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Teachers' Perceptions of the Administration of the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program to Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

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Abstract

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MA, Virginia State University, 2002

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Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

A school in Virginia serves students with significant cognitive disabilities (SWSCDs) whose full scale IQ scores are 40 and below. The problem is the SWSCDs were administered the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) and did not perform well from 2017 to 2019. As a result, the school did not receive state accreditation. The purpose of this study, guided by Pellegrino's conceptual framework on how students construct knowledge, was to examine (a) teachers' perspectives of and experiences with administering the VAAP, (b) how the VAAP measures student achievement and growth, and (c) the support teachers need from administrators. In this qualitative case study, semistructured interviews were conducted via a video platform with a purposeful sample of 10 teachers who met the criteria of having previous experience with teaching SWSCDs and administering the VAAP. Data were analyzed for emerging codes, categories, and themes. Primary themes revealed convergences of perspectives and advocacy around VAAP appropriateness, cognitive severity and capacity, inclusion of functional skills, equity, and needed support. As a result, the findings showed that teachers both perceive the VAAP as inappropriate for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities and advocate on behalf of these students. A position paper for stakeholders on the findings regarding VAAP design, administration, and support needed by teachers may promote social change by informing decision-making and policies related to use of the VAAP for this student population.

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Dedication

My doctoral project study and my doctorate degree are dedicated to God and to my family for their grace, love, and support as I navigated through the mountains and valleys of my journey.

A special note of appreciation goes to my husband and best friend, Avery Miller, for his unwavering faith in God and in me. He stepped up and took on more for our family so that I could pursue my dream of earning a doctorate degree. Also, I will always be grateful for the patience and understanding of my sons Brenden and Avery Miller. I want my love and passion for learning to serve as a positive example in their lives.

Finally, I dedicate my work and give a heartfelt thank you to my mother and father who are my everyday heroes. My mother wanted to attend college but did not have the financial means to do so. I appreciate her for studying with me, encouraging me, and for making sacrifices to ensure my siblings and I could attend college. My father, one of the smartest and kindest persons I know, also had limited educational opportunities. I learned the value of working hard from watching him work every day–even with his diagnosis of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. I share my doctoral degree with them, for allowing me to stand on their shoulders.

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I would also like to acknowledge and thank the Virginia school and district that gave me permission to conduct my research. Special appreciation goes to the teachers who willingly gave of their time to participate in my study and trusted me to raise their voices by sharing their stories.

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Section 1: The Problem

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, required all states to include students with significant cognitive disabilities (SWSCDs) in large-scale testing to measure their achievement and progress (Darrow, 2016). ESSA's guidelines required that state officials develop an accountability system that held all students to learning state standards, with the authorization to measure achievement for SWSCDs using alternate academic standards (Meibaum, 2016). Furthermore, ESSA's guidelines provided how to use the standards and required state officials to provide alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards that aligned with the same high standards and technical adequacy as the regular state assessments and included a public reporting requirement (Meibaum, 2016). As a result, states across the country created alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards for assessing SWSCDs (Darrow, 2016).

Virginia developed a portfolio type of alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards called the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP). The VAAP is aligned with Virginia standards of learning that are designed to measure the achievement and growth of SWSCDs. According to the VAAP participation guidelines, SWSCDs who participated in the VAAP had to submit grade level work samples in performance portfolios in subjects required of their peers who are not disabled—using aligned standards of learning that were Virginia standards of learning reduced in complexity and depth (Virginia Department of Education, 2021c). In 2019, over 90,000

SWSCDs participated in the VAAP across 133 school divisions in compliance with federal and Virginia regulations, which required the Virginia Department of Education to ensure that all local educational agencies included all students with disabilities in all Virginia Department of Education and division-wide assessment programs (Virginia Department of Education, 2021b).

The Local Problem

A Virginia school district with more than 20 schools was required to include SWSCDs (within its low incidence population) in the VAAP. A nurse within the target Virginia school district indicated that SWSCDs with full scale IQ scores of 40 and below were administered the VAAP to measure the SWSCDs' achievement and growth, and their scores did not meet state accountability standards. SWSCDs with IQs of 55 or below are often categorized as having a severe to profound intellectual disability, and they may have other disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, visual impairment, or hearing impairment (Browder & Spooner, 2011; Courtade et al., 2017). Students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities typically read and write at pre-emergent levels, so it is very difficult to measure their progress on large-scale assessments (Smith et al., 2020).

SWSCDs at the target school within a Virginia school district failed to demonstrate adequate achievement, even with the VAAP's use of aligned standards of learning that reduced the assessment in terms of complexity and depth. The last assessment data reported for the target school, prior to Virginia schools closing due to the COVID-19 pandemic, indicated that the students scored 12% in reading and 18% in math

(Virginia Department of Education, 2021b). In a study that examined whether research-based reading instruction was successful with students who had below average IQs, Allor et al. (2014) found that SWSCDs with IQs between 40 and 55 required approximately 3.5 academic years to progress from reading zero to 20 words per minute. Through the results of their study on how SWSCDs' IQs influenced their learning outcomes, Allor et al. provided insight related to the problem in this study.

The problem explored in this study is that SWSCDs from a target school within a Virginia school district who were administered the VAAP did not perform well from 2017 to 2019. The students' low performance resulted in the school not receiving state accreditation (Virginia Department of Education, 2021b). A special education teacher who administered the VAAP communicated that it was difficult administering the VAAP to SWSCDs who had a severe intellectual disability.

The target school not receiving state accreditation presented concerns for school, district, and state officials because school-quality indicators outlined by the Virginia Standards of Accreditation placed the school at the lowest quality level (Level 3), which indicated SWSCDs from the school were not making adequate achievement and growth (Virginia Department of Education, 2021b). Tindal et al. (2016) found the research base on the academic growth of SWSCDs who participated in alternate assessments was limited. Although state educators have used alternate assessments to assess SWSCDs (within their large-scale testing programs) since 2004, there is limited information on the achievement and growth of those students (Tindal et al., 2016).

The assessment of SWSCDs presents a local concern for the target school within a Virginia district—as well as other district staff nationwide—as it relates to the measurement of achievement and growth for SWSCDs. ESSA's guidelines required states to use state quality profiles to report student achievement levels on assessments for all students, disaggregated by subgroups as indicated: students with disabilities, English language learners, gender, migrant, homeless, children in foster care, race and ethnicity, and children with a parent in the Armed Forces on active duty (Meibaum, 2016). Following the Virginia Department of Education's public reporting of schools that were not accredited, which included the target school, a district official informed all school staff that non-accredited schools were failing to adequately educate their students (see also Virginia Department of Education, 2021b).

Public reporting of achievement and growth in Virginia is demonstrated through school and division report cards (state quality profiles by school) that display pass rate percentages in subjects tested at each grade level (Virginia Department of Education, 2021b). In the past, SWSCDs were often exempted from large-scale assessments (Browder et al., 2005). As the accountability system has changed, and the assessments have changed for SWSCDs, researchers, teachers and other stakeholders have become more interested in determining appropriate measures of achievement and growth (Farley et al., 2017). Assessing targeted skills of SWSCDs with accuracy is difficult because SWSCDs often lack prerequisite skills, which demonstrate what students understand about a targeted academic skill to be developed (Jones et al., 2019).

To address the problem of low performance from SWSCDs who were administered the VAAP, it was important to understand (a) the perceptions and experiences of teachers administering the VAAP, (b) how this assessment reflected the achievement of this population in terms of design and content, and (c) the support teachers needed from administrators. There were few data in the local district regarding the academic challenges of teaching grade level specific aligned standards of learning to SWSCDs who have IQ scores that present extreme limitations related to cognitive capacity and adaptive functioning. Teachers who were directly involved in the administration of the VAAP to SWSCDs have valuable information concerning the design and administration of the VAAP and the support teachers need from administrators.

Rationale

The rationale for this study was that the low VAAP performance of SWSCDs resulted in the school not receiving state accreditation, which raised concerns from district and state stakeholders about student academic achievement and growth and school quality. Teachers at the target school followed mandated state requirements to assess SWSCDs using the VAAP. Although the VAAP is designed to measure aligned standards of learning reduced in depth and complexity, the severe to profound intellectual range of the SWSCDs presented limitations that made it difficult for them to demonstrate accurate achievement and growth through the VAAP. Measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs can be challenging because it is typical for these students to have performance inconsistencies that fluctuate widely across their abilities (Jones et al.,

2019). Virginia, under ESSA guidelines, used the state school quality profile to report the target school's VAAP performance.

According to the 2019 State School Quality Profile for the target school in the subject Virginia district, the SWSCDs at the target site did not meet state accountability requirements (Virginia Department of Education, 2021b). The target school serves SWSCDs who participated in the VAAP, but their severe or profound deficits in academic and adaptive functioning made it challenging for them to demonstrate their achievement and growth through the VAAP (Virginia Department of Education, 2021b). The learning profile of students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities is characterized by limited understanding of written language and numerical concepts, with a typical standardized intelligence range of 40 to 25 or below (Virginia Department of Education, 2014). Donne et al. (2018) conducted a 6-year longitudinal analysis study on the reading scores of hearing-impaired students with cognitive disabilities and found their performance on alternate assessments over time static. According to data from the alternate assessments, 37.5% of the students scored at the proficiency level or better, and 62.6% of the students scored below the proficiency level, which would not meet state accountability measures (Donne et al., 2018). According to data reported through the Virginia Department of Education (2021b), SWSCDs from the target school who participated in the VAAP did not meet state accountability measures.

The data shown in Table 1 reflect what the SWSCDs in the target school scored for the years 2017 to 2019. In 2018, reading scores indicated a 6% passing rate, and math scores indicated a 52% passing rate (Virginia Department of Education, 2021b). In 2019

the reading passing rate was 12%, and the math passing rate was 18% (Virginia Department of Education, 2021b). The reading passing rate increased 6% and the math passing rate decreased 34% from 2018 to 2019 (Virginia Department of Education, 2021b).

Table 1

Pass Rate Percentages for a Virginia School on the VAAP (2017-2019)

Subject tested	Year 2017 [a]	Year 2018	Year 2019
Reading	<50	6	12
Math	<50	52	18

Note. [a] In 2017 less than 50 students were tested, which means no data were reported.

Although there was a 6% passing rate increase in reading from 2018 to 2019, the SWSCDs scores in the target school for the years 2017 to 2019 failed to meet state accountability standards (Virginia Department of Education, 2021b). During a district leadership professional development, stakeholders at the local campus expressed concern regarding the VAAP scores and the design of the VAAP for measuring SWSCDs with severe to profound academic and functioning skills.

A former special education teacher, and parent of a SWSCD who has severe and profound disabilities and who participated in large-scale testing, believed that SWSCDs' cognitive and adaptive functioning presented challenges that prevented them from demonstrating their knowledge through alternate assessments. Another parent, during a parent-teacher conference discussion, indicated being less concerned about the child's VAAP score and more interested in the child's daily progress.

In my conversation with a special education teacher who has administered the VAAP, the teacher contended that in the administration of the VAAP the lessons that were taught only progressed as far as the SWSCDs' cognitive ability would allow. The special education admitted that SWSCDs have experienced frustration during the VAAP administration in attempts to push through the cognitive and adaptive functioning limitations of the students' disabilities. During a different conversation, another special education teacher indicated the design of the VAAP was better suited for SWSCDs when it included functional skills.

SWSCDs have a wide range of cognitive and functional disabilities that inhibit them from demonstrating what they know through traditional assessments. SWSCDs should be able to demonstrate their academic achievement, but many SWSCDs cannot demonstrate achievement and growth through their participation in large-scale assessments (Tindal et al., 2016). SWSCDs within the severe or profound intellectual range have a limited understanding of written language, limited knowledge of numerical concepts, limited spoken language, limited fine and gross motor skills, and limited functional daily life skills (Virginia Department of Education, 2014). The former federal guidelines under NCLB that initiated the mandated participation of SWSCDs in large-scale testing and the federal accountability system, ignited national concern about NCLB's insistence that the only way to measure student progress is through standardized testing (Darrow, 2016). After the replacement of NCLB with ESSA, concerns from administrators of alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards increased regarding what ESSA means for SWSCDs given their full range of disabilities.

The wide range of disabilities encompassed in the population of SWSCDs present variation that leads to assessment dilemmas (Anderson et al., 2015). According to Thurlow et al. (2017), SWSCDs who participate in the VAAP demonstrate attributes characterized by

- communication deficits that impact participation in various social and learning environments;
- inconsistent learning patterns in conceptual, social, and practical domains—affecting cognition, communication, self-help, and socialization;
- multiple disabilities and conditions existing simultaneously alongside an intellectual disability resulting in physical, sensory, health, and stamina difficulties impacting engagement in learning;
- impairments in small and gross motor abilities in addition to cognitive and development delays that present challenges for participation in routine activities;
- challenges with learning and retaining new tasks, and making connections in new environments; and
- the need to have varied alternative methods for learning (tactile, visual, multi-sensory, and auditory).

Cameto et al. (2010) investigated teachers' perceptions of alternate assessments for SWSCDs through a study sponsored by the Institute for Educational Sciences. The researchers surveyed 422 teachers—of students considered to have significant cognitive disabilities—from three states. Because individual states have their own definition of

SWSCD, a wide variety of primary disabilities were represented in this study: intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairment, hearing impairment, specific learning disabilities, speech and language impairment, and emotional disturbance (Cameto et al., 2010). The researchers found that 59% of the teachers surveyed strongly disagreed or disagreed that SWSCDs had the ability to meet the alternate achievement standards set by the state. Furthermore, 58% of the teachers who participated in the survey strongly disagreed or disagreed that alternate assessments reflect the achievement and learning outcomes of SWSCDs. Additionally, 71% of the teachers surveyed strongly disagreed or disagreed that the scores from the alternate assessments accurately reflected student progress (Cameto et al., 2010).

Teachers who instruct SWSCDs have reported concerns about the use of alternative assessments for this population. Restorff et al. (2012) conducted a study across three states that collected survey data from teachers administering alternate assessments regarding their perceptions of alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards. The researchers found that 62% of the teachers surveyed indicated SWSCDs with the most profound disabilities should be exempt from participating in large-scale testing, and 58% indicated the alternate achievement standards should include a wider variety of performance levels to better reflect the range of the students' abilities.

Lee et al. (2013) surveyed teachers to examine their perceptions of students participating in alternate assessments, and the findings reflected that 64% of the teachers indicated that before focusing on academics like reading and math, SWSCDs with the

most profound disabilities should focus on functional or daily life skills. Additionally, the researchers reported that only 11% of the teachers surveyed indicated that it was important for SWSCDs with the most profound disabilities to focus on learning the same content (in reading, math, and science) their same-age peers are learning. Large-scale assessments of SWSCDs have not been supported by teachers nationwide.

Researchers have proffered that teachers have validity concerns associated with large-scale-testing for SWSCDs. In 2014, Klehm conducted research to explore general and special education teachers' beliefs and attitudes about students with disabilities participating in large-scale testing. Klehm collected data from 218 general and special education teachers about (a) their beliefs regarding students with disabilities' ability to participate in large-scale testing and (b) their perspectives about the fairness and validity regarding students with disabilities' participation in large-scale testing. The findings from the study showed that 53.9% of the teachers believed students with disabilities do not have the cognitive ability to reach proficiency through participation in large-scale testing. The findings also indicated that 90% of the teachers believed that the data from students with disabilities' participation in large-scale testing were not valid and were not fair to students with disabilities because the alternate assessment scores do not adequately represent the students with disabilities' achievement and growth. Additionally, 97% of the teachers agreed that students with disabilities should have the option of demonstrating achievement through multiple measures (Klehm, 2014). Although research has been conducted on various aspects of SWSCDs' participation in large scale testing through the administration of alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards, very

little is known about SWSCDs' achievement and growth as measured by alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards (Tindal et al., 2016).

The purpose of this study was to understand teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs, how this assessment reflected the achievement and growth of this population in terms of design and content, and the support teachers needed from administrators. Understanding teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and experiences related to their administration of the VAAP may provide valuable information on the use of VAAP to assess SWSCDs and may yield an opportunity to understand more deeply how the design and administration of the VAAP discerns the learning and growth of SWSCDs. Additionally, an examination of teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and experiences regarding the supports they need from administrators may yield an opportunity to understand more deeply how administrators can provide support and guidance in the administration of the VAAP.

Definition of Terms

Aligned standards of learning (ASOLs): ASOLs are academic standards adapted from content taken from the Virginia standards of learning that have been reduced in academic rigor and intensity for use with the VAAP (Virginia Department of Education, 2021c).

Alternate achievement standards (AAS): According to Meibaum (2016), AAS promote access to the general curriculum for SWSCDs because they are standards aligned with state academic standards but have been reduced in academic rigor and intensity.

Alternate assessments (AAs): Students with disabilities whose individualized education plan team decided the student cannot take part in regular assessments have the option to participate in AAs to measure their academic performance (U.S. Department of Education, 2017a).

Alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS): AA-AAS provide SWSCDs with a different type of test created to measure their academic performance, with the use of standards that have been reduced in academic rigor and intensity (U.S. Department of Education, 2017a).

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA): ESSA is legislation that reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and replaced NCLB in 2015, narrowing the role of the federal government by requiring states to develop an accountability system for assessing the academic performance of all students and producing public report cards to display the performance data (Darrow, 2016).

Performance portfolios: In Virginia, performance portfolios are used for the collection of work samples to show evidence of learned aligned standards of learning for measuring the academic performance of SWSCDs through VAAP (Virginia Department of Education, 2021c).

Profound intellectual disability: The Virginia Department of Education (2014) characterized profound intellectual disability as performance on standardized intelligence tests in the range of 20 to 25 and below—with conceptual, social and practical domains resulting in sensory impairments that may hinder physical manipulation of objects,

limited understanding and performance of verbal and non-verbal communication, and reliance upon care-takers for physical needs every day, safety, health, and wellness.

Regular assessments: According to the U.S. Department of Education (2017a), regular assessments are designed to measure students' knowledge of on-grade level state standards in large-scale testing.

Severe intellectual disability: The Virginia Department of Education (2014) characterized severe intellectual disability as a severe cognitive disability with performance on standardized intelligence tests in the range of 40 to 25 and below with conceptual, social, and practical domains resulting in limited understanding of written language and numerical concepts, spoken language limited to single words or phrases with limited vocabulary and grammar, and support with daily living skills such as eating, bathing, dressing, and requires monitoring and supervision.

Standards of learning (SOLs): SOLs are academic standards used in Virginia to provide students with content knowledge in English, mathematics, science, and history/social science (Virginia Department of Education, 2021a).

State quality profiles: ESSA guidelines require annual public reporting, which provides student and school performance data, accountability, financial expenditures per-pupil, qualifications of educators, and any other information states deem appropriate (U.S. Department of Education, 2017b).

Students with significant cognitive disabilities (SWSCDs): Thurlow et al. (2017), through the National Center on Educational Outcomes, characterized SWSCDs with the use of state descriptors for their participation in alternate assessments. The authors

indicated that SWSCDs identified for participation in the VAAP were characterized by (a) communication deficits, (b) inconsistent learning patterns, (c) multiple disabilities existing concurrently with an intellectual disability, (d) impairments in motor skills, (e) challenges with learning and retaining information, and (f) the need for varied alternative methods of learning.

Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP): According to the Virginia Department of Education (2018), the VAAP is an alternate assessment designed to measure the academic performance of SWSCDs in Grades 3–8 and high school. The process involves teachers selecting and teaching alternate achievement standards called Virginia aligned standards of learning and collecting evidence or work samples of learned Virginia aligned standards of learning throughout the year to be placed in a performance portfolio (U.S. Department of Education, 2017b).

Significance of the Study

The results of this study may provide practical considerations for better understanding (a) teachers' beliefs and attitudes about students with SWSCDs participating in the VAAP, (b) teachers' perceptions of and experiences with benefits and challenges of administering the VAAP, (c) factors that contribute to some SWSCDs not being able to demonstrate achievement and growth on the VAAP, (d) the advantages and disadvantages of the VAAP's design and content, (e) the aspects of the VAAP's design and content that can be altered to measure SWSCDs' achievement and growth, and (f) teachers' perceptions of the guidance and assistance they need from administrators. Understanding teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and experiences may provide schools, school

districts, and other stakeholders with information on how the design and administration of the VAAP measures learning and growth for SWSCDs and may provide deeper insight on the supports needed from administrators.

Researchers have used teachers' perspectives to inform educational practices to assist with understanding how to better instruct and assess SWSCDs. In a study related to teachers' perspectives on teaching practices and academic progress for students with disabilities, Klehm (2014) acknowledged validity concerns with assessing students with disabilities. Klehm also contended that validity concerns could be addressed by using multiple formats within assessments and only testing students on instruction they have had an opportunity through time to learn. Petersen (2016) conducted a study on teachers' perceptions about SWSCDs' access to the general curriculum and found that teachers believed there was little guidance on how to support students' access of the curriculum to respond to and demonstrate understanding of content, thus leaving the teachers confused about delivery of the curriculum which is assessed by alternative assessments. Petersen indicated that teachers believed the SWSCDs' access to aligned curriculum standards was a link to their participation in alternate assessments. Ruppar et al. (2017) found that teachers believed (a) the curriculum should also address relevant daily life skills; (b) more time was needed to work on individualized education plan goals; and (c) the state standards were too complex to translate to the students' individualized educational plans. Data collected from teachers' perceptions in this study may provide stakeholders with an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of how the design and administration of the VAAP measures learning and growth for SWSCDs and may yield a deeper understanding

of the support and guidance teachers need from administrators during the administration of the VAAP. In this study, I explored teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs, how this assessment reflected the achievement and growth of this population in terms of design and content, and the support teachers needed from administrators.

Research Questions

SWSCDs with severe and profound intellectual disabilities did not perform well on the VAAP from 2017 to 2019. As a result, the target school failed to meet state accountability standards. The SWSCDs' performance on the VAAP generated concern from local campus and district officials about school quality and student the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe and profound intellectual disabilities. Using qualitative case study methodology, in this study I explored teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs to gain a deeper understanding of: (a) the administration of the VAAP to SWSCDs, (b) the design and content of the VAAP for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs, and (c) the support teachers need from administrators in the VAAP process.

Therefore, I explored the following research questions:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of and experiences with how the VAAP measures SWSCDs' achievement and growth in terms of design and content?

3. What supports from administrators do teachers perceive they need in the administration of the VAAP to SWSCDs?

Review of the Literature

Nearly 10% of students participating in exceptional education services are SWSCDs, and they represent almost 1% of the kindergarten through Grade 12 population of students in public schools in the United States (Greer & Erickson, 2019; Thurlow & Wu, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). To meet the instructional and assessment needs of SWSCDs, it is necessary to understand the nature of how they learn. Research on the profiles and characteristics of SWSCDs indicated they have vast instructional and assessment needs that are varied and complex (Erickson & Quick, 2017; Knight et al., 2019). According to Maryland State Department of Education and Johns Hopkins University (2017), an accurate understanding of SWSCDs' knowledge and skills helps to ensure instruction and assessment leads to improved achievement. The nature of how SWSCDs learn is the core value related to the conceptual framework of this study, which undergirded a deeper understanding of SWSCDs' instructional and assessment needs.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that grounds this study is a system for understanding the nature of knowing and learning through four basic perspectives proposed by Pellegrino et al. (2001). The four basic perspectives—differential, behaviorist, cognitive, and situative—work together to provide information on the nature of what students know and understand, how they construct knowledge, and provides implications for instruction

and assessment (Pellegrino et al., 2001). Shepard et al. (2017) extended research presented by Pellegrino et al. on designing a structured format of assessments from a model of learning. Shepard et al. recommended an approach that would drive educational reform through states designing a system for assessments that begin with district level plans for educational practices and strategies rooted in a structure for learning that is validated by research on what is important for students to know and learn. According to the authors' model, learning should consider intelligence, maturation, encouragement, individuality, and equitable instruction (Shepard et al., 2017). Kleinert et al. (2009), reported about models of cognition for SWSCDs, and recognized the four perspectives as having valuable implications for assessing SWSCDs participating in large-scale assessments.

Differential Perspective

The first perspective, the differential perspective, focuses on the different levels of academic development and achievement of students. According to Pellegrino et al. (2001), the differential perspective highlights specific differences associated with student knowledge and students' capacity for learning. Its premise is that individuals have different mental capacities, and those differences establish measurable mental traits that reflect aspects of knowledge, skill, and intellectual competence (Pellegrino et al., 2001). Learning and retaining information is challenging for SWSCDs due to their (a) limited capacities in memory (short- and long-term), (b) limited ability to generalize knowledge, and (c) limited metacognition, which causes them to retain information more slowly than their peers who have or do not have disabilities (Greer & Erickson, 2019; Kleinert et al.,

2009; Nash et al., 2015). Many SWSCDs have slow developmental progressions that result in gaps in essential prerequisite skills that widen over time as SWSCDs move through their academic years (Jimenez & Stanger, 2017). Use of the differential perspective in assessment considerations for SWSCDs provides insight into their unique variations in mental capacity. However, although valuable to assessment considerations for SWSCDs, the differential perspective apart from the other perspectives would not provide the full scope of what SWSCDs are capable of learning and understanding (Kleinert et al., 2009).

Behaviorist Perspective

The second perspective, rooted in behaviorism, is the behaviorist perspective, which has contributed to the use of daily life skills and functional academics for instructing and assessing SWSCDs. Behaviorism has had an important effect on the realm of education for SWSCDs over time, in terms of what is known about how they learn from and respond to stimulus through the arrangement of daily life skills and functional academics (Snell & Brown, 2006). The use of stimulus-association through the behaviorist perspective has provided important information in measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs. Educators are using a combination of behavioral and academic adaptations to support and better meet the learning styles of SWSCDs (Finnerty et al., 2019). Research on curriculum and assessments for SWSCDs by Kleinert et al. (2009) indicated that the behaviorist perspective has contributed to applied behavior analysis, which has produced options such as completing the same assessment a specific number of times, obtaining real or concrete behavioral outcomes, task-analysis, and obtaining

observation samples over a specific period of time. Nonetheless, in isolation, as noted by Pellegrino et al. (2001), the behaviorist perspective does not focus on how knowledge is constructed, organized, and used. Other perspectives must be considered to glean that information.

Cognitive Perspective

The third perspective, the cognitive perspective, is the model that provides an understanding of how knowledge is constructed, organized, and used. Researchers Kleinert et al. (2009) described the cognitive perspective as a model that focuses on how knowledge is built or represented, the strategies that are used for making connections from background information to new information, and the formal structures for figuring out and working through problems. Hollingshead et al. (2018), who conducted a study of the perspectives of 23 scholars with expertise in students with severe intellectual disabilities engagement in learning, found that the essential features of cognitive engagement in learning include academic responding, meaningful instruction, and learning outcomes. This perspective also focuses on the idea of obtaining progress over an extended duration of time, while creating multi-faceted systems of information and ways of solving problems (Kleinert et al., 2009). Use of the cognitive perspective provides a deeper understanding of how SWSCDs construct, organize, and use knowledge over time—and ultimately informs how to instruct and assess them. But, like the differential and behaviorist perspectives, in isolation the cognitive perspective does not fully capture (even over time) the range of capabilities for the diverse population of SWSCDs (Kleinert et al., 2009).

Situative Perspective

The fourth (and last) perspective, the situative perspective, engages students through community to discover their nature of knowing and learning. Pellegrino et al. (2001) indicated the situative perspective focuses on the student's place in the community of learning and the student's aptitude in adding to and learning from the community of learners. Kleinert et al. (2009) contended that the situative perspective has positive implications for SWSCDs because they benefit from being in a community of learning with typical peers. Schaefer et al. (2018) researched the effects of peer support for students with severe intellectual disabilities and found that students with severe intellectual disabilities had positive experiences across instructional formats with significant gains from interactions with peers during small group instruction. The researchers recommended that educators make arrangements for social interactions that promote learning across all settings, including small group instruction as appropriate (Schaefer et al., 2018). Similarly, Kuntz and Carter (2019) found organizing academic support and communication with peers to have positive influences on instructional and social supports for SWSCDs.

With the use of the situative perspective, SWSCDs obtain usable skills in real world settings that contribute to their competence in the real world (Kleinert et al., 2009). The situative perspective provides the option for SWSCDs to access knowledge in typical educational settings as well as real world settings. Community based instruction is an instructional strategy that educators can use to combine academic and real-world knowledge. According to Collins and Ludlow (2018), community-based instruction

allows SWSCDs to learn academic and functional skills by interacting with their peers within the community and during school planned activities. With the assistance of the situative perspective, Pellegrino et al. (2001) provided a well-rounded system for discerning the true attributes of constructing meaning. According to Kleinert et al. (2009), knowledge of how students learn has valuable implications for SWSCDs' participation in large-scale assessments.

Connection of Conceptual Framework Key Elements

The key elements of the conceptual framework for this study and the four basic perspectives proposed by Pellegrino et al. (2001), are connected as a system for understanding the nature of knowing and learning for SWSCDs. The key elements are also connected by providing implications for instructing and assessing SWSCDs through large-scale assessments, which could address the difficulties associated with measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs.

Additionally, the conceptual framework of this study was interconnected with my qualitative case study research that explored teachers' perceptions of SWSCDs participating in the VAAP. It is also aligned to the research questions to understand (a) teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs, (b) teachers' perceptions of and experiences with how the VAAP measures SWSCDs' achievement and growth in terms of design and content, and (c) supports from administrators teachers perceive they need in the administration of the VAAP to SWSCDs. The conceptual framework's connection informed essential components of the study and provided a deeper understanding of concepts related to the nature of how

teachers perceive and experience the performance of SWSCDs on the VAAP—and informed the support teachers need in the VAAP process. The key elements of the conceptual framework provided direction regarding how SWSCDs may be instructed and assessed effectively and accurately, and how teachers may be supported and guided by administrators throughout the VAAP process.

Review of the Broader Problem

The review of the broader problem, like the conceptual framework, guided the research and informed essential components of the study (i.e., the problem, purpose, research questions, and methodology) by providing a deeper understanding of factors that influence how SWSCDs learn and how teachers may instruct and assess them while receiving support and guidance from administrators in the process. I explored these factors: (a) SWSCDs' varied learning modalities and academic-functional development; (b) difficulties with measuring SWSCDs' achievement and growth; and (c) ensuring the alignment of SWSCDs' curriculum, instruction, and assessment as a part of my search for current, peer-reviewed sources relevant to my study.

During my search for current, peer-reviewed sources relevant to my study, I developed a structured research strategy that involved locating, reading, annotating, and storing peer-reviewed journal articles, published books, state and government publications, and scholarly web publications. An important aspect of my research strategy involved my combining key concepts from my research questions and problem statement to determine search terms, key words and phrases, variations of search terms, and subject headings. Using the Walden University Library as my primary resource for

searching through databases such as Education Resource, SAGE Journal, Educational Resource Information Center, Academic Search Complete, NCES Publications, and Teacher Reference Center, I generated a collection of saved literature resources.

In my search for peer-reviewed sources dated within the last 5 years, I found research conducted specifically on assessments and educational programming for SWSCDs (particularly students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities) to be limited. Whereas there were extensive data available about educational programming for students with disabilities in high incidence populations, there were limited studies available that examined educational programming for SWSCDs with teacher and student engagement for teaching and learning. Additionally, Dukes et al. (2017) found that state websites provided limited information specific to students with severe intellectual disabilities on instructional pedagogy to assist teachers with adapting grade level standards into meaningful instruction for students with severe intellectual disabilities. Nonetheless, as an on-going aspect of my research strategy, I continuously saved literature searches through terms such as *SWSCDs, severe disability, profound disability, alternate assessments, alternate achievement standards, alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards, Virginia Alternate Assessment Program,* and *teachers' perceptions*. As I found research related to my study, I carefully reviewed the reference list provided as well as other works that cited the research, which opened and extended my search strategy to include researching authors such as Kleinert, Browder, Farley, Tindal, and Towles-Reeves, who have written peer-reviewed journal articles on SWSCDs.

Research from those authors helped shape my review of the broader problem as it relates to factors that influence the instruction and assessment of SWSCDs, which led to my exploration of the following issues that should be considered: (a) SWSCDs' varied learning modalities and their fluctuation through different levels of academic and functional development, (b) the difficulty of measuring SWSCDs' achievement and growth, and (c) the alignment between curriculum, instruction and assessment test design (Anderson et al., 2015; Tindal et al., 2016).

Varied Learning Modalities and Academic-Functional Development

The instruction and assessment of SWSCDs should be specialized, flexible, and adaptable to their varied range of abilities and learning styles. SWSCDs have diverse abilities that require (a) intensive, repetitious, systematic, curriculum; (b) significantly individualized materials; and (c) varied ways of receiving information based on their individual needs for acquiring, maintaining, and demonstrating skills (Erickson, 2013). SWSCDs categorized with a severe to profound intellectual disability typically have cognitive, physical, and communication impairments that contribute to their experiencing significant challenges with learning information (Lawson & Jones, 2018). Due to their diverse learning and behavioral characteristics, most SWSCDs are eligible to participate in alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards (Kurth et al., 2015). Most states use criteria for determining whether students are eligible to participate in alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards. Saven et al. (2016) reported that most states use criteria based on (a) the student's identification as a student with a disability that greatly influences cognitive functionality, (b) the student's

individualized education plan team deciding the student will participate in the alternate assessment, and (c) the student's need for considerable changes in rigor in the general education curriculum to ensure access (Musson et al., 2010; Saven et al., 2016; Thurlow et al., 2019).

With SWSCDs participating in alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards, teachers must provide them with curriculum that is aligned with the core state standards–while continuing to address skills that enhance their daily life skills. Educators have been influenced to provide SWSCDs with evidence-based academic instruction aligned with core standards (Courtade et al., 2017), and curriculum for SWSCDs can combine functional and core content by addressing academic skills through meaningful and practical applications intended to enhance the lives of SWSCDs (Collins & Ludlow, 2018). Spooner et al. (2019) researched evidence-based practices such as technology intervention, visual organizers, hands-on materials, and systematic instruction, and identified them as effective practices for teaching math to SWSCDs. Systematic instruction has fundamentals of applied behavior analysis and has been recognized as an essential best practice for students with severe intellectual disabilities learning academics and life skills (Bethune & Kiser, 2017). Although identifying evidence-based practices is essential to selecting and implementing effective instructional practices for SWSCDs, equally important is understanding SWSCDs' diverse abilities. Students with diverse abilities, background knowledge, experiences, language, interests, and family support will progress at different rates, and will require varied support systems to guide them in their development and structure their learning to meet their

needs (Tomlinson, 2014). Universal design for learning is an educational framework SWSCDs can benefit from being exposed to. With the use of universal design for learning, educators can provide an opportunity for SWSCDs to receive differentiated instruction that extends to a wide variety of learners (Lowrey et al., 2017).

Difficulties With Measuring Achievement and Growth

According to Tindal et al. (2016) and Farley et al. (2017), the varied and fluctuating range of abilities associated with teaching and assessing SWSCDs presented challenges with measuring their achievement and growth. Tindal et al. and Farley et al. used growth scale models to examine the achievement and growth of SWSCDs in third through fifth grade who participated in alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards. Both groups of researchers considered the students' communication, sensory, motor and learning profiles—accounting for the type of disability, the severity of the disability, fluctuating ability, and the students' beginning proficiency status. Tindal et al. studied the achievement growth of 1,061 third through eighth grade SWSCDs who participated in Oregon's alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards from 2008 to 2011. The researchers methodically examined growth in terms of changes in levels of proficiency and test score and found little growth in proficiency levels. The use of a transition matrix model to measure the SWSCDs' academic growth yielded the same performance from year to year, showing no academic growth. However, the researchers found that the use of a multilevel linear growth model resulted in the SWSCDs performance scores showing very small but

relevant measurable growth from year to year (Tindal et al., 2016). A second research study provided additional research on the achievement and growth of SWSCDs.

Farley et al. (2017) found the use of alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards to measure the achievement growth of SWSCDs with severe disabilities yielded very slow progress over several years. Farley et al. examined the reading growth data of 1,612 SWSCDs in Grades 3-8 from one Pacific Northwest state over several years. A common scale that accounted for changes in the students' ability was used, and Farley et al. found that students classified as low incidence with an intellectual disability or autism spectrum disorder started with a lower proficiency status and grew at slower rates. Attempts to measure the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards will depend on the creation of common scales that account for changes in ability, mindful and sequential design of academic standards, and whether there are achievement level descriptors that scaffold vertically.

Due to the complexity of assessing SWSCDs (especially SWSCDs who also have sensory disabilities), the use of standardized testing by itself is not enough to discern their capabilities (Bruce et al., 2018). According to Bruce et al. (2018), there are gaps in literature because SWSCDs who also have sensory disabilities are a low-incidence population that consists of a wide variety of learners, making research and the collection of valid forms of data difficult. Although the researchers addressed difficulties with measuring SWSCDs' achievement and alignment of curriculum, instruction and

assessment is another factor that must be considered in the instruction and assessment of SWSCDs.

Alignment of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Consideration must be given to proper alignment of curriculum, instruction and assessment to address the difficulties associated with measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs participating in alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards. Martone and Sireci (2009) conducted a study that showed the significance of the appropriate alignment between assessments, state standards, and instruction—with the strengths and limitations of methodologies designed to evaluate alignment. Martone and Sireci found that the choice of alignment methodology and its implementation were vital to ensuring its effectiveness in delivering a positive impact on instruction and providing an effective assessment. Goldman and Pellegrino (2015) highlighted the need for curricular, instructional, and assessment resources to have (a) aligned and balanced assessment structures for classroom assessments, (b) researched-based features, (c) a system for monitoring students' needs, and (d) more effective approaches for preparing teachers and providing professional development.

Curriculum, instruction and assessments for SWSCDs should be closely aligned to their varied learning modalities, taking into consideration their fluctuation in levels of development and difficulties with measuring their achievement and growth. For SWSCDs with basic awareness in communication and academics (full scale IQ scores of 40 and below), the use of an approach that integrates learning needs and assessment is critical in representing what they know (Kleinert et al., 2009). According to Kopriva et al.

(2016) the person dimension, which involves representing student profiles of strengths, deficits, and other characteristics in the assessment of learning, is just as important for measuring achievement as content. Ayres et al. (2011) proposed that the academic and functional needs of students with severe intellectual disabilities be infused in the development of meaningful curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The researchers suggested that curriculum, instruction, and assessment for SWSCDs should not lose focus of the importance of functional skills that lead to a more independent life (Ayres et al., 2011).

Implications

The findings may yield information for practice regarding how SWSCDs are instructed and assessed and how teachers are supported with the VAAP; therefore, implications for a project deliverable to inform stakeholders may be appropriate. A position paper that informs stakeholders could lead to a deeper understanding of instruction for SWSCDs through (a) teachers' instructional experiences with SWSCDs while administering the VAAP and (b) components of the VAAP teachers perceive to be aligned with classroom instruction and the provision of services according to the students' individualized education plans. Further, a position paper that informs stakeholders could present better awareness and understanding of teachers' needs related to guidance and support in the administration of the VAAP. This qualitative case study could potentially support social change by stimulating dialogue about how the VAAP measures the achievement of SWSCDs with severe to profound disabilities.

Summary

ESSA guidelines required all states to include all students, including SWSCDs, in large-scale testing to measure their achievement and growth (Darrow, 2016). To comply with ESSA guidelines, state officials developed alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards reduced in depth and complexity to assess SWSCDs. SWSCDs with severe to profound disabilities from a school in Virginia were required to participate in large-scale testing, in compliance with ESSA guidelines, to measure their achievement and growth. Even though SWSCDs are assessed using alternate assessments reduced in depth and complexity, the nature of their disability makes measuring their achievement and growth challenging (Tindal et al., 2016).

In this section, I described the local problem of SWSCDs' low performance on the VAAP from 2017 to 2019, and I explained that purpose of this study was to understand (a) teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs, (b) how this assessment reflected the achievement and growth of this population in terms of design and content, and (c) the support teachers needed from administrators. The conceptual framework of this study, a system for understanding the nature of knowing and learning posited by Pellegrino et al. (2001), guided the research and further informed the problem, purpose, and research questions. Through this study's research questions I examined (a) teachers' perspectives of and experiences with administering the VAAP, (b) how the VAAP measures student achievement and growth, and (c) the support teachers need from administrators. Additionally, I presented a review

of connected literature that addressed the problem, and I presented implications for a project deliverable directed by this study's findings.

In Section 2 of this study, I describe the methodology and research design I used, as well as how I collected and analyzed data to address this study's research questions. In Section 3, I describe my project and its development. In Section 4, I present reflections and conclusions that include my projects' strengths and limitations, its implications for promoting social change, and recommendations for future research.

Section 2: The Methodology

The purpose of this study was to understand teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs, to understand how this assessment reflected the achievement and growth of this population in terms of design and content, and to understand the support teachers needed from administrators. Using the four basic perspectives on the nature of what students know and understand and how they construct knowledge proposed by Pellegrino et al. (2001) as a guide, I considered SWSCDs' nature of knowing and learning as it relates to instruction and assessment in connection with the problem of SWSCDs not performing well on the VAAP from 2017 to 2019. It is valuable to understand SWSCDs' nature of knowing and learning, and to understand implications for designing instruction and assessments for SWSCDs because the profile of SWSCDs is characteristic of challenges associated with (a) varied learning modalities and fluctuation through different levels of academic and functional development; (b) difficulties in measuring achievement and growth, and (c) designing aligned curriculum, providing instruction, and administering assessments (Anderson et al., 2015; Thurlow et al., 2017; Tindal et al., 2016). In my consideration of SWSCDs' low performance rates on the VAAP, I found factors connected to the administration of the VAAP to also be connected to difficulties with instructing and assessing SWSCDs, which connects to teachers' need for support in the administration of the VAAP.

In this research study, I explored teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs, how this assessment reflects the achievement and growth of SWSCDs, and the support teachers perceive they need from administrators in

the administration of the VAAP. Using a qualitative case study research design and approach allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of my guiding research questions:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of and experiences with how the VAAP measures SWSCDs' achievement and growth in terms of design and content?
3. What supports from administrators do teachers perceive they need in the administration of the VAAP to SWSCDs?

In this section, I provide an explanation of the research design and approach I used in conducting my research. Thereafter, I continue with a description of the participants, including the criteria I used for the selection of participants, a justification of the sample size, procedures for gaining access, the researcher—participant relationship, and guidelines I used for protecting the participants' rights. This section proceeds with an explanation of the procedures I used for data collection—detailing instrumentation, interview protocol, systems for keeping track of data, access to participants, and my role as the researcher. Then, I explain the data analysis procedures I used by describing how and when data were analyzed, the evidence of quality, and my process for investigating discrepant cases. Next, I present the data analysis results for this study. The data analysis results include (a) a review of the process I used for generating, gathering, and recording data; (b) a presentation of the findings from the problem and research questions; (c) a presentation of patterns, relationships, and themes as findings; (d) a discussion of salient data and discrepant cases; and (e) a review of the evidence of quality with artifacts to

show the procedures used to address accuracy of the data. Finally, I present a summary of this study's outcomes as it relates to this study's problem and research questions.

Qualitative Research Design and Approach

The problem explored in this study was that SWSCDs from a target school in Virginia who were administered the VAAP did not perform well from 2017 to 2019. The SWSCD's low performance on the VAAP resulted in the school not receiving state accreditation (see Virginia Department of Education, 2021b). A qualitative case study research design was used to gain a deeper understanding of teachers' perspectives of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs. Qualitative research was appropriate for this study because the problem explored in this study was aligned with the nature of qualitative research. Qualitative research is a methodology that has a variety of philosophical origins from disciplines such as sociology and anthropology that have been adapted to educational settings (Lodico et al., 2010). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), qualitative researchers use characteristics of qualitative research to understand how people view their experiences, construct their worlds, and attach meaning to their experiences.

Conversely, quantitative research would not have been an appropriate methodology for this study because this study was an exploration of a problem to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon. Additionally, quantitative research would not have been appropriate because I used a small number of participants to obtain rich descriptions to answer this study's research questions. According to Creswell (2018), quantitative research is typically characteristic of providing an explanation (not an

exploration) of a problem, and involves the purpose statement, research questions or the hypothesis seeking measurable data on variables (not a deeper understanding of a naturally occurring phenomena). Additionally, quantitative research involves data collection and analysis methods that include a large number of participants, numeric data, instrument tools used to measure data, the description of trends, relating variables, and the use of statistical analysis (Creswell, 2018).

When selecting the type of qualitative research that would best fit this study, I considered phenomenology, basic qualitative, and case study research. I considered phenomenology for this research because phenomenology research involves an inquiry into the essence or basic structure of a lived experience, and I considered basic qualitative research because it involves an inquiry into the meaning people construct through their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, the nature of this study was bounded by teachers who administer a particular alternate assessment (i.e., VAAP) to a particular group of students (i.e., SWSCDs) within a target school in a Virginia school district. I used interviews to collect data concerning the phenomenon being studied to gain insight on the problem of this study. Therefore, case study emerged as the most suitable type of qualitative research because phenomenology and basic qualitative research are not intrinsically bounded.

Through case study research—a common qualitative approach to research—researchers can gain a deeper understanding of a bounded system by getting close to a particular individual, group, or situation within its real-life context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Considering the bounded nature of this study, I selected qualitative case study

research to investigate teachers' perceptions of administering the VAAP to SWSCDs. Creswell (2018) indicated that case study research can be intrinsic (the case is interesting to the researcher), instrumental (the case is used to highlight a specific issue), or collective (multiple cases are compared to illuminate a particular issue). This qualitative case study was instrumental and used a single case to highlight teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP, while it explored how the VAAP reflects the achievement of SWSCDs and the supports teachers need from administrators in the administration of the VAAP. Therefore, careful consideration was given to the participants I selected for this study.

Participants

This study's subject Virginia school district serves more than 10,000 students and is comprised of more than 20 schools at primary and secondary levels to include: elementary (Grades K–5), middle (Grades 6–8), high (Grades 9–12), and specialty (Grades K–12; Virginia Department of Education, 2021b). The target school and primary setting of this study was a school within a Virginia school district that serves SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities (Virginia Department of Education, 2021b).

Participant Criteria, Sampling Procedures, and Sample Size

The criteria for the selection of participants for this study involved purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling allows inquirers to begin the process of establishing an intensive experience by targeting select individuals or sites to understand the focal phenomenon (Creswell, 2018). Therefore, to explore teachers' perceptions of and

experiences with the administration of the VAAP to SWSCDs, selected participants had to have previous experience administering the VAAP to SWSCDs within the target Virginia school district. My sampling strategy was homogeneous in nature because the participants included five teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and five teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning who were involved in the administration of the VAAP within the target Virginia school district. According to Creswell (2018), using a homogeneous strategy involves purposely sampling members within a subgroup based on predefined characteristics.

The demographics of the 10 teacher participants are shown in Table 2. Five participants were teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning, who had only taught SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities with IQ ranges up to 50. The other five participants were teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning, who have taught SWSCDs with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities with IQ ranges up to 70. Nine of the teachers have more than 10 years of experience teaching SWSCDs, and seven of the teachers have more than 10 years of experience administering the VAAP to SWSCDs. Three teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and three teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning have a master's degree in special education (see Table 2).

Table 2

Demographics of 10 Teacher Participants

Participant numeric pseudonym	Years administering VAAP to SWSCDs	Years teaching SWSCDs	Highest level of education
Teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning			
0110269	10+	10+	M.Ed.
0403792	10+	10+	B.A.
0214735	10+	10+	M.Ed.
1201378	10+	10+	B.A.
0403714	3	10+	M.Ed.
Teachers of SWSCDs with high & low intellectual functioning			
0707142	3	3	M.Ed.
1903425	10+	10+	M.Ed.
0101257	10+	10+	M.Ed.
2010327	2	10+	B.A.
2019386	10+	10+	B.A.

Note. VAAP = Virginia Alternate Assessment Program; SWSCDs = Students with significant cognitive disabilities; M.ED. = master's in special education; B.A. = Bachelor of Art; plus sign (+) = and above.

The sample size in a qualitative case study is determined by varied factors related to the study's purpose (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The purpose of this study was to understand teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs, to understand how this assessment reflected the achievement and growth of this population in terms of design and content, and to understand the support teachers needed from administrators. Using 10 participants in this study allowed me to reach saturation by obtaining in-depth, rich descriptive information pertinent to answering this study's research questions. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), researchers can obtain saturation with a sample size of participants who provide repeated responses to interviews or repeated behaviors in observations that answer the research questions. Just as important as my determination of the sample size was my use of purposeful sampling. In the next section, I describe how I gained access to the district and participants to conduct this study.

Access to Participants

In my efforts to build a good working relationship with the participants, I followed specific procedures for gaining access to the participants under the guidance of the target Virginia school district and Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements. The IRB at Walden University approved my application to conduct my study and sent me a letter of approval with the approval number 04-24-20-0263336. I then submitted the approval information to the director of assessment literacy and research to obtain formal approval to conduct this study within the target Virginia school district. A memo indicating formal approval of my study was sent to principals within the

target Virginia school district through the Office of Assessment Literacy and Research. Using the target school district's public directory of email addresses for teachers and staff, I sent potential participants a letter of invitation via email.

The emailed letter of invitation to potential participants consisted of an explanation of whom I was, and an explanation of my research intentions. The emailed letter of invitation also included an embedded link to the teacher informed consent form and the demographic online questionnaire for teachers, which landed on the online survey platform Survey Monkey to document their consent. Within the teacher informed consent form, I included an explanation of informed consent, the purpose of the study, a synopsis of the procedures, the voluntary nature of the study, risks and benefits, privacy, along with my Walden email address and personal mobile phone number so the potential participants could contact me if they had questions. The demographic online questionnaire served as a part of the consent process, and immediately followed the teacher informed consent form. During their completion of the demographic online questionnaire, teachers were asked to document their consent by clicking "Yes, I consent to participate". Also, in submitting the demographic online questionnaire, teachers agreed to have their responses emailed to me to indicate they read and understood the informed consent and agreed to participate in the study.

In addition to being a part of the consent process, the demographic online questionnaire supported the identification of participants who met the participant criteria and other demographics which were used in analyzing the data obtained through the data collection process. The demographic information included questions about the

participant's highest level of education, years of experience working with students with significant cognitive disabilities (SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning or SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning), years involved in administering the VAAP, and the positions held by the participants. I checked my email notifications daily from Survey Monkey to monitor notifications of participants who documented consent electronically through their informed consent and demographic online questionnaire submission.

After I sent out the initial letter of invitation, I sent a follow-up invitation reminder via email to potential participants who had not responded to the initial invitation letter. As I received an email notification from a participant documenting informed consent, I sent an electronic letter to the participant to schedule a time and date to conduct the individual interview by Zoom videoconference (due to the COVID-19 pandemic). Once the participant returned the form indicating a selected time for the individual interview, I sent an electronic confirmation email regarding the scheduled individual interview by Zoom videoconference. After I gained access to the participants, I established a researcher–participant relationship with them.

Researcher–Participant Relationship

The first phase of building a good working relationship with the participants began with my selection of the participants, following specific procedures for gaining access to the selected participants, and securing informed consent. Establishing rapport and building trust are essential to creating and maintaining a good researcher-participant relationship (Given, 2008). I began to build trust through disclosures within my

documented informed consent form, reassurances of confidentiality, and explanations of the researcher and participant roles. My efforts to establish rapport and build trust naturally transitioned into another phase during the data collection process.

The second phase of building a good working relationship with the participants happened naturally during the data collection process, as I conducted the individual interviews. The nature of qualitative research involves gaining a deeper understanding of a phenomenon through rich and thick descriptions, and these key features of qualitative research tend to promote a closer rather than distant working relationship (Given, 2008). During the individual interviews, I continued to establish rapport and build trust by fostering an environment that was conducive to positive interactions. Researchers can do much to foster positive interactions, so during my individual interviews I was honest, respectful, nonjudgmental, and nonthreatening (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Additionally, to foster positive interactions I explained at the outset of the individual interviews reminders from the informed consent form which included the purpose of this study, why they were selected to participate in the study, what I hoped to accomplish by conducting the research study, and how I would maintain the confidentiality of all participants. All researcher–participant relationships were new or emergent working relationships and not preexisting relationships, in consideration of ethics to ensure the participants' free-choice of participation and open expressions of perspectives and experiences.

Protection of Participants

Protecting the participants' rights was an important aspect of ensuring that ethical procedures were implemented. To further establish and maintain a good working relationship with the participants and as a part of the procedures for the protection of participants I (a) adhered to ethical guidelines by obtaining informed consent that provided an explanation of the study, any associated risks, and information about their right to refuse participation or withdraw their participation; (b) adhered to ethical guidelines by protecting the confidentiality of the participants by randomly assigning them a numeric pseudonym and not including any other information that could disclose their identity; and (c) adhered to ethical guidelines by implementing research practices that included protecting the participants from harm by arranging individual interviews through Zoom videoconferences due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Whereas the selection of participants was a valuable aspect of this study, the collection of data was just as valuable.

Data Collection

Whereas I used qualitative case study research, in my role as the researcher I served as the key data collection instrument to address the problem of SWSCDs' low performance on the VAAP as I explored teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs, how this assessment reflected the achievement and growth of this population in terms of design and content, and support teachers needed from administrators to administer the VAAP.

In this study, I used data collection procedures that involved using and maintaining (a) sources of data from two sets of teachers, (b) a case study database, and (c) a format for keeping track of evidence. The sources of data I collected included responses from individual interviews with teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning through the Zoom videoconference platform. I used the individual interviews to collect data for answering three research questions related to teachers' perceptions of administering the VAAP to SWSCDs. As a part of my process for collecting data in this study, I used a protocol for individual interviews that I developed (and validated using an expert panel) as a tool for guiding the collection of data based on recommendations (see Babbie, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Protocol for Individual Interviews

To address and decrease any biases and ensure validity and reliability related to the development, design and implementation of protocol aligned with answering the research questions of this study, I used an expert panel to review the protocol for individual interviews (which included the interview questions). Babbie (2017) noted that qualitative researchers should gain input from colleagues and other experts to discern agreement of terms used and questions asked to promote face and content validity. I used the expert panel to review the protocol I designed for my individual interviews with teachers. Then, I used the interview protocol for teachers to conduct individual interviews for two sets of teachers. I conducted semi structured individual interviews with teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and teachers of SWSCDs with high and

low intellectual functioning, using a videoconference platform through Zoom. During the individual interviews with teachers, I used systematic procedures and measures to ensure consistency between interviews for both sets of teachers. I arranged one 60-minute individual interview by Zoom videoconference at a mutually convenient date and time.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), deciding to use interviews in the collection of data is appropriate when the information sought from the interviews is needed, and the best way to get the information is through interviewing. Obtaining responses from individual interviews through the Zoom videoconference platform as a means for collecting data was appropriate for this qualitative case study because I gained deep descriptive information regarding teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs essential to answering this study's research questions. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), collecting multiple sources of data, through interviewing different groups of people, is a valuable strategy for increasing the credibility of a research study. Conducting interviews with teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning gave me an opportunity to collect multiple sources of data–to explore, cross-check and compare the teachers' perspectives. I collected a total of 10 participants' interviews. In the next section I describe my interviews with teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning. In the subsequent section that follows, I describe my interviews with teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning.

Interviews: Teachers of SWSCDs With Low Intellectual Functioning

I interviewed five teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning. These five teachers only had experience with teaching SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. All five teachers had more than 10 years of experience teaching SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities, and four of the five teachers had over 10 years of experience administering the VAAP. The interview protocol for teachers included interview questions related to this study's research questions about administering the VAAP to SWSCDs, how the VAAP reflects the achievement and growth of SWSCDs in terms of design and content, and the support teachers need from administrators in the administration of the VAAP.

Prior to beginning each individual interview, I introduced myself and reviewed reminders from the informed consent form, which included the purpose of this study, why the participant was selected for the study, what I hoped to accomplish by conducting the research study, and how I would maintain the confidentiality of all participants. I made sure the participants did not have any questions about the consent form, and the interview process. I also reminded each participant that participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw from the study at any time with no repercussions.

Prior to (and on the day of) the individual interview, I confirmed permission to audio record the interview based on the notice of informed consent. All participants agreed to have their interview audio recorded. I reviewed confidentiality and explained how they would be randomly assigned a numeric pseudonym. I explained the password protected security measures, and how I would keep the data secure. I interviewed

teachers using my interview protocol for teachers I designed with targeted questions specific to answering this study's research questions. I explained that electronic data would be kept secure by storing it in password-protected files on my home computer and that all data would be stored securely for five years, as per Walden University protocol. During the interview process I also took written notes. At the end of the interviews, I reminded the participants of the member checking process that would involve them reviewing a draft summary of this study's findings and providing feedback.

Once I completed the interview process with teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning, I summarized key data from my written notes on the same day as the individual interview. To separate my personal thoughts from the process, I practiced reflexivity and wrote my personal thoughts in a separate journal. Additionally, immediately following the individual interview I uploaded, stored, and organized the audio recordings of the interviews in a software database with password protected files on my personal computer. Within 5 days I transcribed the recordings, provided codes, and summarized for developing patterns in rudimentary data analysis. The same procedures were used to conduct interviews for teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning.

Interviews: Teachers of SWSCDs With High and Low Intellectual Functioning

I interviewed five teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning. These five teachers had experience with teaching SWSCDs with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities and SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Although all five teachers had experience with administering the VAAP,

three of the five teachers had over 10 years of experience administering the VAAP to SWSCDs. As with the interviews conducted with teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning, teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning were interviewed using my interview protocol for teachers with interview questions related to this study's research questions.

All of the pre-interview, during interview, and post-interview procedures I followed for interviewing teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning were used when I interviewed teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning. The process of how and when I generated, gathered, and recorded data is outlined in the next section.

Generating, Gathering, Recording Data: How and When

I generated, gathered and recorded data using a systematic protocol for the individual interviews. Within the process of using and maintaining sources of data from individual interviews, I used and maintained a database within a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) called MAXQDA. MAXQDA assisted me with maintaining a systematic format for keeping track of evidence. Through my study's database in MAXQDA, I uploaded, stored, and organized notes, audio recordings, and transcriptions from my individual interviews. Throughout the process, I also practiced reflexivity by writing personal notes within a separate journal about my thoughts and feelings.

After my individual interviews, I completed the following post-interview steps:

- immediately uploaded, stored and organized the audio recordings of the interviews in the MAXQDA software database on a password protected secure personal computer;
- kept data secure by storing it electronically on a password protected personal computer, and ensured no one else had access to the stored data;
- on the same day as the interview, summarized key information from notes I wrote during the interview; and
- within 5 days transcribed the recordings and used the transcribed interview data to provide codes and to summarize data for developing patterns (for preliminary data analysis).

Systems for Keeping Track of Data

The format I used to maintain and to keep track of evidence involved me using systematic procedures for collecting data that included storing and organizing the audio recordings of individual interviews in MAXQDA, transcribing the recordings, providing descriptive categories for coding with the data sources, and summarizing for developing patterns and data analysis. These data were stored electronically on a password protected secure computer. Using systematic procedures was an important aspect of collecting data because it allowed me to methodically organize and backtrack through rich descriptions of data at various stages of my study. Systematically collecting data allows the researcher to be scientific and as unbiased as possible (Lodico et al., 2010). Having systematic procedures in place was especially useful for the process of gaining access to participants.

Role of the Researcher

Although using systematic procedures in collecting data and gaining access to participants were important aspects of the overall data collection process, just as important to the data collection process was the role of the researcher or investigator. As the researcher in this qualitative case study, I explored teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs. For 12 years I have served as an assistant principal. As an assistant principal one of my responsibilities has been to monitor teachers' administration of the VAAP to SWSCDs. Therefore, I have seen some of the challenges teachers have experienced in administering the VAAP to students within the low incidence population. My research was not conducted in the school where I serve as the assistant principal, and I acknowledged that information in the letter of invitation along with my role as an assistant principal.

In my role as the researcher in this study, I served as the primary instrument in the collection and analysis of data. To address and minimize bias, I acknowledged my administrative position and experiences with monitoring the VAAP process, clearly defined my role as the researcher, practiced reflexivity through journal writing, and used a systematic process for collecting data. According to Geddis-Regan et al. (2021), researchers can ensure transparency and build trust by openly disclosing their professional role and their role as the researcher. The knowledge and experience from my professional role appeared to resonate with the participants and helped with their comfortability and trust in sharing their perspectives (see Durdella, 2019). The participants appeared comfortable with sharing their perspectives with me in my role as a

researcher who is an administrator outside of their school environment, because they appeared eager to have their voices heard. Although the systematic collection of data was an important aspect of my qualitative research, simultaneously beginning the data analysis process was equally important.

Data Analysis Methods

As I collected data through individual interviews, I simultaneously began to analyze the data. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), in qualitative research it is important for researchers to begin analyzing data during the data collection process to avoid reviewing and managing data that is unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming at the conclusion of the data collection process. As I generated, gathered and recorded data, I used rudimentary analysis procedures within the process. I reviewed the data, coded, took notes, and identified themes so that I had basic descriptive categories and summaries assigned to notations for my individual interviews. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described rudimentary data analysis as basic data analysis that occurs in between data collection activities that involves organizing your field notes to create an inventory of your data set according to schemes relevant to your study and its' theoretical framework. Bogdan and Biklen (2016) suggested reviewing field notes and looking for developing patterns during data collection in between interviews and later using the information to complete intense data analysis. Another imbedded rudimentary data analysis procedure that I simultaneously used within the data collection process was my systematic organization and management of data.

Immediately following my individual interviews, I uploaded, stored, and organized my written notes and audio recordings of the interviews in the MAXQDA software database. I practiced reflexivity by expressing my personal feelings within a separate journal. Within 5 days of the individual interviews, I transcribed the audio recordings using MAXQDA, provided basic codes, summarized notes considering the schema relevant to this study, and began to look for developing patterns as a part of my rudimentary data analysis. I also inventoried data using basic developing patterns and stored the data electronically using MAXQDA which had features specially designed for qualitative research.

After I completed the final stages of data collection, I began intensive data analysis by continuing to use MAXQDA to assist me with managing data and by completing the following procedures: (a) reviewed and made adjustments to the organization of data, (b) coded data into richer descriptive categories and summaries, (c) identified and built themes while conducting cross-checks of the multiple sources of data, and (d) interpreted and reported the data using summarized notes from each interview to convey an understanding of the case I researched (see Lodico et al., 2010; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As I reviewed and adjusted the organization of the data, I consolidated emerging themes from what participants said and what I had in my notes in MAXQDA. Additionally, I reduced data by eliminating segments of data that were not central to my study's purpose and research questions. Throughout the process I also arranged the data so that it was secure, yet easy to retrieve from the MAXQDA software database. Whereas

reviewing and adjusting the organization of data was a very important part of the data analysis process, coding data was just as important.

Coding data into richer descriptive categories and summaries was the next procedure in my data analysis process. To code data into richer descriptive categories I had to: (a) reconstruct the categories by reassigning richer relevant analytical codes to the basic open codes completed during the data collection process but keeping each unit of data with its original identifying codes for participants and excerpts, (b) reconstruct the categories by repeatedly reviewing and comparing notes from digital recordings and transcripts from individual interviews, and (c) reconstruct the categories by creating new categories and subcategories that are responsive to this research questions, exhaustive, and mutually exclusive to the purpose of this study (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My coding of data was connected to my identifying and building themes using data sets.

As I coded data into richer descriptive categories and summaries, I identified and built themes. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), identifying and building themes involves capturing recurring patterns that appear across the data. During the process of identifying and building themes I transitioned from a basic mode of discovery to a mode of discovery and verifying, and then moved on to the mode of confirming patterns. Occurring simultaneously was my inductive approach to analyzing patterns in the data, through my development of an explanation for the patterns. In triangulating multiple sources of data, I cross-checked two different sets of data (teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning). Triangulation occurs when the researcher uses multiple sources of data to

compare or cross-check data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As I cross-checked the data, I explored discontinuity, divergences, and convergences. Additionally, within my cross-check of data I did ongoing checks and rechecks of the data as I examined it for new ideas, constructs, and themes. To ensure data saturation I used the comparative method for themes saturation as I compared all the themes first, and then I reordered them in MAXQDA multiple times during the check for new information until the same ideas reemerged. The comparative method for themes saturation is a method for reaching saturation in research that uses interviews (Constantinou et al., 2017). Then, I interpreted and reported the data.

Although interpreting and reporting data was technically the last procedure in my data analysis process, basic aspects of interpreting and reporting data occurred throughout the data collection and data analysis process. Much like there are various levels of data analysis that researchers can complete simultaneously, there are various levels of interpreting and reporting data that researchers can complete simultaneously (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As the researcher examines patterns in the data, the researcher is also making inferences and connecting the data together in a meaningful way (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In my inductive approach to data analysis, I used participants' perceptions and experiences to build themes and generate an explanation of the patterns that interconnected these data to address research questions with accuracy and credibility.

The evidence of quality and strategies I used to assure accuracy and credibility of the study's findings included the triangulation of multiple sources of data, ongoing data checks and rechecks, use of an expert panel, reflexivity, member checking, and adequate

engagement (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mills et al., 2010). Researchers have identified using triangulation of multiple sources of data, using a reflexive approach, using member checking, using sufficient time to build trust with research participants, and using ongoing data checks as strategies to enhance credibility of data collection, analysis and reporting (Mills et al., 2010). Along with enhancing credibility, triangulating multiple sources of data within my study also gave me the opportunity to explore possible discrepant cases from different sources of data (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Discontinuity, divergences, and convergences that are important to the researched case, can emerge as a result of triangulation of multiple sources of data (Mills et al., 2010). As I continually checked and rechecked the interview data, I looked for discontinuity and divergences to account for discrepant cases. Instead of finding discrepant cases, I found convergences as teachers advocated for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities and themselves through their perceptions of and experiences with the administration of the VAAP.

Data Analysis Results

The themes that emerged from this study led to findings and results that informed this study's problem of SWSCDs' low VAAP performance. The interview data addressed this study's research questions: to understand teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs, to understand teachers' perceptions of and experiences with how the VAAP measures SWSCDs' achievement and growth in terms of design and content, and to understand the support from administrators that teachers perceive they need in the administration of the VAAP to SWSCDs. The results provided

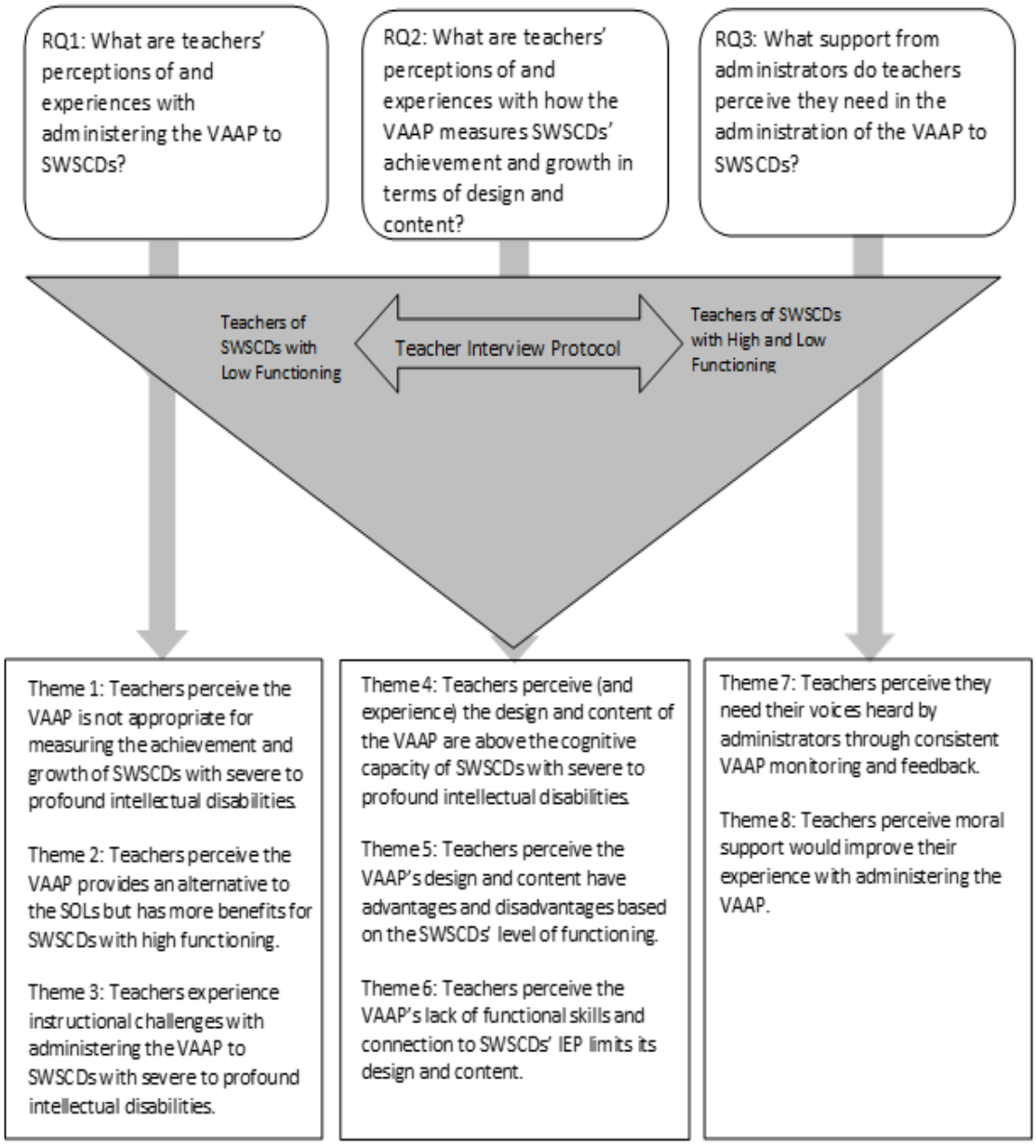
insight regarding (a) teachers' beliefs and attitudes about students with SWSCDs participating in the VAAP, (b) teachers' perceptions of and experiences with benefits and challenges of administering the VAAP, (c) factors that contribute to some SWSCDs not being able to demonstrate achievement and growth on the VAAP, (d) the advantages and disadvantages of the VAAP's design and content, (e) the aspects of the VAAP's design and content that can be altered to measure SWSCDs' achievement and growth, and (f) teachers' perceptions of the guidance and assistance they need from administrators. After continuously reviewing and intensively analyzing the interview data, eight themes emerged as shown in Figure 1.

During my intensive data analysis Themes 1, 2, and 3 emerged for RQ1, related to teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs as shown in Figure 1. Themes 4, 5 and 6 emerged for RQ2, related to teachers' perceptions of and experiences with how the VAAP measures SWSCDs' achievement in terms of design and content. Themes 7 and 8 emerged for RQ3, related to the support from administrators teachers perceive they need in the administration of the VAAP to SWSCDs (see Figure 1).

The results of this study address three research questions (shown in Figure 1) through thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is characterized as one credible method researchers use in their research to identify, analyze, organize, describe, and report themes that emerge within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). The results are presented by themes, with the associated research question.

Figure 1

Study Results Presented by Research Question (RQ) With Connected Emergent Themes



Note. VAAP = Virginia Alternate Assessment Program; SWSCD = Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

RQ1 Results by Theme

Interview data that informed RQ1included: teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs, were obtained through my interviews with five teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and five teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning. Both sets of teachers advocated for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities through the interview data they provided on their perceptions of and experiences with: (a) SWSCDs participating in the VAAP, (b) the benefits of administering the VAAP, and (c) the challenges of administering the VAAP. Themes 1, 2 and 3 emerged from patterns in the interview data, which informed RQ1.

Theme 1: Teachers Perceive the VAAP Is Not Appropriate for Measuring the Achievement and Growth of SWSCDs With Severe to Profound Intellectual Disabilities

Teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning, during individual interviews, advocated on behalf of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities as they shared their perceptions of SWSCDs participating in the VAAP. Theme 1 emerged from interconnected focal points in the interview data and showed that both sets of teachers shared the perception that the VAAP is not appropriate for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The primary focal point shared from both sets of teachers was the inappropriateness of the VAAP for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The cognitive severity of the students' disability and functional skills from IEP goals were interconnected focal points

shared by both sets of teachers related to their perception that the VAAP is not appropriate for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities.

Teachers of SWSCDs With Low Intellectual Functioning. Interviews with teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning revealed patterns related to the VAAP not being appropriate for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Although the inappropriateness of the VAAP was the primary focal point teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning discussed during the interviews, they also believed the influence of the cognitive severity of the students' disability and the need for functional skills from the IEP goals were relevant factors linked to the inappropriateness of the VAAP.

During interviews with the teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning, when asked about their perceptions of SWSCDs participating in the VAAP, the inappropriateness of the VAAP for students with severe to profound intellectual (or cognitive) disabilities was a major discussion topic. The teachers' comments about the VAAP's inappropriateness centered on the VAAP's ASOLs being above the cognitive capacity of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning who have severe to profound intellectual disabilities. According to the teachers, because the VAAP uses ASOLs above the students' cognitive capacity, it is too difficult for the students to demonstrate what they know and what they are capable of learning–which hinders the VAAP's accuracy in measuring the students' achievement and growth. The teachers advocated for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities as they explained that the influence of the

cognitive severity of the SWSCD's disability and the need for functional skills from the IEP goals were relevant factors linked to the VAAP's inappropriateness for measuring the achievement and growth of students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Participant 0110269 stated, "I feel that students with severe significant cognitive disabilities should have the option of not participating in the VAAP." Other teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning expressed similar perspectives related to the inappropriateness of the VAAP, as they advocated for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Participant 0214735 also voiced beliefs about the inappropriateness of the VAAP:

> Participation on the part of students with significant cognitive disabilities in the VAAP, concurrent with regular SOL testing, is appropriate in theory. However, the current assessment design is inappropriate in both content and application.

The teachers believed consideration should be given to the differing abilities and complexities connected to the learning needs of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Participant 0403714 explained beliefs regarding the inappropriateness of the VAAP for accurately measuring the achievement of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities:

> On a whole, I believe the VAAP is not designed in the best interest of students with the most severe significant cognitive disabilities and is not appropriate for accurately measuring their achievement. The VAAP measures their achievement using aligned standards that are too difficult for them to understand because the standards are above their cognitive capacity.

The teachers believed that there were significant differences between the learning profile of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and the learning profile of SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning. Participant 1201378 expressed ideas about the inappropriateness of the VAAP related to it being more appropriate for SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning:

> I think using the VAAP to measure the achievement and growth of lower functioning students with the most significant cognitive disabilities' is absolutely inappropriate. It appears to be more appropriate for the group of higher functioning students with significant cognitive disabilities within the low incidence population.

During the interviews, the statements of teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning about the inappropriateness of the VAAP were connected to their statements about the cognitive severity of the students' disability. The teachers' perceptions provided insight regarding their thoughts on the influence the cognitive severity of the students' disability has on the students' overall VAAP performance. Participant 0110269 from the set of teachers who have only taught SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning stated, "The more severe the student's disability, the more difficult it is for them to show achievement on the VAAP because the ASOLs are too difficult for them to learn." Participant 0403714 explained perceptions related to the appropriateness of the VAAP as it pertained to the SWSCDs' range of cognition based on intellectual functioning within the mild to moderate range and the severe to profound range:

> Students with significant cognitive disabilities have IQs that are 70 and below with cognitive ranges from mild to profound. The VAAP is really only appropriate for students with significant cognitive disabilities with mild to moderate cognitive limitations. Students with severe to profound significant cognitive disabilities do not have the cognitive capacity to learn the aligned standards on the VAAP.

The teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning referenced the cognitive severity of the students' disability as having an adverse influence on how SWSCDs perform on the VAAP, because the teachers perceive the content is above the students' cognitive capacity. Participant 1201378 posited, "The VAAP uses aligned standards based on general education standards that are usually well above the cognitive level of lower functioning students with significant cognitive disabilities." Participant 1201378 described experiences with working with SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning who have severe to profound intellectual disabilities and advocated that the students' participation in the VAAP was unfair:

> For most low intellectual functioning students with significant cognitive disabilities (students with IQs in the 40s who may have multiple disabilities), it is extremely challenging for them to complete the aligned standards based on grade level standards of learning–it's almost impossible. Many of them don't have the prerequisite skills to learn the aligned standards. In fact, many of them are working at a level that requires more focus on functional skills like toileting, dressing and eating–which are accompanied by basic academics. It is just not

> appropriate or fair that they are assessed at a level that is far beyond their cognitive capacity.

Participant 0403792 also advocated for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities, through shared experiences of with working with the students:

> Well, I teach students within a low incidence population who have some of the most significant cognitive disabilities. Their academic profiles are characterized by varying severe levels of cognitive, communication, and social deficits that influence their learning outcomes. So, although the VAAP uses ASOLs that have been reduced in complexity, it often does not align with their varying abilities in a way that measures what they are capable of learning.

Because the state requires SWSCDs to participate in high-stakes testing, teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning emphasized SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities should have an opportunity to demonstrate their abilities through functional skills taken from their IEP goals. Participant 0403792 pointed out that the VAAP is not appropriate because the focus of the design is "solely academic with no reference to functional skills relevant for their [SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities] transition into real world experiences." Participant 0403714 stated, "Functional critical life skills like communication, self-care, and independent living should be the primary focus of their [SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities] instruction and assessment and I think most of their parents would agree." Participant 0110269 expressed concerns about the missed instructional time for critical life skills:

> I feel that their participation in this assessment affects the critical life skills instruction that they need. The time that it takes to teach the standards to this population, with repeated review and instruction, takes away from teaching life skills that are crucial for their development.

Responses from teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning related to functional skills also pertained to SWSCDs' IEP goals. Participant 1201378 advocated for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities to be assessed using functional skills connected to their IEP goals:

> I understand the need for them [SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities] to be assessed to determine their achievement and growth, but it should at least be based on their IEP goals and some of the functional skills they are learning–which are very important to their daily life in and outside of school. If the tasks provided in the VAAP matched varying levels of cognition, it would be more appropriate for higher and lower functioning students with significant cognitive disabilities.

A similar remark was made by Participant 0214735 who explained, "The concept of aligned standards of learning is reasonable as an option for the assessment of students with mild to moderate disabilities but does not reflect the valuable, functional goals generally developed for students with severe to profound disabilities." The patterns in the data that emerged from interviews with teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning were also present from the interviews with teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning.

Teachers of SWSCDs With High and Low Intellectual Functioning. The teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning also provided responses that advocated for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities, expressed through their perceptions about SWSCDs participating in the VAAP. The teachers' perceptions contributed to Theme 1: teachers perceive the VAAP is not appropriate for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The inappropriateness of the VAAP was the most prevalent focal point discussed in the interviews with teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning. The cognitive severity of the students' disability and functional skills from IEP goals were interconnected focal points linked to the teachers' perception that the VAAP is not appropriate for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities.

Participant 2019386 pointed out the limited opportunities, provided by the VAAP's design and content, for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities to be able to show their abilities:

> The use of the VAAP to assess children with severe disabilities is not appropriate. There are limited opportunities or selections of tasks, using the given aligned standards on the VAAP, to show the varied abilities of students with their achievement and growth based on their abilities.

The teachers believed that the learning characteristics of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities did not match the assessment expectations of the ASOLs within the VAAP. Participant 1903425 expressed concern about the appropriateness of

the VAAP in a shared experience on administering the VAAP to SWSCDs who had severe to profound intellectual disabilities:

> Some of these students have severe challenges with writing their names, reciting the alphabet, and counting from one to 10. I am hopeful, but I question whether the expectation for demonstration of reading and mathematics concepts at grade level using aligned standards reduced in complexity is appropriate–especially within the time frame given.

When teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning were interviewed and asked about SWSCDs participating in the VAAP, the cognitive severity of the students' disability surfaced as a focal point connected to the inappropriateness of the VAAP. Participant 2010327 advocated for SWSCDs and explained that the VAAP does not provide an accurate measure of the abilities of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities because it does not consider the cognitive severity of the students' disability:

> The type of disability a student is categorized with has a tremendous influence over their participation in the VAAP. The participation of students with more severe disabilities in the VAAP provides an inaccurate account of their abilities because the content of the VAAP is above their cognitive level. Students with IQs below 40 typically have multiple and simultaneous disabilities that are characteristic of cognitive and physical limitations the VAAP does not appropriately consider with the inclusion of ASOLs.

Participant 0101257 described experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning:

> I have had students in the past who were able to complete a VAAP assessment after the material was presented to them at their level of understanding. They were higher functioning low incidence students who could read and could indicate an answer either verbally, in writing or by pointing to it. One of my students this year was better able to produce evidence for his book [VAAP portfolio] because he functioned at a higher level than the others. The more severe the students' disabilities the more difficult it is to complete a VAAP book.

Participant 1903425 expressed concern that SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities have characteristics that influence the amount of time it takes them to learn skills. As teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning discussed the severity of the students' disability, they also discussed the importance of using functional skills from the students' IEP goals. Participant 1903425 shared that there is a need for balance between academic and functional skills in the ASOLs used in the VAAP:

> While I understand and respect the thought behind the aligned standards being connected to the regular state standards of learning, I do believe that the aligned standards should reflect both academic and functional expectations especially for students with emergent or below emergent skills in literacy and numeracy.

The interview data from both sets of teachers showed convergences and voiced the teachers' belief that the VAAP is not appropriate for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities because it includes ASOLs above the students' cognitive

capacity–which framed Theme 1: teachers perceive the VAAP is not appropriate for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities and informed RQ1.

Theme 2: Teachers Perceive the VAAP Provides an Alternative to the SOLs but Has More Benefits for SWSCDs With High Intellectual Functioning

Theme 2 emerged from patterns in the data through interconnected focal points that surfaced on the benefits of the VAAP. The fact that the VAAP provides SWSCDs with an alternative to participating in the regular SOL assessment was regarded as a benefit by both sets of teachers when they were asked about the benefits of administering the VAAP during interviews. Additionally, both sets of teachers provided data that showed they perceive the VAAP is more beneficial for SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning–which connected to the teachers' perceptions about the inappropriateness of the VAAP for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Interview data from both sets of teachers about their perceptions of the benefits of administering the VAAP addressed RQ1: teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs.

Teachers of SWSCDs With Low Intellectual Functioning. Although the VAAP providing SWSCDs with an alternative to participating in the regular SOL assessment was viewed as a benefit, teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning also viewed the VAAP as more beneficial for SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning. Although the teachers indicated they do not believe the VAAP is appropriate for SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning, the teachers believed the VAAP is a more

viable option than the regular SOLs–especially for SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning. Participant 1201378 indicated, “A benefit to the VAAP is students are not required to participate in the regular standards of learning assessment and are eligible to participate in a different way of being assessed.” Participant 0403792 explained the benefit of being able to administer the VAAP to SWSCDs:

> The major benefit is students with significant cognitive disabilities can participate in an assessment that allows them to be assessed using a different format than the regular standards of learning, and they can be assessed over the course of the academic school year instead of in a cumulative manner all at once at the end of the school year.

The teachers recognized the positive aspects of the VAAP in comparison to the regular SOLs. Participant 1201378 described the various instructional options available for administering the VAAP and the various options for using technology to collect work samples:

> The VAAP allows a variety of activities and formats for collecting work samples for the assessment over time during the school year. The student may do better with paper pencil tasks or actually matching physical items or being observed. The teacher can use various forms of technology like videos, audio recordings, and pictures to collect work samples for the VAAP notebook. The VAAP leaves those instructional decisions to the teacher.

Although teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning recognized the VAAP as a more viable assessment option than the regular SOLs, they also pointed out that it is

more beneficial for SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning who have mild to moderate significant disabilities.

When teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning were asked about the benefits of administering the VAAP, the VAAP being more beneficial for SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning surfaced. The teachers referred to students within the mild to moderate disability range of functioning as SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning, who have basic functioning above students within the severe to profound intellectual range of functioning. Participant 0403714 expressed her perceptions of the VAAP being more beneficial for SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning:

> Well, the benefits of administering the VAAP are really for students who have mild to moderate significant cognitive disabilities. Again, for students with mild to moderate disabilities there are benefits to receiving instruction on aligned standards because the teacher can teach using various styles of learning and collect work samples using different platforms of technology like digital recordings, videos, and pictures to include in the VAAP notebook. It doesn't serve as a benefit for students who have more severe disabilities.

Participant 0110269 explained an experience with teaching SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities and the students' cognitive level of understanding:

> I have not seen any benefits for students with severe disabilities. Some of these students have cognitive and functional ranges equivalent to children who are two to three years old even though their chronological age is eight years old. They are learning functional skills and pre-emergent academics. So, teaching them grade

level ASOLs that come from grade level SOLs is not beneficial, relevant, or appropriate for them.

The discussion points that surfaced from interviews with teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning, related to Theme 2 and the benefits of administering the VAAP, informed RQ1: teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs. Teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning shared very similar perceptions.

Teachers of SWSCDs With High and Low Intellectual Functioning. During the interviews with teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning, the teachers shared their thoughts about the benefits of administering the VAAP. As with teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning, the teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning acknowledged that the VAAP provides students with an alternative to participating in the regular SOL assessment–and advocated on behalf of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities as they emphasized the VAAP is more beneficial for SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning. Clear distinctions were made between SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and high intellectual functioning by the teachers during the interviews. The teachers described SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning as students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities and described SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning as students with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities.

The teachers identified the VAAP as an alternative to the SOLs and indicated it as a welcomed benefit. Participant 0707142 described some thoughts and experiences on the benefit the VAAP provides as an alternative to regular state-wide testing:

> I feel that the VAAP provides an adapted, alternate means of state-wide testing for students with cognitive disabilities. After specialized, intensive instruction, students are able to make progress towards understanding and sometimes mastery of the ASOL.

Participant 2010327 explained her perceptions of the VAAP as an alternative to participating in the SOLs:

> One aspect of the VAAP that is beneficial is the fact that it is not a cumulative assessment given in one sitting like the state assessment. It is a collection of student work samples on aligned standards that have been decreased in difficulty and placed in a notebook throughout the school year.

Participant 2019386, stated, "The VAAP has the potential to be a great alternative to the state assessment based on regular standards of learning, it just does not fit all levels of cognition for students with significant cognitive disabilities." The teachers' beliefs were intertwined with their perception that the VAAP is more beneficial for SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning.

When explaining the benefits of administering the VAAP, teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning immediately added that the VAAP is more beneficial for SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning. Additionally, teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning shared similar perspectives related to

the VAAP having a diminished benefit for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Participant 2019386 described her experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning:

> For higher functioning students with significant cognitive disabilities–typically students with IQs between 60 and 70–it [VAAP] appears to be more appropriate because the VAAP serves as an alternate assessment that provides options for tasks from aligned standards that are closer to their cognitive capacity.

Participant 0707142 shared that a benefit of administering the VAAP to SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning has been "seeing significant ASOL progress firsthand." Participant 1903425 explained:

> There've been instructional benefits for students with significant cognitive disabilities who are functioning at a cognitive level beyond emergent skills. Those students have benefited from the inclusion of aligned standards because it generated higher learning expectations within their ability level. They have an opportunity to demonstrate what they are learning through aligned standards of learning that are reduced in complexity.

Participant 0101257 expressed concerns about time spent teaching ASOL related content to SWSCDs in the process of administering the VAAP. Participant 2010327 described the benefits for SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning related to their exposure to higher expectations and their opportunity to demonstrate what they are learning in the classroom:

> The benefits of the VAAP are mostly for students with higher cognitive levels. For those students the VAAP, with the addition of ASOLs, imposed higher academic expectations that those students were cognitively able to reach. At least with the VAAP they have a greater chance of demonstrating their abilities, and some students with higher cognitive levels are able to learn the ASOLs. The same is not true for students with more severe disabilities, because their cognitive abilities require the consideration of functional skills.

Interview data from both sets of teachers related to Theme 2 provided insight on teachers' perceptions of the benefits of administering the VAAP to SWSCDs, and informed RQ1. The interview data from both sets of teachers were interconnected to the teachers' advocacy and belief that the VAAP includes ASOLs above the cognitive capacity of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities–which connected to the teachers' perception that the VAAP is not appropriate for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities.

Theme 3: Teachers Experience Instructional Challenges With Administering the VAAP to SWSCDs With Severe to Profound Intellectual Disabilities

Teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning were asked about the challenges of administering the VAAP to SWSCDs, and Theme 3 emerged from patterns in the interview data. Theme 3 emerged from patterns in the interview data and showed that both sets of teachers indicated experiencing instructional challenges with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Data showed the

most prevalent focal point discussed during the interviews with both sets of teachers was the challenge with instruction while administering the VAAP to SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The cognitive severity of the disability and time management were interconnected focal points shared by both sets of teachers related to the challenge with instruction. Both sets of teachers' interview data connected to Theme 3 were underpinned by the teachers advocating for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The teachers advocated through their responses related to the VAAP including ASOLs above the students' cognitive capacity–which was interconnected to the teachers' perception of the VAAP not being appropriate for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The interview data from both sets of teachers, regarding the challenges the teachers experienced while administering the VAAP, were used to inform RQ1: teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs.

Teachers of SWSCDs With Low Intellectual Functioning. When the teachers discussed the challenges of administering the VAAP, the challenge with instruction was emphasized. Although the teachers emphasized instruction as their most prevalent challenge, the cognitive severity of the students' disability and time management were intertwined with the teachers' challenge with instruction. The challenge with instruction was recognized as a very difficult challenge to manage with SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Participant 1201378 described an experience with the pressure of trying to manage instructional challenges that arose while administering the VAAP to SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities:

> So, it's a lot of pressure on teachers to try to modify and deliver instruction in a way that makes instructional connections between the students' cognitive level of understanding and the tasks from the aligned standards on the VAAP. The cognitive limitations associated with their learning profile as students with the most severe cognitive disabilities makes learning even the most basic academics on the VAAP difficult. It might take a couple of weeks to get one student work sample because a lot of work goes into the extensive process of creating the right modification for the aligned standard, finding the best delivery format based on the student's needs, delivering the instruction in a way that connects the student to the learning, and re-teaching the lesson until the student is able to reach some degree of understanding.

Participant 0403792 noted difficulties with providing instruction for and collecting work samples with students with varying levels of severe to profound intellectual and physical disabilities:

> Depending on the type and severity of their disability, developing work samples they can understand and complete can be time consuming and challenging. Another challenge comes from attempting to manage the students varying severe disabilities to assist them with completing the work samples.

Participant 0110269 expressed during the interview, "It is extremely challenging to teach students with severe disabilities instruction that is too hard for them to learn." Participant 0214735, described challenges with providing instruction for a SWSCD with severe to profound intellectual disabilities who had difficulty retaining information:

> One student with a qualifying category of multiple disabilities indicated an ability to memorize a given 'picture' word such as cat when paired with a picture and for up to approximately one minute without the picture prompt. After about a minute the student no longer recognized the word. The student was able to recognize her name when written in uppercase letters. As her name was the only word she could read during the year, despite 1.5 hours a day of language arts instruction including both phonics and whole language approaches, she was unable to read enough fiction or non-fiction text to ascertain her comprehension for the related ASOL.

SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities have learning profiles that can be characterized by multiple disabilities and conditions existing simultaneously alongside an intellectual disability resulting in physical, sensory, health, and stamina difficulties impacting engagement in learning–which present complexities with developing instruction and assessments. Participant 1201378 explained challenges with modifying instruction to collect work samples while administering the VAAP to SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities:

> As I mentioned before the process involved in collecting student work samples for the VAAP is extensive. So, naturally my instructional practices are influenced by that. It is very difficult to cohesively merge the aligned standards into regular classroom instruction because they are so far above the cognitive level of understanding of most low functioning students in my class. That means I have to create modifications for the aligned standards within my instructional plans that consider the students' level of cognitive understanding, IEP goals and objectives,

> physical abilities, and interests–while including the functional skills they need for daily life in and out of school.

The teachers believed creating two forms of instruction was difficult but necessary, to address the cognitive severity of the students' disability. The challenge with the cognitive severity of the students' disability was underpinned and connected to the challenge with instruction. Participant 1201378 explained how the severity of the student's disability makes administering the VAAP difficult for teachers and students:

> As I mentioned before, many of the lower functioning students with significant cognitive disabilities don't have the prerequisite skills to learn the aligned standards taken from the regular grade level standards. Under those circumstances, administering the VAAP assessment is challenging for the teachers and the students.

Participant 0214735 shared how the challenges increase according to the severity of students' intellectual disability:

> The challenges increase with the severity of a student's degree of cognitive disability, as the ASOLs are not on a concomitant sliding scale. As they are written now, most ASOLs are irrelevant for students with severe and profound disabilities. Teachers must choose some anyway, and their attempts to design instruction, mobilize an unwitting student, and bring about a passing result require time, attention and resources disproportionate to any proven or even perceived benefit.

Participant 0403714 expressed, “For students with more severe disabilities, some of their cognitive, physical, and behavioral challenges make it extremely difficult for teachers to create the right kind of modifications for them to understand the aligned standards.” Participant 0403792 described experiences with the students:

> Most of my students have IQs below 45. I would say one of the biggest challenges is the amount of time it takes students with the most significant cognitive disabilities to understand the ASOLs, due to the severity of their cognitive disabilities.

Participant 0110269 described the challenges teachers experience with the time it takes SWSCDs with more severe to profound intellectual disabilities to learn a skill:

> Teachers have to create the appropriate ASOL modification, and then adapt it to the most appropriate modality of learning according to the needs of the student. After that, teachers provide instruction in chunks and repeated instruction but are challenged by the amount of time it may take the student to learn the skill to actually demonstrate knowledge or mastery of it.

The comments teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning made about the challenges they experienced with the cognitive severity of the students’ disability were linked to the challenges they experienced with time management.

The teachers reported experiencing challenges with managing the academic and functional skills instruction for students along with ensuring they participate in the regular support services and other activities of the regular school day. Participant 0403792 shared the time management challenges associated with the time it takes to

modify the instruction, teach the instruction, and wait for students to learn the instruction–while ensuring there is time to teach functional life skills:

> The teaching and learning process is very time consuming because of the time it takes me to modify the ASOLS and the time it takes my students to understand the concepts taken from the ASOLs. It is a challenge to make sure that I still provide enough time for teaching the functional skills that will help my students with daily life skills they need outside of school.

Participant 0403714 explained the challenge teachers experience with ensuring there is enough time to address the students' IEP goals:

> With the VAAP in place, instruction for students includes content associated with the aligned standards. For students with severe disabilities, time management is difficult because teachers have to ensure adequate time is given to the students' functional goals associated with their IEP. It takes an extensive amount of time to teach students with severe disabilities content associated with the aligned standards because even with a great deal of modifications the aligned standards are still too much for them to understand.

Participant 0110269 also explained:

> The administration of the VAAP to students with severe disabilities is demanding of the instructional time teachers have with students and it takes away from time teachers have for meeting their IEP goals–which for students with severe disabilities includes functional skills that are a necessary aspect of their development.

The challenges teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning expressed regarding administering the VAAP were also shared by teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning.

Teachers of SWSCDs With High and Low Intellectual Functioning. The teachers 'responses related to Theme 3 connected back to the cognitive severity of the students' disability and the teachers' belief that the VAAP is above the cognitive capacity of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Those beliefs also connected back to the teachers' perception that the VAAP is not appropriate for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. As with teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning, when asked about the challenges of administering the VAAP, teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning emphasized their challenge with instruction. The teachers' responses followed the pattern of advocating for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities, with undergirded concerns about the cognitive severity of the students' disability and the challenge of time management.

Participant 2010327 described an experience with an instructional challenge related to selecting appropriate ASOLs for students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities:

> One challenge is selecting the appropriate ASOL to accurately demonstrate the student's ability. Since the ASOLs are well above their cognitive level, choosing ASOLs for them to learn and then demonstrate their knowledge becomes extremely difficult.

Participant 0101257 explained experiences with administering VAAP regarding modifying instruction:

> When students undergo VAAP testing, their instruction has to change. The emphasis shifts from functional skills and skills designed to further their critical life skills associated with their IEP to teaching the ASOLs for their grade level– which is above their instructional level. So, to teach the ASOLs for the VAAP, I have to modify them, and how much I modify them depends on the severity of the students' disability. Lessons change from learning to read and the number of objects a numeral represents to Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal and the strengths and weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation. This past year the district purchased a curriculum to be used in the low incidence classes. As far as I could into the school year, I used those lessons and materials because they were better suited to my students' needs and instructional levels. However, the daily lessons I used with my class from that curriculum had to take a back seat to learning the information needed so my students could complete work samples for the VAAP based on ASOLs beyond their level of understanding.

Participant 2019386 shared thoughts about the disconnection of the VAAP to SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities' IEP and cognitive capacity:

> As the VAAP is now, there seems to be little connection to the student's IEP and cognitive capacity. As I said before, it's not appropriate for students with the most severe disabilities because there are limited selections of tasks, with the provided

> aligned standards, that match their cognitive capacity and give them the opportunity to show learning outcomes based on their abilities.

The teachers acknowledged that the students they teach who have severe to profound intellectual disabilities typically have physical disabilities along with cognitive disabilities, which further complicates the students' participation in the VAAP. Participant 0101257 explained an experience with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs with severe physical and intellectual disabilities with limited mobility:

> One of the problems I encountered was with students who do not use their hands to mark answers or indicate answers. These same students are nonverbal communicators so getting them to respond to the questions has been difficult. It would seem that more consideration would be given to students with severe disabilities whose physical and cognitive abilities can't be represented due to limitations associated with the severity of their disability.

Participant 0707142 described similar experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs with severe physical and intellectual disabilities with limited mobility:

> A challenge I have come across in VAAP is when students have such severe disabilities that VAAP testing is not an appropriate form of assessment for the child. For instance, a child with severe to profound intellectual and medical needs in my class was not able to make a purposeful choice, independently. This means even given a choice between two preferred objects, non-academic related for example slinky and stuffed animal, she was unable to make a choice given a voice output device, her hand or finger, nor eye gaze. After months of hand-over-hand

> support (which is not allowed in VAAP) in an effort to show her what making a choice between two objects looks and feels like, for example teacher holding student's hand and touching a slinky, she was still unable to make a choice independently. Looking at this situation academically, it would not be ethical to assess her knowledge of a concept such as comparing numbers, when she is still working on pre-learning skills and goals such as making an independent choice.

Time management was intertwined within the challenge of instruction and the cognitive severity of the students' disability. Participant 2010327 shared:

> The administration of the VAAP makes teaching students with severe disabilities harder than it has to be, because teachers have to try to spiral down concepts from the ASOLs that are too difficult for the students to understand. A lot of time is devoted to this process, because after modifying the ASOLs teachers have to teach them to the students and it often requires an extended period of time for them to learn the concepts.

Interview data related to Theme 3 provided insight on the teachers' perceptions of the challenges associated with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs. The interview data were interconnected to the teachers' advocacy and belief that the VAAP includes ASOLs above the cognitive capacity of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities–which connected to the teachers' perception that the VAAP is not appropriate for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The interview data from both sets of teachers related to Theme 3 informed RQ1.

Data Analysis Summary of Results for RQ1

RQ1 addressed: What are teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs? Three themes emerged from the interview data obtained connected to this question: (a) teachers perceive the VAAP is not appropriate for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities; (b) teachers perceive the VAAP provides an alternative to the SOLs but has more benefits for SWSCDs with high functioning; and (c) teachers experience instructional challenges with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. An analysis of the findings showed that all three themes were interconnected through the teachers' perception that VAAP does not adequately consider the cognitive severity of SWSCDs' low intellectual functioning intellectual disabilities nor the nature of their abilities because it includes ASOLs above the students' cognitive capacity. As a result, both sets of teachers advocated for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities because the teachers perceive the VAAP is not appropriate for measuring the students' achievement and growth.

During the interviews the teachers were adamant that the VAAP is not an appropriate assessment for SWSCDs' with severe to profound intellectual disabilities because they believe: (a) the VAAP doesn't adequately consider the cognitive severity of the students' disability; (b) the VAAP doesn't assess students using functional skills; and (c) the VAAP includes ASOLs that are above the students' cognitive capacity. There was a sense of urgent advocacy in the teachers' responses when they spoke about the VAAP

not being a fair nor accurate account of the abilities of their students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities.

Although the teachers agreed the VAAP provides an alternative to SWSCDs participating in the regular SOLs, they also all agreed the VAAP has more benefits for SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning. The teachers again advocated for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities as they explained their beliefs related to the VAAP's benefits for SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning and limited benefits for SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning. The teachers expressed their belief that SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning can understand, and therefore learn, the ASOLs presented within the VAAP because of their higher cognitive capacity.

Finally, the teachers advocated for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities as they explained the challenge with instruction they experience while administering the VAAP to them. The instructional challenges were undergirded by challenges with the cognitive severity of the students' disability and time management. The teachers emphasized the challenges they experience with instructing the students on ASOLs from the VAAP that are far above the students' level of understanding due to the nature of their severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The teachers also shared the challenges they experience with time management in balancing the extended time it takes to teach (and for the students to try to learn) ASOLs that are beyond the students' level of understanding with the time needed to teach functional skills and academics associated with the students' IEPs.

RQ2 Results by Theme

Data that informed RQ2: teachers' perceptions of and experiences with how the VAAP measures SWSCDs' achievement and growth in terms of design and content were obtained through my interviews with five teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and five teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning. Both sets of teachers advocated for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities through their perceptions of the VAAP's design and content for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs related to: (a) the factors that contribute to some SWSCDs not being able to demonstrate achievement and growth on the VAAP; (b) the advantages and disadvantages of the VAAP's design and content; and (c) the aspects of the VAAP's design and content that can be altered to measure SWSCDs' achievement and growth. Themes 4, 5 and 6 emerged from patterns in the interview data, which informed RQ2.

Theme 4: Teachers Perceive (and Experience) the Design and Content of the VAAP are Above the Cognitive Capacity of SWSCDs With Severe to Profound Intellectual Disabilities

Teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning provided data through interviews on their perceptions of and experiences with factors that contribute to some SWSCDs not being able to demonstrate achievement and growth on the VAAP as it relates to the design and content of the VAAP. Theme 4 emerged from patterns in the data from interconnected focal points that showed both sets of teachers perceive (and experience) the design and

content of the VAAP are above the cognitive capacity of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities.

The primary focal point linked to Theme 4, shared by both sets of teachers, was VAAP's design and content include ASOLs that are above the cognitive capacity of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The secondary focal point (an underpinning of the primary focal point) was VAAP's design and content does not account for the cognitive severity of the students' disability for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The interview data linked to Theme 4 from both sets of teachers converged to inform RQ2, and voiced teachers' advocacy for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities.

Teachers of SWSCDs With Low Intellectual Functioning. In the interviews with teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning, the patterns that emerged were related to the design and content of the VAAP having ASOLs above the cognitive capacity of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The patterns that emerged were also undergirded by data that showed teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning believe the design and content of the VAAP do not include measures that account for the cognitive severity of SWSCDs' severe to profound intellectual disability.

The teachers reported that the VAAP including ASOLs that are above the cognitive capacity of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities impacted the students' ability to show their achievement and growth. Participant 0110269

described the cognitive and functional ranges of students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities:

> Students with severe cognitive disabilities are not able to demonstrate achievement and growth through a passing score on the VAAP because the ASOLs used in the VAAP are far above their cognitive capacity. I have taught students with severe cognitive disabilities who had cognitive and functional ranges equivalent to children who are two to three years old even though their chronological age was eight years old. That put them at a major disadvantage for learning and demonstrating knowledge of ASOLs to pass the VAAP.

Participant 1201378 indicated that the ASOLs typically are above SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities' cognitive level of understanding:

> These students have many abilities but, the content of the VAAP does not give them an opportunity to show what they can do and what they know based on their varying levels of cognition. For instance, even if I pick the simplest aligned standard, it is still very complicated and inappropriate for a student with a documented IQ in the 40s. Chances are the student does not have the prerequisite skills to learn the aligned standard as it is presented. So, the teacher has to modify the aligned standard by reducing its complexity.

Participant 0403792 expressed, "Although the VAAP has been reduced in complexity, its design and content present ASOLs related to grade level concepts that are beyond the capacity of students with the most severe to profound intellectual disabilities." Participant

0214735 explained thoughts about the ASOLs being too difficult for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities to learn:

> There are many factors that contribute to students with significant cognitive disabilities' failure to demonstrate achievement on the VAAP. A major factor is many of the ASOLs, as they are written, are simply too difficult for students with more severe cognitive disabilities to learn.

Participant 0110269 described the profile of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual to profound disabilities in an explanation of the ASOLs being above the students' cognitive level:

> The students in my classroom may be old enough to be in the eleventh grade according to their birthdate, but not according to how they function or learn content. I do not feel that consideration has been properly given to the fact that the ASOLs are too far above the cognitive level of lower functioning students who have severe disabilities.

Participant 1201378 expressed thoughts about the VAAP's ability to measure the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities:

> The current design and content of the VAAP does not do a good job of measuring the achievement and growth of lower functioning students with the most severe cognitive disabilities, because it uses aligned standards that are far above their cognitive level of understanding.

Participant 0214735 explained why the design and content of the VAAP is not designed to measure the achievement of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities:

> The current design does not provide an adequate range of content objectives and bullets. It does not allow for the selection of SOLs from grade levels other than that of a student's enrollment grade. There is no relationship between the student's IEP and the ASOLs. These are all disadvantages in measuring student achievement since the bulk of many students' instructional time is spent on necessary functional skills, not arbitrarily selected, but individualized by a responsible team with direct involvement.

Participant 0403714 shared thoughts regarding the use of ASOLs in the VAAP to measure the achievement of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities without the option to use functional skills:

> The use of aligned standards without the option of using functional skills to measure the achievement of students with more severe disabilities is a disadvantage for those students. Like I mentioned earlier, the aligned standards are too difficult for them to understand because they are above their cognitive capacity.

As the teachers advocated for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities, regarding the ASOLs being above the students' cognitive capacity, they also indicated that the VAAP's design and content do not account for the cognitive severity of SWSCDs' severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Participant 0403792 advocated that the VAAP's design and content should offer measures that account for the cognitive severity of SWSCDs' severe to profound intellectual disability. Participant 0214735

presented that the VAAP's design and content should include categories that consider of the cognitive severity of SWSCDs' severe to profound intellectual disability:

> The VAAP's categories should include communication (not just reading), to reflect the many different communication needs, disorders and preferences, among our students. This should include goals and bullets under both expressive and receptive language and should include non-verbal methods of communication.

Participant 1201378 explained that accounting for the cognitive severity of students' disability would enable SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities to show their achievement and growth when assessed using VAAP:

> Since lower functioning students with the most severe cognitive disabilities have to participate in the VAAP as a part of state mandated testing, the design and content of the VAAP should take into consideration the severity of their cognition. With the VAAP taking into account students' cognitive level of understanding and including functional skills, lower functioning students with the most significant cognitive disabilities will be better able to demonstrate what they are learning. This will also allow the VAAP to better manage measuring their achievement and growth.

Participant 0403714 posited that if the VAAP included the option for teachers to select from a broader range of academics closer to the students' cognitive understanding, the VAAP would be more equitable:

> The design of the VAAP should reconsider more equitable measures for students with severe cognitive disabilities. If the VAAP was made more equitable by reconsidering the cognitive capacity of students with severe disabilities, those students would have a wider variety of academics closer to their cognitive level.

Teachers of SWSCDs With High and Low Intellectual Functioning. There was convergence in the interview data by the two sets of teachers on the factors that contribute to some SWSCDs not being able to demonstrate achievement and growth on the VAAP as it relates to the VAAP's design and content. The teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning also provided interview responses during their interviews that focused on the design and content of the VAAP having ASOLs above the cognitive capacity of the students, while also not accounting for the severity of the students' intellectual disabilities.

Participant 0101257 described experiences with the design and content of the VAAP being above the cognitive capacity of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities:

> The primary factor contributing to most of the students I teach with severe disabilities not demonstrating growth and achievement though the VAAP is the nature of the test itself. It is above their cognitive and physical functioning. Years ago, the teacher giving the VAAP began at the student's grade level and if the student was unable to complete the test item, the teacher could move to a grade level that was more reflective of the student's instructional level. The option for teachers to choose ASOLs below the student's grade level has been removed. A

> student must test at their current grade level. To ask a high school student who does not function academically or physically at the grade level he is on because of limitations associated with his disability (hence the reason the student is in the low incidence class) to solve algebra problems, correctly punctuate sentences or write definitions to unknown words is not fair to the student.

Participant 2019386 shared thoughts about VAAP's ability to measure the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities:

> While the VAAP provides an alternative to the regular state assessment, the design and content of the VAAP with its use of aligned standards taken from the regular standards of learning does not accurately measure the achievement and growth of students with the most severe cognitive disabilities. As I have said previously, the aligned standards are well above the cognitive capacity of that group of students with significant disabilities. Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities have a small chance of passing the VAAP because the content is above their cognitive capacity.

Participant 2010327 provided a similar perspective of the design and content of the VAAP as it pertained to SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities:

> The ASOLs used are above the cognitive level of students with severe disabilities. And, although the ASOLs have been reduced in complexity, they are still well above the cognitive level of some students.

Participant 1903425 expressed the perspective that the VAAP does not present an accurate measurement of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual abilities:

> The VAAP presents a skewed picture of achievement and growth for students in the low incidence population who are not able to adequately learn aligned standards on their age-appropriate grade level due to the cognitive and physical limitations associated with their disability. I believe the VAAP's content includes skills from the aligned standards that are above the cognitive level of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. The limitations characteristic of their learning profile put them at a disadvantage for demonstrating achievement on the VAAP.

The teachers believed the VAAP's design and content should account for the cognitive severity all SWSCDs' disabilities–whether they are students with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities or students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Participant 2010327 explained factors that contribute to some SWSCDs not being able to demonstrate achievement and growth on the VAAP as it relates to the VAAP's design and content:

> One contributing factor is the severity of the students' disability. Another contributing factor is the content of the VAAP, with ASOLs above the cognitive levels of the students and no connection to the students' IEP. Those factors play a huge role in students with severe disabilities not being able to pass the VAAP. The design and content of VAAP does not include measures that account for the severity of the student's disability, which would give these students an opportunity to demonstrate their abilities according to their cognitive capacity. It

> also doesn't include connections to the students' IEP, which would add relevance and appropriate content like functional skills.

Participant 1903425 provided an example of how the design and content of the VAAP could account for the cognitive severity of SWSCDs' severe to profound intellectual disability, and shared thoughts about how teachers' voices have not been heard:

> In a perfect world it would resemble project-based learning with goals and objectives from the IEP embedded within the project that would be agreed upon for that individual student. Many teachers have been advocating for this type of assessment for students with the most significant disabilities for years-appealing to the district in meetings, writing to the state, and yet the VAAP remains the only option for students with the most severe disabilities.

Interview data from both sets of teachers related to Theme 4 provided insight on the factors that contribute to some SWSCDs not being able to demonstrate achievement and growth on the VAAP, and informed RQ2. The interview data from both sets of teachers were interconnected to the teachers' advocacy and belief that the VAAP includes ASOLs above the cognitive capacity of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities–which connected back to the teachers' perception that the VAAP is not appropriate for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities.

Theme 5: Teachers Perceive the VAAP's Design and Content have Advantages and Disadvantages for SWSCDs Based on Their Level of Functioning

Both sets of teachers provided data through interviews on their perceptions of and experiences with the advantages and disadvantages of the VAAP's design and content for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs. Theme 5 emerged from patterns in the data from interconnected focal points that showed both sets of teachers perceive the VAAP's design and content have advantages and disadvantages based on the SWSCDs' level of functioning.

Data show the primary focal point linked to Theme 5, shared by both sets of teachers, centered on the idea that the VAAP has advantages for SWSCDs with high functioning to demonstrate achievement. The primary focal point was undergirded by an interconnected focal point related to the disadvantages the VAAP's design and content have for SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning–regarding earning enough points to demonstrate achievement. The interview data linked to Theme 5 from teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning informed RQ2 and showed the teachers' advocacy for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities.

Teachers of SWSCDs With Low Intellectual Functioning. As the teachers discussed the advantages for SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning, they advocated for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities as they also pointed out their concerns that the design and content of the VAAP makes it difficult for SWSCDs

with low intellectual functioning who have severe to profound intellectual disabilities to earn enough points to demonstrate achievement and growth.

Participant 0110269 provided information on her perception of the advantages the VAAP's design and content have for SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning:

> For students with severe cognitive disabilities, there are no benefits to their participation in the VAAP. Students with less severe disabilities, within the mild or moderate range, may benefit from the design and content of the VAAP which provides an opportunity for students to demonstrate their abilities in a portfolio format with ASOLs, instead of participating in the state mandated SOLs.

Participant 0403792 stated, "Some students with significant cognitive disabilities, depending on the severity of their disability and their cognitive level, are able to demonstrate achievement on the VAAP because they are better able to understand the ASOLs included in the VAAP." Participant 0214735 described the advantages the design and content of VAAP provides for SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning:

> As I mentioned previously, an assessment based on ASOLs from the SOLs is a good idea in theory. It gives students with significant cognitive disabilities a different option for participating in state mandated assessments. It has been a great option for students with mild to moderate disabilities who have a higher cognitive capacity for learning, but not so much for students with more severe disabilities. The severity of a student's disability determines if the design and content have advantages that influence positive performance outcomes. Students

> with mild to moderate disabilities can, to some degree learn the ASOLs and demonstrate achievement.

Participant 1201378 compared the experience of participating in the VAAP for SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning to SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning:

> It presents advantages for assessing higher functioning students with significant cognitive disabilities by providing them with a different way of being assessed. Students within the low incidence population learn in so many different ways, so it is fitting for them to have an alternate assessment that gives them a different way showing what they are learning. Like I mentioned before, the concept of the VAAP is good, but it still is not appropriate for both higher and lower functioning students with significant cognitive disabilities. As it is currently designed, I truly believe it is more appropriate for higher functioning students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Participant 0403714 expressed similar thoughts:

> For students with severe cognitive disabilities, there aren't any advantages from the VAAP's current design and content. The VAAP is more appropriate for students who have the capacity to learn the aligned standards, those students with significant cognitive disabilities within the mild to moderate range. The way the VAAP is designed they have a better chance of receiving a passing score because they have the cognitive capacity to demonstrate mastery of the aligned standards on the VAAP.

Participant 0403792 explained experiences with some SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning being able to adjust to the ASOLs in the VAAP to demonstrate achievement and SWSCDs with lower intellectual functioning having challenges with demonstrating achievement. Participant 1201378 expressed, “Over time, the VAAP’s changes in design and content had a negative influence on the ability of lower functioning students to demonstrate achievement and growth.” Participant 0110269 explained an experience with SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning benefiting from the VAAP’s design and content and SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning not benefiting from the VAAP’s design and content:

> Because they are learning functional skills and pre-emergent academics, teaching them grade level ASOLs that come from grade level SOLs is not beneficial, relevant, or appropriate for students with severe cognitive disabilities. But, students with mild to moderate disabilities are able to take advantage of the higher academic expectations for learning the ASOLs influence.

Embedded in the teachers’ responses were also disadvantages of the VAAP’s design and content for SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning to earn enough points to demonstrate achievement. Participant 1201378 detailed how the design and content of the VAAP includes a point system that penalizes SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities when the ASOL has been modified too much:

> Well, the more the teacher modifies the aligned standard, the lower the possible VAAP score becomes for that student work sample. Therefore, the way the VAAP is designed, students with the most severe cognitive disabilities are

> penalized because the limitations associated with the severity of their disability require teachers to drastically modify the aligned standard in order for the students to achieve some degree of understanding. Ultimately, the drastic modification of the aligned standards throughout the student's VAAP notebook results in a VAAP score that is not high enough to pass the VAAP.

Participant 0403714 explained thoughts about students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities not being able to earn enough points due to the design and content of the VAAP:

> Well, the VAAP's use of aligned standards and not functional skills causes teachers to make major modifications in order for the students to be able to complete work samples. And, the modified work samples don't earn students with severe cognitive disabilities enough points to pass the VAAP.

Participant 0214735 stated, "The scoring system should include adequate progress made metrics that reflect individual growth from the student's previous score to determine passing or failing scores." Similarly, teacher Participant 1201378 shared, "The VAAP should use the same adequate progress model that is used for the regular standards of learning assessment which allows students to receive a passing score if they have shown adequate growth towards passing the assessment since the previous year." Participant 1201378 explained how the process of making adequate progress works:

> With the VAAP using the same adequate progress model that is used for the regular standards, even if the student does not make a passing score on the VAAP the student can receive a passing score if the student shows adequate growth since

> the previous year. This VAAP design would have a positive impact on accreditation for schools who have lower functioning students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

Participant 0403714 also provided thoughts about the VAAP providing the option of adequate progress within its scoring format:

> The scoring format [for the VAAP] should have a measure for determining if students made adequate progress, much like the SOLs. And, those students who made adequate progress should receive a passing score on the VAAP. The use of the adequate progress option for scoring the VAAP would make it more appropriate for students with severe cognitive disabilities.

Teachers of SWSCDs With High and Low Intellectual Functioning. The beliefs of teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning converged with the beliefs of teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and were similar regarding the advantages and disadvantages of the VAAP's design and content for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs. During the interviews with teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning, the teachers discussed interconnected focal points related to the VAAP's design and content having advantages for SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning to demonstrate achievement and growth and disadvantages for SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning to demonstrate achievement and growth.

Participant 0101257 described experiences with the design and content of the VAAP while administering the VAAP to SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning and low intellectual functioning:

> For higher functioning students, I can modify the ASOLs to match their level of understanding and they have a better opportunity to demonstrate their abilities through the VAAP. Having said that, for lower functioning students with more severe disabilities there are some ASOLs that no amount of modification can render more understanding for them. For example, a student with emergent numeracy skills, was expected to complete an eleventh-grade work sample for an ASOL on algebra and on an ASOL on longitude and latitude.

Participant 2019386 described her perspective of why the VAAP is a good alternative for SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning:

> The VAAP is a good alternative for higher functioning students with significant cognitive disabilities. They have the cognitive capacity to be able to demonstrate their learning abilities as they are assessed by the VAAP because the aligned standards can be better adapted to their cognitive capacity.

Participant 2010327 stated, “Certain aspects of the VAAP’s current design and content present possible advantages for students with less severe disabilities, because many of the ASOL strands have been shortened and reduced in complexity to provide an opportunity for achievement.” Similarly, Participant 1903425 indicated, “I believe the current design and content may present advantages for showing the achievement or capabilities of students with significant cognitive disabilities who don’t have severe disabilities.”

Participant 0101257 shared an experience with the VAAP being more suitable for SWSCDs with high functioning:

> I administered the VAAP to my students, but most of them could not perform what they were asked to do–even with major modifications to the ASOLs. I had one student who was higher functioning that could complete the work samples for the ASOLs with some modifications. The VAAP was more suited to his cognitive level, so he was able to demonstrate his abilities.

Participant 2019386 indicated that the VAAP's shift to grade level ASOLs had a positive influence on some SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning:

> The changes in the VAAP over the years has had a negative impact on how it is able to measure achievement in students with the most severe cognitive disabilities, but it has had a positive impact on how it is able to measure achievement in higher functioning students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Participant 1903425 explained that the VAAP has advantages for SWSCDs with high intellectual functioning whose learning profile identifies them with having skills above the emergent level:

> For students with significant cognitive disabilities who have skills above the emergent level, the VAAP provides a format that allows them to show their abilities. I believe the VAAP, as it is designed now with the inclusion of aligned standards, was developed with this group of students in mind–students with IQs above 55 but below 70. The VAAP is more appropriate for them according to their learning profile.

The interview data provided by teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning included responses with intertwined disadvantages of the VAAP's design and content for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe intellectual disabilities. Participant 2019386 explained the VAAP's point system is designed to reduce the points a student can earn when major modifications are made to the ASOL:

> Currently, students with the most severe cognitive disabilities only have the ability to earn one point for aligned standards that are minimally satisfied and zero points for aligned standards that they are unable to satisfy. Even with the selection of the least difficult aligned standards it is still outside of the student's ability level when their documented IQ is in the 40s. Chances are the student does not have the prerequisite skills to show achievement on the aligned standard. This is why having options for cognitive levels for the aligned standards in the VAAP would be appropriate. Then students with the most severe cognitive disabilities would have a better chance of demonstrating achievement and growth within their cognitive ability level.

Teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning were consistent in advocating for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities as it pertained to the disadvantage of the VAAP not providing opportunities for those students to earn enough points to demonstrate achievement. Participant 0101257 described the disadvantages the VAAP's design and content has for SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning to demonstrate achievement:

> Most of the students in my low incidence class do not read, cannot write and are not at a level to do basic mathematics, much less solve algebra equations. So, the teacher has to considerably modify the ASOLs for their work samples, which means the student may not earn enough points to pass the VAAP because major modifications to the ASOLs decrease the points that can be earned.

Participant 2019386 explained the type of scoring system the VAAP should have in place for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities:

> It [VAAP] should include a format for determining if a student has made adequate progress-growth based on their last year's VAAP submission. And, if they've made adequate progress towards passing the VAAP, they should earn a passing score.

Similarly, Participant 2010327 explained that the VAAP should have a scoring system that considers the cognition of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities:

> The VAAP should also have a scoring system that considers the cognition of students in a way that does not penalize them for having lower levels of cognition. And, if there was a scoring system that did not penalize students for having the lowest cognitive levels, students with the lowest cognitive capacity would have more equitable opportunities to demonstrate their abilities.

Interview data from both sets of teachers related to Theme 5 provided insight on teachers' perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of the VAAP's design and content, and informed RQ2. The interview data from both sets of teachers were interconnected to the

teachers' advocacy and belief that the VAAP is not appropriate for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities.

Theme 6: Teachers Perceive the VAAP's Lack of Functional Skills and Connection to SWSCDs' IEP Limits its Design and Content

Teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning provided data through interviews on the aspects of the VAAP's design and content that can be altered to more accurately measure SWSCDs' achievement and growth. The data showed patterns that led to two major interconnected focal points for Theme 6, the VAAP's lack of functional skills and the VAAP's lack of connection to the IEP. Theme 6 emerged from the major focal points in the interview data and showed that both sets of teachers shared the perception that VAAP's lack of functional skills and connection to SWSCDs' IEP limit its ability to measure the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Both sets of teachers' perceptions of aspects of the VAAP's design and content that should be altered, in connection with Theme 6, informed RQ2 and advocated for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities.

Teachers of SWSCDs With Low Intellectual Functioning. According to **i**nterview data from teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning the first major focal point linked to Theme 6, VAAP's lack of functional skills, was highlighted when teachers were asked about aspects of the VAAP's design and content that can be altered to measure the achievement and growth of SWSCDs. The second major focal point, linked to Theme 6, was the VAAP's lack of connection to the IEP. Teachers of SWSCDs

with low intellectual functioning advocated on behalf of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities for both focal points and pointed out that both focal points were equally important. The teachers believe SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities should be assessed using functional skills that are relevant to their daily life skills. Participant 0403714 explained thoughts about the affect the VAAP's lack of functional skills has on the performance of students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities:

> Students with severe cognitive disabilities are just unable or not ready to address the expected skills, even with modifications and accommodations. With the use of aligned standards as a measure, and not functional skills, students with more severe cognitive disabilities don't have an opportunity to demonstrate their abilities.

Participant 0110269 expressed the belief that students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities would be able to demonstrate achievement and growth using measures that include basic academics and functional skills, but the VAAP does not assess students using functional skills:

> Students with severe cognitive disabilities are not able to demonstrate achievement and growth through a passing score on the VAAP because the ASOLs used in the VAAP are far above their cognitive capacity. However, they can demonstrate achievement and growth on basic academic and functional skills that are not assessed by the VAAP.

Participant 0403792 pointed out, “For students with the most severe cognitive disabilities (IQs 45 and below), I believe the VAAP’s design and content should include options for measuring a balance of functional and academic skills.” Similarly, Participant 1201378 stated, “The VAAP should be restructured to address the needs of lower functioning students by having a section that allows teachers to select functional and academic skills based on the learning characteristics associated with the students’ cognitive level of understanding.” Participant 0214735 expressed that functional academics related to social and community skills should to be included in the VAAP:

> Social/community skills should be an assessment category to reflect the importance of social interactions, peer relations, social and public behaviors and negotiating various social settings and participating in civic events of interest. The importance of self-advocacy is well known, and progress in this area could be included here.

Participant 0403714 indicated, “If the VAAP included functional skills, students with more severe disabilities would have a better chance of demonstrating their abilities.” Teacher participant 0214735 explained that functional skills should be included in the VAAP as an assessment category for students with the most severe disabilities because they represent “areas of need critical to a student’s self-actualization, increased participation in society and independence.” Participant 0403792 described the achievement students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities would be able to demonstrate if functional skills were included in the VAAP:

> Students with the most severe cognitive disabilities would be able to maximize the demonstration of their achievement by including functional skills in the content on the VAAP. This would be more appropriate because it would allow them to show their abilities through content that is more aligned with the capabilities associated with their learning profile.

The VAAP's lack of connection to the IEP was another focal point highlighted in connection to Theme 6, from the interview data of teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning. Participant 0110269 explained the necessity of including functional or academic skills from the student's IEP goals when measuring the achievement and growth of students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities:

> It [VAAP] does not include functional or academic skills driven by the student's IEP goals. Therefore, it is not possible for them to demonstrate achievement and growth through the VAAP. By not including functional and academic skills connected to students with severe cognitive disabilities' IEP, the VAAP is not designed to represent their achievement and growth.

Participant 0214735 advocated that the VAAP's lack of connection to functional skills from the IEP hinders the students' opportunity to demonstrate their abilities based on the goals on their IEP:

> Well, the VAAP not allowing the use of functional skills presents major differences between instructional goals and supports indicated on the student's IEP and what's allowable on VAAP. The disconnection to the IEP and not allowing the use of functional skills also serve as disadvantages. All of those

> disadvantages influence the performance of students with more severe disabilities on the VAAP. And, VAAP scoring doesn't reward growth, only mastery and demonstration of the ASOL.

Participant 0110269 explained, "The inclusion of functional and academic skills connected to the student's IEP would allow students with severe cognitive disabilities to demonstrate achievement and growth on content that is beneficial, relevant and appropriate according to their cognitive capacity."

Teachers of SWSCDs With High and Low Intellectual Functioning. In the interviews with teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning, the patterns that linked to Theme 6 were interconnected focal points about aspects of the VAAP's design and content that can be altered to measure the achievement and growth of SWSCDs. Teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning also pointed out the VAAP's lack of functional skills and the VAAP's lack of connection to the IEP. Participant 2019386 shared the importance of functional skills for the educational experience of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities:

> The VAAP's design and content does not include functional skills–which are a very important aspect of the educational experience and daily life for students with the most severe cognitive disabilities.

Participant 0101257 explained how the VAAP's lack of functional skills affects students with the most severe intellectual disabilities:

> Special education is not one size fits all. Modifications and adaptations allow our students to learn at their rate and in the best environment for them. If this test

> [VAAP] were designed to include functional skills that show that learning had occurred on material that has some meaning in the life of a student, I would feel it was more valid. As it is, I have to stop teaching functional skills that a student will need to live in the world to teach information that will not benefit him in life after high school. In teaching this material to my students I had to stop and consider when was the last time I used longitude and latitude in my life or discussed the merits of the Paleolithic hunter gather people or discussed the Articles of Confederation with my friends over lunch. It's all good common knowledge to have in one's background but this information is not used in daily life. It is too abstract for the students I work with.

Participant 0707142 explained the learning profile of SWSCDs with severe intellectual disabilities and the prerequisite skills aligned with their cognitive capacity:

> I think that there should be either functional skill standards, or a type of prerequisite skills section of the VAAP. With functional skills standards lower functioning students with severe cognitive disabilities could be assessed to show growth. These students should not be held accountable for comparing numbers. At their cognitive functioning (zero- to two-year-old stage) they must learn that blocks go together, come apart, and stack, car tires roll on the ground when pushed, and cause and effect musical toys will play music when a button is pushed.

The teachers advocated for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities as they expressed their beliefs about how the VAAP's lack of connection to the IEP affected

students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities' ability to demonstrate achievement and growth on the VAAP. Participant 2010327 expressed, "Although the students have functional skills included in their IEP and instructional routines, functional skills are excluded from the content of the VAAP." Participant 0101257 shared how the VAAP's connection to the IEP would allow students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities to be able to show achievement and growth on a more relevant assessment:

> The VAAP should also include functional skills, and it should be connected to the student's IEP goals. The inclusion of functional and academic skills connected to the student's IEP would allow students with severe cognitive disabilities to demonstrate achievement and growth on content that is beneficial, relevant and appropriate according to their cognitive capacity. This would make the assessment more valid and relevant.

Participant 2010327 explained the benefit of including functional skills and a connection to the student's IEP:

> For students with the most severe cognitive disabilities the design of the VAAP should have some type of connection to their IEP, and functional skills should be added to the content of the VAAP. If the VAAP was connected to the student's IEP and included functional skills, it would add flexibility and range to the VAAP that would allow all learners within the population of students with significant cognitive disabilities to be able to demonstrate their abilities.

Interview data from both sets of teachers related to Theme 6 provided insight on teachers' perceptions of the aspects of the VAAP's design and content that can be altered to

measure SWSCDs' achievement and growth. The interview data from both sets of teachers was intertwined with the teachers' advocacy and belief that the VAAP is not appropriate for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The interview data from both sets of teachers related to Theme 6 informed RQ2.

Data Analysis Summary of Results for RQ2

RQ2 addressed: What are teachers' perceptions of and experiences with how the VAAP measures SWSCDs' achievement and growth in terms of design and content? Themes 4, 5, and 6 emerged within the interview data connected to RQ2: (a) teachers perceive (and experience) the design and content of the VAAP are above the cognitive capacity of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities; (b) teachers perceive the VAAP's design and content have advantages and disadvantages for SWSCDs based on their level of functioning; and (c) teachers perceive the VAAP's lack of functional skills and connection to SWSCDs' IEP limit its design and content. Those things limit VAAP's ability to discern the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. In my analysis of these data, the findings showed that Themes 4, 5, and 6 were interconnected. The themes were interconnected by the distinctions teachers made between the influence the design and content have on measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with low and high intellectual functioning.

As with interview data associated with Themes 1, 2, and 3, the interview data associated with Themes 4, 5, and 6 showed the teachers' advocacy for SWSCDs with

severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The teachers shared their beliefs and experiences related to the design and content of the VAAP not accounting for the cognitive severity of severe to profound intellectual disabilities–which is disadvantageous for SWSCDs with the severe to profound intellectual disabilities because the content is well above their cognitive capacity. The teachers proclaimed that the VAAP's design and content, with the inclusion of ASOLs above the cognitive capacity of students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities, makes it difficult for the students to earn a passing score.

Both sets of teachers pointed out the disadvantageous influence the VAAP's design and content has on measuring the abilities of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and the advantageous influence it has on measuring the abilities of SWSCDs with high functioning. The teachers also expressed disappointment that the VAAP's design and content do not include functional skills connected with the IEPs of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning who have severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The teachers believe those aspects of the VAAP's design and content make it difficult for the VAAP to accurately measure the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities.

RQ3 Results by Theme

Data that informed RQ3: the support from administrators teachers perceive they need in the administration of the VAAP to SWSCDs were obtained through my interviews with five teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and five teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning. Both sets of teachers

advocated for themselves and other teachers of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities through their perceptions related to: (a) the guidance teachers need from administrators and (b) the assistance teachers need from administrators during the administration of the VAAP to SWSCDs. Themes 7 and 8 emerged from patterns in the interview data, and informed RQ3.

Theme 7: Teachers Perceive They Need Their Voices Heard by Administrators Through Consistent VAAP Monitoring and Feedback

Both sets of teachers were asked their perceptions of the guidance need in the administration of the VAAP and Theme 7 emerged from patterns in the data. Theme 7 emerged from one major focal point from these interview data and reflected that teachers perceive they need their voices to be heard by administrators through support from consistent monitoring and feedback. Interview data from teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning about their perceptions of the guidance teachers need in the administration of the VAAP were used to provide information on the support teachers perceive they need from administrators during the administration of the VAAP (RQ3).

Teachers of SWSCDs With Low Intellectual Functioning. The primary focal point was about teachers needing administrators to provide a consistent system for monitoring and providing feedback, because the teachers believed that if administrators were more present and involved in the VAAP process their voices would be heard. The teachers indicated needing administrators to have a system of guidance that would ensure the administrators are present and available to listen and observe their experience with

administering the VAAP to SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Participant 2010378 described an experience with an administrator who created and implemented systematic VAAP guidance:

> The VAAP support and guidance the administrator at my school provides should be provided at other schools–specifically the monthly calendar for school VAAP submissions that my administrator creates to monitor/check the VAAP notebooks. Those monthly checks provide guidance through constructive feedback, pacing and accountability–while influencing a positive mindset.

Participant 0110269 indicated administrators need to "provide positive and helpful feedback in their guidance of the administration of the VAAP." Participant 0403714 explained that administrators need to be "systematic with progress monitoring and consistent with providing ongoing feedback throughout the VAAP process." Participant 1201378 discussed routine practices from the administrator's involvement in monitoring the VAAP process that does not occur at other schools.

> The administrator at my school does a great job of supporting teachers in the administration of the VAAP, but that is not the case in a lot of other schools across the district. There does not seem to be much consistency in how the VAAP is supported by administrators. While the administrator at my school does monthly monitoring, and provides support throughout the process, other administrators may not have any type of support or guidance in place–leaving teachers feeling unsupported and lost. At the beginning of the school year, the administrator at my school provides teachers with a calendar of school VAAP

> submission dates indicating when she will be checking the VAAPs throughout the school year.

Participant 0110269 explained, “Administrators can help teachers by arranging specific times to meet with them about their VAAP feedback, and to give them resources to assist with their collection of work samples.” Participant 1201378 shared that administrators should provide “positive guidance and feedback through monthly monitoring checks” throughout the VAAP process.

Teachers of SWSCDs With High and Low Intellectual Functioning. Teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning were interviewed and expressed their perceptions of the guidance teachers need in the administration of the VAAP. Like teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning, teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning expressed the need for administrators to provide consistent monitoring and providing feedback on the VAAP–with the belief that if administrators are more available and involved in the VAAP process their voices could be heard.

The teachers also expressed the need for administrators be available to listen and provide feedback throughout the VAAP process. Participant 0707142 shared some of the things teachers need administrators to do to provide guidance:

> I think administrators should meet with the teacher in October and have the teacher lay out a preliminary timeline of what AOLS will be taught and when, and then check in with the teacher to see if they are on track every month.

Participant 2019386 explained, “Administrators should have some type of progress monitoring system in place that helps teachers by providing feedback to ensure their VAAP notebooks are on track for the district’s final submission.”

Interview data from both sets of teachers related to Theme 7 provided insight on teachers’ perceptions of the guidance they need from administrators, and informed RQ3. The interview data were interconnected to the teachers’ advocacy for themselves and other teachers of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities.

Theme 8: Teachers Perceive Moral Support Would Improve Their Experience With Administering the VAAP

Teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning provided interview data on the assistance they perceive they need in the administration of the VAAP. Theme 8 emerged from patterns in the interview data from one primary interconnected focal point and showed teachers perceive moral support would improve their experience with administering the VAAP. The need for moral support was shared by both sets of teachers. The interview data about their perceptions of the assistance teachers need from administrators were used to inform RQ3: the support from administrators teachers perceive they need in the administration of the VAAP to SWSCDs.

Teachers of SWSCDs With Low Intellectual Functioning. The patterns in the interview data emerged from one prominent interconnected focal point related to the assistance teachers perceive they need from administrators–moral support. The teachers expressed the need to have administrators understand the challenges they experience with

administering the VAAP to SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning who have severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Participant 0403792 acknowledged, “Since administering the VAAP can be challenging and stressful for teachers, they [administrators] should also provide moral support.” Participant 0403714 explained, “Managing the VAAP process and all of the other responsibilities of instructing students with significant cognitive disabilities can be overwhelming for teachers if they are not supported.” Participant 1201378 discussed the importance of administrators “making teachers feel valued.” Participant 0110269 described examples of how administrators could provide moral support:

> They [administrators] could meet with teachers to get information on each student and how the teachers feel about being successful with the VAAP. It’s hard to understand teacher frustrations without truly knowing the population they are working with. Then, the administrator could provide positive and helpful feedback in their guidance of the administration of the VAAP.

Participant 0214735 described how administrators could provide teachers with moral support:

> Aside from the obvious administrative tasks involved with any assessments, I think administrators can best guide or lead the administration of the VAAP by putting the wellbeing and success of the students first. That means considering and providing support for the complexities of the VAAP’s application and the critical role that teachers and families play in positive outcomes for their students with significant cognitive disabilities. If an administrator has been an exceptional

> education teacher, he or she is likely to have valuable insight and realistic feedback for teachers and can contribute significantly to a supportive and balanced evidence collection and submission process throughout what can be a challenging and stressful endeavor.

Teachers of SWSCDs With High and Low Intellectual Functioning. When teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning were interviewed, the patterns that emerged were also from the focal point related to teachers needing administrators to provide morale support. The teachers wanted administrators to be aware of the challenges, stress, and pressure they were experiencing with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Participant 0101257 proclaimed:

> Most of the VAAP process is given to a teacher to complete with a student. An occasional check in with that teacher to encourage or offer assistance would go far in relieving teacher stress.

Participant 0101257 offered, “It would be so much more pleasant if meetings about VAAP books were less punitive and more encouraging.” Administering the VAAP to students with the most severe to profound intellectual disabilities can be tough and at times stressful.” Participant 0707142 explained, “So, administrators should make themselves more visibly involved in the process by joining in on lessons.”

Interview data from both sets of teachers related to Theme 8 provided insight on teachers’ perceptions of the assistance they need from administrators. The interview data from both sets of teachers were interconnected to the teachers’ advocacy for themselves

and other teachers of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The interview data from both sets of teachers related to Theme 8 informed RQ3.

Data Analysis Summary of Results for RQ3

RQ3 addressed: What support from administrators do teachers perceive they need in the administration of the VAAP to SWSCDs? Themes 7 and 8 emerged within the interview data connected to RQ3: (a) teachers need administrators to have a consistent system for monitoring and providing feedback on the VAAP collection of evidence notebook and (b) teachers perceive moral support from administrators would improve their experience with administering the VAAP. An analysis of the findings showed that Themes 7 and 8 were interconnected through the teachers' desire for administrators to be actively present in the VAAP process by listening to them, providing feedback, and demonstrating a level of understanding for what they go through in administering the VAAP to SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The teachers believed the administrator's understanding could result in the administrator advocating for change in the administration of the VAAP for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities at a higher level.

In teachers' responses associated with Themes 7 and 8, in connection with RQ3, teachers advocated for themselves and were eager to be understood by administrators through support. The teachers believed that if administrators provided systematic monitoring and feedback with moral support, it would lead to administrators understanding their experiences related to administering the VAAP to SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The teachers were certain that if

administrators provided regular systematic monitoring and feedback with moral support, administrators would be able to see all facets of VAAP implementation from the teachers' viewpoint and from the viewpoint of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. From those viewpoints of understanding, the teachers believed it was likely that administrators would join them in advocating for change in the administration of the VAAP for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Perceptions from both sets of teachers, linked to Themes 7 and 8, addressed the support from administrators teachers perceive they need in the administration of the VAAP to SWSCDs (RQ3).

Discrepant Case Analysis

No discrepant cases emerged from my analysis of the data. Whereas I did not find discontinuity and divergences through a discrepant case, I did find convergences of perspectives essential to the case in the interview data from both sets of teachers. According to Mills et al. (2010), researchers can use multiple sources of data to examine discontinuity, divergences, and convergences in the case studied. If a discrepant case would have emerged during my data analysis, I would have openly presented the case. Patton (2015) contended providing a discrepant case to support an alternative explanation helps demonstrate the researcher's integrity.

Evidence of Quality

As with data collection and data analysis, I simultaneously included practices to address accuracy and credibility (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To validate the findings of my study I used several strategies recommended by Mills et al. (2010) along with

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) which included (a) using triangulation of multiple sources of data, (b) using ongoing data checks and rechecks (c) using an expert panel, (d) using reflexivity, (e) using member checking, and (f) using adequate engagement.

Triangulation of Multiple Sources of Data

In triangulating multiple sources of data, I gained deeper insight into the problem of SWSCDs' low performance from two different sets of teachers. Further, through my triangulation of multiple sources of data, I found teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning had interconnected beliefs, attitudes, and ideologies about the administration of the VAAP. Convergences of perspectives emerged as I cross-checked data from both sets of teachers, and I found that the teachers' perspectives were linked to a shared perception that the VAAP is not appropriate for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. I also gained deeper insight into the problem of SWSCDs' low performance through ongoing data checks and rechecks.

Ongoing Data Checks and Rechecks

As a result of implementing ongoing checks and rechecks of the data, I was better able to manage data systematically using MAXQDA. My ongoing checks and rechecks helped me to establish procedural consistency for uploading, storing, and organizing data. Implementing ongoing checks and rechecks also assisted me with determining when I had reached data saturation through the comparative method for themes saturation. As a result of comparing all the themes and repeatedly reordering the sequence of the interview data to check the data until new information no longer surfaced, I reached

saturation with eight themes (see Constantinou et al., 2017). The eight themes informed the research questions.

Expert Panel

To ensure validity and reliability related to the development, design and implementation of protocol aligned with answering the research questions of this study, I used an expert panel to review the protocol for interviews–which included the interview questions. As a result of using an expert panel of two educational experts (a low incidence exceptional education specialist and an administrator), I received feedback that assisted me with avoiding leading or biased questions. Using an expert panel also assisted me with formatting the interview questions so that they were in alignment with answering my study's research questions. I used the feedback from the expert panel to revise the interview protocol for teachers. I also used the expert panel's recommended pre-interview reminders prior to beginning all interviews and post-interview reminders as closing remarks after all of the interviews.

Reflexivity

Another one of my evidence of quality strategies was reflexivity. Reflexivity relates to integrity and involves the researcher reflecting on his or herself as the researcher and the human instrument, explaining the researcher's role and biases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In my practice of reflexivity, I presented my role as the researcher and the human instrument within this study, and I openly provided full disclosure of my separate role an assistant principal with experience in the facilitation of the VAAP process. Practicing reflexivity resulted in me having an outlet for expressing

my feelings. It was very important for me to have an outlet for expressing my feelings after the interviews in a separate notebook, and it was important for me to have an opportunity to process and release my feelings and emotions in a separate process. Journaling my feelings in a separate notebook helped to ensure any biases from my work experience were made separate from my research study. Practicing reflexivity during research, manages the researcher's feelings and assumptions (Mckibben, 2019).

Member Checking

To further promote trustworthiness, I used member checking as a strategy to elicit feedback from participants to rule out misinterpretation of meaning from participants (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For the member checking process I (a) informed participants of the process on the consent form, (b) reminded participants of the process immediately after their interview and ensured they understood the process, and (c) emailed participants an encrypted draft summary of the findings to review and provide feedback. I wanted to ensure my interpretation of their interview data was representative of their voices. Babbie (2017) noted the importance of examining the clarity, and coherence of the data.

It is important to note that my individual interviews were completed with the teachers during a time they were not providing instruction because schools within the district were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, so they had a lot of available time. When I emailed the participants the draft summary of the findings, school was back in session and the participants did not have the same available time. Four of the 10 teacher participants responded to my email, by calling me to thank me for raising their voices.

One correction was noted in the summary of the findings. The teachers indicated SWSCDs with severe intellectual disabilities should be referred to as SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities, because some of the students the teachers serve have profound intellectual disabilities. According to Creswell (2018), member checking is one of the primary strategies researchers use to check for accuracy and validate qualitative accounts.

Adequate Engagement

The strategy of adequate engagement was used in data collection as I developed a close working relationship with the participants, to gain a deep understanding of the phenomena under study to answer this study's research questions. In the process of gaining a deeper understanding of a phenomenon, qualitative researchers naturally transition through phases of building a close working relationship with research participants (Given, 2008). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) contended that adequate engagement in data collection is a strategy for increasing credibility. Because I developed adequate engagement, the teachers trusted me to tell their stories through their lived experiences. Adequate engagement also invoked the teachers to willingly and authentically share their perceptions of and experiences with the administration of the VAAP.

Summary of Findings and Outcomes

The findings of this qualitative case study addressed the problem of SWSCDs from the target school not performing well on the VAAP from 2017 to 2019. As a result, the target school did not receive state accreditation. The target school's failure to receive

state accreditation presented concerns for school, district, and state officials related to school quality and the achievement and growth of SWSCDs. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs, to understand how this assessment reflected the achievement and growth of this population in terms of design and content, and to understand the support teachers needed from administrators.

The participation of students with significant cognitive disabilities in high-stakes testing has come into question due to the cognitive severity of their disability and the difficulty of determining their progress (Ware & Healey, 2018). Students with significant cognitive disabilities can demonstrate their capabilities within academic and non-academic domains, but it is more complex to capture measurable academic progress for them on large-scale assessments without using multiple methods that consider the dynamics of their differing needs (Rayner, 2011; Smith et al., 2020).

Using the conceptual framework from the four basic perspectives on the nature of what students know and understand and how they construct knowledge proposed by Pellegrino et al. (2001), the findings provided deeper insight of SWSCDs' nature of knowing and learning as it relates to instruction and assessment in connection with the problem of SWSCDs' low performance on the VAAP. Because the profile of SWSCDs is characteristic of challenges associated with varied learning modalities and fluctuation through different levels of academic and functional development, it is necessary to understand SWSCDs' nature of knowing and learning to better understand implications

for designing instruction and assessments appropriate for them (Anderson et al., 2015; Thurlow et al., 2017; Tindal et al., 2016).

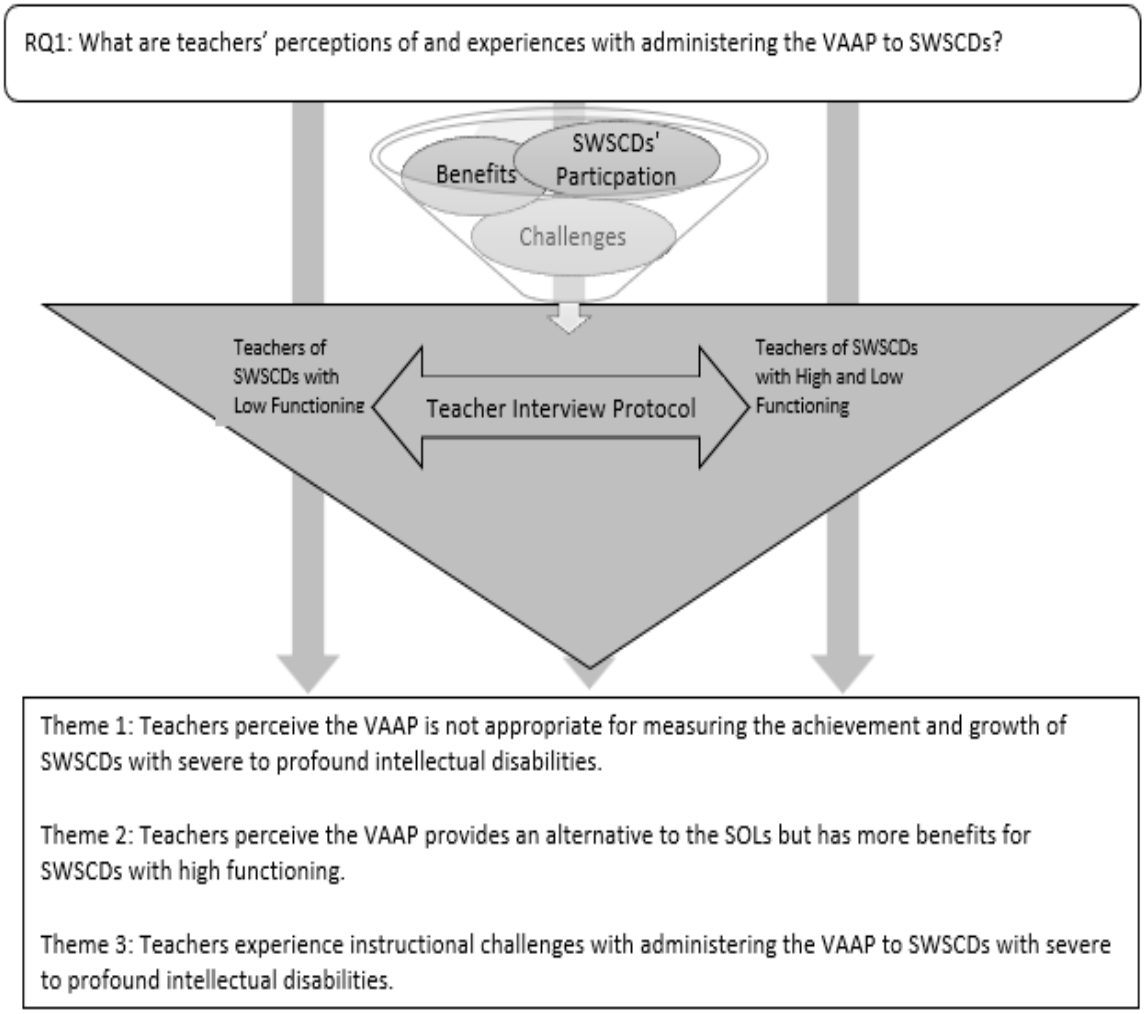
Through teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP the findings informed this study's research questions about: (a) teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs, (b) teachers' perceptions of and experiences with how the VAAP measures SWSCDs' achievement and growth in terms of design and content, and (c) supports from administrators teachers perceive they need in the administration of the VAAP to SWSCDs.

RQ1: Summary of Themes

Figure 2 shows Themes 1, 2, and 3 from interview data connected to RQ1: What are teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDS? As shown in Figure 2, the three themes emerged from interview data from teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning on: (a) the SWSCDs' participation in the VAAP, (b) the benefits of administering the VAAP to SWSCDs, and (c) the challenges of administering the VAAP to SWSCDs. Both sets of teachers were interviewed using the same interview questions related to RQ1 using the same interview protocol, and the teachers' responses showed convergences as patterns in the data emerged and themes were identified related to RQ1 (as shown in Figure 2).

Figure 2

Three Emergent Themes From Interview Data Connected to Research Question 1



Note. VAAP = Virginia Alternate Assessment Program; SWSCD = Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities; SOL = Standards of Learning

Theme 1 emerged from patterns in the interview data and showed that both sets of teachers perceive the VAAP is not appropriate for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The teachers were eager to advocate on behalf of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities as they pointed out factors they believe contribute to the VAAP not being appropriate: (a) the VAAP not accounting for the cognitive severity of the students' disability and (b) the VAAP's exclusion of functional skills connected to the students' IEP. To meet the assessment needs of SWSCDs it is necessary to understand their nature knowing and learning due to their unique assessment needs, which are varied and complex (Erickson & Quick, 2017; Goldman & Pellegrino, 2015; Knight et al., 2019). The teachers proclaimed that because the VAAP uses ASOLs that are above the students' cognitive capacity, it is not appropriate for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The teachers also pointed out the VAAP's exclusion of functional skills influences SWSCDs' opportunities to demonstrate the true nature of their abilities. For students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities, measuring their achievement through their participation in assessments based solely on academics is problematic because the academic content is not always attainable or appropriate (Smith et al., 2020). As both sets of teachers advocated for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities during the interviews, they expressed their belief that SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities have a variety of abilities that cannot be accurately measured due to the inappropriateness of the VAAP for measuring the students' achievement and growth.

Theme 2 emerged from the interview data and showed that both sets of teachers perceive the VAAP provides an alternative to the SOLs but has more benefits for SWSCDs with high functioning. The teachers agreed that while the VAAP offers SWSCDs an alternative to participating in the regular SOLs, the VAAP is more beneficial for SWSCDs with high functioning. Students with intellectual disabilities have deficits in short-term and long-term memory and other areas of cognition that cause them to learn at slower rates than their peers with and without disabilities (Greer & Erickson, 2019; Kleinert et al., 2009; Nash et al., 2015). The teachers believe the ASOLs used in the VAAP are more appropriately matched for SWSCDs with high functioning who have mild to moderate intellectual disabilities. SWSCDs with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities have characteristics described as high functioning with at least some basic academic skills and some level of independence with little to no oversight (Patel et al., 2020). As both sets of teachers discussed the appropriateness of the VAAP for SWSCDs with mild to moderate disabilities, the teachers reverted back to advocating for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities by discussing their perception of the VAAP as it relates to it not being appropriate for measuring the students' achievement and growth due to the cognitive severity of the students' disability.

Theme 3 emerged from patterns in the interview data and showed that both sets of teachers experience instructional challenges with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Because SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities have abilities on varying levels according to their cognitive and adaptive learning profile, which often shows the lack of prerequisite skills,

assessing them on large-scale tests on targeted academic skills with accuracy is difficult (Jones et al., 2019). The teachers expressed their perceptions of and experiences with challenges in administering the VAAP to SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities as it relates to (a) instruction connected to the cognitive severity of the students' disability and (b) time management. SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities often have multiple disabilities that accompany their cognitive disability, creating fluctuating academic-functional development that contributes to difficulties with instructing and assessing their wide variety of learning styles (Sener & Cokcaliskan, 2018). The teachers emphasized their challenges with instruction, underscored by the cognitive severity of the students' disability, because they perceive the instruction they have to provide related to the VAAP's ASOLs is above the cognitive capacity of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities may have multiple disabilities with a combination of cognitive, physical, and communication deficits that present challenges with the teaching and learning process (Lawson & Jones, 2018). The teachers' responses ultimately connected back to their perception of the VAAP not being appropriate for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Data from the teachers' interviews related to Themes 1, 2 and 3 informed RQ1: teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs.

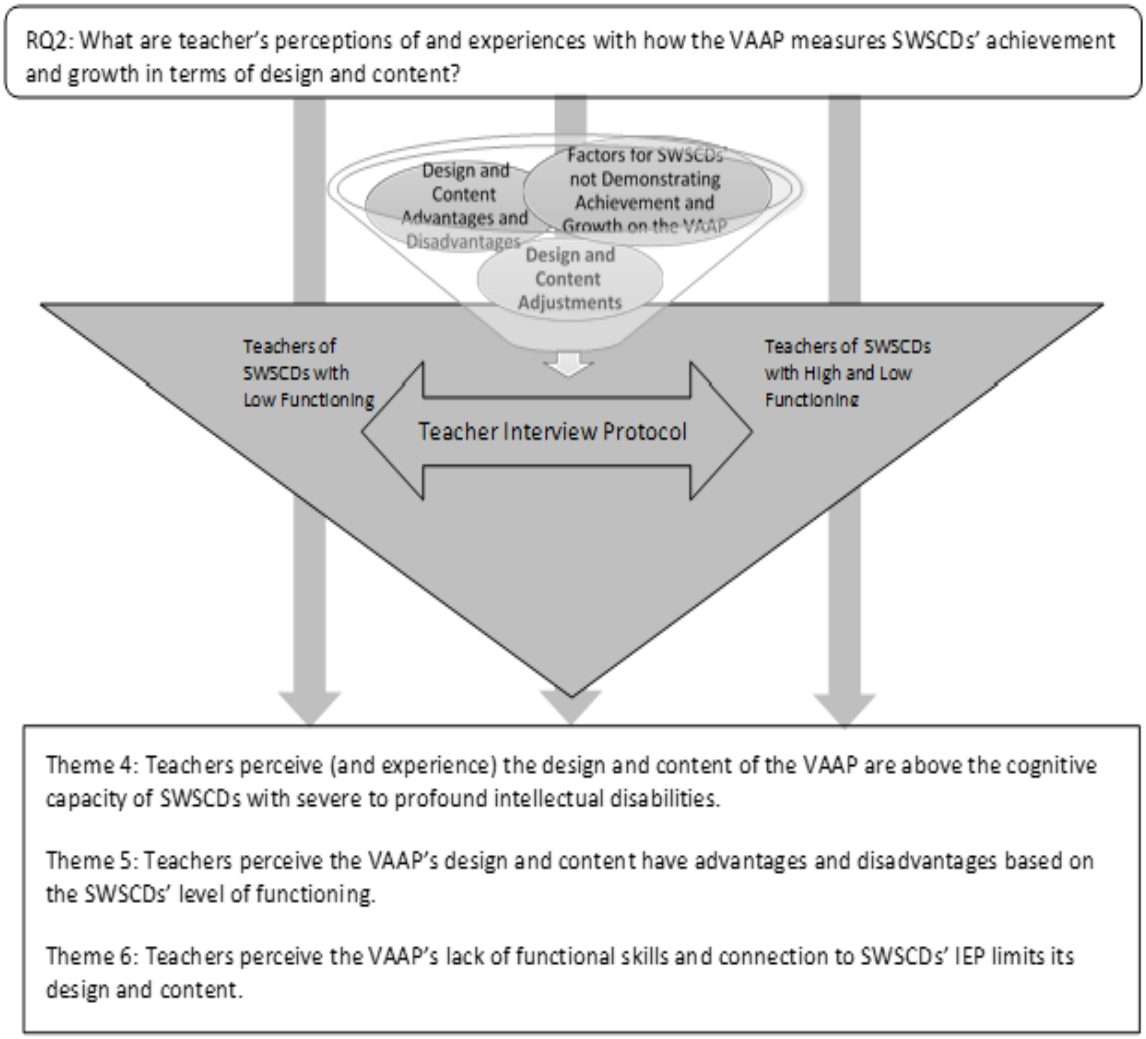
RQ2: Summary of Themes

Figure 3 shows three emergent themes (Themes 4, 5, and 6) from interview data connected to RQ2: What are teachers' perceptions of and experiences with how the

VAAP measures SWSCDs' achievement and growth in terms of design and content? Themes 4 emerged from patterns in the interview data on factors that contribute to some SWSCDs not demonstrating achievement and growth on the VAAP. Theme 5 emerged from patterns in the interview data on the VAAP's design and content advantages (and disadvantages) for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs. Theme 6 emerged from patterns in the interview data on aspects of the VAAP's design and content that should be altered to measure the achievement and growth of SWSCDs. Teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning were interviewed using the same interview questions related to RQ2 using the same interview protocol, and the teachers' responses showed convergences as patterns in the data emerged and themes were identified related to RQ2 (as shown in Figure 3).

Figure 3

Three Emergent Themes From Interview Data Connected to Research Question 2



Note. VAAP = Virginia Alternate Assessment Program; SWSCD = Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities; SOL = Standards of Learning

Theme 4 emerged from the interview data and showed that the teachers perceive and experience the design and content of the VAAP are above the cognitive capacity of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Both sets of teachers emphasized the idea that students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities are capable of learning and demonstrating achievement and growth. However, the teachers agreed that the VAAP uses ASOLs that are above the cognitive capacity of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The learning profile of students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities is characterized by limited understanding of written language and numerical concepts, with a typical standardized intelligence range of 40 to 25 or below (Virginia Department of Education, 2014). Careful consideration must be given to the wide range of abilities of SWSCDs, and SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities have more complex needs. Because students with severe intellectual disabilities have complex needs, their instruction and assessments should mirror the complexity of their needs (Lawson & Jones, 2018; Ryndak et al., 2010). The teachers advocated for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities as they expressed concerns that the VAAP does not accurately measure the students' abilities, because the VAAP includes grade level ASOLs the students cannot learn and understand due to the nature of their severe to profound intellectual disability. When assessing students with severe intellectual disabilities it is critical to capture the learning they are capable of demonstrating within a variety of domains using various modalities, to ascertain their strengths instead of focusing on the limitations they have as a result their disability (Simmons et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2020). Both sets of teachers referred back

to their perception of the VAAP not being appropriate for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities, because they believe the severity of the students' disability has a major influence on the students' ability to learn and understand the grade level ASOLs included in the VAAP.

Theme 5 emerged from the interview data and showed that teachers perceive the VAAP's design and content have advantages and disadvantages based on the SWSCDs' level of functioning. The teachers indicated they believe the severity of the students' disability influences whether the design and content of the VAAP has advantages or disadvantages for measuring the students' achievement and growth. Both sets of teachers shared their perceptions of and experiences with the VAAP's advantages for SWSCDs with high functioning to demonstrate achievement and growth. The teachers highlighted the idea that the VAAP has advantages for SWSCDs with high functioning because they have a higher cognitive capacity and aptitude for understanding grade level ASOLs included in the VAAP. The ASOLs on the VAAP include targeted age and grade appropriate content from the Virginia SOLs using general curriculum that has been reduced in depth and complexity (Virginia Department of Education, 2021c). SWSCDs have a wide range of abilities across levels of severity, which creates the need for variation in the design and content of instruction and assessments (Anderson et al., 2015). Connected to their perceptions about the influence of the severity of the students' disability, was their perception that the VAAP's design and content has disadvantages for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities to demonstrate achievement and growth. To instruct, assess, and discern the capabilities of SWSCDs with severe

intellectual disabilities, teachers have to modify instruction and assessments to include evidence-based, systematic approaches that addresses a wide range of complex learning needs for students with diverse severe intellectual disabilities (Bruce et al., 2018). The teachers explained their experiences with the VAAP's scoring format, which they explained includes decreases in the points students earn based on the modifications teachers make to the grade level ASOLs. Because the teachers perceive the grade level ASOLs are above the cognitive capacity of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities and major modifications have to be made for them to be able to understand and learn the ASOLs, they believe the decrease in points creates disadvantages for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Interview discussions from both sets of teachers about the disadvantages of the VAAP for SWSCDs with severe disabilities led the teachers to advocating for the students as the teachers reiterated their perception that the VAAP is not appropriate for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities.

Theme 6 emerged from the interview data and showed that the teachers perceive the VAAP's lack of functional skills and connection to SWSCDs' IEP limit its ability to measure the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning advocated for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities as they pointed out their concerns about the VAAP not including functional academics and the VAAP not having a connection to the student's IEP. Research conducted by Anderson et al. (2015) and Tindal et al. (2016)

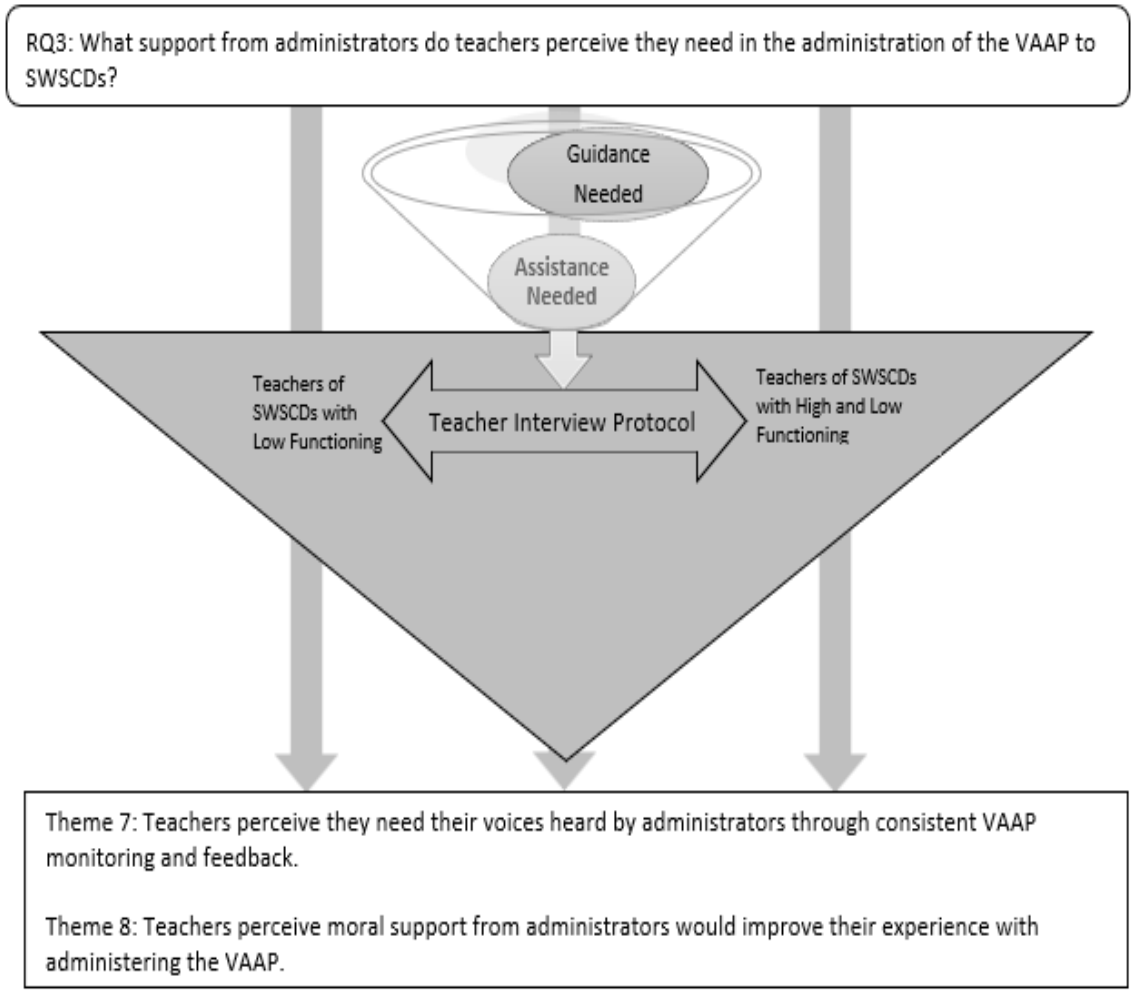
found SWSCDs' varied learning modalities and their movement through different levels of development should be considered in determining instruction and assessments for them. Both sets of teachers explained during their interviews that even with accommodations and modifications, the VAAP does not accurately measure the achievement and growth of students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities because the VAAP lacks relevant instructional and functional skills measures. The teachers advocated for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities as they pointed out that the VAAP's inclusion of functional academics aligned to the students' IEP would provide opportunities for the VAAP to measure the students' achievement and growth using instruction within the students' cognitive capacity. Goldman and Pellegrino (2015) discussed the importance of curricula, instruction, and assessments being aligned and designed to address the varied modalities of the students' learning. The teachers also expressed their beliefs about the VAAP not being able to measure the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities because the design and content does not provide measures aligned with the students' full scale IQ ranges and learning profiles. It is important to consider the different ways SWSCDs receive instruction based on their individual needs for acquiring, maintaining, and demonstrating skills (Erickson, 2013). Data from the teachers' interviews related to Themes 4, 5 and 6 informed RQ2: teachers' perceptions of and experiences with how the VAAP measures SWSCDs' achievement and growth in terms of design and content.

RQ3: Summary of Themes

Figure 4 shows two emergent themes (Themes 7 and 8) from interview data connected to RQ3: What support from administrators do teachers perceive they need in the administration of the VAAP to SWSCDs? As shown in Figure 4, Themes 7 and 8 emerged from interview data from teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning on the guidance and assistance teachers believe they need from administrators during their administration of the VAAP to SWSCDs. Theme 7 is related to the need for a consistent system for monitoring and providing feedback on the VAAP collection of evidence notebook, and Theme 8 is related to the need for moral support from administrators (see Figure 4). Both sets of teachers were interviewed using the same interview questions related to RQ3 using the same interview protocol, and the teachers' responses showed convergences as patterns in the data emerged and themes were identified related to RQ3 (as shown in Figure 4).

Figure 4

Two Emergent Themes From Interview Data Connected to Research Question 3



Note. VAAP = Virginia Alternate Assessment Program; SWSCD = Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities; SOL = Standards of Learning

Theme 7 emerged from the interview data and showed that the teachers perceive they need their voices heard by administrators through consistent VAAP monitoring and feedback. For Theme 7 the interview data from both sets of teachers showed one major point of discussion, which related to the guidance teachers indicated they need from administrators. The teachers advocated for themselves as they expressed the need for administrators to have a consistent system of reviewing and providing helpful feedback on teachers' progress with the VAAP, to include administrators being present and available to listen throughout the VAAP process. The teachers suggested that administrators create a progress monitoring system with some type of timeline or calendar that indicates when the VAAP collection of evidence notebooks will be reviewed with feedback provided. Both sets of teachers expressed concerns about wanting their voices to be heard regarding their experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. An important aspect in the development of pedagogical knowledge to improve educational practices is teacher voice through real experiences (Chen, 2020). The teachers believed that support through progress monitoring and feedback by administrators would give administrators an opportunity to be actively engaged and present in the VAAP process.

Theme 8 emerged from the interview data and showed that teachers perceive moral support from administrators would improve their experience with administering the VAAP. Patterns in the data pointed to one primary focal point of discussion from both sets of teachers on the assistance they believe they need from administrators during the administration of the VAAP. Moral support was the primary focal point of discussion

from the interviews with both sets of teachers. The teachers described the administration of the VAAP to SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities as stressful and overwhelming at times, and they advocated for themselves by proclaiming they need moral support from administrators. The teachers believed moral support from administrators would include the administrators understanding the many facets of teachers' experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The teachers stressed that beyond the regular provision of resources and materials they wanted administrators to understand and see the VAAP process from the teachers' and the students' viewpoint. A study conducted by Liebowitz and Porter (2019) found a direct connection between the well-being of teachers and the role of the administrator as an invested stakeholder. The teachers believed that if administers understood their experiences, it would lead to their voices being heard and some type of change related to the administration of the VAAP to SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Data from interviews with both sets of teachers informed the support from administrators teachers perceive they need for the administration of the VAAP to SWSCDs (RQ3). Through the outcomes summary I provide a closing summary of Section 2 that concludes with a description of the project deliverable as a direct outcome of this study's results.

Outcomes Summary

The interview data from five teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and five teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning showed convergences that connected the teachers' advocacy for SWSCDs with severe to

profound intellectual disabilities through the teachers' perception that the VAAP is not appropriate for measuring the students' achievement and growth. The teachers' perception of the VAAP's inappropriateness was undergirded by their beliefs about the VAAP's design and content for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities—framed from their pedagogical knowledge of SWSCDs, their years of experience instructing and assessing SWSCDs, and their years of experience administering the VAAP to SWSCDs. The teachers believe that the VAAP's design and content do not account for the cognitive severity of SWSCDs' severe to profound intellectual disabilities, because the VAAP includes ASOLs that are above the students' cognitive capacity. According to Jimenez and Stanger (2017), SWSCDs with severe intellectual disabilities have learning complexities as a result of their wide range of disabilities and delayed developmental progressions, which cause them to learn at much slow rates. Both sets of teachers consistently, throughout the individual interviews, advocated on behalf of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities by voicing their beliefs about the VAAP not providing opportunities for the students to show the nature of their true abilities because the VAAP does not include a balance of academics and functional skills connected to their IEP. Representing the entire dimension of learning for SWSCDs with severe intellectual disabilities (to include their strengths, limitations, and other characteristics of their learning profile) is just as valuable for measuring achievement as content (Kopriva et al., 2016). The nature of what students know and understand and how they construct knowledge provides implications for

designing a format for instruction and assessment that addresses their varying needs (Pellegrino et al., 2001; Shepard et al., 2017).

The interview data from both sets of teachers also showed convergences that connected the teachers' advocacy for themselves and other teachers of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities, through the teachers' perceptions of what they need from administrators during the administration of the VAAP to SWSCDs. The teachers expressed needing their voices to be heard by administrators, through administrative involvement and support with VAAP monitoring and feedback. The teachers believed it would assist with the administrators being present and available for listening to (and directly observing) the challenges teachers experience throughout the VAAP process. Liebowitz and Porter (2019) found administrator behaviors to be a key factor in the overall well-being of teachers. The teachers also believe the systematic routine would give teachers an opportunity to ultimately have their voices heard by district officials. Having their voices heard was very important to the teachers, but equally as important to the teachers was feeling as though their concerns were understood by administrators. Therefore, both sets of teachers voiced the perception that moral support from administrators would improve their experience with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs. The teachers who were a part of this study were excited to participate because they were eager to voice their beliefs and perceptions about administering the VAAP to SWSCDs, and hopeful about the prospect of the having their concerns understood to provoke meaningful changes in the way SWSCDs with severe to

profound intellectual disabilities are assessed so the students can demonstrate the nature of their true abilities with a balance of functional and academic skills.

Project Deliverable

Is it appropriate (or just) to measure the achievement and growth of students using content known to be above the students' cognitive capacity according to their IQ score and characteristics of their learning profile? According to the findings and outcomes of this study, teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning do not believe the VAAP is appropriate for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The teachers are concerned with having their voices heard and understood to provoke changes in the way SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities are assessed on the VAAP. Five teachers of SWSCDs with low intellectual functioning and five teachers of SWSCDs with high and low intellectual functioning advocated and voiced concerns about the appropriateness of the VAAP for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The teachers expressed concerns with the VAAP's design and content not accounting for the complex cognitive severity of the students' intellectual disabilities because the VAAP includes ASOLs above the students' cognitive capacity. The teachers voiced concerns that the VAAP does not provide SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities with an opportunity to demonstrate the true nature of their abilities because it does not include a balance of functional and academic skills connected to the students' IEP.

Based on my review of the findings and outcomes of this study, with the approval of my committee chair and team, my project deliverable is a position paper. The primary goal of the position paper is to inform administrators and other stakeholders regarding VAAP design, administration and support needed by teachers.

Section 3: The Project

The project I proposed, based on this qualitative case study's findings, was a position paper. The position paper project I developed includes background information on the problem, the summary of this study's findings, evidence from literature and research, and recommendations. The interview data I collected from two sets of teachers showed the teachers' advocacy for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. As I analyzed the data, the data revealed convergences that connected the teachers' advocacy and their need to have their voices heard regarding their perception that the VAAP is not appropriate for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The teachers' perception that the VAAP is not appropriate is based on the teachers' beliefs and experiences from administering the VAAP related to (a) the VAAP not accounting for the cognitive severity of the students' severe to profound intellectual disabilities, (b) the VAAP including ASOLs above the students' cognitive capacity, and (c) the VAAP's lack of functional skills connected to the students' IEP. The study's findings from Section 2 showed teachers need their voices to be heard and understood regarding their perceptions of and experiences with the VAAP not being appropriate for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities.

As a result of the findings, with the approval of my committee chair and team, I chose to complete a position paper as my project genre. A position paper includes fundamentally relevant and known information about a problem and addresses the problem (Ibrahim & Benrimoh, 2016). In Section 3, I present the project goals, rationale,

the review of the literature, project description, project evaluation plan, and project implications.

Project Goals

The primary goal of the position paper is to inform administrators and other stakeholders of this study's findings on teachers' perspectives of the administration of the VAAP. The secondary goal of the position paper is to provide recommendations for administrators and district officials on the support teachers need, and to provide recommendations for state officials based on teachers' perceptions of how the VAAP can be altered to measure the achievement and growth of SWSDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Raising the teachers' voices for needed support and advocacy may provoke change and may have implications for improving the way SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities are assessed with the VAAP.

Rationale

According to the findings in Section 2 of this study, teachers need support and need to have their voices heard through advocacy for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities regarding their perception that the VAAP is not an appropriate measure of the students' achievement and growth. The teachers' perception is grounded by their pedagogical knowledge and years of experience teaching and administering the VAAP to SWSCDs with intellectual disabilities. The position paper project provides an opportunity for discourse about teachers' perceptions regarding (a) the VAAP not accounting for the cognitive severity of the students' severe to profound intellectual disabilities, (b) the VAAP including ASOLs above the cognitive capacity of SWSCDs

with severe to profound intellectual disabilities, and (c) the VAAP's lack of functional skills connected to the students' IEP.

As a result of federal mandates, the VAAP's administration guidelines do not include the use of functional skills to measure the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities who have IQs of 40 and below (Darrow, 2016). The VAAP uses grade level ASOLs based on the regular SOLs that have been reduced in complexity and depth (Virginia Department of Education, 2021c). The VAAP's inclusion of the same SOLs used to assess students without disabilities, represents aspects of equality in terms of the inclusion and participation of all students in large-scale assessments. However, is it equitable for the VAAP not to include reasonable adjustments to account for the cognitive severity of students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities given the characteristics of their learning profile?

Questions about students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities' participation in large-scale assessments are often accompanied by questions about how assessments can incorporate a more holistic approach (Bautista et al., 2016). Measuring the progress of students with the most severe to profound intellectual disabilities must include the use of multiple methods that consider the dynamics of their differing needs (Rayner, 2011). Test items and accessibility for alternate assessments should be based on student characteristics (Kopriva et al., 2016). The lack of continuous promotion of functional skills may have a negative overall influence on an individual's self-advocacy and self-confidence (Baragash et al., 2020).

As an outcome of this study's findings, I selected a position paper to inform and provide recommendations to administrators and other stakeholders. The content of the position paper project includes elements that may promote social change. The information from the position paper has implications for informing decisions regarding the use of the VAAP, informing the instruction and assessment of SWSCDs, and informing how to best support teachers in the administration of the VAAP.

Review of the Literature

In this review of the literature, I present a scholarly examination of publications related to my position paper. I explain the appropriateness of my position paper for addressing the problem under study, based on the study's findings and an interconnected theoretical framework that supports the content of the project. Next, I describe the literature search methods I used, to include the databases and terms I used to conduct my search. Then, I present scholarly literature on the position paper project genre and on content in support of my position paper. I also show evidence of a gap in literature on position papers as the topic of research and as written works within education on disabilities.

Appropriateness of the Project Genre

The project genre I selected, a position paper, may generate support (from local stakeholders) and provide awareness (to local and state stakeholders) about teachers' perceptions of and experiences with the VAAP. As presented in Section 1, the problem explored in this study involved SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities not passing the VAAP from 2017 to 2019. As a result, the target Virginia school did not

meet state accreditation and that created concerns about school quality and the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Guided by a conceptual framework developed by Pellegrino et al. (2001) on the nature of what students know and how they construct knowledge, the purpose of this study was to understand (a) teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs, (b) how this assessment reflected the achievement and growth of this population in terms of design and content, and (c) the support teachers needed from administrators. According to the findings of this study, presented in Section 2, teachers need support and advocate for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities because they perceive the VAAP is not appropriate for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Based on the findings, I selected a position paper as my project genre.

The primary goal of the position paper is to inform administrators and other stakeholders of this study's findings on teachers' perceptions of the administration of the VAAP. Informing administrators and other stakeholders may have implications for how SWSCDs are instructed and assessed in the school setting and implications for understanding how the VAAP measures the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound disabilities.

Literature Search Methods

To search for literature, I used Walden's library to access databases which included Academic Search Complete, Education Source, ERIC, SAGE Journals, SAGE Knowledge, and SAGE Research Methods Online. Additionally, I used Walden's library

to access Google Scholar to search for literature. I used the resources from Walden's library to gather, store, and review peer-reviewed articles, academic books, and other scholarly literature by topic using search terms that included *position paper, position paper on education, position paper on disabilities, position paper guidelines, white paper, white paper on disabilities, white paper guidelines, models of disability,* and *critical disability theory.*

Position Paper Genre

A position paper, sometimes referred to as a white paper, has different definitions based on its context and purpose (McGregor, 2018). The term position paper is defined in reference material as, "a written report from an organization or government that discusses a particular issue and suggests what should be done" (Merriam-Webster, n.d., More Definitions section). According to Bowie State University (2019), a position paper is used to present a stance or position on a topic using supportive evidence to inform, educate, or obtain support on the topic from a targeted audience. The authors typically select an issue or problem of significant interest, and the authors usually want to persuade others to accept or consider recommendations regarding the problem (Rutgers University, 2017). Young Adult Library Services Association (2021) found position papers to be a useful tool for advocacy and for influencing key stakeholders on specific issues. Position papers in academia have elements that include a problem or issue of concern, evidence, and sometimes recommendations (Bowie State University, 2019; Rutgers University, 2017).

Problem or Issue of Concern

The problem or issue addressed in a position paper should be clearly explained, along with why the issue is of concern and significance. McGregor (2018) noted that the author of position papers should explicitly describe the rationale of their position as it relates to the issue. Providing a strong rationale helps to persuade the audience to consider the importance of the issue (Brock University, 2021; Rutgers University, 2017). Morrow and Weston (2016) recommended appealing to the audience's logical and emotional reasoning through persuasive writing. McGregor (2018) recommended selecting a problem that is somewhat controversial and arguable, in the context of presenting supportive evidence.

Evidence

Another element of the position paper includes presenting evidence. Background information from a review of literature should be provided to support the author's position (American Academy of Family Physicians, 2016; McGregor, 2018). Brock University (2021) presented a format for including evidence that shows both sides of the issue. Rutgers University (2017) presented a format that involved identifying possible counter arguments, providing supportive information for the counter arguments, and resolving the counter arguments. The evidence for a problem or issue of concern within a position paper can be used to provide knowledge and understanding for policies or procedures in government and for building support and acceptance in collaborative organizations (Young Adult Library Services Association, 2021). The evidence can be in the form of confirmable knowledge, research-based information, or anecdotal testimonies

(McGregor, 2018). To be perceived as trustworthy by the targeted audience, authors of position papers should offer evidence that shows strengths and anticipated weaknesses within the position paper, with potential solutions or recommendations (Maricopa Community College, n.d.).

Recommendations

The inclusion of recommendations or potential solutions within a position paper depends on the purpose and function of the position paper (Maricopa Community College, n.d.). A guideline for writing position papers originally presented by Rodin and Champion (2010) and updated by Ibrahim and Benrimoh (2016), included a plan for policy, rationale, and advocacy recommendations. Position papers written within the medical field serve as guiding documents that provide recommendations for practice and advocacy (Ontario Medical Students Association, 2018).

Gap in Research on the Position Paper Genre

In my search for research-based literature on position papers I discovered a gap in the literature, because there has been limited research completed about position papers. Campbell and Naidoo (2017) found that there is a significant gap in research-based literature in academia written about the position paper genre. Although position papers were readily available through Walden's library in various areas of study, the topics of the research were not focused on position papers. However, I found position papers on disability issues aligned to the context of my study's findings.

Higashida (2020) examined position papers from Mongolia on disability policies and practices and found that the position papers were used to share information about

access and participation for persons with disabilities and used to monitor inclusive policies for persons with disabilities. Harvey et al. (2020) wrote a position paper that provided recommendations for policy, practice, and research for students with disabilities on (a) access and equity, (b) curriculum alignment, (c) appropriate accommodations, and (d) collaborative research. A position paper was written by Gartland and Strosnider (2017) on behalf of the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, to advocate for high quality education standards and outcomes for students with disabilities. Flynn (2019) presented a position paper grounded in critical disability theory to inform, educate, and influence the use of persons with intellectual disability in research so their voices are not excluded.

In developing a position paper to inform administrators and other stakeholders of teachers' perspectives of the administration of the VAAP, I found critical disability theory to be interconnected to this study's findings through the nature of its focus on urgent advocacy for marginalized groups (see Hosking, 2008; Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz, 2017). Therefore, along with my review of scholarly literature on the position paper genre, I researched seven elements of critical disability theory originally posited by Hosking (2008) and updated by Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz (2017). In my literature search methods, I accessed several databases and conducted searches using terms related to my project.

Critical Disability Theory

Critical disability theory is a theory that provides a framework for understanding the study and analysis of disability issues and advocacy of marginalized populations

(Hosking, 2008; Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz, 2017). Critical disability theory, also known and used as critical disability studies, embodies elements of discourse about disability issues that promote advocacy to change unjust societal views and structures regarding persons with disabilities. Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz (2017) presented several elements of critical disability theory, originally outlined by Hosking (2008).

Models of Disability: Biopsychosocial Model

The biopsychosocial model acknowledges biological, psychological, and social aspects of disability by combining the strengths of the medical and social models of disability (Andrews, 2019). The biopsychological model acknowledges the existence and reality of an impairment from the medical model, and from the social model it considers the social, environmental, and structural barriers that must be addressed by society (Hosking, 2008; Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz, 2017). Although the biopsychosocial model was revolutionary with its integration of the medical and social models of disability, it is important to understand the multidimensionality of disability (Andrews, 2019). Within intellectual disability are levels of functioning (mild to moderate and severe to profound).

Multidimensionality and Valuing Diversity

Disability is a layered concept and experience with biological, social, environmental, personal, and other dimensions—which makes it multidimensional (Heyman et al., 2020). Multidimensionality is an integral part of critical disability theory because it involves recognizing the differences of marginalized groups by acknowledging that all members of society have differences that are interconnected (Hosking, 2008; Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz, 2017). Understanding disability as multidimensional with

aspects that intersect for all members of society, through a shared continuum, promotes the value of diversity (Nasir & Hussain, 2018). SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities typically have a combination of disabilities, which makes their abilities and limitations multidimensional and complex and adds further marginalization (Andrews, 2019).

Disability Rights and Voice

Critical disability theory highlights the voices of persons with disabilities, who are a marginalized group, and brings stories and issues of disability to the fore in advocacy of disability rights (Hosking, 2008; Nasir & Hussain, 2018; Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz, 2017). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability mandated that international governments challenge stereotypes, prejudices, and inequitable practices by creating awareness of disability rights (Singal et al., 2017; Zeilinger et al., 2020). Equitable and equal practices in education are not the same, because in equitable practices reasonable adjustments are made for persons with disabilities to enable participation and inclusion (Singal et al., 2017). Figure 5 shows an illustrated example of equity versus equality in the provision of accommodations and reasonable adjustments for persons with disabilities.

Figure 5

Illustrated Example of Equity Versus Equality in Education

Note. From *Inclusive Quality Education for Children with Disabilities* (p. 5), by N. Singal, H. Ware, & S. K. Bhutani, 2017, University of Cambridge. Copyright 2017 by Nidhi Singal. Reprinted with permission (see Appendix B).

In Figure 5, equality is represented by the inclusion of everyone picking apples standing on the same level, but the person with a disability is unable to reach an apple and fully participate (Singal et al., 2017). Equity is represented, as shown in Figure 5, by everyone standing on different levels that have been reasonably adjusted to enable inclusion and full participation for persons with disabilities regardless of the type of disability (Singal et al., 2017). Although it is necessary to identify and address barriers to access, disability advocates posit attention must be given to the quality of the educational practices that promote successful outcomes for persons with disabilities (Singal et al., 2017). Further, specific consideration must be given to the nature of the disability so that

all students with disabilities, including students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities, are afforded reasonable adjustments that address the dynamics of their complex needs (Lawson & Jones, 2018).

Language and Transformative Policies

Language used to describe persons with disabilities influences how disability is understood and influences the social, economic, environmental, and educational status of persons with disabilities (Hosking, 2008; Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz, 2017). Slurs for the previously used medical classifications of intellectual disability continue to be used as insults, which devalue persons with intellectual disabilities (Albert et al., 2016). The language used to describe disability is important because it influences societal knowledge and understanding of persons with intellectual disabilities, which reflects expectations within educational policies (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). Educational accountability has increased in public education, which has increased expectations and accountability for SWSCDs (Afacan & Wilkerson, 2021). As a result, there has been an increase of SWSCDs' participation in regular SOLs and alternate assessments as a mandated requirement of federal education laws.

Project Description

My project, in response to this study's findings, was a position paper. I designed the position paper to inform administrators and other stakeholders of this study's findings regarding the VAAP design, administration and support needed by teachers. Further this position paper may stimulate dialogue regarding how the VAAP measures the achievement and growth of students with severe to profound disabilities. The position

paper I developed reflects topics that arose from my review of literature related to elements of critical disability theory–which is used to bring disability issues to the fore on behalf of marginalized groups (Hosking, 2008; Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz, 2017). The position paper I developed presents background information on the problem, presents the summary of this study's findings, presents evidence of literature and research, and presents recommendations for administrators and other stakeholders.

Resources, Support, Potential Barriers and Solutions

The primary resource and existing support I needed was Walden's digital library to develop the position paper. I used databases and Google scholar from Walden's library to obtain peer-reviewed articles and other scholarly literature to support my position paper. Avoiding a blaming point of view may be barrier as I raise the voices of teachers through a position paper framed in critical disability theory. A major premise of critical disability theory is to bring to the fore discourse that challenges issues related to disability concerning underrepresented and marginalized groups (Hosking, 2008; Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz, 2017). Providing challenging discourse around teachers' support and advocacy for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities concerning the appropriateness of the VAAP, has the potential to be viewed as placing blame instead of raising awareness of an issue. To address and provide a potential solution I (a) researched language for the purpose of understanding disability, (b) considered the language I used, and (c) presented the teachers' perceptions and experiences as their stories through their voices. Language use during the research

process and in presenting the findings, is very important in messaging outcomes (Nasir & Hussain, 2018).

Proposal for Implementation and Roles

To raise the teachers' voices and broaden their advocacy for students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities, I will submit recommendations from this study's position paper project to the target Virginia school district's Office of Assessment Literacy and Research and to the Virginia Department of Education's Office of Equity and Community Engagement. After final approval from Walden's CAO and publication, I will submit the recommendations to district leaders and state stakeholders. The recommendations may have implications for improving teacher support and changing the way SWSCDs are assessed on the VAAP.

Project Evaluation Plan

The position paper project has two goals. The goals are an integral part of my goals-based evaluation plan. Whereas my project genre is a position paper with embedded goals made known and stated upfront, having a goals-based evaluation is appropriate. Scriven (1991) described a goals-based evaluation as an evaluation that provides knowledge of the goals and objectives in advance and refers to them. The American Psychological Association (n.d.) described a goals-based evaluation as an evaluation that depends on the program goals and objectives to determine to what degree the program goals have been accomplished. The primary goal of the position paper is to inform administrators and other stakeholders of this study's findings on teachers' perceptions of the administration of the VAAP. After I have received Walden's CAO

approval, to accomplish the primary goal I will achieve the following objectives using the position paper:

- provide administrators and other stakeholders with information on the teachers' perception that the VAAP is not appropriate for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities,
- generate support for the teachers by raising their voices and advocacy for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities, and
- provoke discourse about the way SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities are assessed on the VAAP to promote social change.

The secondary goal of the position paper is to provide recommendations for administrators, and district officials on the support teachers need, and to provide recommendations for state officials based on teachers' perceptions of how the VAAP can be altered to measure the achievement and growth of SWSDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. To accomplish the secondary goal, I will achieve the following objectives using the position paper:

- provide administrators and district leaders with recommendations for supporting teachers during their administration of the VAAP, and
- provide state officials with recommendations for altering the design and content based on teachers' perceptions of how the VAAP can be altered to measure the achievement and growth of SWSDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities.

The key stakeholders for this position paper are administrators, district leaders, and state officials. The primary role of the stakeholders is to receive and consider the recommendations that will be provided. Informing stakeholders of teachers' voices for needed support and advocacy may influence discourse about how SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities are assessed with the VAAP.

Project Implications

The project I developed, a position paper, was designed to inform and to provide recommendations for district leaders and state stakeholders. The project has implications for possibly changing the way SWSCDs are assessed on the VAAP, which may promote social change shown in instructional practices and support for teachers in the administration of VAAP. This project has the potential to begin a discourse that may have implications for change for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities, teachers, parents, the target school district, as well as the state.

Social Change Implications

According to this study's findings teachers need their voices to be heard through advocacy and support regarding their perceptions and experiences with the VAAP not being appropriate for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Grounded in critical disability theory this project brings to the fore advocacy for an underrepresented and marginalized group of students through the perceptions and experiences of their teachers. This project shares teachers' real stories of direct experiences with students who are presented with an assessment that is above their cognitive capacity according to the characteristics of their learning profile. This

project also has implications for the instruction SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities receive, because changes in the assessment would influence changes in instruction. This has implications for components of the VAAP teachers perceive should be aligned with classroom instruction and the provision of services according to the students' individualized education plans. This information could be valuable in the alignment of instruction and assessment for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. This project promotes social change because it will inform stakeholders and invoke discourse about how the VAAP discerns the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities.

Conclusion

In Section 3, I presented an explanation of the project, a position paper, as an outcome of the findings of my study. I presented the project's goals, which described the purpose of the project. Then I presented the rationale for my selection of a position paper. The review of literature I presented provided support for the position paper. Next, I presented the project description and the project evaluation. Finally, I discussed the implications of the project as it relates to promoting social change for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities, teachers, school and district leaders, as well as state stakeholders.

In Section 4, I provide my reflections and conclusions of this study. I present the strengths and limitations of the study, and I discuss recommendations for alternative approaches. Then I discuss how I have grown in scholarship as a lifelong learner while developing the study, and the aspects of leadership and change I have learned. In Section

4, I also reflect on and explain why this work is important. Finally, I consider and present implications, applications, and directions for future research.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities (full scale IQ scores of 40 and below) were administered the VAAP and did not perform well from 2017 to 2019. As a result, the target Virginia school did not meet state accreditation. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs, to understand how this assessment reflected the achievement and growth of this population in terms of design and content, and to understand the support teachers needed from administrators. Based on the findings of this study I designed a position paper to inform administrators and other stakeholders, of teachers' voices for support and advocacy regarding their perception that the VAAP is not appropriate for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities.

In Section 4, I consider and convey the strengths and limitations of the position paper project, along with recommendations of different ways to approach and solve the problem under study. I also consider and present my personal, research, scholarly growth as a reflective practitioner as a result of my development of the position paper project. Through deep reflection, I discuss the importance of this work. Finally, I discuss implications for positive social change, and I discuss directions for further research.

Project Strengths and Limitations

One significant strength of this project comes from my collection of data through individual interviews from teachers. The strength is in the firsthand, personal experiences provided by teachers who instruct and assess SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. My selection of the position paper project was based on findings

drawn from the teachers' individual interviews that revealed they need to have their voices for support and advocacy for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities heard. The position paper is grounded in critical disability theory, which is used to frame and bring to the fore disability issues for underrepresented and marginalized groups (Hosking, 2008; Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz, 2017).

Another strength of this position paper project is its potential to influence discourse and social change regarding SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities, a marginalized group, as it relates to the way the students are assessed on the VAAP (see Browne & Millar, 2016). This position paper provides an opportunity for teachers' voices to be heard regarding their support and advocacy related to how the VAAP measures the achievement of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Although the position paper project has strengths, it also has limitations.

The main limitation of the position paper project is there are limited research studies on the topic. There is a gap in research on statewide assessment results of students with intellectual disabilities, especially for students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities (Afacan & Wilkerson, 2021). Students with intellectual disabilities have a wide range of abilities according to their intellectual classifications of mild, moderate, severe, and profound (Shree & Shukla, 2016). Students classified with mild, moderate, severe, and profound intellectual disabilities are categorized under the intellectual classification of disabilities. According to Browder et al. (2020), there is a problem with terminology in the description of subgroups of a population because unique characteristics of the individual and the other subgroups the students belong to are often

overlooked (Browder et al., 2020). The gap in research presents an opportunity for discourse and further research.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

To address the problem of SWSCDs not performing well on the VAAP, I collected data from teacher participants through individual interviews. The findings revealed teachers need their voices to be heard through support and advocacy for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities regarding their perception that the VAAP is not appropriate for the students. As a result, I developed a position paper.

An alternative way to address the problem could have been for me to develop a professional development program for the teachers. An alternative definition of the problem involves looking at the teachers' instructional practices. A lack of training in evidence-based best practices for teaching students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities could be an alternative definition of the problem. Knight et al. (2019) reported that improving achievement outcomes for students with intellectual disabilities involves providing instruction in evidence-based practices. A possible solution to the problem would have been to implement a sustainable professional development program that reinforces evidence-based practices for instructing SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Cannella-Malone et al. (2019) posited that there are challenges with teachers finding instruction embedded with research-based best practices. Mohammadi and Moradi (2017) found that educators can become more effective from professional development.

Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change

George (2015) posited that a person's life story defines their leadership. A significant piece of my life story has been my participation in this doctoral process. It fuels my determination to give back to others what I have received, which is excellence in the teaching and learning process.

Prior to enrolling in Walden's doctoral program, my postsecondary educational experiences included study at Saint Paul's College, Virginia State University, as well as service-learning abroad at Whitelands College in England. Through this doctoral program, I have become a more reflective scholar, leader, researcher, and practitioner. My curiosity, intentional questioning, and reasoning have been provoked and positively disrupted by my research and development of this project. Through doctoral coursework on research practices, I gained invaluable scholarly content knowledge. However, I developed into a researcher as I traversed Walden's step-by-step research process from my development of a prospectus to my development of an approved proposal, on to my completion of my final study and position paper project. My experiences on this doctoral journey have been essential in shaping my service style of leadership, which integrates my interpersonal traits and effective use of knowledge, organization, and planning. All that I do within the realm of education centers around my passion for ensuring all children have access to the opportunities a high-quality education can provide. However, as a life-long learner, I believe there is always room for personal growth and improvement. It is my desire to be the best person I can be—contributing to the greater good of society.

Reflection on Importance of the Work

Students with disabilities, including SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities, have a right to have reasonable adjustments made for equitable inclusion and participation in education (Singal et al., 2017). In this study, I examined the problem of SWSCDs' low performance on the VAAP. I sought to understand teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs, to understand how this assessment reflected the achievement and growth of this population in terms of design and content, and to understand the support teachers needed from administrators. The findings of the study revealed teachers need their voices to be heard in support and advocacy for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities regarding their perception that the VAAP is not appropriate for them. As a result of the findings, I developed a position paper project. Through my position paper project, I have an opportunity to inform stakeholders of teachers' advocacy and support for students who often are unable to speak for themselves. So, this work is not only important—it is necessary. This research study and position paper project may invoke discourse that influences social change. Initially, I questioned why I selected such a potentially controversial topic. In my reflexivity practices, I would come full circle back to the same answer: because someone needs to bring this topic to the fore to invoke discourse about it and why not you. Through conducting this research, I learned how much this work is needed. There is a significant gap in research on the achievement outcomes of SWSCDs on large-scale assessments, especially for students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities (Afacan & Wilkerson, 2021).

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

My position paper project and the findings from this study may invoke positive social change for SWSCDs, teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders by influencing discourse about how the VAAP measures the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. There may also be implications for understanding the following: (a) teachers' beliefs and attitudes about students with SWSCDs participating in the VAAP, (b) teachers' perceptions of and experiences with benefits and challenges of administering the VAAP, (c) factors that contribute to some SWSCDs not being able to demonstrate achievement and growth on the VAAP, (d) the advantages and disadvantages of the VAAP's design and content, (e) the aspects of the VAAP's design and content that can be altered to measure SWSCDs' achievement and growth, and (f) teachers' perceptions of the guidance and assistance they need from administrators.

SWSCDs have a wide range of disabilities and may have multiple disabilities which means they have a wide variety of abilities. Their intellectual disability may range from mild to moderate or severe to profound depending on the classification of their disability. This study and position paper project have methodological implications for researchers and practitioners, working with or studying students with intellectual disabilities, to consider contextual factors related to the severity of the students' intellectual disability. Therefore, the range of abilities for students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities can be differentiated from the range of abilities for students with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities. Often, studies on students with

intellectual disabilities are inclusive of all classifications of intellectual disabilities, so individual characteristics of the other subgroups the students are a part of are left out (Browder et al., 2020).

Recommendations for practice for school and district leaders include the district establishing a districtwide calendar of monthly supports for teachers that provide opportunities for teachers to meet with school administrators to discuss the VAAP and receive feedback. Recommendations for state officials include state officials considering the use of cognitive levels of scoring that align with the learning profile of SWSCDs, which would account for the complex abilities of students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Donne et al. (2018) reported on an alternate assessment design that considered the varied range of abilities of SWCDS by allowing them to participate in the assessment through cognitive levels of complexity. The design and content of the alternate assessment provided an opportunity for students to begin with a basic level of complexity within their grade level band and move up as they obtained more skills (Donne et al., 2018). According to Donne et al., within their grade level band, students were assigned a cognitive level of difficulty: Level A (most basic), Level B (moderately difficult), and Level C (most complex). A state assessment that accounts for the cognitive complexities of all SWSCDs could provide more equitable inclusion and participation for students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities.

Recommendations for future research include expanding this study beyond the perspectives of teachers to include a variety of educators who work with SWSCDs such as speech pathologists, physical therapists, nurses, and administrators. The results of that

type of study could provide a broader view of perspectives related to the outcomes of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities participating in the VAAP.

Conclusion

Is it appropriate (or just) to measure the achievement and growth of students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities using content known to be above the students' cognitive capacity according to the characteristics of their intellectual classification? SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities did not perform well on the VAAP, which resulted in the target Virginia school failing to meet state accreditation. The purpose of this study was to understand teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs, to understand how this assessment reflected the achievement and growth of this population in terms of design and content, and to understand the support teachers needed from administrators.

The findings of this study revealed that teachers from the target Virginia school do not believe the VAAP's design and content are appropriate for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The teachers' perceptions of the VAAP's inappropriateness were framed by their pedagogical knowledge of SWSCDs, their years of experience instructing and assessing SWSCDs, and their years of experience administering the VAAP to SWSCDs. The teachers believe that the VAAP's design and content include ASOLs that are above the students' cognitive capacity. SWSCDs with severe intellectual disabilities learn at much slower rates due to the complexities of their learning profile, which is a result of their wide range of disabilities and delayed developmental progressions (Jimenez & Stanger,

2017). Throughout the individual interviews, teachers advocated on behalf of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities by voicing their beliefs about the VAAP not providing opportunities for the students to show the nature of their true abilities because the VAAP does not include a balance of academics and functional skills connected to their IEP. To address students' varying needs its import to understand the nature of what they know and how they construct knowledge, to design a format for instructing and assessing them (Pellegrino et al., 2001; Shepard et al., 2017). Although academic content is valuable for measuring achievement, representing the entire dimension of learning for SWSCDs with severe intellectual disabilities (to include their strengths, limitations, and other characteristics of their learning profile) is just as valuable (Kopriva et al., 2016).

Along with advocating for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities, the teachers also advocated for themselves by voicing their need to be heard and understood through administrative involvement and support with VAAP monitoring and feedback. The teachers valued being heard and understood by administrators because they believed it would assist with the administrators being present and available to listening to and observe challenges with their administration of VAAP. There is a direct connection between the overall well-being of teachers and administrator behaviors and relationships (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019). The teachers who participated in this study were eager to voice their beliefs and perceptions about administering the VAAP to SWSCDs. They were optimistic about the possibility of their perceptions and experiences invoking meaningful discourse about changes in the way SWSCDs with severe to

profound intellectual disabilities are assessed on the VAAP, so the students can demonstrate the nature of their true abilities.

As an outcome of the results, I developed a position paper. The primary goal of the position paper project is to inform administrators and other stakeholders, of teachers' needed support and advocacy for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities through the teachers' perceptions of and experiences with the VAAP. The position paper project is grounded in the critical disability theory, as it brings to the fore advocacy for an underrepresented and marginalized group of students through the perceptions and experiences of their teachers (Hosking, 2008; Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz, 2017). Several elements of the critical disability theory aid in raising teacher' voices for support and advocacy for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities: (a) models of disability-biopsychosocial model, (b) multidimensionality and valuing diversity, (c) disability rights and voice, and (d) language and transformative policies (Hosking, 2008; Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz, 2017).

The secondary goal of the position paper project is to provide recommendations to school and district leaders, as well as state officials. The recommendations provide considerations to invoke a better understanding and discourse about the low VAAP performance rates of SWSCDs in the target Virginia school based on findings drawn from teacher interviews with supportive literature. The discourse invoked by this position paper project has implications for possibly changing the way SWSCDs are assessed on the VAAP, which may promote social change shown in instructional practices and support for teachers in the administration of VAAP.

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Appendix A: The Project

A Position Paper to Invoke Discourse: Is the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program Appropriate for Students with Severe to Profound Intellectual Disabilities?

Background

Students with significant cognitive disabilities (SWSCDs) with severe to profound intellectual functioning in a school in Virginia did not perform well on the Virginia Alternate Assessment (VAAP). As a result, the school failed to meet state accreditation standards. The target school not receiving accreditation presented concerns for school, district, and state officials about student achievement and growth and the school's overall quality of education. Although the VAAP uses aligned standards of learning (ASOLs) that have been reduced in depth and complexity, the SWSCDs' severe to profound intellectual functioning made it difficult for them to demonstrate achievement and growth on the VAAP. For SWSCDs functioning within the severe to profound intellectual range of functioning, measuring their achievement through assessments based solely on academics is problematic because the academic content may not be attainable or appropriate (Smith et al., 2020). The focus of this position paper is to inform stakeholders regarding the VAAP design, administration and support needed by teachers.

In the local district there was little data regarding the academic challenges of instructing and assessing grade level specific ASOLs, for SWSCDs who have severe to profound intellectual functioning that presents extreme limitations related to cognitive capacity and adaptive functioning. Although researchers have proffered valuable

information about SWSCDs, research on their academic growth is limited–especially for students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities (Afacan & Wilkerson, 2021; Anderson et al., 2015). Because the literacy and numeracy of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities is typically within the pre-emergent range, it is difficult to measure their progress on large-scale assessments without considering their wide and complex range of abilities across multiple domains and modalities of learning (Smith et al., 2020).

To address the problem of low performance from SWSCDs who were administered the VAAP it was important to understand the perceptions and experiences of teachers administering the VAAP, to understand how this assessment reflected the achievement of this population in terms of design and content, and to understand the support teachers needed from administrators. Teachers' voices, through their perceptions and experiences, may influence transformative policy related to the administration of the VAAP and whether the assessment as designed is appropriate for measuring and demonstrating SWSCDs' achievement and growth. The recommendations in this position paper are based on the findings of this qualitative case study, drawn from individual interviews of teachers with firsthand knowledge and experience with administrating the VAAP to SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities.

Summary of the Findings

The findings of this qualitative case study addressed the problem of SWSCDs from the target school not performing well on the VAAP from 2017 to 2019. The study's findings aligned with the purpose, the research questions, and the conceptual framework

developed by Pellegrino et al. (2001) on the nature of what students know and how they construct knowledge. This study's research questions addressed (a) teachers' perspectives of and experiences with administering the VAAP, (b) how the VAAP measures student achievement and growth, and (c) the support teachers need from administrators.

The target school's failure to receive state accreditation presents concerns for school, district, and state officials related to school quality and the achievement and growth of SWSCDs. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs, to understand how this assessment reflected the achievement and growth of this population in terms of design and content, and to understand the support teachers needed from administrators.

The participation of students with significant cognitive disabilities in high-stakes testing has come into question due to the cognitive severity of their disability and the difficulty of determining their progress (Ware & Healey, 2018). Students with significant cognitive disabilities can demonstrate their capabilities within academic and non-academic domains, but it's more complex to capture measurable academic progress for them on large-scale assessments without using multiple methods that consider the dynamics of their differing needs (Rayner, 2011; Smith et al., 2020).

Using the conceptual framework from the four basic perspectives on the nature of what students know and understand and how they construct knowledge proposed by Pellegrino et al. (2001), the findings provided deeper insight of SWSCDs' nature of knowing and learning as it relates to instruction and assessment in connection with the problem of SWSCDs' low performance on the VAAP. Because the profile of SWSCDs is

characteristic of challenges associated with varied learning modalities and fluctuation through different levels of academic and functional development, it is necessary to understand SWSCDs' nature of knowing and learning to better understand implications for designing instruction and assessments appropriate for them (Anderson et al., 2015; Thurlow et al., 2017; Tindal et al., 2016).

Through teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP the findings informed this study's research questions about: (a) teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs, (b) teachers' perceptions of and experiences with how the VAAP measures SWSCDs' achievement and growth in terms of design and content, and (c) supports from administrators teachers perceive they need in the administration of the VAAP to SWSCDs.

Research Question 1: Summary of Themes

Research question 1: What are teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDS? Themes 1, 2, and 3 emerged from the interview data and informed research question 1. Theme 1 emerged from patterns in the interview data and showed that both sets of teachers perceive the VAAP is not appropriate for measuring the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. As teachers advocated for the students, they explained the factors that contribute to their belief that the VAAP not being appropriate for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities: (a) the VAAP not accounting for the cognitive severity of the students' disability and (b) the VAAP's exclusion of functional skills connected to the students' IEP. To address the uniquely varied and complex needs of

SWSCDs, it is necessary to understand the nature of how they construct knowledge and learn (Erickson & Quick, 2017; Goldman & Pellegrino, 2015; Knight et al., 2019). Most of the teachers interviewed had over 10 years of experience working with SWSCDs and administering the VAAP, and their knowledge and experience undergirded their belief that the VAAP uses ASOLs that are above the students' cognitive capacity—making it not appropriate for measuring the students' achievement and growth.

Theme 2 emerged from the interview data and showed that both sets of teachers perceive the VAAP provides an alternative to the SOLs, but has more benefits for SWSCDs with high functioning who have mild to moderate intellectual disabilities. Although the VAAP offers SWSCDs an alternative to participating in the regular SOLs, the teachers proclaimed the ASOLs used in the VAAP are more appropriately matched for SWSCDs with high functioning who have basic literacy and numeracy skills. Most SWSCDs with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities have some level of basic academic skills and some degree of independence with little to no oversight (Patel et al., 2020). The learning profile of students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities includes deficits in short-term and long-term memory and other areas of cognition that cause them to learn at slower rates than their peers with and without disabilities (Greer & Erickson, 2019; Kleinert et al., 2009; Nash et al., 2015).

Theme 3 emerged from patterns in the interview data and showed that both sets of teachers experience instructional challenges with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The teachers emphasized that their challenges with instruction were the result of the content of the ASOLs being above the

cognitive capacity of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Often, students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities have multiple disabilities with a combination of cognitive, physical, and communication deficits that present challenges with the teaching and learning process (Lawson & Jones, 2018). The cognitive and adaptive skills characteristic of the learning profile for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities often shows the lack of prerequisite skills, so assessing them on large-scale tests on targeted academic skills with accuracy is difficult (Jones et al., 2019). Data from the teachers' interviews related to Themes 1, 2 and 3 informed RQ1: teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs.

Research Question 2: Summary of Themes

Research question 2: What are teachers' perceptions of and experiences with how the VAAP measures SWSCDs' achievement and growth in terms of design and content? Themes 4, 5, and 6 emerged from the interview data and informed research question 2. Theme 4 emerged from the interview data and showed that the teachers perceive and experience the design and content of the VAAP are above the cognitive capacity of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The teachers advocated for the students as they expressed concerns that the VAAP does not accurately measure the students' abilities, because the VAAP includes grade level ASOLs the students cannot learn and understand due to the nature of their severe to profound intellectual disability. SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities have a learning profile characterized by limited understanding of written language and numerical concepts, with a typical standardized intelligence range of 40 to 25 or below (Virginia Department of

Education, 2014). The teachers emphatically proclaimed the students are capable of learning and demonstrating achievement and growth on instruction that is not above their cognitive capacity. The wide range of abilities of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities must be taken into consideration to ensure the students' instruction and assessments address the complexities of their needs. Because SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities have complex needs, their instruction and assessments should mirror the complexity of their needs (Lawson & Jones, 2018; Ryndak et al., 2010). It is important that assessments for students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities capture the learning they can demonstrate within a variety of domains using various modalities, to ascertain their strengths instead of focusing on the limitations they have as a result their disability (Simmons et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2020).

Theme 5 emerged from the interview data and showed that teachers perceive the VAAP's design and content have advantages and disadvantages based on the SWSCDs' level of functioning. The teachers indicated they believe the VAAP has advantages for SWSCDs with high functioning because they have a higher cognitive capacity and aptitude for understanding grade level ASOLs included in the VAAP. The ASOLs on the VAAP include targeted age and grade appropriate content from the Virginia SOLs using general curriculum that has been reduced in depth and complexity (Virginia Department of Education, 2021). Whereas the teachers perceive the grade level ASOLs are above the cognitive capacity of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities and major modifications must be made for them to be able to understand and learn the ASOLs, they believe the students have difficulty earning enough points to pass the VAAP. The

teachers noted that the VAAP's scoring forma includes decreases in the points students can earn based on the modifications teachers make to the grade level ASOLs. Teachers must modify instruction and assessments and include evidence-based, systematic approaches that addresses a wide range of complex learning needs for students with diverse intellectual disabilities (Bruce et al., 2018). There must be variation in the design and content of instruction and assessments, because SWSCDs have a wide range of abilities across levels of severity (Anderson et al., 2015, Tindal et al., 2016).

Theme 6 emerged from the interview data and showed that the teachers perceive the VAAP's lack of functional skills and connection to SWSCDs' IEP limit its ability to measure the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. The teachers advocated for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities as they pointed out their concerns about the VAAP not including functional academics in connection to the students' IEP. The teachers explained during their interviews that even with accommodations and modifications, the VAAP does not accurately measure the achievement and growth of students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities because the VAAP does not include instructional and functional skills to the students' needs. The teachers advocated for the students as they pointed out that if the VAAP included functional academics aligned to the students' IEP, it would provide opportunities for measuring the students' achievement and growth using instruction within the students' cognitive capacity. Many noncognitive skills are relevant critical life skills for SWSCDs that are essential to the instructional and assessment process (Kellems & Glasgow, 2018).

Research Question 3: Summary of Themes

Research question 3: What support from administrators do teachers perceive they need in the administration of the VAAP to SWSCDs? Themes 7 and 8 emerged from the interview data and informed research question 3. Theme 7 emerged from the interview data and showed that the teachers perceive they need their voices heard by administrators through consistent VAAP monitoring and feedback. The teachers advocated for themselves as they expressed the need for administrators to be more present and available to listen thorough a consistent system of reviewing and providing helpful feedback. Teachers expressed concerns about feeling unheard and wanting their voices to be heard regarding their experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. Teacher voice through real, lived experiences is an important aspect of improving pedagogical knowledge and educational practices (Chen, 2020).

Theme 8 emerged from the interview data and showed that teachers perceive moral support from administrators would improve their experience with administering the VAAP. The teachers emphasized that beyond the typical provision of resources and materials they wanted administrators to understand and see the VAAP process from the teachers' and the students' viewpoint. The teachers believed that moral support from administrators would be helpful in alleviating some of the stress they feel during the VAAP process. According to Liebowitz and Porter (2019), there is a direct connection between the well-being of teachers and the role of the administrator as an invested stakeholder. The teachers believed that getting administers to understand their

experiences would lead to their voices being heard and some type of change taking place in the way the VAAP assesses SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities.

Evidence from Literature

The findings revealed teachers need support and advocate for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities because they perceive the VAAP is not appropriate for measuring the students' achievement and growth. A position paper to inform administrators and other stakeholders may promote social change by invoking dialogue regarding the VAAP design, administration and support needed by teachers, which could inform decision-making and policies. Evidence from literature to support the position paper project includes elements from critical disability theory, which is a framework for understanding the study and analysis of disability issues and advocacy of marginalized populations (Hosking, 2008; Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz, 2017). Critical disability theory is also known and used as critical disability studies, which brings to the fore discourse about disability issues that promote advocacy to change unjust societal views and structures regarding persons with disabilities. Hosking (2008) and Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz (2017) presented elements of critical disability theory related to (a) models of disability-biopsychosocial model, (b) multidimensionality and valuing diversity, (c) disability rights and voice, and (d) language and transformative policies.

Models of Disability: Biopsychosocial Model

The biopsychosocial model combines the strengths of the medical and social aspects of disability by acknowledging the existence and reality of an impairment from the medical model, and by considering the social, environmental, and structural barriers

that must be addressed by society from the social model (Andrews, 2019; Hosking, 2008; Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz, 2017). According to Mitra and Shakespeare (2019), the most used and accepted biopsychosocial model is the international classification of functioning, disability, and health (ICF) developed by the World Health Organization.

The ICF elements are connected to an identified health condition and include (a) the bodily functions and structure, (b) activity limitations, (c) participation restrictions, (d) contextual factors, (e) environmental factors, and (f) personal factors (Andrews, 2019). Schiariti et al. (2018) reported that the elements of ICF are grounded in the biopsychosocial model and provide objective descriptions of abilities and limitations, in consideration with environmental and personal factors. The ICF provides a classification of subgroups based on specific criteria, and intellectual disability is described as significant limitations in cognitive functioning and adaptive behavior (Schalock et al., 2019). Andrews (2019) pointed out that the biopsychosocial model was revolutionary with its integration of the medical and social models of disability, but that it was also important to understand the multidimensionality of disability.

Multidimensionality and Valuing Diversity

The concept and experience of disability is layered and has biological, social, environmental, personal, and other dimensions–which makes it multidimensional (Heyman et al., 2020). Multidimensionality is an important aspect of critical disability theory, because it involves accepting the differences of marginalized groups by acknowledging that all members of society have differences that are interconnected (Hosking, 2008; Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz, 2017). Nasir and Hussain (2018) posited that

the value of diversity is promoted by understanding disability as multidimensional, with aspects that intersect for all members of society through a shared continuum. Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz (2017) explained the dilemma of difference from Hosking (2008) as the value of diversity through liberalism and equity. In the dilemma of difference, a decision must be made to acknowledge and address contextual barriers from the difference of disability or just ignore the difference of disability. Ignoring the difference of disability typically hinders equitable opportunities for full participation and inclusion, resulting in the marginalization of persons with disabilities (Hosking, 2008; Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz, 2017). Acknowledging disability differences and addressing them by removing the surrounding barriers not only makes participation and inclusion available, but it also makes it possible (Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz, 2017).

All students, as mandated by IDEA, are required to participate in high-stakes state assessments so alternate assessments were designed by states to reduce the academic barriers of the regular SOLs (Congressional Research Service, 2014; Darrow, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Assessments for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities must use a variety of domains and learning styles that include facets of learning the students are cognitively capable of demonstrating, to focus on measuring their abilities and not the limitations associated with their disability (Simmons et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2020). Because SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities typically have a combination of disabilities, their abilities and limitations are multidimensional and complex and adds further marginalization (Andrews, 2019; Smith et al., 2020). There are complications with the participation of SWSCDs with severe to

profound intellectual disabilities in high-stakes assessments that measure their achievement based solely on cognitive skills, because the content is not always appropriate given the cognitive severity of their intellectual disability (Smith et al., 2020; Ware & Healey, 2018). Many noncognitive skills that are relevant critical life skills for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities are overlooked as essential in the taught and tested instructional process (Kellems & Glasgow, 2018). According to Khine and Areepattamannil (2016), it is important to research ways to integrate cognitive and noncognitive skills to gain a deeper understanding of students' overall cognitive competencies. Although multidimensionality and valuing diversity are important aspects of critical the disability theory because they involve liberalism and equality, disability rights and voice provide a deeper layer of understanding and call to action regarding liberalism and equality for marginalized groups (Hosking, 2008; Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz, 2017).

Disability Rights and Voice

Critical disability theory brings to the fore the voices of persons with disabilities, as a marginalized group, to highlight their stories and issues of disability in advocacy of disability rights (Hosking, 2008; Nasir & Hussain, 2018; Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz, 2017). Persons with intellectual disabilities are of significant concern as it relates to stigma, because although they experience the same inequities as persons with other disabilities the nature of their disability often carries higher levels of health, social, financial, and educational inequities (Scior et al., 2016; Zeilinger et al., 2020). In a global study on public attitudes on the rights and acceptance of persons with intellectual

disabilities, Slater et al. (2020) surveyed 36,508 people across 17 countries and found that respondents who were university educated and respondents who had frequent experiences with persons with intellectual disabilities had higher rates of support and acceptance. By contrast Slater et al. found the opposite for respondents who were not university educated and respondents who had less experience with persons with intellectual disabilities, because they had lower rates of support and acceptance. Persons without disabilities who are not familiar with persons with disabilities, have anxiety and discomfort about contagion and other myths that result in angst that is placed on the persons with disabilities they meet (Mackelprang & Salsgiver, 2016).

International governments were mandated, by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability, to challenge stereotypes, prejudices, and inequitable practices by creating awareness of disability rights (Singal et al., 2017; Zeilinger et al., 2020). The United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals charged that international governments make a deeper commitment to more equitable educational practices for marginalized groups as a fundamental human right (Singal et al., 2017). According to Singal et al. (2017) equitable and equal practices in education are not the same, because in equitable practices reasonable adjustments are made for persons with disabilities to enable participation and inclusion. Once barriers to access are identified and addressed, disability advocates posit attention must be given to the quality of the educational practices that promote successful outcomes for persons with disabilities (Singal et al., 2017). Additional, concentrated consideration must be given to the nature of the disability so that all students with disabilities, including students with severe to

profound intellectual disabilities, are afforded reasonable adjustments that address the dynamics of their complex needs (Lawson & Jones, 2018).

Singal and Sabates (2016) conducted a study on students' basic learning in literacy, numeracy, and English and found that students with moderate to severe disabilities were not able to identify basic letters or identify basic single digit numbers. Further, the Singal and Sabates found that the students' low achievement was not reflective of their abilities, but showed deficiencies in the quality of educational structures. Through inclusive research, the voices of persons with intellectual disabilities should be heard, because they can provide direct information about their lived experiences (Correia et al., 2017). The voices of students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities on these types of educational issues are underrepresented and often go unheard (Browne & Millar, 2016; McKenzie et al., 2017). Parents, teachers, friends, and disability advocacy groups raise their voices on behalf of students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities, because self-advocacy is often challenging for them due to the nature and severity of their intellectual disability (Singal et al., 2017). The more disability rights and voices are raised, the more people have opportunities to be made aware of disability issues, so societal views can be changed using language and transformative policies.

Language and Transformative Policies

The history of disability in the Unities States is blemished by societal views of persons with disabilities as inferior and burdensome to society (Andrews, 2019). The language used to describe persons with disabilities has a large influence on how disability

is understood and affects the social, economic, environmental, and educational status of persons with disabilities (Hosking, 2008; Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz, 2017). Terms such as idiot, imbecile, moron, feeble-minded, educable, and trainable were historically used for many years within the medical profession to describe persons with intellectual disabilities, so that language was acknowledged as acceptable within society (Andrews, 2019). To change the structures of society that show disability negatively, critical disability theory has been used to frame discourse that examined and challenged negative language used towards marginalized groups such as persons with intellectual disabilities (Hosking, 2008; Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz, 2017).

Some of the language used by the medical profession has improved through the influence of federal laws such as Rosa's Law passed in 2010 by President Barack Obama–which changed the medical classification mental retardation to intellectual disability (Friedman, 2016). However, language related to the previously accepted medical classifications of intellectual disability continue to be used as insults–which devalue persons with intellectual disabilities (Albert et al., 2016). The language used to describe disability can be a powerful catalyst to reshape how persons with intellectual disabilities are perceived and understood by society–ultimately influencing transformative educational policies and expectations (Andrews, 2019; Haegele & Hodge, 2016).

With the increase of educational accountability in public education, there has been increased expectations and accountability for SWSCDs (Afacan & Wilkerson, 2021). Therefore, there has been an increase in SWSCDs' participation in regular SOLs and

alternate assessments, as a mandated requirement of federal education laws. There is a gap in research on the outcomes of SWSCDs' participation in large-scale reading assessments, so Afacan and Wilkerson (2021) conducted a study to examine the reading outcomes of SWSCDs in Grades 5-8. Afacan and Wilkerson compared the outcomes of 107 SWSCDs on the regular state assessment and 223 SWSCDs on the alternate state assessment and compared the outcomes between traditional and alternative educational placements. From the 107 SWSCDs assessed on the regular state assessment, Afacan and Wilkerson (2021) found that approximately 3% of the students reached proficiency or higher on the reading assessment. The researchers also found that of 223 SWSCDs assessed on the alternate state assessment approximately 50% of the students reached proficiency or higher on the reading. In comparing the performance rates across educational placements, the researchers found the performance rates to be consistent.

According to research conducted by Schulte et al. (2016), SWSCDs had the lowest reading performance on regular state assessments than any other students with disabilities. Consideration must be given to the quality of educational structures and policies regarding how SWSCDs are assessed, as it relates to reasonable adjustments made for their inclusion and participation in large-scale assessments (Singal et al., 2017). Additionally, because SWSCDs have a wide range of abilities, further research is needed to distinguish between the assessment outcomes of students as categorized by the severity of their intellectual disability. Without more equitable educational structures and policies the outcomes of students with disabilities, particularly for students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities, will show performance gaps when compared to students

without disabilities (Singal et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2020). As research framed in critical disability theory continues to be brought to the fore to address issues of disability affecting educational structures and policies for assessing SWSCDs, discourse around the way SWSCDs are assessed on large-scale state assessments may influence transformative policies.

Recommendations Connected to Evidence and Related to Audience

In consideration of the study findings, four recommendations are suggested that school and district leaders, as well as state officials, may find helpful as it relates to teachers' needed support and advocacy for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities regarding the VAAP not being appropriate for measuring their achievement and growth.

1. School and district leaders should collaborate to establish a schedule of support that gives teachers an opportunity to meet with their administrator to discuss, review, and receive feedback on the VAAP.
2. The second recommendation for school and district leaders is to provide teacher incentives to motivate, celebrate, and provide moral support for teachers.
3. Next, state of Virginia officials should engage in discourse about the VAAP's administration guidelines and consider a cognitive leveled system of scoring that accounts for the severity of the students' intellectual disability.
4. The fourth recommendation is state officials should consider including functional skills as field test items for students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities to gather information from alternative domain.

Raising the teachers' voices for needed support and advocacy may invoke discourse about how SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities are assessed with the VAAP and may have implications for change in the way the students are instructed and assessed.

Conclusion

The purpose of this position paper is to inform administrators and other stakeholders, of teachers' needed support and advocacy for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities through the teachers' perceptions of the administration of the VAAP. The intent of this position paper is to also provide recommendations to school and district leaders, as well as state officials. Recommendations are provided as considerations to invoke a better understanding and discourse about the low VAAP performance rates of SWSCDs in a target Virginia school based on findings drawn from teacher interviews with supportive literature. The discourse, invoked by this position paper project has implications for possibly changing the way SWSCDs with severe and profound intellectual disabilities are assessed on the VAAP–which may promote social change shown in instructional practices and support for teachers in the administration of VAAP.

Undergirded by the critical disability theory, this project brings to the fore advocacy for an underrepresented and marginalized group of students through the perceptions and experiences of their teachers. This position paper project is purposed to share teachers' real stories and lived experiences regarding the challenges students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities endure as they are assessed on content that is

above their cognitive capacity according to the characteristics of their learning profile. This position paper project has the potential for instructional implications for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities, because any changes in the VAAP assessment would influence changes in instruction. Discourse from this position paper could also lead to the alignment of instruction and assessment for SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities. This project promotes social change because it will inform stakeholders and invoke discourse about how the VAAP discerns the achievement and growth of SWSCDs with severe to profound intellectual disabilities.

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Appendix B: Illustration Copyright Permission Letter

Sametrian Miller
sametrian.miller@waldenu.edu

5/18/21

Dr. Nidhi Singal
Faculty of Education
Cambridge University
sn241@cam.ac.uk

Dear Dr. Singal,

My name is Sametrian Miller and I am completing a doctoral dissertation at Walden University entitled "Teachers' Perceptions of the Administration of the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program to Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities." I would like your permission to use an illustration from the following:

Singal, N., Ware, H., & Bhutani, S. K. (2017). Inclusive quality education for children with disabilities. *Cambridge, UK: University of Cambridge.*

The illustration I would like to use, illustration #2 Understanding equity in education, is shown below:

The requested permission extends to any future revisions and editions of my dissertation, including non-exclusive world rights in all languages, and to the prospective publication of my dissertation by ProQuest through its ProQuest Dissertation Publishing business. ProQuest may produce and sell copies of my dissertation on demand and may make my dissertation available for free internet download at my request. These rights will in no way restrict republication of the illustration in any other form by you or by others authorized by you. Your signing of this letter will also confirm that you own the copyright to the illustration shown above.

If these arrangements meet with your approval, please sign this letter where indicated below to grant your permission for the use requested above. Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Sametrian Miller

PERMISSION GRANTED FOR THE USE REQUESTED ABOVE:

Signature: Nidhi Singal 5/18/2021 | 15:13 EDT

Printed Name: Dr. Nidhi Singal

Appendix C: Interview Protocol for Teachers

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">Interviewee

Location: Zoom (Video Platform)</td><td>Assigned ID#:</td><td>Date:

Time:</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">Reminders for the beginning of the interview:
Have two digital recorders ready to record the interview session. Ensure the participant has given permission for the interview to be audio recorded.
Introduce myself and use information from the participant's demographic questionnaire as an ice breaker. Engage in a brief casual conversation about my research intentions.
Review the consent form (explaining the study's purpose, interview procedures, secure data storage, privacy, etc.). Remind participants they can save or print a copy of the consent form for their files, which was already sent to their email address when they were invited to participate.
Assure the participant that their identity and the information shared will be kept confidential. Randomly assign the participant a numeric pseudonym, which will not be in consecutive order of the interviews. Check to see if the participant has questions. Answer any questions asked.
Remind the participant that participation is strictly voluntary and that they may decide not to take part in the study at any time with no repercussions.
Let the participant know when you will begin recording. Begin the recorded interview by saying the interviewee's numeric pseudonym (assigned ID#), the date, and time.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">Use interview questions aligned with research question #1. (What are teachers' perceptions of and experiences with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs?)</td></tr>
<tr><td>#</td><td colspan="2">Interview Questions:</td><td>My Notes:</td></tr>
<tr><td>1.</td><td colspan="2">What are your thoughts about students with significant cognitive disabilities (SWSCDs) participating in the VAAP?

Potential Probes: Tell me more. What influence does the disability category have on your thoughts about their participation?

Potential Probe (Based on Participant's Response _____</td><td></td></tr>
</table>

#	**Interview Questions:**	**My Notes:**
2.	Considering your involvement with administering the VAAP to SWSCDs, describe the benefits of administering it? **Potential Probes**: Have you seen instructional benefits? Please give me an example. **Potential Probe (Based on Participant's Response):** _____	
3.	What challenges have you experienced or seen in your involvement with administering the VAAP? **Potential Probes**: Can you provide an anecdote of a particular challenge? What challenges have you experienced or seen related to obtaining student work samples? **Potential Probe (Based on Participant's Response):** _____	
4.	How has the administration of the VAAP changed the instruction of SWSCDs? **Potential Probes**: Tell me more about how your instructional practices have been influenced. Please give me an example. **Potential Probe (Based on Participant's Response):** _____	

Use interview questions aligned with research question #2. (What are teachers' perceptions of and experiences with how the VAAP measures SWSCDs' achievement and growth in terms of design and content?)		
#	**Interview Questions:**	**My Notes:**
5.	What factors do you think contribute to some SWSCDs not demonstrating achievement and growth through a passing score on the VAAP? **Potential Probes**: How do you think those factors influence the ability of the student to pass the VAAP? **Potential Probe (Based on Participant's Response):** _____	
6.	How have the changes to the design and content of the VAAP (over the past 15 years) influenced how it measures the achievement and growth of SWSCDs? **Potential Probes**: Tell me your thoughts about the VAAP not including functional skills within the assessment and including all academics with the inclusion of aligned standards of learning. **Potential Probe (Based on Participant's Response):** _____	

#	Interview Questions:	My Notes:
7.	What aspects of the VAAP's current design and content do you think present advantages for measuring SWSCDs' achievement and growth? **Potential Probes**: Tell me how those design and content advantages influence SWSCDs' performance on the VAAP. **Potential Probe (Based on Participant's Response):** _____	
8.	What aspects of the VAAP's current design and content do you think present disadvantages for measuring SWSCDs' achievement and growth? **Potential Probes**: Tell me how those design and content disadvantages influence SWSCDs' performance on the VAAP. **Potential Probe (Based on Participants Response):** _____	
9.	How do you think the VAAP's design and content should be altered to measure SWSCDs' achievement and growth? **Potential Probes**: Tell me how students would be able to maximize the demonstration of their achievement and growth. **Potential Probe (Based on Participant's Response):** _____	

Use interview questions aligned with research question #3. (What support from administrators do teachers perceive they need in the administration of the VAAP to SWSCDs?)		
#	**Interview Questions:**	**My Notes:**
10.	Describe the administrator's involvement in the administration of the VAAP to SWSCDs. **Potential Probe**: Tell me more about what the administrator does. **Potential Probe (Based on Participant's Response):** _____	
11.	What are your thoughts on the assistance the administrator should provide teachers in the administration of the VAAP? **Potential Probes**: Tell me more and provide an example. **Potential Probe (Based on Participant's Response):** _____	
12.	What do you think the administrator should do to guide the administration of the VAAP? **Potential Probes**: Tell me more and provide an example. **Potential Probe (Based on Participant's Response):** _____	

Reminders for the end of the interview:

- Let the participant know that the interview has ended. Stop the digital recorder.
- Thank the participant for participating and inform him or her that you will contact him or her if you have questions about the interview responses.
- Remind him or her of their participation in member checking. Explain that you will email him or her an encrypted draft summary for their review and feedback.
- Give the participant your contact information (email and phone number).
- Check to see if the participant has questions. Answer any questions asked.