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Cognitive Dissonance and Special Education Teachers: Examining Instructional Decisions in a High-stakes Testing Era

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COGNITIVE DISSONANCE AND SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS:

EXAMINING INSTRUCTIONAL DECISIONS IN A HIGH-STAKES TESTING ERA

by

ALYSE HALIBURTON SHOWERS

Under the Direction of Dr. Diane Truscott

ABSTRACT

The study examines how special education teachers in elementary schools respond to accountability measures using a cognitive dissonance theoretical framework. Sixty percent of students with disabilities have a specific learning disability with processing challenges and are expected to take and pass end-of-the-year high-stakes tests alongside their non-disabled peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Preparing students with learning disabilities for tests can potentially influence special education teachers' autonomy, instructional decisions, and career satisfaction. Some argue that an increased emphasis on student testing is one reason for the current teacher shortage and attrition rates of special education teachers (Thornton, Peltier, & Medina, 2007). This qualitative research study used a narrative inquiry methodology to explore how mandatory state testing influence special education teachers' abilities to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities. Saldaña's (2016) value coding was used to analyze teacher interviews, analytic memos, and a researcher journal. Findings revealed that high-stakes tests minimize the ability for special education teachers to specialize instruction. Special education teachers value their autonomy to use instructional time on tasks that directly impact student achievement. Reported instructional practices appear to align in support of high-stakes tests even though teachers do not find them valuable. This study has implications for special education teachers, school administrators, and policymakers. Findings from the study can add to the current dialogue about the influence of increased testing on teaching and learning specific to populations with special needs.

INDEX WORDS: Special education, Students with disabilities, Cognitive dissonance, High-stakes tests, Mandatory tests, Instructional decision making

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A Dissertation

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DEDICATION

To my unborn son,

Finding out that you were on the way has blessed me in more ways than you will ever know. I dedicate this dissertation to you so that you may always know that the sky is the limit. You can accomplish anything you want, and I will always cheer for you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A colleague told me that when a doctoral student writes their acknowledgments page, the end is very near. Writing this page is surreal for me, and I am grateful for everyone who has helped me along this journey.

First, I give acknowledgment and honor to God. This journey has been long and hard, but I know that my success is only because of His grace and mercy. I am forever humbled.

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Next, I want to thank the support of my cohort. To sit at the table with such remarkable educators was a blessing within itself. I am thankful for our collaboration and support of one another. There is none other like Cohort 2016 to motivate you to achieve #puffyhatgoals!

Lastly, I want to thank my family and friends who have supported me along this journey. Janiece Benefield, thank you for the countless hours you have been by my side as I researched, wrote chapters, and stressed over my next deadline. Your friendship and support has meant so much to me. To my big sister, Andrea, thank you for being my very first mentor which was as soon as you could read. I believe that it was my introduction to reading at such a young age that has prepared me to accomplish a goal as great as this. To my twin brother, Andrew, thank you

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1 INTRODUCTION

Quality teachers leave the field of education for numerous reasons. According to research by Podolsky, Kini, Bishop, and Darling-Hammond (2016), 25% of teachers who leave the profession attribute the cause to dissatisfaction with accountability measures. Specifically, 17% of teachers attribute their dissatisfaction to the task of preparing students for high-stakes tests (HST) (Podolsky et al., 2016). These trends hold true for special educators. Research conducted by the Innovative Resources for Instructional Success Center (2019) confirmed that special education teachers leave the field for three main reasons: experience, retirement, and work-related. Among work-related reasons for leaving the profession include lack of support from administrators and colleagues, student behavior, lack of opportunity to teach students, salary and benefits, and accountability measures.

Accountability measures refer to the usage of assessment data "to provide indicators—to federal, state, and local stakeholders who make policy and allocate public funds—that students are making academic progress" (Albrecht & Joles, 2003, p. 86). Assessment data, like state-mandated tests, are analyzed to hold schools responsible for the success, or the lack thereof, of students' mastery of grade-level standards.

Reports on the importance of state testing in public schools are pervasive (Beam, 2009). In many cases, public schools center instruction on state testing because test scores are the primary source used to determine a school's effectiveness. In Georgia, third, fourth, and fifth graders' test scores on the Georgia Milestones significantly influence a school's College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI) score (College and Career Ready Performance Index, 2019). While overall test scores reflect the school's adequacy, school leaders commonly review teachers' class data to determine teacher effectiveness. In years past, only students receiving

general education services were included for accountability purposes, but in recent years students with disabilities were added (Beam, 2009). Teachers are held accountable through state testing and performance indicators that are reflected in a school's CCRPI score (College and Career Performance Index, 2019).

Teacher accountability aims to ensure that special education teachers effectively guide students to mastery of grade-level standards as outlined by the state curriculum. Special education teachers are expected to strategically compensate for learning and processing disabilities that their students possess to meet achievement goals and make academic gains. In part due to testing, increased expectations for special education teachers led to teacher burnout and increases in teacher attrition (Billingsley, 2004; McCarthy, 2019).

In a research review of the literature over the last decade, Billingsley and Bettini (2019) identified four reasons that affected teachers' decisions to stay or leave the profession. Billingsley and Bettini reported that nearly 25% of special education teachers left the field because of concerns over accountability. The research reported that special education teachers were most dissatisfied with compensation being tied to performance, the inadequate support to prepare students for assessments, and the time spent on testing instead of teaching. "Special educators have many complex responsibilities, and they may experience frustration and be more likely to leave when their demands require more than they can reasonably provide" (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019, p. 715). The demands of accountability can enhance frustrations of special education teachers and can greatly impact their decision to leave or stay in the profession.

Data collected during the 2018 – 2019 school year identified that the most common disability among students who receive special education services is specific learning disability (SLD). SLD is defined as the inability to process information at an "average" rate, and yet

students who have processing delays are expected to participate and pass mandatory state tests alongside their non-disabled counterparts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Although some students may be eligible to receive some testing accommodations (e.g., additional time, questions provided orally), the fact that they combat cognitive processing demands places them in assessment conditions that ignore their special educational needs. Just as general education teachers must adjust instruction to prepare students for testing, special education teachers must do so in relation to learning that is supposedly tailored to meet a student's individual needs. Special education teachers must make instructional decisions that align with the needs of the students they teach while acknowledging and preparing students to meet the requirements of high-stakes tests and scores that will be used to assess teacher performance.

Teachers, as experts in their craft, make important instructional decisions throughout their day. As the trajectory of inclusion of special education in high-stakes testing continues to rise, it is important to understand how teachers are responding to demands that are based on a norm that does not represent their learners. It is critical to understand how mandatory assessments influence their decisions about teaching and learning. In this study, I examine the influence that high-stakes testing has on elementary special education teachers' abilities to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities. I argue that preparing students with SLD for HST can be an unfairly challenging responsibility that can misrepresent what students with disabilities are able to do while reducing the ability for teachers to use their expertise as specialized educators. Special education teachers are expected to provide individualized and specialized instruction to the students they serve, yet all students - those who receive general education and special education services - have their academic performance measured by the same standardized assessment. As a potential consequence, special education teachers may be more inclined to instruct

their students at the same rate and instructional level as general education teachers with minimized consideration for the special needs their students with disabilities require. In this chapter, I discuss the problem and significance of the study, the theoretical framework guiding this work, and my assumptions and positionality as a researcher.

Problem Statement

Unless a moderate or severe disability has been identified, all Georgian students in third through fifth grades are required to participate in high-stakes tests. Unfortunately, these standardized tests capture more of what a student is unable to do than what they are able to do.

Students diagnosed with SLD have documented deficits with processing (Cornett-Devito & Worley, 2005; Flanagan, Mascolo, & Alfonso, 2016). When compared to students without SLD, these students typically take longer to process information and retrieve information from their short-term or working memory. As a result, these students typically perform below their grade level and require additional support to close achievement gaps. Though all students possess the ability to achieve, students with SLD benefit from specialized instruction that can meet their individual learning needs. It is problematic for students with learning disabilities to be expected to demonstrate proficiency on high-stakes tests that are not differentiated in a way that aligns to the instruction they may have received throughout the year (Brimijoin, 2005).

In addition to standardized tests not being differentiated, students also may not receive testing accommodations on state tests that may have been provided during instruction. Valid testing accommodations on state tests are "changes in the testing administration, environment, equipment, technology, and procedures that allow students with disabilities to participate in testing programs" without changing the nature of the test (Salend, 2008, p. 16). A noted example is not allowing test passages to be read aloud because doing so would assess listening

comprehension and not reading comprehension. Because standardized tests assess students'

skills more than their understanding of content, in some cases, it is difficult for students with

learning disabilities to demonstrate proficiency if they have not mastered necessary skills. Just as

it is problematic for students to respond to the challenges of testing, it is also difficult for special

education teachers who are specially trained to meet their needs.

Special education teachers are required to have extensive training and earn specialized

certification to be considered a "highly qualified teacher" and eligible to teach students with dis-

abilities. To become professionally certified to be a special education teacher in the state of

Georgia, one must "meet minimum education requirements, complete an approved or accepted

educator preparation program, and complete certification assessment requirements" (Steps to Be-

come a Georgia Teacher, 2019, para. 3). The traditional approach to becoming a special educa-

tion teacher is to attend a college or university, obtain a certification in a specialized area (e.g.,

math, elementary education, physical education) and then seek employment.

Throughout the training, educators learn to differentiate instruction and to teach students

on their instructional level or at the level that they are educationally prepared to learn (Beam,

2009; Brimijoin, 2005). In other words, if a student is not ready to learn grade-level material, it is

appropriate, and encouraged, to teach students prerequisite skills if needed, and scaffold other

grade-level standards when they are ready. Students with disabilities can reach high scholastic

standards, but it is important that foundational skills are taught before being exposed to skills that

may be too foreign for them to learn.

It is common for special education teachers to use a mastery learning (Guskey, 2007). A

mastery learning model is defined as "an alternative method of teaching and learning that in-

volves the student reaching a level of predetermined mastery on units of instruction before being

allowed to progress to the next unit" (Robinson, 1992; Davis & Sorrell, 1995, p. 1). As educators use the mastery learning model, emphasis is placed on students meeting prerequisite skills before advancing to skills that are more challenging. For students with learning disabilities, it is difficult for students to learn prerequisite skills associated with earlier grade levels and pass a test that assesses skills that are on their current grade level.

Because an emphasis continues to be placed on HST, teachers have a heightened incentive to prepare each student for proficiency. Requiring students to take tests that are above their level, however, can have negative consequences (Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000; Horn, 2003; Boon, Voltz, Lawson & Baskette, 2007). Students' self-efficacy may suffer when they are presented with tasks that extend beyond their capabilities (Bandura, 1977). Their self-efficacy is even more challenged when students realize the consequences of not passing HST (i.e., grade retention, summer school) (Lackaye & Margalit, 2006).

Special education teachers have a responsibility to support and close academic gaps between each students' current level of performance and the grade-level standards. One benefit of special education is the ability for special education teachers to use their expertise to guide students toward mastery at a pace that supports their individualized needs. Failing to allow special education teachers the opportunity to use professional judgment when educating their pupils can affect students' self-efficacy and motivation for learning and the special education teachers' autonomy and job satisfaction. Most importantly, hindering special education teachers from being the educators they were trained to be challenges the intent of special education which is to allow students to reach their fullest potential through a specially designed instructional program (Department of Defense Education Activity, 2020).

It is important to recognize and address these problems because it significantly influences how special education teachers can teach, and perhaps whether they persevere as educators in times of accountability.

Significance of the Study

Special education teachers are specialized educators who teach students with special learning needs. Special education teachers experience years of schooling to understand the dynamics of various disabilities and study strategies for supporting individuals with these disabilities. A component of understanding special education is knowing that students who require specialized instruction require specially designed instruction that considers psychoeducational reports, among other academic data, to understand how each student best accesses the curriculum. It is important to understand whether special education teachers are able to provide students with disabilities with the specially designed instruction even during times when state-mandated assessments take the stage.

The need for special education teachers has increased with the number of students meeting eligibility criteria growing at higher rates (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2004; Nichols, Bicard, Bicard & Casey, 2008). Though there is an increased need for special education teachers, these positions are hard to staff and retain (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). There are many reasons why teachers leave the field. However, dissatisfaction with accountability and assessment measures in schools remains a consistent factor (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Wronowski & Urick, 2019). Special education teachers, who have spent years of professional learning working to develop their skillset, are required to prepare students for mandatory state testing regardless of whether they consider the assessment measure appropriate for their students. As a result, special education teachers have high turnover rates that are largely attributed to their

disagreement with accountability measures (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). It is natural for people to strive for harmony between their actions and their beliefs. Turnover is one consequence of what may happen when teachers continue to struggle with building harmonious bridges between their beliefs about what is best for their students and the required accountability measures they are to prepare their students for.

Awareness needs to be brought to the effects that HST has on special education teachers so that our students' educational needs are met, and special education teachers feel supported in helping students meet those needs. Because of the teacher shortage in the United States, especially for special education teachers, research that investigates how contextual variables such as mandated testing influence a teacher's instructional decision making and continued commitment to the teaching is needed.

Consequences of HST affect school administrators, students, and teachers. One impact of HST on teachers is in the area of autonomy and may be especially true for special education teachers. Special education teachers are required to prepare students with processing delays and learning disabilities for state testing, although these students are typically not academically taught skills on their grade level. Special education intends to provide instruction for students with disabilities in a way that will help close the achievement gap between them and their peers without disabilities. Requiring students with disabilities to take and pass state tests not only impacts the confidence of students with disabilities (Stiggins, 1999), but also teachers' abilities to instruct students in ways that they know best.

This is especially important for Georgians in third through fifth grades because they are required to participate in standardized testing. Only students who "cannot meaningfully access the Georgia Milestones Assessment System, even with maximum appropriate accommodations,"

as decided by the child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) team, are given an alternative

standardized test known as the Georgia Alternative Assessment 2.0 (GAA 2.0), (GDOE, 2018,

para. 2). These students typically have more severe disabilities and are unable to access a stand-

ard presentation of mandated tests. Students participate in the GAA when the IEP team deter-

mines that it would be more beneficial to present what has been learned through a nonstandard

assessment.

Special education teachers in testing grades make instructional decisions every day, and

HST can influence those decisions. Do special educators teach in a way that prepares their stu-

dents for standardized tests or cater to the educational needs of the individual student regardless

of the repercussions that not passing the HST may have? Experienced teachers with specialized

expertise may experience conflicts with implementing instructional practices that align state

mandates but not professional beliefs and expectations. Cognitive dissonance can help explain

these conflicts or inconsistencies attitudes, beliefs, and actions.

Theoretical Framework: Cognitive Dissonance

The study examines how special educators respond to the challenges of meeting the indi-

vidualized needs of students during mandated testing. I argue that teachers may experience con-

flict in discharging their duties as special educators while complying with testing mandates.

Therefore, I use cognitive dissonance theory (CDT) to guide this study. CDT was first investi-

gated by social psychologist Leon Festinger in 1957, during a time when behaviorism, a theory

that studies human behavior without regard to internal states of being, was at its prime. Festinger

(1957) argued that people naturally strive for harmony, or consistencies, between their thoughts

and actions. Using cognition, the knowledge of one's behavior or environment, to explain one's

thoughts and feelings, Festinger suggested that people can have inconsistent cognitions and

behaviors (Morvan & O'Conner, 2017). Inconsistencies between cognitions and behaviors are referred to as dissonance. Cognitive dissonance can help explain inconsistencies or clashes between attitudes, beliefs, and actions. Metin and Camgoz (2011) noted that "dissonance might arise from logical inconsistencies, cultural mores, inconsistency between a cognition and a more encompassing cognition and past experiences" (p. 131).

Festinger's theory provides explanation of why people have consistencies and suggested certain methods that people can use to realign cognitions (Morvan & O'Conner, 2017). "In the existence of dissonance, individuals are motivated to reduce the dissonance and avoid situations that increase it" (Metin & Camgoz, 2011, p. 131). When people experience inconsistencies, or dissonance, between their behavior and beliefs, one of four naturally occurring strategies are typically used to guide thoughts and beliefs toward the desired consistency: modify cognition, trivialize cognition, add more cognition, or deny cognition (McGrath, 2019).

The first strategy to help balance the equilibrium between beliefs and actions is to modify cognitions. In a case where one's thoughts and behaviors are contradictory, modifying cognitions means that one would work to convince themselves that instead of spending a considerable amount of time teaching to the test, they spend an insignificant amount of time focusing on testing. Modifying their cognition will help weaken the dissonance between their thoughts of testing and their behavior of spending time focusing on testing.

Another strategy is to trivialize cognitions. Using the same example, one might trivialize their cognition by convincing themselves that tests are not *that* bad, so their behavior can be justified. In terms of special education teachers and testing, it may manifest as the teachers convince themselves that the Georgia Milestones is not *that* problematic for students. For example, they

could reason that the testing occurs during a small window of time; therefore, the influence it has on students may be minimal.

A third method for aligning thoughts and actions is to add more cognition. In this case, one adds additional thoughts to support initial thinking and justify one's behaviors. An example of this would be a teacher who believes that the Georgia Milestones is not very vital because of the many other assessments and activities that students partake in throughout the year can serve as documentation of their mastery of state standards and helps guide practice and instructional decision making.

The final strategy is to deny cognitions. In this case, one's thoughts and behaviors are not aligned. In a case with teachers and tests, the special education teacher may argue that their students may do well on the test even though research supports that these students typically do not.

As an elementary special education teacher, I often battle cognitive dissonance while preparing students for HST despite their disabilities. In reflecting on my own response to dissonance, I find myself reacting to HST by adding more cognitions. As I work closely with each student over the school year, I observe the many strengths and talents that students possess that tests cannot measure. Parents who reported that their child was quiet at the beginning of the year have proclaimed that their child had become a social butterfly by the end of the year. There have been students who are masters in sports and unique artists. As a special education teacher, instead of being defeated by the likelihood that many of my students with learning disabilities will not perform well on the end-of-the-year mandated assessments, I remind myself that my students are worth more than a test score and their future will not be predicted or determined based on their performance on a test from elementary school.

The use of a cognitive dissonance theoretical framework allows me, as a researcher, to understand how other special education teachers may respond to the responsibility of preparing students with learning disabilities for HST. Because "cognitive consistency is a key motivational property for humans" (McGrath, 2019, p. 1), I explore how special education teachers respond to anticipated challenges through their instructional decisions and practices.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative research study examines how the demands of HST have influenced special education teachers' abilities to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities. In this study, I sought to understand what special education teachers do when state requirements (mandatory state testing on students' grade level) misalign with the needs of students with disabilities (content presented at their instructional level). Based on my own experiences as special educator and the theory used to guide this study, I anticipated that teacher responses to mandated testing and their students would result in some type of conflict and distress, or a sense of dissonance. I also believed that their responses to dissonance would result in instructional decision making that was specific to HST. Hence, I examined how special education teachers provided instruction that they knew was best, or morally just, for the students they served, while also gearing their instruction to what the state required. To guide my understanding of these experiences of elementary special education teachers, I asked: *How does mandatory state testing influence special education teachers' abilities to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities?*

Assumptions and Positionality

As a researcher, it is important to be transparent about assumptions and professional experiences that influence this work. I became a special education teacher after two years of being a general education teacher. I left the general education sector to fulfill a vacancy that my

principal had difficulty filling. I was excited to know that I would make a lasting impression on these students' educational careers as I would be the first long-term teacher they had in at least a year. Though I knew that being a special education teacher would have its challenges, I knew that the students who were so accustomed to being taught by substitutes needed a permanent and full-time educator to help further their academic growth.

Just as I anticipated, for the six years that I have been a special education teacher, I have been overwhelmed by the general demands of the position which include writing an IEP for every student, collecting data on goals and objectives twice a week per my school district's policy, and spending countless hours tailoring my instruction to meet the needs of my diverse group of learners. Over six years, I have taught in both testing and non-testing grades. I started my position as a special education teacher in a non-testing grade, and though it was overwhelming, I felt that I believed that I was making a difference in my scholar's lives and could appreciate their growth, though often still considerably behind the expectation of their non-disabled peers. Once I started teaching special education in testing grades, my mindset shifted. I no longer felt that I was making a positive difference like I did when I taught primary grades. Parents were more frequently calling on behalf of their frustrated child, who was beginning to experience anxiety and a dislike for school. I found myself explaining my instructional decisions to parents, often blaming decisions on the need for test preparation.

After analyzing how my instructional choices affected my students, I admitted to myself that it was unfair to teach skills at a level that was much higher than my students were prepared to learn. Instead, I chose to focus more on helping students master the goals and objectives that were in their IEP – consistent with skills that the entire IEP team believed the student should focus their attention on academic growth. Instead of teaching the student's grade level curriculum

as the test would reflect, I chose to teach the students based on the curriculum that was most aligned with their instructional needs.

Though this often meant that I was teaching students below their grade level, I could immediately notice confidence growing in my students, and their academic levels rise. It is also important to note that my school's leadership was displeased by the results of my students on the standardized tests and suggested that I change my teaching practices to help my students grow on the state tests. From conversations with colleagues, I know that I am not alone in my frustration of doing what I know is right for students with disabilities.

I began this research study with the assumption that special education teachers across the district have the same experiences with cognitive dissonance as me. Prerequisite skills are needed as foundations to future skills, and students with learning disabilities typically take longer than students without disabilities to master these skills. On the other hand, it is important, for the sake of the school, that students with disabilities perform well on state tests, although the tests do not assess the prerequisite skills that these students have been taught throughout the year. I believe that trusting highly qualified special education teachers to improve the academic levels of students with disabilities with realistic expectations will help to decrease the turnover rate of special education teachers and improve student learning.

Narrative inquiry was selected as the methodology for this study to afford me the opportunity to hear authentic stories and experiences from current and former colleagues. Hearing the voices of other special education teachers is important to getting insiders' perspective about how testing influences their instructional decisions. My hope is that educational policies change to allow special education teachers to focus on what students with disabilities need and not the expectations of what their non-disabled should be able to do.

Overview of the Study

For this research study, I used narrative inquiry to explore the instructional decisions of elementary special education teachers at two local elementary schools from a cognitive dissonance theoretical perspective. Three special education teachers accepted the invitation to develop their narratives representing how they respond to testing in their special education classrooms. Data collection methods included individual interviews, analytic memos, and a researcher journal. I conducted three interviews per participant. After each round of interviews, each interview was transcribed and used to guide the follow-up interviews. A member checking process helped ensure credible data was collected and allowed the research participants to have an opportunity to clarify data points as the narratives developed (Hays, 2004).

In addition to interviews, a researcher journal and analytic memos was used as a tool for me, as the researcher, to record notes about my thoughts and feelings about the data. A code book and data matrix were used to support the data analysis. The transcripts were coded using Saldaña's (2016) values coding. The transcripts were coded using three codes: value, belief, and response. The data matrix was used to document the codes in a table to see the patterns and trends more easily between the codes and research participants. The combination of these analysis tools supported efforts to effectively understand how the special education teachers in the study responded to the influence of HST in their instructional decisions.

Terms/Definitions

Several terms are used throughout the research study that should be defined. I define these words in this section to limit ambiguity and the possibility of incorrect interpretations.

High-stakes tests – standardized tests that are used to make important educational decisions (i.e.,
    promotion, retention). For this research, the Georgia Milestones is the high-stakes tests
    that will be referenced and will be used interchangeably with standardized tests.

Standardized tests – tests in which (1) all test takers answer the same questions in the same way,
    and that (2) is scored in a "standard" or consistent manner, which makes it possible to
    compare the relative performance of individual students or groups of students (The Glos-
    sary of Education Reform, 2015). While a high-stakes test is considered a standardized
    test, the inverse is not always true, so the terms will not be used interchangeably.

Special education teacher – a teacher who services students with disabilities. All special educa-
    tion teachers in this study are teachers of students with specific learning disability (SLD).

Specific Learning Disability – as defined by the Georgia Department of Education (2019a), a dis-
    order in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in
    using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to lis-
    ten, think, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations.

The next chapter will review the literature on the evolution of special education and HST.
Chapter 2 also describes how expectations have increased over the decades and how special edu-
cation teachers struggle with meeting those expectations.

2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A disability is defined under the American with Disabilities Act as a "physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity" (ADA National Network, n.d, para. 2). Present-day there are 12 disabilities that qualify as eligibility categories for students with disabilities: Autism spectrum disorder, deaf/blind, deaf/hard of hearing, emotional and behavioral disorder, intellectual disability, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, significant developmental delay, specific learning disability, speech-language impairment, traumatic brain injury, and/or visual impairment (Georgia Department of Education, 2019a).

In this study, I focus on special education teachers who serve students with a Specific Learning Disability (SLD). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), "In 2015–16, the number of students ages 3–21 receiving special education services was 6.7 million, or 13 percent of all public-school students. Among students receiving special education services, 34 percent had specific learning disabilities" (Children and Youth with Disabilities section, para. 1). Students identified as having a SLD have deficits "in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations" (Georgia Department of Education, 2019a, para. 1). In addition to the number of students with SLDs, SLDs are also important for teaching practice because psychological processing affects the way that students learn and the amount of time it takes for new knowledge to be acquired. Students with SLDs can learn, but they may do so in unique or nontraditional ways. As such, it is important for specialized educators to recognize how these students learn so they can best support their learning needs.

Supporting SLD is the responsibility of all educators, but the specific charge of special education teachers. Ideally, special education teachers provide specialized instruction to students with disabilities so that students may be better able to access the state curriculum. Special education teachers use a variety of assessments, including classroom data, to analyze each student's needs and in order to plan strategies inclusive of each student's accommodations and modifications for academic growth. This specialized instruction happens in a variety of settings (i.e., special education setting, general education setting with collaborative support, co-teaching environment) and depend on the need of students. However, for some special education teachers, there are additional requirements that include preparing students with disabilities for mandatory statewide assessments. These new demands have changed the face of special education for teachers, families, and learners.

This chapter presents a review of the literature to illustrate the challenges in testing and special education and to help inform the study. It begins with detail on the search strategy process used to build the corpus for review and is followed by how special education has changed over time and how special education teachers must balance maintaining compliance of the state's curriculum requirements with meeting the educational needs of their students.

Literature Review Search Strategy

To gather research related to special education teachers' experiences and perceptions with state testing, I used Google Scholar and Georgia State University's online library. I searched for content relating to special education students' experiences with testing, teachers' responses to testing, and students without disabilities' experiences with testing. I also researched the historical context of special education, seeking to learn more about how the requirements for special education have grown over time. The search of the literature targeted studies from the last ten years.

The literature review is organized around three focal topic areas critical to this study: special education, mandatory state testing, and teachers and testing.

Special Education

Special education was established to offer students with disabilities a quality education like their counterparts without disabilities. Students who were considered "average" served as the benchmark for students, and quality instruction and educational programs were tailored to help all students surpass that benchmark (Vaugh & Linan-Thompson, 2003).

In education, where "average" sets the expectation, there will always be students who are more exceptional than others. When students continuously perform below the average expectation, supports are put into place for improvement. Students who need intensive learning support may be identified as having a disability and recommended for special education in order to receive specialized, intense, remedial instruction. The goal is that through special education services, students with disabilities will have a greater chance to profit from education like their counterparts without disabilities (Vaughn & Linen-Thompson, 2003). Special education services have been required by law and have a long history in the United States.

Timeline of Laws Related to the Enhancement of Special Education

In 1965, the original Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was signed by former President Lyndon B. Johnson. ESEA outlined education expectations and funding for public schools and opened the door for future amendments to designate monies for special education, among other specialized programs (Sanders, 2016). Under the ESEA, in 1966, Congress mandated a Bureau for the Education of the Handicapped (BEH) to improve programs to educate students with disabilities (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996). These were intended to specifically

target the instruction of students with disabilities and enhance their educational experiences while increasing their levels of achievement.

Ten years later, states received mandates through the Education Amendments of 1974, also referred to as P.L. 93-380, to provide equal opportunities for all children with disabilities, including instruction with their non-disabled peers. Before this, students with disabilities were often excluded from appropriate and generalized academic experiences. Nondiscriminatory testing was also established through this law, which ensured that consistent and non-biased testing methods be used for student evaluations.

Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EAHCA), provided even more support for students with disabilities, specifically targeting students with physical and learning disabilities. EAHCA was the first educational law to require that all students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education. This act also initiated "child find," a system for identifying students with disabilities, required annual meetings to develop an IEP and required that all students receive instruction in their least restrictive environment (LRE) (Martin et al., 1996). EAHCA's outcomes are still prevalent in special education today.

The demographics of a special education classroom can range from one or all of the eligibility categories, depending only on the students' level of functioning and determination of a student's LRE. All students who have a disability that impacts their education are required to have an IEP, a fluid document that is continuously changing as the needs of the student change.

An IEP serves as a "roadmap to special education" (Rotter, 2014)., and is the most important document for ensuring that students with disabilities receive appropriate and individualized instruction in their LRE. An IEP has many critical components including: Present Levels of

Performance goals and objectives, services to be offered, general education involvement, accommodations on state and districtwide assessments, dates and times of services, transition plan for students over the age of 14, age of majority, members of the IEP team, and members in attendance (Gartin & Murdick, 2005).

To develop an IEP, a multidisciplinary team consisting of teachers and parents come together to analyze the student's current performance in comparison to grade-level expectations (Rotter, 2014). The goal of the IEP is to create a plan of action that will help the child achieve success in mastering grade-level standards. An IEP is important because it recognizes that students with disabilities require additional support than "average" students. An IEP acknowledges that students with disabilities do not fit a "one size fits all" approach to learning and assessment. These students present challenges that are more significant than their non-disabled peers and require specialized instruction and accommodations from a special education teacher.

A significant turning point occurred in 2004 with the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA of 2004). IDEA of 2004 indicated that students were disabilities were capable of doing more than they were once expected to do. Fostering high expectations is important for students who have historically not been given respect by society (Blanchett, 2009; Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996; Spaulding & Pratt, 2015; Yell, Rogers, & Rogers, 1998); however, as educational expectations get higher, so do comparisons of their work to those without disabilities.

By 2001, President Bush's No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), a reauthorization of the ESEA of 1965, mandated that all students in all schools, ***regardless of levels of ability***, should achieve proficiency (Powell, Higgins, Aram, & Freed, 2009; vanSciver & Convover, 2009; Yell, Rogers, & Rogers, 1998). NCLB focused on four main components: stronger accountability, more freedom for states and communities, evidence-based educational methods, and greater

parental choices (Beisser, 2008). NCLB linked federal funding to the success of schools as measured by standardized test scores (Powell, Higgins, Aram, & Freed, 2009). With NCLB, the pressure for schools to make adequate progress was increased, and if progress was not achieved, schools risked closing, and teachers risked losing their jobs (Posner, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2007).

Public Law 94-142 became the IDEA (IDEA) in 2004. The IDEA updated and developed procedures for special education eligibility, due process and parent rights, IEPs, and related services (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996). By signing this law, then president, George W. Bush hoped to align with the NCLB Act of 2001, that urged teachers to have higher expectations and better instruction for all students, intentionally targeting students with disabilities, to achieve higher results on standardized assessments (Yell, Shriner, & Katsiyannis, 2006). For students with disabilities, this meant that there would be more focus on the strategic balance of providing required educational supports for students with disabilities while aiming to produce the desired learning outcomes for accountability purposes (Bowen & Rude, 2006).

In 2009, President Obama signed into law Race to the Top (RTTT). RTTT is a competitive grant that rewards states for their success in making positive educational system changes (Tienken, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The RTTT program mandated that states create conditions for innovation and reform, improve student outcomes, and plan for educational reform. To improve student outcomes, states were required to make gains in student achievement, close the achievement gaps, improve graduation rates, and prepare students for college and careers (Au, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Planning for educational reform included adopting standards that prepare students to compete in the global economy, measure growth to improve instructional practices, staff and retain effective teachers, and "turn around"

low performing schools (Onosko, 2011). Unlike NCLB, RTTT focused on incentivizing states

for their improvement as measured by standardized tests. Doing this raised the pressure for help-

ing students with disabilities to make growth that could be analyzed based on performance on

standardized assessments.

Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary

Education Act (1965), which was developed to ensure equal opportunity for all students (U. S.

Department of Education, 2016). For several decades, students with disabilities were excluded

from HST, and their scores were not used in the average that determined school effectiveness

(Boon, Voltz, Lawson, & Baskette, 2007). ESSA intended to raise academic standards for all stu-

dents while focusing less on standardized assessments (Adler-Greene, 2019). Realistically,

standardized assessments play a major role in assessing student mastery of standards and play a

critical role in determining the "success" of a school as measured by a school's College and Ca-

reer Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI), Georgia's school effectiveness measurement index.

The CCRPI is reported on a scale of 0-100 and includes the categories of: "Achievement, Pro-

gress, Closing Gaps, Readiness and Graduation Rate (high school only)…The CCRPI also re-

ports…the performance of student subgroups, school climate, and financial efficiency status"

(Georgia Department of Education, 2019b, para. 3). Subgroups that are considered when calcu-

lating a school's CCRPI score include English language learners, economically disadvantaged

students, and students with disabilities. Whether large or small, schools are expected to specifi-

cally ensure that students in these subgroups make gains from year to year (Gardiner et al.,

2009). This means that the growth of students with disabilities, as measured by standardized as-

sessments, is a distinct component of the school's success, as reflected by the school's CCRPI

score.

Supported by the research conducted by Welsh, Graham, and Williams (2019), teachers negatively respond to accountability measures that can lead to a school's takeover, and as a result their practices change to best align with what the accountability measures expect of them. Because the growth of students with disabilities directly impacts a school's CCRPI score, it is understandable that special education teachers are encouraged to focus on teaching content, skills, and strategies that will contribute to their students' success on the mandatory state tests.

Mandatory State Testing

Standardized testing has played a role in America's educational system since the mid-1800s. Horace Mann played an influential role in standardized testing; he is noted historically as the person who advocated for standardized written exams to replace oral recitation (Huddleston & Rockwell, 2015). By the mid-1990s, several states had adopted standardized tests to evaluate student and teacher performance. Over time, these test scores were published and were used to determine school quality, teacher effectiveness, and even the property values of homes within a school zone (Christmann & Badgett, 2009).

Over the past few decades, standardized tests have been consistently used to measure student performance, and those in favor of such assessments argue that the measurement tools are objective and enforce accountability (Neill & Medina, 1989). Berliner and Glass (2014) believed that students' achievement, or lack thereof, as determined by accountability measures, is a direct reflection of the quality of the teacher. Critics of standardized tests argue that the assessments negatively impact the quality of instruction, are accompanied by biases, and have been overly used. These critics have also argued that the validity of standardized tests raises concerns (Popham, 2001; Stobart & Eggen, 2012; Tienken, 2015). Despite these critiques, the use of standardized tests has increased because of the ease of implementation and the ease of comparison

between schools, students, and teachers in relation to federal and state accountability policies (Dodge, 2009).

High-stakes Tests

Since the 1800s, standardized tests have evolved in how they are used and are now commonly referred to as "high-stakes." High-stakes tests are used to make critical decisions in student grade advancement, graduation, teacher merit, and school closings or take over (Boon, Voltz, Lawson & Baskette, 2007; Katsiyannis, Zhang, Ryan & Jones 2007; Tanner, 2013).

Since its initiation, the high-stakes testing movement has been the subject of critique. Thompson and Allen (2012) argued that NCLB failed and created more problems than solving those that already existed because of its increased focus on test scores to measure the quality of teachers. Instead of closing gaps, NCLB created more gaps (Thompson & Allen, 2012).Arguably, test scores fail to accurately reflect teacher quality because student achievement is influenced by a variety of factors including, but not limited to, home and community support, prior education, and individual student needs and abilities (Darling-Hammond, Amrein-Beardsley, & Rothstein, 2012).

RTTT incentivized schools to adopt federal education policies and established in 2009 and emphasized school accountability and high-stakes testing (Onosko, 2011). Educational policies created a system where higher-performing schools were rewarded for making gains on tests, whereas the lower-performing schools were penalized and received less funding and risk closing.

High-stakes tests have also received criticism because of the disadvantages that some students face that make it difficult for them to be successful on standardized tests (Au, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Tanner, 2013). Schools that consistently struggle to perform well on standardized tests are typically schools in urban areas that serve the neediest population that

include larger populations of English language learners and students with disabilities as well families who are not as financially equipped as their non-urban counterparts (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Hursh, 2005). Some schools are at a disadvantage due to the unequal distribution of resources that contribute to higher test scores. Schools with higher scores typically have parents who are economically advantaged and can donate funds, resources, and time to improve their child's (and consequently, their child's peers') education (Posner, 2004). With inadequate resources, schools are less likely to succeed, and as a result, the achievement gap will continue to widen (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The widening of the achievement gap will certainly not cease until the requirement to participate in mandatory high-stakes assessments are reconsidered.

Georgia's Mandatory Assessments

According to the Georgia Department of Education, Georgia offers five mandatory assessments: ACCESS for ELLs 2.0, Georgia Alternate Assessment 2.0 (GAA 2.0), Georgia Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills 2.0 (GKIDS 2.0), Georgia Milestones Assessment System, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (Georgia Department of Education, 2019c). Of these assessments, the Georgia Milestones Assessment System (GMAS) is considered to be high-stakes. That is, this is the only assessment that is used to determine student promotion and retention in grades 3-5, used to rank public school effectiveness, and an indicator used for teacher evaluations.

Students with significant disabilities can be found eligible to participate in alternate assessments, while students with less severe disabilities participate in general assessments with appropriate accommodations (Saven, Anderson, Nese, Farley, & Tindal, 2016). Testing accommodations are designed to be individualized support tools offered only to students who have demonstrated a need for such supports (VanSciver & Conover, 2009). Examples of general assessment

accommodations may include having the test read aloud, directions repeated, and frequently monitored breaks. Students with more severe intellectual disabilities may be offered alternative assessments like the Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA) instead of the Georgia Milestones.

Due to NCLB, students with and without disabilities are expected to participate and pass respective assessments on the GMAS to determine promotion to the next grade level.

Including Students with Disabilities in Testing

As mentioned, the IDEA and NCLB of 2001 ensured that all students with disabilities received a free and appropriate public education while meeting the expectation of mastering state standards (Thornton, Peltier & Medina, 2007). These mandates were implemented to ensure that students with disabilities were given the opportunity to reach high scholastic standards because they are capable of doing so. Students receiving instruction in the general education setting are no longer the only pupils subjected to HST. Today, students who receive special education services, particularly students with a specific learning disability, are required to take the Georgia Milestones assessment like their non-disabled counterparts, but with accommodations, as noted in their IEP (Georgia Milestones Assessment System, 2019). Students who have already been identified as having academic weaknesses are required to pass these tests, which are not administered at students' instructional or independent reading level before being promoted to the next grade level, creating a layer of dissonance. By law, special consideration must be given to the administration of standardized tests to students with disabilities (Gartin & Murdick, 2005; Yell, Shriner, & Katsiyannis, 2006). Ofiesh and Hughes (2002) describe how to determine how much extended time students with disabilities should receive on standardized tests, giving a careful note to include that some students are entitled to such accommodation. This entitlement is important to understand how students with disabilities may differ from students without disabilities.

Students without disabilities are expected to learn content standards within an average school year, and it is anticipated that students with learning disabilities will require more time to access the same material due to processing or cognitive delays. On tests, these same students often require additional support with accessing testing materials. Extended time is commonly offered to students to accommodate test completion. Though not discussed extensively in the literature, if a student does not receive the proper instructional time or testing time, their standardized test results can easily be negatively impacted (VanSciver & Conover, 2009). Because standardized tests are used to evaluate teacher performance, not providing appropriate accommodations can also have implications for a special education teacher's performance.

Even with accommodations, involving students with disabilities in HST has presented positive and negative consequences. According to Katsiyannis, Zhang, Ryan, and Jones (2007), because of policies like NCLB, "there has been increased (a) participation of students with special needs in HST, (b) levels of performance by special needs students in high-stakes testing, and (c) participation of special educators in training on standards and assessment" (p. 165). Increasing the participation of students with disabilities in testing also presents negative consequences. These include "(a) the challenge of students with disabilities to achieve "proficient levels,"(b) students with disabilities who fail make schools look less effective, and (c) students are stressed by taking tests and by not accessing or reaching state standards" (Katsiyannis, Zhang, Ryan, & Jones, 2007, p. 165). Students with learning disabilities experience greater difficulty on standardized assessments because of their increased need to rely on coping skills to manage cognitive and academic deficits (Barga, 1996). Students in various subgroups are required to make gains as their growth positively influences as a school's CCRPI score. If students with disabilities do not pass state tests, it negatively reflects the school (Katsiyannis, Zhang, Ryan, & Jones, 2007).

Some researchers have argued that assessments should be differentiated for consistency with instructional practices (Beam, 2009). In other words, to help alleviate the conflict between assessing a student's current academic level versus assessing where they should be according to state standards, assessments should reflect what has been taught and should be administered in ways that instruction was delivered to students. Unfortunately, standardized assessments are differentiated by content and presentation for students who are found eligible for alternative assessments, but standardized assessments are not designed to accommodate various learning difficulties. It is alarming that students who deserve differentiated instruction do not deserve differentiated assessments - the tool that is used to identify, group, and predict the future of vulnerable students - to accommodate their needs.

Apart from the inequity of these standardized tests not being presented to students at their instructional levels, standardized tests today place a lot of pressure on students to pass. Some students are aware that failing high-stakes tests instantly places them in jeopardy of being promoted.

Supporters of NCLB were convinced that the law would live up to its title and leave no child behind, while critics of the law believed that high-stakes tests were detrimental to students because of its potential to leave students feeling embarrassed and ashamed when the results are not what they desired (Kearns, 2011). Segool, Carlson, Goforth, von der Embse, and Barterian (2013) conducted "the first study to directly examine differences in young students' reported test anxiety between No Child Left Behind (NCLB) achievement testing and classroom testing" (p. 489). Students, especially those with learning disabilities, were found to experience greater levels of anxiety and fear of failure when taking high-stakes tests as compared to classroom assessments (Segool, Carlson, Goforth, von der Embse, & Barterian, 2013; Smyth, 2008; Wachelka &

Katz, 1999). One reason that students may have these levels of anxiety is because the tests are too difficult to complete at a level of proficiency independently. At the same time, students recognize the consequences of not performing well on the tests, including grade retention and required participation in summer school. This dilemma, coupled with other factors regarding mandated practices, forces teachers to choose between teaching content, skills, and strategies that are more test-specific or focus on skills that may be more aligned to students' current levels of functioning as outlined in their IEP.

Teachers and Testing

IDEA and ESEA are laws that mandate that all students, even those with disabilities, be taught to high academic standards (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.; Yell, Shriner, & Katsiyannis, 2006). According to Cameron and Cook (2013),

> inclusive classroom teachers today are faced with the challenging tasks of determining (a) which aspects of the general education curriculum are appropriate for which students; (b) how and when to provide instruction in the general education curriculum to different students; and (c) how and when to address the functional, behavioral, and social goals of their included students. (p. 18)

NCLB required that teachers be highly qualified, thereby suggesting that student performance is directly aligned with the quality of the educator. A highly qualified teacher is defined as one holding a bachelor's degree, state certification, and have demonstrated competence in the core subject areas they teach (Brownell, Bishop, & Sindelar, 2018; Schuster, 2012). As a credentialed teacher, one may understandably assume that these educators can be trusted to make sound instructional decisions to meet the needs of their students, but often teachers have minimal autonomy with what and how their students are taught (Dikilitaş & Mumford, 2018; Wright,

Shields, Black, Banerjee, & Waxman, 2018). Even more so, though students' performance on tests constantly measures teachers, the achievement gap has not closed, and the profession has been less rewarding for teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2015).

Also, teachers must work to overcome the obstacles associated with students who may need additional supports (i.e., language barriers with English language learners, learning delays with students with disabilities). Because statewide assessments measure academic gaps, special education teachers have the charge of overcoming dissonance by preparing students with disabilities for high-stakes assessments that will be taken alongside their non-disabled peers. This can understandably be an overwhelming process for special education teachers.

Students with disabilities' participation in the same assessments as their non-disabled peers is a testament to the growth of the way America views students with disabilities, but I argue that all students, especially those with learning disabilities, may not be prepared to participate in standardized assessments, and their involvement is possibly a great strain on their special education teachers as well as students.

Teachers often feel that they are at a crossroads as they cope with pressures surrounding high-stakes testing. Assaf (2006) conducted a study to gain insight into how teachers respond to the demands of testing. She found that as one teacher's student-test scores declined, accountability measures of her practice increased. The teacher had to endure more observations, administer more assessments to frequently analyze student growth, and submit weekly lesson plans that were reviewed by instructional specialists at her school. In this setting, the teacher decided to pursue a different career path because the pressures of testing had become too overwhelming, and teaching was no longer rewarding. This study captured how test scores influenced teaching practices to align with the content that would be covered on the test. Though Assaf studied a

general education teacher, it is reasonable to infer that special education teachers may share the same conditions and consequences.

Not only is preparing students with disabilities for testing difficult for students, but it is also challenging for teachers. Levi, Einav, Raskind, Ziv, and Margalit (2013) studied the role that teachers play in helping students with learning disabilities succeed, as measured by HST. The study consisted of 624 teachers from inclusive classes. Of the 624 teachers, 143 teachers had special education training. The findings indicated that some teachers dishearteningly shared signs of possessing low self-efficacy in regards to preparing students for success due to the lack of specialized training they received. This offers important implications about the importance of understanding the relationship between teachers' efficacy and student achievement. Though teachers with specialized training for special education possessed higher levels of self-efficacy than teachers who were not trained, it is important to note that students are more inclined to be successful on state-mandated assessments when teachers have high self-efficacy to motivate and encourage their students to succeed. Building and protecting teachers' self-efficacy through continued support and fewer punishments may have a positive impact on their students' performance on HST.

Instructional Practices for Students with Disabilities

As classrooms continue to become more academically diverse, so does the need for differentiated instruction (Tomlinson et al., 2003). Differentiated instruction considers the various needs of the individual student and makes instructional decisions based on those needs. Differentiation has been promoted in school for several decades. It has become a requirement for teachers to ensure that lessons are differentiated to maximize the learning potential of individual students. HST are accountability tools that are not aligned with the ideas of differentiation.

Students' participation in HST that fail to accommodate the barriers that students with learning disabilities present creates barriers that are unfair and inequitable.

According to the Georgia Department of Education (2014), Georgia teachers are evaluated using the Teacher Keys Evaluation System's (TKES') rubric. Differentiation has become such an integral component of teaching and learning, that teachers are evaluated based on how well they can differentiate instruction in the daily activities presented to kids. The fourth performance standard on the TKES rubric is "Differentiated Instruction" which reads, "The teacher challenges and supports each student's learning by providing appropriate content and developing skills which address individual learning differences" (Georgia Department of Education, 2014, p.1). Teachers may differentiate instruction by ability, interests, or even through consideration of multiple intelligences (Beam, 2009). The problem is that instruction is differentiated to meet the learning needs of students on an individualized basis, but all students are required to take the same standardized exam (Georgia Department of Education, 2019c).

Teachers of students with disabilities value differentiated instruction and allowing students to demonstrate what they have learned through differentiated products. No two students are the same, thus differential educational practices are essential to the academic growth of students. As such, considering other assessments is especially important for students with disabilities who access education differently from their non-disabled peers (Nelson & Harwood, 2011).

According to Boon, Voltz, Lawson, and Baskette (2007), general education teachers spend 8 to 10 hours of instructional time in a given semester prepping students for testing, including "test-taking strategies, reviewing topics that will be tested, and practicing with previous test forms" (p. 62). The impact of this converted time is not always positive. Students wish to be intellectually stimulated, but for many teachers, it is too challenging to ensure that students are

prepared for standardized tests while teaching beyond the curriculum to engage students in intellectually stimulating activities (Mora, 2011).

Using instructional time to learn test-taking may not be the best use of time when students continue to struggle with content mastery, as is the case for special education students. Strategic use of instructional time is especially important for students with learning disabilities because these students typically have greater academic needs than their non-disabled peers (Hollowood, Salisbury, Rainforth, & Palombaro 1994). Without enough time for instruction, teachers can feel they have not adequately prepared students for standardized tests.

Summary

Teachers are the forerunners of education. Teachers are responsible for providing quality education to all students. Because teachers have a great responsibility for the success of the educational system, it is important to consider their experiences as educators and how their instructional practices may be affected (Pajares, 1992).

For many years in American history, individuals with disabilities were not afforded opportunities that were like the opportunities for those without disabilities. Fortunately, today's society embraces individuals with disabilities, and laws have been developed to offer rights and supports. Education has greatly impacted students with disabilities. However, as Rader (2010) emphasizes in his titled article, *Special Education is Broken,* special education is broken. Researchers have concluded that students with learning disabilities require more academic support and additional time to master concepts that directly affect special education teachers (Boon, Voltz, Lawson & Baskette, 2007). With the increased accountability practices, the focus on special education has been forced to place emphasis on mandates and not enough time on supporting our most vulnerable student population. Rader wrote, "rather than spending ninety percent of

our energy trying to stay in compliance with regulations and miscellaneous paperwork, the department's efforts should be redirected toward the students who are being largely neglected because of the misdirected and overemphasis of district mandates." (p. 83).

The pressure from the federal government to perform well on tests often influences teachers' pedagogical practices (Smyth, 2008). Some researchers have concluded that placing such high-stakes on tests create an instructional environment where teachers feel like it is necessary to narrow their teaching to align with content that will be addressed on the standardized test (Brimi-join, 2005; Mora, 2011). "Teaching to the Test" is, unfortunately, a common reaction to testing demands (Tanner, 2013). Although teachers possess their own beliefs on what constitutes effective instructional practices, many teachers report that they must compromise these beliefs for the sake of test preparation (Assaf, 2006).

Testing mandates are hurting America's special education teachers. It is time for a change in America's educational system. Blanchett (2009) argued that it is time for America to do whatever it takes to make a positive change in education. The educational system should focus on providing an equitable education for all American students "regardless of race, social class, disability, or the intersection of all of these circumstances" (Blanchett, 2009, p. 386), while considering how this will affect teachers. It is imperative to set realistic goals and expectations for students with careful consideration of external and internal factors that students contribute to their education.

Understanding firsthand experiences of teachers as it relates to their abilities to meet the needs of their students in this era of accountability will better help education policymakers identify better ways to support students with disabilities. This focus will allow all students to be

taught with high expectations while empowering special education teachers to have control of the instructional decisions they make for the students they know best.

  Preparing students who perform below grade level for mandated assessments that are presented on grade level can be conflicting. This study will explore how special education teachers respond to the potential conflict between preparing for accountability measures and making instructional decisions as it relates to educating students with a SLD.

3 METHOD

In the previous chapters, I discussed how expectations for students with disabilities have increased over time. From personal experience, I have learned that supporting these students to meet the state's educational expectations, as measured by performance on standardized assessments, has been challenging on special education teachers' abilities to cater to the educational needs of their students.

To explore this further, I conducted a qualitative study drawing from narrative inquiry methodology to understand how the demands of high-stakes tests influenced special education teachers' abilities to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities. This study examined the following research question: *How does mandatory state testing influence special education teachers' abilities to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities?*

Design

As noted by Merriam (1998), "Qualitative research focusses on process, meaning, and understanding. Words and pictures rather than numbers are used to convey what the researcher has learned about a phenomenon" (p.8). To understand the stories and experiences of special education teachers, it is important to hear their authentic voices versus collecting numerical data. Qualitative methods were chosen for this study to capture participants' stories in ways that quantitative methods would not allow.

As a qualitative study seeking to learn about the experiences of special education teachers and high-stakes testing, the research participants needed to tell their stories and perspectives of their experiences. Stories are valuable because they are "how we make sense of our experiences, how we communicate with others, and through which we understand the world around us" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 34). It is important to hear their stories for "…narrative inquiry is stories

lived and told" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). To learn about the authentic experiences of special education teachers, I drew from narrative inquiry methodology.

Stories are best shared with people whom one feels comfortable around and have built a positive relationship with. Through the recruitment process, I sought participants who have been or are currently colleagues of mine so that I could more effectively elicit rich data through the stories told. After the participants shared their stories, I told stories from my perspective in the researcher's journal and analytic memos. I compared my experiences and challenged my thoughts throughout the data collection process.

Because "experience happens narratively" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 19), research participants naturally told stories of how they balanced meeting the needs of students with learning disabilities while preparing them for high-stakes tests. To protect the identify of each participant, the stories that were shared were presented as a collective narrative instead of individual narratives. Collective narratives were chosen because it allowed participants to contribute to a shared perspective of the phenomenon while protecting their individual identifies as the storytellers (Murakami & Middleton, 2006). Though the collective narrative is used to develop themes, individual quotes are shared to help illustrate and substantiate those themes.

Context of Study & Participants

It was important to hear the voices of experienced special education teachers who work with students with learning disabilities and have experienced high-stakes testing. For authentic data, it was valuable to work with special education teachers with whom I had already established a positive rapport. I drew from narrative inquiry as the research methodology to gather data and adopted coding and thematic analysis strategies to understand the meaning. Narrative inquiry required me, as the researcher, to be able to share my participants' lived experiences.

Through existing and the development of these relationships, I was able to capture authentic stories.

Research participants were selected through convenience and purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The advantage of convenience sampling was that it allowed for collegial relationships to influence the research in productive and positive ways. For example, the teachers who were recruited for this study were those with whom I was familiar with. That allowed me to elicit data that was honest and forthright. It also allowed me to build upon professional relationships that I developed since joining the field.

Purposeful sampling also provided advantages for this study and was most appropriate because it allowed me to "select a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). The research participants were selected based on their relevance to the study and experiences with teaching students with learning disabilities and high-stakes testing. Patton (1990) suggested that the selected sample should "reflect the average person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon of interest" (p. 268).

Six special education teachers from two local elementary schools where I have been employed as a teacher were invited to participate in the study, but only three responded to the invitation. The three special education teachers who responded served as research participants. Having three participants instead of six afforded me more time to engage in more intimate and honest conversations during interviews.

All teachers have more than 15 years in education and experience teaching students with SLD in third, fourth, and fifth grade. These grade levels are significant because students in these grades participate in state testing, e.g., the Georgia Milestones. Additionally, all of these teachers use the mastery learning model for instruction. During the interview process, each teacher used a

self-selected pseudonym that was also reflected in the transcripts. However, their presence in the

dissemination of the study are reflected as Teacher 1, Teacher 2, and Teacher 3 to further protect

their identity.

Table 1 depicts the demographics of the teachers and their schools. The wide range of ex-

periences that these special education teachers possess would facilitate data conducive to quality

narrative inquiry. Both schools are Title I elementary schools with approximately 11% of the

school population identified as students with learning disabilities.

Table 1

Demographics and Experience of Research Participants

Special Education Teacher Participants	Title I School (Population)	Number of Years in Education	Grade Levels Taught Since GA Milestones	Estimated Number of SLD Served During '19-20 SY	Current Grade Levels
Teacher 1	School 1 (829)	>25 years	3rd, 4th, 5th	11 out of 15 students	5th
Teacher 2	School 1 (829)	>15 years	K, 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th	4 out of 10 Students	K, 1st, 2nd
Teacher 3	School 2 (706)	> 20 years	2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th	11 out of 26 Students	2nd, 3rd, 4th

School 1 and School 2 are in the same district in neighboring school clusters. Both

schools have similar demographics and all of the teacher participants have more than 15 years of

teaching experience in special education. The longevity of the careers was a factor when selecting the participants. The wide of range of experience that each participant had made their stories richer to the study.

Significantly, each participant was either a former or current coworker of mine and we have established a professional rapport with each other during our time of working together. This rapport was relied upon to encourage the participants to tell their authentic stories during the interviews. Considering that I have the least amount of teaching experience than the teacher participants, it was important that each participant be thoughtfully selected so that they could offer a more tenured perspective on the climate of HST and servicing students with SLD.

The professional relationships that I have forged as a special education teacher has made speaking genuinely about the culture of HST in special education a smooth conversation to have with former and current colleagues. Years before beginning my research, I would engage in casual and passionate discussions with colleagues about the stress that HST places on administrators, teachers, students, and parents. Though some of those colleagues did not participate in this study, I had a strong indication that the previous conversations I held represented the voices of many teachers in our community. Giving teachers an opportunity to freely share their thoughts on the phenomenon while providing a level of trust that their voices will be protected helped capture sincere stories that were not influenced by what I may have wanted or expected to hear.

Data Sources

Narrative inquiry allows the researcher and research participants to tell their experiences through stories. "At the very heart of what it means to be human is the ability of people to symbolize their experience through language" (Seidman, 2013, p. 8). The methods that I used in this narrative inquiry study were semi-structured interviews, researcher journal, and analytic memos.

Two methodological theorists guide this study: Seidman (2013) and Vogt, Gardner, and Haeffle (2012). Seidman (2013) provided rich justifications for the selection of the design while Vogt, Gardner, and Haeffle (2012) offered pragmatic solutions for implementing the design of the study with methodological integrity. I primarily used interviews as a "mode of inquiry" to ask probing questions to elicit rich responses and detailed stories from participants that depict their personal experiences (Seidman, 2013, p. 8). In addition to interviews, I used a researcher journal and analytic memos to record notes from more abstract events that took place during the interview process and record my own contributions through narrative (Bhattacharya, 2017). The contribution of analytic memos as both a tool and a data source is described in the next section.

Data was collected for this study in the spring of 2020. The research was conducted in accordance with guidelines and restrictions imposed by Georgia State University and relevant government or public health authorities. All contact with human subjects was conducted over the phone. Each primary data source is detailed in the next section.

Interviews

The primary data source was semi-structured in-depth interviews. Semi-structured interviews adopt an informal conversational structure focused on an "interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2013, p. 9). In narrative inquiry, it was important that I, as the researcher, shared my experiences with the research participants as well. Not only would that allow for the participants to be more open to the data collection process, but it would also allow me to share my perspective on preparing students for high-stakes tests.

Three interviews were conducted with each participant. Each interview built upon one another. Interview one focused on establishing rapport and getting background information. The

interview process began at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, students and teachers were expected to learn and teach from home using virtual resources. Much of the first interview consisted of teachers explaining their thoughts about the changes and comparing their experiences with virtual learning to face-to-face instruction. Interview two began with a member checking session that consisted of reviewing the researcher's interpretations from the previous interview and allowing the participant to clarify any misunderstandings or misconceptions. The interview continued to build data on the focus of the study with emphasis on high-stakes testing and meeting students' needs.

Because the focus of the study was about how teachers respond to the dilemma of teaching and testing using the theory of cognitive dissonance, specific questions to understand how teachers respond were designed. Interview questions were designed around the four tenets of cognitive dissonance: modify cognitions, trivialize cognitions, add more cognitions, and deny cognitions. I used descriptive questioning to study each participants' views on the phenomena of preparing for high-stakes testing. Descriptive questions also aligned with narrative inquiry because it assumes that "most people organize their understanding of themselves in the form of stories or narrative" (Vogt, Garder, & Haeffele, 2012, p. 38).

Interview three was used for teachers to member check interview two as well as tell clarifying stories to get a stronger understanding of each participants' experiences. Throughout the interview process, I used my insider knowledge to listen for key stories and experiences that I could relate to. As the researcher with firsthand experiences in special education, I was able to recognize key stories that lend themselves to an understanding of how teachers' experiences correlated to the theoretical framework of this study. The design intended to build each participant's story through "tell me about a time" prompts. If teachers vented about their frustrations or

celebrated their victories, I probed for more details and related their experiences to cognitive dissonance.

Each interview was transcribed verbatim and masked for confidentiality. The interview transcripts were used in analysis.

Interview Process and Context

The participants' comfort level during the interview process was key to this study; therefore, the participants were able to select an interview time that was most convenient for them (Vogt, Gardner, & Haeffle, 2012). Due to guidelines around COVID-19, all interviews were held via phone. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Pseudonyms were used in all transcripts.

As recommended by Seidman (2013), it is most ideal that interviews are spaced relatively close between one another to cherish the connections between each interview cycle. All interviews were conducted approximately within two weeks of each other, and each interview lasted for an average of 45 minutes. At the end of each interview, I transcribed the interview and conducted analytic memoing to begin narration creation. The developing narratives were verbally shared with participants at the beginning of each subsequent interview. An example of a developing narrative that I shared with the participants during member checking follows:

> Special ed teachers value the autonomy to work on tasks that directly impact student's academic growth. All of you all said that you really value being able to have some control over working on tasks that directly align with students' academic growth. So can you talk more about that?

At the end of each interview cycle, I considered the shared stories that were told by each of the participant. At the start of the member checking session, I shared the collective story with

each participant and elicited responses. Participants were able to respond with what they agreed or disagreed with and clarified portions of the stories that may not have reflected their experience. Very rarely would a participant express that the narrative I shared did not accurately depict their experience. For example, in one member checking session I shared that the three teachers did not like collecting data. One participant explained that their experience was not that they did not like collecting data, but they did not like how collecting data took away from doing other essential focus areas like teaching. I noted this correction and considered it during the development of themes.

Table 2 depicts the iterative process of the interview cycles, detailing the order in which the participants were interviewed and the opportunities for member checking, which took place at the beginning of the second and third rounds of interviews and lasted no longer than 30 minutes. Participation per participant took an average of one and a half hours per interview and member checking session.

Participants were interviewed in different orders to give each participant an opportunity to be the first, second, or third interviewee. This was important because it is possible that I unknowingly treated participants differently based on the order that I met with them. It was possible that my conversations grew stronger or that I lost momentum throughout the interview cycle. Interviewing participants in different orders allowed for an evenly distributed experience with me, as the researcher.

Table 2

Overview of the Interview Order and Focus

Round One: Introductory Interviews	
Teacher 2	• Bi-directional, conversational
Teacher 3	• Informally discuss dissonance
	• Discussed the benefits and downfalls of teaching virtually in response to
Teacher 1	COVID-19 guidelines
	• Discussed overall satisfaction with the profession
Round Two: Semi-Structured Interviews	
Teacher 3	• Began with member checking narratives
Teacher 1	• Shared developing themes:
	▪ Workload of special education teachers is extensive.
	▪ Teacher burnout should be acknowledged.
Teacher 2	▪ Accountability is not problematic.
	• New questions based on round one interviews
Round Three: Semi-Structured Interviews	
Teacher 1	• Began with member checking narratives
Teacher 2	• Shared developing themes:
	▪ It is hard to balance completing paperwork with other responsibilities.
	▪ It is an unrealistic expectation to expect students who are two to three grade levels behind the pass the Milestones.
	▪ Special ed teachers can predict who can pass the Milestones at the beginning of the year.
Teacher 3	▪ Learning inventories are implemented to learn about students' learning modalities.
	▪ It is important to have honest data talks with your students.
	• New questions based on ongoing analysis of round one and two interviews

This research study was planned before COVID-19 impacted school closures and mandated testing schedules. With the assumption that the Georgia Milestones would be taken in April 2020, it was important to interview teachers before their responses could be influenced because of the testing season. However, since state testing was suspended during the 2019 – 2020 school year, the need to consider the timing of the interviews was no longer a heightened consideration. Interviews were conducted by phone in April.

The suspension of testing for the school year allowed for unexpected opportunities for new experiences and stories to be shared by the teachers. Teachers were able to express how they felt about students not testing because they were experiencing the testing suspension in the moment. The interviews began while teachers were mandated to teach from home so initial interview conversations were naturally centered on the teachers' experiences with providing quality and differentiated instruction from home and helping students navigate online platforms. After allowing teachers to share their experiences, I guided the discussion back to testing.

Researcher Journal

The researcher journal was the mechanism to document my "thoughts, reactions, hunches, assumptions, and beliefs to analyze how they influenced the data collection and analysis" (Bhattacharaya, 2017, p. 13). I used the researcher journal to document thoughts and feelings that I wanted to express during the interview but did not, and I used it as a reflection and planning tool for future interviews. Because narrative inquiry involves developing and sharing my own story, the researcher journal served as an additional space for developing that narrative. The journal was used throughout the research process and began with design considerations. Each journal entry was dated. After each interview, a journal entry was be made to include my thoughts, assumptions, and responses to the interview process. The researcher journal was one

way for me, as the researcher, to share personal experiences alongside the participants. These serve as reflections on how the data aligns with the research questions for this study. The journal was also a place to record recognized biases I had during the research process, including researcher decisions I made during data collection and analysis and hence represented both reflexivity and reflectivity. While the researcher journal was the mechanism to record my role in the process (both directive and responsive), analytic memoing served as a formal tool during the analysis of data (including researcher journal entrees).

Below are examples of an entries in my researcher journal. These entries were made after the first interview. Entries have been masked for gender.

4/6 – I transcribed Teacher 2's interview. There is value in having one grade level, but knowing the nature of special education, that is unrealistic. Teacher 2 talked a lot about how students begin to have behavior concerns as they grow older because they begin to notice that they have deficits when they compare themselves to their peers. I have certainly witnessed students become irate and call themselves stupid when they feel like they do not know or understand something that their peers know. Teacher 2 also talked about burn out and how it is important for special education teachers to recognize that. The workload was noted as the biggest issue with being a special education teacher. Balancing tasks while still providing individualized instruction is difficult. Teacher 2 particularly likes the remote learning style because of the ability to provide the one-to-one instruction to the students without having to worry about the other components of the day. Teacher 2 is working remotely with one student at a time, which I am sure helps to maintain balance.

4/7 - I transcribed Teacher 3's interview. I felt that there was contradiction in the stance on accountability assessments. On the one hand, the thought was that teachers should be held accountable because they signed up to do a job, but on the other hand accountability measures like the Milestones were not a fair assessment. Teacher 3 also discussed how common it is to teach students who are performing below grade level which is a huge concern that I have with these standardized tests! How can students who are multiple grade levels behind be expected to pass tests on their grade level? It was mentioned that students with disabilities should take a completely different assessment than their non-disabled peers and that their accommodations should already be embedded in the test which would also lessen the paperwork load of special education teachers. I think that students with disabilities should take a different assessment, but I think that more than anything, the test should reflect the differentiation that teachers use in the classroom (i.e, present passages on instructional level). This would give the students a fair chance of in-dependently participating in a test that is designed to meet their needs. Paperwork is a big concern in special education, but it is not a big concern for me. My biggest concern is the expectation of getting students ready for a high-stakes test. Another concern that Teacher 3 noted was behavior concerns in students. From conversations with colleagues, student behavior is causing them to reach their breaking point and causing them to consider other job opportunities. A final important point that was addressed was making sure that stu-dents were placed in their appropriate setting, which could take longer than a year. I would like to ask the other participants about their views on making sure that students are in the right setting in their experience. I also note that Teacher 3 favors teaching testing grades because they require more of teachers' attention and focus.

4/8 – I transcribed Teacher 1's interview. Teacher 1's biggest priority seems to be doing what is believed to be in the best interest of students, apart from the classroom. Teacher 1 talked heavily about doing favors for families because their human needs are more important their classroom needs. It was also discussed that paperwork is extensive in special education and it is understandable how special education teachers quit because of it. Teacher 1 has learned how to decipher what paperwork is urgent and critical and what is not, after having taught for over 25 years. This affords the ability to decide what paperwork should be the priority in completing and what can be placed on the backburner. Interestingly, Teacher 1 and 2 discussed the redundancy of the paperwork. Teacher 1 believes that students can overcome their obstacles and that the teacher plays a vital role in helping them to do so, especially when they are in their final years of elementary school. Like Teacher 2, Teacher 1 does not believe that teachers have issues with accountability measures as much as they have issues with paperwork requests.

Analytic Memos

Saldaña (2013) described the purpose of analytic memos as "documenting and reflecting on coding processes and code choices; how the process of inquiry is taking shape; and the emergent patterns, categories and subcategories, themes, and concepts in your data – all possibly leading toward theory" (p. 41). Because the process is iterative, after each interview, I recorded in my researcher journal and then transcribed the interview. Those data sources (journals and transcriptions) were used in coding. Analytics memos are written after every coding session (coding details follow in the next section). An analytic memo was written (typed in Word) at the end of each coding cycle and focused on insights during the analysis cycle related to design, process,

and emerging patterns. For example, an analytic memo focused on decisions made in data and concentrated on observations made from the analysis of the data on whether the interviews were still directed toward the research questions. Analytic memos also targeted whether the data appeared trustworthy from consistencies in patterns. Importantly, analytic memos formalized the development of building narratives through observations and insights into patterns as they developed and served as a springboard for the next interview cycles. Each analytic memo was labeled and used for a mechanism for analysis. Below is an excerpt from one analytic memo:

Interview 2

All of the teachers seemed to be very open. They interestingly brought up the same points. At one point I questioned if two of the teachers knew each other because they had such similar responses. Teachers felt comfortable in using things like "ridiculous' and "no logical sense". I found myself nodding heavily on the phone to a lot of what was said.

Data Analysis

One of the most important components of a research study is deciding how data will be analyzed. I used the developing themes to design questions for the following interview. After I coded the transcripts, I searched for common values, beliefs, and responses that were shared among each participant. I carefully considered the heart of the story that each participant was trying to tell and used that analysis to develop themes. After each interview, I held an analysis session with a member of the dissertation committee to discuss my rationale of the developing themes. I used the developing themes as a foundation for the questions for the following interview. The following is an example of a thematic question:

I looked at all of the interviews from the past interview cycle and I found some commonalities among all participants. I want to talk to about those commonalties and try to get some clarification and some feedback regarding those things. One commonality was that it is hard to balance completing paperwork with other responsibilities. Talk about that.

Using the theoretical framework of cognitive dissonance to guide this study, I operated under the belief that one's thoughts and actions naturally aim to align with one another.

Analysis of Codes

To analyze the thoughts and beliefs of the participants concerning students with learning disabilities participating in high-stakes testing, I used values coding to analyze the data. According to Saldaña (2016), "values coding assesses a participant's integrated value, attitude, and belief systems at work" (p. 124). Once the interviews were transcribed, I anticipated using four codes to code the data: V, A, B, and R.

A code book was developed and used in this study with the assistance of a peer debriefer who was used to ensure that my codes were dependable and fair. Code labels were subjective to the researchers "paradigm, perspective, and positionality" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 135). Despite the subjectivity of codes, the code book allowed for consistency and fairness when coding interview transcriptions. It also provided a mechanism for the use of a peer coder for trustworthiness.

The peer debriefer that I used was a fellow doctoral student who also studied the significance that a peer debriefer adds to the research and data analysis. I shared two transcripts with the peer debriefer. The two transcripts were from the first interview with Participant 1 and Participant 2. I explained each of the four codes that I anticipated using, the meaning of each code and words and phrases that might identify the code. The peer debriefer then independently coded both transcripts using the code book provided. I also independently coded the same transcripts.

Upon completion, the peer debriefer and I compared our codes. Though most of our codes were the same, there were some that overlapped more frequently than others and two codes that were more difficult to differentiate from each other than anticipated. Through a discussion and comparison of codes assigned by the peer and researcher, I refined the code book for use with all data. It was the discussion with the peer debriefer that helped me reach the conclusion that the codes A (attitudes) and B (beliefs) were too similar to consistently differentiate. The codes for analysis were: V (values), B (beliefs & attitudes), and R (response). Table 3 shows the code book for this study.

Table 3

Code Book

Codes	Key Words/Phrases	Examples
Value	I try to… I want…	I try to teach my students that academics beyond state tests matter most.
Belief	They cannot… My students can… I believe… It is… It is not…	Students can only be successful on the test if it is presented on their independent level. I believe that all students can learn.
Response	This is how I do it… I will not. I cannot. I will.. I want to…	I will not teach to a test. In my class, I do what I believe is best.

The code "V" was used to represent lines that indicated the participant's values and "B" was used for the beliefs that the participants expressed. Saldaña (2016) suggested that "value is the importance we attribute to ourselves and others, attitudes are the way we think about ourselves, others, or ideas, belief is a system that encompasses values and attitudes" (p. 131-132). Understanding each participant's values, beliefs, and behaviors helped me analyze their thoughts on testing and holding students with disabilities accountable for high-stakes testing. In addition to modifying Saldaña's original value codes, I also used the code "R" to represent the response, or behaviors, of special education teachers. Using values coding while adding a code for response allowed me to consider the relationship between each participant's thoughts and actions. Table 4 shows some of the coding examples that were used in the study.

Table 4

Coding Examples

Codes	Meaning Units		
	Transcript	**Researcher Journal**	**Analytic Memo**
Value	"…that time would be spent more towards actually planning and really looking at the data"	Teacher 2's biggest concern was with the amount of paperwork that needed to be collected. I relate with Teacher 2 on this because the expectation of collecting twice a week data on EACH objective for EACH student is insane!	Initial conversations about how accountability isn't an issue, but paperwork and the workload is.

Belief	"I don't even think the scores should be counted in the school's overall score because we know right away that they are not functioning on grade level so why would we ask them to take a test on grade level?"	Teacher 1's main objective is to make sure that students have the foundational skills that they need. When asked about which is prioritized between teaches standards or goals and objectives, it was expressed that ultimately goals and objectives will be taught because that is what's best for individual students	Teachers felt comfortable in using things like "ridiculous' and "no logical sense". I found myself nodding heavily on the phone to a lot of what was said.
Response	"So weeks before the Milestones we would intentionally teach math and reading."	Teacher 1 also made it clear that special education teachers can only do as much as they can, but one has to be realist.	One teacher seems like she wants to give me textbook answers, and as the interview goes on I get more of a "keeping-it-real" approach. She say things like "everyone should show growth on the test. We're supposed to be teaching" and then after a while say how most people with LD won't pass because of their deficits.

Each transcribed interview was coded using the code book and recoded using a data ma-

trix "to scan and construct patterns from the codes, to develop initial assertions or propositions,

and to explore the possible dimensions which might be found in the range of codes" (Saldaña,

2016, p. 229). A data matrix was completed for each research participant for each interview cy-

cle. Table 5 depicts a sample of the data matrix that was used.

Table 5

Sample from Data Matrix

	Value Codes	**Belief Codes**	**Response Codes**
Example Transcript Excerpts	I'm just extremely honest with them, and they know that they're not function-ing on grade level.	…if you're a third grader and you have your reading fundamentals together you could pass reading on the Georgia Milestone test.	We spend a lot of time on test taking strategies and skills.
Combined Key Points	- Teach priority standards - Need a para for pa-perwork - Learning invento-ries for learning modalities - Intense, small group instruction - Open and honest conversations - Data talks with stu-dents	- Teach priority standards - Give your best and be satisfied with that - Special ed is for students who are not successfully accessing the gen ed cur-riculum - A para to assist with pa-perwork will be helpful	- Humanly impossible to meet all of the require-ments of a special ed teacher - A realist - Won't waste time - Intentionally teach sub-jects that are important to the Milestones - Understand the skills that will be on the Milestones and focus on those. Also known as the priority standards

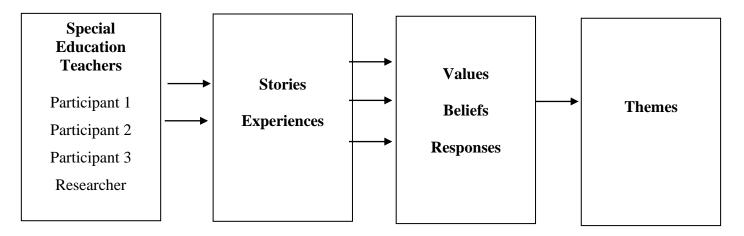|			• Build relationships with and confidence of students first • Teach test-taking strategies to students who have significant deficits

The researcher used a data matrix for each cycle of interviews. Analysis was conducted for each participant in order to present for member checking and across participants for developing the narratives. After coding the interview transcript, each row (representing one teacher) in the matrix was analyzed, an analytic memo was written, and then narrative were developed and shared with that teacher during the next interview for member checking. Teachers were able to add to the developing narratives. That additional information was included in the next analytic memo as part of the interview-journal-memo cycle. Row analysis across all participants offered means to develop patterns in relation to the research questions. Analysis of coding for all teachers in relation to what they are saying about "beliefs" were combined, for example. Those column analyses also took the form of analytic memos and served as data to analyze patterns across time, across all participants, and across all interviews. Ultimately, the row analysis maintained integrity in individual contributions to a collective narrative.

Emergence of Themes

Thematic analysis was chosen as the method of developing themes because it allowed the collective stories of the participants to build upon each other while protecting the teachers individualized voices. To hear a collective voice, each participant gave input to the themes as they emerged. After review of each interview, research journal entry, and analytic memo, I looked for patterns across what each participant shared in relation to their values, beliefs, and responses to

the high-stakes testing in special education. I searched for commonalties and what appeared to

capture the collective voice of the participants. Figure 1 shows the analysis of narration in the de-

velopment of the themes.

Figure 1

Flowchart of Theme Development

Special Education Teachers Participant 1 Participant 2 Participant 3 Researcher	→	Stories Experiences	→	Values Beliefs Responses	→	Themes

I took the initial themes that derived from the first round of data collection and shared

them with the participants during the member checking session at the start of the second inter-

view. This process repeated itself after each interview cycle. Each participant provided clarity

and responses to the proposed themes. Their responses were analyzed to determine the accuracy

of themes and if they represented the collective narrative of the teacher participants. I used the

responses to dig deeper into the shared stories and revise the themes to reflect the participants'

voices more accurately.

Through the cycle of identifying themes and presenting them to the teacher participants, I

was able to identify three themes that reflected how teachers responded to the phenomenon. Dur-

ing the final member checking session, I shared the three final themes that came from the data

sources. Each theme was shared with the participants and I elicited their thoughts and responses

to the accuracy of the depiction of the themes to their experiences. During the final member checking session, each participant agreed with the themes that evolved from the data and represented their stories.

Trustworthiness

Strong qualitative researchers strive for trustworthy research. Lincoln and Guba (1989) defined trustworthiness as being confirmable, dependable, credible, and transferable. Confirmability is achieved when dependability, credibility, and transferability are all met (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). This study met the criteria of confirmability through the researcher's positionality statement and researcher journal. My positionality statement makes it clear how I relate to the study and the background knowledge that I was able to bring to the study. My researcher journal allowed me to contribute my narrative to the research and document biases that arose throughout the interview process. Dependability was achieved through the use of Saldaña's (2016) coding schemes, coding matrix, peer debriefer and the use of a researcher journal. The coding manual and researcher journal clearly outlined the processes of data collection and data analysis and serves as an audit trail. Credibility was achieved through the study through the use of member checking. At the start of each interview, except the first, participants engaged in member checking where they confirmed that the interpretations of the data accurately reflected their thoughts and beliefs. Participants also engaged in a final member checking session for the third interview. Because member checking was used to develop narratives and themes, participants had the ability to make clarifications about the narratives and themes that were presented to them. Finally, transferability was met through the detailed descriptions of the research participants gathered from the narrative inquiry design. Descriptions of sites, processes, and methods of

collecting data also supported transferability. It is my hope that the findings from this research will prove useful in other settings.

Ethical Considerations

An important factor considered through this research study was protecting the confidentiality of the research participants. During the interview process, participants were asked to provide a pseudonym that they would be referred to as throughout the interview and within the study. The schools where the participants were employed were referred to as School 1 and School 2, respectively. Additionally, I followed member checking procedures so that the research participants were comfortable with the information that would be shared in the dissertation. The research participants were consistently reminded that if a concern arose with the way the data was interpreted (i.e., something was taken out of context, an interpretation misunderstood, etc.), the research participant had the right to request it not be included and that request would be honored.

Because of the professional relationship that I have with both school's administrative team, the research participants were assured that information gathered during interviews would be solely used for the study and not shared with outside parties.

Because of the limited number of participants and the likelihood that a participant could be identified, genders and identities were masked. Though pseudonyms were used during the interviews and transferred to the transcripts, pseudonyms were not used in the dissertation to further protect their identity.

Additionally, findings are presented as a collective narrative, including my own, of how special education teachers support students during testing. Narratives were also shared as a

collective. Counternarratives were also presented in the findings to provide a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon.

Limitations

The narrative inquiry approach relied on participants to share their stories with the researcher and therefore may be considered self-reporting data. Connelly (2013) suggested that self-reported data should be considered a limitation because such reports cannot be verified through other sources. Individuals could have had false perceptions or inaccurate memories and relying on accounts like those make the data limiting.

Another limitation of this study was that the research participants were all current or former coworkers of mine. The benefits of interviewing teachers that I have worked closely with allowed me, as the researcher, to have an insider dynamic and firsthand context of teaching conditions at each school and also influenced the participants' willingness to be vulnerable during our discussion about their teaching experiences. While I believed that these teachers felt comfortable sharing their stories with me, they also may have felt inclined to tell or share what they believe the researcher wanted to hear and not their authentic experiences. This appeared to be the case for at least one participant. At the start of data collection process, one participant suggested that accountability measures were favored and that teachers exert more effort when these measures are in place. By the third interview, however, the participant was more outspoken about the negative consequences of increased accountability. I noted in my researcher journal that perhaps during the first interview, the participant had not yet developed a level of comfortability to speak against what may have a been a position that I favored. It was imperative that stories be shared to elicit rich data so each research participant was encouraged to be honest and express their authentic thoughts and experiences.

Another limitation of this study was the sample size. The study collected stories from three teachers in one district and hence does not represent all contexts.

The study also took place at the start of COVID-19. In the unprecedented time, schools were immediately closed, teachers and students work virtually from home, and all standardized testing was suspended. Because testing was suspended for the school year, the participants may have participated with different perspective from if the interviews would have taken place during the time when teachers typically engage in test preparation Additionally, because of COVID-19 restrictions, I was required to conduct all interviews by phone only. Seidman (2013) suggested that nonverbal language can play an important role during interviews. Acknowledging one's nonverbal language, especially if it contradicts their verbal language, can open the door to discuss more than what has been shared at face value. Participants elected to interview by phone, and to honor their comfortability, video calls were not used. Not being able to see nonverbal language presented a limitation because I was unable to have the added benefit of seeing participants reactions or body language to questions that I posed. Instead, I could only rely on verbal language shared by the participants.

Through careful selection of the research methodology and methods, I believe that narrative inquiry best allowed the teacher participants and me to genuinely share our experiences with preparing students with disabilities for high-stakes tests. In the next chapter, I share the findings from the study and three themes that emerged from the data.

4 FINDINGS

The purpose of the research study was to examine the experiences that elementary special education teachers have with preparing students for high-stakes testing (HST). The intent of the research project was to answer the research question, "*How does mandatory state testing influence special education teachers' abilities to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities?*"

Each research participant participated in three phone interviews and member checking sessions. Teachers were interviewed during a time of remote learning in response to COVID-19. Due to remote learning requirements, HST testing was suspended for the 2019-2020 school year which may have influenced the teacher's responses.

Interview questions were developed to understand the role that HST had on their instructional decisions. Each interview was coded to determine what each teacher valued, believed in, and their response to testing. Using the narrative inquiry approach, it was important that I develop my narrative as the researcher alongside the teachers. As I engaged with the teachers, I challenged my thinking around the questions that I asked. Following each interview, I noted personal thoughts and feelings in my researcher's journal and in the analytic memos. After rereading the interview transcripts, analyzing the codes, and reflecting on the researcher's journal and analytic memos, three themes emerged from the data: 1) High-stakes tests minimize the ability to specialize instruction; 2) Autonomy to work on tasks that impact academic growth is valued; and 3) High-stakes tests are devalued, but instructional practices favor them.

In the following section I will discuss each of the themes and provide examples of comments and codes related to what they consider to value, their beliefs, and their response to HST. Although the teachers used pseudonyms to protect their identity during the interviews, for the

sake of this dissertation, the participants will be referred to as Teacher 1, Teacher 2, and Teacher 3. Adding an additional layer of identify protection further masks the teachers' identity by making it more difficult for a reader to identify their gender or age. Connections to cognitive dissonance are made where applicable and counternarratives to interpretations of values, beliefs and response are provided where appropriate.

Theme 1: High-stakes tests minimize the ability to specialize instruction.

The first theme that emerged was "*Special education teachers believe that high-stakes testing minimizes their abilities to specialize instruction*". Special education teachers expressed that knowing that students will be required to take a high-stakes test at the end of the year essentially encourages them to make instructional decisions that align with the test. This theme is strongly supported by teachers' belief codes that HST competes with specialized instruction and their responses to HST by reducing specialized instruction during test time. Belief codes identified in interview transcripts varied widely and were triggered by words such as "My students can't…", "I believe that", and "It is…".

This theme directly highlighted the dissonance that teachers experience due to testing requirements. Each of the special education teachers teach using the mastery learning model, but HST does not support that it. The analysis of the interviews clearly showed that teachers experience dissonance between teaching content that will be tested versus teaching skills that will be assessed.

The teachers shared stories about their experience with teaching students with disabilities who are below grade level and their inability to meet students where they are academically because of the influence of the Georgia Milestones. The curriculum expects that students in kindergarten through second grade should be learning how to read while students in third through fifth

grade read to comprehend. What the special education teachers in this study expressed is that though they may have students who should be reading to comprehend, many are still learning to read. Although the Georgia Milestones assesses students' ability to read to comprehend, these teachers believe that the most beneficial skill for students who are performing below grade level is to learn how to read but find themselves battling which skills should be taught.

Teaching students grade level skills that they have not mastered the prerequisite skills for has been challenging for teachers and students. Teachers describe that when students are not presented with the material at their independent or instructional level, students tend to be disinterested, disengaged, and can become easily frustrated. When presented with educational material that is too advanced for what they are ready to receive, students would often get angry, display signs of defeat, and in some cases, have behavioral outbursts. The teachers would continue to push students to do their best, although they knew that the task would be difficult. To the best of their ability, the special education teachers would stand firm on the task because they knew that the Georgia Milestones would present text on grade level and that their students would not have the accommodation to have reading passages read aloud, per eligibility requirements established by the school district. Although students would become visibly frustrated, the teachers explained that their students' feelings were rational, but that they felt that their hands were essentially "tied" because of their inability to specialize instruction to meet their needs.

Teachers value specializing instruction to meet the needs of their students. In fact, at the beginning of the year, in addition to the required baseline assessments that are administered to each student, each of the teachers conducted surveys and observations to determine if a student learned best through hands-on learning, visuals, or modeling. This measurement was a clear

indication that these teachers valued students as individuals and support specializing instruction to meet their individual needs.

One teacher described how taking anecdotal notes while the class played during recess helped to identify various character traits in those students. She would note who the natural leaders were, and which students were more at ease by assuming a role as a follower. She noted who the more creative students were and those who typically used playground equipment and things found in nature as they were intended to be used. These anecdotal notes would be transferred to the classroom. These notes would be used to help determine who group leaders should be, who worked best in a group as compared to individually, and even who needed encouragement to be more expressive and share their voice with the class. Specializing instruction for students has been of great value to special education teachers, but specializing instruction for students who will take a generalized test, in many ways, is a contradiction for these teachers because many of the differentiated strategies that are used in class are unable to be transferred to HST.

The teacher participants also talked about how they are required to attend weekly grade level meetings with members of the administration team to assess how they are progressing with teaching the standards and how well their students are doing with mastering those standards. Grade level teams develop a pacing guide that outlines how long each standard will be taught. The pacing guide lists all of the standards that will be taught from August to February to allow time for reteaching skills that students struggled with the most and to ensure that all standards are taught before the Georgia Milestones is administered in April.

The pacing guide that the special education teachers follow is identical to the pacing guide that their general education counterparts follow which is an indication that pacing is not specialized for students with SLD. These grade level meetings reinforce that special education

teachers should be teaching at the same pace as general education teachers with little considera-
tion that special education teachers teach students with learning disabilities and processing de-
lays. Although the timeline for teaching a year's curriculum in a limited amount of time is more
aggressive for special education teachers, they find themselves generalizing instruction to meet
their students' needs. In cases where high-stakes tests did not influence instructional decisions,
special education teachers believe that they would spend more time working on skills that they
believe were more essential to students' academic growth like the foundations of reading and
math.

Collectively, the teachers in this study view standardized tests as a one-size-fit-all assess-
ment, which does not meet the individualized needs of students with disabilities. Although these
students may qualify to receive some testing accommodations, the allotted accommodations are
not nearly enough to help students who are multiple grade levels behind to demonstrate mastery
on a high-stakes test. According to the teachers, the school district has implemented guidelines
for helping teachers identify students who may qualify for the various accommodations that the
district offers. These guidelines are implemented to help ensure that students are not overaccom-
modated and that they demonstrate evidence of needing the accommodations that they are as-
signed.

For example, one accommodation is to have reading passages read aloud. Instead of al-
lowing every student to have passages read aloud, only students who can read only a few words
in English would be considered eligible for receiving that accommodation. Unfortunately, in the
teachers' experience, some of the guidelines can be too strict for students. Considering that most
students who will take the standardized assessments are at least able to read on a first grade read-
ing level, which means that they can read may English words, the district's guidelines exempt

those students from being eligible to receive the testing accommodation that permits reading passages to be read aloud. However, if a student who reads on a first grade reading level is asked to participate in an assessment that will be presented as a third grade reading, it is unlikely that the student's reading skills will be sufficient to demonstrate mastery on that assessment. Instead of having reading passages read aloud, the guidelines make it easier for students to receive having test questions read aloud, which does not adequately provide the support that someone who is reading multiple grade levels behind would need. Special education teachers then find themselves teaching strategies that use having test questions read aloud to their advantage of HST instead of being able to teach them the foundational skill of reading.

For the three years that I have taught testing grades as a special education teacher, I found that school test scores were the primary data source that my evaluators used to improve the following school term. For my evaluators and their supervisors, test scores reflected the success of the school and assessed the quality of learning that had been provided that school year. As a result, I was highly encouraged by my administrative team to focus on skills that would essentially help my students to pass and the school's overall score to improve.

Although it was common for majority of my students to perform considerably below their grade level, my goal as the special education teacher was to help each student work toward mastery of the high-stakes assessment. Needless to say, these were the three most stressful years of my career. My students were overwhelmed, I became frustrated, and I felt that I was chasing something that was impossible to catch. My students needed to learn foundational skills but teaching sight words to students who should be independently reading fifth grade passages was too big of a gap to attempt to close.

To acknowledge student's deficits and prepare them for standardized tests, more of my instruction centered on test-taking strategies. I found that I was teaching students how to look for key words in a passage, use illustrations that may be provided to make inferences or predictions, and to rely on the few words that were able to read to make connections to what the questions may be asking. It was not the best pedagogical practice, my students were not successful, and I ultimately decided to teach grades where I could devote my time teaching foundational skills without the worry of HST.

Facing the reality of what the Georgia Milestones will look like for students with disabilities, it is understandable that special education teachers feel like their only hope is to teach advanced skills with optimism that their students will miraculously comprehend and retain what is taught. If not for the high-stakes tests, each teacher expressed that they would have considerably less worry about teaching skills on grade level. Instead, they are certain that their instructional focus would be specializing instruction and helping students master necessary foundational and prerequisite skills.

Because the standardized test is designed to assess students' ability to perform on grade level, special education teachers teach the general education curriculum at a pace that is comparable to students in general education. Certain academic subjects are taught more than others, staff meetings are often centered around the content of the HST, and some students are so far behind that they are unable to be given the attention they need to close their academic gaps.

Each of the special education teachers interviewed expressed how they often have meetings throughout the school year to focus on how student data looks and what strategies should be implemented to help students continue to grow academically. Special education teachers spend a considerable amount of time throughout the year dissecting student data and analyzing potential

tests questions and standards that will be addressed on the test. When asked about the meetings two teachers had this say:

Teacher 2   We meet with the curriculum specialist, known as the Curriculum Support Teacher, to learn about the makeup of the Georgia Milestones so we can know what to teach.

Teacher 3   During our meetings, we review the priority standards which are the standards that are guaranteed to be assessed on the Georgia Milestones.

It is clear from these responses that the teachers are taught to generalize their instruction in preparation for the generalized Georgia Milestones. Instead of looking at the individual needs and learning style of students with disabilities, teachers are asked to teach students the standards that will be on the test and teacher consider what will be presented on the Georgia Milestones when preparing lessons.

In elementary school, fifth grade is the only grade level where students are required to take the Georgia Milestones in English/language arts (ELA), math, science, and social studies. Third and fourth graders are only given ELA and math assessments at the end of the year. Even though fifth grade is the only grade that is assessed in science and social studies, passing these tests are not required for promotion to sixth grade. Because of this, special education teachers expressed that science and social studies are often placed on the backburner, especially when the test nears, and the school heightens its focus on preparing for the test. During the interview, one teacher stated, "There's not a lot of time to dedicate towards teaching science and social studies."

One concern that special education teachers have for HST is its implications that students with disabilities should be able to perform on assessments like their non-disabled peers. Special education was designed to support students who have difficulty meeting expectations when

accessing the general education curriculum but requiring them to participate in standardized tests that reflect the general education curriculum appears to defeat the purpose of special education. The following are excerpts from one of the interviews:

Teacher 2   Special education is for students of whom the general education curriculum was not sufficient. There is a great deal of pressure on special education teachers to have their instruction look like that of general education.

Teacher 3   I try to keep the same pacing as general education teachers, but meeting the needs of all students, especially those who have additional special education services like speech, make it challenging.

As a result of special education teachers being unable to provide specialized instruction to the students they serve because of HST, special education teachers find that they spend more instructional time, especially during designated times for test preparation, preparing students who are more likely to pass the Georgia Milestones for the test. It is common for special education teachers to teach a wide variety of disabilities in one classroom setting, and it is even more common for these teachers to prioritize their instructional decisions by preparing students with greater potential to pass for the Georgia Milestones. One of the research participants explained that the focus is on maximizing students' strengths and forego weaknesses that will realistically not be mastered by the time the Georgia Milestones is administered. Doing so creates a greater likelihood of passing the Georgia Milestones because students will have mastered skills in a particular domain on the test.

Special education teachers' response to this theme proves consistent with the response coding. Although the teachers do not like that standardized tests limit their ability to specialize instruction, they continue to allow it to do so. High-stakes tests set a high standard for all

students who participate in the assessment. Teaching in a way that aligns with the HST suggests that the students who are being taught are up for the task. While this is important, and all students should be taught to high standards, HST minimize teachers' ability to cater to the individual needs or address the specific deficits of their students. Collectively, this theme revealed that although students with learning disabilities have many strengths, the teacher participants believe that the testing does not allow for those strengths to be showcased because of its one-size-fits-all design.

Theme 2: Autonomy to use time to work on tasks that impact academic growth is valued.

The second theme that emerged from the data aligned directly with the value codes. Values coding was used to determine what the teachers valued or found important. I identified what was valued to the special education teachers by listening for sentence starters like "I wish I could…" or "I really want to…". After careful review of the interview transcripts, it was clear that the participants' values varied immensely. As also noted by Billingsley (2004), the special education teachers expressed that they place a high value on their work environment as it relates to their roles as the teacher. Some teachers mentioned how they would value less paperwork or smaller caseloads to allow them to meet the academic needs of their students more effectively. Collectively, however, a theme emerged that "*Special education teachers value the autonomy to use time to work on tasks that directly impact students' academic growth*".

The dissonance from this theme centered on professional identity. Although each of the teacher participants are professionals in their field, they have limited voice in how they spend their time. As a result, students may not grow as much as teachers would anticipate if teachers did have power to determine how their time is used. Further, these teachers essentially risk being viewed as ineffective by their colleagues and superiors because of their students' performance.

The research participants believe that their time is valuable and that their time is best spent preparing lessons and instructing students. After analysis of the interviews, it was evident that the special education teachers wanted to spend time working on strengthening students' foundational skills, as mastery of those skills would ultimately transfer into the success of high-stakes tests. Instead of having the autonomy to spend their time this way, however, their positions require that a considerable amount of their time be spent doing paperwork, hosting IEP meetings, and attending required meetings that may not be of relevance to them.

The time completing paperwork was the primary frustration discussed during the interviews. The teachers felt like, over the years, the workload of paperwork has increased alongside its tediousness and takes away from preparing lessons for instruction. One teacher explained how paperwork is frequently requested for the special education teachers to complete with only a few days of notice before it is due, and it is often paperwork that could be generated from a few codes in a computer. Requests to list the name of the homeroom teacher of each student on their caseload or requests to list the names of each student that is served for each subject are just a couple of tasks that the special education teachers find tedious and a distraction from doing their job of educating students. Not only are many of the paperwork requests tedious, but they can also be considerably time-consuming with the large caseloads that they are often assigned. The requirement to complete paperwork can compete with responsibilities that teachers consider valuable.

In addition to paperwork, teachers also talk about how hosting IEP meetings take away from preparing for quality instruction. Special education teachers explained the process of hosting an IEP meeting and how it also entails a lot of time and preparation. To host an IEP meeting, the special education teacher consults with all members of the IEP team to determine a date that

works best for all. The teacher then sends an IEP invitation to the student's parents to formally notify them of the meeting and to request their attendance. The special education teacher may have to call several times to remind the parent of the meeting and allow the parent to reschedule if necessary. The special education teacher is required to draft an IEP by pulling data from various sources to articulate how the child is presently functioning, as well as updating the many components that an IEP contains. Finally, the teacher carves out time as best as possible to hold the IEP meeting, which in some cases can take so long that the meeting has to be tabled and resumed at a later date. Once the meeting is over, and all parents have shared their input, the special education teacher must update the IEP with all new of the new information and finalize the IEP and send a copy to all members of the IEP team. The special education teachers expressed how time-consuming preparing for IEP meetings can be and how their time could be better spent on instruction if someone was hired to coordinate IEP meetings.

In this school district, special education teachers are instructed to collect data twice a week on every goal and objective for every student that is on their caseload. According to the teachers, caseloads can sometimes become as large as 18 students or more in a pull-out program. Considering that the average student has six goals and objectives, data must be collected an average of twelve times per student in one week. With a caseload of 18 students, teachers can find themselves collecting over 200 points of data in one week! To dedicate time for data collection means that special education teachers are taking time out of their schedules to teach. This becomes problematic because data collection further lessens the time that teachers can dedicate to teaching skills their students need and creates barriers for specializing instruction in ways that will prepare pupils for HST.

When questioned about the reasons for the district's decision surrounding the increased data collection requirement, two teachers were able to provide clarification. In their experience, the more data that can be provided on a goal or objective, the more likely it is to accurately assess student's progress or mastery.

An additional concern of participants regarding data collection is the burden on the students. Some assessments are more time consuming than others (e.g. reading passages and answering questions versus being timed on ability to solve multiplication facts) and can become frustrating for many students.

Lastly, special education teachers described how they had been required to attend meetings that are geared for general education teachers. One teacher explained an experience that took place during a grade level meeting. The meeting was primarily about an upcoming field trip, a topic that would only be of concern for homeroom teachers. This participant explained that homeroom teachers are responsible for communicating information about field trips with their students. Because this participant was not a homeroom teacher, there was little interest in the day the grade level team decided to book the field trip or how much they felt students should pay. To uphold professionalism standards, this special education teacher reported trying to appear engaged during the meeting but found it hard not to think about how the time spent in the meeting could have been used more effectively.

I also share the values of special education teachers. There are often times when I am required to participate in meetings that are intended for general education teachers. I can think of one instance when I was required to attend grade level Response to Intervention (RtI) meetings. RtI is a process that general education teachers go through to provide students with focused instructional time to close gaps on specific skills that have been classified as an area of weakness

for that child. If the interventions work, gaps are closed and the teacher proceeds with monitoring that child's academic progress. If the interventions do not work, the student goes through a process of being evaluation to receive special education services. If that student is found eligible to receive special education services based on the evaluations that were conducted, the special education teacher would develop an IEP team to begin servicing the child in the areas where weaknesses have been identified. As a special education teacher, the RtI process is not relevant. Special education teachers are only brought into the conversation once a child has been identified as needing special education services. Being required to participate in RtI meetings that train teachers on how to conduct and document interventions, how much time should be spent with students, and how large or small intervention groups should be does not impact her position or role as a special education teacher.

While my understanding is that administrative team requires all faculty members to attend such meetings so that all parties are aware various processes and procedures, it is meetings like those that make me feel like my role as a special education teacher is not used appropriately. On the one hand, it is appreciated that special education teachers are not forgotten about and are viewed as valued contributors to students' educational success. On the other hand, however, it is also true that special education teachers can be so included in work that primarily involves general education teachers, that valuable time is taken away from special education teachers to do the work that they are specialized to do. My primary focus is to help students with disabilities grow academically through various methods and strategies. Attending meetings for general education teachers do not help me become a better special education teacher, but rather it takes away time where I can perfect my craft and work to specialize instruction that will directly impact my students' achievement.

The special education teachers in this study spoke immensely about how they each felt that the paperwork aspect of their job was redundant, useless, and time-consuming. A great deal of our conversations consisted of the teachers expressing how challenging it is to maintain data per their district's requirement, schedule, plan, and host meetings, while meeting the individualized needs of their students. Maintaining the requirements and responsibilities as a special education teacher is already overwhelming. Adding to it the stress the requirements and responsibilities of preparing students for HST makes the job even more overwhelming and contributes to teacher burn out.

Loads of conflicting job responsibilities can understandably make one feel helpless. As it relates to cognitive dissonance, as teachers seek to align their thoughts and beliefs, it is a natural reaction for teachers for teachers to forgo some responsibilities or change their mindset around what is required of them. In this case, teachers expressed that they choose to collect data and host IEP meetings as required but are not always able to teach what they believe should be taught.

Special education teachers understand that for accountability's sake, it is important to provide as much instruction to students so that they can prove successful on standardized tests. Completing paperwork, hosting IEP meetings, and attending pointless meetings take away from the time they believe is necessary for working on tasks that directly align to providing quality instruction to their students. The research participants had the following things to say about autonomy:

Teacher 1   Now, I deal with it by doing the minimum that is required for those kinds of things that I don't think have a direct impact on my students' achieving or learning.

Teacher 2   I have limited control over the instruction that I provide.

Teacher 3   …that time would be spent more towards actually planning and really looking

          at the data.

The consensus among the participants was that the process of collecting data and preparing for IEP meetings is a tiresome process that essentially takes away from what special education teachers want to do the most – teach to the needs of their students. One teacher noted that the workload of a special education teacher is strenuous because of the requirements to write lesson plans, maintain legal obligations, and balance teaching. The responsibility of figuring out when paperwork should be completed, contacting members of an IEP team to schedule meetings, and writing IEPs is lot for one person to bear. Another teacher expressed that the workload is humanly impossible. Special education teachers are required to do a lot of work and a lot of times the work is redundant which adds another layer of frustration. Finally, the third teacher explained that because the workload can easily be unbearable, all energy and time is centered on what is most valuable, which may not always align to what the district presents as the most important.

Not only are special education teachers required to do tasks that directly align to being a special education teacher, they are required to do complete these tasks in addition to the tasks that general education teachers are required to complete. Special education teachers are also asked to do things like reviewing student data with general education teachers, reporting class incidences, assisting with organizing field trips, and more. In many ways, special education teachers feel that the burden is sometimes too heavy to bear. Adding additional tasks to teachers who already feel overwhelmed can be exhausting for teachers. Two teachers expressed their thoughts about the task that are required of special education teachers.

Teacher 1   It is virtually impossible for a teacher to fully maintain their role by meeting

the deadlines of paperwork and collecting data while also being responsible

for the providing direct instruction within the standard school year.

Teacher 3   Special education teachers are required to complete work that is relative to

special education in addition to completing tasks that general education teach-

ers are required to complete.

As a result, some special education teachers feel that the best way to cope with the de-

mands that are being asked of them is to do the bare minimum. Some feel that since their time is

best spent support the academic needs of their students, they meet the minimum requirements set

by the district or school leaders, but do not concentrate more effort than is needed to provide data

that is required. This allows them to instead provide instruction for students which is ultimately

the mutual goal of all educators any school.

Because so much time is spent in ways that special education teachers feel compete with

instructional time, all of the research participants suggested that having a paraprofessional is a

necessity for sharing the responsibility of collecting data and doing paperwork and supplement-

ing quality instruction to their students. Having a paraprofessional is not standard in special edu-

cation. Classes earn a paraprofessional for the number of students and the variety of disabilities

that are being served at one time. Each special education teacher found that sharing the responsi-

bility with an adult who can also collect data and other tasks made it easier for them to manage

tasks. The research participants had this to say about having additional support:

Teacher 2   All special education teachers need an assistant for paperwork. I believe

school districts should allow designated people to assess and work with chil-

dren, develop the plan for learning, and then give it to teachers to implement.

Teacher 3   If I had a para or some person that is assigned to this school to do all of the

setting up of the IEP meetings, making the copies of the meetings, and filling

out the FTE paperwork and all of those other stuff that I have to do, that

would free me up to plan more, plan better, plan more specific and targeted

lessons with my students. It would give me more time to spend with what's

important and that is teaching the students.

The collective thought from the teachers is that they value having the autonomy to use

their time as they deem most appropriate. Being a special education teacher naturally comes with

more responsibilities than general education teachers. Having the autonomy to use their time in

ways that help them meet the demands of their job and the needs of their students is incredibly

valued.

Teachers openly expressed that they are not spending their time the way they believe di-

rectly supports their students. They find that they are attending professional faculty meetings that

take away from their planning time. Other times, the teachers express that they spend a consider-

able amount of time planning the logistics of coordinating IEP meetings with IEP team members.

What special education teachers truly value is the autonomy to spend their time on tasks that they

believe will directly impact the academic growth of students while additional help is offered to

complete the miniscule tasks that are not as critical.

This theme highlighted how special education teachers experience conflict with balancing

the requirements of their job while meeting the needs of students as it relates to preparing them

for HST. The feeling of not having enough time to complete tasks, teach content or skills, or re-

alistically help students who are potentially grade levels behind pass HST make special

education teachers feel like it is impossible to be successful at their job as special educators. The next theme highlights how special education teachers respond to the conflict.

Theme 3: High-stakes tests are devalued, but instructional practices favor them.

The third theme was "*Special education teachers devalue high-stakes testing but change their instructional practice in accordance with it*". This theme strongly draws from interview data that was coded as response code. This code was to understand how special education teachers respond to the demands of HST. Response codes differ from value and beliefs because it goes beyond an abstract feeling as it puts action to how the teachers respond. Examples of response codes begin with sentences like "In my classroom…" or "What I do is…". The response code was an essential code to align with the cognitive dissonance. As mentioned in chapter one, cognitive dissonance happens when beliefs and actions do not naturally align. Understanding values and beliefs were important but learning about the teachers' actions were equally critical. The first theme highlighted what special education teachers felt their purpose was while the second theme expressed how teachers feel that they do not have the autonomy or time to fulfill that purpose. This theme will focus on how teachers respond to the conflict.

The collective response that I identified from the research participants was that their instructional decisions align with high-stakes tests, although they expressed how much they disagree with the assessment and its effects on their students.

In both schools, teachers engage in "March Madness", a month where everyone's focus is on teaching standards that will be on the Georgia Milestones and those that may not have been mastered by majority of the students. Each teacher talked about how reading and math are taught the most because these subjects must be passed before students can be promoted to the next grade level. In third grade, students must pass reading, and in fifth grade, students must pass

reading and math to be promoted. During March Madness, the school sorts students by their ability level across the grade level so that the teacher can teach standards to homogenous groups of students. Students who are closer to mastering grade level standards are prepared to take the test by learning new strategies and teaching subjects that will specifically be tested. For some students, the special education teachers spent their time teaching test-taking strategies.

For special education teachers, during March Madness, there is little to no time to continue attempts to helping students master prerequisite skills. At this point in the school year, special education teachers are teaching grade level standards to students with more potential to pass the Georgia Milestones than those who are struggling the most.

Because of the dedication to the Georgia Milestones preparation, teachers find themselves teaching less of the students' goals and objectives that are indicated in their IEP and more of the priority standards and subject areas that all students, regardless of ability levels, are expected to master. This means that the required twice per week data collection is not collected as frequently. During March Madness, teaching goals and objectives are temporarily ceased. If teachers can find time, their priority becomes collecting data on goals and objectives.

High-stakes tests have caused special education to make instructional decisions that they may not initially agree with because it of its tendency to generalize instruction that they believe should be specialized and individualized for their students. The teachers in the study expressed that HST are extremely influential in their practice. Though it was a difficult decision, understanding the weight that test scores play on a school's reputation and CCRPI scores convinced me to go against what I knew was best for my students for the sake of what was best for the school.

Instead of providing the instruction that their data shows students need, teachers in this study, including myself, felt compelled to provide instruction geared toward the Georgia Milestones. This decision is made despite the fact that most of our students not to pass the Georgia Milestones each year. We find ourselves returning to a focus on the test than on the needs of their students beginning in March.

Although teachers expressed their dissatisfaction with testing, many of them alluded to changing their instructional practices and making instructional decision that aligned with the test. For example, each of the participants teach multiple subjects, including reading, math, language arts, science, and social studies. During the interview, all of the teachers explained that when the test nears, science and social studies are taught much less, or not at all. Since science and social studies are not as critical as reading and math on the Georgia Milestones, it is expected that those subjects are not taught during March Madness. The research participants expressed that if it were not for standardized tests, there are certain skills that they would teach longer, science and social studies instruction would not be halted, and grade level content would not be taught until students demonstrated that they were educationally equipped to receive grade level instruction.

Each of the teachers also expressed that because they teach students with a wide range of ability levels, some students are more likely to be successful on the Georgia Milestones than others. Because of this, some teachers prepare students with the greatest potential for passing for the Milestones while other students do not receive the same level of rigor or test preparation. The goal for special education teachers is to get as many students to pass standardized tests as possible. The following are excerpts from our interviews:

Teacher 1   I do not waste my time with the Milestones prep if they are not ready.

Teacher 2   I can't say that I can help a child pass a test who's reading on a kindergarten

level and it's a fifth-grade test. How? It's impossible It is unrealistic - it

doesn't mean it's impossible, it's just unrealistic to expect students who are

multiple grade levels behind to pass the Milestones.

Test-taking strategies are typically taught to students who have not demonstrated mastery and are not yet approaching mastery of grade level content. Students who realistically will not pass the Georgia Milestones because of their current level of performance, according to their teacher's data and observations, are taught test-taking skills. Test-taking skills include how to look for keywords in a text, how to use the process of elimination, and how to use testing accommodations to the best of their ability. In some cases, teaching test-taking strategies works, and students do better than expected on the high-stakes test. Choosing to teach test-taking strategies instead of foundational skills that they need indicates that the special education teachers, to some degree, align their practices in support of high-stakes tests.

The participants shared that during instructional time, they would read questions to students because it appeared to be one of the most beneficial testing accommodations. Although students are unable to have reading passages read aloud, sometimes hearing the question can help students listen for keywords that could help them accurately answer reading comprehension questions on HST. Other accommodations, like frequent breaks and extended time, primarily help students stay attentive for the duration of the test, but not correctly answer test questions. From one perspective, special education teachers provide specialized instruction by the test-taking tools they choose to emphasize for individual students. Although all offered accommodations may not benefit every student, teachers use their knowledge of student learning to practice use accommodations that may directly benefit them on HST.

Teachers have found that teaching lower-level, non-standards based, strategies is a better use of their time. This means that teachers are sacrificing teaching skills that students need to master that may be below their grade level to spend time on teaching strategies that may help them to achieve a higher score on a standardized test. Teachers use of time for teaching test-taking strategies instead of content skills shows that they will go to great lengths beyond what they believe to help their students perform their best on HST.

The actions of the research participants, in many ways contradict their beliefs. As noted with the first theme, special education teachers expressed that high-stakes testing does not allow them to specialize their instruction, which is very important to the service they provide. They spoke against how standardized tests essentially require them to teach in ways that mimic that of general education. Even though they disagree with the design of standardized testing, the special education teachers in this study found themselves engaging in practices that supported teaching in non-specialized ways. This was evident by the teachers saying the following:

Teacher 1   I try to maximize the strengths that he or she has and not worry on skills that has taken a year and half working on with little or no gain. If I maximize your strength based on how the test is given and the number of questions on the test for that domain, I think I have a better shot at getting you to pass the test.

Teacher 2   For those students who are significantly below grade level, I honestly taught them test taking strategies.

Teacher 3   I will say this is a priority standard. And what that means is this will definitely be something that the Georgia Milestones will focus on.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, a benefit of special education is the ability for special education teachers to use their expertise to guide students toward mastery at a pace that supports their

individualized needs. However, HST have minimized the ability of special education teachers to use their expertise to support their students. The teachers argued that they did not agree with standardized tests or the influence that HST have on their workload and instructional decisions, yet they still engaged in actions that misaligned with their beliefs. Each teacher serviced students in testing grades with the tests in mind. Some subjects were dismissed while others were emphasized, test-taking strategies were taught to give hope to students who were predicted to not pass, and standards that were certain to be presented on the Georgia Milestones were intentionally spotlighted.

Mandatory state testing influences instructional decisions more than special education teachers appreciate. HST minimizes the ability for special education teachers to specialize their instruction and devote time to work on tasks they deem valuable. Interestingly, however, these teachers continue to allow their behaviors (i.e., modifying instructional decisions) to go against what they believe and value.

As Festinger (1957) suggested, there are four naturally occurring strategies that typically guide thoughts and behaviors to align. In this study, it was clear that the teachers and I most aligned with the second strategy by trivializing their cognition. Although our beliefs and values did not support HST, our behaviors essentially favored support for the tests. We trivialized our cognition to help our cognition align with the expected behavior. One example of this was made evident when the teachers decided to teach test-taking strategies instead of content that they felt was more appropriate for their students. This example shows how cognition was trivialized by suggesting that test-testing strategies may not be as rigorous as teaching grade level standards, but the lessons may still help students show some level of success on the HST. Instead of

standing firm in our disagreement with the consequences of HST, we modified our beliefs and values to align with the behavior that we knew were expected of us.

Summary

As special education teachers talked about their experiences with the preparing their students for HST it became evident that they know what skills need to be taught but feel that HST expectations impact their autonomy to teach those skills. The common goal in elementary schools is to prepare students to demonstrate proficiency on HST regardless of students' current ability levels. As much as this creates dissonance between what teachers believe and what they are expected to do, teachers find a way to work toward meeting those expectations.

Although teachers may not have full control over what they are able to teach – choosing to teach to the test instead of teaching foundational skills that they believe their students need most – they do have control in their instructional decisions in other ways. For example, teachers decide to teach students who may not be ready to learn grade-level content test-taking skills. This level of differentiation still allows teachers to have a certain level of control and lessens their dissonance as they prepare all students for HST.

The themes in this chapter captured what teachers expect of themselves, what is expected of them, and their response to the phenomenon. As teachers discussed what they expected for themselves, they also talked about how they felt they have limited control over the instruction they provide to their students. However, in some ways, these teachers did demonstrate a level of some autonomy. For example, for students who the teachers really thought were not ready to learn grade level content, they were taught test-taking skills. Understandably, school leaders believe that all students can learn and achieve academic gains, but special education teachers understand that the meeting that goal may be a longer process for some students more than others.

Differentiating how students are prepared for HST is one way that special education teachers subconsciously take control over the instruction they provide to their students. Doing so allows them to positively respond to their dissonance by providing a certain layer of differentiated instruction and strategies to students they believe need it while meeting the expectations of school leaders.

In the final chapter, I will discuss the implications of these findings and offer suggestions for further research.

5 DISCUSSION

This study allowed the researcher to learn about the experiences of fellow colleagues in special education as it relates to preparing students with disabilities for HST. Having firsthand experience working alongside each of these research participants made working on this project a unique and invaluable experience for me. I know of the passion that each of these participants feel for teaching and closing educational gaps between their students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. Taking a deeper look into understanding their positions as special education teachers as it relates to providing the type of instruction that they feel is necessary for their students is a narrative that deserves to be told and a perspective that is often unheard.

In this chapter, I will draw final conclusions to the research, discuss implications, and suggest how further research can be beneficial to improving this work.

Conclusions

Accountability measures lead to some special education teachers feeling burnt out and wanting to leave the profession (Billingsley, 2004; McCarthy, 2019). Accountability measures like high-stakes tests (HST) increase expectations of teachers and often leave them conflicted with making appropriate instructional decisions. Though teachers participated in years of college schooling to become experts in their craft, the weight of HST makes it difficult for some special education teachers to put their expertise to use.

As noted in Chapter 2, the inclusion of students with disabilities gradually increased over time. By 2001, all students, **regardless of ability level**, were expected to achieve proficiency as outlined in the NCLB (Powell, Higgins, Aram, & Freed, 2009; vanSciver & Convover, 2009; Yell, Rogers, & Rogers, 1998). This goal was a grand push for all teachers but carried a different weight for special education teachers teaching students with learning disabilities.

Sixty percent of students with disabilities have a specific learning disability (SLD) with processing deficits. Requiring students with SLD to participate in accountability measures meant that special education teachers had to creatively master improving student's academic performance from their current level to helping them achieve levels of proficiency, as measured by HST. This goal naturally created cognitive dissonance among special education teachers.

In this study, teachers experienced conflict in discharging their duties as special educators while complying with testing mandates. This study found that the participants in the study do not support HST, yet they engage in instructional practices that align with supporting the test. This was evident by the way they cater to priority standards, teach certain subjects more than others, and teach students with greater potential to pass differently from those with less likelihood of passing. The teachers most aligned with the first strategy of cognitive dissonance – modifying cognitions. The research participants modified their cognition by believing that they did not give more consideration to the Georgia Milestones when they, in fact, do. The findings from this study offered important implications for special education teachers, school administrators, and policymakers.

<div align="center">**Implications**</div>

After a thoughtful review of my researcher's journal, analytic memos, and interview transcripts, I offer suggested implications of the research. I reflect on the collective narrative of three special education teachers and my own. These implications are not meant to be generalized but rather considered when making instructional decisions for teachers.

Special Education Teachers

Over past decades, laws have continuously strived to help students with disabilities receive a better and more inclusive schooling experience. Students with disabilities, who were

once excluded from schooling, fully have rights to be included with their peers without disabilities and are held to the same academic standards. Historically, the inclusion of students with disabilities was a significant win in special education. No longer were students with disabilities viewed as outcasts or made to believe that they were less valuable than their peers without disabilities. However, these findings suggest that students with disabilities may be encouraged to be too much like the general education counterparts which ultimately takes away from the individualism that special education supports. And yet, critique of special education may consider the concept of individualism as one way that segregation is being perpetuated (Annamma, Ferri, & Connor, 2018; Conner, 2019).

While schools and laws are supporting inclusion, this study revealed that it may be doing so at the cost of helping students with disabilities receive the specialized and individualized instruction they need to excel academically. General and special education teachers serve different roles in schools, but through collaboration and planning between general and special education teachers, special education teachers will be more likely to understand the ultimate academic goals for students with disabilities. Significantly, however, the teachers in the study believe that HST lessens their ability individualize instruction to meet the needs of the students they serve which have important implication for special education teachers.

This study implies that one of the reasons that special education teachers may leave the profession is because of their battle with cognitive dissonance as it relates to preparing students for HST. As stated in chapter 1, nearly 25% of teachers leave the profession because of accountability measures (Podolsky, Kini, & Darling-Hammond, 2016). If teachers decide to remain in the profession, it is possible that their practices may change to align with meeting accountability requirements, like teaching to the test (Welsh, Graham, & Williams, 2019). Because the teachers

in the study rely on the mastery learning model, it was reported having conflict between teaching prerequisite skills that their students have yet to master versus teaching grade level skills that they know will be on HST.

Special education teachers want to have autonomy to make instructional decisions that they believe are in the best interest of the students they teach. However, because teachers are encouraged to teach with HST in mind, teachers find that their instructional decisions are geared more toward testing than meeting students' needs. For the special education teachers in this study, this conflict of teaching toward HST and teaching what students need directly contradicts what they believe their purpose is as special education teachers. Teachers expressed how special education was developed to support students with disabilities in ways that differ from the standard instruction that students without disabilities receive. In fact, students receive special education services because they were unable to access the standard general education curriculum without additional specialized supports (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2004; Nichols, Bicard, Bicard & Casey, 2008). Focusing attention on HST and not on the needs of students does little to acknowledge that students with disabilities need and deserve unique, specialized, and individualized educational support. This oversight heightens special education teachers' dissonance.

In addition to teachers feeling compelled to teach to HST, teachers also expressed how doing so negatively impacts how they support their students. The teachers openly expressed how some of their students have greater academic needs than others. As special education teachers prepare all students for HST, they find themselves teaching students with highest ability levels differently than those who have the greatest needs. While some students are being taught content that may be above their current instructional needs, others are taught test-taking strategies, for example. This level of differentiation aligns with the needs of students with disabilities, but the

teachers experience dissonance knowing that there is minimal opportunity to teach many of their students at their appropriate instructional levels.

Perhaps most significantly is what special education teachers believe HST does to the confidence of their students. Special education teachers spoke about how their students feel less confident in themselves when they receive poor test results and learn that they will likely be asked to attend summer school and risk being retained, which is also documented by researchers Lackaye and Margalit (2006). Again, this contradicts what special education teachers believe to be their role which is to support students' educational and emotional needs, regardless of their academic level, and help them to make gains within a year. Special education teachers do not believe that their focus should be on helping students pass a standardized test that is not presented on their instructional level.

The findings from the study showed that as it relates to HST, special education teachers are not viewed as the specialists they are. Special education teachers are called upon for tasks that are related to compliance (i.e., IEP meetings, paperwork) and meetings with general education teachers where discussions of inclusion can take place (i.e., grade level meetings), but are rarely, if ever, called upon to offer insight to the instructional needs of their students as it relates to preparing them for HST. Specific to HST, special education teachers have limited input in how they spend their time and the instructional decisions that they make. Requirements of meeting deadlines with paperwork and meetings and balancing supporting large caseloads remain factors that special education teachers consider overwhelming to their work (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

Even with the task of putting their expertise on the backburner to meet the expectations of HST, teachers show a level of commitment to the field to continue the journey of supporting

students with disabilities. Every teacher spoke highly of the capabilities of their students when they are given the opportunity to focus their attention on instruction. Each teacher discussed how they spend time getting to know students' interests and how they learn best so they can make informed instructional decisions that will be most helpful in getting students' attention and helping them to learn to their fullest potential. One final interview question that was asked of the participants was, "What does a successful school year look to you". All the teachers responded that student growth and the happiness of the student were indicators that they had a successful year as a teacher. These responses spoke to why special education teachers attempt to overcome their dissonance to provide quality instruction to their students.

Special education teachers know what their students need and believe in their ability to meet academic goals with the right amount of instruction and supports. However, the collective narrative in this study was that, with the demands of HST, successfully meeting all the requirements of a special education teacher and meeting the needs of students with disabilities is virtually impossible.

The study found that one of the biggest factors in special education teachers feeling that their job is impossible to do effectively is because of the lack of autonomy they have to work on tasks that impact students' academic growth. Time is spent on completing paperwork for large caseloads, attending meetings, and now spending instructional time on testing material instead of foundational skills that are needed. The cognitive dissonance that is likely to be developed because teachers believe in educating their students one way, but their actions are unable to align because of mandates, can trigger frustration and lead to attrition.

Considering that teachers believe their jobs are more doable if given more time to provide quality instruction to their students with fewer meetings, less paperwork, and accountability

measures that do not include HST, it is important, now more than ever, to make plans to support teachers in ways that they need. It is clear from the findings that special education teachers want to teach. Providing them the opportunity to do so and supporting the belief that it can be done effectively will help alleviate the current shortage of special education teachers and weaken the dissonance they currently feel as special educators so retention rates may increase.

School Administrators

At the local level, school administrators play a vital role in the satisfaction of their faculty and staff. School administrators have the power to enforce rules while being flexible with others. This study showed that teachers genuinely want to make decisions that are pleasing to those they report to. Even though the collective spoke against their support of HST, they continued to teach in ways that prepared students for the test because they knew of the importance to the school.

This study highlighted how teachers are eager to do what they believe is in the best interest of their students but are more likely to do what is asked by school administrators even if they disagree. As a result, school administrators should work to relieve the conflict that special education teachers often experience. Teachers' conflicts arise when teachers find themselves making decisions that support their students and making decisions that support the school or administrators. Although school administrators have no control over HST, they can and should consider the intent of special education decisions when asking them to complete tasks or teach in ways that will cause internal conflict. Asking for special education teachers to participate in discussions of test preparation and teaching and learning are ways that school administrators can set a school climate that shows that special education teachers are valued for the specialty they offer to education. Doing so will allow the expertise to be put back into the teachers' hands as well as decrease cognitive dissonance that teachers experience.

Because school administrators are in a position of power at the local school level, it is important for them to listen to the needs of special education teachers. Failure to do so will continue to have teachers feeling burnt out and wanting to leave the profession. Listening to the needs of special education teachers will allow them to voice their concerns about how their time could best be spent and can advocate for inclusion where they feel it is necessary.

Allowing special education teachers to have more control over how they instruct the students they teach allows them to regain the respect as professionals of their craft. The study has shown us that special education teachers want to help their students excel. As school administrators, stepping back will allow these teachers the opportunity to accomplish that goal.

Naturally, humans yearn for the alignment of their thoughts and actions. As much as teachers want to have control over their instructional decisions, this study showed that they will ultimately shift their thoughts to have their actions align to what is expected of them by the school's administrative team. This shift of thoughts risks the teachers' yearning to challenge curriculum, advocate for the students they serve, and strive toward satisfaction in the profession that they spent years preparing for. As such, school administrators should work on ways to support special education teachers so that they can have as much freedom as possible to perform as reliable professionals in their field.

Another implication is centered around teacher evaluations. School administrators tend to assess teacher performance by how well their students perform on HST. School administrators should consider how teachers can be viewed by more than students' test performance. Evaluations should reflect less about how students perform on HST and more on how special education teachers successfully supported their students' academic needs through planning and differentiation.

Since it is known that students with SLD have processing deficits (Cornett-Devito & Worley, 2005; Flanagan, Mascolo, & Alfonso, 2016), it can be inferred that it will take them longer to master skills that are on their grade level. As such, the quality of teachers should not be assessed by how well students perform on a test that is presented on their grade level. These un-fair measurements will continue to result in teachers feeling like they are fighting a battle that cannot be won and can lead to teacher attrition (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Wronowski & Urick, 2019). Classroom assessments, student portfolios, and student observations are examples of tools that can be considered for teacher evaluations that can reflect the quality of a teacher more than HST.

All the teachers in the study also spoke about how they would appreciate having a sup-port person who can handle the administrative tasks that take them away from instructional time and planning. It would be helpful for school administrators to consider how school personnel can be used to provide all special education teachers within their building support so their focus can be on instruction and less on paperwork.

Special education teachers are committed to their professional roles. However, with too much conflict, it is also common for teachers to feel burnt out and want to leave the profession. To support teacher retention, it is important to for school administrators to listen to the needs of special education teachers so they can creatively work to find solutions that will offer teachers what they need to minimize conflict and maximize using their expertise for students' academic growth.

Policymakers

The most significant implications are for policymakers because HST tests are imple-mented because of their directives and mandates. While it is understandable for overseers of

education to expect all students to reach a minimum level of achievement, it is important for these leaders to consider the impact that such expectations have on students with disabilities. Special education teachers want their students to achieve at rates that are comparable to their non-disabled peers but understand that reaching that goal requires a great deal of remediation, time, and specialized instruction.

One of the findings in this study was that HST minimize the ability for special education teachers to specialize instruction. As policymakers reflect on the purpose of special education and the harm that the lack of specialized instruction can cause on students with disabilities, it is important that alternative accountability measures be considered. The use of portfolios, for example, could serve as a way to assess student growth while acknowledging that some students are not yet able to access grade level standards. Portfolios would hold special education teachers accountable without the sacrifice of meeting the needs of the students that they serve. Again, teachers want to teach, but it is most important to consider how to realistically best support our most vulnerable student population.

In addition to considering various accountability measures, policymakers should also consider ways that testing accommodations can better align what is offered in the classroom and what is on HST. The Georgia Milestones is currently not a differentiated assessment, yet students receive differentiated instruction daily. The misalignment of the instruction and assessment makes it more difficult for HST to capture students' strengths.

This study provides evidence to help policymakers recognize that special education teachers hold the credentials and expertise to make informed decisions about the instructional needs of the students they serve. Policymakers should consider allowing special education teach-ers to have more voice in the instructional decisions that they make to allow their students to

make reasonable academic progress that maximizes instructional time by prioritizing skills that students need the most.

Suggestions for Further Research

To learn more about how HST influences instructional decisions of a special education teachers, future researchers should consider hearing the stories from teachers with a variety of backgrounds. This study considered the experiences of four teachers in one district, three of whom have at least 15 years of teaching experience. Considering the experiences of special education teachers from more school districts and with novice to veteran experience would strengthen the study. Novice teachers are responsible for carrying the torch over the next few decades. Understanding their experience and offering support where needed can help lessen the likelihood that they will experience the same cognitive dissonance as the teachers in this study and will also be less likely to feel burnt out. Understanding the experiences of other veteran teachers will help determine if this cognitive dissonance is experienced in other demographics or if it is specific to teachers and schools that are like that in the study.

This study was conducted over a six-week period. Future researchers should also consider interviewing teachers over a longer period of time and observing teaching practices when applicable. A longer time frame and observations will allow researchers to strengthen the research by determining if teachers' perspectives on their teaching and practices align. Observing teaching practices will allow the researcher to get a firsthand view on how teachers may change their instructional practices to align with HST in ways that may be subconscious to them.

An additional recommendation for future researchers is that they consider the impact that HST has on teachers who are not yet in testing grades. It is a common understanding to believe that teaching and learning in primary grades impacts how well a student will be prepared for

HST. Comparing the experiencing that special education teachers who teach in primary grades to those who teach in testing grade could have offer insight and a new perspective to the influence that HST has on instructional decisions. It may be of interest to learn how soon jargon of HST is exposed to students and how soon special education teachers become concerned with their student's performance on HST.

Final Thoughts

This research study afforded me the opportunity to hear from colleagues around a topic that I have found myself battling with as a special education teacher: standardized testing. Special education is a unique system that considers the individual learning needs of students to help them reach their fullest academic potential. In my experience as a special education teacher of students in testing grades, attention was often shifted from the needs of students to getting them prepared to take and pass high-stakes tests. The mindset around testing being the primary focus drove me to want to leave testing grades. Teaching younger grade levels allowed me to help students work on their foundational skills without frequent reminders that my goal should be on passing an end-of-year test.

From conversations with colleagues, I knew that I was not alone. My counterparts often initiated conversations about how our attention is misguided. Time is spent in teaching standards that will be on the Georgia Milestones without acknowledging that most of the students we served were still in need of foundational and prerequisite skills. I believed that the voices of special education teachers needed to be heard as we pride ourselves on being advocates for our students.

As I continue to work as a special education teacher, I wonder what education might look like if special education teachers were considered school leaders. In my ideal school setting,

special education teachers are referred to whenever questions about specializing instruction are happening or whenever there is talk about students with disabilities. Ideally, special education teachers should be treated as experts in their field and should be valued and appreciated for the knowledge that they can offer. Special education teachers should not be made to feel like they must complete tasks for the sake of completing tasks or attending meetings simply to avoid disciplinary action. Special education teachers are one of the greatest gifts to education and should be cherished so that they are valued enough to continue to do the work that students with disabilities so desperately need.

It is my hope that this dissertation contributes to the discussion of standardized testing and allows those in power to enact change to have an insider's perspectives on the negative effects that high-stakes testing has on our students with disabilities. I understand that change does not happen overnight, but with research from the mouths of teachers that are expected to meet the demands set before us, I am hopeful that a change will soon come. It is time that special education regains control of providing the service it was intended to provide – meeting students where they are to help them make academic growth on individualized levels.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A Informed Consent Form

Georgia State University

Informed Consent

Title: Cognitive Dissonance and Special Education Teachers: Examining the Instructional De-
     cisions of Special Education Teachers in a High-Stakes Testing Era

Principal Investigator: Dr. Diane Truscott

Student Principal Investigator: Alyse Showers

<u>Purpose</u>

The purpose of the study is to examine the experiences that elementary special education teach-

ers have with preparing students for high-stakes tests. You are invited to take part in this research

study because you are a special education teacher at a local elementary school in _____ County

and have a professional relationship with the researcher. A total of six people will be invited to

take part in this study.

<u>Procedures</u>

If you decide to take part, you will participate in three interviews and a final member check ses-

sion at a mutually agreed upon location or via phone. Each interview will last approximately one

hour but will not extend beyond an hour and a half. Each interview will also be audio recorded

and transcribed. Member checks will take place at the beginning of the second and third inter-

views and will reference the preceding interview. A third member check will be conducted at

the end of the interview cycles to reference the third interview. Member checks should not last

longer than 30 minutes. Interviews and the final member check session will span over a six-week time frame. The first interview cycle will take place in March.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may decline to answer questions or stop participating at any time. You may refuse to take part in the study or stop at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time.

Though you are a former or current coworker of the researcher, the researcher does not supervise you. Participation, or lack thereof, will not affect your standing at your school.

Contact Information

Contact Alyse Showers and Dr. Truscott at ahaliburton2@student.gsu.edu

- If you have questions about the study or your part in it
- If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study

Consent

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you are willing to volunteer for this research and agree to be audiotaped, please sign below.

_____
Printed Name of Participant

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

_____   _____
Principal Investigator or Researcher Obtaining Consent   Date

Appendix B Interview Questions

Interview 1

- How long have you been in education?

- How long have you been an elementary teacher?

- Have you always been special education?

- What grade levels have you taught in elementary?

- What led you to teaching?

- Do you see yourself teaching in 5 years?

- What do you think keeps you teaching for so long? Is it you really love the kids or do you just like that you know what to do? Like you're good at it? What keeps you teaching?

- What has been your favorite grade level to teach and why?

- Research shows that 25% of teachers leave education because of accountability measures. How do you respond to that? Like what do you think about that?

- How has your experience been with this remote learning because of the coronavirus?

- Overall, what has been your personal experience with preparing your scholars? What has been your personal experience I guess with preparing students for the Milestones?

Interview 2

- Special education teachers often discuss how much paperwork is involved with their job. Can you talk about that work? Your experience as a SEPD teacher?

- How do you feel like the paperwork influences your teaching?

- Do you feel like if they said, "You know what? You don't have to worry about writing IEPs and you don't have to worry about collecting data twice a week" – How do you think that might change your day-to-day? Your teaching, your practice?

- So I'm trying to know like when you think about paperwork and the data collection and all of that stuff, how does that factor in with the Georgia Milestones?

- Do you have experience, or have you ever taught students who were not maybe in their right setting?

- What is the experience like balancing caseloads with a wide range of exceptionalities?

- How does teaching multiple great levels impact your ability to meet the needs of your students, particularly those with learning disabilities?

- Do you have students with learning disabilities now in your class?

- What percentage of your students have a learning disability?

- Generally speaking, based upon your many years of experience, are those kids performing on grade level, above or below grade level, or significantly below?

- How do you specifically meet the needs of students with learning disabilities?

- Goals and objectives are developed by the teacher. How often is it that their goals and objectives are aligned with their grade level standards?

- As a SPED teacher what do you teach? Do you teach the goals and objectives or do you teach the grade level standards? How do you maneuver that?

- For the students who have LD, was it a lot of them who were able to master those prerequisite skills?

- What are your conversations like with students, specifically students with learning disabilities, about the Georgia Milestones?

- Do you feel or have you felt pressure before with preparing your students to pass the Milestones?

- If there were no Milestones, if all high-stakes tests were thrown out the window, do you think that you would expose those students who have learning disabilities and have not yet demonstrated mastery of prerequisite skills, would you still expose them to grade level work?

Interview 3

- One of the common themes was that it is hard to balance completing paperwork with other responsibilities, and I would just like for you to talk more about that.

- How has technology influenced your ability to collect paperwork? What role does it play?

- Someone commented that observational data is more important than tangible data. How do you respond to that?

- If you had less paperwork, what would happen?

- Another thing that a lot of people talked about was the importance of having extra support like a para. Can you talk more about that need?

- Another theme was that it is unrealistic to expect students who are two to three grade levels behind to pass the Milestones. Do you agree and I want you to talk about why or why not?

- Do you feel like your students receive sufficient testing accommodations?

- I want to talk about the CRCT-M. I know that you've had experience with that in the past, so I want you to talk a little bit about what that experience was like from your perspective and from the students' perspective and even from the parents' perspective.

- A statement was made that if you can read you can be successful on any reading test regardless of the grade level. Do you agree with that? Why or why not?

- Now that we don't have state testing this year what do you think that's going to mean for students' progress as far as their achievement and growth, and how do you feel about not testing?

- Another theme was that special education teachers can predict who will pass the Milestones at the beginning of the year. How do those predictions impact your instructional decisions throughout the year?

- How much control you feel you have over the instruction you provide. Why do you feel like that and what do you have control over?

- Can you talk about how your planning looks different than general ed, and how you take those plans and individualize? Or do you individualize for your students?

- How does students receiving different services impact your ability to provide quality instruction to your students?

- Alyse: Another thing a lot of you all talked about was how it is important to have honest data talks with your students. Can you tell me your thoughts on that?

- A lot of you also talked about the importance of building confidence in your kids and building trust in your kids. Can you talk explicitly about how you do that?

- What does a successful year look like to you?