

2015

Middle School Teachers' Perceptions of Incorporating Alternative Assessments to Accommodate Students

Terra Wright
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Terra Wright

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Walden University
2015

Abstract

Middle School Teachers' Perceptions of Incorporating Alternative Assessments to
Accommodate Students

by

Terra Malissa Wright

MA, Cambridge College, 2004

BS, Alabama State University, 1997

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

Walden University

August 2015

Abstract

A suburban middle school located in the southeastern United States included differentiated instruction and technology in all aspects of the curriculum. Teachers at this school received professional development on differentiated strategies; however, many teachers did not apply the strategies to assessments and continued to use traditional assessments despite the poor performance of their students on class evaluations. This qualitative case study, rooted in constructivist theories, examined middle school teachers' perceptions and use of alternative assessments. All 6th Language Arts teachers were selectively invited to participate in my study because they teach a core 6th grade subject, four teachers responded and consented to complete an open-ended survey on their use of assessments, to participate in individual interviews about their perceptions of alternative assessments, and to submit teacher lesson plans indicating assessment use. Descriptive analysis of the survey responses from the four Language Arts teachers revealed the participants infrequently differentiated their assessments. Content analysis of lesson plan assessments supported this finding, indicating that most evaluation activities included traditional tests and quizzes. Interview data were analyzed with typological coding and thematic analysis. Findings revealed that participants endorsed the effectiveness of alternative assessments of student learning, but used traditional assessments mostly due to ease of creation and grading. Participants noted that with increased collaboration, the use of alternative assessments could be supported. This study may promote social change at the study site and its school district by providing data to help plan and develop training focused on differentiated assessments, allowing teachers to share strategies and plan differentiated assessments that enhance student-centered learning environments.

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Dedication

This doctoral study is dedicated to my wonderful husband, Thomas (Mike). You have supported and encouraged me through every step of this journey. I thank you for all the technical support and for always assisting me in any way that I needed you to, no questions asked. You are truly my best friend and biggest cheerleader, and for that I thank you.

To my three beautiful children Emoni, Eboni, and Ean, each of you is my inspiration and my motivation in life. I love the individuals that you are growing into, and I want each of you to forever reach for the stars and to know that there are no limits to what you are able to do.

To my parents, Donald and Sandra, I thank you for always encouraging and supporting all my decisions and choices. I have always been allowed to discover my place in the world and taught to always put God first in all that I do.

To my siblings, Trimeka and Terrance Sr., you two have always been the best big sister and brother, who have always protected me and supported me, and for that I thank you both.

To all my amazing family and friends, I am truly blessed. My family has always fully supported all the decisions and the choices that I have made and will continue to make and has provided me the support to be successful in all that I do. I am so thankful for the support, patience, and encouragement of “my village.” I *CAN* do all things through Christ God who strengthens me! I am so very grateful for each and every one of you and I love you all!

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Section 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

The system of public education in the United States today was first formed during the 1840s. Bringing diverse groups of people into the American mainstream was one of the primary goals of public education advocates (Scott, 2011). Thomas Jefferson was one of the first American presidents to consider developing a public education system; Jefferson's ideas formed the foundation of the education system created in the 19th century (Thattai, 2001). During the late 1800s, American schools began to restructure teaching practices based on new principles and cultures of instruction that began in other countries. The beginning of a new system of industrial education began with a steady reform in the vision of American schools (Gatto, 2003).

Reform in American schools during the early 19th century was largely due to the analysis of the relationships between the increasing enrollment of students and new directions in curriculum and instruction (Tyack, 1979). For example, Thattai (2001) described the public school system of the United States as an example of a system that instills the principles of equality and freedom in every student. The ideals and principles of a national public school system created to teach the diverse population of students continue to be the foundation of the public school system of today. This qualitative study examined middle school teachers' perceptions of differentiated assessments in order to understand the types of assessments that meet the learning needs and abilities of the individual middle school student.

The 19th century was a turning point in American education. This era paved the way for the modern public school system (Levin, 2001). Assessment practices appeared in the early 1900s, and the US government was the dominant user of these assessment practices. Early assessments took the form of examinations and tests focusing more on determining what a student was capable of than assessing actual learning (Cobb, 2004). Data from early tests indicated that only one-quarter to one-third of the population was capable of academic learning (Peterson, 2010). Early testing practices were not designed to test the general student population. Cobb (2004) explained from the 1920s-1950s the primary function of testing was to track students and for student selection for programs and higher education. During the 1960s, test performances became a national obsession. Students' test scores and comparisons and classifications of students and schools led to the conclusion that value could be placed on the nation's education system as a summation of its test scores (Sacks, 1999).

The testing culture of the 1980s and 1990s became one of the most dominant forces in American schools. Proponents of the nation's school accountability movement contended that if teachers, principals, and school boards were more accountable for performance, then schoolchildren would inevitably become greater achievers (Sacks, 1999). Proefriedt (2008) stated that for three decades beginning in the 1980s, the focus of reform was the schoolhouse itself. Setting high standards, mandating rigorous curriculum for all, frequent testing, and holding students, teachers, and administrators accountable from the local schools to state education departments became the priority for schools to reform. The responsibility of schools has transformed. Assessment methods traditionally

were created to encourage accountability by separating successful from unsuccessful students and acknowledging their differences. Assessments should now support learning of all students (Stiggins, 2006). When assessment outcomes are used to measure the strength of learning and as a compass to show the direction of future achievement, all students become competent learners (Hearne, 2009).

This qualitative study investigated types of assessments used at a middle school in central South Carolina. At the time of this study, the daily sixth grade curriculum at this suburban middle school included a variety of instructional methods, using differentiated instruction and technology in all aspects of the curriculum; however, the assessment of student work was still limited to traditional assessments (e.g., multiple choice, true/false, and essay tests). The current assessments used by these sixth grade middle school teachers were reviewed to determine how differentiating assessments support individual learning abilities and needs for the middle school student. All teachers employed by the district were aware of the district's Academic Service Division's main priority and mission which is to support teaching and learning in a student-centered environment. The teachers invited to participate in the study regularly attended professional development opportunities that focus on student-centered environments on a school, district, and national level.

Background to the Problem

In this study, examining the ways teachers assessed students in their classrooms was central to understanding the types of assessments that meet the learning needs and abilities of the individual middle school student. During this process, decisions to

differentiate assessments most likely are affected by the students' individual academic ability and performance levels. There are strong beliefs of teachers being conscious of their students' social and academic differences. They must create lessons that drive all students to learn and implement these lessons using differentiated strategies to increase student learning (Moore & Hansen, 2012). Exploration and collaboration are the most preferred forms of learning. Students should have the opportunity to explore and discover new concepts through collaborations and investigations (Keeley, 2011). Moore and Hansen (2012) concluded that differentiated instructional methods increase student achievement and inspire students because students are being taught in ways that align with their ability levels, personal interests, and learning profiles.

When implementing differentiating instruction into the curriculum, teachers have the ability to plan instruction regardless of student needs and student backgrounds. Differentiated practices empower educators to accommodate their students' diverse needs by adjusting the way students present and learn new information (Tricarico & Yendol-Hoppey, 2012). Curriculum should address the diverse needs of all learners because all students are capable of learning. Educators must aim to teach all individuals, and assess them accordingly. The goal is to create assessments that will challenge the advanced student and not hinder the desire and will to learn of the underachieving learner (Bruner, 1966). Research shows that differentiation strategies are productive ways to teach and meet each student on his or her ability in all academic classrooms (Servilio, 2009).

Problem Statement

Sixth grade students in a suburban middle school located in central South Carolina are assessed regularly, however; there are sixth grade teachers who limit the types of assessments that are used to evaluate their students, even though many sixth grade students do not perform well in class and work below grade level. The daily sixth grade curriculum includes a variety of instruction using differentiated instruction and technology in all aspects of the curriculum; however, the assessment of student work is still limited to traditional assessments (e.g., multiple choice, true/false, and essay tests). Even though these teachers are being trained on the national, state, and district levels, and also continuously receive school wide professional development opportunities to create student-centered environments, assessments are not always differentiated to meet the needs of the individual middle school student. By using a variety of assessments to monitor students' progress based on meeting curriculum goals and standards, teachers assess where students are and then make effective and immediate decisions to help struggling learners and challenge accelerated learners (Burke, 2010). This study reviewed the assessments currently used by sixth grade Language Arts middle school teachers at the study site to determine the way differentiating assessments support individual learning abilities and needs for the middle school student.

Curricula should be designed in acknowledgment of the abilities and needs of every learner (Bruner, 1966). If curriculum is designed to accommodate the individual student then these students' abilities and needs will be addressed. Middle-level education in the United States has long supported student-centered learning and encouraging

learners to take ownership of their own success (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2008). In differentiated classrooms, assessments are continuous and diagnostic in order to provide teachers with daily data on students' abilities for specific ideas and skills, personal interests, and each student's learning profiles (Tomlinson, 1999). According to Schurr (2009) middle school teachers now understand that assessment practices need to be reorganized. Assessment activities should address the needs of adolescents and the desired outcomes of the middle school grades curriculum. Differentiation naturally occurs when teachers set goals, observe where students are in relationship to those goals, and respond accordingly (Doubet, 2012). Tomlinson (2008) concluded differentiation offers a system that maintains trust by allowing teachers to actively and positively support all students' learning. Examining the types of assessments sixth grade Language Arts teachers use to assess students in the classroom may create professional development opportunities for teachers who have yet to differentiate and vary assessments based on individual abilities and needs of their students.

Nature of Study

The ways alternative assessments may accommodate learning for the individual student at the middle school level were examined using a qualitative case study design. This case study was chosen because it allowed me to examine the impact alternative assessments have on individual student learning using an open-ended survey, individual teacher interviews, and teacher lesson plans. The sample consisted of sixth grade Language Arts teachers, each of whom was invited to participate in this study because they, along with the researcher, have taught one of the four core subjects in the sixth

grade curriculum for many years. The teachers were chosen because they are familiar with the expectation of the school's and the district's commitment to meeting the needs of the individual students. A variety of data collection methods were used to triangulate the data, including an open-ended survey, semistructured interviews, and teacher lesson plans. Section 3 presents a detailed description of methodologies and the data analysis procedures used in the study.

Research Questions

1. How do traditional assessments identify the learning ability and needs of individual middle school students?
2. How do alternative assessments identify the learning ability and needs of individual middle school students?
3. How are learning outcomes different for the individual middle school student when comparing traditional to alternative assessments?

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine the assessments used by sixth grade teachers to support individual student learning at the middle school level. The study focused on the types of assessments that are currently used by these teachers. The participants in this study are regular education teachers who teach one of the academic subjects in the sixth grade curriculum. To integrate alternative assessments effectively into the curriculum to address the needs and abilities of sixth grade students could possibly allow curriculum to move to more student-centered assessments, and may increase student motivation to learn.

Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is based on the theory of constructivism. In constructivist classrooms, students learn from active participation and are provided the opportunity to discover meaning through discussion, debate, and inquiry (Anderson, 1998). Students form opinions from their school experiences about themselves as learners based on the feedback they receive from their classroom assessment (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2008). Middle school is a critical period and assessments are crucial factors in determining how these students see themselves and their classmates during this time (Rieg, 2009). Contemporary American classrooms have students who are culturally and linguistically diverse (Huebner, 2010). Accommodations for learning styles and learning abilities for all students must include assessments that allow every student to show what they can do (Bauer & Brown, 2001). All students are capable of learning and teachers should be resourceful when using instruction and assessments that meet the academic needs of each individual student they teach (Rieg, 2009). Teachers are able to personalize learning for students by relating learning to their past, present, and future (Childre, Sands, & Pope, 2009). Students should be allowed to make learning relevant by merging their work to real world experiences.

The responsibility of constructivist educators is to assist and facilitate students in their building knowledge (Boghossian, 2012). Johnson (2009) reflected constructivism is the term that describes student-centered and student-controlled learning. According to Piaget (1947/1950), the degree in which a person interacts with other people is dependent on that person's cognitive development which in turn shapes the person's perception and

knowledge of relationships. It is the actions, recollections, and responses of the participants that makes, or constructs a complete description, or definition of a relationship. Interaction with peers is an effective way of developing skills and strategies. Teachers may use cooperative learning exercises where academically struggling children can develop skills with help from more skillful peers (Vygotsky, 1978).

Cognitive constructivism is based upon the way individual learners comprehend things, based on developmental stages and learning styles (Atherton, 2005). Bruner (1966) stated, “there is no unique sequence for all learners, and the optimum in any particular case will depend upon a variety of factors, including past learning, stages of development, nature of the material, and individual differences” (p. 49). Learning takes place at different stages for learners and learning is based on many factors. As individuals, we learn in different ways and at different times in our lives. Children build an understanding of the world around them, then experience the differences between their previous knowledge and what they discover in their surroundings (Piaget, 1973).

Constructivism is founded on the principle that allows students to connect previous knowledge and experiences with new knowledge through active participation and interactions with others and their surroundings (Childre, Sands, & Pope, 2009). Building knowledge from experiences is learning, therefore; constructivist learning principles are based on creating knowledge from experiences (Boghossian, 2012). Students having opportunities to reflect on important questions and solve problems through active participation and assessments should be the foundation of learning. The

principle learning objective is to transform students from academically passive to actively engaged participants as learning becomes more relevant and interactive (Childre, Sands, and Pope, 2009). Using assessments to focus on student interests and learning preferences illustrate the power of emphasizing what works for students (Tomlinson, 2008). Past and present approaches of constructivism focus on how students create understanding. Learning for all students should be guided by continuous formative assessment for student understanding and building knowledge (Childre, Sands, & Pope, 2009). Chappuis and Stiggins (2008) stated research shows that learning is improved as a result of formative assessments if students comprehend the expected learning and assessment objective, if students are given feedback that is meaningful, detailed, and most importantly if students are engaged in their own learning process.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are used:

Alternative assessment: Any and all assessments that are different from the multiple choice, timed, and one-time evaluations which describe most standardized tests and many classroom assessments (Marzano, Pickering, & McTighe, 1993). Also known as non-traditional assessment.

Assessment: Any technique used to better understand the existing knowledge of a student. The belief of existing knowledge imply that what a student understands is constantly changing and that judgments can be made about student success based on relationships over time. Assessments may influence decision about grades, academic placement, instructional concerns, and curriculum (Dietel, Herman, & Knuth, 1991).

Differentiated instruction: A practice of revising curriculum to accommodate the needs of individual students. Whether teachers differentiate the information, activity, student work, or the learning environment, the use of continuous assessments and diverse grouping makes this a successful approach to learning. To accommodate how students learn requires common sense and a strong foundation of the principles and investigation of education (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000).

Formative assessment: An instructional practice that ongoing and supports the instructional decisions teachers make regarding students. It is a method that can be expanded to accommodate and assist future learning (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2008).

Inquiry-based learning: Student-centered learning that provide opportunities for students to create personal knowledge through questioning. It guides the students to ask questions and make discoveries (Suchman, 1962).

Learning styles: Mental, perceptual, and physiological instruments that are reliable gauges of how a person observes, collaborates, and responds to all learning that is taking place in their environment (Keefe, 1979).

Multiple intelligences: The ability to solve problems or to create results that are vital in many diverse settings. All people have nine intelligences in various levels. These multiple intelligences can be nurtured and made stronger, or ignored and weakened (Gardner, 1983).

Performance assessment: Application strategies, application of knowledge, ability skills, and work ethics through performance or the completion of instruction that is relevant and engaging for the learner. This form of assessment provides data for teachers

based on a child's ability to comprehend and apply knowledge. In addition, teachers can implement performance-based assessments into the curriculum to provide ongoing learning opportunities for all students (Brualdi, 1998, p. 1).

Summative assessment: The traditional method of evaluating student progress. Outcomes from tests develop into an evaluation, such as a score in a grade book or a grade on a report card. These assessments reflect the ability level of student progress at a particular point in time (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2008, p. 12).

Traditional assessment: Tests or an exam that contain multiple choice questions, true false questions, and completion questions that focus mainly on Bloom's Taxonomy lower levels (Marzano, Pickering, & McTighe, 1993).

Assumptions and Limitations

Data gathered in this case study included an open-ended survey, interviews, and lesson plans, which was collected with several operative assumptions. The first assumption was that the Language Arts teachers that participated in this study were an accurate representation of the total population of teachers at the middle school located in central South Carolina that was used as the study site. It may be assumed that all teachers who participated in the research incorporate alternative assessments on a regular basis in their curriculum. It was also an assumption that all responses from the interviews accurately represented the feelings and attitudes of the participants in the study and that all questions answered by the participants were answered openly and honestly. Finally, learning how the participants administered assessments to students was a reflection of the most common assessments used at this particular school.

The case study was limited to one selected group of teachers in one school in one district; therefore, the results cannot be a generalization of all middle school teachers. If the study were to be replicated, a larger interview sampling could provide greater teacher perceptions of alternative assessments and the link to student learning. The participants have varying educational levels and teaching experiences and therefore may influence the objectivity of the information.

Scope and Delimitations

This qualitative case study was conducted in September and October 2014 using participants from a suburban middle school located in central South Carolina. The study was therefore confined to interviewing one purposeful sampling grade level of teachers. Delimitations of this study included the school district and one particular grade level. These teachers regularly attend professional development opportunities that focus on student-centered environments on a school, district, and national level. Data collected in the study was obtained from an open-ended survey, individual interviews, and teacher lesson plans for further analysis of the phenomenon.

Significance of the Study

Observing students in diverse contexts across curriculum will require teachers to take a closer look at themselves, their practices, their students, and their students' learning. Locally, the information I gained as a researcher will provide teachers with foundational knowledge regarding alternative assessments and the impact they could have on student learning. Details of the learning process are revealed and clarify the kinds of environments and practices that support different learners to learn in different

ways (Lieberman & Miller, 2001). The study is significant because it examined types of alternative assessments that are used to identify the learning ability and needs of individual sixth grade middle school students. Additionally, differentiating assessments may accommodate learning for every student; therefore, findings of the research may allow educators to incorporate additional assessment strategies that could possibly meet the academic needs and abilities of the individual student in their present classrooms. The use of alternative assessment methods that engage students in meaningful exploration and demonstration of mastery of learning objectives may provide alternative evaluation strategies for professionals in the educational community.

Summary

This section defined the types of assessments that are given to middle school students on a daily basis. The use of assessment methods that engage students in meaningful discovery and demonstration of the learning objectives are important to individual student learning. Wickersham and Chambers (2008) noted it is significant to have the ability to use an outcome assessment practice that actively engages students to become dependable and reflective learners. Constructivism relates to educational methods that are student-centered, relevant, procedure oriented, engaging, and receptive to student interest (Johnson, 2009). Research has shown that creating a constructivist learning environment empowers the individual student to actively construct his or her own meaning which may result in the desire for learning. The goal of this case study was to examine assessment practices that accommodate the needs and abilities of the individual middle school student.

Section 1 presented the introduction to the study, background of the problem, statement of the problem, nature of the study, research questions, purpose statement, conceptual framework, definition of terms, assumptions and limitations, scope and delimitation, and the significance of the study. Section 2 includes an in-depth analysis of the literature regarding the history of assessments in the United States. The literature review includes analysis of history of assessments, types of assessments, and the effectiveness of assessments. Section 3 details the methodology used in this study, including the research design. It also explains the rationale for selecting the participants and data collection procedures. The results of the study, including detailed narrative description, are found in Section 4. Section 5 includes interpretation of the findings and recommendations for further action and further study.

Section 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This review of the literature is centered on the history of assessments in the United States, types of assessments that exist in schools, and evidence of the effects different types of assessments have on middle school students. It specifically discusses student-centered classroom assessment that opens the assessment process and welcomes students as partners who are responsible for their own levels of achievement (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2011). A guiding theory in this study was constructivist theory, which recognizes that meaning and understanding grow out of social interactions. A child is part of their social setting and the relationship of a child to their environment and then environment to a child occur through that child's experiences and activities (Vygotsky, 1962).

This review of literature consisted of research and data relevant in the area of creating assessments that support individual student learning and achievement. Multiple sources, inclusive of journal articles, peer-reviewed articles, government reports, and books, represent the research found in this chapter. Electronic databases were searched using EBSCO Host. These individual databases include, ERIC, Education Research Complete, Academic Search Premier, and ProQuest Central. The databases were searched using the following keywords; *assessments, constructivist classrooms, traditional assessments, non-traditional assessments, alternative assessments, summative assessments, formative assessments, performance assessments, differentiated instruction, No Child Left Behind, multiple intelligences, and student achievement*. The resulting

discussion of research is divided into four major components: historical perspectives on national school reform, types and effectiveness of assessments, combining assessments, and the connection to curriculum and No Child Left Behind.

A Brief History of National School Reform

Education is one of the most important responsibilities of government. It was a concern for the early Americans and a plan the Founding Fathers wrote into the U.S. Constitution, specifically because the democracy of the United States is dependent upon educated citizens (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). It was the responsibility of national and state leaders to provide a quality education to every American student since the development of the public school system in our country. Beginning with Dame schools and one-room schoolhouses, education and the operation and oversight of public schools has traditionally been the responsibility of states and local school communities. Theoretically, the federal government was not supposed to play a major role controlling or directly financing schools (Anderson, 2007). Understanding the universal importance of education, the federal government took on a larger role of financing public schools by passing the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) in 1965 (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). The last three decades regarding the reform of education can be described as the standards, assessment, and accountability movements (Laitsch, 2006).

In August 1981, the National Commission on Excellence in Education was chartered under the authority of 20 U.S.C 1233a, to review and produce information and scholarly literature on the quality of teaching and learning in America's schools, colleges, and universities, both public and private (Jorgensen and Hoffman, 2003). Ravitch and

Cortese (2009) believed that all of the nation's students are entitled to receive a quality and content-filled education that will provide the background knowledge necessary for students to effectively pursue their dreams. *A Nation at Risk*, written by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, issued in April 1983 was the findings of the 1981 study. The report's findings and recommendations covered four important components of education: (1) content (2) expectations (3) time and (4) teaching (Jorgensen & Hoffman, 2003).

A Nation at Risk (1983) "went national" with the passage of the Improving America's School Act of 1994 (IASA) and resulted in achievement testing and standard-based reform (Jorgensen & Hoffman, 2003). Since the publication of this report, educators and policymakers throughout the nation have had trouble defining academic performance standards and creating relevant assessments (Laitsch, 2006). Politicians have tried to set higher expectations for tougher standards since *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on the Excellence in Education 1983) was published and the subsequent creation of Goals 2000 (Smyth, 2008). Goals 2000-Educate America Act was an important law passed in 1994. Congress passed the Goals 2000: Educate America Act in 1994 as an effort to implement standards based curriculum in more than one-third of all the districts in the nation (U.S Department of Education, 1999). Improving America's School Act was the 1994 reauthorization of the ESEA and was designed to conform the Goals 2000 school reform framework (Anderson, 2007).

From 1994 to 2000, the majority of states implemented content and performance standards and methodologies for setting performance standards. No Child Left Behind

was reauthorized in 2001, and it requested states to establish standards for student performance and teacher quality (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). On January 8, 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), with overwhelming bipartisan support from Congress. The final votes were 87-10 in the Senate and 381-41 in the House (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). The principals of NCLB are founded on *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) where U.S. Supreme Court banned racial segregation in public schools and concluded the “separate but equal doctrine” was unconstitutional. In 2002, many civil rights supporters initially approved the Bush Administration’s major Education Bill, positively named “No Child Left Behind,” as a step forward in the ongoing fight for the students historically left behind in America’s school (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

According to the Office of the Press Secretary (2009), progress toward rebuilding the country’s schools demands holding schools responsible for assisting each student to master world-class standards that are aligned to the requirements of the 21st-century job market. States and local school districts are responsible for the establishing and enforcing policies and guidelines for individual success for each student. These guidelines, according to the U.S. Department of Education Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (2006) were intended to provide feedback regarding best practices in data collection. The United States’s economic competitiveness is founded on providing each student with an education that will allow him to compete in a global market that is based upon understanding and innovation (Office of the Press Secretary, 2009).

The Implementation and Results of No Child Left Behind

According to Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NREL, 2006), the NCLB Implementation Center helps schools and school districts create local facilities to design and execute the legislative requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. This support is provided through research, technical support, and evidence-based best practices and resources for teachers. With funds provided by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the U.S. Department of Education works with states to enhance data systems that monitor student growth and evaluate the competence of educators (Office of the Press Secretary, 2009). However, the most current release of scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) provided no evidence for the validity of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (Ravitch, 2009).

Several years after its implementation, the country is examining the effects of NCLB. Educators have determined the act is flawed, developmentally incompatible, poorly funded, and is leaving more schools, educators, and students further behind than ever before (Smyth, 2008). Schlechty (2008) added the debate over the reauthorization of NCLB generally over looks or looks past what may be the most basic flaw of the legislation. As the law is currently written, parents and the school community do not have control of how students are expected to perform in school. National standards will not improve education without acknowledging that content matters (Ravitch and Cortese, 2009). Educators, students, and families face many challenges in responding to testing mandates of the NCLB and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Salend, 2008).

In recent years, educators have moved away from using assessments merely to evaluate and grade student achievement to using assessments to modify teaching practices that will lead to greater learning for students (Stiggins and Chappuis, 2008). A report that shows American students at the age of 15 have the lowest mathematical abilities of all developed countries is very significant because at 15 years old students may consider entering the competitive job market (Clark, 2011). Comer (2011) suggested the main purpose of assessment should be to guide instruction. The purpose of assessments is not to assign a grade for students, instead it is to inform teachers of what needs to be addressed in the classroom (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2005).

Traditional Assessments

Traditionally, an important role of assessment practices has been to identify and focus on the differences in student learning in order to group students based on their achievement. These assessment experiences have produced winners and losers in classrooms (Stiggins, 2005). Assessment practices historically have been developed to rank students in order from highest to lowest which means some students succeeded at learning while other students failed (Stiggins, 2006). An assessment may be defined as any approach used to better understand the existing knowledge of a learner. According to Marzano, Pickering, and McTighe (1993) a traditional assessment may be defined as tests that include multiple choice questions, true false questions, and completion questions, that is based on Bloom's Taxonomy lower levels. Assessments play a major part in educating students with learning disabilities, they are used as the foundation for evaluations, academic placement, and instructional outcome (Soodak, 2000).

Assessments may influence decisions regarding grades, advancement placement, instructional needs, and curriculum (Dietel, Herman, & Knuth, 1991).

Caffrey (2009) reported educational assessments are complex endeavors that involve gathering and examining data to support decision making about students and the evaluation of academic programs and policies. According to research, learning in the traditional environment is based on repetition of content with the teacher role being directive and grounded in authority. The traditional method of learning is based on the mastery of information. Traditional assessments are very objective forms of measurement that identifies ability levels of students related to particular knowledge and skills. Stufft, Bauman, and Ohlsen (2009) added that teachers generally use assessments as the primary method of receiving grades from students. It continues to be standard practice to create a form of teacher-made assessment at the end of the lesson to find out levels of student learning.

Types of Traditional Assessment

Assessments that are most appropriate to track growth in student learning are writing assessments, quizzes, tests, and other assessments teachers assign regularly to the students in their classroom (Guskey, 2003). Presently, according to Soodak (2000), assessments are used to determine how well schools and students are performing and to completely understand the reason some students fail to achieve. Guskey added teachers trust the results of these types of assessments because of their direct correlation to classroom instructional goals. Traditional assessments are particularly good at measuring factual and conceptual knowledge and other applications of knowledge (Zane, 2009).

Brualdi (1998) related it is standard practice for teachers to create tests to determine whether or not information from previous content has been learned prior to new content being introduced to students. The test may be a fill-in the blank or multiple-choice test. This familiar type of assessment encourages students to keep up with assignments (Goldwater, Grabavac, & Acker, 2005).

Traditional assessments are also known as “summative assessments.” The main function of multiple-choice tests is not the principal purpose in the evaluation of relevant learning (Dietel, Herman, & Knuth, 1991). Summative assessments fulfill the traditional function of tracking the progress of students because results from assessments feed into an evaluation, in the form of grades on a report card grade (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2008). Many educators, according to Chesbro (2010) may agree that although the multiple-choice test is not the best form of assessment, it is a needed tool to test a large student population in a short time period. Most recall and recognition assessments take the form of a multiple-choice test (Duncan & Buskirk- Cohen, 2011). True-false questions may be the best means to measure the student’s ability to recall information (Tasdemir, 2010). Whether true or false or multiple choice tests are more generally preferred it most often depends on what exactly is to be tested (Howard & Anderson, 2010). When measuring student achievement the first reaction would be to think traditional standardized tests all depend on written test questions that a student reads and then choose the correct or incorrect item (Tasdemir, 2010).

When preparing to take a multiple-choice test, students may spend less time studying for this type of assessment than students taking other types of test. In many classes

students take these tests and do not receive any feedback except for their overall score (Roediger & Marsh, 2005). According to Guskey (2003), almost all students have experienced spending countless hours preparing for a major assessment, only to discover the test questions do not reflect what they spent hours studying for. Brualdi (1998) described it is arduous to create traditional assessments that go beyond the recall level. For these reasons, educators have to be very certain that the assessments used are created fairly for every learner so the students' inability to achieve is separated from differences in student experiences or not having an opportunity to learn.

Relevant multiple-choice assignments integrate and combine historical topics and skills that are very similar to creating a scholastic essay (Blackey, 2009). Chesbro (2010) reported when multiple-choice tests are constructed and administered properly, there can be negative consequences when relying exclusively on multiple-choice tests. Traditional chapter tests may be assigned with the main goal of giving a grade to each student. After the test is completed, there is no going back regardless of how a student performed (Britton, 2011). Students could perhaps begin to view traditional assessments as a guessing game, especially beginning in middle school. These students could regard success based on how well they can predict what the teacher will ask on these forms of assessments (Guskey, 2003).

Effectiveness of Traditional Assessments

When students ask before an assessment, "What kind of test is it going to be? True-false? Multiple Choice? Essay? Will there be problems to solve?" Students are trying to determine from these questions what information they should study and how to study for

the test (Diekhoff, 1984). Studying intensively is one of the most practical ways to study for traditional assessments. There are many basic levels of recall such as memorizing facts from a study guide that only provides questions and not answers (Hodges, Lamb, Brown, & Foy, 2005). Being prepared before a multiple-choice test allows students to reflect and rely on their great study habits and reflecting skills, as well as to recall the actual information that is being studied and learned (Blackey, 2009). Sterling (2005) reported a variety of question formation, from traditional multiple-choice to fill-in the-blank, should be used to allow students to articulate their knowledge in different ways. Using different formats also give teachers a more in-depth picture of student understanding. Weekly testing can be a motivation for students to keep up with their assignments; however, the time and commitment required to create and grade frequent assessments can also be seen as a hindrance to time-strapped educators (Goldwater, Grabavac, & Acker, 2005).

Research conducted by Project 2061 of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (2011) launched a website with more than 600 multiple choice test questions to help teachers assess more accurately what students recall and do not recall about key ideas in science. Sterling (2005) stated designing assessments to effectively investigate students' understanding of science concepts is a challenge that requires an overall assessment strategy and well-designed assessment tools. For assessments to be most effective they need to be continuously woven throughout teaching and learning. Multiple-choice tests have gained a level of importance in learning assessments, mainly due to objectivity and the effectiveness this test format represents (Tasdemir, 2010). Roediger and Marsh (2005) added there are many advantages to multiple-choice tests. Although difficult

to create, these tests are easy to grade and are evaluation methods for larger classes.

Research from the study also revealed newly developed multiple-choice test questions contradict the views of many that these questions are useful for only testing recall.

Multiple-choice tests also investigate a student's ability to describe real-world experiences and justify logically through problem solving (American Association for the Advancement of Science, 2011).

For the ones who believe multiple-choice tests depend simply on repetitive memorization, there is a lot to learn about multiple-choice questions and the variety of strategies that can be used while taking this type of assessment (Blackey, 2009). Knowing the misconceptions and how pervasive these assessments are can help teachers improve classroom instruction and to better create their own test questions to assess whether students fully comprehend the content they are being taught (American Association for the Advancement of Science, 2011). Multiple-choice items have produced a reliable and easy to grade way of evaluating student outcomes. Additionally, ample test theories and many statistical approaches have been created to support their development and use (Dietel, Herman, & Knuth, 1991). The objective of Project 2061 was to improve the overall design and purpose of multiple-choice questions. Any form of assessment can be adequately used because quality assessments can be administered to actually increase students' learning and not just hold educators and schools accountable (American Association for the Advancement of Science, 2011).

Alternative Assessments

Keeley (2011) suggested the initial thoughts of assessments for many teachers include testing, quizzes, performance tasks, and other summative forms used primarily for evaluation purposes. These evaluation practices represent a portion of the types of assessment used regularly in effective classrooms. Unfortunately according to Chappius and Stiggins (2002), the use of the assessment as a tool is missing from the traditional classroom assessment environment needed to encourage greater student achievement. Traditional fixed-response tests do not provide a clear or accurate picture of the students' ability to apply knowledge. The test only shows that students can recall; comprehend; or in some cases, interpret, but they do not evaluate students' ability to use knowledge (Bauer & Brown, 2001).

Traditional assessments are characteristically formal and provide educators with data regarding the performances level of individual students (Clark, 2012). Textbooks, worksheets, and lectures are a small part of the vast repertoire of teaching strategies and are not necessarily the most important. The three are used extensively in American schools and only reach a portion of the learning population (Armstrong, 2000). Much is made of the meaningfulness and challenge of alternative assessment as a means to renew our students' interest and commitment to school (Baker, 2010). The current trend in middle school assessment is to move in the direction of more practical forms of assessments that focus less on the recall of content and more on the construction of content (Schurr, 2010).

Brualdi's (1998) research concluded a disadvantage of traditional assessment is that it does not consider the holistic individual and that students are able to function as a

team or apply reasoning skills in solving problems. Teachers open the door to using assessments in ways that are more effective when they recognize that students respond differently to the use of test results. According to Guskey (2003) teachers trust the results of quizzes, tests, writing assignments, and other assessments because of their direct correlation to classroom instructional objectives. Bloom (1956) agreed that comprehension objectives represent the lowest level of understanding. An individual must not only have knowledge, but must also understand what he knows (Manton, Turner, & English, 2004).

Traditional multiple-choice bubble tests are not an appropriate assessment instrument to assess student achievement on the information being taught (Parkes, 2010). Multiple-choice testing is a stark reality in the world of education, but neither teachers nor students should fear the depersonalization nature of these tests. Teachers should rise to the challenge of ensuring these tests are followed by meaningful evaluation whenever possible (Chesbro, 2010). Students with leaning or disabilities related to learning often have problems with multiple-choice tests because of the difficulty distinguishing between information, omitting distracters, and forming a mental best answer (Trammell, 2011). Generally, assessments are created with a specific purpose in mind and the results should be used for an intended purpose because assessment information is about the student, yet some teachers often ignore the ownership students have on their own learning. Many teachers have neglected the fact that students can also benefit from a universally placed structure (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2008).

Academic assessment is an ongoing tradition in education. Assessments usually involve measuring student progress with the intent of informing (Hall, 2002). There is evidence according to Chesbro (2010) that suggests too many multiple-choice assessments are given without an evaluative element. Teachers quite often return student assessments, regardless of the form, Scantron cards or computerized bubble form, without reviewing the test. In the case of midterms or final exams, the test is returned without students being able to access the original test. Pedagogical theory and research have been moving away from traditional grading in recent years, finding it too subjective, and often not conducive to learning (Potts, 2010).

Lombardi (2008) stated during the mid-1990s, authentic assessments were used as models for reliance on standardized reading tests in K-12 public schools. School districts and teachers were advised to use outcome-based forms of assessments that are often related to portfolios and performance tests. Protocols for creating alternative assessments vary widely and are built mainly on trust. These assessments must include a description of the type of academic skills assessed, such as an explanation or problem-solving (Baker, 2010). Alternative assessments can help encourage and motivate all students, especially students with disabilities. A variety of projects and presentations can help bring out talents and provide insight into student knowledge of content that tests will not (Hodges, Lamb, Brown, & Foy, 2005). An authentic assessment, or performance assessment, allows students to demonstrate skills they have learned in a rational manner. This form of assessment attempts to make the testing practice more practical and relevant for students (Schurr, 2010). A key element of authentic assessment is the opportunity for

students to help create the evaluation and reflect on its objectives individually and as a class (Kohn, 2011).

Performance-based assessment is now common practices in numerous classrooms because many more educators are now concerned with the validity of their assessments and how to use data from assessments as formative feedback that improves teaching and increases student learning (Frey and Schmitt, 2007). Performance assessment is an alternative to the traditional method of assessing student success. Traditional assessments expect students to answer questions correctly (too often on a multiple-choice test), while performance assessments require students to demonstrate comprehension and skill, including processes to solve problems (National Campaign for Public School Improvement, 2005). In a lot of the current and professional literature, standardized multiple-choice tests are a thing of the past. Performance assessment, a.k.a “authentic” or “new” assessment or the “3 P’s”- performance, portfolios, and products- is in (Madaus & O’Dwyer, 1999). Performance assessments provide students with diverse learning styles more opportunities to be successful and are closely aligned with real world experiences the students need (Tung, 2010).

Traditionally, assessment methods were created to encourage accountability by separating the academic achieving from the academic underachieving learners and by acknowledging these students’ differences (Stiggins, 2006). Soodak (2000) added supporters of authentic assessment corroborate the use of ongoing curriculum embedded measures of learning, such as portfolios and other performance assessments are better correlated with the recent improvements in curriculum and teaching. Performance

assessments can ignite 21st century skills in ways that traditional fixed response tests cannot. Accountability networks that are in favor of using performance assessment should be created (Tung, 2010). Supporters for differentiated curriculum changes viewed performance assessments as a means to communicate and promote new perceptions of school learning. These new types of assessments support active student engagement both in learning and showing what students have learned (Haertel, 1999). One main aspect of performance assessments is that students are expected to be active participants. The focus is also on how students find their answers and students are required to justify their reasoning or demonstrate the skills needed to get a correct answer (National Campaign for Public School Improvement, 2005).

Formative assessment is another name for alternative or performance assessments. A formative assessment is continuous practice used to communicate instructional decisions made by teachers and students. The practice can be expanded to stimulate and advance further learning (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2008). Formative assessment has grown over the last 20 years across educational systems in many different national settings. Formative assessment is viewed by many as a crucial crossroads in education, the connection between curriculum and assessment (Crossouard & Pryor, 2012). Formative assessment is a form of classroom assessment used by educators to enhance teaching and learning (Keeley, 2011). This form of assessment is not a test or a resource but an ongoing process with consistent support for learning beyond school years by developing appropriate learning strategies that individual students may depend on for their entire life (Clark, 2012). Britton (2011) added using formative assessments involve collecting information from students on their

academic progress and levels of understanding so that teaching can address the students' learning needs.

Effective formative assessments ensure instructional alignment among standards, objectives, and learning activities (Doubet, 2012). It seemed that classroom assessments were excessively used as summative judgments of student learning, instead of as a formative process to direct daily instructional decisions and increase student learning (Huinker & Freckmann, 2009). Formative assessments are focused on forming decisions routinely in the flow of instruction, whereas summative assessments are based on making judgments after instruction takes place (Roskos & Neuman, 2012). Formative assessment allows students to determine the effectiveness of their own learning. It also allows students to be able to combine or convert present knowledge, and strengthen new knowledge and skills (Trauth-Nare and Buck, 2011). Formative assessments are not measurement instruments and are not designed to provide a summary of ability at pre-determined intervals. This type of evaluation is designed as an ongoing support of teaching and learning (Clark, 2012). Using formative assessment includes collecting data based on student progress and comprehension in order to monitor instruction to meet students' learning needs (Britton, 2011). Additionally, ongoing formative assessments allow students to be more involved in setting their learning goals and assessing their own progress. Students may become comfortable evaluating and discussing with their teachers and classmates how well they understand key concepts and skills (Education Digest, 2011).

Types of Alternative Assessments

By applying key principals of what is called *assessment for learning*, teachers follow key research findings on the effects of high quality formative assessments and student achievement (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2002). Aspects that are now predominantly used in American schools as *assessment for learning* have the goal to present comprehensible learning goals, measurement criteria, and feedback to students (Crossouard & Pryor, 2012). It is important to present assessment data for feedback that is essential to guide student learning (Wickersham & Chambers, 2008). Formative classrooms are founded upon key principles that provide the starting point for what formative assessment looks like in routine practice. For effective formative assessments to happen, a classroom should be an ideal setting that allows quality interactions between students and teachers (Clark, 2011). Chappuis and Stiggins (2009) noted that students are actively engaged in the assessment for learning process when students use assessment data to set goals, to make judgments about learning, to be able to recognize quality work, to self-asses, and to communicate their progress towards established learning goals. In *assessment for learning* classrooms, teachers appreciate when students self-assess frequently, track, and share their progress, are confident learners and their motivation for success increases with their growing achievement (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2008).

Authentic and sound assessments encourage student learning at every level and focus most directly on the student and the work. If students are expected to solve problems, have them solve problems (Hearne, 2004). Assessments play a vital part in the education of students with learning disabilities, acting as the source for diagnostic, student placement,

and decisions regarding instruction (Soodak, 2000). Assessments become more than one-time evaluations at the end of teaching. They become part of the learning process that keep students focused on their progresses and confident enough to continue striving for success (Stiggins, 2005). Formative assessments should be a routine practice and a vital part of instructional decisions in the classroom (Trauth-Nare & Buck, 2011). Teachers should accommodate the needs of their individual students' diverse abilities and backgrounds by using a smorgasbord of methods and strategies. Teachers can incorporate a wide range of teaching tools into their classroom such as, sound, music, visual movement, and class discussions. Teachers need additional strategies that support students with cognitive disabilities and specialized learning needs while still accommodating learning of the other students in their classroom (McCoy & Ketterlin-Geller, 2004).

Active learning is an essential aspect of the constructivist approach to learning. When students are engaged in the lesson, the content and information that is learned is retained. Active learning helps students with learning disabilities understand and recall information (Steele, 2005). Research shows that differentiated instruction in the general classroom is a successful way of educating the individual student with a disability on his or her level (Servilio, 2009). Brualdi (1998) stated students do not learn information the same way. Based on this knowledge, differentiated instruction is a teaching practice founded on the grounds that there should be a variety of instructional practices that accommodate the individual and diverse student population of the classroom (Hall, 2002). Tomlinson (2008) added differentiated instruction is student conscious teaching. It is guided on the foundation that schools should enhance students' full potential, and not just prepare students for

externally set standards on an assessment. Strategies for differentiating instruction include teachers using a variety of materials that target multiple learning styles and reading abilities. Teachers should develop activities that target auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learners; teaching should stimulate thinking at various levels of Bloom's taxonomy (Willoughby, 2005).

Teachers should change their approach to assessments if they plan to use assessments to enhance teaching and student learning (Guskey, 2003). The ability to know the world through dialogue, spatial demonstration, musical thinking, using the body to solve problems or create things, is a perception of others and a perception of ourselves (Gardner, 1995, 2004, & 2011). For the musical intelligent student, the essence of the content can be taken and put into a rhythmic format. It can be in the form of a song, chant, or a rap. Students may also create the song, raps, or chants to apply meaning to the subject (Gardner, 1983). Another way students can be creative and communicate their thoughts and feelings is in the form of storytelling. Through storytelling students have the ability to use their imagination to apply meaning to a subject. Storytelling according to Armstrong (2009) has historically been seen as a form of entertainment, in addition, storytelling should be seen as an important teaching tool. When storytelling is used in the classroom, weave the concepts, objectives, and instructional goals directly into the stories told to the students. Storytelling gives children an opportunity to use their imagination, communicate effectively, enhance their social literacy, and build community in a different way. Teachers can help by making storytelling a regular part of their classes (Berkowitz, 2011). Another strategy for differentiated instruction includes creating

different stations for inquiry based independent and collaborative learning activities (Armstrong, 2009).

For professional development of classroom assessment strategies teachers are required to recognize the potential social building of knowledge that is needed to increase student learning (Clark, 2011). Inquiry implies the “need or want to know.” Inquiry based classrooms are open systems that allow students to explore and use resources that reach beyond the classroom and the school. To bring out the actor in each student, encourage students to perform the passages, questions, or other material to be learned by dramatizing or role playing the information. It can be done without any materials or with the use of props (Armstrong, 2009). Social knowledge is attained through participation in orderly interactive relationships with others (Bruner & Haste, 1987). Inquiry based learning works well with many teaching techniques. Inquiry is a key tool for learning in the constructivist theory and it is a vital component for addressing students’ multiple intelligences.

The child is part of the social situation, and the relationship of the child to the environment and the environment to the child occurs through the experiences and activity of the child (Vygotsky, 1962). Cooperative learning is an essential tool for performance based instruction. The teacher becomes the facilitator and the students work in small heterogeneous groups. Marzano (2007) stated collaborative learning techniques can be employed on a wide variety of instructional activities. During cooperative learning, students collaborate with one another in small groups on a structured assignment. In small face-to-face teams, students share their strengths and improve weaker skills by working as

a team. Small groups working cooperatively towards common instructional goals are the main component of the cooperative learning model. Students in cooperative groups are able to engage in learning assignments in many ways (Armstrong, 2009). Bruner and Haste (1987) added that children are not only problem solvers, but they are also problem creators. Children do not only try to solve problems they are faced with, but they desire to overcome challenges.

Project-based learning (PBL) is an innovative aspect of learning that teaches numerous strategies that are essential to be successful in the twenty-first century (Bell, 2010). PBL is typically considered a practice in teaching where students resolve real-world problems or challenges by participating in an extended exploration process (Lattimer & Riordan, 2011). Project-based learning is an important method for creating independent thinkers and learners. Project-based learning has become widespread. Multimedia tools such as Hyperstudio or PowerPoint are often the source for students' work and presentations (McMullin, 2002). In the twenty-first century students use computers in very advanced ways. Technology as a means, not as an end, permits students to experiment with different technologies for all facets of PBL (Bell, 2012). Media is already an important part of the educational delivery system and will become even more important in the future (Gardner, 1995, 2004, & 2011). Teachers choose their technologies based on their capacity to support individual project-based learning (Basham, Perry, & Meyer, 2011).

An electronic portfolio is an example of technology used as an assessment. The electronic portfolio creates a personal collection of reflections and work that increases the use and knowledge of technology and enhances instructional practices. Students assume

responsibility of learning through the use of electronic portfolios (Wickersham & Chambers, 2008). Students can use a multitude of applications, including Web 2.0 for their projects. Students may also use wiki to share knowledge or blog with other students. These applications also help students realize appropriate ways to use technology (Bell, 2010). Podcasting is an additional way to tap into a student's interest. This is an excellent way to tailor learning to the students' interests and add technology to daily instruction (Scigliano and Hipsky, 2010). Other examples include a student being asked to explain a moment in historical, generate scientific hypotheses, analyze math problems, communicate in a different language, or research a particular topic (Wren, 2009).

Students may participate in individual or group projects, which serve as complete demonstrations of skills or knowledge. Students are empowered to choose the topic and presentations for their projects (Bauer and Brown, 2001). Using a variety of assessments allows the teacher to collect samples of student work throughout the year to create a "scrapbook" of student learning and not just use a snapshot at a determined time (Roskos & Neuman, 2012). Bauer and Brown (2001) reported use of projects serve as comprehensive demonstrations of skills or knowledge learned by the student. In order to incorporate students' many multiple intelligences, learning styles, and abilities, including of a variety of projects are essential in the curriculum to reflect the diverse group of students of today. The projects may range from simple poster assignments to formal research projects with a variety of visuals (Brualdi, 1998). Interviews or oral presentations allow students to verbalize knowledge and provide opportunities for students to create and work on long term projects of their own design. Students also need to be given feedback on their

assignments and activities (Marzano, 2003). Mueller (2003) reflected every student should be given feedback when the objective of a performance assessment is diagnosis and monitoring of student progress which is accomplished by the use of grading rubrics.

Grading Rubrics

The word *rubric* derives from the Latin *rubric* or “red” which describes the red print used to direct or redirect readers’ attention to text of significant importance. Grading rubrics used today are an essential set of scoring guidelines that are shared with students, or in many cases collaboratively created with the students (Lombardi, 2008). Creating a rubric is an important part of authentic assessment. Rubrics are a series of detailed statements that describe the levels of expectation for a product, performance, or portfolio (Schurr, 2010). Students should be given descriptive feedback to allow them an opportunity to improve their performance on an assessment. Instead of only highlighting student mistakes or omissions, valuable feedback guides students to better performance throughout the learning process (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2002). Rubrics are an effective assessment tool because they help students become more insightful judges of the quality of their own and other people’s work. A rubric is a scoring tool that lists and describes the criteria for an assignment, an activity, or another piece of work (Goodrich, 1997).

A rubric is a scoring tool for students and teachers that lists the criteria for an assignment or activity. Rubrics are normally given out before the assignment begins to allow the students to use the rubric as a guide for success (Mueller, 2003). Rubrics inform students of expectations of each section of the assignment (Britton, 2011). Chappuis and Stiggins (2002) further stated teacher feedback for learning has an even bigger impact

when the student is told where he or she is in relation to the defined target and where the teacher ultimately wants them to be. Through teacher observation or analysis of a student's response, it can be determined what the students understands, what the student does not understands, and what misconceptions the student have based to the objective of the assessment (Moskal, 2003). Adding a rubric to the assessment process can improve and monitor student performance when teachers' expectations are clear and students are shown how to meet these expectations (Goodrich, 1997). Rubrics are written to support measurement through accurate grading, constructive feedback, and feedback that support classroom instruction through clear communication and self-evaluation (Zane, 2009).

For many educators, there is the need to assess the performance of students in ways that allows one to take changing situations into consideration which can be done by creating rubrics (Brauldi, 1998). According to Mueller (2003), the fact that rubrics can be altered and can vary from teacher to teacher again emphasize that rubrics are flexible assessment tools that can be shaped to any purpose. A rubric can be a list of detailed statements or a matrix of detailed statements. The rubric can also be created to analyze a list of specific criteria for a small section of a project or assignment or for a final project or assignment (Schurr, 2010). According to Jorgensen and Hoffman (2003) many experts believe that rubrics improve the end products of students which result in an increase learning for students as well. When teachers assess assignments or projects, they know exactly the characteristics of a great final product and why. A rubric is an authentic assessment tool used to enhance the measurement of students work. Hearne (2004)

concluded comprehensible learning outcomes make it easier to use assessment results as an accountability tool to evaluate student work.

Connections to Learning Styles

Bruner (1996) regarded techniques of learning as reflecting folk-pedagogies concerning the nature of mind, which is in direct contrast to lecturing and procedural drill. Discovery and collaborative discussions are the most appropriate forms of learning. To meet the demand for diverse teaching methods, teachers must first accept there are diverse learning styles. One way to differentiate learning is to consider the seven multiple intelligences in children developed by Howard Gardner (Beam, 2009). Howard Gardner, the American psychologist, is the most notably known as the developer of multiple intelligences. When Howard Gardner wrote his seminal work on multiple intelligence, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (1983), he was aware of the need for differentiation (Nolen, 2003). Armstrong (2009) suggested if teachers routinely teach through multiple intelligences then there will be daily opportunities to assess their students through multiple intelligences as well. Nolen (2003) further reported, that Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences expects teachers to adjust their instructional practices to include role play, musical performances, cooperative learning, visualization, reflections, and storytelling which appeal to all the intelligences and student needs. Brualdi (1999) explained students learn information in different ways. It is suggested that teachers consider multiple intelligences when developing lesson plans because by incorporating different learning styles into daily practice, it is believed that all students will be reached academically (Beam, 2009).

One of the main objectives of differentiated instruction is to increase the learning potential of each individual student. Differentiated instruction is the philosophy of teaching acknowledging that students learn best when teachers successfully accommodate diversity in students' ability levels, interests, and learning profile preferences (Tomlinson, 2001, 2003, & 2005). Differentiated learning styles and learning abilities are the realities that *students' needs come in all sizes* in the middle school classroom. Many students have not mastered the content through traditional assessments because they are incapable of reading and understanding the information being taught. Other students have continued to demonstrate that content is being learned short term usually only long enough to pass the assessments. Bauer and Brown (2001) stated traditional fixed-response testing does not provide clear or accurate pictures of what students can do with their knowledge. Differentiation expects teachers to have apparent learning objectives that are grounded in content standards and are created to ensure student engagement and comprehension. If teachers are uncertain about the learning direction for their students then these students are adrift (Tomlinson, 2008). Teachers should review their assessments to make sure they are free from situations that may exclude students with disabilities or limited English proficiency (Bauer & Brown, 2001).

Assessments play an important part in teaching students with learning disabilities, serving as the foundation for diagnostic, academic placement, and decisions regarding instruction (Soodak, 2000). Teachers need strategies that accommodate students with cognitive disabilities and specialized learning needs and still be able to challenge the other students in the classroom (McCoy & Ketterlin-Geller, 2004). Differentiation has

become a technique used to teach all levels of students with learning disabilities (Beam, 2009). Recognizing that many students with learning disabilities require accommodations in order to engage in high quality evaluations, IDEA require students' individualized education programs (IEPs) outline assessment accommodations for state, district, and teacher-made tests (Salend, 2008). The diversity of student personalities and learning needs can cause numerous problems for regular education teachers as they teach difficult content to diverse classrooms (McCoy & Ketterlin-Geller, 2004). Students with special needs can be an extra challenge for teachers because they face frustration trying to prepare for assessments and often have more frustration trying to articulate what they have learned (Hodges, Lamb, Brown & Foy, 2005).

Stiggins and Chappuis (2008) acknowledged that because of individual challenges, many students may end up on the wrong side of academic decisions. If educators are going to support these students, and close the achievement gap, then teachers must believe that they are able to be successful and their success is worth the commitment. Many students enter middle and high school classrooms performing significantly below grade level. Struggling readers often focus on decoding text and fail to comprehend the content, whether it is due to learning disabilities, language barriers, or basic skill levels (McCoy & Ketterlin-Geller, 2004). Servilio (2009) suggested one way to motivate and engage students with disabilities in academic subjects is to teach them at their ability level and increase their involvement in the lesson and lesson activities. Alternative assessments can motivate and excite all students, particularly students with learning disabilities. When evaluating special needs students, it is essential to assess the whole picture of understanding concepts

(Hodges, Lamb, Brown & Foy, 2005). Authentic assessments evaluate students' abilities to communicate and apply their knowledge and skills. This process allows students translate content they learn to and confront challenges they may face outside of school (Schurr, 2010). Instructional decisions should be based on the student's learning styles, the assignment, and the content rather than teaching from preplanned objectives. The best teaching practices routinely incorporate concepts from constructivist and behaviorist philosophies (Steele, 2005).

Effectiveness of Alternative Assessments

If the belief is that all students can learn, then it is important to create high academic standards for all students (Feldman, 2002). Learning in a constructivist environment is interactive, building on what students know from previous experience with the teacher sees as a mediator. The theory of constructivism can be defined as the principle based on observation and scientific research regarding how a person learns. The constructivist approach also emphasizes the role of intrinsic motivation that involves engaging in a behavior that is key to creativity (Duncan & Buskirk-Cohen, 2011). Once it is understood that a teacher's perception of a learner defines the content that is provided, then supplying teachers with the best available approach of the child's mind becomes critical (Bruner, 1996).

Lincoln (2001) stated classrooms and learning change as teaching follows a more constructivist theory of learning. "The first and most obvious problem is how to construct curricula that can be taught by ordinary teachers to ordinary students and at the same time reflects clearly the basic or underlying principles of various fields of inquiry" (Bruner,

1966, p.18). Jerome Bruner, the developer of the theory of cognitive growth, held the child is a social individual and through social interaction gains a foundation for interpreting experience (Smith, 2002). Bruner's theory of cognitive learning theory is based on the fact people interpret the world through its comparisons and contrasts which are revealed among objects and events (North Central Regional Education Laboratory, 2005). The implications of this theory and how Bruner applied them have shaped the foundation for constructivist education.

Social constructivism is the theory that has an emphasis on how meanings and knowledge develop out of social encounters. Vygotsky (1962) created the theory of Zone of Proximal Development founded on the theory that development is defined equally by what a child can do independently and by what the child can do with the help of an adult or a more skilled peer. Vygotsky, according to Lincoln (2001) cited a surrogate sociocultural version of constructivism. Vygotsky believed that knowledge is created by an individual's interaction their environment rather than being only created inside the mind of an individual.

Formative assessments have become an important way to support students during their learning, so students will be able to comprehend what counts as quality in any particular assignment. Vygotsky's (1978) 'zone of proximal development' also suggested teachers actively collaborate with students during the instruction to produce best performances in students (Crossouard & Pryor, 2012). Vygotsky (1962) stated it is upon the education foundation that the personal realm of experience is constructed. It is precisely here that knowledge of individual differences manifest itself with great force.

Ernest Von Glaserfeld is one of the founding leaders of radical constructivism. Radical constructivists see knowledge as something that is personally constructed by individuals. From the constructivist point of view of Von Glaserfeld, students must be taken seriously as intelligent beings capable of independent thinking that construct their own reality (Poerksen, 2004). Knowledge in cognitive organisms is capable of constructing for themselves, based on their own experiences (Von Glaserfeld, 1996).

In a constructivist classroom, performance based learning drives a more student centered, participatory curriculum regardless of the constructivist theories and practices that are implemented (Lincoln, 2001). Gibbon (2002) added that learners in a constructivist classroom are taught to think for themselves, create for themselves, and to ultimately construct their own personal perspective. Purposeful learning is reflective, productive, and self-regulated this is according to researchers at the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Testing Center (CRESST). The common objective of traditional multiple-choice tests is not the most important aspect in the assessment of relevant learning (Dietel, Herman, & Knuth, 1991). According to Bruner (1966) curriculum must address the needs of all learners and abilities. Our current standards movement attempts to ensure all students will achieve core knowledge and standards of performance, yet it fails to take into consideration the diverse ability levels of students.

President Obama called on education leaders to develop assessments that do not merely measure if students are able to choose an answer on an exam, but if students possess 21st century skills like problem-solving, critical thinking, entrepreneurship, and creativity

(Strawser, 2009). Vygotsky (1997) continued to force everybody into the same mold represents the greatest of all delusions of pedagogies. The fundamental prerequisite of pedagogies demands an element of individualization that is the conscious and rigorous determination of the individualized goals of education for each particular student.

According to research, learning in the traditional setting is based on repetition with the teacher role being directive and rooted in authority. Teachers want to provide clear learning targets for their students and give students critical feedback throughout their learning to help improve student performance (Chappius & Stiggins, 2008). Student feedback should be based on the particular qualities of his or her work, with advice on what he or she can do to improve (Education Digest, 2011). Bruner (1996) concluded that if one believes that poor performance of the educational organizations is due predominantly to the deficiencies in the assessment of teachers and students, then reform efforts targeted at creating better tools for measuring the performance of students in the core academic subject and related subjects makes perfect sense.

Assessment activities must meet the needs of preteens, the middle school organizational structure of integrative teaming, and the desired outcome of the middle school students' mastering the curriculum (Schurr, 2010). The goal is to construct material that will challenge the advanced student while not destroying the confidence and desire to learn of the lower achieving student (Bruner, 1966). Performance assessments allow students to show their abilities in a more authentic environment than other types of assessments. Students are able to make real-world connections with performance assessments. Wixson and Valencia added (2011) the most practical assessments directly

measure a specific ability instead of other skills that are interrelated to a topic of concern. Procedures that implement constructive assessments ensure that instructional information is responsive to student needs. Additionally, students are more intrinsically motivated when high quality performance assessments are used (Wren, 2009). Schurr (2010) concluded the trend in middle school assessment is to move towards more practical types of evaluations that focus less on the recall of information and more on converting information.

Combining Traditional and Alternative Assessments

Educators open doors using assessment in more productively when they acknowledge students respond differently to the use of test results (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2002). Although traditional assessment measures are still crucial to the education process, a balance between traditional tests and authentic assessments is now advocated (Schurr, 2010). A balanced system is composed of both formative and summative assessments administered routinely in classes. These assessments that present content in a timely manner are vital to a balanced assessment system (Wren, 2009). When teachers' classroom evaluations become an essential part of the instructional routine and main component in the teacher's effort to support student learning, the affects of these assessment for both students and teachers become endless (Guskey, 2003). There are numerous ways of assessing students and the work they complete, and many ways of preparing students for the assessment (Hodges, Lamb, Brown, & Foy, 2005). In any assessment environment, educators must begin assessment development by having a clear definition for the meaning

of success (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2008). Teachers should plan and implement a variety of assessments for their students.

The two most common types are formative which is constructed mainly to increase learning and summative which is constructed mainly to judge learning (Crisp, 2012). The relationship is more complex because a summative assessment must fulfill its main purpose of recording what students are able to do, but if created carefully, it should also successfully meet another purpose of supporting learning (Bennett, 2011). Comer (2011) added summative assessment practices such as exams and their outcomes can enhance instruction; other assessments, specifically formative authentic assessments, help to inform instruction in a more holistic manner. The goal of a balanced assessment system is to make sure the data is available to the assessment users when they need it, which directly serves as the effective use of multiple measures. The effective use of multiple measures is successful when using both formative and summative assessments (Chappuis, Chappuis, & Stiggins, 2009).

In recent years, middle school teachers are coming to an understanding that assessment activities must be aligned. Educators should be able to develop assessment practices where summative assessments consistently improve learning, and formative assessments consistently add to the teacher's overall informal judgments of student achievement (Bennett, 2011). The developmental needs of students and the scope and sequence of the curriculum should guide assessments (Schurr, 2010). Steele (2005) added that even though it is easier to teach using one method, instruction is most effective if special education and regular education teachers become familiar with other options and

collaborate on decisions regarding instruction. Teachers must develop and implement assessments in a method that produce accurate results. Educators need to select appropriate evaluation practices, quality assessment items and scoring guides, and aim for careful sampling of achievement (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2006). Deciding which type of test is better or more appropriate is not easy. To select the appropriate tool, teachers first need to have an idea of the job to be accomplished (Norris, 2012).

How students feel about and what they do with assessment data is as important, and possibly more important, than what teachers think about and do with assessments. Educators can help students self-assess, set goals, and identify their own strengths and areas of weaknesses (Huinker & Freckman, 2009). Hall (2002) regarded initial and routine assessment of student readiness and progress are essential. Incorporating assessments inform teachers how to better provide approaches, options, and scaffolds for the different needs, interests, and abilities that are present in a classroom of diverse students. The coordinated systems of formative and summative assessments would have an advantage of supporting formative assessment practices that are essential for student learning (Alonzo, 2011).

Teachers can use assessment data on a daily basis as feedback to students, and to state what students have mastered and what students still need to complete (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2008). Assessments should be used as a teaching tool to extend learning instead of only measuring instruction. Assessments must take place before, during, and after the instructional experiences, and help to present questions concerning student needs and learning (Hall, 2002). Bruch and Reynolds (2012) noted summative assessments focus on

recording results and formative assessments focus on the interactions and knowledge that shape outcomes. In a balanced classroom assessment system, summative and formative assessments are used equally. These assessments work collectively to produce the combined results that are greater than the individual parts (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2008). Developing assessment competencies requires teachers to make decisions about what to discard and what to reuse (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2006).

Impact on Curriculum Development and the Connection to No Child Left Behind

According to Rod Paige, former U.S. Secretary of Education, the stated focus of NCLB “is to see every child in America regardless of ethnicity, income, or background achieve high standards” (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). NCLB wants schools to focus on providing quality education to students who too often do not receive adequate services, students with disabilities, from low-income families, students with language barriers, and African-Americans and Latino students (White, 2008). Districts and schools should examine ongoing data to determine the needs of their students. Schools and school districts can create an expanded schedule for schools to allow more time for students who are struggling, as well as time for students to collaborate, examine data, and create individualized procedures to address weaknesses (Owens, 2012). In the past, a small number of teachers, policymakers, or parents would not have considered questioning the validity of these assessments (Chappuis, Chappuis, & Stiggins, 2009).

Aggressive accountability language and strict governing guidelines developed a national system of accountability that uses federal funds as high-stake tools to influence organized reform at the state, regional, and local level (Laitsch, 2006). If children are not

learning, then the law demands schools to investigate and determine the reason why. Schools must make certain all students learn the fundamental skills and knowledge (Jorgensen and Hoffman, 2003). The accountability provisions included in NCLB Act of 2001 greatly increased the need for states, local educational agency (LEAs), and local schools to construct authentic, reliable, high-quality educational data (U.S. Department of Education Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2006).

Under No Child Left Behind, the federal government will fund educational practices that are successful. Research evidence shows to be productive in increasing student performance (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Teachers of today must develop relevant ways of evaluating students that integrate traditional, authentic, and alternative assessments (Hodges, Lamb, Brown, & Foy, 2005). Chappuis and Stiggins (2008) explained when summative and formative classroom assessments are designed with quality and intentionally created, they are interdependent parts of the balanced system and can help create a more complete and accurate picture of student learning. Schools must provide all students with experiences that engage them in crucial intellectual pursuits. NCLB brought significant clarity to the meaning, purpose, and relevance of the assessment of students in kindergarten through high school. A new age began when accountability, parental involvement, and investing became the foundation of the country's educational system (Jorgensen and Hoffman, 2003).

Teachers have a variety of assessment options to select from as they focus on the essential learning objectives. Authentic assessment outcomes are dependent on the selection or the creation of appropriate evaluation tools (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2008). The

movement towards high-quality testing and the implementation of testing provisions associated with NCLB and IDEA have generated a variety of issues that challenges our educational system (Salend, 2008). The challenge in all contents is to match an assessment with a predetermined achievement objective. Bad matches produce inaccurate assessments. The teaching challenge is to use assessments as a vehicle to deepen learning and to reveal to students their developing proficiencies (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2008). Teachers have options in the assessment methods they implement. Selecting an assessment method that is unable to reflect expected learning will compromise the accuracy of the results (Chappuis, Chappuis, & Stiggins, 2009).

Rather than having assessments drive what teachers teach and how teachers teach in middle schools, the fundamental needs of the student combined with the scope and sequence of the curriculum should guide the assessment (Schurr, 2010). To understand how assessments impact student learning, one must begin with a sense of how assessments fit into instruction. Teachers evaluate for two reasons, to present instructional outcomes and to motivate students to learn (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2005). Hearne (2004) regarded there is a shift from using assessment as a negative factor in schools to a positive factor that builds an environment of reflections regarding classroom experiences. With an increase in standardized testing after the NCLB Act of 2001 became the law, teachers renewed their interest in the different forms of alternative assessments. Assessment may be the most dominant resource available for ensuring comprehensive student mastery of important standards (Wren, 2009). Students do not enter the classroom with the same learning abilities, experiences, and learning needs (Tomlinson, 2008).

Using best teaching practices demand a mutual knowledge of what diverse evaluation procedures are, how they look, and most importantly, how they are made to predict the results recommended by theory or experimental research (Frey & Schmitt, 2007). When sound assessment strategies are implemented by teachers, the best way to ensure there is balance is to create a plan. A plan that is focused on the knowledge to be attained and not only the grade to be earned (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2008). Assessment tools designed by teachers are a vital part for students planning their own learning (Crisp, 2012). Stiggins and Chappuis (2008) proposed the use of student engaged classroom assessments convert student thinking in more positive directions. The evidence shows that there is no question about what happens to student achievement and assessment results in a student centered classroom. In reaction to the accountability movement, schools now have additional levels of assessments. Using information from these assessments, schools now make decisions regarding individual students, groups of students, instructional programs, resource distribution, and much more (Chappuis, Chappuis, & Stiggins, 2009).

Literature Related to the Method

The research on alternative assessments has gained major attention for educating students more effectively. Formative assessments provide insight and give feedback to the teacher about students learning the content being taught (Brookhart & DeVoge, 2000). Formative assessment practices have been an essential part in the field of education since the late 1960s (Baroudi, 2007). Torrance and Pryor (2001) recognized formative assessment as an incremental process, in which the teacher obtains a product

from students and uses the information in the planning of assessments. Black and Wiliam (2010) reviewed the effectiveness of formative assessments when utilized properly.

Teaching and learning must be interrelated and teachers must have a great knowledge of students' strengths and weaknesses when using formative assessment practices in their classrooms. Blankstein (2004) stressed the value of formative assessment practices which provide feedback for assessing learning. Feedback received from implemented formative assessments may direct teachers to change instructional formats or reorganize learning opportunities for each student to improve performance on summative assessments.

In considering the various methods used to approach the topic of assessments in middle school, I found research that approached the topic from a qualitative perspective. According to Creswell (2007), one main strength of qualitative research is the focus on content. Because researchers most often collect data in the field, they have an opportunity to develop an understanding of the content and how individuals behave in certain situations. Yin (2011) added qualitative research has the ability to represent the point of views and perceptions of the participants in a research study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described the role of qualitative research as one that discusses a need for the revelation of the problem, allowed for an in-depth description of the context or setting, and captures the outcomes or lessons learned through inquiry. Qualitative research can enhance and inform decisions of practitioners and policymakers. Through rich adaptive research designs, qualitative research can help to identify key factors that contribute to or hinder students' academic success (Sallee and Flood, 2012). Qualitative research is richly descriptive and uses words rather than numbers to communicate what is learned about a

phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). Sallee & Flood (2012) concluded because qualitative methods call for close interaction between the researcher and participants, this ultimately allows the researcher to develop a deeper comprehensive understanding of the setting.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) described the role of qualitative research as one that discusses a need for the explication of the problem, allowed for an in-depth description of the context or setting, and captures the outcomes or lessons learned through the inquiry. I chose to use the case study approach for several reasons. In order to select and understand the method, the researcher studied literature related to case study research. According to Yin (2009), the case study is used to contribute to the understanding of individual groups, organizations, and related experiences. The case study allows for an end product that is richly descriptive and allows for the perspectives and opinions of the participants' viewpoints. The case study also permit purposeful selection of the participants within the study (Merriam, 2009). The purposeful selection of participants allows the researcher to maximize what is learned by selecting participants that will lead to the greatest understanding (Stake, 1995). Patton (1990) concluded using purposeful selection of participants allow for information-rich cases.

The case study approach is also known as a "bounded system." It allowed for the investigation of a case "over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information" (Creswell, 1998, p.61). Glesne (2011) stated the study of the case tends to involve in-depth examinations of data gathered through participant observations, in-depth interviewing, and document collection and analysis. Qualitative research relies more on conveying similar ideas. "The researcher builds a complex,

holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants and conducts the study in a natural setting” (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). As the researcher, I desired to gain a better understanding of sixth grade teachers’ perspectives of the types and effectiveness of differentiated assessments in the sixth grade curriculum. The qualitative research study, particularly a case study, was the best research method that allowed meaning to be constructed by the individual participants as it related to their own experiences.

Summary

Students of today are diverse in terms of their educational backgrounds, knowledge, learning styles, and learning abilities. Armstrong (2009) explained in his research that over the past 25 years, The American education system has experienced great changes in demographics that have created a student population more racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse than ever before. To meet and accommodate the individual needs of the diverse student population, students may need an interactive and engaging learning community conducive to student growth and achievement. To achieve student success there is a need to accommodate and appeal to the individual student’s multiple intelligences, learning styles, and abilities through instruction that encourages hands on learning. Research in this literature review has shown that creating a constructivist learning environment may empower the individual student to actively construct his or her own meaning that results in student achievement. Research has also indicated the need to differentiate assessment methods and use effective learning outcome strategies that accommodate and address the needs of the individual middle school student.

This section presented a review of the literature related to qualitative research. Section 2 included research on the types of assessments currently used in middle school curriculum. The research described the history and the effectiveness of both types of assessments, and the impact on student learning when traditional and alternative assessments are combined. In addition, it included literature that strongly supported the implementation of alternative assessments and the connection to individual learning for the middle school student. Section 3 discusses the research questions in relationship to the research method. Section 3 offers my rationale for using a qualitative research approach. Section 3 also examines the role of the researcher, the explanation for the selection of participants, data collection procedure, and process for analyzing the data.

Section 3: Methodology

Introduction

This section includes an explanation of my rationale for conducting this study and an explanation of the research participants, data collection instruments, data collection procedures, and data analysis. This study examined the daily sixth grade curriculum in a suburban middle school located in central South Carolina. At the time of the study, this curriculum includes a variety of instruction using differentiated instruction and technology in all aspects of the curriculum; however, the assessment of student work was still limited to traditional assessments (e.g., multiple choice, true/false, and essay tests). Although many sixth grade students do not perform well in class and work below grade level, there are sixth grade teachers who limit the types of assessments that are used to evaluate their students. The assessments currently used by sixth grade Language Arts teachers were reviewed to determine the way differentiating assessments support individual learning abilities and needs for the middle school student.

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine the assessments used by sixth grade teachers to support individual student learning at the middle school level. The following research questions were used to examine the impact assessment methods have on the individual student:

1. How do traditional assessments identify the learning ability and needs of individual middle school students?
2. How do alternative assessments identify the learning ability and needs of individual middle school students?

3. How are learning outcomes different for the individual middle school student when comparing traditional to alternative assessments?

Research Design

Alternative assessments and learning for the individual middle school student were the focus of this study. The most appropriate qualitative approach for investigation of this topic was a case study. This methodological approach best fits the research topic because teachers were involved and actively engaged in the research process. Case studies are the preferred methodology when context specifically influences the case (Yin, 2003). According to Creswell (1998), a case study is a situation where the researcher investigates a program in detail, an occurrence, an activity, a procedure, or one or more people. Such cases are often bound by time and action, and detailed information is collected by the researcher using a variety of data collection methods sustained for a period of time. Hatch (2002) reported that case studies are a particular kind of qualitative research that examines a contextualized existing (rather than historical) experience within certain restrictions. This methodological approach best fits the research topic because teachers were involved and actively engaged in the research process.

Several other research approaches were considered and discarded. Grounded theory work involves specific procedures for data collection and analysis that include continual data sampling, coding, categorizing, and comparing in order to generate theory about a social phenomena (Glesne, 2011). Hatch (2002) stated grounded theory works from the assumption that rigorous methods can be used to discover social reality that are

empirically represented in carefully collected data. A grounded theory research approach was considered however; I did not study how people act or react to a phenomenon.

An ethnographic approach was also considered and rejected. Ethnographic research is a qualitative method that involves a study of a cultural group in a natural setting over an extended period of time (Creswell, 1998). This kind of research, Hatch (2002) added, seeks to describe a culture or parts of culture from the viewpoint of members of the culture. The nature of this study therefore was not useful to the researcher because the study did not focus on the natural setting of a cultural group over an extended time frame.

Phenomenological research studies human events as they are immediately experienced in real-world settings (Yin, 2011). Creswell (2003) added phenomenological research is focused on a small group of participants through comprehensive and extended engagement that is used to develop meaning out of patterns and relationships. This research approach was not useful to me, as the researcher, because the study did not take place over an extended period and the participants' human experiences are not relevant for the study.

Lastly, narrative research was defined by Hatch (2002) as research that is focused on gathering and interrupting the stories told by people to describe their lives. Under this method, the perspectives of the participant's and the researcher's lives are combined in a collaborative narrative. The purpose of the study involved research and data that support student learning and student achievement, therefore the narrative of the students' lives is not significant to the outcome of the study (Creswell, 2003). A case study research design

is done purposefully, not at random, therefore; it is a particular person, place, process, or any other limited accessed system that is chosen because there are characteristics that interest the researcher (Merriam & Associates, 2002). The case study methodology was chosen because the important attribute of the data collection for the case study is the use of multiple sources of information concurring on the same issues (Yin, 1993). The credibility in using case study research design was to understand the decisions teachers made when using assessments; most importantly why they choose the assessment, and how these assessments were implemented into their curriculum. The case study allowed me to examine how assessments accommodate student learning and achievement using an open-ended survey, individual interviews, and teacher lesson plans.

Role of the Researcher

Creswell (2003) stated that a researcher should clearly identify their biases, morals, and personal interests about the research topic and process. As I involved myself in this case study, I assumed several roles that included interviewer, interpreter, and analyst. I took an active role when interviewing the teachers in the study by communicating and interacting with the participants. This was done without the inclusion of my opinions or views of the respondent's answers. To accomplish this task, I began each interview by explaining to the participants that I was a colleague and researcher, and as the researcher, I had no authority over them and that their participation in this research was strictly voluntary. All interviews were conducted in a professional manner that adequately protected the rights and privacy of each participant in the study.

I acknowledged that researcher bias existed because I value alternative assessments. The validity of the case study could possibly be subject to vulnerability due to my bias. Strategies were put in place to limit the impact of researcher bias. These strategies included triangulating multiple sources of data during data collection, self-reflection narratives were used to clarify any bias that I may have brought to the study, and lastly member-checking. Yin (2009) added one way to show this type of validity is to use multiple sources of data. Interviewing each participant allowed me to witness and interpret body language and other actions. In this situation, my position as a teacher will permit me to include my insight to the responses (Hatch, 2002). Therefore, in order to reduce the effects of researcher bias, multiple sources of data were used during data collection. The case study included information from an open-ended survey, individual interviews, and teacher lesson plans.

My role as an interpreter and analyst were incorporated in the study through analyzing the emerging patterns from the responses of interviews, transcriptions, and the coding process. The participants were informed that the confidentiality of all data collection materials would be sustained for the duration and after the conclusion of the study. All research materials were stored securely on my password-protected laptop and also a locked file cabinet located in my house.

Population and Sample

The participants invited to participate in the study were, at the time of the study, employed at a middle school located in central South Carolina. These participants consisted of sixth grade Language Arts teachers and an assistant principal was also

invited to participate in this study because she formally taught sixth grade Language Arts and now serves as an administrator. The focus of the case study was to examine ways these teachers incorporate assessments in the classroom. All teachers employed by the district are aware of the district's Academic Service Division's main priority and mission which is to support teaching and learning in a student-centered environment. This support is reflected in the quality of professional development offerings, the programs established to meet the needs of all learners, and special initiatives to address the goals and objectives of excellence in all schools. The division represents the academic interests of the school district and is engaged in the delivery of comprehensive educational services (XXX School District XXX Academic Service Division, 2013). The teachers invited to participate in the study regularly attend professional development opportunities that focus on student-centered environments on a school, district, and national level. I attended these meetings and conferences with the participants for many years.

The sampling of participants is purposive because of the information the participants will provide to understand the problem (Yin, 2009). All 6th grade Language Arts teachers were invited to participate in my study, and four teachers responded and consented to participate in my research. All participants are regular education teachers and an assistant principal who is a former Language Arts teacher. I contacted the participants through an email letter of invitation and I also sent the letter to each participant through the inter-district mail system (see Appendix A). I met informally with the participants to explain the purpose of my study and the method of data collection. The participants were given the opportunity to ask questions regarding the study. I explained

to the participants that their participation was completely voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The participants were also informed that all data collection materials would be kept confidential. In addition, each teacher was given a copy of the consent form (see Appendix B) and all signed consent forms were kept in a locked file cabinet located in my home prior to the open-ended survey being completed by the participants and the individual interviews taking place.

Through research, I learned ways the teachers incorporated various content level assessments in their classroom. These teachers are diverse in race, varying levels of educational experiences and backgrounds, and gender. This sample of teachers teach Language Arts, which includes all academic levels of student performances ranging from remedial/basic skills, regular placement, honors, and gifted and talented. Creswell (2003) concluded “the idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants and sites that best help the researcher understand the problem and the research questions” (p. 185). The purposeful sampling of the sixth grade teachers that participated in this study were chosen because they each teach one academic subject in the sixth grade curriculum and these teachers are familiar with alternative assessments.

Data Collection

Data were collected for this case study using qualitative methods after receipt of Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (#05-21-14-0103272). The use of an open-ended survey, individual interviews, and teacher lesson plans in this study provided me with descriptive feedback regarding the effectiveness of alternative assessments and academic learning at the middle school level. Data collection for a case study includes a

wide variety of procedures to form an in depth description of the case (Yin, 2009).

Qualitative research approaches depend on a variety of methods for obtaining data (Glesne, 2011). The case study provided me the opportunity to gather information about the effectiveness of assessment strategies in a natural setting. The case study gained a clear perspective through an open-ended survey, individual interviews, and teacher lesson plans of both traditional and alternative assessments in a middle school. Data collection began in September 2014 and concluded in October 2014.

Open-Ended Survey

Initial data was collected through an open-ended question survey. This type of survey is based on a standardized interview, a special type of formal interview that contains predetermined questions. Open-ended questions give the informants the opportunity to share their unique perspectives in their own words (Hatch, 2002). I created a 9-question open-ended survey using Survey Monkey and the survey questions were very similar to the individual interview questions. The link to the survey was emailed to the participants in the study and was active for one week to allow the participants to complete it anonymously online. The participants were given a copy of the questions prior to the link being emailed to allow the participants the opportunity to be prepared and aware of what questions were asked on the survey. The open-ended survey questions are also designed to allow participants to respond openly and honestly about assessments and individual student learning. The majority of the survey questions gave the participants an opportunity to reflect on their classrooms practices, the students they teach, and the assessments that they choose for their students (see Appendix C).

Individual Interviews

Semistructured interviews were administered to individual teachers. The individual interviews took place during the months of September and October after the open-ended survey was completed by the participants. These interviews took place in settings familiar to the individuals. Yin (2003) stated for data collection is one of the most important sources of case study information is using interviews. According to Hatch (2002) qualitative researchers use interviews to discover meaning structures that participants use to organize experiences and to understand their world. Two of the teacher participants were interviewed and each participant was randomly chosen.

In qualitative research, conducting the study in a natural setting is important to the researcher (Creswell, 1998). The researcher often goes to the home or office of the participant to conduct the research (Creswell, 2003). Each participant worked with me to identify a day and time that was convenient for the personal interview to take place. As such, the individual interviews took place in a location chosen by the participant. The questions asked during the individual interviews were semistructured, open-ended questions that were designed to encourage conversation from the participants based on assessment and individual student learning at the middle school level (see Appendix D).

All questions asked during the interview were given to the participants prior to the interviews being conducted to allow the participants the ability to be prepared and informed of what was expected. Prior to the interviews officially beginning, I discussed with each participant the importance of genuine answers opposed to answers the participants may assume that I would like to hear. Each interview took approximately 45

minutes to an hour to complete and the same interview protocol was used for each participant. All interviews were digitally recorded using a digital voice recorder with a clear voice microphone to allow clarity for voice and speech. I informed the participants when the interview and the recording of the interview began. Each recording was labeled with the number of the participant. For example “Study Participant 1” was labeled on Tape 1 which identified the recorded information from the specific participant. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded. Data was also recorded in the researcher’s field journal that included reflective information of each interview. Self-reflection narratives were used to clarify any bias that I may have brought to the study. Hatch (2002) stated research journals provide a record of the effective experience during a study. They provide places where researchers can openly reflect on what is happening during the research process and how they feel about it.

All interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and coded immediately. It is recommended by Hughes-Hassell and Bishop (2004) that the participants are informed that the session is being recorded and the participants are aware that the details of the session will be reported as group data and that no individual participant will be identified. I closely followed ethical procedures, protected the confidentiality of all participants, and maintained the validity of the study. All participation of the participants was voluntary and the participants’ identity remained anonymous because pseudonyms were used. Each participant was given a copy of the consent form (see Appendix B) and all signed consent forms were placed in the locked file cabinet located in my home prior to the individual interviews taking place.

Document Analysis: Teacher Lesson Plans

Document analysis provided the opportunity to study documents used by the participants to assess their students. Using the consent form (see Appendix B), I requested permission from the teachers to review one week of lesson plans. Data from documents are gathered without the direct involvement of research participants; they are unobtrusive because their collection does not interfere with the ongoing events of everyday life (Hatch, 2002). The purpose of collecting lesson plans from the participants was to observe types of assessments used within each classroom. By examining each teacher's lesson plans, I was able to gather evidence of the types of assessments used in the sixth grade curriculum. I collected the lesson plans via email from the participants. After I analyzed the types of assessments described in the lesson plans of the participants, the lesson plans were stored in the locked file cabinet.

Data Analysis

According to Yin (1984) a case study is an experimental investigation that examines a contemporary experience in real-life in which multiple sources of data are used. Because the research approach was a case study and an open-ended survey, individual interviews, and teacher lesson plans were the primary forms of the data collection process, typological analysis was the best fit for the data analysis process. According to Hatch (2002) typological analysis is especially useful in data collection for the individual interviews. Hatch's typological analysis is a nine-step process. The following is description of each step and an explanation of its use in the analysis of data from this study:

1. Identify typologies to be analyzed
2. Read the data, marking entries related to your typologies
3. Read entries by typologies, recording the main ideas in entries on a summary sheet
4. Look for patterns, relationships, themes within typologies
5. Read data, coding entries according to patterns identified and keeping a record of what entries go with elements of patterns
6. Decide if patterns are supported by the data, and search the data for nonexamples of patterns
7. Look for relationships among the patterns identified
8. Write patterns as one-sentence generalizations
9. Select data excerpts that support generalizations (p. 153)

Data from the survey, interviews, and teacher lesson plans provided rich detailed information from the participants, therefore; transcribing interviews and reviewing the field notes took place first. Triangulation was used to strengthen the study by using multiple sources of data collection. In research, the principle goal is finding at least three ways to verify or corroborate a particular event, description, or fact being reported by the study. Such corroboration provides another way to strengthen the validity of the study (Yin, 2011). For the present study, triangulation was employed through the collection of data by open-ended survey responses, individual interviews, and teacher lesson plans. Data from interviews and surveys allowed me to compare what was shared in the interviews against what was stated on the survey regarding classroom assessments.

Triangulation of the data occurred once the case study field notes from the surveys and interviews were transcribed, organized, and coded for common themes. Teacher lesson plan data was coded based on the objective of the lesson, lesson's activities, and the assessment of the objective. Each lesson plan was further analyzed to learn more about types of assessments used and the documentation that supported the research questions.

Member-checking was another method used to verify data in this study. Member checking helped to determine the accuracy of the findings by taking the final report or specific descriptions. I also reviewed impressions that were previously recorded in the research notes and highlighted the most important impressions as recommended by Hatch (2002) who recommended "that potentially salient impressions be noted in some way in the research protocols and/or in the research journals. This can be done with a highlighter or some other distinguishing marking by hand" (p.182). Impressions were studied to identify relationships among the impressions and then memos on sticky notes were the interpretations of these impressions. Researchers must start by being immersed in the data. Reading through the data set repeatedly is the only way to be immersed at the level required (Hatch, 2002).

Member-checking was the final step in the data analysis process. In member-checking according to Creswell (2003) the source will serve as a check throughout the analysis process. An ongoing discussion regarding the researcher's interpretations of the source's experiences and meanings will ensure the truth-value of the data. Lastly, I used member-checking to determine the accuracy of the findings by allowing the participants

to verify the final report and specific descriptions included in the report. Notations of any discrepancies was included on the final report.

Reliability and Validity Procedures

A qualitative reliability serves to ensure that the procedures used in the study are consistent and stable (Creswell, 2009). Several strategies were used to ensure qualitative reliability to this study's research. Peer reviews were also used as an approach to strengthen reliability of the research questions and the open-ended survey. The peer reviewers informally reviewed each survey question prior to the administration of the instrument as an effort to establish certain components of reliability. Two assistant principals, one is a former sixth grade Language Arts Teacher, were asked to be peer reviewers for the study. Additionally, each survey question was evaluated for its significance to the research questions. These colleagues were not part of the actual study and participated in the review of the questions on a voluntary basis. Questions that posed any uncertainties or confusion would be removed to increase clarity of meaning to all participants. Each peer reviewer found that all open-ended survey questions were reliable and relevant to each research question.

In qualitative research, to check the accuracy of the findings determine the validity. A valid study has accurately collected and analyzed its data so that the conclusions candidly reflect and represent the real world that was studied (Yin, 2011). Several strategies are included within this research study to support the validity and the credibility of the findings. One way to show this type of validity is to use multiple sources of data (Yin, 2009). This study used an open-ended survey, individual interviews,

and lesson plan reviews to provide a more complete and accurate picture of the research outcome.

Summary

This section evaluated the qualitative research using a case study design. It included an outline of data collection and data analysis. Section 3 also revealed my rationale for incorporating the case study design that is used to examine assessments and student learning for the individual student at the middle school level. In the next section, data collected for the study is presented and analyzed. Subsequent sections elaborate on the discussion of results and recommendations for future research based on differentiating assessments in middle school curriculum.

Section 4: Data Presentation and Analysis

Introduction

The intent of this study was to better understand how the assessments teachers choose for their students support learning for the individual student. In this section, I present the findings of the qualitative data analysis. The primary focus of this study was to examine types of assessments used by sixth grade Language Arts teachers. This section presents an overview of assessments used to accommodate learning for the individual student learning along with a complete description and analysis of the collected data. An open-ended survey, semistructured interviews, and teacher lesson plans were collected in response to the following research questions:

1. How do traditional assessments identify the learning ability and needs of individual middle school students?
2. How do alternative assessments identify the learning ability and needs of individual middle school students?
3. How are learning outcomes different for the individual middle school student when comparing traditional to alternative assessments?

The qualitative methodology of this case study design included an open-ended survey, semistructured individual interviews, and the evaluation of teacher lesson plans. A combination of opened-ended survey questions and semistructured individual interviews were conducted with a total of 4 participants during the months of September and October 2014. To gather the data, a digital voice recorder was used to record each

individual interview. To maintain complete confidentiality, each participant in this study was identified by one of four codes: P1, P2, P3, or P4.

The goal of this qualitative study was to provide a descriptive account of the types of assessments used by sixth grade Language Arts teachers. The responses from the individual interviews and information from teacher lesson plans were examined using typological analysis. According to Hatch (2002), typological analysis is especially useful in data collection for the individual interviews. The questions presented to the participants were focused on the types of assessments used by these teachers and the effectiveness of the assessments. To complete typological analysis I reread data to record the main ideas. Based on my review of the data, I looked for patterns, relationships, and themes. I identified words and phrases that were heard often in the information gathered from the open-ended survey and individual interviews.

The individual interviews took place in a neutral setting to alleviate any potential uncomfortable feelings of the participants. The setting chosen for each of the individual interviews was the local library. After the date and time were arranged with each participant, I met the participants separately at the library to conduct the individual interviews. Each individual interview was guided by the same set of semistructured interview questions (see Appendix E). As the conductor of the interview, it was my goal to make the participants feel relaxed and I showed interest in what they had to say by actively listening and responding appropriately. During the guided conversation, I took notes on the general tone and expression of each participant. In the margins of my transcriptions, I included descriptions of each participant's overall demeanor during the

interview and transcribed each interview immediately after the interview was finished. To ensure trustworthiness, I summarized each participant's responses into paragraphs for transcription review. I presented each participant with the responses for review to determine if the participant needed to clarify or include any additional information. The transcription was emailed to the participants and then I met informally with each participant to discuss the transcription giving the participant an opportunity to clarify or add to any responses made during the individual interview. At the conclusion of the research study, a summary of the findings that emerged from the data was given to each participant.

Findings

The data analysis phase of this study followed the five data analysis phases recommended by Yin (2011): compiling or organizing data, disassembling data by breaking the data into smaller fragments, reassembling by coding and reorganizing the data into themes, interpreting the data by displaying data in figures, tables, or a new narrative, and concluding by drawing conclusions from the entire study (pp. 178-179). Both the open-ended survey questions and the individual interview transcripts were coded for common themes or patterns that emerged using typological analysis. As I read through the responses for each participant, I looked for common patterns and then created categories. The emerging patterns, relationships, and themes suggested new concepts within the categories that led to the creation of new codes. Because the new codes were subordinate components of the more comprehensive categories, I used these codes to show the relationship of the various codes within each category.

I transcribed the individual interview responses into a Microsoft Word document, then read and continued to reread for meaning. I coded the two interviews separately and by each question. Again, I coded by classifying words and phrases into units of meanings which became categories. Data was coded from transcripts of the interviews in a similar way to that of the open-ended survey responses by color-coding each category. I compared the categories to those that emerged from the analysis of the open-ended survey. For example, a common theme that “alternative assessments such as formative assessments are a great tool to use...alternative assessments are very effective as a teaching strategy,” emerged from both the open-ended survey and the individual interviews. The themes were made by grouping similar words and phrases. Some of these phrases were “*collaborative grouping, academic success, collaboration, differentiated strategies, variety of learning strategies, and variety of assessments.*”

After the process of cataloging and analyzing the data, three themes were developed based on the responses from the participants. The themes included: (a) variety of teaching strategies is needed, (b) alternative assessments are great teaching tools, and (c) working collaboratively is essential.

Theme 1: Variety of Teaching Strategies Is Needed

The first theme developed based on feedback from the open-ended survey. The participants explained the importance to them of using a variety of learning strategies. For example, P4 described traditional assessments as effective teaching strategies, but noted that there was an attempt (by P4) to have a variety of learning strategies in the class.

P2 explained,

I believe in using a variety of learning strategies to meet the needs of my children. All children learn differently. Having a variety of teaching strategies will help meet the needs of the children that have different learning styles than their other classmates.

P1 added that it depends on the students.

The majority of students love movement and music! For example, students create movement for their stems. They love it and perform better on quizzes. The students also enjoy acting out literature that is read in class and it deepens their comprehension of the material. They tend to retain information better.

P3 stated that alternative assessment methods are necessary to make learning relevant for students because sometimes students do not see the relevancy and they may not be motivated during the lesson.

The first essential research question focused on the effectiveness of traditional assessments and student learning. Research Question 1: How do traditional assessments identify the learning ability and needs of individual middle school students? Research Question 1 was answered in open-ended survey questions 4 and 5 and again in the individual interview question 7. The results of the data collected from the participants found that traditional assessments should be used to form small groups and to guide instruction. P4 stated, "These assessments have been around forever and are easy to create and grade." P3 continued by saying these types of teaching practices should be used when needed. Too much lecturing and too many notes may not benefit all students.

The participants concluded by expressing traditional assessments are informative assessments that provide data, but if not used correctly teachers may not know if students really learned the material. P1 concluded, "I do not think students retain information from traditional assessments as well as they do from alternative assessments." The goal of Research Question 1 was to understand how traditional assessments identify the learning ability and needs of individual middle school student.

Theme 2: Alternative Assessments Are Great Teaching Tools

The next theme was based on data that supported alternative assessments as great teaching tools. Data collected from the participants identified several factors that influenced the incorporation of alternative assessments into the curriculum. The participants shared their experiences based on the research question regarding alternative assessments. When asked about alternative assessments P1 replied by stating alternative assessments such as formative assessments are great tools to use. Formative assessments guide instruction and also provide feedback that could be used to help meet the needs of all students. The connection of alternative assessments as great teaching tools continued with the response of P2 who added alternative assessments are awesome teaching strategies. Especially when students have an input regarding the assessments and the assessments match the students' learning styles.

The next essential research question was asked to better understand alternative assessments and the connection to student learning. Research Question 2: How do alternative assessments identify the learning ability and needs of individual middle school students? This research question was discussed and answered in the open-ended survey

questions 6 and 7 and in the individual interview questions 9 and 10. Based on the data collected from the participants, I gained a clearer picture of how effective these assessments are to the participants. P2 explained that alternative assessments increase student comprehension in many ways by helping students retain what they learn. P3 expressed at times if students do not see the relevancy, they will be less motivated to reach their fullest potential during the lesson. The lesson must be worth it to the students in many of ways.

It was also revealed in the data that although the participants found alternative assessments to be the most effective assessment to meet the needs of their students it takes a lot of time to create these assessments and to grade them. P2 described, “I consider alternative assessments for most of my lessons, but some lessons are not easy to mold into alternative strategies.”

P1 concluded by stating,

Students tend to want to have alternative assessments in my class such as projects, presentations, open book, etc. because it fits their particular learning style. I think I am able to assess what they really have learned or know from these types of assessments. For example, I can really determine what a student knows from an essay, but it takes much longer to grade.

Identifying the different learning outcomes of individual students when comparing traditional assessments and alternative assessments was the motivation for the last research question. Research Question 3: How are learning outcomes different for the individual middle school student when comparing traditional to alternative assessments?

Research Question 3 was answered in the open-ended survey questions 1, 2, and 3 and in interview questions 8 and 9. Data from the participants revealed 3:4 of the participants believed that students tend to perform better when alternative assessments are used. P3 describes the structure of learning for students as, “the structure of learning in my class usually begins with some type of pre-assessment, then introducing the content in a creative way to grab students’ attention.”

P1 stated,

Overall if the student understands or do not understands the material, but I also know that sometimes students do not retain the information-almost as if they learn and dump it. Whereas with alternative assessments they learn the material and apply it-it is a process. I think they (students) receive much more from that process. But it is time consuming for the teacher to set up and grade.

P2 expressed nevertheless, that alternative assessments have their place just as traditional assessments do. Because state test are based on traditional assessments this participant has to somewhat mirror that in the classroom. P2 continued by saying “However, traditional assessments can bridge more relevancy to the lesson to create a more organic learning experience.” The purpose of Research Question 3 was to determine how learning outcomes are different when comparing traditional and alternative assessments and individual student learning.

Theme 3: Working Collaboratively Is Essential

The last theme investigated the importance of collaboration. Data from the participants revealed the effectiveness of routinely collaborating with colleagues to discuss, plan, and implement strategies for student learning. Research Question 3: How are learning outcomes different for the individual middle school student when comparing traditional to alternative assessments? This research question was discussed and answered in the open-ended survey questions 8 and 9. The participants' feedback from the open-ended survey questions described the necessity of working collaboratively to discuss, plan, and to determine strategies for their students. P1 explained, "Collaboration is the key to success. As a teacher, I collaborate with my colleagues daily, and we discuss the needs of our children. We begin with a purpose...then we pursue our goals to meet the needs of our learners." The discussion continued with P2 saying the grade level collaborates once a week to determine strategies that work with students. Each department meets once a month to determine strategies for mainly content purposes.

Collaboration at the district level was also very important to the participants as well. The discussion continued with P1 describing how the school district provides numerous opportunities to collaborate with other colleagues to plan differentiated assessments. "I am very supported with implementing differentiated strategies, however, I have not received any recent training, but the district offered a weeklong summer professional development on differentiated instruction many years ago," responded P2. Additionally, P3 answered, "District wide, these are announced periodically throughout the school year. For example, there is a district in-service for two days this month."

Routine collaboration with colleagues is vital for discussing, planning, and implementing strategies to support student learning. The purpose of Research Question 3 was to determine how learning outcomes are different when comparing traditional and alternative assessments and individual student learning.

Review of Teacher Lesson Plans

In addition to the open-ended survey and individual interviews, I also reviewed teacher lesson plans. The two participants who participated in the individual interviews were also asked to allow me to review their lesson plans. The instructional lesson plans focused on South Carolina State Standards for English Language Arts. Each lesson plan included: the learning objective, lesson agenda, materials students needed to bring, homework/classwork, and the assessment. The purpose of the interviews and a review of teacher lesson plans was to collect rich data to obtain a clear understanding of the assessments used by sixth grade Language Arts teachers.

Following the individual interviews, I emailed the participants and asked them to submit their lesson plans for one week. They were given the option to submit the lesson plans to me via email or if they could provide me a paper copy by means of inter-district mail or in person. Both participants chose to submit their lesson plans to me via email. In analyzing the artifacts, I looked for the types of assessments these participants use in their classrooms to assess their students. The artifacts fell into two categories: traditional assessments and alternative assessments. Figure 1 presents the artifacts' descriptive statistics in terms of types of assessments that is based on Research Question 3: How are

learning outcomes different for the individual middle school student when comparing traditional to alternative assessments?

Traditional Assessments	Traditional Assessments							Alternative Assessments	Alternative Assessments				
	Vocabulary Chart	Summarizing Chart	Article Opinion Chart	Context Clues Chart	Foldable Worksheet	Stems Quiz	Grammar Review & Practice		Collage	Foldable	Materials for Project	Vocabulary Review (Technology Assignment)	Journal Reflections
Participant 1	X	X		X		X	X		X		X	X	
Participant 2	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X			

Figure 1. A chart displaying the types of assessments used for a week by the participants to assess their students.

Data from reviewing the teacher lesson plans revealed that although all the participants in the study discussed the effectiveness of alternative assessments, the assessments used by these teachers to assess their students were still mainly traditional assessments. Data from the teacher lesson plans are consistent with the participants' feedback based on using traditional assessments. As stated by P1 "traditional assessments are easier to create and grade." The responses from the other participants were similar and P2 added, "I consider alternative assessments for most of my lessons, but some lessons are not easy to mold into alternative strategies." The participants are aware of the impact alternative assessments have on individual student learning; however, these teachers are still using traditional assessments because these assessments are easy to create and grade.

Discrepant Case

Throughout the data collection period, I encouraged honesty on the open-ended survey and during the individual interviews. The participants had similar experiences that were developed into the three themes discussed earlier. However, there was an experience that did not fit with the three established themes, nor did it aid in answering the research questions. One of the survey questions asked about the types of support and training provided at the school level and at the district level for incorporating differentiated assessments in the curriculum.

Teachers in the United States are required by state and federal law to modify assessments for many students with accommodations. One of the participant's answers was based on modifying the assessments given to their students. The participant answered, "The only assessments that are modified for my children are the assessments that are given to students with accommodations." I was given information about assessments being modified for students with accommodations. However, the purpose of this case study was to examine the types of assessments that are used by sixth grade Language Arts teachers to support individual student learning at the middle school level; therefore, the when and why assessments are modified for individual middle school students were not suitable to include with the three main themes.

Evidence of Quality

I chose a case study for this study because a significant part of the case study is to use multiple sources of evidence during the data collection. It was important to maintain a standard of quality regarding accurate reporting of information from the open-ended

survey, the individual interviews, and teacher lesson plans. The use of triangulation authenticated the information gained from the sources (Hatch, 2002). SurveyMonkey electronically distributed the Types of Assessments Open-Ended Survey to the participants in order to collect qualitative data. Some of the data from the open-ended survey was also analyzed using SurveyMonkey. As previously stated, the individual interviews were recorded on a digital device with permission from the participants. After each session, I listened to the entire interview and then transcribed the interview, and a sample of a transcribed interview is found in Appendix F. I met with each participant and provided a summary of the transcribed interview. Providing each participant a summary of his or her comments is an example of member checking (Merriam, 2002). During our 15-20 minute meeting, the participants were allowed to ask me questions related to their portion of the case study. The participants were also given an opportunity to clarify or add to any responses made during the individual interview.

The participants were purposefully chosen because they currently teach or taught sixth grade Language Arts. The sixth grade Language Arts teachers provided an ongoing summary of the types of assessments that are use in their classrooms. In order to accurately outline the types of assessments used, I separated the open-ended survey and individual interview responses into three themes. The themes included: (a) alternative assessments are great teaching tools, (b) variety of teaching strategies is needed, and (c) working collaboratively is essential. In Section 5, I use these specific experiences to explore the implications and interpret the case study findings. The following section includes a discussion concerning the conclusions that address the research questions and

the relationship within the literature. Implications for change also includes a discussion to provide teachers who have yet to differentiate and vary assessments based on individual abilities and needs of their students, administrators, and the community at large an opportunity to consider other professional development options as well as suggestions for implementation.

Section 5: Discussions, Recommendations, and Conclusions

Overview

Transformations in the nation's schools in curriculum, instruction, and assessment depend on states moving beyond current testing systems to new systems of assessments that support deeper student learning (Conley & Darling-Hammond, 2013). Years of research and development have helped educators realize how to use the classroom assessment procedure and its results to help students become confident learners. There is a new vision of excellence in assessments that will tap the determination, desire, and learning potential found in every student (Stiggins, 2006). Conley & Darling-Hammond (2013) concluded new systems of assessments will also prompt the need for new accountability that will use assessments and other data in ways that support achievement without distorting teaching and learning. The purpose of the study was to examine the types of the assessments used by sixth grade Language Arts teachers to support individual student learning at the middle school level as well as to identify the types of assessments that are currently used by these teachers. Qualitative research methods were used to better understand the following research questions:

1. How do traditional assessments identify the learning ability and needs of individual middle school students?
2. How do alternative assessments identify the learning ability and needs of individual middle school students?
3. How are learning outcomes different for the individual middle school student when comparing traditional to alternative assessments?

Interpretation of Findings

Section 4 presented rich narratives within each research question of the data collected from four sixth grade Language Arts teachers. The data collection included a combination of an open-ended survey, individual interviews, and teacher lesson plans. The case study took place during the months of September and October 2014. Both the open-ended survey questions and the individual interview transcripts were coded for common themes or patterns that emerged using typological analysis. The emerging patterns, relationships, and themes suggested new concepts within the categories that led to the creation of new codes. The themes were made by grouping similar words and phrases. Some of the phrases were *collaborative grouping*, *academic success*, *collaboration*, *differentiated strategies*, *variety of learning strategies*, and *variety of assessments*. After the process of cataloging and analyzing the data, three themes were developed based on the responses from the participants. The themes included: (a) alternative assessments are great teaching tools, (b) variety of teaching strategies is needed, and (c) working collaboratively is essential.

The findings revealed that all participants in the study endorsed the effectiveness of alternative assessments. The data also revealed that the participants were aware of the impact alternative assessments have on student learning; however, these teachers were still mainly using traditional assessments because these assessments are easy to create and grade.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was based on the theory of constructivism. Research has indicated that in constructivist classrooms, students learn from being actively engaged and when they are given the opportunities to explore their own ideas through discussion, question, and investigate (Anderson, 1998). The participants in this study found that their relationships with colleagues impact student success. P1 expressed that relationships, community, and high expectations impact student success and building a community plays a role in impacting the academic success of children. All students are capable of learning and teachers should be resourceful when using instruction and assessments that meet the academic needs of each individual student they teach (Rieg, 2009). Stiggins & Chappuis (2008) concluded student-centered classroom assessments open the assessment process and include students as partners during learning and allow students to monitor their own levels of success. The case study participants concluded that it is the responsibility of teachers to plan and deliver instruction. When students, parents, and teachers work together academic success will follow.

One recurring element found in the data was the importance of varying strategies. The participants believed having a variety of teaching strategies help address the needs of the students that have diverse learning styles. Therefore, their conclusion became the theme: variety of teaching strategies is needed. Interactions with peers are effective ways of developing skills and strategies. Constructivism is founded on the principle that allows students to connect previous knowledge and experiences with new knowledge through

active participation and interactions with others and their surroundings (Childre, Sands, & Pope, 2009). Using assessments to focus on student interests and learning preferences illustrate the power of emphasizing what works for students (Tomlinson, 2008). Allowing students the opportunities to take control of their learning is the foundation of constructivism education.

Learning in constructivist environments is interactive because it builds on students' previous knowledge and the teacher is seen as the mediator. Once it is realized that a teacher's perception of a student guides the instruction that is given to the learner, then providing teachers with the best available concept of the child's mind becomes critical (Bruner, 1996). P1 added, "With alternative assessments they (the students) learn the material and apply it because it is a process. I think they receive much more from that process." Nontraditional assessments, such as alternative assessments, are grounded in the constructivist theories of learning, therefore a constructivist theory was used as the basis of this study. Learning style, language competence, foundational skills, learning abilities, and other contributing factors can vary widely in a classroom. Regardless of their individual differences, students are expected to master the same concepts, standards, and skills (Willoughby, 2005).

Implications for Social Change

The findings in this study are indicative of the participants' desires to learn and grow in their daily practices as well as to become more aware of the assessments that meet the needs and abilities of the individual middle school student. Common to the literature were variables found that either supported or hindered the participants' efforts

to incorporate alternative assessments into the curriculum. The participants supported this stand and acknowledged the need to differentiate assessments to meet their students' individual needs. Therefore, equipping today's teachers with a full range of differentiation strategies, providing them with ongoing professional development, and continued collaboration with colleagues that best meet the needs of the individual student are essential to assure that all students achieve their full academic potential. Owens (2012) added schools and districts can allow more time for teachers to meet, analyze data, and develop individualized approaches to determine and address specific needs of their students. Effective strategies and methodologies are vital to all curricula and necessary for creating a stimulating learning environment for the individual student. Trauth-Nare & Buck (2011) concluded that the aim is to create our own practical philosophies of formative assessments that relate to middle school classrooms to enhance the environment for teaching and student learning.

Ensuring that all students' individual needs and abilities are met may provide our nation and society with a generation that can successfully meet and overcome challenges and obstacles they may encounter in our ever-changing world. Students should be given the opportunities to make content relevant by linking the work to real world experiences. Teachers are able to personalize learning for students by relating learning to their past, present, and future (Childre, Sands, & Pope, 2009). Additionally, differentiating assessments may accommodate learning for every student; therefore, findings of the research may promote social change at the local level and for other educators by allowing teachers to study the current beliefs and practices found in this case study. In turn, the

participants can then identify best practices for incorporating alternative assessments strategies that support the individual student in their present classrooms. The use of alternative assessment methods that engage students in meaningful exploration and demonstration of mastery of learning objectives may also provide alternative evaluation strategies for professionals in the educational community.

Recommendations for Action

In order to facilitate teachers' differentiating assessments to accommodate learning for the individual middle school students, three key issues need to be addressed: the types of assessments that we assess our students, ongoing professional development for incorporating formative or alternative assessments, and continued collaboration with colleagues. Open-ended survey and individual interviews data indicated that these teachers believe alternative assessments better meet their students' individual academic needs. Using formative assessment includes collecting data from student progress and comprehension in order to monitor instruction to meet students' learning needs (Britton, 2011). The participants also revealed that although alternative assessments are most effective in meeting the needs of their students, these assessments take a lot of time to create and grade. P2 explained "I considered alternative assessments for most of my lessons, but some are not easy to mold into alternative strategies." P4 continued by stating traditional assessments have been around forever and are easy to create and grade. This study found that time affected the participants' decisions regarding the incorporation and the routine use of alternative assessments in their classrooms.

Data gathered by the participants in this study provided evidence for the need to continue professional development at the national, state, and district levels. The open-ended survey and individual interviews data indicated the participants' willingness and desire to differentiate assessments for their individual students while at the same time disclosed their need for ongoing professional development for differentiation of assessments. As one participant who received training in differentiated strategies stated, "I am very supported with implementing differentiated strategies; however, I have not received any recent training." The participants expressed a need for professional development to keep them updated on current differentiation strategies. For professional development of classroom assessment strategies teachers are required to recognize the potential social building of knowledge that is needed to increase student learning (Clark, 2011).

Lastly, the participants' data also revealed the need for continued collaboration with their colleagues in order to share strategies and discuss resources to accommodate learning for their students. One participant explained, "Collaboration is the key. As a teacher I collaborate with my colleagues daily, and we discuss the needs of our children." Another participant added, "My grade level collaborates once a week to determine strategies that work with students." The need for continued collaboration was suggested by P2, "collaboration with colleagues on the implementation of differentiation strategies has been limited this year." Effective strategies and methodologies are vital to all curricula and necessary for creating a stimulating learning environment for the individual student. Strategies for differentiating instruction include teacher access to a range of

resources that target different learning preferences and reading abilities. Teachers should create activities that address auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learners (Willoughby, 2005).

Implementing alternative assessments effectively into curriculum will take time and continued practice for teachers. Providing appropriate and ongoing professional development for alternative assessments may lead to routine use of alternative assessments in the classroom. The participants expressed a need for ongoing professional development to keep them current and informed on differentiated assessment strategies. Creating collaborative environments for teachers where strategies are shared and planning of differentiated assessments take place were also needs requested by all participants. P2 described weekly grade level collaboration where teachers determine strategies that work for students. In order to fully meet the needs of the individual student, these teachers must be afforded the resources and training to effectively differentiate their assessments. The purpose and results of this case study may be disseminated at school and district level professional development meetings that focus on differentiation strategies and formative assessments.

Recommendation for Further Study

This study was limited to sixth grade Language Arts teachers at a central South Carolina suburban middle school. To understand more fully middle school teachers' perceptions towards differentiating assessments to accommodate the individual needs of middle school students, a larger sample size would provide more strength and present more definitive findings. Increasing the sample size to include middle school teachers

from other schools within the district, or within the city, or even the state could produce more in-depth data. Increasing the sample to include teachers at all grade levels of middle school could also increase the scope of the research by investigating the research questions.

Additionally, the participants assessed their students using a variety of assessments that were mainly traditional assessments. The participants explained traditional assessments are easy to create and grade as the reason for continuing to use these assessments, even though they each stated the effectiveness of alternative assessments in meeting the academic needs of their students. To provide a more comprehensive investigation of their perceptions on differentiating assessments for the individual middle school student, there remains a need to further explore the use of alternative assessments as a constructivist approach to accommodate the needs and abilities of the individual middle school student. Questions still remain unanswered and will require further investigation. These questions include:

1. How effective are alternative assessments in identifying learning for the individual middle school student when they are used daily?
2. What professional development opportunities would be needed to support and assist these teachers with routine use of alternative assessments?

Researcher's Reflection

As a qualitative researcher, I strive to understand and find meaning in the types of assessments these sixth grade Language Arts teachers choose to identify the learning ability and needs of their students. In doing so, I acknowledge the benefits of

differentiating assessments for the individual student and the increasing obstacles and challenges middle school teachers must face in order to effectively differentiate assessments for their students. I realize firsthand what teachers deal with while trying to meet the diverse educational needs of students on many different levels. The levels of student differences and learning requirements can present numerous challenges to regular education teachers as they deliver complex content material to diverse classrooms (McCoy & Ketterlin-Geller, 2004). Therefore, I entered the research process with the preconception that middle school teachers desire to provide all students with assessments that address each student's individual needs and meet the student where he or she is academically. Because I shared common teaching experiences with the participants as a former sixth grade middle school teacher, I felt the participants respected me and responded honestly and frankly on the open-ended survey questions and during individual interviews. My teaching experiences also allowed me to recognize and appreciate the participants' successes in the classroom as well as to understand the challenges these participants must address daily.

The research study consisted of the research questions being written and the conceptual framework disclosed. Data was collected from four purposefully chosen participants in the form of an open-ended survey, individual interviews, and the review of teacher lesson plans. Data was then analyzed and the process of member-checking was used to diminish probable biases. Continuous reflecting on the data and drawing conclusions from this data have provided me with concerted self-examination of my responsibility as a researcher. During the

countless hours that I spent researching assessments, particularly alternative assessments, I have gained so much more information on how to support the individual abilities and needs of all students than I ever expected to.

Conclusion

My years of teaching experience have shown me that addressing and supporting the needs of the individual student impact student learning. I now realize that if the students' individual abilities are addressed and their academic needs are met then students are able to become competent learners of the content. I am more dedicated and determined to reach all my students and to accommodate their individual needs after completing my research. This qualitative research study has given me additional insight on how the teachers who participated in my research study feel about their students' academic success and the assessments they use to assess these students. These are middle school teachers who participate regularly in ongoing professional development to continue to grow as a professional and would like to receive additional professional development on differentiating assessments.

This qualitative case study examined sixth grade Language Arts teachers' perceptions towards assessments and their impact on learning for the individual middle school student. To conduct this investigation, this study examined the types of assessments these teachers incorporated into their instruction to assess their students. The findings of this study indicate that, although the participants stated the effectiveness regarding the impact alternative assessments have on learning for their students, these

participants are still mainly using traditional assessments because they are easy to create and grade. Overall, these sixth grade Language Arts teachers are using alternative assessments to assess their students. By providing these teachers with ongoing professional development opportunities on differentiating assessments and continued collaboration with colleagues that best meet the needs of the individual student is a big step towards creating student-centered learning environments. Teachers require an arsenal of tools to have in our teaching toolbox and differentiated assessment strategies are additional tools that can meet the academic demands of the dynamic 21st- century student.

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Appendix A: Participant Invitation Letter

Dear Potential Participant,

I am currently a student at Walden University working towards my Doctor of Education Degree with a Specialization in Teacher Leadership. As such, my study is titled Middle School Teachers' Perceptions of Incorporating Alternative Assessment. You are invited to participate in a research study because you currently teach 6th Grade Language Arts or you formerly taught middle school Language Arts. The purpose of this study is to examine assessments regular education Language Arts Teachers use to assess their students.

If you participate in this study you will be asked to complete an open-ended survey regarding types of assessments and the survey may take approximately 30 minutes to complete. You may possibly be asked to participate in an individual interview because I will randomly choose two teachers to participate in the interview. The interview should take approximately 45 minutes to an hour to complete and it will be audio recorded. If you are chosen to participate in the individual interview, I will also ask to review one week of your lesson plans. If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me by email at (email). I thank you in advance for your assistance and support of my research study.

Warmest Regards,

Terra Wright

Appendix B: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

You are invited to take part in a research study based on the effects of assessment and individual student achievement in middle school curriculum. You are chosen to participate in the study because you teach one of the four core subjects in the sixth grade curriculum, Language Arts or you formerly taught middle school Language Arts. You were also chosen because you regularly attend professional development opportunities that focus on differentiating assessments on a school, district, and national level. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part. This study is being conducted by a researcher named Terra M. Wright, who is a doctoral student at Walden University.

Background Information:

The purpose of the research is to examine the impact assessments have on individual student achievement at the middle school level.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, you may be asked to:

- Participate in an open-ended survey regarding types of assessments (survey may take approximately 30 minutes to complete)
- Possibly participate in an individual interview that should take approximately 45 minutes to an hour to complete
- Allow the researcher to review your one week of lesson plans if you are chosen to participate in the individual interview

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with this colleague. If you initially decide to participate, you are still free to withdraw at any time later without affecting those relationships.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

There are minimal risks associated with participating in this study and there are no short-term benefits for participating in this study. The long-term benefit includes the information gained from the researcher can possibly provide teachers with foundational knowledge regarding alternative assessments and the impact they could have on student learning. In the event you experience stress or anxiety during your participation in the study, you may terminate your participation at any time. You may refuse to answer any questions you consider invasive or stressful. There is no penalty for refusing to participate in or discontinuing your participation in this study.

Compensation:

There will be no compensation given for taking part in this research study.

Confidentiality:

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your information for any purposes outside of this research project. The interviews will be audio taped and the audio tapes will be transcribed. When not in use, the audio tapes and transcripts will be kept in locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home. All participants will be referred to as "Participant A" or "Participant B" in the audio tape transcripts or any written report of the study. All other research information will be stored on the researcher's laptop that is password protected.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher of this study is Terra M. Wright. The researcher's doctoral chair is (Name). If you have questions, you can contact her at (email) or at (number). You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may call the researcher, Terra M. Wright at (number). The Research Participant Advocate at Walden University is (Name); you may contact her at (number), if you have questions concerning your rights as a participant in this study.

You will be given a copy of this form from the researcher.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Printed Name of Participant: _____

Date of Consent: _____

Participant's Written or Electronic* Signature: _____

Researcher's Written or Electronic* Signature: _____

Electronic signatures are regulated by the Uniform Electronic Transactions Act. Legally, an "electronic signature" can be the person's typed name, their email address, or any other identifying marker. An electronic signature is just as valid as a written signature as long as both parties have agreed to conduct the transaction electronically.

Appendix C: Open-Ended Survey Questions

 Survey Questions Corresponding Research Question

- | | |
|--|------|
| 1. How would you describe the structure of student learning in your class? | RQ 3 |
| 2. What factors do you think impact academic success for the individual student you teach? | RQ 3 |
| 3. How do you accommodate the individual learning styles and abilities of each student? | RQ 3 |
| 4. What types of traditional assessments do you currently incorporate in your classroom? | RQ 1 |
| 5. What types of alternative assessments (non-traditional) do you currently incorporate in your classroom? | RQ 2 |
| 6. How do you accommodate the individual learning styles and abilities of each student? | RQ 3 |
| 7. How effective do you consider traditional assessments as a teaching strategy? | RQ 1 |

8. How effective do you consider alternative RQ 2

assessments as a teaching strategy?

9. How much collaboration with colleagues do you engage in RQ 2

for the implementation of differentiated strategies?

10. What support and training are provided in incorporating RQ 2

differentiated assessments in your curriculum? At school? At the district level?

Note. RQ1= How do traditional assessments identify the learning ability and needs of individual middle school students? RQ 2= How do alternative assessments identify the learning ability and needs of individual middle school students? RQ 3= How are learning outcomes different for the individual middle school student when comparing traditional to alternative assessments?

Appendix D: Individual Interview Questions

 Interview Questions Corresponding Research Question

1. General Information: How long have you been teaching?	<u>None: Demographic</u>
How many years at this school?	
What subject do you currently teach?	
2. How would you define alternative assessments or non-traditional assessments?	RQ 2
3. How would you define traditional assessments?	RQ 1
4. What support and training are provided in incorporating differentiated assessments in your curriculum?	RQ 2
At school? At the district level?	
5. What factors do you think impact academic success for the individual student you teach?	RQ 3
6. How do you accommodate the individual learning styles and abilities of each student?	RQ 3
7. How would you describe the structure of student learning in your class?	RQ 3
8. How effective do you consider alternative	RQ 2

assessments as a teaching strategy?

9. What types of traditional assessments do you currently RQ 1

incorporate in your classroom?

10. What types of alternative assessments (non-traditional) RQ 2

do you currently incorporate in your classroom?

11. How does the use of traditional assessments affect academic RQ 1

performance in your class?

12. How does the use of alternative assessments affect academic RQ 2

performance in your class?

Note. RQ1= How do traditional assessments identify the learning ability and needs of individual middle school students? RQ 2= How do alternative assessments identify the learning ability and needs of individual middle school students? RQ 3= How are learning outcomes different for the individual middle school student when comparing traditional to alternative assessments?

Appendix E: Individual Interviews

Individual Interview #1

Participant #1- Is a 6th Grade Language Arts Teacher-

Date and Time of Interview- September 27, 2014 @ 10:00 am

Place of interview- The **County Public Library **** Branch**

Researcher- I would like to thank you for your participation. Again, everything you have said here will be kept confidential. Your name, the name of your school, and the city you live in, and any other specific identifying information will not be used in this research. Your signed consent form containing your name will become part of the research records. Do you have any questions for me about this research?

Participant #1- I do not, thanks

Researcher- I will begin by asking you some general information- How long have you been teaching?

Participant #1- I have been at _____ Middle School for 20 years and I have taught all my years at this school and I currently teach 6th Grade Language Arts/Reading.

Researcher- How would you define alternative assessments or non-traditional assessments?

Participant #1- Alternative assessments or non-traditional assessments are projects, portfolios, presentations, and other student created assessments. They tend to match and meet a student's individual needs and abilities. When I think of alternative assessments, I think of any other assessments other than traditional

pencil and paper.

Researcher- How would you define traditional assessments?

Participant # 1- I think traditional assessments are normal assessments that have been around for ages such as multiple choice, fill in the blank, True or false, matching, and teacher observation. Traditional assessments are easier to create and grade.

Researcher-What support and training are provided in incorporating differentiated assessments in your curriculum? At school? At the district level?

Participant # 1- The district leader over Language Arts/Reading came to our school during our planning periods and gave us information on differentiation this year. My district offered a weeklong summer professional development on differentiated instruction many years ago. My district also administers the MAP Test to students which supports differentiated instruction based on their RTI bands and lexile ranges. My new textbooks, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt addresses differentiated instruction.

Researcher-What factors do you think impact academic success for the individual student you teach?

Participant #1- I think the following factors impact academic success-teachers, parents, and students, and community- school board, district personnel. When all of these factors work together effectively, academic success will take place.

Researcher- Then how do you accommodate the individual learning styles and abilities

of each student?

Participant #1- I accommodate the various learning styles in my class by offering my students choice of assignments, different types and topics for essays, literature circles for reading, using Lexile ranges for independent reading, and allowing students to create their own assignments and rubrics. Basically differentiating instruction by content, process or the product.

Researcher-How would you describe the structure of student learning in your class?

Participants # 1- The structure of learning in my class usually begins with me pre-assessing the students on the content to see what they know and do not know, then I introduce the content in an interesting way to capture students' attention, I may lecture on the content. Then I demonstrate for students or show them examples. We then complete an activity together, and then students work independently on the concept.

Researcher- How effective do you consider alternative assessments as a teaching strategy?

Participants # 1-I think alternative assessments are very effective as a teaching strategy. All students are unique learners and I think when the assessments matches their particular learning styles it helps them to prove what they have learned. I think alternative assessments enable students to use their higher order thinking skills and they (students) enjoy the learning.

Researcher-What types of traditional assessments do you currently incorporate in your

classroom?

Participants # 1-Traditional assessments I use are T or F, multiple choice, matching, fill in the blank, and short answer.

Researcher-What types of alternative assessments (non-traditional) do you currently incorporate in your classroom?

Participant # 1- Alternative assessments I use are verbal assessments, choice projects, electronic presentations, open book, computerized quizzes (USA Test Prep), and essays.

Researcher-How does the use of traditional assessments affect academic performance in your class?

Participant # 1- I have been using traditional assessments for many years, and they let me know overall if the student understand or do not understand the material. But I also know that sometimes students do not retain the information- almost as if they learn and dump it. Whereas with alternative assessments they learn the material and apply it-it is a process. I think they (students) receive much more from that process. But it is time consuming for the teacher to set up and grade.

Researcher-How does the use of alternative assessments affect academic performance in your class?

Participant #1-Students tend to want to have alternative assessments in ,my class such as projects, presentations, open book, etc. because it fits their particular learning

style. Students also enjoy completing these types of assessments; students absolutely love the technology component but I wonder if they (students) sometimes get caught up with technology and the learning takes second place. I think I am able to assess what they really have learned or know from these types of assessments. For example, I can really determine what a student knows from an essay, but it takes much longer to grade.

Researcher-Thanks again because I really appreciate your participation in my study. Oh, my goodness I really do!

Participant #1-(laughing) You are quite welcome. My pleasure.

Individual Interview #2

Participant #2- Is a 6th Grade Language Arts Teacher-

Date and Time of Interview- 10/18/14 @ 10:30

Place of interview- The ** County Public Library **** Branch**

Researcher- I would like to thank you for your participation. Again, everything you have said here will be kept confidential. Your name, the name of your school, and the city you live in, and any other specific identifying information will not be used in this research. Your signed consent form containing your name will become part of the research records. Do you have any questions for me about this research?

Participant #2 –No. I don't.

Researcher- I will begin by asking you some general information- How long have you been teaching?

Participant #2- I have been teaching almost 12 years; this is my 3rd year at _____
 _____ I teach English/ Language Arts

Researcher- How would you define alternative assessments or non-traditional assessments?

Participant #2- Alternative or nontraditional assessments involve students demonstrating their learning in multiple ways besides a paper/pencil test. For example, instead of giving students a test on a book or novel, students can participate in a Socratic seminar as a culminating activity.

Researcher- How would you define traditional assessments?

Participant # 2- Traditional assessments are pencil/paper assessments such as multiple

choice, true/false, fill in the blank, etc.

Researcher-What support and training are provided in incorporating differentiated assessments in your curriculum? At school? At the district level?

Participant # 2- I am not sure if the district provides training for differentiated assessments...if so, it would be listed on My PD. My school does provide professional development on work days that focus on assessment for Common Core and _____ (Participant 2 named a program that is exclusively at this middle school). Oftentimes, _____ (Participant 2 named a program that is exclusively at this middle school) training will take place during the summer.

Researcher-What factors do you think impact academic success for the individual student you teach?

Participant #2- The factor that impacts student achievement the most, in my opinion, is parental guidance and involvement. Students must know that their parents value an education.

Researcher- Then how do you accommodate the individual learning styles and abilities of each student?

Participant #2- I accommodate the learning styles of students in a variety of ways, but it depends upon the lesson. At the beginning of the year, I conduct an inventory that notifies me of each child's learning style, and then I plan my lessons accordingly. Most of my kids are visual, so I use a lot of graphic organizers to accommodate their learning. Auditory runs second on the list...I simply try to

use both styles in every lesson. Kinesthetic is the learning style of less than 2% of my students, but I periodically do lessons that require this style to support growth in this area.

Researcher-How would you describe the structure of student learning in your class?

Participants # 2- The structure of student learning....students will see me model a lesson; then we do it together before they are required to do it as individuals.

Researcher- How effective do you consider alternative assessments as a teaching strategy?

Participants # 2-I think alternative assessments are very effective as a teaching strategy.

All students are unique learners and I think when the assessments matches their particular learning styles it helps them to prove what they have learned. I think alternative assessments enable students to use their higher order thinking skills and they (students) enjoy the learning.

Researcher-What types of traditional assessments do you currently incorporate in your classroom?

Participants # 2- I incorporate both matching and multiple choice assessments in my classroom.

Researcher-What types of alternative assessments (non-traditional) do you currently incorporate in your classroom?

Participant # 2- We just covered story elements, so in addition to a traditional multiple

choice test, students will create their own production of a short story they've read based upon the elements. (Ex. Theme-Create a Soundtrack for the story using the theme.)

Researcher-How does the use of traditional assessments affect academic performance in your class?

Participant # 2- I think traditional assessments help to strengthen the foundation that students need to build their learning. They (students) cannot necessarily do inquiry based alternative assessments unless it is know that the prior knowledge is strong

Researcher-How does the use of alternative assessments affect academic performance in your class?

Participant #2- I think alternative assessments increase student comprehension in a number of ways by helping student retain what they have learned.

Research- Again, I thank you for your time and support because it is greatly appreciated. Do enjoy the rest of your day.

Participant #2- You are very welcome and have a great weekend.