

PEPNet

Challenges and Opportunities for Testing Students Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Information for Educators on Creating Test Equity

Schools rely on testing to measure the knowledge and abilities of their students. However, reports from the 2008 Test Equity Summit indicate that disproportionate numbers of students who are deaf or hard of hearing at all grade levels are failing critically important tests—even though their classroom work may show that they know the test material. This long recognized discrepancy prompted Test Summit attendees to question academic tests' accuracy and reliability in measuring the knowledge and aptitude of students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Accurately evaluating student knowledge and ability has become increasingly important for schools as funding and curriculum development are currently tied to standardized testing and reporting mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

The 2008 Test Equity Summit convened by the Postsecondary Education Programs Network (PEPNet) identified and examined problems, challenges and issues academic and psychoeducational tests pose for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. Participants in the summit included specialists on deafness and educational testing; individuals who are deaf, hard

of hearing, and hearing; test and test accommodation developers; language and communication researchers; academicians, K-12 educators and administrators; health professionals; and clinicians with extensive experience in psychoeducational evaluation.

Summit participants suggested that a large array of complex factors might determine how a student who is deaf or hard of hearing could perform on a given test or psychoeducational evaluation. The factors can occur in any combination, and each factor or mix of factors might affect individuals differently. Ultimately, the unpredictability of the factors that can affect test performance yields unpredictable and inaccurate test results for students who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Participants also emphasized that low or failing test scores can have long-term effects and dictate or limit life choices for students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Results of tests for academic courses, vocational aptitude, professional licensing, certifications, driving, college entrance, and others can open/other word—or bar—an individual's access to professions, employment, education, and other life choices for a student who is deaf or hard of hearing.

Test Equity Factors for Students Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

For most students, test taking is a challenge. For students who are deaf or hard of hearing, classroom quizzes, tests, and exams are even more challenging. Standardized tests—The SAT, ACT, state proficiency tests, No Child Left Behind annual tests, and psychoeducational evaluations—present additional challenges for students who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Here's why:

- The aptitude to do well on tests requires a strong language base which in turn is supported by an individual's ability to acquire language, and language acquisition depends on access to language during a child's formative years. The majority of children who are deaf or hard of hearing are born to hearing parents who face the challenges of learning about the impact of their child's hearing loss, establishing a communication system, and building a language foundation for their child. Despite their parent's best efforts, many children who are deaf or hard of hearing do not have full language access during their formative years.
- Providing communication access—access to curriculum, teachers, classroom discussion, and social interactions with peers—is complex, but broad, inclusive communication access is essential in building a strong language base for a student who is deaf or hard of hearing. Schools and school districts utilize a variety of accommodations to provide educational access for students who are deaf or hard of hearing. The level of access depends on the suitability and quality of the accommodation provided.
- The language style and structure of tests can present obstacles to individuals who do not have a strong language base. The language of tests uses phrasing, grammar, and sentence structure that is different from everyday English. Multiple-choice questions, idioms, words with multiple meanings, homophones, and those with complex grammar or unnecessary information may be difficult to understand for some students who are deaf or hard of hearing.
- Many education professionals believe individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing learn English in much the same way as their hearing peers who have learned English as a second language. This parallel is inaccurate because it does not recognize that a solid language base, developed early in life, is essential to learning a second language.
- Students who are deaf or hard of hearing have not had the same access as their hearing peers to English conversation, broadcast media, and other ubiquitous cultural elements that model English usage. This limited access to English can then affect the student's understanding of test questions and instructions. In effect, a test may measure the test taker's knowledge of English and testing methods, rather than the subject of the test.
- Test content may rely on knowledge of hearing culture by including questions about sound, communication, and the media not accessible to individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing.
- The language of mathematics is an independent system that may present additional obstacles for students who are deaf or hard of hearing.
- Students who are deaf or hard of hearing who struggle in school may be evaluated for a co-occurring disability. The psychoeducational assessments used for these evaluations are generally written in English and presume students taking the test have a solid, first-language base in English. An ASL translation does not make the assessment accessible, nor equivalent to assessments administered in English. In addition, there is often no requirement that the psychologist giving the assessment be experienced in testing individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. As a result, students who are deaf or hard of hearing may be misdiagnosed as having a co-occurring disability.

- The social isolation resulting from limited communication with family and peers may affect the social skills of an individual who is deaf or hard of hearing or his/ her comfort in social situations. This can lead to misdiagnosis of psychiatric disorders.

What Schools Can Do

Educators and administrators can take effective steps to improve test equity in their schools and districts. Here are some suggestions:

1. Formal Guidelines: Develop formal guidelines and methods for fairly and accurately measuring the abilities and progress of all students, including students who are deaf or hard of hearing.

- Define the circumstances when tests are an appropriate method of measuring student knowledge, ability, or progress.
- Use portfolio assessments, interviews, and other alternatives and/or adjuncts to traditional and standardized tests to gauge a student's skills and knowledge.
- Recognize that test results may not correspond to the actual abilities and knowledge of students who are deaf or hard of hearing.
- Ensure that test scores are used properly and in the context of the student's classroom performance.

2. Team Approach: Use a team to assess a student's abilities and potential. Include community members who are deaf or hard of hearing who understand Deaf culture and deafness. A diverse team can more effectively evaluate the potential of a student who is deaf or hard of hearing.

3. Curriculum-Test Alignment: Ensure that curriculum, instruction, and test content are aligned.

4. Clearly Written Tests: Avoid language in tests that is unnecessarily complex. Consult a teacher of the deaf or other specialists in deafness for advice on accessible, effective test design.

5. Accommodation Guidelines: Develop test-taking accommodation guidelines that can adapt to the needs of individual students. Accommodations may include additional time to complete a test, and test instructions and questions communicated in sign language. In some instances, it may be an appropriate accommodation to allow the student to sign answers to an interpreter who then records the answers given.

6. Qualified Interpreters: Provide a qualified sign language interpreter if that is an appropriate test accommodation for a student who uses sign language. The interpreter and the instructor should meet at least one day before the test to ensure that the interpreter understands the test's content and objectives.

7. Test-Taking Skills: Teach test-taking strategies and techniques that improve test-taking skills. A teacher of deaf students or a successful student who is deaf can provide valuable information and insight.

8. Language: From the outset of their education, students who are deaf or hard of hearing need a rich, fully accessible language foundation and instruction by teachers who are linguistically competent, and trained to provide bilingual instruction.

9. Psychoeducational Testing: Assign evaluations of students who are deaf or hard of hearing to psychologists who have appropriate training and experience in evaluating these students.

10. Deaf Culture: Offer professional development to teachers and staff on Deaf culture and testing issues experienced by test-takers who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Visit www.pepnet.org for more information about test equity issues and solutions. Available documents include: The PEPNet Test Equity Summit Summary, and Test Equity reports for parents, schools, psychologists and public policymakers. At pepnet.org you'll also find informative videos of Summit participants discussing test equity.

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