

Secondary special education teachers' experience with accessibility supports and accommodations before and during COVID-19

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Abstract

While it is recognised that the numbers of students needing accessibility supports and accommodations are increasing exponentially, research on accommodations during the COVID-19 pandemic is still sparse. The purpose of the current study was to explore special education teachers' accommodation practices at secondary schools before and during the unprecedented time of COVID-19. To better understand the experiences of participating teachers, we engaged seven teachers from a prairie province in Canada with one-on-one online semi-structured interviews. Teachers who offered accommodations to students before COVID-19 used a range of accommodations such as general technologies and assistive technology that fall into major categories of accommodations as defined by research. Evidence from this study indicates that some teachers delivered learning packages to homes or taught online classes during school closures, while some teachers did not. Teachers who taught remotely changed some of their accommodation practices during the school closures because in-person classes were switched to online learning. The implications for professional development are also discussed in this paper.

Keywords: *secondary school; special educational needs; teaching practice*

Introduction

People around the world have been suffering from the devastating crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic for more than 1 year. The ongoing pandemic crisis is on a massive scale and affects every single individual on the earth, including children who are most vulnerable among the populations. Schools were closed at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-March 2020 in Canada, and students had to stay home and receive remote education. There have been heated debates on school reopenings in the fall of 2020 across provinces in Canada.

Among children at school, those with diverse special learning needs have drawn stakeholders' attention. Students with individualised education plans (IEPs) may require varied support services such as individualised instruction and interventions, assessment, specialised therapies and equipment. However, due to the ongoing pandemic, such support services may have been reduced, modified or even removed in the virtual learning environments. These students may struggle with transition into remote learning and then struggle when transitioning back to school. Further, it is recommended that offering appropriate accommodations and accessibility supports (hereafter referred to as accommodations) (e.g. assistive technology, computer, extra time) to students with special needs can help these students demonstrate their knowledge and skills, increase their participation rates and ensure test validity and fairness for all students (e.g. Bolt & Thurlow, 2007; Fuchs, Fuchs, Eaton, Hamlett, Binkley, & Crouch, 2000; Lindstrom & Gregg, 2007). Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the Accessibility Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education Standards Development Committee, Planning for Emergencies and Safety Working Group suggested that it is important to assess a student's accessibility and accommodation needs in the remote learning mode, as well as to make data-driven decisions to ensure that learning activities still occurred during these difficult times. As research on how special education teachers accommodate students during the unprecedented time of COVID-19 is still sparse, it is important to explore special education teachers' use of accommodations in the present study to narrow the gap in research. The present study focuses on special education teachers' practices of accommodation amid the COVID-19 pandemic. It is worth noting that the current study was undertaken to understand teachers' accommodation practices, instead of just comparing practice changes before and during the school closures.

1. Literature Review

1.1 What are Accommodations?

According to the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (American Educational Research Association et al., 1999), test accommodations are defined as 'any action taken in response to a determination that an individual's disability requires a departure from established testing protocol' (p. 101). In its latest version published in 2014, the *Standards* suggests, 'accommodation is used to denote changes with which the comparability of scores is retained, and the term *modification* is used to denote changes that affect the construct measured by the test' (p. 58). It further adds, 'With a modification, the changes affect the construct being measured and consequently lead to scores that differ in meaning from those from the original test' (p. 58). In other words, the term 'accommodation' is limited to changes in test administration conditions that are intended to support students with special needs in demonstrating their knowledge and skills, but do not change what the test is intended to measure. The changes do not inflate the test results or simply help student score higher or give unfair advantages/disadvantages to examinees. In contrast, changes that do affect what a test measures are sometimes referred to as modifications.

1.2 Accommodation Practices

Earlier work on special education teachers' accommodation decisions and practices calls for paying attention to the importance of improving the quality of accommodations offered to the students with special needs. For instance, Fuchs et al. recommend the use of data to make reliable and objective decisions on accommodations for students with learning disabilities for math and reading, because teachers were not able to reliably judge – without data – the effectiveness of accommodations offered to students (Fuchs, Fuchs, Eaton, Hamlett, Binkley, & Crouch, 2000; Fuchs, Fuchs, Eaton, Hamlett, & Karns, 2000). In addition, teachers were found to overaccommodate their students in the studies. Another group of researchers also found that special education teachers' accommodation practices were not in line with a child's accommodations in the IEP and academic performances (Ketterlin-Geller et al., 2007). There are similarities among these studies: the idea that teachers can benefit from teacher training and professional development on instructional and assessment accommodations. For example, DeStephano et al. (2001) offer an intervention to teachers and school administrators to assist them in making decisions on student participation in a statewide assessment and accommodation for students with special needs. Before training, there was a wide variation of accommodation practices among school districts with respect to who made the decisions and the range of accommodations. Teachers either offered a large number of accommodations or no accommodations to students; all students received the same package of accommodations. Teachers' accommodations also tackled both target and access skills. In addition, instructional accommodations linked loosely with assessment accommodations. After training, teachers were much more confident in making decisions on students' assessment participation and accommodations than they were before. Teachers were less likely to accommodate target skills (e.g. read aloud a reading test to a student or dictate a student's responses in a writing test) and assign the same set of accommodations to all students.

Previous research highlights the need for a further investigation of special education teachers' practices of accommodations. The current study seeks to explore how secondary special education teachers implemented accommodations before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this paper, we have also reflected on what we learned from teachers' experiences and have made use of our findings to bridge the accommodation theory and practices.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

Through the contact of the university, we recruited seven secondary special education teachers in a prairie province in Canada to participate in one-on-one confidential interviews through an online meeting platform, Zoom, between January and March of 2021. These online interviews lasted between 50 min and 1 h and 20 min. They were asked a set of semi-structured questions that address our research objectives. The online interviews were conducted in a private room that was not accessible by individuals outside of the research team during the interview. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and kept strictly confidential. All data were identified only by pseudonyms in any transcription.

2.2 Context of the Study

We also collected demographic data on teachers' characteristics and backgrounds, including years and grade levels taught, the highest level of education, school type and size and the number of students with special needs served (see Table 1). Special education teachers in the province (known as student services teachers, student support teachers, learning assistance teachers or learning resource teachers in different school divisions) work with students on IEPs (known as IIPs or eIIPs [inclusion and intervention plans]). Some school divisions may provide student support plans (SSPs) to tier-two

students using a tiered approach (e.g. responsiveness to intervention). Special education programmes in the province are situated within the framework of inclusive education, and therefore, students with special needs may be educated in the general classroom with their counterparts without special needs. Schools across the province closed in mid-March after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The provincewide policy mandated that remote learning was optional and teachers were not required to assess a given student's learning progress towards learning goals between mid-March and June of 2020. Most of the schools reopened in September of 2020. In mid- or late-September 2020, students were offered choices to physically attend school or continue to learn from home. Some school divisions closed schools 1 week before and after the Christmas holidays.

Table 1. Participating secondary teachers' characteristics and backgrounds.

Pseudoname	Years taught	The highest level of education	School type	School size	Number of students with special needs each teacher served*
Grace	9	Master's	Urban	301–600 students	10–20
Abigail	7	Master's	Rural or remote	1–300 students	35
Catalina	9	Master's	Urban	601–900 students	16
Liliana	26	Bachelor's	Urban	301–600 students	23
Charlotte	16	Master's	Urban	More than 1200 students	24 plus six online students
Isabelle	9.5	Master's	Urban	1–300 students	10
Natalie	15	Master's	Rural or remote	301–600 students	15

*Note: The number of students with special needs each teacher served in the 2020–2021 school year.

2.3 Data Analysis

Upon completion of the data collection, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify themes in the responses. A thematic analysis is a commonly used inductive approach for analysing and synthesising the data, as well as describing and identifying the observable patterns in rich detail (Guest et al., 2011). I followed the six phrases suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Rennie (2012) to conduct the thematic analysis of the interview data. I read and recoded the data systematically and iteratively to obtain five main themes throughout the six phrases of thematic analysis. I reviewed the identified themes to make sure they faithfully reflected parts and the entire set of data. This approach allows me to synthesise robust descriptions that authentically portrayed participating teachers' experiences in rich detail (Cho & Trent, 2006; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Through the lens of readers who read the rich descriptions, the authenticity, trustworthiness or validity of interpretations, and inferences drawn from the data can be established.

3. Results

3.1 Teachers' Use of Accommodations Before and Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

Among the seven participating teachers, five frequently commented that they have been accommodating students by meeting their special needs. For example, Isabelle, who taught music classes, repeatedly stated that she had been 'always willing to meet where students are' throughout the interview by saying the following: 'I accommodate everything on a daily basis'; 'adaptation goes like everything I do is adaptation'; 'I give everyone adaptations'. In addition, Lauren added, 'Because some of the classrooms are quite large with sometimes 30 students, ¼ there's a focus to make sure that the needs of those students and intensive needs are being met'. The evidence shows that the majority of teachers were committed to special education and inclusion. The following findings present five major themes that emerged from the teachers' interviews.

3.2 Technologies and Assistive Technologies

Three teachers shared their use of general technologies in the classroom before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic; these included iPad, computers/laptops, Smartboard and Switch. In addition, they often purchased and utilised assistive technologies such as a reader, visual calendars, Google, Google Speak, Google Translate, Scribe and alternative and augmentative communication systems (Indi, Board Maker). Teachers who made use of technologies or assistive technology held positive beliefs and attitudes towards the technologies. Teacher Grace stated, 'One of our kind of broad accommodations is we always look for assistive technology ... whether that be as simple as the use of a computer available to them at all times. Whether that be iPads, speak aids ... any of that assistive technology piece is a big accommodation

we put in place'. Teacher Catalina, added, '[W]e have access to technology in a Smartboard. We have classroom laptops, a small set, only five – which isn't enough for a whole class. But it does make a big difference in terms of I can split them and have two different groups working on different things'.

3.3 Remote Teaching

A majority of teachers reported that they sent out learning packages to students staying at home and receiving remote teaching, although online learning varied tremendously among school divisions. More specifically, two teachers did not send paper-and-pencil packages to students' homes, while five teachers photocopied learning materials and created packages for their students with special needs, which were delivered by school staff or dropped at doorways by teachers approximately once a week. In addition, among the seven participating teachers, three teachers did not teach any online classes during school closures from mid-March to early or mid-June of 2020. Remote learning was optional for students across the board in the province during school closures. For those teachers who taught online classes, they utilised different teaching platforms such as Google Classroom, Seesaw and/or Moodle, and met with their students with special needs through Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams or Flipgrid. Charlotte stated, 'I told the kids that if they can call me or set up a Google Meet. I really preferred doing the Google Meet or Zoom or Teams, whatever it was, just so I could see their face and their expressions and get to know students better. It's good for those who are struggling with communication'.

3.4 Braille and Large Print

One teacher shared that her students use Braille or large print in the visual impairment programmes. The teacher, Isabelle, noted, 'There's a couple who have ended up having Braille, so we have ended up having Braille notations. They had someone who had done tons of courses on it and took all of the music and actually wrote it out for Braille'.

3.5 Setting Accommodation

One teacher commented that they provided their students with seating accommodation. Teacher Grace said, '[W]e put in place accommodations daily for any physical limitations.... I work with students who have, say cerebral palsy as an example, so they need accommodations for their physical barriers whether that be specific seating, a different lay out of the classroom, access to different tools, equipment for them, that's an accommodation we use daily'.

3.6 Grouping and Class Scheduling

Three teachers reported that they used scheduling or grouping accommodation for class activities or special education services before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Regarding the practices before the outbreak of COVID-19, Catalina stated, '[W]e have an increased budget or a specifically designated classroom budget that we can spend on resources and supplies, and food.... We have designated time for life skills activities like cooking, we get designated time in a cooking lab.... We had designated time and supports for going out to work education including job coaches from downtown'. Charlotte commented, '[W]hat I do is, the scheduling is done so that I focus on the different skill levels that we're working on.... what are their IIP goals.... I have three classrooms is what I have.... one classroom is an academic classroom, the other classroom.... I have a kitchen in there, I have a sensory room, I have like a living room setting.... I can teach those social skills in there ... and then we have our physical therapy, occupational therapy, and personal care space which has any kind of equipment that we need in there'.

During the school closures, three teachers indicated that educational assistants (EAs) held one-on-one online sessions for students with special needs. Natalie indicated, 'My educational assistants would Zoom one-on-one with the high needs students and read an epic book and talk and play a game'. Similarly, Kaylee also said, 'The EA would set up time to work with that student individually ... we would try to have it where the students had a book and the EA had the same book ... they could read together and support each other that way'.

4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to further investigate how special education teachers accommodated their students with special needs before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. A substantial number of accommodation studies have been conducted using large-scale assessment data (e.g. Bolt & Thurlow, 2007; Bolt & Yesseldyke, 2006; Cook et al., 2010). While this approach has proven to be effective, it is nonetheless unclear precisely how teachers accommodate their students in the classroom, because accommodation decisions are made at the local level (Lin & Lin, 2015a). Findings of the current study help us better understand teachers' accommodation practices on a regular basis and at the unprecedented times and interpret the results generated from large-scale assessments.

Accommodations are often classified into four or five major categories. Four major categories of accommodations are allowed for writing statewide assessments in the USA (Bolt et al., 2004; Cawthon et al., 2012; Gregg, 2012; National Research Council, 2004). Fuchs et al. (2005) listed four common types of accommodations, including setting, timing, presentation or response modality and technological supports. The flagship institute, National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO), suggests five major categories: (1) setting, (2) timing or scheduling, (3) presentation, (4) response and (5) equipment and materials' accommodations (Christensen et al., 2011, 2008; Thurlow et al., 2005, 2010). In the present study, participating teachers shared their use of accommodations (student grouping, class scheduling, setting, large print, Braille, assistive technologies and general technologies). Results suggest that accommodations used by teachers generally fall into most of the major categories, including setting, scheduling, presentation or response, equipment and materials' accommodations.

Participating teachers reported that they used a variety of general technologies (iPads, Google, visual calendar, etc.) and assistive technologies such as Indi, Board Maker in the classroom setting. These results are in accordance with our earlier investigations. Among different types of accommodations, previous studies reported that assistive technology and computers, along with other types of accommodations, are two of the most used accommodations for students with special needs in Canada (Lin, 2010). Most jurisdictions in Canada permit test takers to use a computer, word processor or assistive device and technology to write the provincial large-scale assessments, although the accommodations may be subject specific and the policies vary from province to province. Furthermore, we examined 574 bundled accommodation packages that were offered to Grade 10 examinees with learning disabilities in Ontario (Lin & Lin, 2015b). In this study, we found that assistive technology and computers were frequently used by this student population. Teachers' use of technologies and assistive technology in the present study were consistent with our earlier findings taken from large-scale student performance data.

It is worth noting that a noticeable number of participating teachers did not send home paper-and-pencil learning materials, nor did they teach online classes during school closures last year. The provincial government announced an indefinite suspension of classes in all provincial schools and made remote education supplementary and optional for students in the province in mid-March 2020. It is questionable how well students' special learning needs were being addressed during the school closure if they chose not to receive remote learning for any reason. Teachers and students had to make the switch to remote teaching in as little as a few days when schools closed. It is not hard to imagine that teachers scrambled to be ready to work with students and families remotely, and thus, teachers' needs for professional development for remote teaching are well recognised and discussed, especially for the emergency online teaching amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Christensen & Alexander, 2020; Hartshorne et al., 2020; Philipsen et al., 2019; Sadler et al., 2020; Trust & Whalen, 2020). Professional development may help better prepare educators to respond to the challenges in the event of another widespread crisis.

It appears that teachers who taught remotely changed some of their accommodation practices (e.g. setting accommodation, student grouping) during the school closures, because in-person classes were switched to online learning. Among the teachers who shared how they accommodated online exceptional learners, one-on-one online sessions were held by EAs or teachers (grouping and class scheduling). It is worth noting that the current study aims to better understand teachers' accommodation practices before the COVID-19 pandemic and during school closures, rather than comparing them, as the provincial supplementary education plan was in place and online classes were not mandatory across the province.

Conclusions

The purpose of the current study was to explore special education teachers' accommodation practices at the secondary school before and during the unprecedented time of COVID-19. This study has shown that teachers were committed to special education and put students' learning needs first. Findings suggest that, in general, teachers who offered accommodations to the students used a range of accommodations, including setting, class scheduling, presentation and response accommodations (e.g. general technologies, assistive technology, large print, Braille) before COVID-19. While some teachers taught online classes and/or delivered learning packages to homes, it was not the case with some teachers at local school divisions. Some accommodation practices such as setting accommodations and student grouping were changed when school buildings closed due to COVID-19. The results of this research support the idea that offering substantial supports and professional development opportunities is of importance to teachers and students who are vulnerable in a large-scale pandemic.

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