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# From the Inside Out:

## A Look at Testing Special Education Students

**Ms. Meek invites us into her classroom to watch what happens when Dominic, one of her students with learning disabilities, has to take the same high-stakes test as his regular education peers. She wishes that everyone setting today's testing policies or asserting that they are good for the Dominics of the world could witness such a scene.**

**BY CLAUDIA MEEK**

**I**N RECENT years No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has focused the educational lens on testing children rather than on teaching them. Much to the dismay of many educators and parents, the burden of this yearly ritual falls most heavily on learning disabled students, who are often tested inappropriately.<sup>1</sup> And a clear picture of what these special-needs students experience when taking a high-stakes test is, and should be, troubling. In this article, I wish to present such a picture. Here is an inside look at the first day of the California Standards Test in 2005.

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*Susan, the assistant teacher in our elementary school resource program, and I fan out to collect the children from their various classrooms. We know full well that they will not be rushing into the resource room on their own during testing week. Our school has blended special education students with other children who require similar testing accommodations. After much encouragement and, yes, downright bribery in the form of a pizza party for perfect atten-*

*dance, seven of the eight students scheduled in our first group are rounded up and herded back to the resource room. The arrangement is a little tricky, as our space is small and several students who are not familiar to the rest of the group are joining us. We know special education children sometimes have a more difficult time with transitions and changes.*

*But where is Dominic? Dominic is a volatile child who has most of a full deck of cards stacked solidly against him at this point in his life. He has a medical diagnosis of ADHD compounded by a low-average cognitive ability, according to several formal measures and classroom data. A third-grader who has attended eight schools in the four difficult years of his brief academic career, Dominic is still receptive to the materials and lessons being presented to him both in the classroom and in his resource reading period. His short-term memory often fails him, and his delicate ego collapses easily. Multiple school-related frustrations are obvious. In spite of these many hurdles, we feel he is starting to "lift off" academically.*

*The phone rings. "Dominic is in my office," says Nurse Kathy, "but he looks fine to me."*

*I go to collect him.*

*"I can't do it," he says. These are the first words out of*

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his mouth as I enter the nurse's pristine office. "I'm tired. It's all we do in class. Test. Test. Test."

"I know, Dominic. But I want you to at least try. Come with me. We'll take lots of breaks."

Dominic's look is one of resignation, that lively spirit temporarily tucked away. A split second later, he kicks the wastebasket as we leave the room, not hard, but with emotion. I ask him to straighten the wastebasket, which he does without protest. I know he is entering the testing "window"

long morning for all of us.

I let him relax for a couple of minutes, then quietly approach him. "If you can work another few minutes, Dominic, I will take you out for a break. Do you want me to sit by you?" I glance at his test, a 15-page reading section that includes eight long selections on such topics as a mythological creature from a foreign country's folklore or how to build a canoe. Other sections deal with computer searches and how to play an elaborate Native American game.<sup>2</sup> Domi-

**Some master reading; some do not. Those who don't must wrestle each and every word to the ground, each and every day. Like little gladiators they struggle and sweat to extract meaning, morpheme by morpheme. For them, time is the enemy, and the high-stakes test is the Grand Inquisitor.**

(as it is affectionately called) already burned out after days of test preparation. The nurse and I share a knowing look. We both know this little guy needs to blow off steam, not sit at a testing table for four hours.

Dominic takes his seat next to David, an autistic third-grader on a 504 plan. David is high functioning and tested at or nearly at grade level last year. His general education teacher is collaborating with his previous teachers to design an amazingly effective set of classroom accommodations for him.

I nix this seating arrangement and put David in an area where he is less likely to be distracted, because distracting other students is exactly what Dominic could excel at this morning. Around them sit a cast of characters as different as the patrons of the bar on Tatooine in the first Star Wars movie, though infinitely more attractive and lovable. One little boy, Blake, suffered a traumatic brain injury. Another girl experienced a swimming accident that caused substantial loss of brain function. Several are dyslexic or are diagnosed with ADHD. They share more than childhood and what they probably perceive as somewhat wacky resource teachers; they all confront extreme challenges in decoding the written word, especially under time pressure.

Test instructions are read, and we begin. Dominic, sitting by my computer, dives in optimistically. His optimism lasts 10 minutes, a concession to our previous pleas for testing cooperation. After that short time, he quietly places his head on the desk, with a sigh that is truly heartbreaking. He has answered two questions out of 50. It's going to be a long,

nic can have extra time if he needs it, according to his IEP (individualized education plan). That he needs extra time is obvious. The tricky part will be getting him to see success as a possibility and thus fully engage his testing task.

"I don't feel so good," says Dominic. "I told Nurse Kathy that."

"I think you don't feel good about the test, Dominic."

"I'm going to barf."

Dominic and Blake are immediately released to go to the restroom. This is one call I just hate to be wrong about.

"He did it!" exclaims Blake upon return, like someone who has finished digging a tunnel out of a jail.

"You gotta send me home," says Dominic, in his most respectful voice.

Checkmate.

"You're right, Dom. I have to send you home."

I feel a certain admiration for those who make the break, even if in my heart I know I shouldn't. The other students watch with obvious envy as Dominic leaves, even though both students and staff know that there is no real escape. Dominic will be scheduled for makeup tests next week.

## STUDENTS WITH MILD TO MODERATE DISABILITIES

Students with mild to moderate disabilities, like Dominic, deserve a closer look when the question of one-size-fits-all testing policies is raised. The caseload for a resource teacher in California is 28 pupils, and they are as diverse as any other classroom full of kids: tall, short, happy, morose,

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light- and dark-skinned, and every hue in between.

Some of the children are capable of high cognitive functioning; others are not. Math is often among their strengths. Most can be taught to read using direct phonetic instruction, supplemented by multimodality reinforcement. Some go on to master reading; some do not. Those who don't must wrestle each and every word to the ground, each and every day. Like little gladiators they struggle and sweat to extract meaning, morpheme by morpheme. For them, time is the enemy, and the high-stakes test is the Grand Inquisitor. These children are different from those in general education, sometimes in more than one way. That's why the term *special education* is so apt. Though this diversity does not warrant exclusion from exposure to mainstream curricula and high expectations and in no way excuses these children from making strong, measurable academic progress, we do need to sample and document their progress in a more humane and valid way.

In any given year, some of these learning-delayed students will meet grade-level competencies and be moved from the special education program. However, statistics gleaned from a number of states over time reveal that less than one-third of learning-disabled students can be expected to pass high school competency exams.<sup>3</sup> Among this same group are learners who make good-to-adequate progress but are not at grade level. They have mild disabilities, but many have strong areas on which success can be built, such as math, art, drama, music, or athletics. Clever teachers and caring parents work together during the IEP process to help these children move toward specifically tailored goals. With multi-layered home and school support, some of this group may be able to meet — or come close to meeting — grade-level standards.

Then there is the group of students (perhaps the lowest third) whose disabilities, though in the moderate range, are more severe than those described above. These students — dare I even say it? — will in all probability never come close to meeting the stringent standards on which NCLB exams are based. Yet they are not so profoundly developmentally delayed that they qualify to take alternative assessments like the California Alternate Proficiency Assessment, which was limited to no more than 1% of the testing population in 2005.<sup>4</sup>

On 7 April 2005, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings proposed that an additional 2% of disabled children be excluded from the calculation of general education proficiency, although there was some confusion about how many states might qualify for this plan.<sup>5</sup> However, more than 3% of our learning-disabled children should be considered for an alternative approach to testing. The current

NCLB exams are simply too densely written, too long in duration, and too difficult in terms of readability and required level of conceptual understanding to warrant their indiscriminate administration, even with such common accommodations as extra time and extra breaks.

Consider children afflicted with ADHD, for example. Inactivity is agony for them. Not surprisingly, parents grow alarmed at the approach of the tests and do not wish their children to become victims of an unyielding testing system that takes hours to complete.<sup>6</sup> Many special education teachers and administrators agree that the experience can be damaging to children's self-concept and motivation to succeed.<sup>7</sup>

### DENSITY, DIFFICULTY, AND DURATION

If we believe our testing policy should strive to give a fair measure of the children taking the test, especially those with learning disabilities, then both sides of the testing equation need to be examined. We've looked at some of the children and their characteristics. Now, let's look at some characteristics of the test. We can't actually examine the forms or the items because, in California, teachers are asked to sign documents before administering the test promising not to reproduce any of the content. This has an unfortunate impact on public awareness, because parents and the general public would be astounded by the physical appearance of the exam given to elementary school children.

The sheer density of words tightly packed onto the pages, relieved only by the occasional graph or diagram requiring interpretation, is overwhelming to a child who struggles with each and every syllable. Amazingly, a recent application of the Flesch Reading Ease Scale and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade-Level Scale to the 2004-05 high-stakes test used in California rated 50% of the passages as exceeding normal grade-

level reading norms by one year or more. Nearly 20% more were more than two years above grade level. And some passages surpassed grade level by three years or more.<sup>8</sup>

Also affecting test difficulty are the depth and breadth of many of the questions. Some researchers have argued that even the lowest levels of numerous performance standards exceed the highest possible levels of achievement for disabled students.<sup>9</sup> If these children cannot engage the exam materials, the data provided by the scores provide no meaningful information about academic progress.

ing has a positive impact on special education students.<sup>10</sup> Other studies point to negative outcomes associated with high-stakes testing.<sup>11</sup>

As an aside, it would be interesting to know what percentage of the researchers studying high-stakes testing have ever administered such exams to special education children. Gathering data, surveying adults, and writing about the results are nothing like watching a learning-disabled child confront a test. Writers try to be precise about testing data, but they often fail to address a more central ques-

**As adults, we would feel uncomfortable if asked to sit, hour after hour, and complete a task that, even with our very best efforts, we were physiologically unable to perform. And, of course, we must question the quality of the data gathered from such an approach.**

Last, the duration, or the time it takes to complete the test, is outside the bounds of what we should expect of a special-needs child. In 2004-05, third-graders in California were allotted approximately nine hours to complete the exam. Although the test is given on a number of days and accommodations often include both extra time and extra breaks, the total time children in California are being tested is almost twice as long as the time needed to complete the Graduate Record Exam.

Frequently, during prolonged testing, mild to moderately disabled students — even after the best instruction, coaching, appropriate accommodations, and genuine effort on their part — simply give up and mark answers at random. Some are able to maintain focus for a time and with more frequent breaks, but even they lose heart long before the testing time has formally ended. What effect might this have, in both the long and short term, on these children's spirit and on their attitude toward learning? As adults, we would feel uncomfortable if asked to sit, hour after hour, and complete a task that, even with our very best efforts, we were physiologically unable to perform. And, of course, we must question the quality of the data gathered from such an approach.

Much to our good fortune, there is an abundance of research on the consequences of high-stakes testing of special education children. However, the "research apples" seem to be falling in all different directions from the educational tree. Some data support the view that NCLB test-

tion: What is good for children, both academically and experientially?

### **RETHINKING THE SIZE OF THE TESTING BOX**

Criticizing the current testing policy is easy. Proposing solutions in the real world of politics, personality, and underfunding is much more difficult. Without completely discarding current exams, there are modifications that would inject much-needed flexibility into the system and would help mitigate the density, difficulty, and duration typical of the current batch of tests. In general, the use of accommodations during testing to buffer the effects of students' disabilities is increasing.<sup>12</sup> Excellent. But we still need to make the test itself more accommodating.

Using the IEP team to make final decisions on an individual basis, we should consider the following:

- Out-of-grade-level testing should be allowed. Going several grade levels below a student's chronological age may be necessary to ensure that he or she can engage the test. Staying as close to grade level as possible should certainly be the goal, but allowing this flexibility would mitigate both the difficulty and density of the test. Professionals actually working with special education students overwhelmingly favor making this option available.<sup>13</sup>
- Partial testing within a given section is another way to modify the current exams. For example, a painfully slow reader might complete three or four of nine required read-

ing selections. This option would decrease the duration of the test and still give students an opportunity to both decode and encode, albeit at a much slower rate. Some learning-disabled students can understand the concepts being covered, but not within the time allowed for a general education student.

- Finally, the testing could focus on particular subject areas. Some learning-disabled students, for example, are capable of earning a decent score in math, but not in language arts, or vice versa. So a student might be given the state standards test only within the math sections. In this case, individual reading progress would be assessed by other means.

I realize that these suggestions will create statistical challenges, but they will also improve the chances that the data we collect are actually a measure of a student's abilities. That means we could appropriately use the results to make educational decisions, but not to compare learning-disabled students to the general population of test-takers. More important, each of the modifications I've suggested makes the testing experience itself a more reasonable challenge for many mild to moderately disabled students.

In the end, we need to step back and refocus on the entire landscape of testing. Even with a more individually appropriate testing scenario, the vast majority of students (well over 90% of the total school population and including some special education students) could continue to be tested without using alternative assessments.<sup>14</sup>

Although some learning-disabled children can and will meet the academic targets set for their nondisabled peers, stating that all students with disabilities can meet those same expectations implies that they are the same as their nondisabled peers. They are not. They are equal, but they are not the same. To demand academic proficiency of our entire population of disabled students becomes an inadvertent cruelty. Measuring achievement need not mean that all students must be tested in exactly the same way. Such policies have been developed without giving due consideration either to the emotional impact of the process or to the lack of validity of the results. Reason, reality, and compassion compel us to offer alternatives.

1. Christine Samuels, "Special Education Test Flexibility Detailed," *Education Week*, 18 May 2005, p. 11.

2. I have created comparable test topics rather than using actual items to preserve the integrity of the California exams. The names of all students have also been altered.

3. Sharon H. Defur, "Education Reform, High-Stakes Assessment, and Students with Disabilities," *Remedial and Special Education*, July/August 2002, p. 209; and Martha Thurlow et al., *Annual Performance Reports: 2002-2003: State Assessment Data* (Minneapolis: National Center on Educational Outcomes, University of Minnesota, June 2005), Appendix B.

4. Samuels, op. cit.

5. Sam Dillon, "Facing State Protests, U.S. Offers More Flexibility on School Rules," *New York Times*, 8 April 2005, p. A-12; and Michelle Davis and David J. Hoff, "Questions Linger Over NCLB Policy Shifts: States Uncertain About Impact of Federal Plans," *Education Week*, 20 April 2005, pp. 21-22.

6. Catherine Ross Hamel and Fred L. Hamel, "State-Mandated Testing: Why We Opt Out," *Education Week*, 12 March 2003; and Rachel Gottlieb, "A Is for Anxiety: Parents Are Becoming Increasingly Concerned About the Effect of High-Stakes Testing," *Hartford Courant*, 30 September 2002, p. A-1.

7. Defur, p. 209.

8. Gregg Nelsen and DeWayne Mason, "State Exams Flunk the Readability Test," *Riverside Press Enterprise*, 1 May 2005, p. D-4.

9. See Defur, op. cit.; and Lorraine M. McDonnell, Margaret J. McLaughlin, and Patricia Morison, *Educating One and All: Students with Disabilities and Standards-Based Reform* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1997).

10. Defur, p. 209.

11. James Ysseldkye et al., "What We Know and Need to Know About the Consequences of High-Stakes Testing for Students with Disabilities," *Exceptional Children*, Fall 2004, pp. 1-22.

12. Sandra Cimbricz, "State-Mandated Testing and Teachers' Beliefs and Practice," *Educational Policy Analysis Archives*, 9 January 2002, available at <http://epaa.asu.edu>; Walt Haney, "The Myth of the Texas Miracle in Education," *Educational Policy Analysis Archives*, 19 August 2000; and A. T. Clapper et al., *2003 State Policies on Assessment Participation and Accommodations for Students with Disabilities* (Minneapolis: National Center on Educational Outcomes, University of Minnesota, Synthesis Report 56, June 2005).

13. Sandra Thompson, Amanda Blount, and Martha Thurlow, *A Summary of Research on the Effects of Test Accommodations: 1999 through 2001* (Minneapolis: National Center on Educational Outcomes, University of Minnesota, Technical Report 34, December 2002); and Jane Minnema and Martha Thurlow, *Reporting Out-of-Level Test Scores: Are These Students Included in Accountability Programs?* (Minneapolis: National Center on Educational Outcomes, University of Minnesota, Out-of-Level Testing Report 10, October 2003), Table 16.

14. *Pocketbook of Special Education Statistics, 2002/2003* (Sacramento: California Department of Education, 2005). **K**

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