

TIME'S UP: BARRIERS TO TESTING ACCOMMODATIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Providing accommodations for students with learning disabilities in India, specifically at the high-school level, is a crucial element not only for the inclusion of a marginalized and often forgotten section of society, but also for a sociocultural integration of differently abled individuals. While there exists a variety of methods in which such accommodations can be made, the most common manner is through the provision of extra time, which studies have indicated to have a mixed and not entirely positive influence on the better performance of those with learning disabilities. This paper analyzes the efficacy of extra time as an accommodation methodology, and further makes an argument following the review of relevant literature of the importance of nevertheless providing for extra time accommodations as the lesser of two evils, with the alternative in a resource-poor environment being the complete lack of provision of all accommodation. Further, policy recommendations are made for other types of testing accommodations which can be made with minimal extra manpower and resources required to be devoted for implementation. By doing so, the existing barriers to testing accommodations will be deconstructed, and detailed steps provided for the importance and modality of providing extra time during high-school examinations.

Keywords: Education; Learning disorders, Dyslexia, Accommodations

INTRODUCTION

India is the world's largest democracy, with over 200 million children between the ages of 6 and 13 who are required to be educated (Census, 2011). While progress has been made at increasing the access to education, in many cases this has been proved to be an exclusionary process. While a 2014 report from the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) demonstrates that 96.7% of children between 6 and 14 years of age in rural areas are in schools and enrolled, and also that there has been an increase in the education of other marginalized communities of lower classes, genders, and castes (ASER & Pratham). However, even within these statistics, various

challenges are visible - in rural schools in 2014, it was shown that half the children in 5th grade could not effectively read as well as a standard 2nd grade student (ASER & Pratham).

With respect to disabilities and the differently abled, the 2011 National Census revealed that a mere 1.05% of children in school have a disability (although this in itself amounts to nearly 2.13 million students) and that of these students, nearly 28% are not provided with the appropriate resources to access school, an underestimated amount that is of 588,000 students (Census, 2011). Further, it is shown that 44% of such students have multiple and complex forms of activity limitations and functioning difficulties which are not properly diagnosed or accommodated within the school. The reasons for stating that these statistics are underestimated lie in the direct line of questioning that is adopted with the Census, where multiple binary yes-no questions are posed, due to which studies have shown that the direct questioning about one's disability status underestimates the prevalence, with people tending to not report the same, specifically with learning disabilities (Raffo, et. al., 2009).

Specifically in the national capital, New Delhi, surveys have shown that 32 % of disabled children under the age of 19 have never attended any educational institution - an alarming statistic, in any regard. Within this, while the rates for visual impairment (16.7%), hearing impairment (17%), mobility limitations (25%), and speech impairments (30.5%) are relatively lower, the highest percentage of children with disabilities who are unable to access education are those with learning disabilities (51%) and mental illness (56%). This clearly shows that there is a large need to bring into the fold hundreds of thousands of citizens who are otherwise left out of an education, denied upward mobility, and consequently disadvantaged in accessing employment, and contributing to the Indian economy.

While the implementation of inclusive education policies such as the Sarva Siksha Abhyan has attempted to perform this comprehensive mandate of disability inclusion, this has not yet occurred in a systematic manner with effective implementation in the primary and secondary level of education. Providing accommodations for students with learning disabilities in India, specifically at the high-school level, is a crucial element not only for the inclusion of a marginalized and often forgotten section of society, but also for a sociocultural integration of differently abled individuals. While there exists a variety of methods in which such accommodations can be made, the most common manner is through the provision of extra time, which studies have indicated to have a mixed and not entirely positive influence on the better performance of those with learning disabilities.

This paper analyzes the efficacy of extra time as an accommodation methodology, and further makes an argument following the review of relevant literature of the importance of nevertheless providing for extra time accommodations as the lesser of two evils, with the alternative in a

resource-poor environment being the complete lack of provision of all accommodation. Further, policy recommendations are made for other types of testing accommodations which can be made with minimal extra manpower and resources required to be devoted for implementation. By doing so, the existing barriers to testing accommodations will be deconstructed, and detailed steps provided for the importance and modality of providing extra time during high-school examinations.

BACKGROUND

A survey conducted in 2012 over more than 1200 households in India with respect to access to education, retention trends and barriers to education revealed that children with disabilities are much less likely to begin and are more likely to drop out of school without the completion of the high-school education as compared to non-disabled children, with a specifically wider gap when it comes to women, children from lower economic strata, and families with an uneducated male head (Raffo, et. al., 2009). Taking this in the context of the 4th Sustainable Development Goal, where the quality of education is defined in terms of inclusion and equity, it is clear and visible that there is a large need to improve the access to children with learning disabilities to not merely acquire the most basic communication and learning skills but also to complete the larger learning cycles associated with primary and secondary education in India.

Specifically with respect to learning disabilities such as dysgraphia, dyslexia, and others in the autism spectrum (AD), the attempts at inclusion through increased testing time have been faced by criticism across the world. The criteria for establishing that a certain accommodation is legitimate for standard practice is if it minimizes negative effects of specific learning disabilities, without affecting the performance of non-disabled examinees (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2001). Tindal and Fuchs (1999) called this specific standard as a “differential boost”, since it is important that to have a true equalizing effect, the disabled students must receive greater advantage and boost in performance through such accommodations than non-disabled students.

Studies have general proven to show that while extra time for testing usually results in a boost for both disabled and non-disabled students, there is a greater boost for disabled students (Sireci, Scarpati & Lee, 2005). It is interesting to note that in certain studies, neither group of participants benefited from extended time accommodations, whereas in other studies, both groups benefited substantially. The specific cases where the greater effect was seen for

non-disabled students were in “high stakes” tests which are timed, where speed is crucial, and ceiling effects are nullified due to which they are able to accomplish more tasks during additional time (Lewandowski, Lovett, Parolin, Gordon & Coddington, 2007). However, it has been shown that this exception does not apply with respect to learning disabilities -- of which those

affected constitute the largest body of students who usually opt for the testing accommodation of extra time, due to their deficits in processing speed and reading fluency, due to which extra time definitely benefits them (Mather & Wendling, 2005). Researchers have even gone to the extent to say that for some learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, it is impossible for students to take tests in a fair manner without there being the provision for extra time, comparing the extra time for those with LDs with insulin for diabetes (Shaywitz, 2003).

Alongside such clear and nearly objective reasons for extra time accommodation, there are other perspectives to this stating that the disadvantage faced by students with learning disabilities are not related to their cognitive ability -- but rather that they read more slowly, and complete fewer test items - due to which extended time helps even more and this impairment can be remedied with the same. When one considers the ways in which the CBSE has gone about categorizing and providing accommodations for disabilities, it is first seen that they categorize Specific Learning Disabilities (SLDs) into learning disabilities in reading (dyslexia), learning disabilities in expression (dysgraphia), learning disability in number faculty and mathematical ability (dyscalculia), and speech and language disorders (dysphasia). For this, the concessions that are provided include extra time of 60 minutes for a three hour paper, 50 minutes for a 2.5 hour paper, 40 minutes for a two hours period, 30 minutes for a 1.5 hour paper, as well as the permission of a scribe for the student in the case of autistic students (Vinod, 2018). With respect to the kind of medical certification accepted, they are primarily either of government hospitals and clinics, non-governmental organizations or groups connected to the state or central government, or national level councils and organizations with specific repute and accreditation.

DISCUSSION

The importance of extra time as accommodation and the barriers faced in India came to light most recently in 2018, when the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) arbitrarily denied several differently abled students of Grade 12, specifically those with learning disabilities, testing accommodations a mere two months before the exams themselves (Vinod, 2018). This resulted in a situation where various students with learning disabilities such as dysgraphia were faced with immense psychological stress without such accommodation, and resulted in their poor performance. Aside from this, an accommodation made is the provision of a scribe, which has also been denied in many instances. In this specific case, a psychiatric consultant with a government hospital, Dr. Ajeesh Ramachandra, stated that there was a large incidence of bureaucratic deficit -- doctors and psychiatrists diagnosed and provided proof of the existence of various learning disabilities for students on the basis of criteria in the relatively new DSM-V, which in many situations was not recognized by the CBSE (Vinod, 2018).

This resulted with the only other option being to gain an attestation of the existence of such learning disability from a single government doctor, where hundreds of students and their parents needed to line up as early as 5.30 AM in the morning to receive such letters of diagnosis from (Vinod, 2018). It is clear that there is required specific and clear methods of removing such institutional barriers to students with learning disabilities, where the lack of good performance and scoring in high-school examinations impacts candidates, particularly those of lower socio-economic background, from gaining access to further tertiary education and effectively entering into the formal market economy and employment. The many hundreds of thousands of such young citizens are excluded from contributing meaningfully to the growth and GDP of India due to such limitations.

Considering the existing literature and CBSE policies that have been reviewed in the previous section, it is recommended that a policy is enacted and implemented effectively which is mindful of the lack of differential boost with respect to certain kinds of testing accommodations for certain disabilities, and instead of purely attempting to implement extra time accommodations also restructures the manner of testing and examination to non-time bound methods such as research essays, papers, and other forms of evaluation that aren't "high-stakes". This takes from the notion of universal test design which suggests that tests should be constructed in a way that is fair to all examinees, making accommodations unnecessary (Thompson, Johnstone, Anderson & Miller, 2005). In the near future, a shift to computer based testing has a large potential to minimize the existing barriers to accommodating students with learning disabilities as well as the negative consequences of the disabilities themselves. It is the duty and requirement of the CBSE and other boards to adapt their testing and teaching patterns to be more inclusive for students with special needs.

CONCLUSION

The paper has reviewed literature and opposing critiques of the utilization of extra time as a method of accommodation, and has arrived at the common scholarly consensus that specifically with respect to students with learning disabilities, there is a significant differential boost through the provision of extra time, whether the perspective of affected cognitive ability or reading time is considered. It is also seen that several barriers exist to the effective provision of testing accommodations to students suffering from learning disabilities in India, specifically in the CBSE board. The paper has concluded with policy recommendations that not only effective implementation of extra time accommodation with more accessible diagnostic facilities be done, but also that the format of testing and examinations is itself changed to better suit a more inclusive population, as opposed to archaic modes of time-sensitive and high-stakes exams that cause unnecessary psychological stress to disabled and non-disabled students alike. In this case,

specifically with respect to those with learning disabilities, the rise of computer testing and more inclusive modes of the same will allow for a situation where perhaps extra time and other accommodations are not required at all in the future, or required at a minimum, but until then the government and associated bodies must persist with equally and freely providing extra time accommodation for those who require it.

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