High Stakes? Considering Students with Mild Intellectual Disability in Accountability Systems

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Abstract: The assessment participation of students with disabilities is now an important part of students’ education and educational decision-making. While much attention has been paid to the participation of students with significant intellectual disability, little research exists regarding the extent to which students with mild intellectual disability participate in the accountability system. This study represented a secondary analysis of the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2). The study focused on to what extent secondary students with mild intellectual disability participated in mandated assessments (i.e., does not participate, alternate assessment, general assessment with accommodations, and general assessment without accommodations) as well as the relationship between participation and educational factors, such as special education curriculum, core classes in general education, and postschool goals. Participation in assessments by students with mild intellectual disability was multifaceted with the majority taking an alternate assessment. However, statistically significant relationships existed between assessment participation and special education curriculum, language arts and mathematics in general education, and postschool goals. Implications of the results are discussed in light of educational planning for students with mild intellectual disability.

Accountability and assessment are hot topics in education, including the education of students with disabilities. With the implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997, 2004), all students — including students with disabilities — were to be included in a state’s accountability system. The inclusion of students with disabilities into an accountability system stood in contrast to past educational practices, in which students with disabilities could be excluded or waived from participation (Malmgren, McLaughlin, & Nolet, 2005; Thurlow & Johnson, 2000). Today, students with disabilities participate in a state’s accountability system, typically through the state’s general large-scale assessment — generally considered the statewide assessment all students take (Towles-Reeves, Kampfer-Bohach, Garrett, Kearns, & Grisham-Brown, 2006). However, the laws acknowledged that the general large scale assessment may not be appropriate for all students and options were created for students with disabilities, such as taking the general large-scale assessment with accommodations or taking an alternate assessment (Thurlow, Larazus, Thompson, & Morse, 2005).

One popular option when including students with more high incidence or mild disabilities in the accountability system is to have them take the general large-scale assessment with accommodations (e.g., extended time, calculator, test read aloud; Lindstrom, 2010). By definition, an accommodation is something that alters the assessment administration to enable students with disabilities to demonstrate their knowledge or ability yet does not threaten the validity of the assessment (Cox, Herner, Dmcyzk, & Nieberding, 2006). Although this option allows students with disabilities to take the general assessment, the use of accommodations is not without issues (Lindstrom, 2010). For example, states have different policies about what accommodations are allowed on a general large-scale assessment and still have scores count towards schools’ Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP; Cox et al., 2006; Thurlow et al., 2005). Addition-
ally, accommodations alone are not likely to level the playing field for all students with disabilities, such as students with mild intellectual disability in terms of their memory challenges or their difficulty with transferring and generalizing information (Belmont, 1966; Dunn, 1973; Kirk, 1972; Spitz, 1973; Stephens, 1972; Thomas, 1996).

Besides taking the general large-scale assessment with accommodations, NCLB (2002) and IDEA (1997, 2004) also allowed for students with disabilities to take alternate assessments. Alternate assessments are defined as “an assessment designed for a small group of students with disabilities who are unable to participate in the regular state assessment, even with appropriate accommodations” (United States Department of Education, 2003, p. 68699). Alternate assessments are typically reserved for students with severe disabilities, and initially established for 1% of the student body to take and have scores count towards a school’s AYP (Branstad et al., 2002; NCLB, 2002; Perner, 2007; Yell & Drasgow, 2005). While more than 1% of students can take the alternate assessment, the scores of students who exceed 1% of the school’s population count as zeros towards AYP (Yell & Drasgow, 2005).

The United States Department of Education acknowledged the limiting nature of only 1% of students who take an alternate assessment counting towards AYP. Specifically, they noted the exclusion of students with disabilities for whom the general large-scale assessment is still not appropriate, but exist outside of the small percentage allotted to count towards AYP. Thus, the United States Department of Education (2007) determined that “a small group of students with disabilities” would be allowed to use modified achievement standards and take alternate assessments based on these modified achievement standards (p. 17748). This change allowed an additional 2% of students with disabilities to take an alternate assessment and have it count towards a school’s AYP. United States Department of Education Secretary Margaret Spellings indicated the 2% would capture students classified beyond severe disabilities – the original target of alternate assessments – to involve such students as individuals with mild intellectual disability and severe emotional-behavior disabilities (Harper, 2005; Kleinert & Thurlow, 2001; Thompson, Quenemoen, Thurlow, & Ysseldyke, 2001; Ysseldyke, Olsen, & Thurlow, 1997). However, the 2% rule is not without challenges, most notably that states are allowed but not required to develop an alternate assessment based on modified achievement standards [AA-MAS] and states are left to determine eligibility for the 2% rule (Burling, 2007; Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], n.d.; Lazarus, Thurlow, Christensen, & Cormier, 2007).

Although several articles have been written regarding students with severe disabilities (or significant intellectual disability) and accountability, few have addressed students with mild intellectual disability (Kearns, Towles-Reeves, Kleinert, Kleinert, & Thomas, 2011; Towles-Reeves, Kleinert, & Muhomba, 2009). Students with mild intellectual disability once made up the largest population within the field of special education; yet, the population is slowly declining and perhaps losing its identity (Bouck, 2007; Edgar, 1987; Hourcade, 2003). Instead of identifying students as having a mild intellectual disability, they are now likely to be aggregated as students with a mild disability, high-incidence disability, developmental disability, or intellectual disability in general. This aggregation fails to account for the quantitative and qualitative differences of students with mild intellectual disability as compared to students with learning disabilities or moderate/severe intellectual disability. The result of this melding (Polloway, 2004; 2005) is a loss of consideration of students with mild intellectual disability in terms of critical issues, such as accountability, as well as decreased research on this population and attention in scholarly pursuits (Bouck, 2007; Polloway 2004, 2006).

The current system of accountability, including the 2% rule, could mean that students with mild intellectual disability are still largely ignored from consideration in the accountability system because alternate assessments based on modified achievement standards are not mandated and it is unclear if students with mild intellectual disability would all fit within the additional 2%. Hence, students with mild intellectual disability may still be excluded from alternate assessments and need to take the general large-scale assessment. That would
mean students who, by definition, have an IQ between 55 and 70, taking a grade level assessment in mathematics, science, and literacy in grades 3–8 and once again in high school (Hardman, Drew, & Egan, 2002; NCLB, 2002). Students with mild intellectual disabilities taking the general large-scale assessment have multiple ramifications. For one, these students can become frustrated by taking an assessment that is likely to be above their ability level.

A second, and perhaps more important, implication of students with mild intellectual disability taking the state’s large-scale assessment is that participation in the general assessment almost necessitates these students be educated in the general education classroom with the general education curriculum. To be successful on general large-scale assessments, it seems obvious that students would need to receive the general education curriculum taught by highly qualified general education teachers, which can preclude students with mild intellectual disability from partaking in alternative curricula, despite potential benefits (Bouck, 2007). This may limit students with mild intellectual disability from access to, for example, a functional curriculum, which has been cited as a potential benefit for this population at the secondary level (Bouck, 2004; Cronin, 1996; Dever & Knapczyk, 1997). Thus, instructional environments and curriculum for this population become less flexible and move away from a continuum, based on individual student progress and needs (Bouck, 2009).

In addition, one has to consider if general large-scale assessments really measure the skills and knowledge students with mild intellectual disability need to be successful post-school. Older data suggested that as a population only about 2.5% attend any post-secondary education (Keye, 1997), although, more recent data indicated 12.5%–27.1% of students with mild intellectual disability depend on receipt of academic or functional curriculum attend any postsecondary education within two years of leaving school (Bouck & Joshi, 2012). The percentage of any postsecondary education attendance (i.e., two-to-four year college, vocational training) for students with mild intellectual disability is lower than the general young adult population (62.1%) and the young adults with disabilities population (54.9%) (Sanford et al., 2011). In contrast, 45–64% of students with mild intellectual disability were currently employed and 67.3%–71.5% ever employed after leaving school – the range reflecting differences via curriculum received in school (i.e., academic and functional, respectively) (Bouck & Joshi, 2012). Hence, one has to question if the knowledge and skills needed by students with mild intellectual disability to have successful post-school outcomes are captured by a general large-scale assessment? If not, then perhaps curriculum, instructional environments, and accountability system participation need to be reconsidered.

This research project reflects a secondary analysis of the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (SRI International, 2000b). In particular, the researcher sought to understand the extent to which secondary student with mild intellectual disability participate in mandated assessments. The project also focused on the relationship between participation in the accountability system (i.e., does not participate, alternate assessments, and general large-scale with and without accommodations) and educational factors, such as curriculum (i.e., functional, academics), participation in the general education curriculum, and postschool goals (e.g., postsecondary education, employment).

**Method**

Using the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) – a national, longitudinal study sponsored by the Department of Education (SRI International, 2000b), this study sought to understand in which type of standardized assessment secondary students with mild intellectual disability participate and the relationships between standardized assessment and other education factors, such as curriculum, time in general education, and postschool goals. This study represents a secondary analysis of the NLTS2 dataset and readers are invited to refer to the NLTS2 website (http://www.nlts2.org) as well as previously published articles on specifics aspects of the NLTS2 (viz., Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski, & Epstein, 2005).
Participants and Setting

Participants in the study represent a subsection of the NLTS2 database. To be included in the original NLTS2, students receiving special education services were randomly selected from local education agencies (LEA) and state-supported schools to account for geographical region, student enrollment and wealth of LEA or state-supported school (SRI International, 2000a, Wagner et al., 2005). Students aged 13–16 and at least in seventh grade were included, although the sampling targeted students in the older end of the range. The sampling for the NLTS2 was also done to ensure a 3.6% standard error in the highest frequency disability categories (i.e., learning disability, emotional/behavior disorder, intellectual disability, speech and language impairment, other health impairment, and hearing impairment; SRI International, 2001a; Wagner et al., 2005).

To be included in this secondary analysis, participants from the NLTS2 database were in school during wave 2 of the NLTS2 data collection (i.e., 2003–2004); had an IEP during the year of data collection; had a primary disability of mild intellectual disability, as recorded on their IEP; and received special education services during the year of data collection. In addition, all students for whom a response of “not at this grade” to the variable representing the students’ participation on standardized assessments were removed; only students for whom a decision was made about their participation in standardized assessments (does not take, takes alternate assessment, takes general large-scale with accommodations, and takes general large scale without accommodations) were included.

This secondary analysis involved 83,598 students with mild intellectual disability; it should be noted that all data analysis involved weighting which is described in greater detail in the data analysis section. The majority of the students with mild intellectual disability in the study were Caucasian (57.4%, SE = 4.4), followed by African-American (32.2%, SE = 4.1), Hispanic (7.5%, SE = 3.0), and Asian (2.8%, SE = 1.7). More males were included in the study than females (59.7% vs. 40.3%, SE = 6.0). The majority of the students were in grade 12 at the time of data collection (40.5%, SE = 6.7), followed by eleventh grade (26.5%, SE = 3.7) and tenth grade (25.1%, SE = 6.0). Only a small percent were in either grade 13 (i.e., ungraded; 6.0%, SE = 2.4) or ninth grade (1.8, SE = 0.8). Student ages ranged from 16–20, although the majority of students were 16–19 years of age (all slightly less than 25%); the average age of the students was 17.6. The most frequently indicated household income was less than or equal to $25,000 (44.5%, SE = 5.1), followed by greater than $50,000 (26.5%, SE = 3.6), and $25,001–$50,000 (29.0%, SE = 4.9). The majority of the 83,598 students were educated in suburban schools (42.8%, SE = 5.3), and urban schools (40.7%, SE = 5.7); only a small percent were educated in rural school (16.5%, SE = 2.8).

Data Collection/Procedures

For this secondary analysis, raw data were obtained from the NLTS2 data files through a restricted use license given to the author. Although the NLTS2 involved five waves of data collection across a nine year period and used six different data sources, this secondary analysis involved one wave of data – wave 2 collected during 2003 and 2004 – and data from one source: school program survey. Variables to address the research questions were found in the targeted data source from the second wave of data collection; non non-relevant variables were deleted from the database. Next, the school program database was reduced to only the students participating in the secondary analysis (i.e., in school during wave 2, had an IEP during the year of data collection, had a primary disability of mild intellectual disability as recorded on their IEP, received special education services, and school officials indicated a response to the question regarding the extent to which a student will participate in mandated state testing other than no testing at students’ current grade level).

The database used for secondary analysis included the following variables: primary disability (npr2D2b); student participation in mandated standardized tests (npr2A5a); focus of nonvocational special education class (npr2D9); instructional setting for language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies (npr2A3a_1-npr2A3d_1, respectively), pri-
mary postschool goals: 2-to-4 year college, postsecondary vocational training, competitive employment, sheltered employment, supported employment, and independent living (npr2E4a-npr2E4f, respectively); and demographics: gender, family income, ethnicity, urbanicity (of school), grade level, and age. While many original NLTS2 variables were used, the author also recoded some variables. For example, the variables reflecting core content courses in general education – both all four (language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies) as well as just language arts and mathematics – were created by summing the number of courses the student indicated they received in the general education instructional setting (npr2A3a_1-npr2A3d_1); this was out of four to reflect the general education content courses and out of two to reflect just language arts and mathematics.

Data Analysis
All data analyses were completed using IBM Statistics 19.0 and specifically the complex samples package. The complex samples module allowed the researcher to apply the weights from the NLTS2 data to represent population characteristics rather than just the sample. All data reported are weighted. The reader is invited to refer to Javitz and Wagner (2003) and Wagner and colleagues (2005) for additional information relative to weighting the data.

To address the extent to which secondary students with mild intellectual disability participate in mandated assessments the author ran frequency distributions on the variable (npr2A5a). Frequency distributions were also calculated for the demographic variables (e.g., race/ethnicity, grade, household income, school geographical location) as well as special education curriculum, language arts and mathematics in general education, core content areas in general education, and postschool goals. In addition, frequency distributions were calculated for participation in mandated assessments per receipt of a particular special education curriculum, receipt of language arts and/or mathematics classes in general education, and indicated postschool outcomes. Finally, to address the relationship between participation in the accountability system (i.e., does not participate, alternate assessments, and general large-scale with and without accommodations) and the other educational factors (curriculum, participation in the general education curriculum, and postschool goals) separate Chi Square Tests of Association were conducted. Chi Square tests were deemed appropriate given all variables examined were categorical in nature – and not ordinal (Field, 2009).

Results
Of the 83,598 students with mild intellectual disability involved in the secondary data analysis, school personnel indicated 40.6% (SE = 7.3) took an alternate assessment, 38.3% (SE = 5.4) took the general large-scale assessment with accommodations, 17.4% (SE = 5.2) were reported as not taking such assessments, and 3.8% (SE = 2.0) the general large-scale assessment without accommodations. With regards to the other school-based factors for the students in the secondary analysis, the majority indicated receiving an academic curriculum in their special education courses (54.7%, SE = 5.8), followed by a basic academic curriculum (22.0%, SE = 4.2), a life skills curriculum (19.9%, SE = 3.9), and a study skills focus (3.4%, SE = 1.5).

In terms of impact of factors on the extent to which a student participates in mandated assessments, a relationship emerged between receipt of special education curriculum and assessment participation (see Table 1 for the frequency of assessment participation as a function of special education curriculum). For students who received either an academic or basic academic curriculum over 40% took the general large-scale assessment with accommodations (43.1%, SE = 10.1 and 46.7%, SE = 8.7, respectively), followed by an alternate assessment (43.0%, SE = 11.0 and 32.6%, SE = 7.1, respectively). The majority of students who received a life skills curriculum took an alternate assessment (47.0%, SE = 8.9), followed by the general assessment with accommodations (33.6%, SE = 8.4). Students who received a study skills curriculum, although low in numbers, all took the general large-scale assessment with accommodations. No student who received a life skills curriculum took the general large-scale assessment with-
out accommodations, and then less 10% who received an academic or basic academic curriculum did so. Less than 25% of students who received any of the four types of special education curricula did not take an assessment, even if offered at their grade level, with the largest percent for students who received a life skills curriculum (19.4%, SE = 16.6). A Chi Square Test of Association revealed a statistically significant relationship between these two categorical variables – assessment participation and curriculum, $X^2(9) = 16.92, p < .05$. The data in Table 1 suggest students who received language arts or mathematics as well as language arts and mathematics in the general education environment were more likely to take an assessment and specifically assessments with accommodations. In contrast, students who did not receive language arts and mathematics in the general education setting were more likely to not take any assessments (i.e., not participate).

In terms of primary postschool goals, the majority of students with mild intellectual disability indicated yes to competitive employment (55.2%, SE = 7.0) and living independently (58.7%, SE = 6.7). Less than one-third of students indicated a primary postschool goal was supported employment (30.5%, SE = 6.4), while less than one-fourth indicated vocational education (23.2%, SE = 4.1) or sheltered employment (20.8%, SE = 5.2). Less than ten percent indicated a primary postschool goal of attending a two-to-four year college (9.6%, SE = 3.4). The data in Table 2, which depicts the relationship between participation in mandated assessments as function of postschool goals, suggest the majority of students with postsecondary education plans (i.e., two-to-four year or vocational training) took the general large-scale assessment with accommodations. Conversely, students with sheltered or supported employment as a primary postschool goal were more likely to take an alternate assessment or not to take any assessment (i.e., waived). The Chi Square Test of Association (df = 3) for each postschool goal (i.e., two-to-four year college, vocational

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Special Education Curriculum</th>
<th>Does not Take Assessments</th>
<th>Alternate Assessment</th>
<th>General With Accommodations</th>
<th>General Without Accommodations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>9.5% (3.9)</td>
<td>43.0% (11.0)</td>
<td>43.1% (10.1)</td>
<td>4.3% (3.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic academic</td>
<td>12.6% (8.4)</td>
<td>32.6% (7.1)</td>
<td>46.7% (8.7)</td>
<td>8.1% (4.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life skills</td>
<td>19.4% (16.6)</td>
<td>47.0 (8.9)</td>
<td>33.6% (8.4)</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study skills</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language Arts and Mathematics in General Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neither</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.9% (3.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46.0% (7.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35.5% (6.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3% (2.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>92.0% (7.4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Data with low unweighted count are not reported (i.e., represented by dashes in the table). The number in the parenthesis represents the standard error. The percent is based on those in each category who responded to the question (i.e., some individuals did not have responses to every question).
training, competitive employment, sheltered employment, supported employment, and living independently) resulted in a statistically significant relationship with students’ participation in the mandated state assessments, $p < .05$.

**Discussion**

Although the data collected and analyzed for this secondary analysis predates the implementation of the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA and much of the impact of the implementation of NCLB (2001), it addresses important information, particularly as it pertains to the participation of students with mild intellectual disability in accountability systems. Students with mild intellectual disability are likely a forgotten group amongst the discussion and consideration of students with disabilities and mandated assessments. Attention has been paid to students with more significant intellectual disability (e.g., Kearns et al., 2011; Towles-Reeves, Kearns, Kleinert, & Kleinert, 2009; Towles-Reeves, Kleinert, & Muhomba, 2009) as well as other high incidence or mild disabilities (e.g., Conderman & Pedersen, 2010; Lindstrom, 2010). The position exits that alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS) are for students with severe intellectual disability as the 1% who count toward AYP (Cho & Kingston, 2012; Kearns et al., 2011; Quenemoen, 2009). Yet, researchers reported little concrete guidelines exist specifying who is appropriate for the AA-AAS or the AA-MAS at either a state or federal level (i.e., at a federal level criteria involves, “...whose cognitive impairments may prevent them from attaining grade level standards, even with the best instruction” (Cho & Kingston, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2005, p. 24). Further troubling is the lack of information about alternate assessments based on modified achievement standards (AA-MAS), leading one to question where students with mild intellectual disability stand in the accountability system?

Perhaps not surprising, the participation of students with mild intellectual disability in

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**TABLE 2**

**Frequency Data for Mandated Assessment Participation via Post-High School Goals**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Does Not Take Assessments</th>
<th>Alternate Assessment</th>
<th>General With Accommodations</th>
<th>General Without Accommodations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2-to-4 year college</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>18.4% (6.0)</td>
<td>42.9% (8.3)</td>
<td>35.0% (5.3)</td>
<td>3.8% (2.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>62.8% (23.8)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>20.2% (6.9)</td>
<td>48.8% (8.9)</td>
<td>30.2% (5.5)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>4.8% (2.2)</td>
<td>19.8% (5.3)</td>
<td>62.4% (8.1)</td>
<td>13.0% (7.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive employment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>28.7% (7.9)</td>
<td>38.7% (5.4)</td>
<td>31.7% (6.9)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6.9% (2.2)</td>
<td>44.8% (10.5)</td>
<td>42.4% (9.2)</td>
<td>5.9% (3.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheltered employment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>8.2% (1.8)</td>
<td>43.3% (8.1)</td>
<td>43.9% (7.2)</td>
<td>4.6% (2.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>48.9% (13.1)</td>
<td>37.3% (9.9)</td>
<td>13.8% (4.9)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supported employment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>11.8% (2.9)</td>
<td>37.6% (9.8)</td>
<td>45.9% (8.4)</td>
<td>4.7% (2.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>27.7% (10.9)</td>
<td>52.3% (9.1)</td>
<td>18.7% (6.4)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live independently</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>18.1% (5.0)</td>
<td>49.0% (9.9)</td>
<td>30.8% (8.1)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>21.0% (6.9)</td>
<td>45.2% (6.6)</td>
<td>29.8% (5.5)</td>
<td>4.0% (3.3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Data with low unweighted count are not reported (i.e., represented by dashes in the table). The number in the parenthesis represents the standard error. The percent is based on those in each category who responded to the question (i.e., some individuals did not have responses to every question).
mandated state testing is multifaceted, including students who do not participate (i.e., waived or not enforced), who take an alternate assessment, and who take the general large-scale assessment with or without accommodations. The 17.4% of students who do not participate in assessments, despite being given at their grade level (i.e., students for whom school personnel reported their participation in assessments as not being offered at their grade level were removed from the database) is evident of the data collection prior to full implementation of the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA and NCLB in 2001. While IDEA (1997) mandated all students participate in an accountability system, it was not until IDEA (2004) that all students were forced to fully participate. In other words, after IDEA (1997) students could still be waived from participation (Elliott, Erickson, Thurlow, & Shriner, 2000; Malmgren et al., 2005; Thurlow, Lazarus, Thompson, & Robey, 2002). Students not participating in the accountability system is disconcerting given the belief that if students count (i.e., participate in the accountability system), then their education will be taken seriously as well as more attention will be paid to equity (Hardman & Nagle, 2004). In converse, participating in the accountability system can result in a particular curriculum or instructional environment, and, for students with mild intellectual disability, a decreasing emphasis on functional life skills (Bouck, 2009; Hardman & Nagle, 2004; Laughlin & Rhim, 2007).

Beyond the students who do not take any assessments, the students who take the general large-scale assessments without accommodations is disconcerting. Accommodations are a way to level the playing field for students who, by definition or classification characteristics, have an IQ between 55 and 70 as well as limitations in two or more adaptive functioning areas; struggle with short attention spans; are easily distracted; experience difficulty transferring and generalizing information; and trouble inputting and retrieving information into and from memory (Belmont, 1966; Dunn, 1973; Hardman et al., 2002; Kirk, 1972; Polloway, Smith, Chamberlain, Denning, & Smith 1999; Spitz, 1973; Stephens, 1972; Thomas, 1996; Zeaman & House, 1979). It would seem that not providing students with mild intellectual disability accommodations is counterproductive to assessing these students and determining what they know (Cho & Kingston, 2012). Yet, there may be logical rationale for why a student with a mild intellectual disability is not provided an accommodation. For example, some accommodation policies for state-level testing are inflexible or particular accommodations deemed invalid (e.g., reading the test aloud; Bolt, 2011; Cho & Kingston, 2012). The concern over accommodations was noted by Cho and Kingston (2012) as a rationale IEP teams provided as to why students with mild disabilities were participating in the accountability system via alternate assessments.

Outside of the frequencies reflecting participating – no, alternate assessment, and general assessment with or without accommodations, is the consideration of educational factors that may impact an IEP team’s decision regarding how a student with mild intellectual disability will participate. Chi Square Test of Association revealed statistically significant relationships for a special education curriculum, language arts and mathematics courses in general education, and postschool goals. For curriculum, the directional impact is not able to be discerned but concerns exist that assessment participation will dictate curriculum, such as a decreasing emphasis and access to a functional curriculum as students participate in the general large-scale assessment with accommodations (Bouck, 2009). The data—predating the full implementation of NCLB (2002) and IDEA (2004) do suggest that more students who receive a functional curriculum do not take any assessment or take an alternate assessment whereas more who receive an academic curriculum take the general large scale with or without accommodations. In converse, while the majority of students with mild intellectual disability in all four forms of participation received an academic curriculum (range of 44.0%–58.8% with the lowest for does not participate and the highest for takes an alternate assessment), a life skills curriculum was received by a larger percentage of students whose assessment participation was reported as does not take (32.5%, SE = 12.6) or alternate assessment (23.3%, SE = 7.4), than the general large-scale with accommodations (15.2%, SE = 4.6). The concern over
assessments driving curriculum is important as students with mild intellectual disability do benefit from functional curriculum (Bouck & Flanagan, 2010).

Similar to curriculum, the relationship between more general education courses, when considering those assessed on state-level assessments (i.e., language arts and mathematics), suggests the more a student receives core courses in general education, the more likely s/he is to participate in the accountability system via the general large scale assessment with or without accommodations. Despite concern over students with mild intellectual disability taking the general large scale assessment with accommodations, it is promising to think that if a student takes the general large-scale assessment s/he might have more general education courses to at least gain exposure to the content presented (Bouck, 2007, 2009). It does seem irresponsible of schools to have students with mild intellectual disability taking a general large-scale assessment without exposure to the general education curriculum upon which the assessment is based (Bouck, 2007, 2009).

Finally, the relationship between postschool goals and assessment participation were generally as hypothesized. Students with mild intellectual disability whose goals included post-secondary education (2-to-4 year college or vocational training) were more likely to take the general large scale assessment with accommodations, and, in contrast, students whose primary goals included sheltered or supported employment were more likely not to take any assessment or take an alternate assessment. These results are not surprising in light of research connecting assessment participation to graduation or diploma options (i.e., certificate of attendance) and the relationship between a diploma vs. a certificate of attendance and outcomes (deFur, 2002; Hartwig & Sitlington, 2008).

Limitations and Future Directions

Previous research analyzed how IEP teams make accountability system decisions (Cho & Kingston, 2012; DeStefano, Shriner & Lloyd, 2001; Ketterlin-Geller, Yovanoff, & Tindal, 2007); this is not such a study. Although it is meaningful to understand how and why IEP teams decided a student with mild intellectual disability takes an alternate assessment or general large-scale assessment with or without accommodations – or does not take any assessment, this study sought to shed light on the participation of this population and the relationship between participation and key factors, such as curriculum, general education content instruction, and postschool goals.

A limitation is that this study is a secondary analysis of the NLTS2. Hence, the secondary analysis is subject to the limitations of the original study. Another limitation involves the older data (i.e., collected 2003–2004), yet the results do shed light onto the participation – or lack thereof – of students with mild intellectual disability in the accountability system. Future research should examine more recent data, including analyzing NLTS 2012, which could provide a snapshot of assessment participation following NCLB (2002) and IDEA (2004) (IES, n.d.). In the future, attention should be paid to the assessment participation with the expectation that “does not take” as a response to the extent to which a student participates will cease to exist, but increasing use of AA-MAS as a form of participation. Future research should also compare the assessment participation of students with mild intellectual disability to other groups, such as students with moderate and severe intellectual disability or students with learning disabilities.

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