

Going in Blind

Reducing the potential for teacher bias in special education assessments

By *Kenneth J. Ashman and Neal D. Kitterlin*

The principle is so obvious that the popular television show *The Voice* regards it as fundamental: Judges assess contestants “blind.” They turn their chairs away from the contestants and spin around to see them only after they have judged their voices to be worthy of further evaluation. They assess the quality of the voices without the bias seeing their owners might create.

Researchers, too, conduct “blind” studies to remove potential bias in assessment. Yet, while the education system teaches students the importance of blind assessment in their own research, too many school districts fail to employ this practice when assessing student performance. Nowhere is this more important than in special education.

The Big IDEA

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the federal government requires schools to develop an individualized education program (IEP) for each disabled child. The IEP specifies the child’s present performance level, goals, and objectives; specific services that will help the child meet those goals; and evaluation criteria and procedures to determine whether the child has met the goals.

The more abstract the goal, the more subjective the assessment—and the higher the potential for skewed or inaccurate results. Many higher-level institutions and instructors use blind-graded exams to minimize this potential.

In the special education context, the relationship between instructor and student is qualitatively different. The teacher-to-student ratio is smaller, and teachers give more intimate, individualized attention to

students, often forming close bonds. Also, the goals to be achieved are often more personalized and abstract than for “typical” students.

However, this increases the responsibility to ensure assessments remain unbiased. No interests are advanced if a student is measured to have mastered a goal that he or she has not. Yet even the best-intentioned instructors might err toward giving a student the benefit of the doubt due to their fondness for the child.

The issue is compounded when special education teachers are themselves evaluated by how often students meet their goals. Administrations

take note of special education teachers whose students routinely fail to meet goals, so those instructors might try to write goals that are readily achievable—and perhaps not challenging enough.

Researching Bias

The possibility of introducing subconscious bias is not theoretical. Multiple studies show that outside factors, including the self-interest of those conducting the assessments, can influence outcomes.

In a study reported by the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, for example, researchers found that nonblinded



Even the best-intentioned teachers might inject bias into assessing their own students' abilities when it comes to subjective assessments.



assessors of subjective measurements in clinical trials tended to generate substantially biased results compared to blinded trials. They overcompensated for an expected bias in favor of an experimental intervention, “paradoxically [introducing] a bias favoring the control.”

Individuals who resist the possibility that they might be biased are actually worse at decision-making than those who recognize their bias. A Carnegie Mellon University study found that people who have high bias “blind spots” are more likely to ignore the advice of peers or experts that could improve the quality of their decisions.

Moreover, once individuals form an opinion, they are reluctant to change their minds. A study from the University of Iowa found that equity analysts who issue written forecasts about stocks do not let new data significantly revise their initial analyses. Similarly, when educators form a view about the proficiency of a student, they might favor aspects of the assessment that support that view and ignore aspects that contradict it.

Bias Best Practices

Unintentional bias is a risk for educators who conduct subjective assessments, especially when positive outcomes for the educator are tied to students' performance on the evaluation. A goal of our educational system in conducting assessments is to minimize the potential for bias.

As such, the following are best practices to employ in conducting subjective assessments of special education students:

1. Have subjective assessments evaluated by an individual other than the instructor who has the primary responsibility for, or the most interaction with, the student being evaluated.
2. Since it isn't possible for another individual to evaluate assessments in their entirety, submit subjective

assessments to independent oversight and review.

3. If it isn't possible to give all subjective assessments an independent review, audit certain assessments randomly.
4. Ensure that evaluations of educators are not tied to the results of any subjective assessments the educator is responsible for conducting.

Minimize Obstacles

School districts should adopt these best practices if they wish to measure students' performance accurately and without bias. Districts are often lumbering, bureaucratic entities that are slow to change, however, and they might fear that they lack the resources needed to implement these strategies.

The resources needed to implement best practices are minimal. Instead of hiring new personnel, each special education teacher can assess the students of another special education teacher, and vice versa. If a total switch can't be implemented, one teacher could audit another teacher's grading by performing an independent assessment of the papers on a random basis.

Little is more important than assuring that an assessment of a student's ability is accurate. To assess a child with more ability than she or he has is to shortchange the student's learning. By adopting a blind-assessment practice, districts can minimize bias and enhance the reliability and validity of assessments.

This will lead to more accurate assessments of each student's knowledge and performance, and in turn, inform more focused learning strategies that address areas of need and improve student performance overall—and that's exactly what our educational system is designed to do. 

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