One State’s Experience Implementing Links for Academic Learning

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What’s in today’s presentation?

Overview of Links for Academic Learning
Changes we made and why we made them
Challenges
Conclusions and recommendations
What is Links for Academic Learning? (Flowers et al., 2007)

A procedure for alignment of a state’s alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards (AA–AAS) with general curricular standards.
Why use Links for Academic Learning?

Flexible and comprehensive method to evaluate a state’s AA–AAS on eight criteria
Where do LAL data come from?

- Special Education Experts
- Current Teachers
- Content Area Experts
Special Education Experts
- Received binders of documents and coding materials
- Returned coded worksheets by email, mail, or fax

Content Area Experts
- Attended two-day workshop in central location
- Trained together with examples, coded in teams

Current Teachers
- Randomly selected from master list
- Received link by email and completed online survey
Key Tasks for Special Education Experts

1. Assess level of symbolic communication required for extended standards
2. Assess age-appropriateness of extended standards
3. Review assessment procedures and professional development materials
Key Tasks for Content Area Experts

1. Assess academic content of extended standards with respect to national standards
2. Assess alignment of extended and general standards
3. Evaluate depth of knowledge of extended standards
Key Tasks for Current Teachers

1. Report on current alternate assessment students
2. Report on professional development
3. Report on instructional practices
What changes did we make?

Special education experts (out of state): 6
  3 independent special education reviewers
  3 trained LAL reviewers working as a team

Content area experts (in state): 24
  2 special educators and 4 content experts,
    elementary and secondary, on 4 review teams

Current teachers (in state): 84
  Respondents to online Curriculum Indicators
    Survey (this part of LAL was not modified)
Why did we do this?

1. To increase number/background of reviewers
2. To collect information on disagreements/lack of consensus in ratings
3. To evaluate LAL methodology
What did we learn?

Descriptions of symbolic communication were unclear.

Independent special education reviewers did not always agree with LAL team.

Content area experts and special educators agreed on some rating criteria but not others.
## Levels of Symbolic Communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awareness/Presymbolic</td>
<td>Has no clear response and <strong>no objective in communication</strong>. Communicates with gestures, <strong>purposeful</strong> moving to object, sounds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concrete Symbolic</td>
<td>Beginning to use <strong>pictures or other symbols</strong> to communicate within a limited vocabulary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract Symbolic</td>
<td>Speaks or has vocabulary of signs, pictures to communicate. Recognizes some sight words, numbers, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What Issues did we find with LAL?

Symbolic communication definitions are inconsistent across components of LAL.
Terminology changes: *Early Symbolic* instead of *Concrete Symbolic*.
Misinterpretation of *symbol*: “Students do not need symbolic communication skills to rote count.” Numerals, their names, and words are all symbols.
Expressive and receptive language skills are not distinguished.
What Issues did we find in the literature?

Terms like *presymbolic* and *concrete symbolic* have no consistent meaning

Confusion about meaning of *symbol* and *icon*

**Concrete symbols** are icons: images or representations of objects (Rowland & Schweigert, 1990)

Iconic graphics are interpreted as symbols (Sutton et al., 2009)

Iconic graphics are not easier to understand than abstract symbols (Poncelas & Murphy, 2006)
Order of Symbol Acquisition

Gestures (McLaughlin & Cascella, 2008):
- Proximal gestures: touching, pushing
- Distal gestures: pointing

Symbols (O’Toole & Chiat, 2006; Tomasello et al., 1999):
- Iconic gestures: combing hair
- Objects and miniatures as icons
- Objects and miniatures as symbols
Independent reviewers thought extended standards required higher levels of symbolic communication than review team did. Hypothesis: Definitions of symbolic communication were inconsistent; reviewers had own opinions.

Independent reviewers and team disagreed on age-appropriateness of extended standards and inferences about student learning. Hypothesis: Independent reviewers looked at state materials and LAL criteria with fresh eyes; found evidence in state materials missed by team.
What did our content area experts say?

Agreed on academic content (100%)
Agreed on depth of knowledge (93%)
Disagreed on national content standards (22%)
Disagreed on content and performance fidelity (20%)
Disagreed on best grade level alignment (21%)
Content experts often disagreed with one another
Disagreements sometimes occurred between content experts at different grade levels
Often just one person dissented
## Coding Agreement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Mathematics</th>
<th>Science</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic content</td>
<td>100% All academic</td>
<td>100% 99% academic</td>
<td>100% All academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National standards</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content Fidelity</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance fidelity</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depth of knowledge</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best alignment</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What were our conclusions about Links for Academic Learning?

LAL is a formidable tool for alignment of AA–AAS. Clarity and consistency are needed in symbolic language definitions and terms throughout LAL. Expressive and receptive language skills should be distinguished.

Training reviewers can be challenging 😊. Local special educators and content experts worked well together on alignment tasks, broadened perspective of team.

There’s value in consensus!
Sources


