

TABE Testing Issues for Adults with Special Learning Needs

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The TLP Group has been collecting data on the special learning needs of literacy, basic skills, at-risk youth, and TANF students/clients since 2003. This data has specific implications for the use of the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) in programs serving these populations. The TABE is used to measure entry skills and knowledge and post-instruction skills and knowledge. The special learning needs data is specific to key aspects of information processing that are critical to learning. These same key aspects are critical to the demonstration of academic skills and knowledge that are being tested by TABE.

The implications of this data present key issues related to test materials and test environments. These issues must be addressed so that the learners can demonstrate 'what they know' – i.e., skills and knowledge - on the TABE.

The TLP Group statistics are based on 4,567 students/clients in adult basic education and literacy, at-risk youth, and TANF programs from 108 programs in 13 states, 2003–2006. The data was collected and compiled by staff trained in administering the engagement interview and screenings that make up *PowerPath to Education and Employment*, a comprehensive learning system (Weisel, 2007). It is important to note that of the individuals in the database of nearly 5,000, one-third of the individuals had reading levels below 4.0, one-third had reading levels between 4.0 and 8.0, and one third had reading levels of 8.0 and higher.

The screenings included an information processing screening battery, vision and hearing function screenings, and screenings for attention difficulties and Visual Stress Syndrome. The core screenings have been normed, standardized, and proven to be reliable measures for screening individuals 16 years of age and older who are native English speakers. They also have been correlated and weighted to predict a *Woodcock- Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery* full-scale score.

It is significant to keep in mind that the TABE test is printed on white paper, has black letters, and, in most situations, is administered with the corresponding bubble answer sheet to ease administrative issues with scoring. Most classrooms rooms, in which the TABE is administered, have white or pale walls and bright florescent lighting.

Based upon the data profiling program participants, the TABE format, testing environment, test protocols may present brain-based information processing problems for students/clients. The environmental problems included the following.

- Too much glare from white pages under bright, florescent light causing letters and words that appear to move or go in and out of focus.
- Difficulty with tracking, following lines within paragraphs due to the white paper with black letters.

- Great difficulty going from the test booklet to filling-in answers on a bubble sheets.
- Challenges with focusing attention or sitting still for an extended length of time.

Since the TABE is intended to demonstrate academic skills and knowledge, the format, test environment, and testing protocols may actually be hindering a large portion of students/clients from being able to really demonstrate the very skills and knowledge that are being tested.

Here are the key findings in the study:

1. About 4-5 out of every 10 of the students/clients in the study has a vision function problem—mostly near vision and binocularity (using the two eyes together for sustained reading). Everyone in the study, who had prescriptive glasses, was screened wearing their glasses throughout the entire vision screening. About 4 out of every 10 students/clients wore prescription lenses. The implications of vision function issues impact testing reading skills due to the font size, spacing between lines and kerning (spaces between letters).

2. About 9 out of every 10 student/clients have issues with Visual Stress Syndrome. Visual Stress Syndrome (Wilkins, 2006), initially referred to as ‘word blindness’ as early as the 1880s (R. Berlin, 1880), light or scotopic sensitivity, Meares Syndrome (Meares, 1980), Irlen Syndrome (Irlen, 1983), and Meares/Irlen Syndrome, is a relatively under-researched neurological condition that is now being looked at as having great impact on reading, writing and migraines.

Visual Stress Syndrome has to do with hypersensitive color receptors in the visual cortex. When triggered by certain colors in white light, the hypersensitive receptors set off a chemical and electrical reaction producing over-stimulation throughout portions of the brain that have to do with reading, writing, auditory comprehension, focusing or attention, in addition to other brain functions. Research on Visual Stress Syndrome also includes research on light-induced headaches and migraines.

Visual Stress Syndrome is exacerbated by bright white light and white paper with black letters. In rooms that have white walls reflection of the white light is increased. Individuals who have VSS choose low levels of light – preferably natural or low levels of light, use a color overlay, and almost always elect to have materials printed on color paper in a larger font.

The National Education Association (July 6, 2007) adopted an action about Visual Stress Syndrome (also known as Irlen Syndrome and Scotopic Sensitivity). NEA states that VSS....”results in serious reading difficulties for many thousands of school children” and that NEA will work to educate all teachers about the impact this syndrome can have reading and learning.

For more information about this syndrome, see “An In-depth Discussion of Special Learning Needs of Individuals in Adult Education, At-Risk Youth Programs, and One-

Stop Centers Part 2—The Impact of Visual Stress Syndrome,” at www.naasln.org/documents/articles/weisel_02_special_learning_needs.pdf) or checkout a recent bibliography of writings and research at www.essex.ac.uk/psychology/overlays/publications2.htm

3. Nearly 4 to 5 out of every 10 students/clients are challenged by the task of copying. The screening includes copying relatively simple graphic figures into rather large spaces. The TABE requires filling-in responses on a separate bubble sheet, i.e., in very small spaces to correspond to a letter representing the correct response in the Test Booklet. The impact of this challenge on copying from a workbook or test booklet onto another page or form is huge. Yet, this is the mode of much instruction and most standardized testing.

4. Between 7 to 8 out of every 10 students/clients in the programs surveyed have attention challenges that can lead to difficulties with extended reading, sitting in one place for an extended period of time or listening comprehension. These attention challenges impact the ability to:

- Stay on-task
- Sit and stay focused on test materials
- Work under restrictive time limits

These challenges are neurologically-based and do not impact demonstrating academic knowledge and skills UNLESS the testing conditions do not permit flexible test time, the ability to move as needed, and the ability to have manipulatives to release neurological energy.

5. About 4 out of every 10 adults in the programs surveyed already have a diagnosis of 'Learning Disability' with about 6 to 7 out of 10 that could, if not already, be clinically diagnosed as having a some type of learning disability including:

- Reading disorder, mathematics disorder, disorder with written expression, learning disorder not otherwise specified
- Developmental coordination disorder
- Expressive language disorder, mixed an attention deficit disorder, phonological disorder, communication disorder not otherwise specified
- Inattention, hyperactivity, impulsivity (DSM IV TR, 2000)

The high likelihood of being able to be diagnosed with one or more of these conditions indicate that a high number of students/clients in the database, could, if not already, be diagnosed with one or more of the listed learning disorders.

The problem is that, with an already identified indigent (low income) population, diagnosis is a costly process and most psychological tests do not identify or use accommodations for visual or auditory function challenges or the challenges of Visual Stress Syndrome. Both of these challenges can directly impact psychological test

outcomes. With these issues in mind, the *appropriate intention* of the tester (program and personnel) is critically important.

This intention to provide the best testing situation, for all student/clients to show what they know, leads to accommodations and adaptations in the test environment and in the use of accommodations in administration of TABE is both critical and essential. If needed, laws already exist to support the right intention: the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

CTB/McGraw-Hill, publisher of TABE, knows that there needs to be special accommodations and adaptations made for adults with special learning needs, most of which could be identified as 'disabilities' if the resources were available for full neuro-psychological testing. Even without such diagnostic testing being readily available for a formal diagnoses, CTB McGraw-Hill has created a set of accommodations and adaptations for inclusion of all adults to better demonstrate knowledge and skills on the TABE.

The Guidelines for Inclusive Test Administration is not often referred to by either TABE trainers, in TABE materials, or by the CTB McGraw-Hill sales force. In fact, this document isn't easily found at the CTB-McGraw-Hill website and isn't widely circulated, but it does exist! The complete booklet can be found at:

www.ctb.com/articles/article_information.jsp?CONTENT%3C%3Ecnt_id=10134198673254933&FOLDER%3C%3Efolder_id=1408474395222381&ASSORTMENT%3C%3East_id=1408474395213825&bmUID=1195562339042

These guidelines have been included at The National Association for Adults with Special Learning Needs (NAASLN) conferences with representation by CTB staff, in NAASLN sponsored pre-conference sessions (COABE 2006, CEA 2007), and in NAASLN conference sessions tracks at COABE, ProLiteracy, and CEA.

It is a huge disservice to all of our literacy and adult basic education students if accommodations and adaptations are not made possible in all learning situations, especially in testing situations.

If you would like more information on the data collection, please contact me directly.

References

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*The TLP Group is a social entrepreneurial company that uses traditional entrepreneurial principles to organize, create, and manage ventures for creating needed social change to address recognized social problems. The social entrepreneurial company often tackles social problems that have not been successfully solved by traditional government or nonprofit initiatives.

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