An Accommodations Model for the Secondary Inclusive Classroom

David Scanlon¹ and Diana Baker, MS¹

Abstract
Despite expectations for accommodations in inclusive classrooms, little guidance for effective practice is available. Most accommodations policies and evidence-based practices address assessments. High school regular and special educators collaborated in focus groups to articulate a model based on their practices and perceptions of best practice. The model addresses classroom accommodations identification, provision, and evaluation. The model is particularly appropriate for cotaught classrooms with high enrollments of students with high incidence disabilities.

Keywords
academic accommodation (disabilities), inclusive schools, intervention, learning disabilities, secondary schools

Students with mild/moderate disabilities are increasingly being educated in regular education classrooms where they learn alongside their regular education peers (e.g., McGuire, Scott, & Shaw, 2006). Instructional accommodations are envisioned as a primary means of ensuring “appropriate” education in this evolving context (McLeskey, Hoppey, Williamson, & Rentz, 2004). By definition, accommodations are minor changes in how instruction is delivered and/or how a student participates, without substantially altering curriculum or expectations (Laprairie, Johnson, Rice, Adams, & Higgins, 2010; Thompson, Morse, Sharpe, & Hall, 2005). They can be divided into four categories: presentation, response, scheduling/timing, and setting (Thompson et al., 2005). (Thurlow, Thompson, & Lazarus, 2006, also identified an equipment category for assessment accommodations.) Providing instructional accommodations requires planning and fitting them with classroom practices.

The Inclusive Environment
Although inclusive education may reflect the ideals of “appropriate education” in the “least restrictive environment” (Individuals With Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2004), the realities of the regular education context pose several challenges. Chief among these is that teachers must ensure that students with and without disabilities benefit from the learning environment. Teachers report being unsure of how to provide accommodations and are often only willing or able to provide those that do not “disrupt” the classroom routine—which often means providing whole class accommodations (Fletcher, Bos, & Johnson, 1999; Polloway, Epstein, & Bursuck, 2003; Schumm & Vaughn, 1991). Historically, regular education teachers have feared that the presence of students with disabilities would detract from instructional time and that they do not have the expertise needed to provide specialized instruction. Brown (2007), however, found that regular and special educators understood the intention of accommodating and approved of providing assessment accommodations to “students with disabilities.”

To the contrary, in fact, inclusive environments can enhance educational practices and benefit students with and without disabilities (Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002). Several instructional methods have been developed to support learning in inclusive settings. Among the most popular of these is coteaching wherein special and regular educators collaborate to develop curricula and curricular accommodations and to teach classes (e.g., Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007). It is known to facilitate the use of instructional accommodations—particularly on the whole-class level (as opposed to individualized supports; Pearl & Miller, 2007). This structure allows paired teachers to balance content-area knowledge with pedagogical expertise and specialized supports. However, it should be noted that coteaching can also be challenging and often results in special educators effectively serving as aides to the regular education teacher and curriculum (see Scruggs

¹Lynch School of Education, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA, USA

Corresponding Author:
David Scanlon, PhD, Lynch School of Education, Boston College,
140 Commonwealth Ave., Chestnut Hill, MA 02467, USA
Email: scanloda@bc.edu
Educators need to know how to effectively provide instructional accommodations.

### Instructional Accommodations

Instructional accommodations support students with disabilities in accomplishing educational objectives in regular education classrooms (Vallecorsa, deBettencourt, & Zigmond, 2000) and are instrumental in differentiating instruction (Salend, 2010). A small body of literature offers insight into effective practices for instructional accommodations across three phases of the accommodation process: identification, provision, and evaluation.

**Identification.** In identifying instructional accommodations, teachers should consider students’ individual strengths and challenges rather than disability categories alone (e.g., “a student who has LD will need . . .”; Salend, 2010). Teachers should also be cognizant of how well a particular accommodation will work in his or her classroom in terms of “manageability” and “maintaining lesson integrity” (Boyle & Scanlon, 2010)—Accommodations tend to be most effective when integrated in the curriculum and aligned with teachers’ “routines and procedures” (Vallecorsa et al., 2000).

**Provision.** Choosing the accommodation best suited to a particular activity is a complex task that relies on a combination of factors: data (e.g., work samples, assessments, direct observation, interviews; Salend, 2010), teachers’ clinical judgment, and student input—Students can offer valuable perspectives regarding their own accommodation needs and may gain a sense of agency through being involved in the process. Middle school students reported preference for accommodations that built skills, gave them control in the learning process, were fair, and nonembarrassing to use (Nelson, Jayanthi, Epstein, & Bursuck, 2000). High school (HS) seniors trained about their accommodations and impending postsecondary rights and responsibilities reported being more confident about requesting and using accommodations and achieving (Wood, Kelley, Test, & Fowler, 2010).

**Evaluation.** Finally, evaluation is a crucial—though often neglected—component of the accommodative process (Salend, 2010). Teachers and students alike may gravitate toward certain “favorite accommodations,” although these might not be the most effective. Evaluating the outcome of an accommodation allows teachers and students to see what is or is not working well and to seek alternatives when an accommodation is ineffective.

### The Need for a Comprehensive Model

In light of the dearth of scholarship on providing instructional accommodations, teachers need information on the components of the accommodation process and how they
fit together to create an integrated model. Research reveals that many teachers remain unclear as to the distinction between curricular modifications and accommodations, and whether accommodations should be provided only “as needed” rather than whenever “beneficial” (Ysseldyke et al., 2001), for example. We also know that teachers are more likely to provide accommodations that are closely related to academic content (e.g., calculator for math assignments), designed for students with the greatest academic needs (Ysseldyke et al., 2001), and generic (e.g., extended time on tests, shorter assignments) rather than idiosyncratic (Vallecorsa et al., 2000).

Because teachers adopt practices that fit their instructional theories and routines (Joyce & Showers, 1995; Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992), the present study was designed to identify instructional accommodation practices HS teachers consider appropriate and are willing to provide. What the teaching context allows and demands also influences the practices teachers adopt (e.g., Harris, Graham, & Deshler, 1998). Therefore, there is a particular need for understanding how accommodations can be delivered in the secondary context. Because accommodations involve identification, provision, and evaluation, and they intersect regular and special education missions and practices, the purpose of this study was to organize the perspectives of HS educators to reveal a comprehensive model for instructional accommodations in an inclusive HS, indicative of how regular and special educators are willing and able to work together to provide accommodations. Because comprehensive “best practice” accommodation models do not exist, a case study approach (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2005) was used to discern the teachers’ “situation and context [and the] meanings and intentions inherent in that situation” (p. 306) as a necessary first step to “develop the capacity to explore and refine . . . educational practice” (p. 307). As Burns and Ysseldyke (2009) suggested, addressing intervention and research gaps should begin with being responsive to teachers’ needs, perspectives, and likely practices.

Method

Participants

The participants were 12 HS teachers (see Table 1). Of these, 5 were special educators who cotaught in inclusive regular education classrooms. Each also taught students in resource settings—including a “skills for learning class” (SFL), a special education class where students with significant skill deficits learn specific academic skills and strategies. The 7 regular education coteachers taught English language arts, history/social studies, mathematics, and science. A total of 2 special educators did not participate in the third focus group, for personal reasons, and 3 regular educators joined at the third session out of interest in the project (see Table 2). The teachers reported that the students with IEPs in their inclusive and SFL classes were overwhelmingly students with LD and/or attention deficits.

The teachers taught the middle and lowest of three academic-level classes in the HS. Student assignment to a particular level was based on grades, test scores, recommendations from previous teachers, and parent input. Some were in different level classes for different subjects, and all were able to move between levels from 1 year to the next.

The researchers, who moderated the focus groups, were a male university professor and a female doctoral student.
Both were experienced special educators who have taught and researched at the secondary level.

Setting

The study took place in the HS of a suburban community close to a major metropolitan northeast city. Although predominantly White (83%), the city includes a substantial Hispanic population (9%) and significant immigrant communities from Central America, Africa, and South East Asia (sources: U.S. Census Bureau and municipal websites).

All teacher focus group meetings were held in the same special education classroom. Teachers and researchers sat either in a circle of moveable chair-desks or around a large worktable. Focus groups were recorded using digital voice recorders, which were placed in the middle of the group of participants.

Data Collection Instruments

Digital voice recordings and field notes were used to capture the content of the focus group sessions. In some sessions, the participants also made notes on poster paper. A draft graphical representation of the accommodations model was developed by the researchers following the second focus group session based on analysis of the tape and field notes, which was reviewed by the teachers at the third session.

Procedures

Focus group methodology facilitates interactions among teachers, allowing for depth of understanding and spontaneity missed in individual interviews (Johnson & Turner, 2003); it also allows researchers to analyze group interactions in addition to individual attitudes and perceptions about a topic. Given our desire to develop a model reflective of regular and special educators’ perspectives, this was the most appropriate format for data collection.

Because socially and intellectually homogeneous groups have been shown to be more productive and to promote candid participation (Johnson & Turner, 2003), the special educators and regular educators met separately for their initial focus group meetings, so that the perspectives of the two disciplines could be identified. Procedures for all focus groups were the same. The researchers acted as moderators, keeping the group conversation “focused” and serving as “enlightened novices” (Johnson & Turner, 2003, p. 308), using a protocol to ensure that specific topics were addressed but leaving the participants otherwise free to direct the conversation. The researchers did not contribute their own perspectives but in the role of moderators did provide information when the group raised a question (e.g., clarifying IDEA expectations for regular educators’ participation in IEP meetings). Across the focus groups, the teachers came to consensus on three aspects of the accommodations process: identification, provision, and evaluation. Johnson and Turner (2003) acknowledged that achieving consensus is one form of discussion appropriate for focus group methodologies. As a form of member check, the synthesized data from each session were returned to the participants at the next focus group for review.

First focus group meeting. For their first focus group meeting, the five special educators met with the researchers to discuss (a) the challenges of identifying and providing appropriate accommodations for students with mild/moderate disabilities and (b) their ideas of what makes an accommodation effective. The first focus group meeting of the four regular educators had the same task. Next, the ways in which needs of academically diverse students are met in the teachers’ inclusive classrooms were discussed as a lead-in to discussing if, and how, accommodations are provided. The impacts of providing accommodations were also discussed. Both groups were also asked how lists of individual students’ accommodations are generated.

Second focus group meeting: Special and regular educators together. In the second focus group session, the special educators and regular educators shared their ideas about accommodation provision and effectiveness from their first meetings. The researchers shared the four forms of accommodations (presentation, response, setting, and scheduling; Thompson et al., 2005) to remind the teachers to think expansively about accommodations in their classrooms. The teachers then collaboratively discussed who should provide accommodations, who should and does participate in identifying appropriate accommodations, and what practices are realistic to use in providing instructional accommodations in the inclusive classroom. Finally, they addressed how the effectiveness of accommodations should be assessed. A model for the three stages of providing accommodations (planning, delivery, monitoring, and evaluation) resulted from analysis of the session recordings and field notes.

Third teacher team focus group: Model specification. The researchers presented the model for identifying, providing, and evaluating appropriate accommodations that reflected the teachers’ perspectives. As a form of member check, a graphic depiction was shared with the teachers, and they were asked to critique and refine it.

The combined special and regular education teacher focus group then reconvened a final time to review and provide feedback on the model that was revised based on their input at the third teacher focus group session. Approximately 2 weeks transpired between each teacher focus group meeting. Meetings lasted a maximum of 2 hr.

Data Analysis

The two researchers analyzed the focus group data by listening to the digital recordings and reviewing their field notes and written materials from the sessions. Because the
primary topic of the focus group discussions was elucidation of an accommodations model and the policies, actions, materials, dispositions, and so on necessary to enact it, a content analysis (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009) was used. Content analysis can be used to compare the frequency or patterns of categorized data points; however, it was used here to identify how each data point contributed to a single cohesive model the teachers were articulating via the focus group conversations. To do this, the researchers focused on “commonalities” and “differences” among participants’ perspectives (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Thus, the model reflected the collective thinking of the focus group participants and not just select statements.

After the second focus group session, one researcher independently identified all statements from the recordings that described effective accommodation practices in the opinion of one or more teacher participants. Different from a theme analysis used to identify common categories among comments, the researcher sought to connect all of the comments to illuminate how the participants were envisioning the model (e.g., Linda introduced the idea of keeping an Accommodations Chart, and the statements that followed in that session described similar practices and/or approval of Linda’s. But in the following focus group session, Linda added the qualification that she did not begin to update the chart “in September . . . I wait until I get to know the student better,” which the group then agreed should be part of how the chart gets used). Following a coding check process (Gall et al., 2005), the second researcher independently listened to the recordings for statements about effective accommodation practices and then reviewed the first’s identified comments list and draft graphic of how they related to a model. Following that, the two reviewed and reconciled via discussion both the accuracy of lists of comments—establishing descriptive validity (Johnson & Turner, 2003) of the data and the structure and components of the model—for theoretical validity (Johnson & Turner, 2003). In this process, the two iteratively read/listened to the data and worked to consensus to represent their theory (Boudah, 2011) of the model the teachers were articulating. Member check by the fully assembled focus group team at the third meeting was used to review the accuracy of the described model; to confirm its interpretive validity (Johnson & Turner, 2003), the researchers presented the model to the teachers, describing each component/step to them (e.g., “you said you would . . .”), and the teachers were asked to comment on whether the model accurately reflected what they “do or are willing to do.” The process of critically reviewing the model in stages, first between the researchers and then with the teachers, served to establish its “credibility” and “trustworthiness” (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005; Johnson & Turner, 2003) or potential to accurately reflect the comprehensive model the teachers were articulating. To ensure that the researchers accurately incorporated member check feedback into the model, the full focus group repeated the member check process in a final meeting to review the updates. The three regular educators who were new to the group at the third session functioned similar to a theoretical sample (Charmaz, 1995), engaging with the other teachers as outsiders while confirming the feasibility of the model.

Findings
The resultant instructional accommodations model is based on the inclusive HS teachers’ practices and perceptions of what is required for effective accommodation provision. As their comments reflect, their context was one that necessitated active response to students’ needs for accommodations.

The Inclusion Context at HS
The teachers’ understandings of, and experiences with, inclusion contribute to explaining the model for accommodations provision they articulated. The teachers (with one exception) taught in HS’s L1 track, which was the lowest of three levels of academic placement based on achievement. Important to note, the teachers (with that one exception) taught L1 classes that contained high percentages of special education students, “I’m up to 23 and 19 or 20 of them have IEPs” (Linda). They further reported that while in some ways special education students have different needs—“they require more attention than other students . . . hands are in the air more often asking questions” (Doug)—they are generally not all that different from the other L1 students. Statements such as Doug’s that they treat all students in the class the same “because they are in the same class” were clarified by comments indicating all or nearly all L1 students need accommodative instruction.

The teachers reported believing in inclusive education: “Inclusion is a fantastic thing if done right” (Sarah). They regarded it as having a positive effect on their students with special needs. Despite the typically high percentages of students with special needs in a classroom, Sarah claimed that the regular education students provide models and that the purpose of inclusion is to “push [special education students] to the same level.” Sam stated in the same conversation “inclusion is to maximize potential.” The teachers also noted that they value coteaching as an approach to inclusive teaching: “[That’s] what’s made the biggest difference for the kids I teach who are on IEPs” (Sarah).

The regular and special educators saw themselves as having roles in classroom accommodations provision: “We’re all obligated to make sure the accommodation is being provided” (Doug). They identified those roles across all stages of providing accommodations: identification, provision, and evaluation. Furthermore, they repeatedly cited the necessity for regular educator–special educator collaboration and coteaching. As one regular educator noted, “It really helps when you have a coteacher or paraprofessional
The accommodations model the teachers articulated represents their differentiated roles within coteaching.

**The Accommodations Model**

The focus group discussions addressed effective and ineffective practices—experienced and imagined—the roles of various individuals, and the importance of the practices discussed. The teachers articulated a model for providing instructional accommodations incorporating the three phases proposed by the researchers in the focus group meetings: *Preparation, Provision,* and *Evaluation* (see Figure 1). Each phase consists of multiple major steps. In Phase 1, educators Identify Accommodation Needs, then Identify Accommodations, and next Prepare to Provide Accommodations; in Phase 2, they Provide Accommodations and Progress Monitor. The progress monitor step carries over to Phase 3 that also includes Evaluation. As is noted in the following description of the model, the steps are not enacted exclusively in a lockstep progression (e.g., progress monitoring may lead to identifying additional needs).

The teachers also identified major activities that are enacted across model phases and their respective steps. Listed in the leftmost column of Figure 1, the major activities correspond to actions taken within the various steps of the model.
Phase 1: Preparation

Prerequisite. The first major activities of the model are labeled Prerequisite. The teachers identified them as enacting in preparation for various steps of the model to be engaged. All prerequisites are actions taken during the Preparation Phase.

The teachers agreed that proper diagnosis of disabilities and educational needs is a necessary prerequisite for appropriate accommodations provision. This is one of the few examples of a distinction between the views of regular and special educators. The idea was suggested and supported by special educators; the regular educators acknowledged it may be relevant but suggested that they tend to provide accommodations regardless of diagnoses (which is not to say they ignore diagnostic information).

Other prerequisite activities the focus group teachers identified related to improving communications with sending schools about accommodations. Much of that discussion related to the middle schools that send students to ninth grade at HS with executed IEPs. The teachers want the middle school educators to be better informed about the HS routine and classroom context so that the IEPs would be more responsive to the HS context. Those activities include discussions and observational visits by the middle school educators as well as sharing an Accommodations Reference Sheet that the teachers agreed to create. The Accommodations Reference Sheet will list the most commonly identified accommodations and define each with examples of how they may be enacted at the HS level. All teachers would receive the Accommodations Reference Sheet. The special educators would take the lead in developing it (“I’d have to list all of my kids, I don’t want to have to make a personalized one for every teacher in the school” [Laurie]) and seek input and feedback from the regular educators.

The teachers also recommended that the special educators participate in IEP meetings for the students transitioning from eighth grade: “I’d like to be able to go to [eighth grade IEP] meetings with kids so that I could go through with them what are necessary [accommodations] (Karen). Especially if I’m the SFL teacher.” Although there was consensus that regular and special educators should participate in IEP meetings at HS, they agreed that the special educators could represent all perspectives sufficiently at the middle school meetings.

There was a presumption among the teachers that IEP creation across all years is primarily the responsibility of special educators. “To me it’s [the special educators’] job to create the IEP because they’re working with the parents more” (Doug). General and special educators made multiple references to regular educators informing the special educators of needs and what works, and to the special educators having expertise in drafting IEP documents and understanding the needs of learners with special needs, for example.

The regular education teachers agreed that they should be present and actively involved in IEP meetings. Among the contributions they wanted to make was describing the classroom routine and the curriculum to the team. “We want to tell SFL teachers what we need students to do, not just be told what accommodations to use” (Doug). However, they voiced a common frustration that it was often difficult to attend even a portion of a meeting.

Identifying needs and accommodations. As noted, the teachers agreed that identifying accommodations is the responsibility of general and special educators. They noted that they can provide observations of how the accommodations have been working in practice as well as what the student needs and how she or he seems to learn best: “First of all look at the disability and what it is preventing . . . then the feedback from the regular education teacher, you know, ‘where are they struggling in class?’” (Laurie).

Coteaching roles. Despite examples of general and special educators conceiving of themselves as all “classroom teachers,” there are still ways in which they clearly differentiate each other’s roles. They noted that it is the role of the special educator to inform the regular educator of the final approved list of appropriate accommodations from an IEP meeting, even if the regular educator was present at the meeting. Furthermore, the special educators are responsible for assessing the student’s ability to use her or his accommodation and providing initial instruction in usage when that is needed. Also, the regular educator has responsibility for informing the special educator of tasks and learning tools to be used in her or his class and of any anticipated accommodation needs for an individual student: “I’ll start off with a test by giving it to Laurie, she will look at it and tell me if I’m accommodating enough and if not she’ll make the corrections and send it back” (Doug). Similarly, the special educator is presumed responsible for teaching a subset of students enrolled in the SFL class individually about appropriate academic and study skills, which may not be the same as their accommodations. In SFL class, the students do learn to use some of their accommodations, but the teachers noted that they want the model to incorporate SFL to consistently introduce and monitor progress of students’ accommodations skills. That class is also where the students learn organizational skills, such as homework management, and receive remedial and strategic instructions on reading, math, and writing skills. The special educators are expected to then communicate to the regular education teachers what those skills are so that they can be emphasized and supported in the classroom. The special educators use their knowledge of the regular education curriculum and classroom routines to inform selection of those skills but ultimately have responsibility for determining the skills curriculum, much as the content-area teachers do for their curriculum. It is also the special educators’ role at the start of the school year to remind
students of their individual accommodations and how to use them effectively.

**Phase 2: Provision**

*Managing the list.* The list of accommodations generated via the IEP process in the Preparation Phase is not sacred. For that reason, the student training activities listed for the preparation phase are listed again in the Provision Phase. This is to acknowledge that new accommodations will be identified for the student across the school year. When that happens, it is again primarily the special educator’s responsibility to teach the student about the accommodation, including how to self-advocate for it in the classroom and how to use it independently. “How many kids know what their accommodations are?” (Laurie), “or how to use them?” (Karen), “or that they have a responsibility to use them?” (Linda), and “[We should have] a conversation with the students regarding their learning style and actually go through the list of accommodations; ‘does this work for you?, no?, what will help you?’” (Laurie).

Among the ways that new accommodations get identified in the school year, one is by the regular education teachers keeping an Accommodations Chart,

I make a chart, I write the student’s name, their disability as it is explained [on the IEP], I try to sum it up very quickly, (I write) their accommodations which are very general, a lot of them are the same, but I also have a column for special issues that I notice either from the IEP or I witnessed or talked about with the student. (Linda)

Some of the teachers in the focus group reported keeping the chart handy in a desk drawer for easy reference. Other classroom teachers on the spot declared they would begin the practice. The special educators also expressed valuing the chart, “as the liaison, it would force me to go over those IEPs with a fine-toothed comb” (Karen). The teachers also used the Accommodations Chart to record new accommodations that they come to realize would be appropriate for an individual student: “It should be a living thing” (Linda). As the first teacher to describe using an accommodation chart explained, “I don’t do it in September . . . I do it after I get to know students better” (Linda). Sarah added, “You’ve got to work with a kid for 4 weeks before you know ‘this is how I’m going to use this (accommodation).’” In discussing the need to treat the accommodations list as a “living document,” the regular educators expressed that IEPs do not always fully correspond with what they observe in the classroom: “A lot of times I see the accommodations do not address some things these students need” (Linda).

In addition to the regular educator’s notes on the Accommodations Chart, the regular and special educator make notes and have conversations with each other as a form of progress monitoring. By making notes and having dedicated conversations, the teachers ensure that they attend directly to the effectiveness of the accommodations process. Not surprisingly, the teachers reported that finding time to discuss students can be challenging. They expressed a preference for communicating via e-mail. The teachers engage in the same sort of discussions and electronic memoing regarding the study skills some special education students are taught if they are enrolled in the SFL class.

Consistent with their view of accommodations needs as evolving, the teachers do not presume that accommodations on the IEP must be adhered to and cannot be altered prior to the expiration of an IEP. They presume that accommodations need evolving and some accommodations will cease to be required, just as new ones will be identified over time. “There ought to be a way to update it. We’ll have a team meeting in September . . . by May I might realize this kid desperately needs a thesis starter or something like that” (Sarah). In addition, there was criticism of the lists in IEPs that they cocreated as a “stamp” (Laurie). When asked by the researchers, “how do you know what accommodations a kid needs?” Melissa, a special educator, replied, “not from their IEPs! ‘Oh good, they all need preferential seating!’” Two regular educators then chimed in: “typed up notes” (Doug) and “wait time for response” (Linda). Other conversations during the focus groups reiterated that there tends to be commonly listed accommodations. However, several teachers agreed with Sam when he stated, “nine out of ten have that standard information . . . and rare is the case that needs another one.” These conversations evidenced that the teachers believed there are several accommodations that are commonly needed, and despite disdainful comments about the “stamp” list, most students would have their needs met via some of the accommodations on that list. Again, they believed that in-class observation is the best way to determine which are needed.

In the third focus group session, the teachers discussed at length the relationship between home and school in accommodations provision. Part of that discussion reflected the challenge of modifying IEP-approved accommodations lists. They commented that parents sometimes misinterpret accommodations as a way to “excuse” their child from certain expectations, whereas the teachers prefer to be able to allow or deny specific accommodations as they consider pedagogically appropriate. In one instance, a regular education teacher cited not agreeing with an approved accommodation as her reason for not providing it: “When I get weird ones like [only grade assignments that are turned in] I think ‘are you kidding? I’m not doing that’” (Linda). The teachers also noted that accommodations should be modified or removed as students develop their skill proficiency; however, parents often interpret that as a denial of services.
The teachers also noted that students should monitor their own accommodations usage—for accuracy and effectiveness; however, they did not consider their students to be doing so at present. That means that the students must be scaffolded in how to monitor and advocate for accommodations usage: “An accommodation has been effective . . . when they can communicate their need for something, when they’ve internalized it . . . when they get to the point when they can advocate for their need themselves” (Laurie).

**In-class provision.** Several of the teachers referred to accommodations provision in ways similar to “just good teaching,” although they also acknowledged that students with special needs sometimes have a particular need for accommodations. “When you get two-thirds of your class that needs accommodations you’re really going to accommodate everybody. Unless somebody needs a modification, you can take that individually from there” (Doug). Each of the regular education teachers described practices during instruction, homework, or testing by which they scaffolded all students’ participation or made accommodations available to any who wished them (Doug did comment that he sometimes only provides accommodations to those students who he can first see are “trying.”). They also acknowledged that they observed which tasks were typically challenging for students to determine whether or not to provide an accommodation. We noted examples of the teachers using their own clinical judgment leading to variation in what accommodations they provide; for example, Doug allows automatic extensions on homework if he sees students struggling to complete it, whereas Linda “never” allows homework extensions.

Consistent with Schumm and Vaughn’s (1991) finding regarding what teachers reported being willing to do, the regular education teachers in this study noted that the accommodations they are best able to provide and, therefore, most likely to are those that can be used with the entire class: “If Johnny needs the directions printed, OK, I do that for everyone . . . I think the accommodation is something everyone has to take part in” (Doug). Expanding on Schumm and Vaughn’s findings, in this study the special educators, who all co-taught in inclusive classrooms, agreed on whole-class administration because it is the most feasible and beneficial: “I focus on the learning. What I do for the [IEP] kids is good for all kids” (Judy). Importantly, however, the teachers justified this as pedagogically sound practice and not merely convenient: “I have one class that’s inclusion and one not, I do the same accommodations for each of those classes” (Sarah). Furthermore, the teachers were clear that in the whole-class approach, they must remain responsive to the unique needs of individuals: “You see a kid who is [working hard] and just doesn’t get it, you say ‘okay, what else can I do?’” (Sam).

As Linda noted, and several agreed, planning and organization are necessary for effective accommodations provision. Several of the teachers also acknowledged attempting multiple accommodations if one does not appear to be effective. Doug noted that students should have a list of accommodations “just like we do” and even carry it with them.

**Phase 3: Evaluation**

The Evaluation Phase overlaps with the Provision Phase. This configuration of the model makes it clear how much evaluation practices are recursive with intervention, similar to how instructional practices and assessment inform one another in curriculum-based measurement (Deno, 2003).

As has been noted, the accommodations provision model calls for regular and special educators communicating with each other throughout the school year. They inform each other as to what accommodations are listed in the IEP, appear appropriate for a student based on day-to-day observations, and are needed based on the curriculum and classroom routine. They also make note of how effective the accommodations are, including how well the student uses them. In conjunction with these evaluation activities, the teachers keep notes for their individual practice as well, by such means as updating their Accommodations Charts.

The recursive relationship between accommodations provision and evaluation also represents how the teachers regard the IEP document in guiding classroom accommodations. They acknowledge the importance of IEPs, reflecting their utility for their teaching; Sam explained, “[in September] I’ll read the IEPs, then a month later I’ll read them again.” They also consider their participation in the IEP meeting to be important. In addition to lamenting that classroom coverage often prevents their full participation in the meetings, they agreed that they would prefer to be present for the full meeting instead of a brief portion. They noted that they would gain valuable insights into the student as well as have useful information to share. Although several of the regular educators were not aware that progress reports on IEP goals must be sent home, they did agree with the special educator who suggested that progress on accommodations should be reported as well.

The teachers also agreed that students need to play a role in monitoring their own accommodations. Notably, only Judy commented that she asks her students when the teachers were discussing communicating with each other regarding what accommodations are being used and are effective; although, other special educators agreed that they should do that. As described previously, they expect students educated in using their accommodations to be able to “advocate for their learning needs” (Laurie). Judy noted that because of stigma associated with being a special education student, those students are sometimes less likely to seek her support in the regular education classroom than are regular education classmates. The process of student self-monitoring needs to begin with the student participating in the IEP meeting: “Students should be at their IEP meeting [to know] ‘this is
your disability, this is how it affects you and these are the tools that are going to . . . help you to level the playing field” (Laurie). The teachers agreed that student training in using their accommodations should take place in the SFL class.

Related Activities

The rightmost column of the model lists related activities. These correspond with the various steps of the model and with each phase. Two of the major foci are refining the model activities and professional development on accommodations. The Accommodations Reference Sheet is a document the teachers proposed developing as a consequence of participating in the focus group conversations. Although it was not yet enacted, they already anticipated that they would need to develop a system by which it could be updated. A popular sentiment was that it would be updated similar to individual teacher’s Accommodations Charts. Teachers would be expected to make notations on the Reference Sheet and to periodically submit those to update it. The intention is to make certain that the Reference Sheet remains practical by ensuring it reflects their experience-based best practices. The teachers did agree that there should be a mid-fall meeting of a student’s regular education and special education teachers, once they had all gotten to know the student. That meeting would be a time to discuss what accommodations (and other practices) are/are not benefiting the student.

To facilitate an efficient IEP meeting, the teachers suggested that parents should receive a progress report that includes information about accommodations no less than 2 days before the meeting. The teachers commented that providing parents with a progress update at the meeting routinely wastes valuable meeting time. They further noted that the parents need time to review and consider the progress report before a productive conversation can be had. They suggested that the student, parents, and educators all sign a list of agreed-to accommodations. Although the accommodations would be listed on the signed IEP, they wanted a separate list that included a statement that the accommodations might be updated across the school year. They believed that a cosigned list would reinforce to parents that accommodations should evolve as students develop in proficiency.

To support the student consistently receiving appropriate accommodations, the team suggested that the special education liaison be assigned to monitor the student across the 4 years of HS. Again, they also desired the special educators to be assigned to students enrolled in the same inclusion classrooms where they coteach. The special educators thought that it would be ideal if they could loop with a student for at least 2 years.

There was consensus that professional development should be provided for explaining accommodations (e.g., those listed in the Accommodations Reference Sheet) and how to provide them. Sam reflected others’ sentiments about training when he noted that after an initial professional development—“from there it’s a team effort.” As Linda, a teacher with 19 years of experience, noted, they need support in learning about student needs and not just how to provide the accommodation—

I think I’ve always provided accommodations but it really is in the past 2 years that I’ve understood the depth of some of the learning disabilities, what they mean, how they present themselves, little nuances that I never knew about before. I definitely credit that to [her two special education coteachers].

Finally, the teachers noted that to be effective, the classroom culture must be hospitable to provide accommodations. This includes ensuring that approved accommodations are consistent with classroom routines and resources. Although the teachers acknowledged that class-wide provision of an accommodation is the easiest, they also believed that individuals or small numbers should sometimes receive unique accommodations.

As to the importance of providing accommodations, we note a comment from Linda that reflects the sentiments of all teachers in this project, “there are very few [struggling] kids [for whom] accommodations are not working.”

Discussion

Increased placement in regular education requires effective instructional practices to ensure special education students’ access to the curriculum and achievement (McLeskey, Landers, Hoppey, & Williamson, 2011). Instructional accommodations are an expected special education service (IDEA, 2004) and a practical necessity in that context. Just as with other aspects of instruction and special education service delivery, providing accommodations requires planning and coordination with other educational activities (Thompson et al., 2005).

A Comprehensive Model

The model presented here is a comprehensive response to the HS inclusive education context. It represents effective practices that practitioners identified they are willing and desire to use. The model reflects their observations and experiences and represents the teachers’ own “best practices.” A further research study should examine the feasibility and effectiveness of this model in practice. However, the model makes a significant contribution by informing on how HS teachers believe instructional accommodations should be provided, is an important response to the limited descriptions in the professional literature of such teachers’ practices, and is a starting point for validating effective practices.
The model makes clear that accommodations provision is the shared responsibility of general and special educators. It reflects their overlapping and distinct roles as coteachers. Friend and Bursuck (2006) noted that coteaching can exist in a variety of partnerships, with equal and “unequal” roles being appropriate based on the context. The teachers who participated in evoking this model considered their coteaching partnerships essential to providing accommodations. The regular educators were recognized as leaders of content instruction and to varying degrees as “lead” teachers in the classroom. The special educators were experts on skills for learning and leaders in preparing students for accommodations. Both had roles in selecting and evaluating accommodations, although regular educators tended to defer to their special education partners for approving their appropriateness within the classroom (as opposed to IEP development, where they assert more equal input from their respective content and skills expertise). Roles were more equalized in the literal provision of the accommodation (e.g., who checked on an individual student or who rephrased instructions to the class). Thus, the teachers practiced and valued the “one teach, one assist” model of coteaching, which Scruggs et al. (2007) found to be the most common inclusive education coteaching model. Interestingly, who “teaches” and who “assists” is freely alternated between content and skills/accommodations instruction.

These findings may enrich previous research findings that document that secondary general educators are less willing to provide accommodations (Maccini & Gagnon, 2006) and that when they do, they prefer generic to personalized accommodations (Vallecorsa et al., 2000). Coteaching was essential to the practices in this study. Two research syntheses have documented limited research, particularly at the secondary level, but generally favorable findings for coteaching’s appeal and effectiveness (Murawski & Swanson, 2001; Scruggs et al., 2007). The regular educators in the present study turned to their special educator colleagues to identify accommodations and prepare students, and as Byrnes (2008) and Maccini and Gagnon (2006) recommended, they also relied on positive coteaching relationships for accommodations delivery and monitoring. Educators adopting this model would, therefore, also need to develop effective coteaching relationships. It should also be noted that accommodating and coteaching for these HS teachers typically reflected whole-class instructional practices, which predominate secondary instruction (Scruggs et al., 2007).

Much of the limited scholarship on classroom accommodations focuses on their “delivery” during instruction. This model addresses how possible appropriate accommodations are identified and evaluated consistent with the special education planning process as well. Thus, the accommodations model is also comprehensive in that it addresses what occurs not only during classroom instruction but also in all phases of the accommodations process. Specifically, it is coordinated with best practices such as coplanning, IEP planning, individualized instruction intended to accomplish access and achievement, data-based instructional decision making and evaluation, as well as monitoring and reporting on student progress.

The teachers value the practices identified across the stages of this model. As Laurie noted in the final focus group session, “[this model] is cleaning up what we currently do and making it more effective.” Teachers’ commitment and valuation of a practice are essential to accurate performance (Joyce & Showers, 1995; Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992).

Implications for Practice

In addition to presenting a comprehensive model for instructional accommodations, the findings from this study contribute to establishing a broader knowledge base for effectively accommodating students in instructional and assessment contexts. As has been noted, existing policy and research on accommodations is overwhelmingly focused on assessment. At best, it addresses how instructional accommodations should be in-service of assessment accommodations (see, for example, Thurlow, Lazarus, Thompson, & Robey, 2002). The present model speaks to the need for conceptualizing instructional accommodations as a teaching activity. It also introduces factors that should guide accommodation identification and administration. Such information will help in determining how professional knowledge for assessment accommodations informs the instructional accommodation process. For example, appropriate assessment accommodations are typically thought of as those that provide a “differential boost,” meaning only those who need the accommodation will earn improved test scores as a result (Scarpati, Wells, Lewis, & Jirka, 2001). The teachers in this study indicated that providing class-wide accommodations for the benefit of all is not only pragmatic but also desirable because it benefits all learners (with some exceptions where students who do not need the accommodation may elect to decline it). Thus, this study reminds us that classroom teaching and learning is more communal than assessment and helps us to consider the question of what is appropriate practice for special education instruction in the inclusive context (Zigmond, Kloo, & Volonino, 2009).

The process for instructional accommodation selection in some ways parallels professional knowledge for how to select effective assessment accommodations, yet also indicates different considerations may be appropriate. Item-level differences are rarely tested in assessment accommodation studies; rather, their impact on overall test performance is judged (Scarpati, Wells, Lewis, & Jirka, 2011). Similarly, the teachers in this study indicated that they select instructional accommodations based on how
well the accommodation has worked for the student in the past (in addition to its fit with the instructional routine). However, although the approved list of accommodations for assessments is based on normed outcome data, individual outcomes are the basis for selecting instructional accommodations, and the range of potential options is often far greater (see Lovett, 2010, for discussion on the limitations of matching accommodations to individual students).

The process the teachers wish to follow for selecting and updating accommodations in the classroom also varies from the process typically used in assessment. For assessments, accommodations are typically selected from lists of approved options provided by test regulators (Thurlow & Quenemoen, 2011). The teachers wish to modify, eliminate, and introduce classroom accommodations across the course of the school year. Their Accommodation Guide is a personally developed list that has its origins in the IEP-approved list of accommodations but constantly evolves based on their clinical judgment. Whether this approach to individualizing accommodations will violate the agreed-to practices on the annual IEP will have to be determined.

The comprehensive instructional accommodations model presented here reflects best practices in special education and providing accommodations in the classroom. It contributes to broadening the profession’s thinking about what it means to accommodate students. It also reflects practices that a range of educators agree are realistic and appropriate for effective inclusive classroom teaching at the secondary level.

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