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Accommodations and Modifications

The difference between the right word and the almost right word is really a large matter—it's the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.

—Mark Twain (1888)

In the second step of the Inclusive Grading Model presented in Chapter 3, we emphasized the importance of distinguishing between *accommodations* and *modifications*. This is an essential distinction in the model, because accommodations do not affect what is being measured and reported, but modifications do. Nevertheless, recognizing the differences between these two types of adaptation is not always easy. In fact, it is a distinction that can sometimes confuse general educators and special educators alike. So in this chapter we revisit the differences between these two types of adaptation and clarify their defining characteristics with regard to specific standards and individual students.

Definitions

Accommodations

In basic terms, accommodations simply allow students to participate fully in the instructional program. They can be thought of as

similar to eyeglasses. A student who needs eyeglasses in order to see well is permitted to wear those eyeglasses in the classroom at all times. The eyeglasses simply give the student access to the material. They do not make the material easier for that student than for anyone else in the classroom. Rather, they allow the students to participate as fully as students who have better vision. In essence, eyeglasses simply level the playing field (Freedman, 2005) for that student. Accommodations serve in exactly the same way. Accommodations are supports that provide access to the general curriculum but do not fundamentally alter the learning goal or grade level standard (Freedman, 2000, 2005).

Modifications

For some students, however, an accommodation is not enough. These students need additional support in certain areas in order to be successful. In considering the educational background and learning history of these students, the educational team might decide that some or all of the grade-level standards are not achievable during the academic year, and some change or “modification” in the standards is needed. Unlike accommodations that simply level the playing field, modifications actually change the game (Freedman, 2005). Modifications are changes to the curriculum and assessments that do fundamentally alter the learning goal or grade-level expectation (Freedman, 2000, 2005).

Determining the Function of the Adaptation

From the definitions above, it would seem that we could construct a list of possible adaptations and then categorize each as an accommodation or a modification. Many schools, as well as numerous textbooks, websites, and articles, do exactly this. These lists of possible adaptations almost always consider “extended time” and “oral test taking” to be accommodations. But what many educators do not recognize is that these popular adaptations may or *may not* be accommodations. Subtle differences in context matter. Because of these contextual differences, few adaptations can be labeled as always an accommodation or always a modification. These contextual differences also must be noted in individualized education program (IEP) meetings and in the development of programs and corresponding forms.

Classifying a particular adaptation as an accommodation or a modification requires consideration of the circumstances of its use. Recall, accommodations do not fundamentally alter the grade-level expectation, but modifications do. Depending on the circumstances, therefore, an accommodation for a student in one subject area might actually be a modification for that student in another subject area.

Janis and Carlos, for example, are both permitted to respond orally on assessments. That adaptation would be considered an accommodation on assessments in science, so long as the science assessment is not measuring writing skills. If part of what is being measured includes writing skills, however, then responding orally fundamentally changes the standard or goal. In this case, the adaptation of responding orally would be considered a modification. So while being permitted to respond orally on most assessments in science or social studies might be considered an accommodation for Janis and Carlos, in language arts assessments designed to measure writing skills, it would be considered a modification. In the next section we explore examples of common adaptations and various circumstances in which each might be considered an accommodation or a modification.

Common Adaptations

1. Extended Time

One of the most common adaptations is extended time on an assessment or to complete an assignment. If the purpose of the assessment is to measure students' knowledge and understanding of particular concepts and not to measure speed or response rate, then extended time is an *accommodation*. And, indeed, the purpose of most assessments and assignments is to determine students' mastery of content or to provide evidence of a learning process, not to measure students' speed or rate of performance.

There are, however, instances when extended time is clearly a modification. One of those instances is if the assessment is specifically designed to measure students' speed or rate of performance. In certain math or reading assignments, such as "Mad Minutes" in mathematics and timed reading, for example, the provision of extra time would be considered a *modification*, because both accuracy *and* rate of performance are being measured.

SNAPSHOT: Norah

Because of Norah's difficulty with reading fluency, tasks that require reading are more time consuming for her. Her teachers are concerned that although she needs to continue working on her reading fluency, without adaptations she could fall behind in other subject areas. She is able to write her responses, too, but it always takes her longer. For this reason, Norah is given the adaptation of extended time on many school tasks and assessments.

For *most tasks*, giving Norah additional time does not make it easier for her than her classmates. Rather, having the extra time simply offers her the same access to the material as her peers. In language arts, however, extended time on assessments of reading fluency is a modification. This lowers the expectation on the fluency standard.

2. Complete a Task Orally

Allowing a student to take quizzes or exams orally is also a common adaptation for struggling learners. This adaptation is a great choice for students whose verbal skills are much higher than their writing skills, a scenario common to English learners and students with learning disabilities. Taking an assessment orally is an *accommodation* for any assessment that is not designed to measure proficiency in writing. If the assessment is connected to a grade or mark on a writing standard, however, it is a *modification*.

SNAPSHOT: Carlos

Carlos's fifth-grade teacher and English learner (EL) teacher met to discuss how he will participate in science and social studies assessments. He enjoys these subjects, but he has difficulty with his writing skills in both. His teachers determined that he needs to be able to take his social studies and science quizzes orally. Because he is learning English, and his conversational skills are much better than his written academic English skills, taking these quizzes orally will allow him to show more of what he has mastered.

For Carlos, taking quizzes orally in history or science is an accommodation. The adaptation does not make the content easier or in any way lower the expectation. This change merely allows him to express his knowledge and understanding in a different way. The quality of his responses also would be evaluated using the same criteria as are used for other students in the class.

3. Use Computerized Spell, Grammar, and Punctuation Check

For students who struggle with the conventions of spelling, grammar, and punctuation in writing, computerized word processors can serve as an excellent accommodation. As they work to complete written assignments, these students can concentrate on demonstrating

fully what they have learned and are able to do, knowing that a prompt will be given for many of the spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors they might have. This use of computerized spelling, grammar, and punctuation checks is an *accommodation* for any assessment or assignment not connected to a grade or mark in conventions of writing. In subjects such as mathematics, science, or social studies, for example, the assessments are generally designed to measure students' understanding of concepts in those subjects, not their writing ability. To use word processing software to complete assignments in such subjects is an accommodation. On the other hand, this same adaptation would be considered a *modification* if the assessment or assignment focuses on a language arts standard and is designed to measure students' proficiency in the conventions of writing.

SNAPSHOT: Janis

Because of her learning disability, Janis experiences difficulties with the conventions of writing. Punctuation and capitalization are especially difficult for her. When given a prompt that there is an error, Janis is usually able to identify the error and correct it. But while she is writing, using the capitalization and punctuation skills that are automatic for most students in early elementary grades are tasks that require much concentration for her. Janis's IEP team determined that using a laptop computer and word processing program to complete her in-class assignments would be an appropriate accommodation for her. She is allowed to use this accommodation in all non-language arts classes. In language arts class, however, Janis and her parents decided that she will try to master this skill this year and will not use the adaptation in language arts class. The rest of the IEP team agreed that with practice and support in learning to identify errors in and revise her work, Janis is ready to work toward the grade-level expectation. If she had used the word processing program in language arts, it would have been a modification.

4. Complete Only Certain Parts of the Task

Reducing the length of assessments or assignments is an adaptation frequently chosen for struggling learners and for those who require additional time to complete tasks. This adaptation may mean fewer questions, problems, or tasks. And as is true of most adaptations, this can function as either an accommodation or a modification.

If all parts of the assignment address the same standard(s), and the length of the assignment is designed to provide more practice, then eliminating portions of the assignment is an accommodation. For example, a teacher might adapt an assignment of 100 two-digit multiplication problems by requiring that a struggling learner complete only 50. This adaptation is considered an *accommodation* as long as all 100 problems are of comparable difficulty. Instead of extending the time allowed, the redundancy in the task is eliminated.

Reducing the length of an assessment or assignment becomes a *modification*, however, when more difficult parts of the assessment or assignment are not required. A mathematics teacher, for example, may adapt an assignment by requiring that a student complete all of the two-digit multiplication problems but none of the three-digit ones. Because the more difficult items have been taken away from the task, the assignment has been modified.

SNAPSHOT: Norah

During social studies, Norah's second-grade class learns about each of the states in the United States by doing research online and using encyclopedias. Students are given 12 to 15 questions about each state and record their answers in a journal. Norah's general education teacher and reading specialists met to discuss how best to support Norah in this activity. They agreed that Norah has the skills to complete the task, but it will take her about twice as much time as it does her peers. At first, her teachers thought that having Norah research fewer states would be an appropriate accommodation. But, wanting to ensure that Norah felt as though she completed the project, they reconsidered. They discussed allowing her extended time to complete the task, but decided that would require too much of her time to be spent on this single task. Finally, the teachers agreed that the appropriate adaptation was to reduce the length of the assignment by requiring her to answer only 6 to 8 questions about each state. Because the purpose of the assignment is to increase library, encyclopedia, and research skills, Norah could demonstrate the same skills as her peers even though the length of the assignment was reduced.

Because Norah was expected to demonstrate mastery of grade-level skills, the adaptation of requiring fewer questions was an *accommodation*.

5. Take-Home Task Instead of In-Class Task

Having students complete a task in class can be the perfect way for a teacher to quickly check students' understanding of a concept

and then offer immediate feedback. But for some struggling learners, the time constraints of the class period or the pressure of completing the assignment in the same way or at the same speed as others in the class is difficult to manage. In these circumstances, an educational team may decide to allow the student to complete certain assessments or assignments at home instead of in class. This adaptation is an *accommodation* if, and only if, all of the same relevant resources are available to the student at home as are available to students completing the assignment in class. On the other hand, if students taking a quiz in class, for example, are not able to use Internet resources, books, and class notes that are available to the student completing it at home, then this adaptation is a *modification*.

SNAPSHOT: Janis

Janis's eighth-grade teacher, her special education teacher, Janis, and her parents met to discuss her struggles in completing the increasingly difficult in-class papers being required in English Literature class. Janis said that because she was a slower writer, even when using her laptop, she felt self-conscious during the assignments. She did not feel she did her best work in class, because she was distracted by thoughts of how much longer her response took. Consequently, she had been submitting assignments before she had revised them and sometimes before she completed them. The team decided to allow her to complete some of her in-class, short paper assignments at home. By having Janis take home these in-class assessments and finalize them at home, she could devote more time and her full attention to the task.

The adaptation provided to Janis in the above example will provide her with greater opportunity to master the content. Because students in class are also able to use writing resources as they complete the short papers, Janis does not have any resources at home for this assignment that her classmates do not have. Thus, Janis's adaptation for this series of assignments is an accommodation.

6. Easier Tasks

When an educational team agrees that the grade-level expectation is inappropriate for a student, assignments and assessments can be changed to address expectations of a lower grade level. This may include adaptations such as reading text at a lower grade level, completing easier math problems, or mastering lower-level science skills.

Any time the grade-level expectation is lowered, the adaptation is a *modification*.

Students with more significant disabilities often work on a level of content that is multiple grade levels below that of their classmates. This may be true for only some subject areas or standards, but usually the level of work is different across most or all of the curriculum.

SNAPSHOT: Jimi

Jimi's IEP team met to determine his educational priorities for the upcoming year. Jimi is in 10th grade, and his special education and general education teachers collaborate to modify the curriculum to an appropriate level for him. Of the 36 standards on the report card, Jimi required modification on 32. His IEP team prioritized the standards and selected 8 to modify and include on the IEP as annual goals. For each of these 8 goals, Jimi is working toward elementary-level expectations. The changes in the standards do more than provide a different way to access or demonstrate content. The changes lower the expectation to a level that is attainable for Jimi. For example, a 10th-grade speaking/listening expectation is that students "respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented" (CCSSO, 2010). Jimi's IEP team determined that a foundational skill that Jimi needs in order to work toward this standard is to "follow the standard rules of conversation, including (1) gaining attention from others in respectful ways, (2) actively listening to others using eye contact, and (3) taking turns to speak one person at a time."

The goals that Jimi's team developed are excellent examples of modifications that clearly connect to the general curriculum, despite the difference in expectation needed.

7. Changes to the Environment

Many struggling students need supports in the classroom environment to have access to an optimal learning experience. Students who are easily distracted, for example, may benefit from options such as completing assessments alone in a quieter area, sitting at the front of the classroom, or using a picture schedule. Adaptations to the environment like these are always *accommodations*. They do not alter the learning expectations; they merely are changes to the environment that make learning at the expected level more likely.

SNAPSHOT: Norah

Many second-grade students have some difficulty in dealing appropriately with distractions. Norah's teachers believe that because she is also struggling in the area of reading, though, that this normal distractibility is more of a concern for her. Consequently, her teachers decided she should sit at a table near the teacher's desk and with a group of students who do not frequently show distracting behaviors. By reducing distractions, Norah's teachers aim to create an environment in which mastery of reading is easier.

Examples of changes to the environment like those given to Norah in no way change the expectations for her learning. These are always accommodations.

8. Assistive Technology

Some students require the support of assistive technology. Assistive technology is any equipment or device made, adapted, or available commercially that provides access or improves functioning for a person who has a disability (Dyal, Carpenter, & Wright, 2009). Assistive technology includes equipment such as text readers, speech-to-text software, wheelchairs, and communication devices.

But assistive technology also includes devices, equipment, and software that are available to and used by the general public. The word processing software Janis used in the earlier example fits the definition of assistive technology, as does the video technology she uses in the example below. Widely available, commercial technologies such as these are considered "assistive technology" when they are used to improve access or functioning for a person with a disability. Any of these assistive technologies is almost always an *accommodation*.

SNAPSHOT: Janis

Janis's science teacher, special education teacher, and parents met to discuss how she might participate in the upcoming series of science projects. Each of these is a major assignment, and these assignments are repeated throughout the year. The science projects are connected to several of the standards each reporting period. Janis has difficulty in the area of written expression, and a significant portion of each science

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project is a comprehensive paper that students write about their projects. Janis enjoys using technology and has shown an interest in video and web-based technology recently. Her teachers determine that she can complete the project by recording herself delivering a video presentation on all of the required components of the paper. In order to continue developing her writing skills, Janis will still complete the papers, and her special education teacher will give her feedback on these. But her science teacher will give her credit for mastering the content if she demonstrates it in *either* format. The teachers decided that allowing her to present her project through the video will provide her the opportunity to express what she knows about the content without the limitations her disability might otherwise impose.

Web-based and digital technology offer ever-increasing options for students to demonstrate mastery of content. By high school, almost all students have available to them computers with Internet connections, and many have mobile phones with video capabilities. Teachers and students can use these technologies in exciting, creative ways to adapt the curriculum for struggling learners. Because Janis's teachers are requiring her to demonstrate mastery of the same science content as her classmates, using video and web-based technology in this way is an accommodation that provides her access.

Summary

In this chapter we provided detail on distinguishing between accommodations and modifications. Most adaptations cannot be categorized as either an accommodation or a modification without understanding the context in which they are implemented. In fact, the same adaptation can be an accommodation for one standard and a modification for another. *Accommodations* are adaptations that provide students access to the general curriculum but *do not* fundamentally alter the grade-level standard. *Modifications*, on the other hand, fundamentally alter the grade-level expectation for students. Most struggling learners require accommodations for some standards and modifications to others. Adaptations should not be seen as pervasive or permanent. That is, a student may require adaptations for some subject areas and not for others, and as intervention is successful, the need for adaptations changes. In the next chapter we discuss an intervention planning and progress monitoring process that can be used to determine report cards grades based on modified expectations.