



Partnership for Accessible Reading Assessment

Technical Advisory Committee Meeting

July 28, 2005 – Washington, DC

On-site participants: Jamal Abedi, Lizanne DeStefano, Deborah Dillon, Michael Kamil, Sheryl Lazarus, Linda LeBlanc, Dave Malouf, Scott Paris, Martha Thurlow, Carina Wong

Teleconference participants: Paul Sandifer, Sharon Vaughn, Joanna Williams

Teleconference observer: Ross Moen

Dave began by explaining the background of the competition for research on accessible reading assessment, and announced his transfer from OSEP to the Institute of Education Sciences. Martha continued by introducing PARA, the Partnership for Accessible Reading Assessment, and its collaboration with Designing Accessible Reading Assessments (DARA), housed at ETS, under the collaborative umbrella National Accessible Reading Assessment Projects (NARAP). She explained NARAP's advisory committees, the goals of the project, and the role of PARA's Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) in advising the research and development phase of the project, as well as other aspects of the project's activities.

Sheryl presented PARA's study on state literacy standards, breaking them down into five major themes. The committee questioned PARA's coding, suggesting that states have made serious changes in policy since 2002 when the information was gathered. The new NAEP framework precipitated some of those changes. Members suggested looking for content standards and multimedia/multi-literacy elements.

Sheryl also reported on a series of papers PARA prepared to explore issues related to reading and major disability categories, including learning disabilities, mental retardation, emotional/behavioral disorders, autism, visual impairments, hearing impairments, and speech/language impairments. Martha explained that PARA has struggled with some of the controversies in the field, such as the use of Braille vs. auditory methods for children with visual impairments. The TAC suggested that PARA should explain more thoroughly the methods of the papers, and discussed the difficulty of classification. The TAC suggested the papers should help delineate the implications of dividing students into certain categories, and address major controversies in the field, but should not attempt to resolve them.

Next, Sheryl talked about PARA's work on state accommodations policies, and briefly touched on some of the major issues regarding read aloud accommodations. The TAC discussed how states decide whether questions, directions, and/or passages should be read aloud, and under what circumstances. States have widely divergent policies on this and other accommodations, and often are not clear on exactly how read aloud accommodations should be used. Validity studies are lacking, and research on

accommodations has been inconclusive, so states are able to do very little analysis as they create their policies.

The sign interpret questions accommodation also presents unique challenges, and states have divergent policies on this accommodation as well. The committee debated whether this accommodation should be likened to a second language translating issue, or if it could also be interpreted as analogous to the read aloud accommodation, since deaf/hard of hearing students are able to read print on the page.

BREAK

Deborah Dillon presented the work of NARAP's Definition Panel in crafting three draft definitions of reading, the final version of which will serve as the foundation for the projects' research and development. NARAP has been holding focus groups with experts and stakeholders to get feedback on the definitions before it moves forward with the final revisions. Next, NARAP staff will draft a set of reading proficiency statements for grades 4 and 8, as well as a synthesis document explaining the research and decision making behind the definition, for the Definition Panel to review in September. NARAP will also present PARA's papers on reading and disabilities to the Panel, to help them think broadly about accessibility and disability.

Lizanne asked about a statement in the RFP that said "individual, interpretive, and diagnostic reports." The wording in the RFP may lead to the expectation that decoding, understanding, and any other element in the definition needs to be measurable. Michael added that the idea of purposes, for instance, couldn't be measured on an assessment. Dave clarified that it was language from No Child Left Behind – "diagnosis" as in information to help the students achieve the standards, or information about why the student isn't reaching the proficiency standard. Lizanne suggested that the word diagnosis should not be bolded in presentation materials to avoid confusion.

The TAC discussed the benefits of a one sentence definition, as opposed to the current longer definitions. On the one hand, a shorter definition could narrow people's thinking too much. On the other hand, with a one sentence definition, people must read the commentary before they can act on it. As with the NAEP definition, the commentary can go into the issues and implications of the definition very deeply, guiding implementation. The TAC agreed that a long definition that lists some specific exceptions or accommodations runs the risk of leaving out other important items. A shorter definition can rely on a long, detailed explanation to spell out specific options and implications for students with disabilities. The committee agreed that a shorter definition was preferable.

The TAC also discussed the relative importance of decoding in the definition of reading. Decoding is a vital part of most people's understanding of the reading process, and needs to be assessed, but the definition should also emphasize higher level skills. Even "understanding" does not get at the high level skills proficient readers develop.

LUNCH

Jamal Abedi walked the TAC through PARA's research plans (see PowerPoint slides). The TAC offered practical advice, including using teacher ratings to see whether the new tests improve performance, and adding special education directors to the list of people to interview regarding feasibility. One member suggested that it is sometimes a good idea for students with disabilities to act as their own controls. For the instructional sensitivity study, the TAC suggested, in addition to regular classrooms, looking at pull-out programs, tutoring, and earlier grades to see where students receive instruction on reading assessment and accommodations.

Dave reminded the TAC that accessibility on assessments means more than accommodations. He urged the committee to think broadly about what access might mean for students with disabilities on reading tests, beyond accommodations.

For the qualitative review of existing test booklets, the TAC suggested doing think-alouds with students with disabilities. The TAC also suggested looking at different kinds of assessments, including portfolios, alternate assessments, and individually administered instruments, to see what elements of tests make them accessible. One member also suggested adding graphs and graphics to see what might be troublesome for some students.

For research sites, the TAC recommended picking some high quality classrooms to see how those settings create access and excellence for students. The committee suggested a number of specialized schools for students with particular disabilities. Sheryl commented that instruction looks much different in a mainstream setting than in a specialized classroom, and suggested that an inclusive setting would have important information to offer. Carina warned that states might balk at a test developed based on information from elite specialized schools, leading them to claim that scarce resources limit what is possible for them. The group agreed that the sample doesn't have to be large, but must be well chosen.

BREAK

Martha talked about assessment options and considerations, including design, administration, and scoring considerations. The TAC felt that technology has a lot to offer for designing tests that are accessible for all students, and that are able to provide better information about students' skills. On a computer selective or adaptive test, the computer could do font size adjustment, text to speech, supported reading, and repeated questions. Lizanne suggested that such a program could first get a pure measure of decoding, and then proceed with needed supports. Scott added that students with disabilities who struggle with decoding might do well on comprehension questions with decoding supports - if comprehension doesn't increase with decoding supports, then the student also has a comprehension problem. Michael suggested the IRT model, with conditionalized scores, and added that costs of computerized tests would be much lower than for paper and pencil testing.

A computer program could allow students who struggle with decoding first to take a pure decoding assessment, and then proceed with needed decoding supports to access higher level comprehension questions. This would give students with disabilities access to questions that test higher level skills. Michael suggested an IRT model with conditionalized scores. The costs of a computerized test would also be lower than for pencil and paper tests.

Carina cautioned that policy issues are complex for states, especially with NCLB, as tests have become customized for states. Paul agreed that states generally already have a program in place, and making a transition would require extensive equivalence studies, including in terms of AYP. Carina suggested developing a set of guidelines for a state director to use to figure out how to create items across the states. She suggested creating an “item bank,” allowing states to buy individual items, with specifications of the kinds of items available. Lizanne added that tests could also be modularized in a way so that states could use parts of them – i.e. a “testlet bank.” Paul added that tests have to comply with the state procurement code, which requires an RFP. One way to work around that is to work off organizations in which states are already members, such as the Southern Region Education Board.

For accommodations and scoring issues, the group agreed that guidelines for states on issues such as read aloud accommodations would be very helpful. Martha suggested doing a research study that looked at validity and accommodations to come to some defensible conclusions. The group thought that would be very important.

Martha thanked the committee for the good discussion, and the meeting was adjourned.



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