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The Alternate Assessment Based on Alternate Achievement Standards Eligibility Decision-Making Process

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Abstract

Under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), students with significant intellectual disabilities (ID) are allowed to take alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS) in lieu of the standardized assessments taken by their peers, however evidence suggests that IEP teams inconsistently and sometimes inaccurately apply established participation criteria in finding students eligible to participate in AA-AAS. The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to describe the decision-making process used by Individual Education Program (IEP) teams to identify students eligible to participate in AA-AAS. Thirteen case managers of students taking the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) from central Virginia participated in in-depth interviews. The findings resulted in the Influences on the Process of AA-AAS Eligibility Decisions (IPAED) Model describing a three-phased eligibility decision-making process. Implications suggest the need for training for all IEP team members, with a particular focus on parent education and involvement.

Keywords

Alternate Assessments, Alternate Assessments Based on Alternate Achievement Standards, Decision-Making, Qualitative Research, Significant Intellectual Disabilities

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The Alternate Assessment Based on Alternate Achievement Standards Eligibility Decision-Making Process

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Under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), students with significant intellectual disabilities (ID) are allowed to take alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS) in lieu of the standardized assessments taken by their peers, however evidence suggests that IEP teams inconsistently and sometimes inaccurately apply established participation criteria in finding students eligible to participate in AA-AAS. The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to describe the decision-making process used by Individual Education Program (IEP) teams to identify students eligible to participate in AA-AAS. Thirteen case managers of students taking the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) from central Virginia participated in in-depth interviews. The findings resulted in the Influences on the Process of AA-AAS Eligibility Decisions (IPAED) Model describing a three-phased eligibility decision-making process. Implications suggest the need for training for all IEP team members, with a particular focus on parent education and involvement. Keywords: Alternate Assessments, Alternate Assessments Based on Alternate Achievement Standards, Decision-Making, Qualitative Research, Significant Intellectual Disabilities

Before the 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 97) students with significant intellectual disabilities (ID) were often excluded from statewide, high-stakes assessment accountability systems. IDEA 97 created a provision for students with significant ID to participate in these high-stakes statewide assessments by allowing them to take alternate assessments (AA). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) reinforced the use of AA for students with significant ID by allowing AA scores to be included in adequate yearly progress (AYP) calculations. As a result, AA are now aligned with general education academic content standards. However, the United States Department of Education (USED) allows for the academic achievement standards used in AA to be reduced in depth and complexity (2005). These reduced achievement standards are intended to address all domains within the grade-level academic content areas of reading, math, and science, but do not require the depth or breadth of knowledge required of students achieving on grade level. The USED has placed a cap on the number of proficient AA scores that a school district or state may include in AYP calculations at one percent. As AA have evolved since their inception in 1997, they have become known as alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS).

Students with Significant Intellectual Disabilities

The Assistance to States for the Education of Children with Disabilities and Preschool Grants for Children with Disabilities (2006) defines intellectual disability (ID) as "...significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period, that adversely affects a child's educational performance" (pp. 46, 756). Students with the most significant ID represent about one percent of the total population of school children. AA-AAS are

designed to assess the individual academic achievement of students who have the most significant ID. Students considered appropriate participants in AA-AAS (a) have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or one in development; (b) have an intellectual disability; (c) need instruction in multiple settings or in multiple ways to generalize their learning across environments; and (d) participate in a curriculum with functional skills instruction (Towles-Reeves, Kearns, Kleinert, & Kleinert, 2009). Students with significant ID are found eligible to take AA-AAS by an IEP team.

Statement of the Problem

Under IDEA 97 and NCLB, students with the most significant ID are allowed to take AA-AAS as a participation option in a state's high-stakes assessment accountability system. Up to one percent of passing AA-AAS scores may be included in AYP calculations, and AA-AAS must adhere to the same quality standards required for traditional high-stakes assessments. Students with significant ID are a heterogeneous group. The AA-AAS participation criteria provided by state and federal agencies are broader than a student's IQ score and are open to IEP team interpretation, challenging IEP teams to accurately and consistently identify students as appropriate AA-AAS participants. Kohl, McLaughlin, and Nagel (2006) assert that the technical quality of AA-AAS can be affected by the criteria used to identify students appropriate for AA-AAS. For example, Tindal et al. (2003) and Yovanoff and Tindal (2007) found that students from disability categories that do not include intellectual disability as a characteristic (speech/language impairment or specific learning disability) are sometimes taking AA-AAS. This evidence suggests that IEP teams inconsistently and sometimes inaccurately apply established participation criteria in finding students eligible to participate in AA-AAS. Research examining the decision-making process for finding students with significant ID eligible to participate in AA-AAS appears to be absent from the literature.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to describe the decision-making process used by IEP teams to find students with significant ID eligible to participate in AA-AAS, as perceived by special education case managers. The overarching research question was: What is the decision-making process used by IEP teams to find students with significant ID eligible to participate in the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP)? The following sub-questions informed the interview protocol.

1. Who are the primary decision-makers for determining a student's participation in VAAP?
2. How might the formal policies and informal practices employed by IEP teams inform the decision-making process?
3. What factors influence the decision-making process?

Significance of the Study

AA-AAS play a significant role in the education of students with significant ID by including evidence of these students' academic achievement in high-stakes assessment accountability systems. Such inclusion makes state and local education agencies, as well as teachers, principals, and superintendents, accountable for the success of all students, including those with the most significant ID. Issues surrounding which students should take

AA-AAS, participation criteria, and technical quality make it critical to ensure that only those students with the most significant ID, those for whom the assessments are designed, take these specialized assessments. Understanding the decision-making process used by IEP teams to find students eligible to take AA-AAS and the factors that influence those decisions can provide insight to help improve the educational policy that guides the continued development and implementation of AA-AAS.

Research in AA-AAS

Recently, AA-AAS research has often focused in three areas. First is teachers' perceptions of AA-AAS (Flowers, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Browder, & Spooner, 2005; Kampfer, Horvath, Kleinert, & Kearns, 2001; Kim, Angell, O'Brian, Strand, Fulk, & Watts, 2006; Restorff, Shapre, Abery, Rodriguez, & Kim, 2012; Roach, Elliott, & Berndt, 2007; Towles-Reeves, Garrett, Burdette, & Burdge, 2006). The second area of focus is alignment between AA-AAS and general education content (Flowers, Browder, & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006; Roach, Elliott, & Webb, 2005; Spooner, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Kohprasert, Baker, & Courtade, 2008). The third focus is technical quality (Elliott & Roach, 2007a, 2007b; Kettler et al., 2010; Marion & Pellegrino, 2006) and learner characteristics (Kearns, Towles-Reeves, Kleinert, Kleinert, & Thomas, 2011; Towles-Reeves, Kearns et al., 2009).

Teachers' Perceptions of AA-AAS

Flowers et al. (2005) examined teachers' perceptions towards AA. Teachers from several states implementing different types of AA participated in the study by completing the Alternate Assessment Teacher Survey. Over 50% of participants agreed that students with significant ID participating in AA should be included in state assessment accountability systems. Seventy-one percent of teachers agreed that completing AA interfered with teaching time while only 24% were convinced that AA participation produced better outcomes for students. Many indicated that AA produced a paperwork burden, especially with portfolio assessments. Several of these results reflected findings from studies conducted by Kim et al. (2006), Restorff et al. (2012), and Roach et al. (2007). Moss (1992, as cited by Towles-Reeves et al., 2006) suggests, "Ultimately, assessments affect what teachers teach and what students learn, regardless if they are teaching students with disabilities or not" (p. 45).

Alignment Between AA-AAS and General Education Content

Roach et al. (2005) examined the alignment between the Wisconsin Alternate Assessment (WAA) and Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards using Webb's (1997) alignment model. Webb's model employs four criteria:

- 1) categorical concurrence,
- 2) balance of representation,
- 3) range-of-knowledge correspondence, and
- 4) depth-of-knowledge.

Categorical concurrence for reading, math, and social studies on both assessments was acceptable, but weak for language arts and science. The range-of-knowledge on both assessments was acceptable for all five content areas, with reading and language arts having a 100% rating. The balance of representation for both assessments was 100% for all five content areas. Because alternate assessments are reduced in depth and complexity, the

researchers expected the depth-of-knowledge ratings to be less than 50%; however, the alignment panel rated all content areas as having generally acceptable levels of depth-of-knowledge, indicating that some items may be too difficult for students with significant ID participating in the WAA. The WAA was found to have adequate alignment with Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards according to Webb's alignment model. The authors recommend further investigation of the depth-of-knowledge alignment. They suggest that including content specialists on the alignments panels may produce different results. They also suggest replicating this study with alternate assessments from different states.

Flowers et al. (2006) also applied Webb's (1997) alignment model to establish the validity of assessments of general academic content standards to the portfolio or performance-based alternate assessments of three states identified only as A, B, and C. Their findings suggested a relationship between the alternate assessments and content standards, although not as strong as findings by Roach et al. (2005). They also suggest that, given the nature of alternate assessments, there may never be alignment to meet Webb's standards. Their recommendations to states are to document how alternate assessments are aligned to academic curriculum standards, describe how alternate content standards are modified from the academic curriculum standards before conducting an alignment study, and document the intended depth of knowledge of standards intended for use with alternate assessments.

Spooner et al. (2008) examined the science performance indicators (PI) for alternate assessments that were posted on state department of education websites for linkage with the *National Science Education Standards* (NSES). From the 23 states that had science PI for their alternate assessments posted on their websites, Spooner and colleagues found a wide range of science PI linked with NSES, with physical science having the most linkages and the history and nature of science having the fewest. Their discussion included commentary on the difficulties of integrating science standards into the traditional functional curriculum used with students with significant ID. However, they found that some of the traditional functional skills taught include science concepts, such as checking the weather each day. They also found that some of the science PI indicated on the state websites were not truly linked to NSES categories; for example, brushing teeth or washing hands. They recommend research on how to best teach science concepts to students with significant ID, and that states adopt science PI for alternate assessments addressing all seven NSES standards.

Technical Quality of AA-AAS

Elliot and Roach (2007a) review the technical challenges of alternate assessments by comparing and contrasting the three most common types of alternate assessments: comprehensive rating scales, performance-based, and portfolio assessments. They address issues such as alignment with grade-level academic content standards, scores and scoring, and standard setting and range finding. They assert that the majority of states' alternate assessments have failed to meet the technical requirements and standards alignment required by USED. Portfolio assessments showed the weakest technical alignment. They conclude that alternate assessments are significant to the development of best practices and services for students with significant ID.

As one percent of passing scores earned by students with significant ID on AA-AAS may be included a school district's AYP calculations, AA-AAS must meet the same high level of technical quality as any other high-stakes state assessments of student achievement used in AYP calculations (USED, 2005). An important element of the technical documentation of AA-AAS discussed by Marion and Pellegrino (2006) is the description of the students taking the assessment. The criteria used to identify students as appropriate participants in AA-AAS can influence the technical quality of these assessments (Kohl et al.,

2006). Technical quality of AA-AAS is in jeopardy when students who do not truly possess significant ID take AA-AAS. However, there does not appear to be any published research examining AA-AAS participants as an element of technical quality. Ensuring that only the appropriate students, those with the most significant ID, take AA-AAS is important to the technical quality of these high-stakes assessments. Understanding how IEP teams determine a student's eligibility to participate in an AA-AAS begins to address this neglected area.

Learner Characteristics

Kearns et al. (2011) and Towles-Reeves et al. (2009) studied the learner characteristics of students with significant ID who participated in AA-AAS from several states. These researchers found that students taking AA-AAS had a wide range of abilities and characteristics in reading and math skills, levels of engagement in social interactions, levels of symbolic communication, and physical, hearing, and vision impairments (Kearns et al. 2011; Towles-Reeves et al., 2009). In other words, students taking AA-AAS represent a heterogeneous group.

AA-AAS Participation Criteria

Roach (2005) discussed the importance of establishing meaningful criteria for determining eligibility to participate in AA-AAS. The AA-AAS participation guidelines suggested by NCLB and IDEA 97 are broad, and leave each state education agency (SEA) to establish specific participation criteria. The Federal Regulations for the Inclusion of Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities in Title I Assessment (Federal Regulations, 2003) specify that IEP teams decide how a student with a disability will participate in a state's assessment accountability system, including participation in AA-AAS. The USED (2005) offers non-regulatory guidance to guide SEAs in developing AA-AAS participation criteria:

Only students with the most significant cognitive [intellectual] disabilities may be assessed based on alternate achievement standards. The regulation does not create a new category of disability. Rather, the Department intended the term "students with the most significant cognitive [intellectual] disabilities" to include that small number of students who are (1) within one or more of the existing categories of disability under the IDEA (e.g., autism, multiple disabilities, traumatic brain injury, etc.); and (2) whose cognitive impairments [intellectual disabilities] may prevent them from attaining grade-level achievement standards, even with the very best instruction. (USED, 2005. p. 23)

In a study to validate AA in reading and math, Tindal et al. (2003) reported that students taking AA-AAS represented all disability categories, although most participants had ID. In a later study, Yovanoff and Tindal (2007) found that while most students participating in AA-AAS had an ID, an alarming 18% of students did not.

IEP teams are tasked with the important job of identifying students with significant ID who are eligible to take AA-AAS, using participation criteria that are general and open to interpretation. Tindal et al. (2003) and Yovanoff and Tindal (2007) report that students who do not have ID are taking AA-AAS. There is no known research available to describe the training IEP teams receive in applying AA-AAS participation criteria to ensure accurate identification of students with significant ID eligible take AA-AAS.

Musson, Thomas, Towles-Reeves, and Kearns (2010) and Streagle (2011) completed formal and informal reviews of the AA-AAS participation criteria available on each states' website in October 2007 and March 2010, respectively. Common AA-AAS participation criteria found in most states' guidance documents included:

- The student must have an IEP or have been found eligible for special education services
- The student must have a significant intellectual disability that prevents him/her from participating in and/or making progress on the state's grade-level academic content standards, even with the use of accommodations
- The student receives instruction based on the aligned academic content standards (as developed by the state for use with the AA-AAS)
- The student's instructional program includes elements of functional skills development
- The student is not working toward a standard diploma. (Streagle, p. 29)

Musson et al. add that most states did not specify IQ cut off scores, established disability categories, or educational placements as AA-AAS participation criteria.

Virginia's AA-AAS is entitled the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP). Participation criteria defined in the *VAAP Participation Criteria Form* (VDOE, 2011) are similar to the criteria found in other states. As IEP teams consider a student's eligibility to participate in the VAAP, they must affirm all of the following:

1. Does the student have a current IEP (or is one being developed)?
2. Does the student demonstrate significant cognitive [intellectual] disabilities?
3. Does the student's present level of performance indicate the need for extensive, direct instruction and/or intervention in a curriculum based on the Aligned Standards of Learning? The present level of performance, or student evaluation, may also include personal management, recreation and leisure, school and community, vocational, communication, social competence, and/or motor skills.
4. Does the student require intensive, frequent, and individualized instruction in a variety of settings to show interaction and achievement?
5. Is the student working toward educational goals other than those prescribed for a Modified Standard, Standard, or Advanced Standard Diploma? (VDOE, 2011)

Virginia provides a guidance document that describes the learner characteristics, significant delays in adaptive behaviors, and levels of intellectual functioning (including IQ ranges) that may be present in students with significant ID (VDOE, 2009). However, the VDOE guidance document does not prescribe a definitive formula for how many learner characteristics, adaptive behavior deficits, and/or IQ cut scores are necessary to designate a student as having a significant ID.

Methodology

This study employed a generic qualitative methodology to investigate the decision-making process used by Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams to identify students with significant ID eligible to participate in the VAAP. Generic qualitative research methods

were selected as this study investigated IEP descriptions of decision-making experiences, an exploration that is not quite appropriate for one of the more traditional qualitative methods, such as phenomenology, grounded theory, case study, or ethnography. Percy, Kostere, and Kostere (2015) suggest that in cases where the “psychological experience is reported.... researchers should consider a more generic qualitative inquiry approach” (p. 76). I conducted semi-structured interviews with special education case managers in central Virginia to gather primary data to describe [experiencing] the decision-making process used by IEP teams to find students with significant ID eligible to participate in AA-AAS, as perceived by special education case managers.

Role of the Researcher

As the sole investigator, I recruited participants, conducted interviews, and analyzed the data. An assistant transcribed interviews. My extensive experience with the VAAP as a special education teacher, District Testing Coordinator, and member of state range-finding and standard-setting committees informed the development of my research question and the foreshadowed problems used to guide this project.

Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, and Richardson (2005) describe the qualitative researcher as the instrument and the importance of reflecting on that role in qualitative inquiry. Brantlinger et al. assert that the researcher must clearly establish and understand her role as researcher and how her expertise on the topic under study may influence data collection and analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Self-awareness of the researcher as instrument is also closely tied to Lincoln and Guba’s (2000, as cited by Morrow, 2005) writings on trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry and their criteria of transferability. By understanding the researcher’s context, the reader is able to judge whether or not the findings transfer to her own context (Morrow, 2005).

I began implementing alternate assessments (AA) in 2001, the first year of full implementation of the VAAP with my students with significant ID in a small rural school district in central Virginia. From 2001 to 2006, I implemented the VAAP with my students as the assessment evolved from an assessment of functional life skills, to functional academic and communication skills, to an assessment of the Aligned Standards of Learning (ASOL) based on the general education academic content standards in reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies. As a special education teacher implementing the VAAP, most of the students on my caseload and the caseloads of my colleagues for whom VAAP was considered truly had a significant ID and met the participation criteria.

When I became the District Testing Coordinator I began overseeing and managing all components of VAAP for my school district: training teachers to implement the VAAP, training district scoring teams, and training administrators in supporting IEP teams making VAAP eligibility decisions. For each student found eligible to take the VAAP, teachers submitted learner characteristics worksheets documenting a student’s IQ, communication skills, social skills, and adaptive skills. I reviewed these forms, along with the VAAP Participation Criteria Form and provided technical assistance to IEP teams when the learner characteristics worksheet did not indicate that a student had a significant ID. According to the documentation submitted to me by special education teachers in the district, most of the students found eligible to take the VAAP met the participation criteria.

During my tenure as District Testing Coordinator, I served on Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) VAAP Range-Finding and Standard-Setting committees for four years. During that time, my school district was one of many identified by the VDOE as over-identifying students for participation in the VAAP, above the 1% cap on the number of passing AA-AAS scores that can be included in AYP calculations. I was tasked with

examining the over-identification issue in my school district and working with teachers and administrators to more accurately and consistently identify appropriate VAAP participants. I trained teachers and administrators to understand and apply the VAAP participation criteria and to use the Guidance Document: Significant Cognitive Disabilities developed by the VDOE. I encountered teachers and principals making VAAP eligibility decisions that appeared to be based on whether or not the student would pass the regular Standards of Learning (SOL) test, instead of whether or not the student had a significant ID and met the criteria to participate in the VAAP. With support from the school administration, I was able to support these IEP teams to make appropriate and consistent VAAP eligibility decisions, so that only those students with the most significant ID were taking the VAAP in my school district. These experiences caused me to wonder how other IEP teams were making VAAP eligibility decisions and led me to develop this study.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers employ design features to establish rigor or trustworthiness in their studies. Lincoln and Guba (1985, 2000) discuss components of trustworthiness as they are linked to traditional statistical practices as follows:

- a) credibility, which is aligned to internal validity;
- b) transferability, aligned to external validity or generalizability;
- c) dependability, aligned to reliability; and
- d) confirmability, aligned with objectivity.

Each of Lincoln and Guba's (2000) components of trustworthiness are addressed in the design features described below. The chronology of my research activities and processes described below specifically help establish the dependability of the study, as a function of Lincoln and Guba's (2000) trustworthiness.

With any qualitative research, the researcher acts as the instrument and is intimately connected with her data. Therefore, she leverages qualitative design features to establish rigor and a "...degree of congruence between the explanations of the phenomena and the realities of the world" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, p. 324). I employed several verification strategies to establish rigor and quality for my study. I sought feedback from colleagues implementing the VAAP with their students on the interview protocols. I collaborated with two fellow qualitative researchers in peer debriefing and peer review activities (McMillan & Schumacher). I electronically and mechanically recorded all participants' interviews, had participants review their interview transcripts for a fit with their lived experience in member checking, and used their language in verbatim accounts. Finally, I consulted my reflexive field notes and observations to ensure that I captured an emic understanding of participants' feelings and attitudes.

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) discuss two issues that inform traditional guidelines for a researcher's ethical behavior with work with human subjects: protection of participants from harm and informed consent. I adhered to their strategies in this study.

Peer review and peer debriefing were important verification strategies that I designed into the study features to establish trustworthiness during the inductive data analysis phase. A former Coordinator of Special Education from a school district in central Virginia and fellow qualitative researcher served these roles for me. She reviewed my coding on the first nine interviews, in the form of full transcripts with coding markings and color designations and exports of the coded text segments with my code definitions. As a peer debriefer, my colleague brought a unique perspective to my work because she had worked with special

education teachers as they implemented the VAAP in her school district and she was familiar with the data after reviewing the coding. She and I discussed my inductive reasoning and analysis. We also discussed my interpretation of the data as an avenue for establishing verisimilitude. She examined the visual representation that summarized the major themes emerging from my data, and agreed the model encapsulated the depth and breadth of the data in a meaningful way. This collaboration helped mitigate my biases about the VAAP eligibility decision-making process.

Recruitment

To gain access to potential participants, Seidman (2006) iterates the importance of seeking permission from those in authority over those who may participate. I communicated with school superintendents and special education directors in candidate recruitment school districts. I honored participants' privacy by having the special education directors make the initial contact with candidates for the study, leaving it up to them to contact me if they were interested in joining study. During my initial telephone conversation with each, I outlined the time commitment and scheduled interviews at times and locations of participants' choosing. Once they agreed to join the study, I protected their identities by allowing them to choose pseudonyms during the interviews and redacting all references to their identity and school district from interview transcripts. No identifying information was cited in the final report or subsequent articles. Participating school districts were assigned a number. Data were stored on my password-protected computer.

Informed Consent

The informed consent form was developed under the guidelines provided by the VCU IRB. Seven of Seidman's (2006) eight elements of respectful informed consent were included in the consent form used for this study. (His "special conditions for children" element was not relevant to this study). I discussed informed consent with all participants during my initial telephone conversation, and it was read and signed by all participants at the first interview. I retained a copy of each Informed Consent Form and gave a signed copy to participants. The transcriptionist signed a confidentiality agreement, and I maintained electronic interview data files on my password-protected computer and audio tapes under lock and key.

Participants

Guided by Bogdan and Biklen (2007) recommendation to use purposeful sampling techniques to identify potential, information-rich participants, I created a framework for identifying participants from school districts with VAAP participation rates above one percent over a six-year period. VAAP participation rates data between 2006 and 2011 provided by the VDOE allowed me to identify potential school districts in central Virginia, within a 150-mile radius of where I lived. Districts targeted for recruitment had VAAP participation rates ranging from 1.06 to 3.78. School districts from which participants were recruited represented urban, suburban, and rural communities with large, medium, and small populations.

Through two phases of recruitment, I recruited 13 special education case managers, all women with one to thirty years of teaching experience and one to ten years of experience implementing the VAAP. Nine participants were white and four were African-American. Six participants taught in suburban schools, five in rural schools, and two in urban schools. Five participants taught high school, four middle school, and five elementary school.

Interview Guide

My experience as a VAAP case manager and District Testing Coordinator gave me expertise and resources to develop the interview guides for this study, in collaboration with experienced VAAP case managers in my school district to establish rigor for interview protocols (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). I developed two interview guides. The first included questions designed to establish rapport and gain participant background information (Seidman 2006). Open-ended questions probed participants about their education, years of experience teaching students with significant ID, and their general experiences implementing the VAAP. The interview closed with a charge to reflect on how they and their IEP teams engage in the VAAP participation decision-making process and to gather copies of any training materials or guidance documents they had to illustrate their experiences. The second interview guide was specifically designed to investigate the VAAP participation decision-making process. These open-ended questions encouraged participants to share their stories about how they and their IEP teams engage in the decision-making process for their students to participate in the VAAP and their perceptions about what the process means to them.

I used the data and knowledge collected from the first three interviews to refine the interview questions for the remainder of the study. Since participants in the first three interviews raised issues related to parent participation and training on VAAP eligibility criteria, parent questions were added to the second interview guide as prompts when participants did not discuss these issues spontaneously.

Interviews

I interviewed the first five participants with the planned series of two interviews lasting approximately 30 minutes each. The last eight participants were offered the option of taking part in two interviews or discussing all topics in a single interview. All eight opted for a single interview, which lasted between 35 and 50 minutes. The richness of interview data obtained during the two-interview and one-interview phases appeared consistent.

Interviews were electronically and mechanically recorded on my computer and on a mini cassette recorder. This ensured the fidelity of the data collected and allowed me to review recordings to check the accuracy of transcriptions.

Data Collected

The Virginia Commonwealth University Institutional Review Board (VCU IRB number HM13577) approved this study on March 30, 2011. The study was also approved by the school districts from which participants were recruited, through formal and informal procedures. I contacted district superintendents and special education directors of potential school districts to discover their procedures for gaining access to their teachers as participants for my study. One school district had a formal IRB process; all other school districts provided recruitment permission after reviewing information about the purpose of my study with references, research questions, study procedures, the role of the school division and copies of the recruitment email, the consent form, and the interview protocols.

The primary source of data in this study came directly from the interview transcripts. Marshall and Rossman (2006) discuss triangulation with other data sources as a technique to establish rigor in qualitative inquiry. I wrote reflexive field notes and observations, as suggested by McMillan and Schumacher (2006), immediately after each interview to help me fully understand the participants' context. Three participants shared documents that helped illustrate their experiences with the VAAP participation decision-making process: a VAAP

Implementation Manual; a copy of the VDOE Guidance Document, *Significant Cognitive Disabilities*; and a tracking sheet used for managing student progress toward completing the VAAP. My reflexive field notes, observations, and the participant-provided documents informed my inductive data analysis and triangulation of the findings. I interviewed two participants in their homes, three in a study room at their local branch library, and eight at their schools.

Data Analysis

TAMSAalyzer (TAMS) is a Macintosh-based qualitative data analysis software program that I used to facilitate my inductive data analysis process. I converted interview transcripts to raw text files (.rtf) and imported them into the TAMS program. Transcripts of the first five participants, who engaged in two interviews, were consolidated into a single document, converted to .rtf files, and imported into TAMS. Each participant had a single data file. Taking an emic perspective, I corrected a few clerical errors in the transcripts imported into TAMS, carefully maintaining participants' wordings and meanings.

Coding

I began coding by inserting universal codes to identify each participant with a pseudonym, their locality type (urban, suburban, and rural), and school level (elementary, middle, and high). These universal codes were helpful in identifying participants once the fully-coded data were exported from TAMS for intense analysis.

I used participants' words in creating early naming conventions. For example, one of the first three data files I analyzed described students who "switched to VSEP" (Virginia Substitute Evaluation Program, an alternate assessment for students with disabilities in high school who are achieving on grade level). The code "switched to VSEP" was joined with "overqualified for the VAAP," "one who could probably take the VGLA" (Virginia Grade Level Alternative, an alternate assessment for students with disabilities in elementary and middle school who are achieving on grade level), and "bumped up" to become "too high." Several participants said their students "do qualify," "there's no gray area with these girls," VAAP was the "most appropriate assessment," and "only the ones who absolutely need it" were taking the VAAP. These codes were merged to become "appropriate." However, as my coding evolved, the codes "too high" and "appropriate" became sub-codes of the category "appropriateness of the assessment," with the addition of a sub-code entitled "came off" to describe the experiences of some participants who were part of the decision to remove students from the VAAP because they did not qualify. The resulting Theme 1:

VAAP assessment decisions yield 3 outcomes: (1) students with significant ID are appropriately determined eligible for VAAP; (2) students without significant ID were inappropriately determined eligible for VAAP; and (3) students without significant ID who had previously been determined eligible for VAAP, were reassessed as ineligible.

My coding evolved as I worked through each transcript, with codes being added, sub-codes created, similar codes combined, and others abandoned.

Once this initial coding was completed in TAMS, I exported the coded chunks of text into a spreadsheet program. I immersed myself in the data by printing the encoded spreadsheet and mounting them on the wall. My coding continued to evolve as I made notes on the wall, moved codes around, and consulted my reflexive field notes, observations, and

the participant-provided documents. As categories emerged, I continually returned to TAMS to merge similar codes and discard others. Some sub-codes became potential themes. The audit trail described above helps illustrate the study dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

During the inductive reasoning process, the data collected from participants were organized into data bits following Merriam (2009). As described in the examples above, data bits with similar verbiage and meanings were grouped together into concepts. Similar concepts were grouped together into categories. Finally, I organized the categories into themes illustrated in the *Influences on the Process of AA-AAS Eligibility Decisions (IPAED)*. The IPAED Model is organized into influences informing three process phases: *VAAP eligibility influences before the decision*, *VAAP eligibility influences during decision-making*, and *resultant VAAP eligibility decisions*. The three phases of the VAAP decision-making process have two to four themes each, while a separate theme, *parents self-select as passive participants*, stands alone as an undercurrent across all phases. The IPAED Model (Figure 1) visually represents the phases and themes that emerged from the data during my inductive reasoning process. After the model was developed, I showed it to my transcriber and to my peer reviewer. My transcriber agreed that the model visually represented what she had heard when transcribing the audio recordings into text. I explained to my peer reviewer how the organization of the categories finally made sense when I conceptualized the phases and themes into the visual model. My peer reviewer agreed that she could follow my reasoning and see how I had arrived at my conclusions. Participants' own words are used to illustrate the themes.

Influences on the Process of AA-AAS Eligibility Decisions

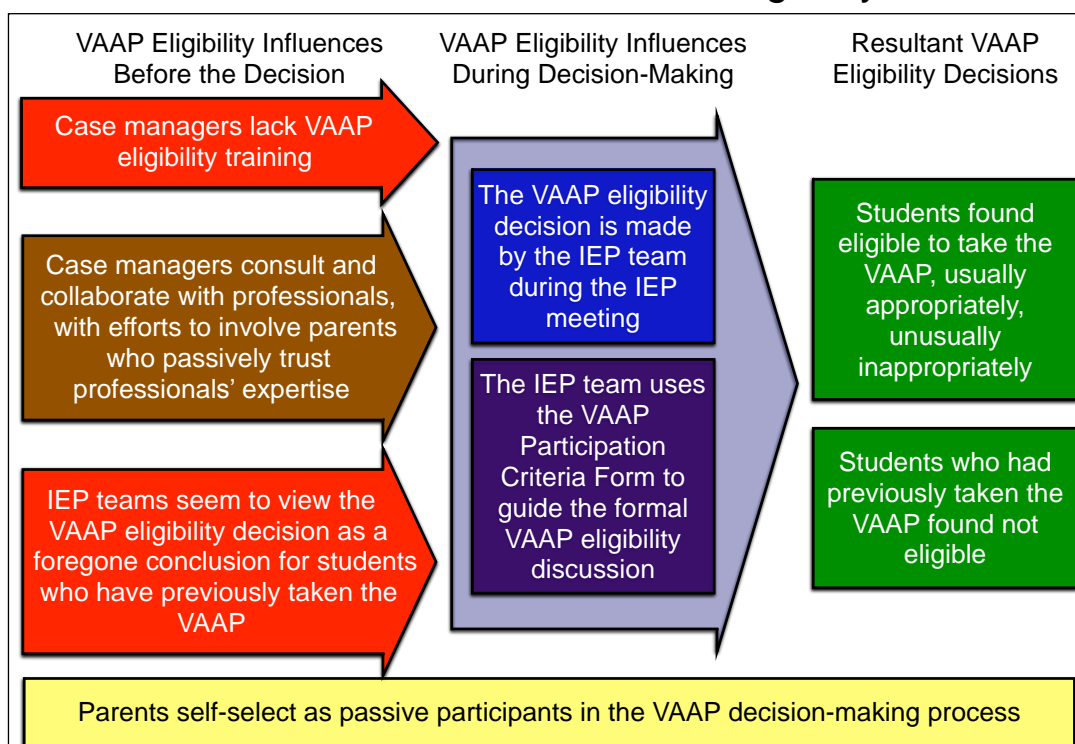


Figure 1. The emergent Influences on the Process of AA-AAS Eligibility Decisions (IPAED) Model is depicted as three phases.

VAAP Eligibility Influences Before the Decision

The phase *VAAP eligibility influences before the decision* includes three themes that describe influences that occur before a formal VAAP participation decision is made: *case managers lack VAAP eligibility training*; *case managers consult and collaborate with professionals, with efforts to involve parents who passively trust professionals' expertise*; and *IEP teams seem to view the VAAP eligibility decision as a foregone conclusion for students who have previously taken the VAAP*. In Figure 1, the themes are placed with the phase in which they occur, and arrows represent the flow of their influence in the VAAP eligibility decision-making process by informing how the decision is made and the outcome of the decision itself.

Case Managers Lack VAAP Eligibility Training

The VAAP is a portfolio assessment that includes work samples, pictures, video clips, and teacher annotations that illustrate a student's performance on each academic standard being defended in the portfolio. Teachers submit VAAP portfolios to their district office to be scored. Participants were explicitly asked to talk about the training they received in preparation for implementing the VAAP with their students. All participants describe training experiences at the district level that prepared them to collect and catalog evidence of student performance according to the rules established by the VDOE.

When asked to describe the training the participants received to prepare them to make VAAP participation eligibility decisions, the answers consistently indicated a lack of training. Only two participants recall VAAP eligibility as a component of their training. Deborah (pseudonym), a high school case manager, talked about a two-day training she attended during the summer where "part of the training was that we talked about what types of children would be eligible for doing the VAAP." Ruth (pseudonym) received even less training than Deborah, recalling how VAAP eligibility was only "slightly touched upon in the trainings."

Even though participants considered their training adequate to implement the VAAP, the lack of training participants described to prepare them to identify students with significant ID and to accurately and consistently apply VAAP participation criteria is inadequate according to Abigail (pseudonym). She relates:

We have training, but it's optional, a lot of it...But a lot of our training is more on "okay here's your VAAP kid, this is how you collect data." This is...that's most of our training. It's on the collection...of data, not on the eligibility of that [taking VAAP]. So, I think they could do a better job with that.

Ruth shared, "But as far as training to determine eligibility, that's not really something that I've been provided." As stated earlier, students with significant ID are a heterogeneous group (Kearns et al., 2011; Towles-Reeves et al., 2009), and identifying students who have significant ID and are eligible to take an AA-AAS is complicated (Streagle, 2011). Competence in preparing evidence of student performance does not translate to competence in recognizing the characteristics of students with significant ID or accurately applying criteria to make an appropriate participation decision (Streagle, 2011). A lack of training about how to apply VAAP participation criteria can influence how teams decide VAAP eligibility and subsequent outcomes.

Case Managers Consult and Collaborate with Professionals, with Efforts to Involve Parents who Passively Trust Professionals' Expertise

Even though most case managers lacked adequate training to prepare them to make accurate and consistent VAAP eligibility decisions, it appears evident that they took this decision seriously and collaborated with others as they prepared to make eligibility decisions. Case managers described their interactions with parents and other professionals about students' characteristics and/or the VAAP participation criteria as they prepared to make the VAAP eligibility decision. Consider Ruth's description of how she "sometimes" prepared to make VAAP eligibility decisions for her students:

Sometimes, I will sit down...with the principal, or maybe a couple of the more experienced special ed. teachers and be like, "I'm a little stumped here...How do you suggest we go about this?" And so, sometimes they come and observe the child...so that they can help me make that decision...I don't make it alone.

Phoebe (pseudonym), a middle school case manager, described how she leveraged electronic communications as she communicated with a parent regarding the VAAP eligibility decision to be made at an upcoming IEP meeting:

His mother and I email back and forth quite a bit...before I did his IEP last year, and we were planning the IEP meeting, and I said, "I think we should leave him on the VAAP because..." and I gave her my reasons. And she told me, "Yeah, I agree." So we discussed it and I gave her an option to say...rethink this, or can we retest, or can we do this, you know. In this case, she didn't because she's honest about her child.

This theme illuminates the VAAP eligibility decision-making process as collaborative. It reflects how case managers consult and collaborate with other professionals and parents, where possible, who know the student as the IEP team prepares for the IEP meeting where the VAAP eligibility decision will be made. These consultation and collaboration events occur before the VAAP eligibility decision is made, inform the discussion when the decision is being made, and can influence the outcome of the decision.

IEP Teams seem to View the VAAP Eligibility Decision as a Foregone Conclusion for Students who have Previously Taken the VAAP

Participants illuminate a consistent reluctance to revisit previously made VAAP decisions. This theme represents common experiences shared by case managers at all levels whereby the VAAP eligibility decision seemed to be a foregone conclusion because students had previously taken the VAAP. Deborah related the following:

I haven't had a discussion as to...whether or not their student is or is not eligible. It's normally always been, "Your student is eligible to take the VAAP." This is the assessment that they take. You know, they've been taking it. They'll take it again.

Mary (pseudonym), a middle school case manager, describe the situation as, "...by the time they get to me, they've been doing the VAAP for a long time, and if they've met the criteria in the past, it's kind of assumed, as I get them, they'll meet the criteria now." Anna

(pseudonym), an elementary school case manager, succinctly reported the situation, "...at my school, my building, it is usually, if a child has been taking it...forever...they're going to continue on to take it...that's just how it is there."

The accounts of these and other study participants who experienced similar situations, are concerning even if previous IEP teams applied the participation criteria accurately and appropriately. It stands to reason that, if a student is accurately assessed with a significant ID and is eligible to take the VAAP, he/she would continue to be found eligible throughout his/her school career. However, if a student is erroneously found eligible to take the VAAP and subsequent IEP teams assume eligibility based on an original erroneous decision, the future of the student could be jeopardized by the perpetuation of the poor decision of a previous IEP team. This scenario may seem farfetched; however, there are times when a student is found eligible to take an AA-AAS when he/she does not have an ID (Yovanoff & Tindal, 2007). This issue will be discussed in more detail under the *Resultant VAAP eligibility decisions* phase. The VAAP eligibility decision-making process appears to be influenced by the fact that a student has been found eligible to take the VAAP in the past.

VAAP Eligibility Influences During Decision-Making

Any decision-making process will include the time or event when an actual decision is made. It is the dynamics and influences of that context that bear examination. In this study, two themes emerged that describe the influences during the VAAP eligibility decision-making: *the VAAP eligibility decision is made by the IEP team during the IEP meeting* and *the IEP team uses the VAAP Participation Criteria form to guide the formal VAAP eligibility discussion*.

As discussed earlier, state and federal regulations associated with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) require that an IEP team make decisions regarding how a student with a disability will participate in state accountability testing. The stories shared by all case managers reflect compliance with this regulation. Though case managers consult other professionals before the IEP meeting occurs, with efforts to involve parents who passively trust professionals' expertise; and though IEP teams seem to assume the VAAP eligibility decision as a foregone conclusion for students who have previously taken the VAAP, the actual decision is made by the IEP team members at the IEP meeting, using the VAAP Participation Criteria Form. In Figure 1, the *VAAP eligibility influences during decision-making* themes are encapsulated within a large arrow to illustrate how these two components combine to influence decision outcomes.

The VAAP Eligibility Decision Is Made by the IEP Team During the IEP Meeting

Reflecting on how *case managers consult and collaborate with professionals, with efforts to involve parents who passively trust professionals' expertise* before the formal VAAP decision is made; some of the professionals with whom case managers consult before the IEP meeting are members of the IEP team. During the interviews, participants were explicitly asked to describe the primary decision-makers in the process for determining a student's eligibility for the VAAP. Participants identified the IEP team and/or specifically named the members of the IEP team as the primary decision makers. The IEP team members identified included case managers, general education teachers, administrators, principals, parents, special education teachers, speech pathologists, and others who individually contributed to a specific student's plan. When asked about the primary decision makers, Rachel (pseudonym) replied, "The IEP team. And, that is, typically, case manager of the

child, a general ed. teacher, the parents, and the principal...So...we are the decision-makers.” Rachel’s statement illustrates an implemented example of the policy established by the VDOE, stating that the IEP team is responsible for making VAAP participation decisions for students with disabilities (2009).

Participants described using the typical cycle of IEP meetings as the venue for deciding whether or not a student would participate in the VAAP. Since state and federal regulations require that a student’s IEP be reviewed annually, and since VAAP eligibility is an IEP team decision (Federal Regulations, 2003), it stands to reason that the decision makers (i.e., the IEP team) would make the VAAP eligibility decision at the annual IEP meeting.

The IEP Team Uses the VAAP Participation Criteria Form to Guide the Formal VAAP Eligibility Discussion

Case managers described using the VAAP Participation Criteria Form to focus their discussion as they made a decision about a student’s eligibility to participate in the VAAP. Ruth described how the “form” guided the VAAP decision-making process for her IEP team:

Well, we have this form that we print off of the IEP online that’s automatically put into our IEPs...We print that off. We go over it as an IEP team. We decide, you know, “Do they meet this criteria?” If they do, then that helps us go in one direction. It’s really...a great form because it takes you in one direction or the other. When you answer the questions you get to a certain point that, if you say, “no,”...you decide...VMAST (Virginia Modified Achievement Standards Test), VGLA (both grade-level alternative assessments available to students with disabilities in Virginia), or SOLs (Standards of Learning, the grade-level multiple choice test taken by most students). But if you continue to answer, “yes,” then it only takes you one direction, which is VAAP. So, it’s based on those participation criteria...it’s really easy to follow. We just print it out, we go over it as a team, and then we take those directions.

Although other participants did not describe their use of the form with Ruth’s earnestness, they mention using the VAAP Participation Criteria Form specifically. Esther (pseudonym) stated, “We pretty much just read it as we go and check *yes*, check *yes*, check...you know.” Joanna (pseudonym) added, “And then, you have your criteria sheet there, and you just get them to sign it. It’s not a big elaborate process. It’s just another sheet in the IEP.”

The two sub-themes in the *VAAP eligibility influences during decision-making* theme illustrate that the case managers in this study complied with state and federal regulations by working with their IEP teams at IEP meetings to make VAAP eligibility decisions using the official participation criteria form developed by the Virginia Department of Education.

Resultant VAAP Eligibility Decisions

The VAAP eligibility decision process typically has only two decision options: either a student can be found eligible to participate or he/she can be found not eligible to participate. The resultant “eligible” decision can also have two options: a student actually meets the VAAP criteria (an appropriate and accurate decision) or a student does not actually meet the VAAP criteria (an inappropriate and inaccurate decision). Further, IEP teams might be reviewing a student being considered for initial VAAP eligibility with no previous decision, or a student who has a prior VAAP decision. The student new to VAAP eligibility review

risks the more usual decision option set: IEP decision (a) that he/she meets the VAAP participation criteria (appropriately and accurately or not); or the IEP decision (b) that he/she does not meet the participation criteria. The student previously awarded a VAAP decision risks the IEP team assuming the original VAAP decision should continue. If the original decision was erroneous, the affected student also has the unusual but possible option that the IEP team will decide that a student who had previously taken the VAAP may be found not eligible. Figure 1 illustrates these two decision options. It is important to note that the size of the boxes are not intended to show a relationship between the numbers of students found eligible or not eligible, or those who meet or do not meet the participation criteria.

Students found eligible to take the VAAP, usually appropriately, unusually inappropriately

Many of the students whose IEP teams find them eligible to take the VAAP have significant ID and meet the participation criteria. However, as case manager participants shared stories about their experiences with the VAAP and the eligibility decision-making process, they spoke often about the students for whom they had concerns. They talked about only one or two students for whom they thought the VAAP was not appropriate, suggesting that typically their students who were found eligible to take the VAAP by the IEP team met the participation criteria.

It is important to note that when the case manager participants talked about their few students who were found eligible to take the VAAP by their IEP teams when the students did not meet the participation criteria, I did not explicitly ask case managers whether they had students taking the VAAP who did not meet the participation criteria. Since I had seen this phenomenon in my work as the District Testing Coordinator, I was careful not to ask leading questions on this topic.

Case manager participants at all levels described situations where students were found eligible to take the VAAP when they did not have significant ID and did not meet the participation criteria. Anna at the elementary level, recalled:

I've had students where I felt they probably shouldn't take the VAAP. Maybe it should be something else...A lot of times, administrators don't like that.

A compelling story comes from Phoebe, at a middle school:

I've got one [student with an IEP] who came from another county...I almost think she's misdiagnosed...That worries me because she has been...in this category [intellectual disability]...she...didn't get...pushed to do better. But then, at this point, like, I'm almost scared to say, "Oh good, you'll be in seventh grade next year. Let's pull you out of...the self-contained and hope that you can get up to grade-level, so by the time you hit eighth grade, you'll be okay. And, that makes me feel a little trapped... a little sorry.

Finally, Candace (pseudonym) gives a high school perspective:

I don't get what's going on at the middle school...I don't know what those discussions are or why they're making those decisions back then. [But] by the time we get them and they're in 9th grade, and they haven't...taken all the other classes the other kids have, just suddenly dumped them in and put them on an SOL track, it probably would not be successful...But, we see these kids

now and we see some that might have had more potential, but were not pushed early on, then it's kind of disappointing.

The participants view students who take the VAAP, or other AA-AAS, when they do not meet the participation criteria as victims of low expectations who are denied a free appropriate public education. However, it is not within the scope of this study to discuss outcomes for these or any other students taking the VAAP or AA-AAS.

Students who had Previously Taken the VAAP Found Not Eligible

As with the case manager participants who described students who were found eligible to take the VAAP when they did not necessarily meet the participation criteria, case managers also described students who had taken the VAAP in the past, but were subsequently found to be not eligible. Rachel, an elementary school case manager, described what seemed to be a culture of reversing VAAP eligibility decisions on a regular basis. She stated, "There are many children that are switched at times, depending on their progress in class and new testing...there are a lot of children that may have taken the VAAP previously, that are not taking the VAAP anymore." Rachel's experience with VAAP reversals seemed unusual among the participants in this study. Abigail, a high school case manager, described her experience with one of her students, "I have had one [student IEP decision] where it was VAAP and switched him to VSEP...I'm wondering why they didn't do VGLA in middle school." These scenarios beg the question: Why were these students found eligible to take the VAAP in the first place? A student has a significant ID or does not; there is no, one year he/she has a significant ID and another year he/she does not.

Two issues in the *resultant VAAP eligibility decisions* phase are cause for concern: (1) some students are found eligible to take the VAAP when they do not meet the participation criteria, and (2) students who had previously taken the VAAP are found not eligible. Since students with significant ID represent only about one percent of the total student population, the students with these concerns are very few. Nonetheless, making an inappropriate decision about a student's participation in the VAAP can result in the denial of a free and appropriate public education for that student.

Parents Self-Select as Passive Participants in the VAAP Decision-Making Process

As discussed earlier, case manager participants described how VAAP eligibility decisions are made by the IEP team at the IEP meeting and that parents are members of their student's IEP team. Parents were also identified as people with whom case managers consulted and collaborated before the IEP meeting. However, a conflicting theme emerged from the data describing parents typically self-selecting as passive participants in the VAAP decision-making process. This theme is depicted in Figure 1 as a long bar below the three major phases of the VAAP eligibility decision-making process because it appears to be an undercurrent that flows across the entire decision-making process. Participants used words like "too trusting" or "passive" to describe parents. For example; Abigail said, "The parents tend to be more passive," while Candace commented that parents tended to be "...too trusting and just taking the word of the IEP team."

Taken altogether, the participants describe influences at all three phases of the VAAP eligibility decision-making process that inform and shape the resultant decision. The emergent IPAED Model uncovers those influences, allowing them to be investigated and eventually addressed.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study reduce to an issue of training. The findings show that students were sometimes erroneously found eligible to take the VAAP, implying that participants in this study did not receive adequate training on how to identify students with significant ID, and that IEP team members may not have been adequately trained to apply the VAAP participation criteria and make the eligibility decision. Further, findings suggest that parents tend to self-select as passive participants in the VAAP eligibility decision-making process, implying that parents need training to understand the importance of and the outcomes of a decision to have their child take the VAAP.

Training Recommendations

Special education case managers and other members of a student's IEP team need training in two areas: (1) how to accurately identify a student as having a significant ID and (2) how to accurately and consistently apply the VAAP participation criteria. These two training topics are interconnected because recognizing the characteristics of a significant ID is integral to applying the VAAP participation criteria. VAAP eligibility criteria questions two through four illustrate this relationship:

2. Does the student demonstrate significant cognitive [intellectual] disabilities?
3. Does the student's present level of performance indicate the need for extensive, direct instruction and/or intervention in a curriculum based on the Aligned Standards of Learning? The present level of performance, or student evaluation, may also include personal management, recreation and leisure, school and community, vocational, communication, social competence, and/or motor skills.
4. Does the student require intensive, frequent, and individualized instruction in a variety of settings to show interaction and achievement? (VDOE, 2011)

A designation of significant ID is more complex than a low IQ score, but includes other specific learner characteristics and significant deficits in adaptive functioning (VDOE, 2009). Although the VDOE makes their guidance document available to special education case managers and other IEP team members to use when considering VAAP eligibility for a student in special education, there does not appear to be specific training available for decision makers to ensure that they are accurately identifying a student as having a significant ID.

Were decision-makers to avail themselves of training to identify a student having a significant ID, they would still need further training in applying the VAAP participation eligibility criteria accurately and consistently. Questions three and four of the VAAP eligibility criteria can be difficult to interpret and apply because there are students with disabilities whom teachers or administrators consider to be in need of "extensive, direct instruction and/or intervention in a curriculum based on the Aligned Standards of Learning" and/or "intensive, frequent, and individualized instruction in a variety of settings" because the students are performing below grade level or at risk of failing the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) test. Special education case managers, administrators, and other IEP team members have a legitimate concern about the academic achievement of students in special education and how these students will perform on grade level achievement tests. It is

important to point out that there may be some students in special education for whom neither the VAAP nor the SOL test is appropriate, but it is not within the scope of this study to address the assessment needs of these students. Just because a student with a disability is performing below grade level or is at risk of failing the grade level test does not mean that he/she has a significant ID and should take the VAAP. Providing special education teachers, administrators, and other IEP team members with training to understand and apply VAAP participation criteria accurately and consistently can help ensure that only those students with the most significant ID are identified to take the VAAP.

Training for parents is a complex issue, because it includes more than simply helping parents understand terminology, a set of characteristics, or criteria to take a test. These topics are important for parents to understand and should not be neglected. However, parents also need to understand the importance of their role in the VAAP decision-making process and the consequences of having their child take the VAAP. Parents need to know the right questions to ask during the VAAP decision-making process to ensure that their child is found eligible to take the VAAP only if he/she has a significant intellectual disability.

The decision for a student to take an AA-AAS is a complex decision with consequences beyond simply what academic achievement test a student will take at the end of a school year. It influences the academic instruction a student will receive and the performance expectations to which that student will be held. Students who take AA-AAS receive academic instruction and have educational expectations that are reduced in depth and complexity from that of their peers without significant ID. These instructional decisions are appropriate for students with significant ID. However, if these instructional decisions are made for students who do not truly have significant ID, then those students can unnecessarily fall victim to low expectations, poor post-secondary outcomes, and may be denied a free appropriate public education.

Limitations

It appears that this study of the decision-making process of finding students with significant intellectual disabilities eligible to participate in an AA-AAS is the first of its kind. Since this study was conducted with special education case managers from central Virginia, the findings cannot be generalized beyond this group of participants. Broader understandings of this issue cannot be ascertained without learning more about what is happening in other parts of the United States with other stakeholders in this issue.

Research Recommendations

My recommendations for further research in the AA-AAS participation decision-making process are threefold: (1) replications of this study with special education case managers in other states, (2) inquiry into this issue with stakeholders other than case managers, and (3) the development of a survey instrument on this topic. I recommend that this study be replicated with special education case managers in one or two other states to identify variability in the AA-AAS decision-making process. Replicating this study with other participant stakeholders, such as administrators, directors of special education, and/or parents, would broaden the understanding of this important decision-making process. The goal would be to develop a survey that could be widely distributed to AA-AAS stakeholders across the United States to better understand and improve the AA-AAS participation decision-making process for students with significant ID.

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