



Accommodations vs. Modifications: What's the Difference?

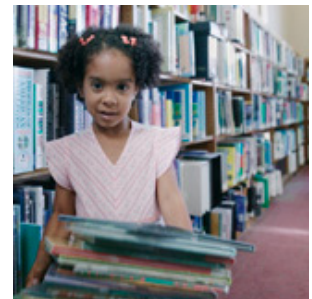
By Lindy Crawford, Ph.D.

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The following is a transcription of the podcast, "[Accommodations vs. Modifications: What's the Difference? \(Audio\)](#)."

In this NCLD podcast, Candace Cortiella speaks with Dr. Lindy Crawford about accommodations and modifications for students with learning disabilities (LD). Dr. Crawford is a member of the [Professional Advisory Board](#) at the National Center for Learning Disabilities. She is also an associate professor and the Ann Jones Endowed Chair in Special Education in the College of Education at Texas Christian University. And, she's the author of NCLD's report, [State Testing Accommodations: A Look at Their Value and Validity](#).



Candace Cortiella: Dr. Crawford, thank you for joining us. Let's begin by having you provide our listeners with a brief description of what is meant by accommodation.

Lindy Crawford: Accommodations are instructional or test adaptations. They allow the student to demonstrate what he or she knows without fundamentally changing the target skill that's being taught in the classroom or measured in testing situations. Accommodations do not reduce learning or performance expectations that we might hold for students. More specifically, they change the manner or setting in which information is presented or the manner in which students respond. But they do not change the target skill or the testing construct.

Let me give you an example. A student with a learning disability in reading may have difficulty reading the content and/or the questions on a history test. Therefore, he may not be able to demonstrate what he knows through reading, so a teacher or a test administrator may read the test aloud to him.

Another example would be a student with [Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder \(ADHD\)](#) who might not be able to concentrate on a classroom assignment if multiple distractions are present. And so the teacher may allow the student to work in a separate setting.

In both of these examples, a change of presentation or a change of setting enables the students to demonstrate what they know without lowering the learning expectations, and without lowering the performance expectations or changing the complexity of the target skill being taught or measured.

Generally, a large number of accommodations can be grouped into five categories:

Timing. For example, giving a student extended time to complete a task or a test item.

Flexible scheduling. For example, giving a student two days instead of one day to complete a project.

Accommodated presentation of the material, meaning material is presented to the student in a fashion that's different from a more

traditional fashion.

Setting, which includes things like completing the task or test in a quiet room or in a small group with other students.

Response accommodation, which means having the student respond perhaps orally or through a scribe.

Candace Cortiella: You used the term “target skills” several times. Can you explain what is meant by target skills?

Lindy Crawford: Sure. A target skill is the core content that’s being either taught or tested. Researchers will refer to it as the construct of interest. It has nothing to do with how the student accesses or gets to the skill, or how the student shows his knowledge or skill in that skill or that content.

Candace Cortiella: And, by contrast, what is meant by modifications?

Lindy Crawford: Modifications actually do change that target skill or the construct of interest. They often reduce learning expectations or affect the content in such a way that what is being taught or tested is fundamentally changed.

Modifications are instructional or test adaptations that allow the student to demonstrate what he knows or can do, but they also reduce the target skill in some way. So if a child is provided with a modification, generally it will lower the performance expectations, and a modification may do that by reducing the number of items required or the complexity of the items or the task required. In essence, a student doesn’t demonstrate what he knows or can do in that target skill or that content because the modification changes it to such a degree that the student’s product no longer represents what we think it does.

Another way of thinking about this is that the inferences we make about what a student really knows end up being inaccurate, and we may unintentionally overestimate the knowledge and skills that the student actually has.

Candace Cortiella: Do you think that accommodations and modifications are frequently confused in the process of designing individualized instruction for students with disabilities such as learning disabilities?

Lindy Crawford: I think they’re sometimes confused because teachers do not always know how to separate the *target skills* from the *access skill*. I think it would be helpful if teachers begin by identifying the target skill the student needs to know and then identifying the skills the student needs to access it or respond to that target skill. And once the teacher has identified these target skills and access skills, they’re better able to maintain the target skill expectations but accommodate the student around the access skill.

Candace Cortiella: What is the danger of such confusion between accommodations and modifications?

Lindy Crawford: Three dangers come to mind (and there are probably more). First, if we confuse the two and we make changes to the target skill, we end up with incorrect assumptions about what a student truly knows.

Second, if we provide students with modifications, we’re more than likely to reduce our expectations for them. But if we hold all students to the same performance expectations while providing access to the content, through use of accommodations, then we can maintain those similar expectations for students.

And finally, by providing modifications instead of accommodations, we limit students’ opportunity to learn and possibly contribute to learned helplessness in future work environments because we reduce our expectations of kids when we provide them with modifications or “crutches,” if you will, around the content.

Candace Cortiella: Why is it important for parents and also for students (as appropriate) to understand the difference between accommodations and modifications?

Lindy Crawford: Well, teachers, parents, and other people don’t make an inference about a student’s performance such as, for example, “She is proficient at multiplication,” or “He understands the process of osmosis.” But if that student demonstrates that skill and/or that knowledge with help of a modification, then that inference we make is incorrect.

But if the student demonstrates his skill and knowledge while using an accommodation, then our inferences are, in fact, correct or accurate. Parents and students also need to know that in high-stakes test situations such as state tests, modifications automatically invalidate a student's score, and this has very negative consequences for students. Parents and students also need to know that in advance of a testing situation. I also think it's important for students to understand the difference so that they can self-advocate for accommodations as opposed to modifications.

Candace Cortiella: So why do parents sometimes encounter situations where an accommodation has been allowable in classroom instruction and even classroom testing but is not allowable on state assessments?

Lindy Crawford: First of all, it's important to differentiate between instructional accommodations that occur in the classroom and classroom tests like teacher-made tests. And I think that parents should only encounter a difference between what happens in the classroom and what happens on state test day if it's explicitly stated in the child's IEP.

So decisions about classroom accommodations and allowable accommodations on state tests need to be made at the student's IEP meeting. If the parent doesn't understand why some accommodations are allowed during instruction but not on state tests, she should be provided with that information at the IEP [meeting].

Now that applies if there's a difference between instructional accommodations and state test accommodations. But there really should never be a difference between classroom testing accommodations and state testing accommodations. If students are provided the accommodation on a classroom test, then they must be provided that accommodation on state tests.

This isn't to say, however, that every instructional accommodation should be allowed on a state test. So again, I'm talking about instruction and not classroom testing, because sometimes the two just may not be compatible. For example, the teacher may allow the student to take home a project and work on it as an instructional accommodation. And you might even note it as a setting accommodation or as extended time. But in a state testing situation, [these accommodations] would obviously affect the validity of the score. A student should never be provided with an accommodation during a state test that they've never used in instructional (classroom) setting.

To summarize, state test accommodations must have been used in classroom settings during classroom testing and during instruction, but instructional accommodations do not always have to be on state tests. Any way you slice it, it always has to be decided at the student's IEP [meeting] and be recorded on the IEP every year.

Candace Cortiella: This information seems to be critical for parents to understand as they navigate the educational progress and program for students with learning disabilities. Thank you for joining us and for sharing your expertise on this important issue.

This transcription was made possible by a grant from the American Legion Child Welfare Foundation.

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