



Too Accommodating? The Science and Myth of Testing Accommodations

A Review of

Testing Accommodations for Students With Disabilities: Research-Based Practice

by Benjamin J. Lovett and Lawrence J. Lewandowski

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The discussion of academic testing accommodations typically begins with consensus. The desire to level the playing field seems laudable. Disabled and nondisabled students should have equal access to testing. On this we appear united. The consensus, however, quickly disappears when the conversation turns to: Exactly how do we make this happen?

Testing accommodations are intended to obtain test scores from which valid inferences can be drawn (Kettler, 2012). They are designed to lessen the impact of disabilities so that more accurate test score information can be obtained (Elliott, McKeivitt, & Kettler, 2002; Lai & Berkeley, 2012). A visually impaired or orthopedically disabled student, for example, is entitled by law to modifications in the testing process and environment that mediate the impact of that student's disability. The theory and application of testing accommodations, however, lose clarity when so-called high-incidence disabilities enter the discussion. Presently, much of the controversy centers on two such disorders—attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and learning disabilities (LD). Lacking specific biological markers, these disabilities are not as easily identified. The accommodation process, especially as it applies to these specific disorders, is further complicated by an inadequate research base.

In *Testing Accommodations for Students With Disabilities: Research-Based Practice*, Benjamin J. Lovett and Lawrence J. Lewandowski provide an extensive review of the theory and practice of testing students with disabilities. Their tone is professional yet provocative. They are hopeful without pulling punches. They make clear that much of what has become standard educational practice has received little, if any, scientific support. The entire process, the authors insist, deserves scrutiny. Who should be entitled to accommodations? What portion of this population is actually receiving them? Does extended time or preferential seating level the metaphorical playing field? What about frequent breaks, headphones, or private rooms? What is the predictive validity of an accommodated

standardized test? In short, the world of testing accommodations is replete with uncertainties.

While recognizing the controversy and confusion surrounding this matter, the authors point to solutions. Throughout the book, Lovett and Lewandowski call for research-based practices. Our hope, they insist, rests in the science.

The Controversy

Vickers (2010) wrote, “No other disability has seen as dramatic a rise in numbers of diagnoses in recent decades” as have LD and ADHD (p. 4). Hinshaw and Scheffler (2014) described “a serious run on accommodations” (p. 96) occurring in our schools. These researchers along with Lovett and Lewandowski join a growing list of educators and psychologists, as well as certain media outlets, who have suggested that the LD and ADHD diagnoses have now become incentivized. In other words, accommodations intended to assist disabled students have become increasingly attractive to nondisabled students intent on “gaming the system” (Hinshaw & Scheffler, 2014, p. 96).

Levitt and Lewandowski skillfully craft a message of concern and hope. They acknowledge that certain accommodations may actually “overaccommodate” (p. 113), giving disabled students “an unfair advantage” (p. 109). Further, and perhaps more importantly, is the concern that lower socioeconomic status (SES) students may not have equal access to needed accommodations. Higher SES students, for instance, have access to private psychological/educational evaluations whereas lower SES students may only be eligible for what their schools can provide. In a thorough examination of testing accommodations, moral and justice issues surface. Our efforts to accommodate disabled students may have further tilted the field. The argument is easily made that our present system of doling out accommodations has been anything but fair.

“We know that some test accommodations are invalid,” the authors write. “We know that they are often applied arbitrarily. . . .we know that the research support for many of them is either nonexistent or weak” (p. 208). This weakness leads to injustice, inconsistency, and misleading scores. For example, the amount and types of test accommodations vary from state to state (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Capizzi, 2005). They also vary from one college campus to another (Vickers, 2010). “Too often accommodation decisions are guided by intuition, lore, and warm hearted intentions,” write Lovett and Lewandowski, “rather than by evidence and careful reasoning” (p. 231).

Testing Accommodations for Students With Disabilities makes a clarion call for a stronger research foundation to support the implementation of testing accommodations. The authors’ presentation is clear and compelling. As the book progresses, Lovett and Lewandowski describe where the science may be taking us. They present what a fair and scientifically based approach to testing accommodations might look like.

Universal Design

At a minimum, improving our testing procedures for disabled students will involve building a stronger research base and then properly educating psychologists, educators, and policy

makers. But we may need to do more than improve the existing system. We may need to make an outside-the-box type change.

An alternative—more systemic—strategy would be to alter the testing environment with the intent of reducing the need for accommodations. This would involve establishing testing systems that accommodate the widest range of students, thus decreasing the need for individual testing modifications.

Over three decades ago, architect Ronald Mace proposed a plan to create environments that would meet the needs of a broadly diverse population. The term *universal design* (UD) was coined to reflect this approach of proactively incorporating inclusive design features while minimizing the need for individual retrofitted accommodations (Center for Universal Design, 1997; McGuire, Scott, & Shaw, 2006). Since then, UD has begun to influence education. Terms such as *universal design for learning* (UDL), *universal instructional design* (UID), and *universal design for education* (UDE) have emerged. In each of its applications, UD intends to design procedures, environments, and products that are functional for the greatest number of users (Welch, 1995).

Thompson, Johnstone, and Thurlow (2002) suggested that “universally designed assessments are designed and developed from the beginning to allow participation of the widest possible range of students, and to result in valid inferences about performance for all students who participate in the assessment” (p. 6). Such an approach hopes to maintain standards while reducing the need for individual accommodations. Lovett and Lewandowski state unequivocally that “the universal design of assessments, creating a test that can be equally accessed by any person, is an ideal to strive for” (p. 217). Furthermore, they summarize their stance with equal clarity: “We strongly advocate for this shift from a test accommodation to more of a UD approach” (p. 210).

Although the perfect prototype for this UD approach to testing may not quite have arrived, Lovett and Lewandowski’s work brings us closer to that vision. The architects of this new system must understand the science and apply this research in creative ways. The authors provide a remarkable blueprint that places us on the verge of creating a better approach to testing all students.

Testing Accommodations for Students With Disabilities deserves a wide audience. It would be appropriate for advanced undergraduates. Indeed, it would be hard to find a better introduction to the topic. Further, this book is essential reading for anyone involved with testing elementary, secondary, or college-level students. It is both an accurate presentation of the state of testing accommodations as well as a vision for the future. Lovett and Lewandowski do a superb job of identifying the static and dynamic dots that, when connected, produce a picture of where we are and what we could be.

Testing Accommodations for Students With Disabilities would be our nomination for what we might call the *One Book Award*. If you read only one book on educational or school psychology this year, you would be well served by choosing this one.

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