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Research Report

High Stakes Testing and Students with Learning Disabilities: Factors of Passing and Failing the Virginia Standards of Learning Tests

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Abstract:

In the era of high stakes testing there are questions about the performance of students with learning disabilities. Passing or failing the Standards of Learning (SOL) tests in Virginia can be the difference between ultimately obtaining a regular diploma, modified diploma, or a certificate of completion. This study analyzed the performance of middle school students with learning disabilities to ascertain why some students passed the Virginia SOL tests and others failed. Student failure was attributed to two main trends in the data. First, was a significant pattern of inconsistency in program planning. Second, was a systemic set of problems in the delivery of educational services. Students passed the SOL tests largely because of their ability to read proficiently. Typically, these were students who did not have reading as their learning disability. Recommendations are included apropos to the study findings.

Brief Review of the Literature

Since the landmark work *A Nation At-Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1988), school systems in the United States have been evolving by a myriad of reform efforts, particularly with regard to the “standards movement.” Outcomes of standards-based education are measured by accountability and assessment systems. Currently, all states have some kind of assessment system that (1) provides information about individual student achievement and (2) gauges the success of schools and school systems. Conventional wisdom is if standards are raised *all* students will benefit through greater student achievement and the efforts of educators will, in essence, be validated.

All students include students with disabilities. Their situation is complicated when it comes to accountability testing, particularly for students who are academically-able, like those who are in the high incidence category of learning disabilities. Alternate assessment for students who are severely disabled is even more challenging and comes with an additional set of testing challenges. Efforts to ensure fairness still continue today. These efforts are driven by both legislation and litigation. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), called the Improving America’s Schools Act (IASA) in 1994 mandated fairness in testing students with disabilities, as did the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997. Moreover, a class action suit on behalf of students with learning disabilities in Oregon (Wrightslaw, 1999) has put all states under scrutiny when testing all students with disabilities.

There are a wide variety of strategies to instruct and test students with learning disabilities. Generally, included are accommodations for instruction and testing that are generated by the individualized education plan (IEP) committee when formulating an IEP. Accommodations in instruction usually are the same as those used when testing students with disabilities to evaluate their

academic progress. Accommodations for testing students with disabilities are quite varied. Generally, there are four categories – timing/scheduling accommodations, setting accommodations, presentation accommodations, and response accommodations. In total, there are scores of accommodations that can be implemented to meet the specific testing needs of students with disabilities.

A number of intended and unintended consequences emerge from accountability testing of students with disabilities. On the positive side, year 2000 data have shown that accountability standards have raised the academic performance of students with disabilities. Also, students learn meaningful and necessary accommodations during their school-age years. They take this important information about accommodations into their adult years and into a variety of settings, including employment. On the negative side, there are possibilities of lower level IEP objectives to ensure mastery of curricular goals. Teacher burnout is an increased possibility as is student absenteeism and dropout issues. Moreover, from an administrative perspective, accommodations for accountability testing are just one more unfunded mandate imposed on school systems across the country.

With the advent of accountability testing for students with disabilities, especially placed in the same assessment system with non-disabled students, the principle of normalization (Wolfensberger, 1972) has been reached in the educational arena. After many years of being placed in a *de facto* dual system of education, students with disabilities have become part of a truly integrated K-12 educational system with the advent of standards-based testing.

As the Commonwealth of Virginia proceeds on its track of testing all students with accountability tests to ensure the value of its K-12 effectiveness, it is important to explore its effects on students with disabilities, particularly learning disabilities. The purpose of this study is to investigate why middle-school students (grades 6 through 8) with learning disabilities pass and fail the Virginia

SOL subtest that measures performance in the area of language. It is this area of instruction and testing that is typically at-risk for students with learning disabilities.

Method

The research was conducted during fall, 2003 in order to answer three questions pertaining to pass and fail outcomes of students with learning disabilities on the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOLs) for the English, Reading/Literature, and Research subtest. The research questions were:

1. Why do students with learning disabilities pass the English Reading/Literature and Research SOL test?
2. Why do students with learning disabilities fail the English Reading/Literature and Research SOL test?
3. What variables are key to each outcome – pass or fail in English Reading/Literature and Research SOL test?

Subjects

The subjects for this study were students with learning disabilities who had taken the English Reading/Literature and Research SOL test in eighth grade during the 2002-2003 school year. They were from six school divisions located in central Virginia – Chesterfield County, Colonial Heights, Hanover County, Henrico County, Hopewell, and the City of Richmond. All subjects were identified as learning disabled consistent with Commonwealth of Virginia law (same as learning disabilities in the federal mandated Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) as well as the rules and regulations of their respective school divisions.

Fifteen cases were randomly selected for investigation - 5 passes and 10 failures. Ten cases were male and 5 cases were female. Moreover, gender-pass/fail rates were as follows: male-fail 6, male-pass 4, female-fail 4, and female-pass 1. (Note: typically males outnumber females in learning disabilities classes by more than a 2:1 ratio.)

All parents/guardians were asked for permission to use their child's records for the study. Procedures for informed consent were followed according to the rules of Virginia Commonwealth University's Institutional Research Board (IRB).

Procedures

Randomly selected cases were accessed, and data were collected by way of a four-part research protocol focusing on students, accommodations (for instruction and testing), learning disabilities teachers, and instructional practices. The research protocol was devised by the principal investigator and members of the Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium (MERC) study team, a group comprised of one member from each of the MERC partner school divisions. In addition, data were collected by the MERC study team. All data used in the study were archival in nature. They were obtained from student records, specifically individual education program (IEP) documents, and fifth grade and eighth grade SOL scores.

The data were analyzed with an emergent case study design (Yin, 1989). This was the preferred strategy because the research questions were "framed in a how or why format when the investigator had little or no control over events and when the focus of the study is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context" (p.13). Through this method, multiple case studies were used to understand the phenomenon of students with learning disabilities passing and failing the English Reading/Literature and Research part of the Virginia SOL test in fifth and eighth grades. This specific SOL test was chosen because students with learning disabilities are typically at-risk for reading and

associated language skills deficits. The research strategy was exploratory in nature and “sought to illuminate a decision or set of decisions – why they were taken, how they were implemented and with what result” (p. 22). Repeated findings from the data analysis lead to a series of important trends and are discussed below as themes and findings.

Findings and Themes

The analysis of the data yielded two main themes. First, there was a significant pattern of inconsistency of program planning throughout grades 6, 7, and 8 for students with learning disabilities, irrespective of a passing or failing outcome. Each year their individualized education program (IEP) seemed to be “up for grabs.” There was little evidence that there was consistency in such areas as educational placement, instructional strategy, and learning and testing accommodations. The result of this inconsistency was a disjointed middle school experience. In essence, each year seemed to be a new year for students with learning disabilities, with little articulation of program planning from the previous year of special educational services. The result was a cumulative effect of student underachievement that put them at-risk for passing the SOLs.

The second theme that emerged was that when students with learning disabilities fail the English Reading/Literature and Research SOL test it is largely attributed to a systemic problem in the delivery of educational services. This theme was highly related to the first theme. When students with learning disabilities failed, there was a year-to-year record of decisions *where students were made to fit the system rather than the system being responsive to the specialized needs of the student*. Meaningful coordination with general education programs seemed to be woefully lacking in collaborative planning and meeting student goals. Goals and objectives changed from year to year in a seemingly fashion; different reading programs and levels of instruction were implemented, and varying learning and

testing accommodations were instituted in a manner that seemed to fit the system or the philosophy of the current teacher rather than the individual needs of students. In the cases that were analyzed, the data showed a rather haphazard manner of follow-through and data-driven practices from year to year. Most puzzling was finding a significant number of students in the study who received passing grades (sometimes as high as a B) in their class work but repeatedly failed their SOL test. This disconnect was rather remarkable, in that, in-class performance evaluation simply did not match outcomes of the SOL test.

Findings

A number of key findings emerged from the data analysis. They were gleaned from the areas of inquiry of the study - students, accommodations (for learning and testing), teachers, and instruction. The findings oftentimes are not discreet. Therefore, the four areas tend to overlap each other in the findings statements.

Students Passing the English Reading/Literature and Research SOL Test

Passing of the English Reading/Literature and Research SOL test in fifth grade was indicative of passing in eighth grade. Students who passed had consistently higher pass grades in related courses from one year to the next. Therefore, their course grades were predictive of a passing score on the SOL test, particularly reading grades. What is not surprising, however, is those students who passed had a learning disability in the area of mathematics or some other area not directly related to performance on the English Reading/Literature and Research part of the SOL. At the same time, individual education planning for the students who passed showed a pattern of inconsistent planning

from year to year (not unlike the students with learning disabilities who failed). Fortunately for the cases analyzed, this seemed not to have a negative impact on SOL performance.

Students Failing the English Reading/Literature and Research SOL test

The students who failed the English Reading/Literature and Research part of the SOL test showed great inconsistency in their programs and performance. The following findings are illustrative of the elements that contributed to their failure.

1. Inconsistency was apparent in instruction (particularly reading instruction from year-to-year).
Goals seemed to be rather randomly set and sometimes not even sequenced. For example, one year the focus of reading instruction might be vocabulary, and the next year might stress phonemic awareness and fluency. The next year might target vocabulary again.
2. There was no continuity in learning and testing accommodations from year-to-year. In fact, it was not uncommon for them to be different each year (or have very little overlap) and not be coordinated with instruction, in-class testing, and SOL testing.
3. The number of years of service for special education teachers did not have a bearing on students failing SOLs. The range of endorsed teaching experience was from 2 to 27 years. In very few cases, students with learning disabilities had the same teacher for two consecutive years. Only one teacher in the study had a provisional endorsement.
4. The number of years receiving special education services tended to have a detrimental impact on the failure rate. In most cases the more years receiving learning disabilities services the more chance of failing the SOLs.
5. Grades were given relative to individual education plan (IEP) goals, but grades were not aligned to SOL tests. Failure resulted when a student with learning disabilities was tested at their

instructional level but oftentimes far below the level of the eighth grade content of the SOL test. This was also reflected in the gap between report card grades and SOL scores. There was a pronounced disconnect in this area.

6. There was too much promotion from grade to grade when, in fact, it was not warranted nor educationally defensible. Students did not seem to be able to catch up. There simply was not enough time. In essence, the issue boiled down to time because it was needed to raise the student with learning disabilities to the level needed to compete successfully during SOL testing. It seemed students with learning disabilities who failed never could close the gap. Moreover, it was found that retention, as well as summer school, did not have any positive effect on the students who failed their eighth grade English Reading/Literature and Research SOL test.
7. Accommodations for students with learning disabilities were all over the map. The whole notion of accommodations seemed to be a process of trial and error, changing from year to year, sometimes without repeat or coincidence. Thus, there was little or no consistency when it came to the issue of accommodations. In a number of cases there did not seem to be a good reason for the accommodations listed on the student's individualized education program (IEP). Therefore, students with learning disabilities lost valuable time and fell behind in instruction. This had a deleterious effect on their SOL performance.
8. Very few students in the study had ancillary services as part of their individual education program (IEP). Only speech and language services were indicated. These services did not seem to have an effect on SOL outcomes.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were driven by the findings of the study. They incorporate the themes and specific findings discussed in the sections above.

1. Students with learning disabilities should be assured of continuity in instructional methodology and focus, accommodations, and modifications in order to promote mastery of SOL content through application of specialized strategies, and recall and application of information. This could be accomplished, in part, through a transition planning process as each student progresses through grade levels annually.
2. Because students with learning disabilities tend to fall behind in reading the farther they proceed through the grades, intensive tutoring/remediation should begin in grade 4 (based on third grade SOL results). Moreover, it seems advisable for IEP committees to consider services in a self-contained setting if students do not pass the third grade Reading SOL.
3. Reading goals/objectives included on IEPs need to focus on proficiency in all five areas of reading – from phonemic awareness to fluency. Students need “learn to read” techniques not just “read to learn techniques.”
4. Yearly evaluation and analysis of educational progress for students with learning disabilities should focus on the correlation of grades in core classes and SOL scores. This also should include evaluation of the appropriateness of the service delivery model for each individual student with learning disabilities.
5. Classroom instruction needs to be focused on SOL objectives, and SOL objectives need to be reflected in IEP goals and objectives. Grade specific objectives need to be taught prior to administration of SOL tests. Successful completion of these objectives should determine grade placement and impact of service delivery model from year to year.
6. Extended learning time needs to be built in for students with learning disabilities so they have a chance to “catch up” in deficit areas. Currently, there does not seem to be enough time to

address areas of needed improvement. If necessary, time needs to be found before or after school, during the summer, or even as a replacement for elective classes.

Discussion

High stakes testing in the form of SOLs provide demanding challenges for students with learning disabilities as well as the school divisions that are charged with educating them. Failure has very harsh consequences. Students with learning disabilities who do not pass the SOLs cannot lay claim to an academic high school diploma. School divisions that have students with learning disabilities failing SOLs are at-risk for bureaucratic sanctions under state and federal mandates because their results are aggregated with non-disabled students. It is in the interest of all to remedy the systemic and structural problems in the delivery of educational services that foster failure in students with learning disabilities.

At this time it simply is not enough to show “compliance” for special education services for students with learning disabilities. With the infusion of the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOLs) and the federal mandates of No Child Left Behind there is greater need for more precise and effective educational planning for students with learning disabilities. That means educational services, more than ever before, need to be aligned according to the specific needs of students with learning disabilities. Therefore, educational delivery systems must put the student first in its planning year after year with a consistent and coherent program that prepares them for accountability tests like the SOLs.

Currently, the majority of students with learning disabilities attend school until their twelfth grade year. Some (and in a number of geographical areas many) drop out for a variety of reasons – the newest reason being the realization that they are destined not to pass the SOL tests that lead to a high school diploma. Modified diplomas and certificates of attendance are perceived in a variety of ways

by students, parents and potential employers, some positive and some negative. Therefore, a possible unintended consequence of SOL failure is a greater demand of students with learning disabilities extending their stay in school beyond their senior year and potentially up to their twenty-second birthday as provided by state and federal law. At this time, it would seem prudent to address the weaknesses uncovered in this study of educating students with learning disabilities. In this era of accountability testing, the middle school years should be viewed as very important. It is a midpoint that allows for both prevention and intervention measures as informed by academic progress and high stakes testing performance.

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