## *Who Does the Alternate Assessment Really Assess?*

**Debra Bruster**

### *Abstract*

Special education teachers in Georgia are required to develop grade level tasks, reflecting grade level standards, teach the tasks and document the progress of their students with significant cognitive disabilities in the areas of math, science, literature, and social studies. The teachers must then compile the evidence of the students' progress on the tasks into a portfolio that is graded to determine if the students (and sometimes the schools) make adequate yearly progress. This literature review will look at research concerning teachers' perceptions of alternate assessments. This literature will attempt to prove the hypothesis that teachers perceive alternate assessments as an assessment of their ability to complete the task rather than student learning and knowledge. The literature is arranged chronologically.

### *Introduction*

In the state of Georgia, teachers of students with significant are required to create and compile a portfolio of student work samples and evidence that correlate with grade level Georgia Performance Standards in the areas of reading, math, science and social studies. The portfolio of evidence serves as the alternate assessment for the Georgia High School Graduation Tests required for 11$^{th}$ graders and for the Criterion Referenced Competency Test required of students in grades K-8 (Georgia Department of Education, 2010). These assessments also determine if the school and system make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as defined by No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The following review of the literature will examine the question, "Who does the Alternate Assessment portfolio truly assess?" The research has indicated that the alternate assessment actually assesses the special education teacher's ability to assemble a passing portfolio rather than the students' actual progress toward grade level standards.

### *Review of the Literature*

Kleinert, Kennedy, and Kearns (Summer 1999) study investigates the perceptions of special education teachers on the perceived benefits and impact of the alternate assessment on instruction. The researchers sent a survey to teachers from Kentucky, the first state involved in the alternate assessment and accountability system for students with moderate and severe disabilities. The method consisted of a one page survey designed to access the teachers' perceptions of their students' need to be part of the accountability system, whether the involvement had any benefits for the students and if the assessment increased the time students were in general education classes. The survey also inquired about the portfolios being incorporated into the daily routine and if the students were

assessing their own progress. The researchers mailed out 508 surveys and 331 were returned.

The results of the survey revealed that a majority of the surveyed teachers perceived the alternate assessment as more of a "measure of teacher accountability than one of student accountability" (p. 89).

This early study validated the hypothesis that teachers feel the alternate assessment is more of a teacher assessment than for the student. The research also found that the focus of collecting evidence of learning situations, skills, grade level standards, across multiple settings with general education peers and supports is an unfair expectation.

In a later study, Kampfer, Horvath, Kleinert, and Kearns (Spring 2001) sent a survey to 206 special education teachers in Kentucky who had completed at least one alternate assessment portfolio for a student with significant disabilities. The Kentucky alternate assessment requires the teacher to document the students' progress in achieving skills and the efforts made to include the students' social relationships and to provide evidence of performance across multiple settings.
The survey questioned the perceptions of the teachers on the amount of time and effort spent on completing the alternate assessment. The specific research questions were:

- Is there a relationship between portfolio scores and time spent working on the portfolio?
- Which portfolio items require the most time and effort?
- To what extent do teacher and instructional variables predict portfolio score?
- What aspects of the alternate assessment portfolio are the most concern for teachers? (Kampfer et al, 2001).

The result of the survey found that teachers spend a significant number of hours outside of the regular teaching and planning time to complete each portfolio. The time spent on the portfolio is found to have no correlation to the score received for the student. The survey found that the instructional variables such as student involvement, embedment of portfolio items into the regular instruction in the classroom and the teachers' perception of the benefit of the portfolio to the student are strongly related to the student scores.

This study, much like the earlier study, has shown that the perceptions of teachers about the value of the alternate assessment and the time involved can affect the score on the alternate assessment.

Flowers, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Browder, and Spooner (2005) researched the perceptions of Alternate Assessments (AA) by teachers in five states. The researchers surveyed 983 special education teachers who used state mandated alternate assessments such as portfolios, checklists and performance-based assessments. The teachers were given The Alternate Assessment Teacher Survey which was designed to test the teachers' perceptions of the impact of the AA on students, teachers, parents and educational practices. The survey consisted of 65 items with Likert scale replies.

The researchers used descriptive statistics to report the results of the participants' perceptions. The research demonstrated that half of the respondents agreed that students with severe disabilities should be included in the state accountability systems. Yet only a very small percentage felt that students are receiving an overall better education. Like the previous studies the teachers report that completing the alternate assessment takes time away from teaching and student needs. The teachers reported that completing the alternate assessment resulted in increased paperwork especially for those teachers that completed portfolio assessments.

The research indicated that teachers find the alternate assessment especially**,** portfolio assessments**,** to be an increased burden of paperwork with little benefit to the education of the student assessed. This is consistent with the hypothesis and previous research.

Roach (2006) studied the influences on parent perceptions of the alternate assessment for their children with severe cognitive disabilities. The researcher surveyed 77 parents and teachers of students with severe disabilities. The researchers found that teachers and parents alike perceive that achieving appropriate outcomes on the alternate assessments are difficult because the grade level content and instruction, even with maximum accommodations and modifications, is irrelevant and out of reach for most students with severe disabilities.

The research found that some parents perceive that an academic standards based alternate assessment takes away from their students' overall educational needs especially those skills that are required for employment and daily living. The research also found that just over half of the parents want to know how their child's progress compares to the general education students but the number decreases as the student ages.

This research helps support the hypothesis that alternate assessments take significant time away from teaching skills that are necessary for independence and employment.
Kim, Angell, O'Brian, Strand, Fulk, and Watts (2006) researched the perceptions of teachers in Illinois about the alternate assessment system used by their state. The Illinois Alternate Assessment (IAA) uses a portfolio system that includes teacher-collected and annotated documentation of a students' progress on the grade level Illinois Learning Standards. The researchers surveyed special education teachers who have completed an IAA the previous year. The survey consisted of four sections: 1) teachers' perspectives about the IAA system, 2) teachers' self reported classroom practices, 3) open ended questions related to concerns about and suggestions for improving the IAA, and 4) demographic information. The study was a mixed method with quantitative data gathered using a Likert scale and qualitative data from the open ended questions and responses.

The results of the study both quantitatively and qualitatively are that the teachers perceive the IAA as labor intensive, taking time from instruction, and pointless (p.93). The data also showed that the teachers felt that neither their participation nor the student's participation in the IAA had any benefit to the students' academic progress or the teachers' instruction.

These results continue to support the hypothesis that Alternate Assessments are time consuming and of no real benefit to the student.

Elliott, Compton, and Roach (Summer, 2007) researched the validity of the scores on Idaho's alternate assessment. The researchers looked at the relationship between the ratings on the Idaho Alternate Assessment (IAA) and the ratings on two norm referenced teacher rating scales for 116 students with significant disabilities. The focus of the research was to study if the scores on the IAA had validity.

The validity of alternate assessments has been questioned because previous research has found that the score of some portfolios were influenced by the teachers' ability to assemble the portfolio more than the students' knowledge of the content standards. The previous research on validity and reliability has also found that the portfolio assessment is an assessment of the teachers' ability to compile a portfolio according to the states' guidelines rather than an accurate measure of a student's progress toward IEP skills or the success of a program in giving students with disabilities access to content standards.

The researchers found that evidence to support the validity of the IAA was mixed. The correlations between scores on the IAA and concurrent academic skills scales were moderate at best. The IAA measures some content but the Vineland Adaptive Behavior scale identified more skills because it measures more than reading and math achievement.

This article supports the hypothesis that the alternate assessment may not measure what is intended but actually it is measuring teacher ability.

Elliott and Roach (2007) researched the different types of alternate assessments and found several technical challenges to the validity of the alternate assessments. The researchers looked at the challenges of validating alternate assessments and found that additional research needs to be done to determine the connection to curriculum, effects of participation on the instruction and education of the students, and the usefulness of the results.

These challenges have been identified in previous research. The question that remains is how we can call the portfolio an assessment of student achievement when it is compiled, annotated and completed by teachers with minimal input by students.
Katsiyannis, Zhang, Ryan, and Jones (2007) in their review of the literature for alternate assessments found that requiring students with severe cognitive disabilities to demonstrate achievement and progress in grade appropriate content and standards such as algebra and world history was inappropriate. The literature continues to find that the alternate assessment systems in the various states do not benefit the students with disabilities nor do alternate assessments give teachers, parents and other stakeholders usable information on the progress of the student. The findings continue to point out that even if the assessments are aligned to state standards the alternate assessments do not give an accurate or true level of functioning for the student.

These findings also support the hypothesis that the alternate assessment assesses the teachers' ability to complete a portfolio successfully not the students' progress or knowledge.

Reeves, Kleinert, and Anderman (2008) researched the principals' perceptions of alternate assessments. The participants and their perceptions were compared as part of the research. The participants were a total of 389 principals from the two states that were familiar with the state's alternate assessment. The method was a mixed method study. The principals were given a survey with a Likert type of scale. It also included an open ended question section.

The results from the research found that although principals realized the federal requirements to teach students with severe disabilities grade level content and standards**,** the principals felt that functional skills were more appropriate and important. The research also found that principals that had more experienced special education teachers felt the dual curriculums of functional and academic were not a problem for their teachers. One state , the author did not identify particular states but used a State 1 and State 2 designation, had a very negative perception of the alternate assessment as a time spender and not relevant to a students' needs.

Elliott, Kettler, and Roach (December 2008) researched the new policy of alternate assessments that assess modified achievement standards for students with disabilities. The policy requires students' achievement in content areas to be assessed on grade level standards. The researchers found that the tests are functioning more as a test modification than a test accommodation. The items, vocabulary and relevance on alternate assessments have been modified and simplified to the point that they do not assess what are actually grade level standards for typically developing students. This research supports the hypothesis that the alternate assessment is time consuming for teachers without results that yield information for the parent, student or teacher.

Weigert (2009) researched the perspectives on the current state of alternate assessments for the US Department of Education and found that there is a lack of knowledge on the best way to assess students with severe cognitive disabilities by test designers and psychometricians. The specialists have very little experience assessing this population on grade level**;** and content standards when the students are unable to collect annotate or at times communicate their knowledge. The portfolio that has been adopted by many states is assessed with teacher taught, compiled, annotated student work. The teacher assembles and completes the portfolio often with no assistance or input from the student.
The research points out the need for significantly assessing students with cognitive disabilities, not the teachers' ability to put together the portfolio.

Reeves, Kleinert, and Muhomba (Winter 2009) conducted a literature to examine the changes in perceptions and the studies of alternate assessments since the first research from 1999. The research continues to reveal that the increase in paperwork and time demands is the most significant impact of alternate assessments according to the attitudes of teachers in five states, identified as only two from the western region of states and

three from the southern states. The alternate assessments have had no impact on the daily instruction of students with disabilities. The alternate assessment portfolio is seen as one more task for the teacher to complete along with data tracking and IEP development. The positive perceptions of alternate assessments decrease as students age and the divide between their cognitive abilities and the expectations of content standards becomes wider. This literature review supports the hypothesis for this paper.

Flowers, Wakeman, Browder, and Karvonen (Spring, 2009) discussed teachers' perceptions of alternate assessments in their research on aligning alternate assessments with alternate achievement standards. The data identified that for special education teachers to "buy in" to alternate assessments they need to see a meaningful link between the academic and functional skills in the curriculum for students with disabilities. Until they see the relevance of the assessment the teachers' perceptions will continue to be negative.

Kleinert, Browder, and Reeves (March 2009) researched the unique learning characteristics of students with significant cognitive disabilities in developing and demonstrating academic achievement on grade level standards. They found that students with disabilities that were assessed using an alternate assessment on grade level content had the following characteristics: 8% had no clear use of words, pictures or objects, 15% had no awareness print or Braille, 13% had no awareness of numbers~~, ;~~ yet the students were suppose to be assessed on grade level content performance standards in areas such as algebra, biology and world geography. The focus on academic standards takes time away from teaching students to communicate and functional skills. This disconnect between the students actual ability to access much less meet the standards is one reason teachers perceive alternate assessments negatively.

Tindal, Yovanoff, and Geller (May, 2010) conducted research on the reliability of reading assessments for students with significant cognitive disabilities using receptive and expressive formats. The research found that there is a tradeoff between meaningful participation and accurate measurement of students with disabilities. The research found that the reliability of reading assessments vary across alternate assessment formats such as portfolios, checklists, and performance assessments for students with severe cognitive disabilities.

Previous research has shown that teachers question the reliability and validity of teacher completed alternate assessment portfolios and the present study shows they should be concerned. This concern is a reason some teachers cite negative perceptions of the alternate assessments.

Cameto, Bergland, Knokey, Nagle, Sanford, Kalb, Blackorby, Sinclair, Riley and Ortega (2010) in their report from the national study on alternate assessments found that 52% of teachers felt their students were not aware of the alternate assessment or the meaning of the test. In the study the research found that 54% of teachers felt that students with cognitive disabilities did not benefit from inclusion in the accountability system (p. 69).

The research found that a strong majority, 71%, felt the alternate assessment scores are not reflective of students' actual progress (p.68).
This research study consisted of a survey that was piloted, revised and given to over 400 special education teachers who completed alternate assessments in the spring of 2009. The survey and the accompanying demographic questionnaire were then analyzed. Conventional frequency distributions were calculated for each survey question. The report shows that the majority of teachers feel that alternate assessments are time consuming and an additional paperwork requirement that offers little benefit to students.

### *Conclusions and Discussion*

This literature review supports the hypothesis that teachers perceive the alternate assessments for students with significant cognitive disabilities most significant impact as the amount of time and paper work required for the teacher to complete the assessment and portfolios. The impact of the alternate assessment will continue to be on a teachers time and resources that could be better spent on activities that promote self care, independent living and work readiness skills

## References


Cameto, R., Bergland, F., Knokey, A., Nagle, K., Sanford, C., Kalb, S., et al. (2010). *Teacher perspectives of school-level implementation of alternate assessments for students with significant cognitive disabilities*. A Report from the National Study on Alternate Assessments. NCSER 2010-3007. National Center for Special Education Research, Retrieved from ERIC database.

Elliot, S. N., Kettler, R. J., & Roach, A. T. (2008). Alternate assessments of modified achievement standards. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies. 19*(3) , 140-152.

Elliott, S. N., & Roach, A. T. (2007). Alternate assessments of students with significant disabilities: Alternate approaches, common technical challenges. *Applied Measurement in Education, 20*(3), 301-333.

Elliott, S. N., Compton, E., & Roach, A. T. (2007). Building validity evidence for scores on a state-wide alternate assessment: A contrasting groups, multimethod approach. *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice, 26*(2), 30-43.

Flowers, C., Ahlgrim-Delzell, L., Browder, D., & Spooner, F. (2005). Teachers' perceptions of alternate assessments. *Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 30*(2), 81-92.

Flowers, C., Wakeman, S., Browder, D. M., & Karvonen, M. (2009). Links for academic learning (LAL): A conceptual model for investigating alignment of alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards. *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*, 25-37.

Georgia Department of Education (2008/2009). *Score interpretation guide.* Georgia Department of Education, Atlanta, GA.

Hartwig, R., & Sitlington, P. L. (2008). Employer perspectives on high school diploma options for adolescents with disabilities. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies, 19*(1), 5-14.

Kampfer, S. H., Horvath, L. S., Kleinert, H. L., & Kearns, J. F. (2001). Teachers' perceptions of one state's alternate assessment: Implications for practice and preparation. *Exceptional Children, 67*(3), 361-374.

Katsiyannis, A., Zhang, D., Ryan, B. R., & Jones, J. (2007). High-stakes testing and students with disabilities: Challenges and Promises. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies, 18*(3), 160-167.

Kettler, R. J., & Elliott, S. N. (2009). Introduction to the special issue on alternate assessments based on modified academic achievement standards: New policy, practices, and persistent challenges. *Peabody Journal of Education, 84*, 467-477.

Kim, Y., Angell, M. E., O'Brian, M., Strand, K. H., Fulk, B. M., & Watts, ,. E. (2006). Relationships among teachers' perspectives, self-reported practices, and concerns related to an alternate assessment system. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 29*(2), 83-97.

Kleinert, H. L., Kennedy, S., & Kearns, J. F. (1999). The impact of alternate assessments: A statewide teacher survey. *The Journal of Special Education, 33*(2), 93-102.

Kleinert, H., Browder, D. M., & Towles-Reeves, E. A. (2009). Models of cognition for students with significant cognitive disabilities: Implications for assessment. *Review of Educational Research, 79*(1), 301-327.

Roach, A. T. (2006). Influences on parent perceptions of an alternate assessment for students with sever cognitive disabilities. *Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 31*(3), 267-274.

Tindal, G., Yovanoff, P., & Geller, J. P. (2010). Generalizability theory applied to reading assessments for students with significant cognitive disabilities. *The Journal of Special Education, 44*(1), 3-17.

Towles-Reeves, E., Kleinert, H., & Anderman, L. (2008). Alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards: Principals' perceptions. *Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 33*(3), 122-133.

Towles-Reeves, E., Kleinert, H., & Muhomba, M. (2008). Alternate assessment: Have we learned anything yet? *Council for Exceptional Children, 75*(2), 233-252.

Weigert, S. (2009). Perspectives on the current state of alternate assessments based on modified academic achievement standards: Commentary on Peabody Journal of Education Special Issue. *Peabody Journal of Education, 84*, 585-594.