

In Providing Supports for Students,



What's the difference between accommodations and modifications, and why is the distinction important?

Lee Ann Jung

Every teacher faces the challenge of how to support students who fall below grade level. Some of these students qualify for special services on the basis of standardized test results or medical diagnoses. However, many others don't qualify for IEPs—students who have had interrupted formal education, fewer resources or exposure to literacy, are English language learners, and who are behind for undetermined reasons. Whether any of these students qualify for special education is irrelevant to their need for support.

To improve the power of core instruction for all students and to minimize the need for intensive intervention, schools are placing an increased focus on Universal Design for

Learning, co-teaching, and Response to Instruction and Intervention in the general education setting. Students who are behind grade level are not automatically sent for special education evaluation or intervention in a segregated setting as they have been in past years.

Instead, general education teachers are now tasked with differentiating instruction to present content to students at varying levels of functioning. Together with special education teachers, classroom teachers adapt instructional plans for students who need extra support. These adaptations can include changes to the learning environment, presentation of materials, assessment, student assignments, and so on. These changes aim to ensure that all students



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are able to access and engage with the content and processes of the learning environment.

Clarifying the Differences

The adaptations that teachers make to curriculum and assessment can be classified into two categories: *accommodations* and *modifications*. Rarely, though, are educators compelled to define which type of support they use. Even on IEP forms, there is often a global prompt to list the “accommodations/modifications” a student needs. But the difference between these two categories is significant, and use of the correct term has important implications for instruction, intervention, and assessment. As Mark Twain once said, “The difference between the almost-right word and the right word is really a large matter—it’s the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.”

Accommodations

Accommodations are adaptations that provide access to the general curriculum but do not fundamentally alter the learning goal or grade-level standard. These supports “level the playing field” (Freedman, 2005, p. 47). Within the context of assessment, accommodations are supports for a skill that is *different*

from the skill being measured. Take, for example, a driver’s exam. The skill being measured is driving. If a driver doesn’t have 20/20 vision, he or she is allowed an accommodation to wear glasses or contact lenses. Driving is definitely easier when you can see clearly. But it is not easier for that person than it is for anyone else.

The same holds true with a social studies assessment. The purpose of the assessment is to determine a student’s level of mastery on a number of social studies standards. Support of any skill or behavior other than those related to the social studies standards is an accommodation. If a student has significant needs in writing that would affect the quality of a response, a teacher may choose to allow the student to respond orally. If another student struggles with reading, an adult may read the questions aloud. All of these adaptations are accommodations because they support a skill other than the social studies standards being measured and reported.

Modifications

Modifications, in contrast, are changes to curriculum and assessment that fundamentally alter the learning goal or grade-level expectation. Unlike accommodations, which simply level the playing

For accurate grading and reporting, we must clearly understand and communicate the use of modifications.

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field, modifications “change the game” (Freedman, 2005, p. 48). In other words, modifications support the skill that is being measured. If a person wears glasses or contact lenses during an eye exam, this changes what is being measured (his or her vision).

Imagine a math class where students are working on algebraic problems that require them to multiply fractions. One student who needs a great deal of support is learning multiplication with whole numbers. Accordingly, his assessment includes whole-number multiplication and one-step algebra problems requiring addition and subtraction. Although the adapted skill is just as difficult for this student as the grade-level skill is for students who don’t need support, what is being measured—the math skill—has changed. (See Figure 1 for additional examples of both types of support.)

Why Does the Distinction Matter?

When teachers provide accommodations and modifications, they differentiate instruction and assessment to give students the support they need. Why does it matter, then, what the supports are called? In short, our ability to both measure and report progress accurately depends on our knowing which type of support was given.

Accommodations and Measurement Validity

Accommodations play an important role in ensuring that we have measurement validity—that we are actually measuring what we intend to measure. For instance, although driving and vision are distinctly different skills, poor vision does indeed affect driving skills. Because of this relationship, if we did not allow the driver to wear corrective lenses, we wouldn’t have the necessary

information to truly measure that person’s driving skills.

Likewise, if a student fails to perform well because of test anxiety, we can’t say the student didn’t understand the content. Instead, we have to acknowledge that we didn’t validly measure what that student knew. To the greatest extent possible, we must

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remove the anxiety (perhaps by setting up a separate test environment or allowing additional testing time) and get new information about what the student knows.

This same principle applies to all students, not only those who qualify for special education. Disability status is irrelevant. If we have evidence that there’s an external influence on how a student performs on what is being measured, we have a responsibility to reduce that influence. This is not only about being fair—it’s also fundamental to the validity of our measurement.

Modifications and Grading Accuracy

Because modifications change what we measure, we must identify modifications and note them as such to provide an accurate account of what the student knows or is able to do. Without making such a distinction, the result is often “unintended modifications.” That is, we intend to provide support, but we don’t recognize that the modification changed what we measured. As a result, we mistakenly evaluate the work as if it were

grade-level work.

For example, consider a student in a language arts class whose writing skills fall two grade levels below those of her peers. The teacher assigns a persuasive essay to all students and sends this particular student to a learning support class. In this environment, the learning support teacher prompts

the student with leading questions to identify a topic and guides her through the research process. During the writing process, the teacher provides corrections until the student produces a high-quality essay.

All of these supports may be very appropriate for the student to learn the necessary skills for writing a persuasive essay. But unless the rest of the class is given the same kind of support, what the educator ultimately measures in this student’s essay is different from what is measured in other students’ work. If the teacher is measuring students’ ability to independently approach the project, conduct research, and draft and edit the paper, then this student’s modification—working on the tasks with prompts and guidance—carries a different expectation.

Grading the student on the level of work she is able to complete is best practice, but we must note that her grade is based on a modified expectation—both on her report card and on her permanent record or transcript (Jung & Guskey, 2010, 2012). Not

FIGURE 1. Adaptations: Accommodations vs. Modifications


Adaptation	Accommodation	Modification
Extended time	When rate or speed is not the skill being measured Example: Measures of reading comprehension or content-area knowledge	When rate or speed is fundamental to the skill being measured Example: Measures of reading or math fluency
Completing tasks orally	When writing is not the skill being measured and reported Example: Long-form answer on a social studies assessment	Any time writing skills are being measured and reported Example: Research paper in language arts
Fewer questions	As long as all questions measure the same skill and are of comparable difficulty Example: Removing half of the four-digit multiplication problems on a math task	Taking away the harder questions or omitting one of the skills measured Example: Taking away the higher-level analysis essay questions and leaving the recall questions
Prompts and cues	When the prompts and cues support a skill other than the skill being measured and reported Example: A graphic organizer that helps a student plan an essay that will measure knowledge in a history class	Any time the prompts and cues support the skill that is being measured and reported Example: Feedback on a student's use of math operations while the student completes a task designed to assess ability to select the correct operations

making this notation implies the student's performance was measured against grade-level criteria, which is not accurate. For accurate grading and reporting, we must clearly understand and communicate the use of modifications.

Support for All

Any change to the curriculum or assessment is not automatically an accommodation or modification. To classify the change, we have to know the context of what is being measured. Accurate data from assessments is the foundation for making crucial decisions about instruction, intervention, referral, and placement for students

Unlike accommodations that simply level the playing field, modifications change the game.

who need support. Because issues of adaptations and measurement are inseparable, we have to understand and appropriately document the types of support being provided so we can measure with validity, grade with honesty, and help all learners grow and succeed. 

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Lee Ann Jung (jung@ascd.org, www.lajung.com) is an education consultant who supports schools internationally in the areas of inclusion, standards-based grading, and intervention planning and progress monitoring. Follow her on Twitter @leeannjung.