apply to the way that teachers approach students. When teachers are applying this strategy, they are using intervention strategies with young children and their families that affirm and respect family, cultural, and linguistic diversity. Inherent in this core standard is recognizing that all students with disabilities are different and learn differently. The use of
alternate assessments demonstrates how teachers recognize that standardized assessments will not reflect what students with disabilities know if they are not able to access them. The seventh common core standard is in regards to instructional planning. Within this standard lie the skills of implementing, monitoring, and evaluating individualized family service plans and individualized education plans. Teachers also plan and implement developmentally and individually appropriate curriculum. When the IEP team and teachers come together to individualize curriculum and assessments, they are utilizing this standard. These two common core standards relate the most to the subject of alternate assessments.

**Conclusion**

Students with disabilities are unlikely to be able to demonstrate proficiency on regular state assessments. However, school districts must be held accountable for the achievement of all students whether or not they have a disability. The option that teachers have for students with disabilities is to provide them with an alternate assessment. Alternate assessments allow students the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge on a test that is technically easier, but has the same content as the regular statewide assessment. There is a wide range of modification options for students who are eligible to take an alternate assessment. The modifications that are currently being used are shown to be effective in making not only the testing process easier for students with disabilities, but making the test scores more valid. Furthermore, the scores that are obtained allow teachers to adjust teaching style and curriculum to ensure the most success for students with disabilities in the classroom. However, further research can delve into determining the appropriate level of modifications to use based on students’ disabilities.

**References**


Elliot, S. (2010). Effects of using modified items to test students with
persistent academic difficulties. *Exceptional Children*. 76(4), 475-495.


**Additional References of Relevant Sources**


