Interview on Assessment Accommodation: Transcription

Clare Hubbard; Senior Occupational Therapist at Department Education in Eastern Cape Province

Date: April 2024

**Millicent** : Clare, I just want to start off, you know, assessment accommodations or when we just even talk about accommodations, we immediately talk about, even some people have been mistaking it for a concession. We use those terms interchangeably. Could you just elaborate or give an example, explain a little bit more about assessment accommodations and the difference between that and a concession?

**Clare:** Yes, and you know, I think in South Africa we've been using the terms interchangeably, which has led to a lot of confusion. But in terms of global standards, an accommodation is the measure that's put into place, and I'll explain some of those accommodations, to support a learner to be on the same, to have the same opportunity in a test situation, given that they have a learning difficulty or barrier to learning. And so accommodations are, for instance, being able to provide a learner a reader or a scribe or an adapted paper.

**Clare:** So that might be a large print paper. It also, there are other accommodations like a handwriting sticker. So those accommodations allow the learner to be able to produce their examination in the same way, but actually supports them in producing their script. When we talk about a concession, this is almost a deviation or a permission is or waiver that is given in terms of normally subject choices. So that, for instance, if a child has a severe language disorder like dyslexia, perhaps they will be allowed to drop the second, the FAL, first additional language in and take up another subject because obviously language, learning a second language might be very problematic for a learner with dyslexia.

**Millicent**: In South Africa we use those terms interchangeably. You've given us a wonderful definition of between assessment accommodation and a concession as well. But who are eligible? Which type of children are eligible for an assessment accommodation and who's not?

**Clare:** All right, so the policy states that these are learners who are normally in mainstream curriculum, the CAPS curriculum. And so we're talking about some special schools that offer the CAPS curriculum. Such as schools for the physically disabled, some of our autism schools do, some don't, and special schools for specific learning difficulties. But on the whole, it's children in mainstream schools doing NSC curriculum. The policy is quite clear that, for instance, if you have an intellectual disability, So a moderate or severe intellectual disability, you're most likely going to be in a school that offers a different curriculum, such as the severe intellectual disabilities differentiated curriculum, what we call the SID curriculum. And therefore those children are not going to be eligible for the traditional NSC accommodations.

**Millicent:** So, in other words, for those children who are not eligible, what type of assessment or what type of accommodations is it offered for them? And how do we make sure that they are not falling through the cracks?

**Clare:** So, within those schools, and I'm talking about schools of skills, some secondary schools that offer the technical occupational, curriculum and our SID schools, they will already be offering what we call an alternate curriculum, where the curriculum and the standard of the curriculum has been lowered. So it won't be the same grade standard as NSE. So that is the way that they're accommodated. And the policy for responding to learner diversity really takes full force in that respect because the alternative assessments and alternative curriculum, differentiated curriculum, allows for differentiated instruction and also the child being able to be tested in a different way.

**Millicent:** So you've mentioned a couple of assessment accommodations that is available, and you talked about an enlarged print. You talked about having a reader or scribe, handwriting accommodation. But when selecting an assessment accommodation, what factors should the officials or the professionals take into consideration when doing this, when selecting an assessment accommodation for a learner?

**Clare:** So the school will need to look at how that child's difficulty is presenting in the class. So if it is a problem with reading and writing, for instance, one has to be sure that the difficulty is not as a result of poor quality teaching and learning. So the reading and writing difficulties will need to be formally assessed. And this is why our teams, our multidisciplinary teams of psychologists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, physiotherapists, audiologists, and specialist teachers form part of that adjudication.

So the school will ensure that the child has been formally assessed either by a specialist remedial educator who will do scholastic tests of reading, writing, and spelling, or that the child has seen an educational psychologist to assess those areas, or a speech and language therapist. So in the case of a child who's presenting with reading and writing difficulties, There might be a diagnosis of a language disorder in expressive language or in written language. These are new terminologies that have replaced the term that we just collectively knew as dyslexia. And then based on that, an appropriate accommodation will be selected.

Some children might only need a reader, some children might only need a scribe. And we're also starting to look at how technology can assist us in the classroom. I'll give you a little case study. We had a query from a school of a grade eight learner, a boy, who from junior school, he had a reader and a scribe, and the high school hadn't yet implemented a reader and a scribe. And when I asked the question, well, how is he coping for ordinary school-based assessments? They said, no, we just lump him in with everybody else.

And I said to them, well, really, he should be afforded the same thing that's going to happen in exams.

An example of a case we had of a boy in grade 8 who needed assessment accommodation when he moved to another school where and was previously receiving an accommodation, when the current school was asked why they were not implementing the accommodation? The school said to me, well, they don't have the manpower to do that. And I suggested to them that you can use technology so you can get a recording device, not a cell phone, because children are not allowed to take a cell phone into the classroom, but take a recording device. And I have one on loan that will go to them in a couple of weeks, where the teacher can record the questions. So the child actually has a recording of the whole test paper. And at this point, we'll still be producing that test in handwritten format.

But another alternative they can start to explore and should start to explore is whether the child can produce his paper on a laptop and provisions with some software that will allow for word prediction and spell checks and thesaurus. So we have softwares like ClaroReader that could assist him. You know, when we're looking at which accommodation is the most appropriate, everyone gravitates towards those that are well known, like reader and scribe. But with technology, there are other alternatives.

We also have a reading pen. It's quite limited. It's a pen that you hold. It has no thesaurus or dictionary. You hold it over your written script, the written paper, and it reads for you. But unfortunately, at this time, it's only available in English and Spanish and German, but that's not going to help our children in South Africa.

**Millicent:** Clare, you've touched on the next part of our question, which talks about the use of technology and making it more accessible in assessment accommodations. You've talked about the reader pin. You've talked about maybe using a laptop with certain software to assist the children. How are officials or invigilators doing assessments? Taking on the use of technology and assistive devices or technology in an assessment. Do you find that they are able to accommodate that or do you find it very difficult or see that as an irregularity?

And how do we begin to change these perceptions that assistive devices and technology are part of people, certain people, when they have to be used in an assessment accommodation?

**Clare:** You know, when I talk to schools, I ask them the question, are you offering CAT at your school? And they say, yes. And I say, well, if you think about what happens before a CAT exam, you have to ensure that every device is clean, that it's not connected with other devices, that the children don't have access to the internet or the intranet. And in that way, you safeguard the CAT exam. Well, if you think about assistive technology, a child using a laptop in the classroom or any other IT device, the same applies**.**

So the school really just needs to apply the same type of thinking that you would in a CAT exam. So some of the obstacles are who are going to procure these assistive technology. Laptops is quite simple.

Normally there are, in every province we have a school resourcing of IT. And if you remember during COVID, all our matriculants got laptops with their own, that were loaded then with Windows and with Office 365 and they were created email addresses for them. Well, in our province, what we've started to do with learners who are mainstream and require laptops because of their disability, we just request from that section the same thing. So the provision of laptops isn't normally a problem.

If the learner needs another device like a trackable, so we have a young quadriplegic patient, not patient, a learner who's gone back to school into grade 11. And being a quadriplegic means that you've got no finger movement or wrist movement, but he can type almost one fingeredly, well, two fingeredly. But with a tracker ball, he will be able to use the mouse. So we have then borrowed that tracker ball from a special school as resource center. So, we were able to get a laptop, the trackable came from special school resource centre or from your assistive devices loan centres.

And those budgets are normally held at provincial level and from LTSM and should be procured in whichever way the province feels that they can do that. Examinations, on the other hand, should also be making sure that we have some assistive technology for exams. For instance, in the second chance metric, there are quite a lot of learners who require a laptop because they're going to be using, because they're blind or they're partially sighted, so they would need a screen reader or a screen. So I think it's important that Examinations for the second chance metric also hold stock of some basic assistive technology. Now, that's really important.

**Millicent:** You've talked about those types of accommodations that we have in place in the South African context. You've also talked about the importance of making sure that we have these stock available for ICT and assistive devices for learners in all schools as well. Can you explain to me a little bit about how important it is to document assessment accommodations provided to a learner and also what type of documentation or what's the procedure for the application for an assessment accommodation?

**Clare:** OK, so it is the responsibility of the school, not the parent or the learner themselves, to apply for an examination accommodation. There's normally a provincial circular or memorandum that goes out in January, February of every year requesting applications. And there's normally a deadline by the end of the first term. So the school has the responsibility of identifying the learners that require exam accommodations. And completing the special needs assessment one and two, which are really the school's way of, it should be the process that they've gone through in order to identify that a child in fact needs an accommodation in order to compete at the same level as the other learners.

So the special needs assessments are called SNA one and two and normally there needs to be some sort of verification of disability. So in the case, as I explained right at the beginning with a reader and a scribe, we would need the educational psychologist or the speech and language therapist diagnosis of dyslexia or expressive or language disorders, whichever they might be. If it's a learner who's hard of hearing, who might need an FM system and an adapted paper, into more simplified English, then we need the audiologist's report.

If it's a learner that requires enlarged print or braille, then we would need the report of the optometrist to verify this. We encourage schools to apply at the beginning of every phase. Because the accommodation that will be awarded will last for a whole phase, for those full three years. And it means that the schools and the parents are not overburdened with getting this medical verification annually. It will be done once every three years. We have some grey areas. So in the case of autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, we would need a report from a paediatrician or neurologist or paediatric neurologist. Some children who already are in the school system might have access to an educational psychologist who can also diagnose those two disorders. And a few others.

So, for instance, some of our anxiety disorders, obsessive compulsive disorders, we would need the psychiatric verification. So the school has the SNA1, SNA2, the verification of disability, in which you use the DBE form 126, which is the health and disability assessment. And then also, correct me if I'm wrong, I think it's the DBE 124.

**Millicent :** Yes 124.

Clare: And then those with the application form are then submitted, prepared and submitted and handed to the local education office, either to inclusive education or to the exams officials in that education office for adjudication, which normally takes place by May of every year so that the school will, the district then will inform the schools of the results of the adjudication before the June exams. And then that same accommodation will then be carried over to the November exams of that year, and if it's at the beginning of the phase, for the following three years.

**Millicent:** Okay, so that gives the parents that time to make sure that They don't actually just keep on reapplying all the time. So that phase is basically for a period of what, three years? how long is the phase? Three years. So you talk about the forms SNA 1 and 2. What are these forms and what policy document is that from That's the South African context. What is those policy documents that we use?

**Clare:** So those documents come from the policy that we know as the CEAS policy, which stands for Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support policy. It was 2014 policy that gives the mandate of schools to identify when children are having barriers to learning, when learners are having barriers to learning. And one of the provisions made is exam accommodations. There are lots of others, for instance, classroom support should really come first and then be replicated in an examination.

So the SIAS policy really gives really clear instructions. There are a number of forms attached to that policy. It outlines, for instance, levels of support as low for placement in special schools. So it's a very powerful document that every school should be aware of That CS document also mandates that every school has a school-based support team. So school-based support team are there to support learners with barriers to learning. And the barriers to learning might not only be scholastic.

It could be a learner that's been identified because of a child-headed household. There are lots of barriers to learning that impact on learning. So really with the strength of the school-based support team is one of the cornerstones of the CS policy. And normally accommodations will be driven from that team, or maybe they would formulate a school-based accommodations committee. So we're very reliant on the processes of the SIAS policy.

**Millicent:** Clare, thank you so much for talking to us about assessment accommodations. The challenges that we have in the South African context, the procedures that needs to be put in place. But you also make mention of the importance of having a team at every level, at the school level, where you talk about that being a school-based support team, at the local education level, which is then the district level, which is then the district-based accommodations team, and then, of course, at your level, at the provincial level, which is then the provincial assessment accommodations team. You've made mention of the importance of the multidisciplinary team to be able to adjudicate for every learner as well. We have come to the end and I just want to say thank you so much for this and I look forward to our next discussion. Thank you, Clare. Thank you very much.

Clare: It's been good to participate.

\*End\*