Differentiating Assessments for Special Populations

Assessing K-12 students in online environments poses new challenges, including assessing special population students. With accommodations, modifications, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles adapted to the online environment, teachers can differentiate assessments to support student learning and provide equity for all students.

1. What are my experiences differentiating assessments for special population students?
2. Why is it important for me to consider how students represent the content they have learned?
3. How can I differentiate and/or adapt online assessments for special populations while ensuring that the target content has not changed?

? to Consider

KEY Elements

In inclusive K-12 classrooms, special population students integrate with general education students, and all students engage in the instruction and assessment cycle. Differentiating instruction and assessments creates equity for all students, but differentiation is very challenging in online environments. To ensure special population students' unique needs are met and barriers are overcome, teachers must make accommodations and modifications. In assessment through accommodation, the assignments given to special populations and general education students are the same, but the approaches by which students are assessed are changed. With modification, on the other hand, the assessments for special populations are changed. For example, a common form of accommodation is allowing students more time to complete an exam, while a modification might be the use of a different exam format or different questions.

In order to differentiate assessments for special populations in online environments, teachers should pay specific attention to the individual needs of students as outlined in students' Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), Individualized Learning Plans (ILPs), and 504 Plans. These plans are binding legal documents that identify individual student needs, goals, and required accommodations or modifications. One way to differentiate assessments for special populations is by providing students with varied support such as providing visual cues to denote how much time is given for a particular assessment or indicating different stages of assessments. Assessment activities can also be adapted to remove any obstacle. For instance, if a student has difficulty with verbal communication, they can be prompted to respond in writing instead. Sometimes, supplying special equipment and technology can help students complete assessment items such as using screen reader software to help visually challenged students understand and respond to textual assessment items. Another way of differentiating assessments is by developing rapport or relationships that support students. One-on-one virtual meetings can be utilized to facilitate the process. It is also important to promote student self-advocacy by encouraging students to self-identify and communicate their learning needs.

When differentiating assessments for special population students, consider Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles. Teachers can best support learning by providing multiple methods of representation, multiple means of student action and expression, and multiple modes of student engagement. Implementing UDL principles will benefit all students, including both general education and special population students. However, it is important to keep in mind that if UDL principles do not meet the specific individual needs identified in students' IEP, ILP, and 504 plans, it is a legal requirement to further differentiate assessments. Differentiating assessments for special populations is very important to support all students and enable them to be successful.