



## RESEARCH NOTES FOR APRIL, 2008

### *Learner Characteristics of Students Taking AA-AAS: Seven States' Data and Implications for the Field*

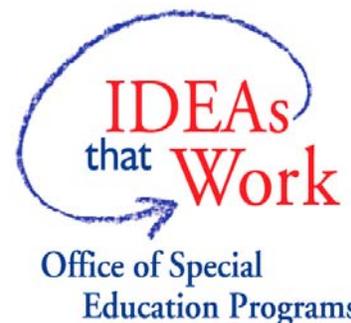
It seems a relatively simple task to define the population of students who participate in alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS) and to build an assessment that provides reliable and valid information about what these students know and can do. However, despite that apparent simplicity, the challenge in this initial step of assessment design cannot be underestimated and the implications for the validity of the assessment are significant. The population description is essential to understanding the demonstration of competence in academic domains. Furthermore, adequately describing the population represents a fundamental testing standard, "the population (s) for which a test is appropriate should be clearly delimited" (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education, 1999, p. 17), thus providing a foundational underpinning for the validity of the AA-AAS results.

While it is possible that students from all IDEA categorical labels may participate in AA-AAS, students from the IDEA categories of mental retardation, autism, and multiple disabilities are most often represented (Education Week, 2005). In addition, participation guidelines for AA-AAS have shared common language that defines the population in terms of severity of cognitive disability, restricted curricular outcomes, and functional living skills curriculum (Kleinert, Haigh, Kearns, & Kennedy, 2000; Warlick & Olsen, 1999). However, research that investigates the learning characteristics of students (using consistent language beyond IDEA category) is limited (Almond & Bechard, 2005; Towles-Reeves, in press). Therefore, the purpose of this research study was two-fold: a) explicate the findings of a multi-state study examining the characteristics of the population of students participating in AA-AAS, and b) discuss the implications of those findings for designing assessments that move us closer to understanding what these students know and can do.

The Learner Characteristics Inventory (LCI) (Kearns, Kleinert, Kleinert, & Towles-Reeves, 2006) developed by researchers at the National Alternate Assessment Center (NAAC) includes ten items: receptive and expressive communication, use of an augmentative communication system (ACS), hearing, vision, motor, engagement, health/attendance, and a reading and mathematics indicator based on broad range skill progression. During the 06-07 school year, 7 states participated in this research with responses for more than 13,000 students.

Findings consistently revealed across all seven states that the majority of students use symbolic language to communicate (i.e., verbal or written words, signs, Braille, or language based ACS). Similarly, the majority of students have some level of receptive response where they can follow 1-2 step directions with or without cues. Academically, the majority of students can read basic sight words or simple sentences and perform computational procedures with or without a calculator. For those students who communicate through cries, facial expressions or changes in muscle tone or who have intentional communication but not yet at a symbolic level, 50% or more of these students do *not* have augmentative communication systems. In addition, looking at cross-sectional grade band data, students do not appear to be moving through the levels of symbolic communication as they move from elementary to middle to high school. The numbers in each of these categories remains fairly consistent. Similarly, in all three grade bands, the majority of students can read simple sentences and do calculator math.

(See page 2 for a continuation of this story)





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We would hope to see more students in the higher levels of these broad academic categories especially as they move into the higher grades, but the cross-sectional data do not appear to support this supposition. Additionally, analyses are being conducted to look at the achievement of students on AA-AAS to see if there is a relationship between that achievement and learning characteristics.

Currently, a manuscript and book chapter are being developed that further explicate the findings of this research. Please stay tuned to future updates and our website for more detailed, aggregated findings and implications for the field. For questions, please contact Liz Towles-Reeves at [liztowles-reeves@uky.edu](mailto:liztowles-reeves@uky.edu).

## ***Teacher Competencies for Students Taking the AA-AAS***

Since No Child Left Behind (2001) was passed, it has changed the landscape of assessments for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. As research is evolving about students who participate in AA-AAS, another avenue of research is quickly becoming a parallel area of focus: what competencies do teachers need to best teach these students grade-level academic content and administer AA-AAS? The information gained from this research study will help bridge research, practice, teacher preparation, and professional development for the betterment of students who are assessed using AA-AAS.

NAAC has collected data from 18 states using the Critical Incident Technique (CIT), a qualitative research methodology that centers on educators sharing their AA-AAS experiences within particular time categories (prior to IDEA 1997, IDEA 1997 until NCLB 2001, or NCLB 2001 to the present). This methodology has been successfully used to identify job requirements, recommendations for effective practices, and competencies for professionals in numerous disciplines.

Announcements were distributed through TASH and the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) requesting educators' participation and outlining specific directions on submitting their stories. These experiences were then analyzed to find common competencies that are needed to administer the AA-AAS in a variety of formats including portfolios, checklists, and performance events.

Stories were submitted by teachers in 18 states covering all assessment formats. Initial data is being analyzed and will be posted on the NAAC website ([www.naacpartners.org](http://www.naacpartners.org)) in early summer. At the same time, this site will be available over the course of the next few years which will also allow researchers to track responses longitudinally as a whole and within states. Continue to check the website for updates and information.

### **IMPORTANT UPDATES**

- 1) The Council for Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) National Conference on Student Assessment will be held this year June 15-18, 2008 in Orlando, Florida. Please go to: [http://www.ccsso.org/projects/national\\_conference\\_on\\_student\\_assessment/](http://www.ccsso.org/projects/national_conference_on_student_assessment/) for more information.**
- 2) The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) Project Director's Meeting will be held July 21-23, 2008 at the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel in Washington, DC.**