

## Random Reflections on Papers from the 1999 NATD Symposium “Issues and Trends in Inclusive Assessment Practices”

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As I listened to these papers, I couldn't help but be struck by the fact that assessment technology hasn't even begun to catch up to the laws and regulations that govern assessment of students with disabilities. The demands placed upon assessment professionals far exceeds their ability to comply with the requirements; indeed the federal government seems to be proceeding under the assumption that we know how to:

- develop appropriate alternate assessments, aligned with IEPs, as well as state and local standards, for all students, regardless of disability, level of English proficiency and type of instruction provided
- set standards for alternate assessments
- decide which accommodations are appropriate and fair
- report results of alternate assessments
- aggregate results of regular and alternate assessments
- interpret results of norm-referenced tests given under non-standard conditions.

That measurement professionals know how to do these things is news to me (and, I suspect, news to most of them, too).

Increased accountability for student learning as well as for simply providing services is at the heart of this discussion. And that's as it should be. However, the consequences of these new policies may be far from the ones envisioned by those who sought the changes. In an era of standards-based education and accountability, how can we ensure that the policies will serve to improve the education of students with disabilities? Clearly this will require an extraordinary effort on the part of the federal and state governments, publishers, researchers, and school and district staff.

I am encouraged to hear that the federal government is offering grants to develop models for alternate assessments. What concerns me is that those models won't be available until after the new requirements kick in. Given that assessments are to be specified in IEPs as much as a year in advance of the time the assessments are given, I suspect that many IEPs will contain the assessment equivalent of vaporware, assessments that the IEP teams hope will be available, but that don't actually exist yet. That's a shame and a disservice to the students. It also trivializes assessment and makes a mockery of accountability, which is really what this is all about. Clearly the timetable for the implementation of new assessment requirements is unduly optimistic.

The crucial issue is how the federal government and states will provide school districts

help in implementing new assessment and reporting regulations. Model assessments and reporting systems are desperately needed. Our state and probably others as well are looking into the possibility of creating an alternative assessment for those students for whom the regular state assessment is inappropriate. What is curious to me is how they could ever hope to come up with a single assessment that would be any more appropriate for all disabled students than the existing state assessments. Clearly a *collection* of possible assessments for disabled students would be much more suitable and helpful to schools than yet another "one-size-fits-all" assessment that doesn't fit any given individual very well.

Although inclusion of special education students in score reporting may have little effect at the state level, it will have profound impact at the district and local levels. It is all too easy to envision a future in which there are separate and unequal assessment systems for students with disabilities and those without. A pessimist would predict that many students with disabilities would not take part in "regular" state and district assessments for very long before the schools, concerned about test scores and rankings, decide that alternative assessments would be more appropriate for disabled students after all. Including students the first year it's required would yield a low baseline and improved school or district averages could be easily obtained by just funneling an ever-increasing percentage of (presumably low-scoring) disabled students into an alternative assessment system. That's especially true if out-of-level tests are automatically considered to not meet state standards.

It is vital that the following questions be studied:

1. What are the consequences of the new assessment and reporting requirements?
2. How are assessment decisions made?
3. How many students and which students wind up taking the "regular" assessment?
4. How many students are given alternate assessments?
5. How do schools best decide which accommodations are appropriate?
6. What assessments might be appropriate for disabled students whose first language is not English?
7. What are the effects of accommodations on assessment validity?

Test publishers and other test developers have an integral role in promoting appropriate assessment for disabled students. In particular, they can:

- Provide accommodations for special education students who take part in norming studies. It will put us in a better position to interpret disabled students' performance on standardized tests.
- Make time limits so generous for *all* students that there is virtually no need for "extended time." This would increase fairness and also help out students who aren't classified as disabled. Disabilities, e.g., learning disabilities, fall along a continuum and there are probably many students who are not officially categorized as disabled who would benefit from extra time. If we truly are committed to standards-based

instruction and assessment, we owe it to our students to give them the time they need to show what they know and can do. Conspicuously absent from the state or local standards I've seen is any specification of how well a student must perform *within a particular time limit*. If that's the case, why should the assessments be timed?

Increasing testing time has several advantages. First, it will remove some of the terror for students who know the material, but suffer from test anxiety related to time limits. My colleagues and I did one study that suggests that some students did better on standardized tests given in an untimed administration *even if they used no more than the publisher's regular maximum allotted time* (Perlman, *et al.*, 1996). Time limits on standardized achievement tests are primarily an administrative convenience and they are set such that perhaps 90% of all students finish within the allotted time. However, I suspect that within certain populations (e.g., disabled students or students in poverty), the percentage is certainly higher. This has the effect of turning a what is supposed to be a power test into a timed test. Whenever a student fails to finish a test, content coverage is inevitably compromised. How would that student have performed on the last several items? We have no way of knowing. Increasing or eliminating time limits removes one possible way for educators to "cheat" on standardized tests by allowing students extra time. And if everyone has as much time as he or she needs to complete the test, we won't have to worry about possibly providing an accommodation that confers an advantage on disabled students as compared with their non-disabled peers. The longer I've been in the field, the more disenchanted I've become with timed tests for all of the reasons cited above. The problems caused by timed tests are a high price to pay for the administrative convenience they provide.

Even the most ambitious and well-intentioned policies will be fruitless unless they can be made to work in the schools. States and districts will have to provide the massive amount of training that will be needed to assist schools in selecting the best assessments for their students. In the ideal situation, a disabled student will receive instruction that targets all of the standards that he or she is capable of attaining. The student will be taught by a teacher who has the same professional development opportunities and instructional resources as teachers of non-disabled students. IEPs will be developed by persons knowledgeable about the curricular standards. Students, their parents, and their teachers will all know at the beginning of the school year what assessments will be taken and the accommodations and stakes for each of those assessments. Anything less is a disservice to our students.

## Reference

Perlman, Carole L., Borger, Jeanne, Collins, Carla, Elenbogen, Janet and Wood, Judith. The effect of extended time limits on learning disabled students' scores on standardized reading tests. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Council on Measurement in Education, New York, April, 1996.