



The Basics of Accommodations and Modifications

There continues to be confusion among some educators and staff in State Education Agencies (SEAs) and Local Education Agencies (LEAs) about what is an accommodation and what is a modification. This confusion about accommodations and modifications happens in how these words are used in both instruction and assessment. The confusion is further compounded by the use of the term “modified curriculum” when describing the academic content taught to some students with disabilities. The misunderstandings of these terms affect how Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are written and then implemented.

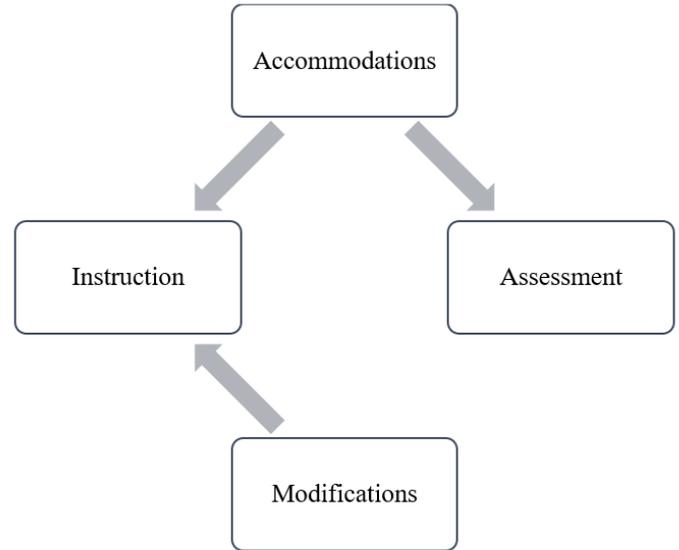
The purpose of this Brief is to clarify what accommodations and modifications are for both instruction and assessment for students with disabilities. We also disentangle the use of the term “alternate or modified curriculum” from the meaning of modification used for instruction and assessment. Accommodations and modifications can also be appropriate for English learners; however, this Brief is focused on students with disabilities, including English learners with disabilities.

Accommodations and Modifications in Instruction and Assessment

For students with disabilities, including students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) are the guiding federal education legislation about accommodations and modifications. IDEA indicates that IEP teams need to identify individual accommodations necessary for students with disabilities on state and districtwide assessments. Additionally, among other supports, IEPs must list specific accommodations and modifications that will be provided for students. ESSA requires that appropriate accommodations be provided during state assessments to students with disabilities identified under IDEA, as well as to students who are provided accommodations under an act other than IDEA. Neither of these laws provide a definition for accommodations or modifications, nor do they address modified curriculum. Rather, they emphasize that all students are to be provided access to and make progress in the grade-level general education curriculum even if the student is taking an alternate assessment based on alternate academic achievement standards (AA-AAAS) (Sabia et al., 2020a).

Figure 1 shows that accommodations may be used for both instruction and standardized assessments, but modifications can only be used for instruction.

Figure 1. Relationships Among Accommodations and Modifications for Instruction and Assessment



Accommodations

The *Council of Chief State School Officers' (CCSSO) Accessibility Manual* defines accommodations as changes in procedures or materials that: (a) ensure a student has equitable access to instructional and assessment content, and (b) support valid assessment results for those students who require them (Lazarus et al., 2021). Accommodations do not reduce or change learning expectations. Generally, the same accommodations provided for instruction are provided for assessments. However, sometimes an accommodation provided for instruction may not be appropriate for an assessment. In some cases, this is because the accommodation available on the assessment is different from what is used in the classroom (e.g., an electronic highlighter is embedded in the online assessment but a highlighting marker is used in the classroom).

There are a variety of accommodations that are used for both instruction and assessment. In regard to state assessments, all states have guidance on what accommodations are allowed. Other standardized assessments should also have their own accommodations policies (e.g.,

standardized vendor assessments). Instructional accommodations are determined by IEP teams as per IDEA. A few examples of typical accommodations include:

- American Sign Language or other sign system
- Braille text and tactile graphics
- Extended time
- Large print
- Scribe

Accommodations should be accessible to the student in all required school settings and provided by general educators, special educators, support staff, and related service providers.

Modifications

The *CCSSO Accessibility Manual* (Lazarus et al., 2021) indicates that modifications are changes in practices or materials that lower state-required learning expectations. IEP teams determine whether a student needs modifications and identifies what those specific modifications are and who will be making them. Because modifications change expectations, they should be used with caution during instruction. Modifications used during instruction may result in students missing out on essential knowledge or skills. Modifications should never be used during standardized assessments because they change what is being measured, resulting in an invalid assessment score.

Examples of instructional modifications include:

- allowing a student to have fewer learning objectives than other peers
- requiring fewer assignments
- giving students easier homework than peers
- providing below-grade-level curriculum or assignments

The *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (AERA/APA/NCME, 2014) address both accommodations and modifications as testing adaptations. They emphasize that accommodations are adjustments to the test presentation, environment, content format, or

administration conditions that do not alter what is being measured by the test. Modifications are a change in test content, format, or administration conditions that alter what the test is measuring, resulting in scores that differ in meaning from scores from an unmodified assessment. Although the *Standards* refer only to assessment, we can apply these definitions to instructional accommodations and modifications. For instruction, use of accommodations do not alter the content that is being taught, but modifications do change (lower) the learning expectations.

Alternate or Modified Curriculum Standards

Part of the confusion about accommodations and modifications may be due to the use of the terms “alternate or modified curriculum” in some state policies. Many states’ decision-making criteria for AA-AAAS participation require that for a student to participate in the AA-AAAS substantive modifications to the general education curriculum are required (i.e., the student uses alternate or

Alternate Assessments based on Alternate Academic Achievement Standards (AA-AAAS)

In the early 2000s, some states considered AA-AAAS to be the “ultimate accommodation” and believed that accommodations were not necessary for an AA-AAAS. Since that time, the field has recognized that there are still barriers that may need to be removed for students who take the AA-AAAS. IEP teams can make accommodations available for students who take an alternate assessment. For example, many states now administer their AA-AAAS as an online computer-based assessment. Students who are unable to access the online assessment may need a paper version of the assessment as an accommodation. Other possible accommodations may include the use of accessibility devices, a braille version of the assessment, and tactile graphics.

modified curriculum standards) (Quanbeck et al., 2023). These terms have sometimes been further shortened to “alternate or modified curriculum.” Federal law makes clear that students who participate in the AA-AAAS must have access to the general education curriculum. According to Bechard et al. (2021) “students with significant cognitive disabilities are expected to engage in higher thinking and operations to accomplish more complex academic content” (p. 7). Additionally, ESEA requires that states’ AA-AAAS align with the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014 requirement that students who take the AA-AAAS are on track to pursue postsecondary education or competitive integrated employment (Thurlow et al., 2019). ESEA and IDEA do allow for states to have alternate academic achievement standards, aligned to grade-level academic content standards, for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who take the AA-AAAS. Alternate academic achievement standards describe adjusted performance expectations for these students while still providing access to the general education curriculum.

IDEA states that a student’s IEP goals are to be designed to enable the child to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum by meeting the child’s needs that result from the child’s disability (Sabia et al., 2020b). This means that the curriculum is based on the same grade-level academic content as for other students, but it can be presented in a way that reduces breadth, depth, and complexity. The curriculum is not modified because it does not change the academic content for the student (i.e., they learn the same academic content, but possibly with less depth, breadth, and complexity).

Referring to learning the same academic content with less depth, breadth, or complexity does not mean that the curriculum is different. A different curriculum is suggested by the terms alternate curriculum standards or modified curriculum standards.

Summary

The primary purpose of accommodations and modifications is to provide access to learning for students with disabilities. The major difference between accommodations and modifications is that accommodations provide access to both instruction and assessment for students with disabilities without changing expectations for their learning or performance; whereas, modifications lower performance expectations on grade level content. Modifications for instruction are not the same as a modified curriculum.

Recommendations

IEP teams, including students who participate in them, need to understand the differences between accommodations and modifications. Specifically,

- IEP teams should know which accommodations are allowable on assessments and provide students the opportunity to practice these accommodations during instruction. When the IEP team has determined that the allowable accommodation meets the student’s individual needs it should be provided during assessments.
- The more aligned instruction and assessment accommodations are, the better students will be able to demonstrate what they know.
- Modifications should not be used for assessments because they produce invalid results for the content being assessed.
- Modifications should be used with caution for instruction because they change the learning expectations for students.
- Although instructional modifications may be appropriate for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who take an AA-AAAS, those students still must be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum.

Process for Creating Grade-Aligned Lesson Plans for Students

Who Take the AA-AAAS

Lee et al. (2015) identified a research-based process for creating grade-aligned lesson plans to promote numeracy and literacy skills for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities:

Numeracy

1. Select the content and objectives for the lesson from grade-level content targeted by the general education teacher or prioritized with content partners within and across grades.
2. Identify a real-life activity for the lesson to give the content purpose.
3. Use evidence-based practices with content broken into smaller objectives and sequenced.
4. Use instructional supports and graphic organizers to keep track of steps to solve the problem.
5. Plan methods to monitor progress (both steps used to solve and number of problems solved).
6. Promote generalization through application to untaught problems and different real-life situations. (pp. 2-3)

Literacy

1. Select the target text—same as assigned grade level targets, with opportunities for inclusive instruction, interaction with peers.
2. Adapt text as needed—look for picture supports and headings already included; some texts may need simplification or a summary.
3. Augment the text for understanding. This may include providing picture symbols for key vocabulary, a summary sentence that is repeated, or highlighting key vocabulary. “No more different than necessary” is a general rule of thumb.
4. Identify multiple ways (e.g., human reader, technology) that the student could access the text. The passage should always be in view so the student can apply his or her reading skills. During instruction, the student should have the opportunity to request to “read it again” if he or she is unsure of the answer to a comprehension question. A “reread” can be requested using either the symbol provided for “reread” or the student’s own communication system.
5. Consider how the student will demonstrate understanding. Although some students with significant cognitive disabilities will have a speech or communication system to generate answers to open-ended questions, many will need to select from an array of responses (e.g., words or pictures). Response options should be familiar to students or pre-taught prior to being used for responding. (p. 5)

Resources

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