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Investigating the English Language Arts Placement of Struggling High School Freshmen

Pamela Burke-Haug
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Pamela Burke-Haug

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Walden University
2015

Abstract

Investigating the English Language Arts Placement

of Struggling High School Freshmen

by

Pamela Burke-Haug

MEd, William Paterson University, 2003

BA, Drew University, 1995

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

August 2015

Abstract

This qualitative case study addressed a suburban school district's placement of academically at-risk English language arts (ELA) 9th graders as the district transitions from the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) to use of the unfamiliar and controversial Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). Based on the theoretical frameworks of the zone of proximal development, cognitive apprenticeship, and Bandura's model of self-efficacy, the purpose was to understand the characteristics of struggling (labeled "academic") ELA students, placement practices and perceptions of these practices, and placement improvements. A purposeful sample was recruited of 7 staff members involved with placement and instruction of academic ELA students in Grades 7—10 for individual interviews. Using thematic data analysis, 4 themes emerged pertaining to the characteristics of academic students, placement practices, the efficacy of assessments used for placement, and improvements. Additionally, content analysis of data on academic students' standardized test scores and grades, collected from district reports, and research on reading assessments were conducted. Findings indicated consensus on the students' characteristics, but no standard procedure for placing academic ELA freshmen. A multiple measure placement matrix was created and incorporated in a white paper for the district's stakeholders, including administrators, teachers, guidance counselors, and child study team members. The implications for positive social change include a better understanding of academic students, their placement, and the benefits of communication, uniform policy, and the use of multiple measures to improve future placement practices.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this doctoral study first and foremost to my family. First, to my children who understood (usually) why I could not be there for many events, awards, or games, as well as why I was unavailable on countless evenings and weekends. Second, to my parents and in-laws who were always there for my children when I couldn't be. The many hours they gave up to take care of my children are greatly appreciated. Last, I thank my husband for understanding why it was important for me to achieve this goal. The love, support and encouragement from my family and friends helped me persevere and succeed. My love and gratitude to you all is immeasurable. I would also like to dedicate this to my students, who inspired this research and are the reason I love my career.

Acknowledgments

The completion of this doctoral study was possible due to the advice, encouragement, and participation of many. To begin, my doctoral committee chairperson, Dr. Barbara Hunter, provided the perfect balance of criticisms and compliments throughout the dissertation process. Despite some setbacks and challenges, her words of encouragement and praise, along with suggestions for improvements, helped me see the light at the end of the tunnel was always getting brighter. I also thank her for making me see myself as someone with valuable insight and knowledge worth sharing. I would also like to thank committee member Dr. Billie Andersson for her always prompt, spot-on advice which enhanced this research and project study. Dr. John Hendricks, my university research reviewer, deserves my gratitude for also understanding the time-sensitive nature of my study and providing helpful feedback to further improve my work. Thank you all for your patience and support with my many questions, and for making it possible for me to succeed in this part of my academic career.

It is essential that I thank those who participated. It goes without saying that this would not have been possible without them. I know for some, there was hesitancy about participating. Their honesty and input is greatly appreciated. Their professionalism and dedication to their students is admired even more. It is a privilege to work with them all.

I cannot go without acknowledging the many friends, family, students, and educators who advised and helped me personally, professionally, and academically over the years. I would also like to thank my friends and family for putting up with me throughout this journey. My friends know I have been largely absent, and I hope we can

pick up where we left off a few years ago, before I immersed myself in my studies. My family put up with my stress and crazy hours, and I hope they know that without their love and support, none of this would be possible. I hope Madison and Matthew understand how important this was to me and are proud of my accomplishment, just as I am so proud of them both. Thank you all for your care and encouragement.

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Section 1: The Problem

Introduction

Students who are struggling in language arts in middle school and high school in a middle-class, suburban New Jersey district are often placed in what is called an *academic* language arts class. As explained by the district's English department supervisor, the academic class is typically for general education, nonclassified students who are deemed at risk based on poor proficiency scores on the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK), which was the state standardized test (personal communication, September 15, 2014). However, 2013–2014 was the last year that the NJASK was administered (State of New Jersey Department of Education, n.d.), requiring the district to find an alternative means of assessment for determining appropriate classroom placement for at-risk students.

Definition of the Problem

Due to this change in assessment for the 2014–2015 school year, a problem emerged in determining what data can be used as the district transitions from the previous state standardized test, the NJASK which was administered for the last time in the spring of 2014, to the upcoming one, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), administered in March and April–May of 2015. This study's findings may assist staff in determining correct placement for incoming ninth grade academic students in language arts. Since there was no experience or familiarity with PARCC testing and its use for placement purposes is prohibited, it was beneficial to discover what other measures were available in the 2014–2015 school year to justify and

provide evidence for the appropriateness of academic placement decisions for the following fall. A qualitative study that investigated the needs of academic students and examined the current assessments available that could be used for placing future ninth grade academic students, as well as identified any other measures that might be included to provide for accurate placement in the absence of the NJASK, can benefit not only this district, but other districts facing a similar problem.

Rationale

Evidence of the Problem

For the 2014–2015 school year, a new test, the PARCC, replaced the NJASK (State of New Jersey Department of Education, n.d.). However, NJ Senate Bill 2154 was introduced to the New Jersey legislature on June 9, 2014 to postpone using the results of this test until the bill's proposed Education Reform Review Task Force can evaluate New Jersey's use of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and PARCC assessments (NJ Senate No. 2154, 2014). This would also provide teachers and students time to be better acclimated to the CCSS that the PARCC will be evaluating and have a better understanding of the PARCC assessment. Three other bills to be discussed in the literature review regarding testing have also passed in the New Jersey assembly. As of yet, none of these bills have been voted on by the New Jersey Senate. Even if Bill 2154 had been voted on and did not pass, resulting in the legal right to use the PARCC for placement, teachers and students would not have had time to become familiar with the test itself, since there have been no practice tests for the PARCC and no collection of baseline data (McGlone, 2014; NJEA, 2014). According to the district assistant

superintendent, given these factors, the PARCC is not, at least not yet, a suitable measurement to use for placing students for the 2015–2016 school year (personal communication, October 17, 2014).

This reliance on English language arts (ELA) proficiency scores, derived from the state's standardized test, for the purpose of informing instruction also exists in many districts throughout New Jersey, since the switch from NJASK to PARCC is occurring to public schools across the state (Fratz, 2014; Herzog, 2014). Therefore, the dilemma faced by the district where the research was conducted is one that is undoubtedly faced by many New Jersey schools. In fact, districts in many states across the nation are facing similar difficulties in transitioning from state assessments to their state's selected standardized assessment, typically the PARCC or Smarter Balanced Assessment (Educational Testing Service, 2013; Sears, 2014).

Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature

Research supports the use of multiple measures in making decisions that impact instruction (Brimijoin, 2009; Mandinach & Gummer, 2013; Mandinach & Jackson, 2012; Skalski & Romero, 2011). Yet previous academic placement practices for struggling students in this district depended on NJASK literacy scores to determine placement of academic students, even though this dependence on one piece of data may not provide as complete a picture of student performance or need to facilitate placement decisions. Furthermore, until the PARCC test is firmly established, there are no other standardized assessments that have been used in conjunction with, or in the place of, the NJASK for placement of academic students, as explained by the English department supervisor

(personal communication, September 15, 2014). This compounds the predicament the district faces, as the NJASK is no longer being administered.

Definitions

Academic: A group of (generally) nonclassified students identified in this district as struggling or at risk based mainly on their scores of below or border-line proficient on the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK), according to the English department supervisor (personal communication, September 15, 2014).

At risk students: Students who have not achieved grade level proficiency expectations (Kaufman & Bradbury, 1992).

Common Core State Standards (CCSS): A set of standards that outline grade level expectations in math and English language arts (ELA) created to unify the skill level of all students graduating from high school to improve upon skills required for college and careers. They have been adopted by 43 states (CCSS, n.d.).

Comprehensive Testing Program 4th Edition test (CTP4): A standardized test that compares student performance across national and district norms using scaled scores, stanines, and percentiles. The areas measured are: reading, vocabulary, writing, mathematics, and verbal and quantitative reasoning ability (ERB, 2011, 2014).

Multiple-measures: The use of several methods or instruments to measure student achievement, collected at more than one point in time (FairTest, 2010).

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP): The largest nationally administered standardized test, which remains largely the same year after to year so as to

provide an accurate picture of student achievement over time and place (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK): New Jersey's state standardized test designed to measure student achievement of the state's curriculum standards to provide information about student performance and to meet federal and state accountability requirements, administered from 2003–2014 (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2012).

Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC): Computer-based K–12 assessments developed by Pearson and Educational Testing Services (ETS), created by a consortium of several states and through federal funding that measure implementation of the CCSS and student academic achievement, and meet federal accountability requirements (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers [PARCC], 2013).

Placement: The practice of homogeneously grouping or tracking students based on their academic ability (United States Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, 1992).

Standardized tests: Norm referenced assessments that are mass produced with specific instructions and evaluation methods; they are generally used for accountability purposes (United States Congress. Office of Technology Assessment, 1992).

Stanine: A score from 1 to 9, with 5 as the middle point, determined by dividing all students' scores into nine segments (ERB, 2014).

Significance

A significant number of early adolescents struggle in ELA (Allington, 2011; Dotterer & Lowe, 2011; Kitson, 2011; McDowell, Sweeney, & Ziolkowski, 2011; O'Reilly, Sabatini, Bruce, Pillarisetti, & McCormick, 2012; Stowe, 2014). As demonstrated by the NAEP 2013 test, 36% of eighth grade students were reading at or above the proficient level, and the rest were achieving at the basic level, having only "partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012, para. 4). Struggling adolescent readers' and writers' challenges are exacerbated as the CCSS (n.d.) demand increased complexity; students are also required to read much more complex and comprehensive texts in science, math, social studies, and other content areas. Therefore, in order to show improvements in adolescents' literacy proficiency, there needs to be an identification of these students' reading abilities that will enable them to be college and career ready. Consequently, the identified gap in placement practices that is occurring as districts move from one standardized state test to another can be viewed as an opportunity to make positive changes in placement practices, beginning with the incoming freshmen in the district under investigation.

Guiding Research Questions

In this study, I requested teachers to describe the unique characteristics of their at-risk students and examined the placement practices and assessments used by teachers in the district, as well as explored other evaluations that might serve to address any needs not currently met. Through this study, the district gains insight into what measures are beneficial in accurately placing academic students. Proper placement of academically

struggling students into appropriate educational settings is a critical step in targeting instruction and closing the gap in literacy proficiency rates.

In alignment with the research problem and purpose, the following research questions were posed:

RQ1: How do the teachers and guidance counselors of seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth grade academic ELA students describe the characteristics and needs of these academically struggling students?

RQ2: In the absence of the NJASK, what are the assessments currently being used in the 2014–2015 school year that could be used to assist in determining the appropriate academic placement of incoming ninth graders in ELA classes?

RQ3: What types of assessments, if any, are needed to provide a more complete picture of struggling students in order to more accurately place them?

Review of the Literature

This literature review begins with an overview of constructivism, the overarching theoretical framework that guided this study. The review continues with a summary of standards and high-stakes testing. Included is a discussion of the danger of over relying on the results of high-stakes tests to inform instruction and placement; it is more beneficial to use multiple measures. Also discussed are the characteristics of struggling adolescent literacy learners and placement of these students. Finally, there is an outline of assessments to address the needs of struggling adolescent learners and their accurate placements.

This review of the literature was conducted using various sources, including journal articles, reports, fact sheets, position statements, news reports, and books. Electronic sources were located on Education Research Complete, SAGE, ProQuest Central, and EBSCOhost. Searches were conducted via Walden University Library, Google, and Google Scholar. Terms searched include *high-stakes testing, middle school literacy, tracking, adolescent literacy, assessments, adolescent literacy assessments, New Jersey standardized assessments, struggling readers, Common Core State Standards,* and *PARCC.*

Theoretical Framework

The overarching framework for this study was constructivism. The leading theorist is Vygotsky (1978). Vygotsky's emphasis on developmentally appropriate tasks and his concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) in which a mediator challenges a student to gain new knowledge based on current levels of understanding are key facets for instructing struggling students who are often unable to read and comprehend grade-level texts. Stemming from Vygotsky's seminal research and continuing in the constructivist framework is the theory of cognitive apprenticeship developed by Collins, Brown, and Newman (1987). This theory, like Vygotsky's, stresses the scaffolding of learning, a critical component to address the skill gaps present in many at-risk learners. Collins et al.'s (1987) theory includes methods and sequencing of knowledge that are critical for learning to occur. Integral to the cognitive apprenticeship theory is that reading strategies and skills be broken into separate components, whenever possible, to ensure mastery of skill sets and that students be given ample opportunity to

demonstrate their thinking processes in ways that are comfortable for them (Collins et al., 1987). This theory relies on modeling, coaching, scaffolding, articulation, reflection, and exploration. Collins, Hawkins, and Carver (1991) also posited that the cognitive apprenticeship theory is particularly effective for disadvantaged students because it emphasizes the real-world connections and applications to learning while providing needed support and guidance as students move from concrete to abstract skills, and from teacher-modeled learning strategies to autonomous, strategic student learning.

Vygotsky's (1978), Collins et al.'s (1987), and Collins et al.'s (1991) approaches to learning apply to the research conducted because they support the use of tiered learning and multiple means to determine student ability. These theorists posited that learning does not occur unilaterally and equally for all students, and that learning is a composite of various skills that build upon one another and through interaction. As such, learning cannot be demonstrated at one point in time by one measure. However, existing grade-level curriculums and state standardized tests assume students have mastered previous grade level knowledge and skills though many have not. Therefore, by applying constructivist theories to placement and instruction, learning can be geared to students' actual levels.

The study also drew upon the work of Bandura's (1977, 1993) self-efficacy model. This explains success in terms of not just cognitive factors, but affective and motivational considerations as well. The importance of Bandura's (1977, 1993) work on at-risk adolescents is noteworthy due to the large role self-perception and motivation play on the academic progress of struggling adolescent learners. When students are in

situations in which they feel they cannot succeed, despite the task, they engage in a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure; conversely, if provided the opportunity to succeed and regulate their own learning, the level of academic achievement and motivation often increases (Bandura, 1993; Zimmerman, 2000). If struggling students are not instructed at their level through methods that are appropriate to their developmental, social, and emotional needs, they are likely to continue to fall further behind.

Standards and High-Stakes Tests

Standardization is not a new concept in education. Standardized tests began to be implemented as early as the mid-1800s as U.S. cities became more populous and education was seen as a universal right (United States Congress. Office of Technology Assessment, 1992). These tests were not norm referenced, but standardized in that they were mass produced with set instructions and evaluation methods. Standardized testing continued to expand and develop in the United States with the dawn of the mental measurement branch of psychology in the late 1900s, which became known as *psychometry* or *psychometrics*. This, in turn, led to the creation of ability and achievement standardized tests such as those developed by Thorndike in the early 1900s. Although many applauded this quantification and efficient development in education, others, such as John Dewey, feared it reduced education to averages and percentages. Army testing for World War One was perhaps the most influential event in the rapid widespread use of standardized testing in the United States (United States Congress. Office of Technology Assessment, 1992).

What is new about the current standards movement and subsequent high-stakes tests is that previously, standards were controlled locally. The current reform policy on the standardization of curriculum in education that has resulted in the development of a common set of standards to be used by most if not all states (known as the CCCS) is a federally-driven initiative to create a national *standard* of education. The goal is to ensure the same quality and content of education to all students across the nation, thereby improving the college and career skills and knowledge required to succeed after high school graduation (CCSS Initiative, 2014).

Common Core State Standards. The CCSS initiative began in 2009 with the support of 48 states, two territories, and the District of Columbia (CCSS Initiative, 2014; Porter et al., 2012). State school chiefs and governors sought a way to unify across the nation criteria for proficiency at each grade level and for high school graduation. The purpose is to increase the educational achievement of students in the United States and thereby produce a more successful workforce. The adoption of rigorous, common standards K–12 in math and ELA should provide the needed knowledge for students to "compete successfully in the global economy" (CCSS Initiative, 2014, para. 7).

Although supporters often present the standards as the solution to today's failing public schools, much controversy surrounds them, and it is difficult to find accurate information about them. For example, according to the CCSS (2014) website, the standards were developed with the input and support of teachers and professional educational organizations. One such organization listed is the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). Yet the NCTE was not involved in crafting the standards;

it was just given the opportunity to review them and provide feedback (Williams, 2010). Furthermore, while the NCTE does not publicly oppose the CCSS, it does not endorse them either (Gilyard, 2012). A major reason for not endorsing them, as explained in the NCTE's *Resolution on Teacher Expertise and the Common Core State Standards*, revolves around the risk that the CCSS does not seem to value teacher expertise and judgment, to the detriment of students, and may conflict with the NCTE's own policies (2012). NCTE President Sandy Hayes formally requested that the implementation of the CCSS move more slowly and advocated for a moratorium on standardized tests meant to evaluate the CCSS implementation (DeWitt, 2013)

Another source of conflict has been the implementation of the CCSS. There is concern regarding the funding and resources required by schools so that their students can meet the high expectations of the standards (Vega, 2013). Based on Porter et al.'s (2012) report, in 2012 only seven states had fully developed implementation plans, five of which were Race to the Top (RttT) grant winners. This proved the 2011 Center on Educational Policy report correct in suggesting that the states that won the RttT competition would be at an advantage and points out another concern, that there is an unequal distribution of federal funds. As the RttT funds were set up as a competition, the distribution of funds only to those who won the grants created inequality by design. In a study conducted by The Center on Education Policy (2012), most states felt they did not have adequate funding to fully implement the CCSS and would not be ready to do so until 2014–2015 or later. Inequality can also be seen in its impact on diversity. Camangian (2011) explained that the current focus on standardization and testing

perpetuates social inequalities by forcing a universal curriculum on districts whose students may have vastly different needs.

Finally, there is pushback from states' rights advocates who are against national standards and coercion in the form of federal Title 1 funding for adoption of these standards, as well as from progressive educators who are against the corporatization of education (Barth, 2014; Sheehy, 2013). These progressives believe that the CCSS or corporate education reform are ill conceived, and wariness is growing (Au, 2011; Tierney, 2013). Four states have pulled out of the CCSS, and six have bills pending the same course of action (Barth, 2014).

The CCSS and New Jersey school districts. New Jersey adopted the CCSS in 2010, which replaced the math and language arts New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards (NJCCCS). The NJCCCS were developed in 1996 and revised every 5 years (NJCCCS, 2014). New Jersey schools still implement the NJCCCS for the following subject areas: 21st-century life and careers, comprehensive health and physical education, science, social studies, technology, visual and performing arts, and world languages. The implementation of the new language arts and math CCSS in New Jersey is praised by some for adding rigor and focusing on critical thinking and real world scenarios. Others express concern that the CCSS standards may be developmentally inappropriate for some students, especially those who are attending urban schools and may be struggling with the existing standards (Waters, 2013).

High-stakes tests. Standardized tests have been used in public schools since the mid-19th century. The widespread use of norm-referenced tests relied on multiple-choice

assessments. In the 1980s, schools began to administer standardized performance based tests, which included open-ended responses thought to increase equity, reliability, and validity of the results (Dietl, 2011). These tests' results were used to check student learning, inform instruction, and guide placement decisions. These factors still hold true. However, in 2001 the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) was passed to improve schooling for all children. A major component of NCLB was the annual testing of students in Grades 3–8 and at least once in Grades 10–12 (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). These tests were used for accountability, to determine effectiveness of schools and teachers, and for funding (Braden & Schroeder, 2004; Schul, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). With so much hinging on the results of the tests, they became known as *high stakes* tests.

As a result of NCLB, contracts for the development and publication of standardized tests for each state by commercial testing companies increased exponentially. This coincided with an increase in public and private scrutiny. In efforts to gain or maintain funding, avoid punitive measures, and be seen by their communities as succeeding, schools began to adjust their curriculums to allow for more time to be spent on the two tested subjects, ELA and mathematics, resulting in narrowed curriculums geared to the test (Dietel, 2011; Musoleno & White, 2010; Reardon, 2013). Schools placed more emphasis on ELA and mathematics despite research demonstrating the flaws of such high-stakes testing practices (Amerin-Beardsley, Berliner, & Rideau, 2010; Assaf, 2008; David, 2011; Dietl, 2011; Supovitz, 2009; Walker, 2012).

These reforms are continued under the current federal Race to the Top (RttT) initiative (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Currently, the RttT initiative ties federal funding to states' inclusion of a rigorous set of standards, such as those standards that are found in the CCSS, and to states' administration of standardized testing to demonstrate effective implementation of those standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). These standardized tests are also being used for accountability purposes (McGuinn, 2012; Mrowka, 2012; Walker, 2012).

Two testing consortiums were created to design tests to assess each state's implementation of the CCSS, receiving $360 million in RttT funds (National Conference of State Legislatures [NCSL], n.d.; Strauss, 2015b). They are Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced) (CCSS Initiative, 2014). Similar to the CCSS, there was great initial support for these assessments, but as more information has become available, support has dwindled. Initially, 24 states and DC joined PARCC, including New Jersey (NCSL, n.d.; Schneider, 2014); however, many have withdrawn (PARCC, 2014; Strauss, 2015). Getting a clear picture of just how many states remain in PARCC is difficult. The PARCC website states there are 11 states and DC (PARCC, 2015a). On the PARCC Computer-Based Administrator Survey, 10 states plus DC are included (HumRRO, 2015). Mississippi is one state included. However, Mississippi's Board of Education voted to withdraw from PARCC in January of 2015 (Wright, 2015). In addition, Massachusetts, another listed PARCC state, is allowing districts to choose which test to administer, PARCC or its own state standardized test, the MCAS; it is the only state

allowing this choice (Gewertz, 2015). It is reported that slightly more than half of Massachusetts districts that are K–8 administered PARCC, while that number fell to about a quarter of districts with a high school administering PARCC (Rocheleau, 2015). Gewertz's (2015) updated map of testing demonstrates 10 states plus DC administering PARCC.

To further complicate issues and demonstrate the discord surrounding high-stakes state standardized tests, the U.S. House of Representatives agreed in a voice vote to permit local agencies to administer their own assessments instead of state tests (Johnson, 2015). Although it is not believed that this will become law, it does demonstrate the growing concern over state testing. These concerns revolve around worries that the tests are too hard, take too much time, cost too much, and infringe on state's rights (Bidwell, 2015; Johnson, 2015; Tatter, 2015). To address the concern of time, PARCC states voted to shorten testing time by 90 minutes and simplify administration; instead of the test being administered twice a year, it will be given only once, somewhere after 75% of the school year is completed, but before 90% (PARCC, 2015b). Policymakers in 24 states have delayed the use of several consequences of high-stakes testing as well (Weingarten, 2015).

High-stakes tests and New Jersey. In New Jersey, standardized testing began in1978 with Minimum Basic Skills (MBS) tests in Grades 3, 6, and 9, and a graduation test requirement (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2009). In 1988, the Early Warning Test (EWT) was added to Grade 8. The purpose of the EWT was to determine which students might have trouble on the Grade 11 test required for graduation

(Crown & Rosenstein, n.d.). The NJCCCS resulted in the creation of the fourth grade test, the Elementary School Proficiency Assessment (ESPA), administered from 1997–2002. The EWT was then replaced by the Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA), which was administered through 2007. The High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) became the graduation test requirement (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2009).

NCLB brought more changes and more testing to New Jersey. NCLB required that students in Grades 3 through 8 be tested. The Elementary School Proficiency Assessment (ESPA) and Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA) were replaced with the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK), which was administered once a year to students in Grades 3 through 8 (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2009). This test was in use from 2003 to 2014. RttT ushered in the CCSS, and New Jersey administered the PARCC twice in the 2014–2015 school year, to students in Grades 3 through 11 (PARCC, 2013).

The administration of PARCC in New Jersey is not without complications. Karp (2014) of the Education Law Center explained several concerns after the PARCC field tests were administered in New Jersey. There are worries that schools do not have the technology and infrastructure needed to administer this computer-based test or the financial funding to obtain what is needed. Governor Christie proposed $10 per student in PARCC aid (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2014a), which is a nominal amount believed to exist just so PARCC would be considered a funded mandate (Karp, 2014). The actual cost of PARCC in New Jersey is unclear, as state officials

cannot state how much its 4-year contract with PARCC will cost. It is estimated near $108 million dollars, not including money spent on getting technology up to date and on training and resources. This cost cannot be determined in part because it depends on how many students take the test, no longer an easy estimate due to parental refusals (Kachmer, 2015). In Montclair, New Jersey, 42.6% of students refused the test (Kaulessar, 2015), though this may be the highest refusal rate in the state. PARCC stated it expected 5 million students nationwide to take its test this year (Bidwell, 2015). The cost of the contracts can increase if other states opt out of their PARCC contracts, a valid concern as support dwindles (Kachmer, 2015).

There are additional concerns about how much time will be devoted to the test, in both the amount of time spent taking the test and the time spent preparing for it. Concerns also exist in the accountability measures that attach students' results on these tests to teacher evaluations and also affect school standings. Finally, there are concerns about the "educational impact of the longer, more difficult tests on curriculum, instruction and student experience in schools" (Karp, 2014, para. 7). Such concerns have prompted efforts to slow down PARCC.

These efforts have manifested in the passing of several bills in the New Jersey State Assembly. One is the NJ Assembly Bill A3081, which passed with bipartisan support in June of 2014. This bill called for an Education Reform Review Task Force to analyze the CCSS and PARCC testing and remove student test performance from teacher evaluations until the Task Force analysis is complete or two years after the bill's effective date (govtrack, 2014). The bill was received in the NJ Senate on June 16, 2014, but the

vote on Senate Bill 2154 has been postponed (govtrack, 2014; NJ Senate No. 2154, 2014; Ujifusa, 2014). In addition, Bill A3077 passed, which requires schools to inform parents by October 1 what tests students will be taking, who requires the test (federal, state, district), how they will be used and their cost (Clark, 2015a). Bills A3079 and A4190 also passed, which prohibit standardized tests that are not mandated by state or federal law in Grades K–2 and delays the use of PARCC in student placement and teacher evaluation until 2016, respectively (Clark, 2015a). Finally, Bill 4165 passed on March 26, which permits parents to opt-out their children (D'Amico, 2015). None of these bills have been voted on in the Senate.

Another adjustment to PARCC implementation in relation to these concerns has been to adjust the percentage of influence the PARCC results will have on teacher evaluations. Initially, tested-area teachers were to have 30% of their effectiveness rating based on PARCC results; now, the PARCC tests will count for 10% of a teacher's evaluation in 2014–2015 and 20% in 2015-16 (Ujifusa, 2014). Governor Christie also announced in July of 2014 the creation of a task force to evaluate the CCSS and PARCC, comprised of nine members he appointed (Ujifusa, 2014). The most recent, and only, press release regarding this task force was made on July 14, 2014, announcing Governor Christie's creation of the Task Force (Drewniak, 2014). Almost four months after his announcement, on November 10, 2014, Christie announced the nine appointed members, who presented an interim report at the end of 2014 (Mooney, 2014). On December 31, 2014, an interim report was published explaining its progress to date, which mainly entailed presentations regarding assessments and evaluations, and an outline of its work

plan for January through July, 2015 (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2014b).

Dangers of High-Stakes Tests

Standardized tests serve a needed purpose in education. These tests can act as a barometer for progress. They allow comparisons among students, schools, and districts. Also, they provide a means to demonstrate trends among student populations by sorting data by population. Information from the tests can be used to help target those students who need special services, such as remediation or enrichment. They also hold schools and districts accountable for meeting all learners' needs (Center for Public Education, 2006). Yet when too much depends on one test score, the high stakes assigned to these tests can create negative consequences.

Au (2011) pointed to the problematic philosophy that guides the whole system of standardization. According to this view, applying the principles of scientific management to education results in treating students as products, carefully instructed according to the standardized tests, which drive curriculum. Ravitch (n.d.), an education historian and professor at New York University, is one of many who is critical of treating education according to a business model. Dangers of this framework of reform are that it narrows curriculum, reduces teacher morale, puts undue pressure on students, and can result in erroneous assumptions (William, 2010).

The current trend to focus on tested subjects at the expense of other disciplines as a result of standardized high-stakes testing is well documented (Au, 2011; David, 2011; Mason, 2010, Musoleno & White, 2010). This focus on tested subjects narrows the

curriculum and has resulted in teaching to the test (Musoleno & White, 2010; Supovitz, 2010). The stakes are so high to do well that they also can result in unethical behaviors (Williams, 2010). Amrein-Beardsley, Berliner, and Rideau (2010), Dietl (2011), and Giambo (2010) explored how misinterpretation of data and cheating by scoring companies and schools occur to avoid punitive measures. Williams's (2010) research reflects Campbell's Law, in which the results of a test that has been made the focus of political and public attention improve; yet those results do not necessarily improve on related measures, such as SATs or NAEP tests. Campbell's Law stems from the work of Campbell (1976) who documented how data can be skewed to suit a purpose required; when programs are being evaluated and the stakes are high, the evaluation process can become corrupted to ensure desired results.

Moreover, standardized tests such as the NJASK are not designed to be used for the wide range of purposes they serve in many schools. This calls into question the validity and reliability of such practices. In fact, Mandinach and Jackson (2012) considered the use of such "dead on arrival" or DOA data to be flawed, since data that can influence such crucial decisions such as placement of students occurs months after the testing date and sometimes too late in the school year for the data to be of any use in decision-making. This problem also exists with PARCC testing, as the "PARCC consortium will not determine what scores are considered passing for this year's test until the summer, so students and schools won't receive scores until October" (Clark, 2015b). This is also documented by McDowell, Sweeney, and Ziolkowski (2011). Mandinach and Jackson (2012) explained the distinction between assessments *for* learning, and

assessments *of* learning; a state standardized test is a summative assessment *of* learning test that is best used for accountability measures, whereas assessments *for* learning are specifically designed to help drive and inform instruction (Mandinach & Jackson, 2012).

Another concern regarding testing validity was revealed when it was discovered that Pearson, the PARCC test developer, was monitoring social media for information about the test. Validity could be compromised by the sharing of testing content. More importantly, perhaps, was the extent of student apathy found; if a large number of students are not trying to answer the questions correctly, an accurate baseline cannot be found (Wall, 2015).

Brimijoin (2009) and Dennis (2009, 2013) noted that using high-stakes tests to place students is erroneous, as such tests are only a snapshot of a child's achievement and do not reflect the whole child. This is particularly true for students whose cultural or socioeconomic status might present an additional challenge when taking large-scale standardized test that do not consider their ways of knowing (Nelson-Barber, 2010). These testing practices often result in homogeneously grouping students who in actuality have different needs. Perhaps part of this problem is that when teachers receive the results of standardized tests, those tests are not properly disaggregated or available in a timely manner (Ronka, Lachat, Slaughter, & Meltzer, 2009). Dennis (2013), Supovitz (2010), and WestEd (2014) further explained that standardized tests often do not provide individualized information that is required to determine needs and target future instruction.

Benefits of Multiple Measures

Conversely, multiple measures can provide greater depth and range of student ability and need. More than one measure of ability should be used to inform decisions that impact instruction, such as determining student placement (Mandinach & Jackson, 2012; Spielhagen, 2010; WestEd., 2014). FairTest (2010) defined multiple measures as "the use of multiple indicators and sources of evidence of student learning, of varying kinds, gathered at multiple points in time, within and across subject areas" (para. 1). Mandinach and Jackson (2012) called the use of multiple data sources *triangulating*. They explained that data usage must align with its purpose and be accessible and timely. FairTest (2010) explained further that as a result of NCLB, many states purport to use multiple measures, but are really just manipulating standardized test data for a variety of purposes. Other research demonstrated that a standardized test score can be useful as an initial cut-off, but then multivariate measures are needed to determine pattern of abilities and areas of weakness for accurate placement (Connor, Alberto, Compton, & O'Connor, 2014; Dennis, 2013). Overall, it is important to have several reliable and valid assessments for placing struggling students, not simply one (Connor et al., 2014).

To accurately employ multiple measures and get a better picture of student ability, both formative and summative assessments should be used (Brimijoin, 2009). Supovtiz (2010) expanded on this idea, explaining that different cycles of assessments, short, medium, and long, should serve different purposes. Cycles of assessment typically refer to the amount of content covered that each assessment is measuring; a short cycle might occur at the end of a 10 minute mini-lesson or day's lesson, whereas a long cycle would

assess what has been learned at the end of a month-long unit or an entire year (Herman, 2013). Although state standardized tests (long) can serve accountability purposes, it is district (medium) and class assessments (medium and short) that define and target improvement and intervention (Herman, 2013; Supovitz, 2010). Other important sources of data to consider when determining practice are demographics, behavior, teacher survey data, and student status, such as LEP (Mandinach & Jackson, 2012; Ronka et al., 2009).

Another largely absent piece of data important for placement is student input. Enriquez (2011) made a good point when he proposed that to best address the needs of struggling adolescents, one must first understand their goals and perceptions of reading and of themselves as readers. Reading success is not just a cognitive process. It is also an emotional process, particularly for adolescents (Enriquez, 2011). It is also imperative to note that teaching and testing need to be adaptive. That is, as student populations change and become more diverse and engage in multiliteracies, such as participating in discussion forums, weblogs, or texting, all aspects of education, including testing, need to reflect these changes. However, current high-stakes tests fail to reflect those changing forms of literacy (Jacobs, 2013; Powell, Cantrell, & Rightmyer, 2013).

Although it was difficult to find research on multiple measures and placement practices for the age group of this study, there were many studies on this topic at the college level. In order to reflect the inability of one standardized test to accurately place students, California forbids the practice of basing community college developmental placement decisions on one standardized test score (Ngo, Kwon, Melguizo, Prather, & Bos, 2013). Instead, developmental placement decisions must be based on multiple

measures, as it is believed equity and accuracy in placement practices will improve as a result (Ngo et al., 2013; Texas Toolbox, 2013). In Ngo et al.'s (2013) study to test this belief, it was found that the students who were placed into higher level courses based on the results of multiple measures, but who would have been excluded based on their standardized score alone, achieved the same rates of success as their peers who had the standardized scores to place in the same course. This gives credibility to the notion that using multiple measures to place students can result in improved accuracy of placement and student achievement (Ngo et al., 2013). A study conducted by Hodara, Jaggars, and Karp (2012) reached similar conclusions. Hodara et al. (2012) found that using one standardized test score as a criterion for placing incoming college freshmen in certain classes was not as valid as a predictor of achievement as considering the students' GPAs.

Despite these flaws, however, many schools continue to rely on one standardized test score for placement because it is efficient to do so. It is true that standardized tests do have a role in placement practices, as long as they are part of other metrics (Texas Toolbox, 2013). Many educators recognize that using multiple measures is more effective, even though the measures may be too cumbersome to administer and interpret. (Hodara et al., 2012). The rationale behind the benefits of using multiple measures to better place college freshmen could also apply to the placement of high school freshmen, such as those involved with this study.

Struggling Adolescent Literacy Learners and Their Placement

Early adolescence is a time when many students' academic achievement suffers (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011; Kitson, 2011). Data from the past decade of NAEP scores

demonstrated that a significant number of eighth graders are reading below grade level (Allington, 2011; McDowell, Sweeney, & Ziolkowski, 2011; O'Reilly, Sabatini, Bruce, Pillarisetti, & McCormick, 2012; Stowe, 2014; The Nation's Report Card, n.d.). This drop in literacy achievement that occurs in early adolescence is often seen as a result of increased focus on higher level skills and critical thinking activities. At this age, students are no longer learning to read, but rather must read increasingly complex texts of different genres and structures in order to learn. Therefore, those who did not fully grasp the skills and strategies needed to be proficient readers fall further behind their peers (Brasseur-Hock, Hocka, Kiefferb, Biancarosac, & Deshlera, 2011; Flynn, Zheng, & Swanson, 2012; Kitson, 2011; Snyder, 2010). Unfortunately, the future is grim for many of these struggling literacy learners; research demonstrates that students who do not succeed in the ELA are more likely to drop out of school and wind up in the juvenile justice system (Berkley et al., 2012; Connor et al., 2014).

Wang and Eccles's (2012) research demonstrated the decline in engagement, participation, and achievement that occurs between grades seven and eleven. This decline can also be attributed to the unique nature of adolescence, in which puberty and social status diminish the importance of academics for many students; the characteristics of the school environment as students change from elementary to secondary may not be developmentally appropriate for young teens (Musoleno & White, 2010; Wang & Eccles, 2012). McDowell, Sweeney and Ziolkowski (2011) noted the extant research which demonstrates the decline in motivation and decline in reading during this stage of development. These issues are exacerbated by home lives that cannot foster education,

such as can be found in low-income, single parent homes with irregular work schedules (Layton, 2015). Placement for struggling youths must take into consideration the unique nature of adolescent learning (Lindstrom, Nealy, & Stagliano, 2012). Enriquez (2011) explained that identifying struggling readers is more complex than determining a cut off score on a test. He further explained that deciding on the placement, level of support and instruction depends on a multitude of factors, including classroom performance. Another complication is that most literacy interventions are designed for the elementary level and do not reflect the complex contexts and purposes for reading that adolescents must engage in (Flynn et al., 2012).

Adolescent perceptions. There is enough research to support the important role of affective factors in learning that it can be taken for granted that those who feel positively about a task are more likely to engage and succeed in the task than those who do not (Henk, Marinak & Melnik, 2012). This is particularly true for adolescents. Adolescents who enjoy literacy tasks are more likely to read and write and thus do well in ELA (Henk et al., 2012). Unfortunately, the opposite is also true. Teens who do not have positive experiences with ELA will avoid such tasks, which often contribute to future failures and greater avoidance. Therefore, it is helpful to understand students' perceptions and feelings towards ELA, especially when trying to improve the achievement of struggling readers (Henk et al., 2012).

Marin (2009) and Enriquez (2011) conducted case studies examining struggling adolescent readers' perceptions of themselves. A common theme is the notion that reading is something to be avoided whenever possible. Allington (2011) cited research

that found struggling middle-grade students spend only minutes a day actively engaged in reading. It is interesting to note that the students who did read for pleasure – things like sports or web articles – did not consider this "reading"; "reading" was relegated to what was mandatory for school (Marin, 2009). Students would rather spend time finding summaries of books or gathering information from others' conversations on the books than actually reading the books assigned (Enriquez, 2011; Marin, 2009). To do nothing and still pass was the goal and was continued even though success with this strategy rarely occurred. As Henk et al. (2012) and Allington (2011) determined, for many struggling readers, reading is not viewed as an intrinsically satisfying activity.

Another common theme among struggling adolescents studied was the students' belief that their poor achievement was the result of being lazy or not practicing, not an issue of ability (Enriquez, 2011; Marin, 2009). Outside factors were to be blamed for lack of success. Their lack of follow through on tasks, a significant concern of the teachers involved, was often viewed in a positive light by the students, as if being lazy were something to be proud of. It seems clear that this is a defense mechanism; failing because one does not try is easier to deal with than failing when one does try.

Enriquez's (2011) study portrayed two types of struggling students who both exhibit avoidance behaviors. One avoidance behavior is the student who "flies under the radar" and does just enough in class to be left alone, and the other is the behavior problem who tries to engage with classmates with limited or no success and is often seen as disruptive. This type of resistance is largely an adolescent phenomenon, in which students who have been struggling now for years have decided they would rather be seen

as “bad” than “dumb” (Laureate Education, Inc., n.d.). This can also help reduce the shame many struggling readers feel (Kearns, 2011).

Much work with struggling readers stems from a deficit perspective, which focuses on weakness (Barton & Stepanek, 2009; Enriquez, 2011). By labeling students, the notion of being “no good at reading” becomes part of their identity, a concept also supported by Henk et al. (2012). Instead, progress can be made if the approach changes to capitalize on strengths, such as allowing for more social interaction, providing adapted versions of grade level texts or providing more choices in reading materials (Allington, 2011; Enriquez, 2011; Henk et al., 2012). This can improve students’ sense of academic worth, which improves their academic performance (McDowell et al., 2011).

Placement. The practice of placing students in American public schools based on ability has been around since the 1800s and had the support of many prominent educators, such as Horace Mann (United States Congress. Office of Technology Assessment, 1992). In the mid-19th century, public schools began to use standardized tests to track students by ability. (United States Congress. Office of Technology Assessment, 1992). However, research conducted on tracking is inconclusive. On one hand, it provides a setting to carefully target instruction tailored to the needs of its students. This has shown to have positive results in remediation, particular in Response to Intervention (RTI) models (Barton & Stepanek, 2009; Burns, 2008; Nunn & Jantz, 2009). In addition, ability tracking can benefit the higher students by allowing them to progress more rapidly through content or be provided advanced curriculums (Spielhagen, 2010).

On the other hand, there is also research that demonstrates greater benefits to heterogeneously grouping students; that is, having classes of students of mixed ability. The argument here is that when low-performing students are exposed to the more advanced or higher-level thinking of their peers, it has greater impact and learning value than if such information were either not included or shared by the teacher; this is particularly true in adolescence when all things social dominate (Spielhagen, 2010). Moreover, heterogeneously grouping students takes into account not only their academic needs, but also their social and emotional needs, which is often at the forefront of adolescence (Musoleno & White, 2010). Furthermore, it is suggested in the research that low-performing students who are grouped together suffer from negative self-image, which further hinders their learning (Henk et al., 2012; Kearns, 2011; Laureate Education, Inc., n.d.).

Further compounding the problem of addressing the needs of struggling adolescent readers is the limited research on this particular population. As noted by Allington (2011) and Brasseur-Hock et al. (2011), the nature of adolescent struggling readers lacks scientific support, making it difficult to design and implement effective interventions. Allington (2011) stated the focus on early intervention is the reason research on adolescent struggling readers (ARS) tends be neglected. Programs such as Head Start and Reading First make early intervention the priority, so those students who are at-risk in adolescence do not benefit from the same sort of programs or attention. Similar to Dennis' (2009, 2013) research, Brasseur-Hock et al. (2011) and Allington (2011) found that the homogeneously grouped at-risk students had a variety of different

needs and abilities. Brasseur-Hock et al. (2011) determined six clusters of ARS students, from overall severe weaknesses in all areas of literacy to being separated by distinct weaknesses, such as those with weak language comprehension and dysfluent readers. Readers who are dysfluent are unable to read with ease and accuracy; as a result, they have difficulty comprehending what is read (Scientific Learning, 2014; Torgesen & Miller, 2009). Consequently, each cluster of students would need targeted intervention or remediation in their area of weakness, not placement in one large group of ARS students.

Assessments for Struggling Adolescent Literacy Learners

In order to address the unique needs of adolescent struggling readers and writers as described above, assessments need to be chosen carefully. As stated, standardized high-stakes tests can serve a valuable purpose in education but alone cannot provide the information necessary to understand a student's ability or target his or her instruction. Other information is required, such as which skills are deficient and to what extent. A student may have a low vocabulary score. However, it may not tell if this is a result of poor phonemic awareness and/or lack of background knowledge needed to understand new vocabulary in context. The purpose of this section of the literature review is to shed light on the types of assessments that can assist educators in determining such information.

A review of the comprehensive research of Connor et al. (2014) and Torgesen and Miller (2009) resulted in the description of three categories of assessments that should be considered when determining appropriate placement and instruction of adolescents who are struggling readers and writers. The first are assessments that are used as a screening

tool. The second are those that are diagnostic and provide detailed information regarding students' needs and abilities. Lastly, there are progress monitoring assessments.

Literacy screening assessment tools. A screening tool is generally an assessment that can be administered easily and quickly to a large population for the purpose of determining which group of students might benefit from intervention or remediation services (Connor et al., 2014; Jenkins, n.d.; SERC, 2012; Torgesen & Miller, 2009). This practice is typically used as part of a Response to Intervention program which follows a preventive approach by screening all general education students at each grade level to determine those who are at-risk for falling behind, and hopefully through appropriate intervention, to address the gaps before they increase (Jenkins, n.d.). The assessment is administered and those students who fall below a predetermined cut-off score warrant further examination to determine if remediation is needed, and if so, to what extent (Jenkins, n.d.). Examples of screening assessment tools include state summative standardized tests such as the NJASK, benchmark assessments such as Northwest Education Association's Measures of Academic Performance (MAP) and CTB/McGraw-Hill's Acuity Assessments like the Terranovas, and curriculum-based measurement reading assessments (Johnson, Pool & Carter, n.d.).

At the time of McDowell et al.'s (2011) research, there was no literacy screening tool purposefully created specifically for adolescents known to them. This is supported by the large-scale report by Connor et al. (2014) that reviewed screening tools from 2002—2008, all of which were relevant for the youngest students, preschool through first grade. Jenkins (n.d.) also noted that there is little research on screening tools beyond

grade two. Facing such a challenge, McDowell et al. (2011) created their own screening tool (ZAM), which consists of six subsets: word identification, nonsense words, spelling, vocabulary, oral reading fluency, and comprehension. O'Reilly et al. (2012) also developed their own screening tool, which also consisted of six subtests, four of which are related to vocabulary and phonics. This most likely stems from research that focuses on the gap in phonemic awareness of struggling readers who are several grades below their peers (Flynn et al., 2012; McDowell et al., 2011) and the fact that these phonics and vocabulary concepts represent skills that are more easily measured than skills required for critical thinking tasks (Dennis, 2013). However, such assessments might not best measure the ability and weaknesses of those adolescents who are only one or two grades below level and who may have stronger phonemic awareness.

Facing such difficulty in locating an age-appropriate screening tool, upper elementary, middle and high schools might find it expedient to use the previous year's state standardized test scores as their screening tool (Berkley et al, 2012; Jenkins, n.d.; Torgesen & Miller, 2009). Although it has been shown that summative tests such as these are not useful in determining placement and need, they do show which students have not met grade level expectations. If the state test were to be used as a screening tool, those students who failed to score proficient, or perhaps just made it by a few points, would then be further evaluated to determine if intervention is warranted (Jenkins, n.d.). As stated, other screening tool options include using a benchmark assessment that is aligned to state-adopted standards and are commercially available, or a curriculum-based measurement (CBM) reading and writing assessment (Johnson et al., n.d.).

Benchmark assessments. Benchmark assessments are designed to provide similar information that a state summative test measures, but in a more timely and focused fashion. Benchmarks are created within a system of long-term goals for student learning (Herman, Osmundson, & Dietel, 2010). The end goal is usually connected to an aspect found on the state summative test, and benchmarks are designed to determine how much progress is being made in this area so far. It is worth adding a note of caution here, however, as relying on benchmark assessments that mirror state summative tests can further exacerbate problems noted above involved in high stakes testing, most notably engaging in a curriculum that is dominated by the practice of "teaching to the test".

The results of benchmark assessments can be used to adjust future instruction and to compare student progress individually, to a class, school or district (Herman et al., 2010). Benchmark assessments, unlike formative assessments, which will be discussed later on, are typically determined by grade/content at the district level and administered to all or most students accordingly. These tests are often administered horizontally across one grade level to maintain consistency across classrooms and vertically, which helps maintain consistency across grade levels (California Department of Education, n.d.). Furthermore, benchmark assessments are considered part of a balanced assessment approach as they can effectively connect expectations for both standards and the curriculum and because of the frequency with which they are administered (Herman et al., 2010). Benchmarks are considered medium cycle assessments, as they are administered several times a year, not once like a summative or on an ongoing, often unscheduled basis like formative assessments. The initial benchmark test, frequently

considered a baseline, can be used the same way a screening tool is used by establishing a cut-off score for proficiency on the baseline and then administering further assessments as needed.

Curriculum-Based measurement. Curriculum-based measurement (CBM) is, as the name implies, a measurement of students' progress using the curriculum within which the students are being instructed (Shapiro, 2011). Unlike more typical classroom based assessments, however, a CBM differs due to the specificity of its conditions; it is timed, scored using a set rubric, and its results are plotted on a graph to document progress (Hosp, Hosp, & Howell, 2012). Such measures increase the validity and reliability of CBM assessments.

While the most widely researched and used form of CBM is CBM-R, which evaluates primary students' oral reading (Christ, Silberglitt, & Cormier, 2010) the principles of CBM can effectively be adapted to other age groups and literacy skills. CBM works very similarly to benchmarks, in that they are medium cycle assessments administered at set times throughout the year. CBM is an attractive choice as a screening tool because it can be administered easily and efficiently, is aligned to existing curriculum and can be extended for use as a progress- monitoring tool, which will be explained in further detail shortly (Christ et al., 2010; Hosp et al., 2012).

Diagnostic assessments. Once the initial population who is determined to be at-risk based on the screening tool utilized is identified, follow-up tests should be administered. A score of "below proficient" does not reveal enough to determine whether or not a student requires intervention, but is a good starting point for further

examination (Dennis, 2009). The second round of assessments administered to the flagged group should be diagnostic; they need to provide information on why students fell below the cut-off on the initial screening test (SERC, 2012).

These assessments must distinguish between the two main types of struggling readers. The first are the students who are unable to meet grade level expectations due to difficulty with higher-level reading comprehension skills or lack of vocabulary knowledge, but can read fluently at grade or near grade level. The second are the students who have difficulty with foundational reading skills, placing them several years below grade level (Torgesen & Miller, 2009). Despite their differences, these two groups are often treated as one homogeneous group (Calhoon, 2013; Dennis, 2009). The screening tools created by McDowell et al. (2011) and O'Reilly (2012) which focus on phonics and fluency would locate the latter group, but would not help identify the many struggling adolescent readers who are fluent readers but have not mastered sufficient comprehension skills and strategies to access increasingly complex texts and, as a result, are not comprehending what they read at grade level (Dennis, 2013). Therefore, it is important to be sure that the assessments employed are appropriate for the grade level being administered and sensitive enough to incorporate various reading skills and proficiency levels.

Furthermore, it is important that the diagnostic assessments use multiple measures. As explained earlier in the literature review, multiple measures provide the depth and breadth of information required to fully understand the abilities of each child. Johnson, Pool and Carter (n.d.) recommend that diagnostic measures include independent

reading inventories (IRIs), decoding measures, comprehension measures, fluency measures and interest inventories.

An IRI is administered in a one-to-one setting and consists of a series of leveled reading passages, which are followed by comprehension questions which require the reader to think at the literal, inferential, and critical levels. Perhaps the most widely used is the Developmental Reading Assessment, second edition (DRA2), commercially available through Pearson, perhaps because schools can use Title I, Title III, and Race to the Top grants and funds to implement DRA2; in fact, Title I monies are the number one funding source for Pearson's interventions (Pearson, 2014). The purpose of the IRI can be to determine reading instructional level and competency across content or genre (Nilsson, 2013). The results of an IRI should not be used alone, as the results may have weak reliability and validity (Nilsson, 2013). However, used with other diagnostic tools as mentioned by Johnson, Pool and Carter (n.d.), an IRI serves a valuable purpose. In using multiple diagnostics, vocabulary, phonemic awareness, comprehension and motivation are all assessed and students can be better placed and their needs addressed.

Progress monitoring assessments. Once the at-risk populations have been identified and the level of need determined by the diagnostic tests, progress-monitoring assessments need to be selected for use. A progress monitoring assessment evaluates "students in specific academic and behavioral areas in order to determine the efficacy of and inform instruction/intervention and to make effective decisions regarding the instructional/intervention needs of a class, small group or individual student" (SERC, 2012, p. 2). Ideally, these assessments would ensure that instruction is tailored to the

needs of the students and that progress is made. Such assessments would also likely result in those students who fell just below the cut off receiving timely intervention or remediation which would result in meeting grade level expectations in a short time frame and in reducing the number of placement errors that occur within this population (Jenkins, n.d.). In addition, they determine when students move between more or less intensive levels of remediation (Connor et al., 2014).

Torgesen and Miller (2009) distinguished between two general types of progress-monitoring assessments: interim or benchmark assessments and frequent classroom-based assessments. They believe that the former is more beneficial for comparing overall progress to other students and for predicting future success on standards-based assessments such as the state standardized test, while the latter is more beneficial for improving each student's reading ability, being based not necessarily on pre-determined set of grade level standards, but rather on the individual's own abilities and goals obtainable for that child.

Using formative assessments to monitor progress may have the greatest improvement results (Torgesen & Miller, 2009), but they are the most difficult to put into practice. The results of the diagnostic test can inform a teacher as to what must be taught, but they cannot provide information on how to teach it. Initially, formative assessments may seem like trial and error; instructional strategies are implemented, and based on formative assessments, adjusted accordingly. Formative assessments may include class discussion, evaluation of a written task, or observation of group work (Torgesen & Miller, 2009). This short cycle is continuous. Adding to the difficulty in

progress monitoring is the very nature of adolescent literacy. In other content areas, such as math or science, information is usually sequential and clearly outlined. Yet as students advance in the English language arts, grade level proficiency is more an issue of degree of complexity than learning a new skill (Torgesen & Miller, 2009).

Conclusions

This is a challenging time in education. The current political reform movement of standardization and ensuing high-stakes tests has drawn increased accountability and scrutiny to our schools and classrooms. New Jersey, like many states, is in a state of flux. The CCSS replaced our state standards and a new era of testing has begun as the NJASK has been replaced by PARCC. Although intended to raise achievement levels for all students, making these changes before we are sure we are ready for them can put our neediest students at greater risk. On the other hand, this time of transition can also provide an opportunity to capitalize on the changes being made to improve conditions for this population.

As shown, struggling adolescent readers and writers is a population that is increasing. As the standards demand more from students, the risk of the achievement gap widening for this group increases, preventing many from catching up. In order to remedy this, intervention is necessary. Although there is not an abundance of research targeting this population, there is enough to provide guidance. This starts with carefully and accurately identifying who the struggling adolescents are through a screening tool. Then, diagnostic measures should be used to determine individual skill sets and confirm that intervention in the form of separate placement is in fact necessary. Once at-risk students

are properly placed, their progress needs to be carefully monitored and assessed so that instruction can continue to be adjusted accordingly.

Implications

A white paper was a project option that logically stemmed from this research. I chose to develop a white paper to be presented to the appropriate administrators, in this case, the Assistant Superintendent and English department supervisor, to disseminate to other stakeholders which discusses the problem that inspired this research and its outcomes. My recommendations for solving the problem of placement based on what assessments are already in district and those that still need to be included offer a possible solution. The solution proposed is a placement matrix that addresses the gaps discovered and would be ready to be implemented for the next year's high school freshmen. Part of this solution includes a dialogue and committee component to allow ninth grade academic teachers and guidance counselors, as well as others involved with placement, to provide feedback on its use so that adjustments could be made and hopefully its use continued and expanded to other grades for the following year.

Summary

Educators have always faced the challenge of how to get all students to meet grade level expectations. There is evidence to justify that today's more challenging standards and high-stakes tests put at-risk adolescents in further jeopardy, and due to increased accountability measures, the stakes are higher than ever to ensure that these struggling students succeed. Yet despite the pressure and good intentions to improve learning outcomes, there is little research or evidence to actually guide teachers on how

to accurately place struggling adolescent readers and writers so these at-risk students can receive the instruction they need. However, it is known from the literature that relying on one piece of summative data for placement does not provide a complete picture of ability or provide sufficient data for proper placement; multiple measures are needed for that analysis. A carefully chosen screening tool followed by other measures, such as diagnostics tests, has better success rates of accurately placing students by ability. Adolescent learners have distinct academic, social and emotional needs that need to be considered. Thus informed, this time of testing transition can be used beneficially by providing an opportunity to improve placement practices.

As New Jersey is currently transitioning from one state standardized test, the NJASK, to the PARCC, it became necessary to examine practices that rely on the NJASK, such as the placement of at-risk students into academic level ELA classes. This study to investigate the placement of academic freshmen began with interviews of those with the greatest knowledge of this population and placement practices. The knowledge gained from the interviews assisted in determining what data related to placement practices and academic needs assessments were collected and analyzed. The NJASK scores used to place current ninth ` academic students were collected and analyzed, as well other assessments that were discovered in the interview process. Assessments were evaluated based in large part on the knowledge of assessments for and needs of at-risk adolescents gained in the literature review. A detailed description of the methodology follows.

Section 2: The Methodology

Introduction

In order to address the academic placement of high school freshmen in this district as the transition occurs from one state standardized test to another, a qualitative case study was conducted. This section discusses the methodology, including the process for data collection and analysis used to answer the research questions.

RQ1: How do the teachers and guidance counselors of seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth grade academic English language arts (ELA) students describe the characteristics and needs of these academically struggling students?

RQ2: In the absence of the NJASK, what are the assessments currently being used in the 2014–2015 school year that could be used to assist in determining the appropriate academic placement of incoming 9th graders in ELA classes?

RQ3: What types of assessments, if any, are needed to provide a more complete picture of struggling students in order to more accurately place them?

Qualitative Research Design and Approach

A qualitative approach suited the nature of this study, which centered on an investigation of the method of assessment currently used and assessments that may be needed to place incoming freshmen academic ELA students. Qualitative methods best fit the nature of the problem presented as the study centered on open-ended questions to best understand the problem from the perspective of the participants, rather than determine a cause and effect or correlational relationship between variables in a carefully controlled environment, a method that is better suited to quantitative research (Creswell, 2012). In

addition, the study required a qualitative approach, as the data on participants' perceptions relied on interviews and the inductive reasoning required to analyze that data (Hatch, 2002; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

The best qualitative approach to use was that of the case study. In this approach, the use of interviews and documents to gain understanding of the particular characteristics of academic level freshmen and of assessment options available to place incoming academic freshmen for the 2015—2016 year was supported by Glesne (2011). As explained by Creswell (2012), this study met the criteria of a case study in that the problem related to understanding a process – placement practices – and existed within a bounded system.

Furthermore, while other methods of qualitative approaches exist, they would not assist in addressing the research questions asked. For example, as I am not interested in particular cultural aspects as related to the problem or in addressing any inequities, a realist or critical ethnography would not be suitable (Creswell, 2012). Moreover, although I am interested in the specific traits of the adolescent academic student, my purpose is to improve their placement, not define this group as a cultural identity, which provides further evidence against the use of ethnographic study (Zemliansky, 2008). Similarly, grounded theory research would not apply, as no new theory was developed (Creswell, 2012). Lastly, narrative research is not a valid option as the focus was not on one individual’s story or experiences regarding placement practices (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2013).

Participants

Selection

Participants were selected using purposeful sampling, as specific information about the problem under investigation was sought from knowledgeable individuals (Creswell, 2012; Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). The participants were those who were involved in the teaching and placement of academic ELA students in the seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth grades of the district's middle and high schools. These participants were the academic ELA teachers and the guidance counselors assigned to the middle schools and high school selected for this study and the English department supervisor. However, during the data collection process, several participants mentioned that Child Study may also be involved with academic placement of students. According to procedure, a change of procedure form was submitted to IRB to allow the inclusion of Child Study Team members from the two middle schools and the Assistant/Transition Coordinator of the Special Education department, who was mentioned as having a role in placement as well. After IRB approval, these people became part of the participant pool.

As a result of using purposeful sampling procedures of which only a small percentage of the larger population meets the criteria, the number of participants was small. The total population (n = 76) consists of the English department supervisor, regular education and special education ELA teachers at both middle schools and the one high school, as well as the three schools' guidance counselors and Child Study Teams and the Assistant/Transition Coordinator of the Special Education department (Table 1).

The sample of the population for this study was made up of two academic ELA level teachers at the middle school level and three at the high school level. Along with the English department supervisor, 12 guidance counselors from the middle and high schools, five Child Study Team members from the two middle schools, and the Special Education Assistant/Transition Coordinator, this sample of 24 represented the key informants who had the depth of knowledge into the problem and of the targeted age group required for the study (Lodico et al., 2010). Of these 24 informants, seven agreed to participate in the study. Having a small number of participants is acceptable in qualitative research because, unlike in quantitative research, a large sample size is not required since the goal is not to generalize results but rather to understand this particular situation that affects academic students (Glesne, 2011).

Table 1

Description of Population

	Two Middle Schools	One High School
Guidance Counselors	5	7
Academic and Regular Education ELA teachers*	21	16
Special Education ELA teachers	8	4
Child Study Team	7	6
Special Education Assistant / Transition Coordinator	1	(same)
English Department Supervisor, K-12	1	(same)

* Some Academic ELA teachers also teach regular ELA classes and are therefore not removed as a separate group of teachers.

Procedures for gaining access to participants. As a necessary preliminary step, an overview of the proposed study and a request for permission to conduct this research was made and granted by the building principals, English department supervisor, assistant superintendent and superintendent. This was obtained through meetings with my building principal, English department supervisor and assistant superintendent, and via email to the two other building principals, English department supervisor and assistant superintendent. In addition, as per institutional review board's (IRB) protocol, a formal letter of cooperation was sent to the superintendent. Once the research study was approved by Walden University IRB (#02-04-15-0361757), an e-mail was sent to the superintendent, assistant superintendent, middle and high schools' principals and the English department supervisor informing them of Walden University approval and my intent to proceed with the data collection stage of my research.

I then sent an email to the sample of teachers and staff participating in the study, presenting an overview of the study, my permission to conduct it, participant expectations and protections, my contact information and a request for their voluntary participation, which they could withdraw at any time. As an employee of the district, I have access to all staff members' email addresses. Attached to the email was a letter of informed consent with instructions to complete the form, sign and date it and return it, or to reply to the email with the words, "I consent", prior to the provided due date (Appendix B). There were several follow-up emails with the attachment due to delayed responses and low consent rate. In addition, as mentioned, a Change of Procedures form was submitted

to IRB and after their approval, an invitational email was submitted to the additional members.

Establishing a Researcher-Participant Relationship

My department supervisor was also instrumental in helping me establish a researcher-participant working relationship. His objectivity, support and involvement may have reassured participants who might otherwise have been hesitant to participate in the study. Moreover, I emphasized my role as researcher and the great service the participants were providing; they were portrayed not as subservient but as key contributors to a study that may improve teaching and learning for students. Beyond the interviews and member-checks once the data was collected, I did not have a great deal of contact with the participants, with the exception of my supervisor, with whom I did have several follow up questions and requests for data I hoped would verify certain participants' statements. The researcher-participant relationship was minimal, though collegial and professional.

Ethical protection of participants. All data collected followed closely with the IRB protocol for the protection of human subjects. I obtained informed consent from participants, and was granted permission to conduct this research by the superintendent and assistant superintendent of schools, English Department and the principals. Staff members' participation in this study was completely voluntary. Moreover, I am not in a position of authority or supervision over any of the staff members or colleagues of mine who were involved. While there may have been a perceived risk in making a comment that might have reflected negatively on the district, all responses were kept anonymous

and confidential. However, due to the limited number of participants in total, there still may have been the concern that certain responses could result in identifying the staff member. Therefore, their identities were protected and not compromised during the processes of the collection, analysis, and reporting of the data. Another perceived burden may have been the time staff had to spend answering interview questions. To address this burden, participants were given the choice to respond to interview questions in person or via telephone. Telephone interviews were offered for those who would prefer human, synchronous interaction but could not schedule time to meet in person. However, in this study, all interviews were conducted "face-to-face". What was not anticipated was that the timing of the interviews would conflict with the scheduling of state standardized achievement testing, which resulted in some of the potential participants declining to partake in the study and the delay of several interviews.

The letter of consent also stressed that there were minimal risks to participating, and that the possible benefit of more accurately placing some of our neediest students could lead to improved literacy learning. Participants were reminded that their honest responses were essential to the study's success, and their responses would be kept confidential, as outlined in the informed consent letter (Appendix B). This letter of consent provided an overview of the study, the participants' role as well as why they were chosen, an overview of possible risks and benefits, confidentiality procedures, and lastly, a reminder that participation was completely voluntary and could be retracted at any time. (See Appendix B for letter of consent). Participants were informed that there would be no compensation for participating in the study.

The specific student data that were collected from district and school records prior to the interviews were the academic level students' NJASK scores, since this was the only test consistently used to place academic students. The English department supervisor agreed to conceal information that could identify students, which was also a condition set by the superintendent of the district prior to giving his approval. In doing so, the researcher was removed from the process. Furthermore, during the actual interviews, information that could identify the participant or could identify another person in district, directly stated or implied, was redacted. In efforts to maintain confidentiality, the demographics of the participants were not described. By obtaining informed consent, keeping information and participation confidential, and having no authority over the participants, participants were treated ethically (Lodico et al., 2010).

Data Collection

Data collected were triangulated through the incorporation of several methods and sources of data. As proposed, I conducted interviews with the participants who consented to participate in the study. I also gathered documents from the 2013—2014 school year related to 2014—2015 academic placement to determine what specific information was used to place academic students. The main data used to place these students in the 2014—2015 school year was the Grade 7 NJASK summative scores. NJASK Grade 7 scores were used to place current academic Grade 9 students since NJASK 8 scores were not available until after schedules were made. Based on information discovered during interviews, other data were collected. The Grade 8 NJASK score, Grade 9 NJPASS9 score and Grade 9 English grades for current 2014—

2015 academic Grade 9 students were collected, since they were used to help place these students in Grade 10, for the 2015—2016 school year. Furthermore, I collected information on the measures used by the reading specialist to determine academic students' strengths and weaknesses in 2013—2014 and 2014—2015, as determined by the interviews. The only specific measures discovered in the interview process were the reading specialist's use of the DRA2 and GMRT. Several participants also mentioned the Comprehensive Testing Program 4th Edition test (CTP4), so information on this test was also collected. It was further discovered during the interview process that while no rubric exists for academic level students' placement, there is one for advanced classes, called enriched in the middle school and honors in the high school. This rubric was also collected and analyzed, though I was not able to secure permission to include it at the time of publication.

Interviews

Interviews are an effective way to understand participant perspective and are often used in qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Rubin and Rubin, 2012; Woods, 2006). Because so much of the study depended on the information learned through the interviews, a field test of the main interview questions was conducted (e.g. Sims, 2013). The field test helped to ensure the reliability and validity of the interview data.

Interview field test. Qualitative case study research demands a certain level of rigor be used during the field test, in particular having a panel of experts who hold advanced degrees and are familiar with the population and content of the study look at the interview questions. However, such a group does not exist in reality. In my district, there are no teachers, academic level or otherwise, who hold a doctoral degree. Furthermore, as a result of my purposeful sampling, I included in the study's participants all academic level teachers and guidance counselors for the age group being studied.

Due to real-world dilemmas such as this where the reality of a situation does not allow for the exact criteria of a theory to be carried out, Design Based Research Methods (DBR) was implemented by Brown (1992) and Collins (1992). The purpose of DBR is to bridge the gap that exists in educational research between theory and practice and allow for the practical applications of theory in real-life settings, which cannot be carefully controlled and manipulated. DBR aims at creating new theories or practices that positively impact teaching and learning in naturalistic settings (Barab & Squire, 2004).

Therefore, although the ideal criteria for field testing the interview questions could not be met, there was still an attempt to address the same criteria through available means. Volunteers were asked to review the interview questions to (a) determine the clarity of the questions, (b) ensure that the questions were asking what I intended them to, and (c) decide if the questions were too broad or too narrow (See Appendix E for interview questions). I first had the school psychologist, who served as an expert in psychometric testing, critique my questions. Based on her input, revisions were made to Questions 5 and 6 in Cluster 2. Whereas I originally proposed a panel of experts to field

test the interview questions, not all invited responded. My intention was to have this panel consist of the following five members: three current Grade 8 ELA teachers, of which there was one person who taught academic level ELA several years ago; a different member of the Child Study Team; and a middle school guidance counselor from a nearby district. These members were chosen for their knowledge of ELA content, age group, testing, and placement practices relevant to the research study. The final field test was conducted without the input of the additional child study team member and guidance counselor, who did not respond. No other changes were made to the questions, as the panel felt they were effective as written.

Interview process. To determine perceived characteristics and needs of academic students, seven participants were interviewed. These participants included English language arts (ELA) academic teachers and guidance counselors from both the middle and high school levels, and the English department supervisor. Participants were coded as Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3, and so on, to safeguard their identity. In addition, I asked questions regarding what current measures are being used to evaluate and determine the strengths and weaknesses of the academic students. I also questioned the participants as to what the current placement practices were and their perceptions of these placement practices. Finally, participants were asked if there was any other information they would like to have on their academic students, and any changes they would like made to current placement practices.

The structure of each interview followed essentially the same pattern, in which I thanked each participant for agreeing to participate in the study and engaged in small talk

if time allowed, reducing anxiety and improving rapport. I then asked again for permission to record, and proceeded to ask the same interview questions, in essentially the same order (Appendix E). There were times when additional questions were asked based on participant response. Through the course of the interviews, there were times when clarification was requested, by either me or the participant, and given. I also probed for greater detail to certain responses in order to gain a fuller or deeper understanding of a response, unless it was clear that I had asked a question that the participant was not comfortable discussing, which did occur on several occasions, with several participants. Although probes are an essential component of effective interviewing to elicit richer responses (Lodico, 2010), I engaged in them only when it seemed clear that the participant was comfortable with the current line of questioning. At other times, the order of the questions was modified if a consequent question was answered in a previous response.

The purpose of the interview was threefold. First of all, I wanted to understand the participants' perceptions and understandings of academic level students. Through this it was hoped that some general characteristics based on strengths, weaknesses, behaviors and attitudes of this population would be determined. However, as discovered in the literature review, struggling adolescent learners, though often treated as a homogeneous group, actually consist of a variety of abilities and behaviors. I checked if this is also true according to the participants interviewed so that such variety would also be reflected and considered when determining academic placement. Secondly, I wanted to understand how students were placed into academic level ELA classes. This included

what the typical procedure was, if there were exceptions, and if so, under what circumstances exceptions were made. Finally, an understanding of participants' opinions of the current placement practices was gained.

The interview was the first aspect of the research study conducted, as it was hoped that the results would point to other documents and assessments related to the placement of academic level students. While it was intended that interviews would occur as soon as informed consent was given, due to busy schedules of the participants, several interviews occurred weeks after consent was given. Interviews were held wherever it was easiest for the participant; I had permission by the superintendent to travel to other schools during my planning periods and was granted the use of available classrooms or office space. Most interviews were conducted in my classroom, though one occurred in an office and another in a lounge space. Interviews lasted from approximately 30 minutes to 60 minutes. I needed to follow-up with three participants, to both clarify responses or information provided, and to request data the participant mentioned during the interview.

After each interview was conducted, I recorded reflective field notes. My field notes served to record aspects of the interview that would not be evident on the recording, such as body language and descriptions of the initial contact prior to recording. I also described the location and timing of the interviews. Most importantly, the field notes contained any problems, such as information that might conflict with another participant's responses or my own experiences, or notes to myself on follow-up questions or requests for data.

Once field notes were completed, I transcribed the interviews. This produced transcripts totaling 85 single-spaced pages, with individual responses ranging from eight to 19 single-spaced pages of transcription. After an interview was transcribed, I went back to my field notes and revised them, adding additional questions or impressions based on responses, changes in volume, tempo, speech pattern, length of pauses after certain questions, etc. Once this was completed, the member checking process was initiated. Transcriptions were sent to participants to verify their accuracy. I asked each participant to please review the transcripts to see that they accurately portrayed his or her perceptions and understandings of the questions asked, and that attention was not paid to any grammatical errors or awkward phrasing. Each participant was thanked again for his or her help. Some participants returned them the very same day while others took weeks; some included little to no clarification while others clarified several responses, though no significant changes were made. Once member checks were completed, transcripts were coded for initial themes. During this phase, interview field notes, reflective journal research log and transcripts were used to further develop emerging themes.

Placement and Assessment Data

The only verifiable data that was used consistently when placing academic ELA students into Grade 9 was their Grade 7 NJASK scores. This information was obtained from the English department supervisor. The supervisor removed the students' identifying information before giving the data to me.

According to the NJ ASK 2013 Grades 3—8 Technical Report (2014), the NJASK has demonstrated reliability, with “the alphas for overall student responses

ranged from 0.81 to 0.89 for ELA" (28). High inter-rater reliability is also demonstrated. Moreover, content and test validity are documented in the NJ ASK 2013 Grades 3—8 Technical Report (2014). However, in practice, there are problems with using the NJASK results. For example, the NJASK test administered was not the same year to year, and cannot guarantee that the same skills and difficulty levels were tested each year, nor does it compare the same group of students as they progress making true comparisons difficult (Standardized Assessment Report – NJASK, n.d.). In addition, some districts did not see a correlation between report card grades and NJASK test results (Simone, 2014).

In addition, the Grade 8 NJASK score, Grade 9 NJPASS9 score and Grade 9 English grades for current academic Grade 9 students, which will be used to help place these students in Grade 10 for the 2015—2016 school year were provided by the English supervisor in an Excel spreadsheet. Moreover, I collected information on the DRA2 and GMRT used by the reading specialist to determine academic students' strengths and weaknesses in 2013—2014 and 2014—2015. I also gathered information on the CTP4 Grade 8 test for current Grade 9 academic students, as this test was mentioned by participants as well as a district-used assessment given to all students.

Role of the Researcher

My job in this educational setting is as a regular and academic level eighth grade ELA teacher. Whereas my close connection to the problem under investigation prevented me from being an objective outsider, I believe this connection was an asset rather than a liability in addressing this issue. My experiences with this population of

students have provided me with insight into their abilities and needs, which may not always be taken into consideration when determining policy. Though this group does not represent the majority of my students, I have found myself advocating for them on a number of occasions. As a result, I recognize that I entered the study with certain assumptions. I believe that there may be better ways to place academic students, which made this a worthy topic of investigation. I also would like to help ensure that this population gets the attention they need. These assumptions are what drove this research, but I do not think they negatively impacted it. Certain safeguards, such as peer debriefing, which in this study involved two teachers not involved in the study who reviewed for bias or assumptions, as described by Brandon, Cooper and Lindberg (1997), and member-checks were put in place to prevent my biases from interfering with data collection, analysis and findings.

I have a collegial relationship with the teachers in my building and a professional relationship with my department supervisor, my setting's guidance department and the academic teachers at the other middle school. Prior to this research, I did not know the academic ELA teachers at the high school or the guidance department members at the other middle school or high school. There are pros and cons to each type of relationship. Familiarity with participants allowed for easier access and more natural interactions; however, these participants may have felt a friendly obligation to help me with my research. Conversely, working with participants who I have not previously met could have resulted in stilted or awkward communications in which time was needed, but was not available, to develop a more familiar interaction. As a positive, this group most likely

did not feel any pressure to respond or phrase responses in ways thought to be beneficial to me.

Data Analysis

Interviews

At the completion of each face-to-face or telephone interview, I wrote down my immediate perceptions and thoughts as part of the reflection process. The transcriptions of the recordings were completed as soon as possible and saved into Word documents to keep all responses in a uniform format. As I read through the transcriptions, the intention was to code information at that point. However, because I had some follow-up clarification questions for two of my early respondents, and because my interviews were so spaced out, I thought it might be better to code after I verified the transcriptions through the process of member-checks. I discussed this with my Chair and second committee member who also agreed that I should conduct member checks prior to coding. At this point, a change of procedures form was submitted to IRB to request this and approval granted. Member checks began as soon as approval was granted.

I read and re-read the information gathered while I engaged in thematic data analysis, the process by which trends in responses are noted and overarching themes created (Fink, 2008; Glesne, 2011). As Kvale (2007) and Glesne (2011) explain, this process involves determining what ideas or phrases are shared by the participants and the frequency with which they appear. Although I originally thought that I might use software such as HyperRESEARCH to assist me in analyzing data collected (e.g.

Hurworth & Shrimpton, 2007), I found it more beneficial and valuable to review the data myself. Figure 1 shows the interview data analysis procedure.

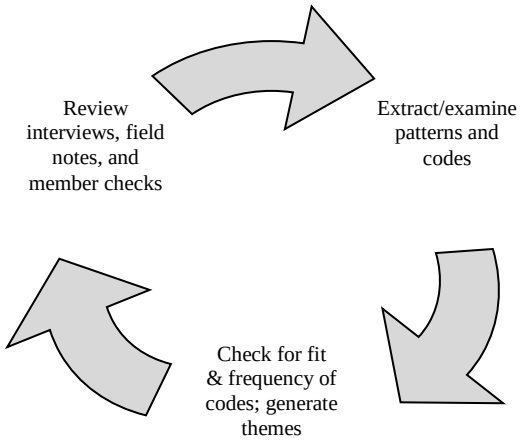

Figure 1. Data analysis procedure.

After a review of the interview data, the four overarching themes that evolved from the data were (1) characteristics and needs of academic ELA students (2) current placement practices (3) assessments and (4) improvements. Minor themes were also discovered. Once the data was coded and analyzed, I wrote a descriptive narrative of my findings (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

NJASK Data

The NJASK categorizes students in one of three ways. Scores below 200 are considered partially proficient, scores of 200 to 249 are proficient, and scores between 250 and 300 (the highest score possible) are advanced proficient. Based on what was known at the onset of the research study, general education students were placed into academic classes because they scored partially proficient on the NJASK, or were only a

few points above proficient. Whether students scored a 170 or a 200, the placement was the same. It was believed that the NJASK score was not disaggregated by skill when making placement decisions; only the final score was used. When I analyzed this data, I clustered students by final score. I also wanted to group them by disaggregated skill sets, but did not receive this information.

Additional Assessments

Results from the interviews revealed that the DRA2 and GMRT were the only types of specific assessments mentioned by the respondents, which the reading specialist gave to me. There were no particular formative assessments mentioned. There were informal, random assignments such as projects, letters and quizzes, but nothing specific could be collected.

The English department supervisor also shared Grade 9 NJPASS9 score and Grade 9 English grades for the current (2014—2015 school year) academic Grade 9 students, which will be used to help place these students in Grade 10, for the 2015—2016 school year. In addition, as result of its mention by several participants, the CTP4 test was also analyzed. This information was helpful when trying to determine what types of information is useful in placement practices when creating a procedure for incoming Grade 9 academic students. Content analysis of assessments helped answer the research questions.

Journal and Research Log

A reflective journal and research log was maintained to keep track of what data was collected and when, as well as what information was learned from each source. The

reflective journal was used to monitor and reduce any researcher bias by forcing me to acknowledge and check any assumptions. I also engaged in peer debriefing to minimize any bias or illogical conclusions.

Accuracy, Credibility, and Validity

Accuracy and credibility of findings were obtained through several measures, as recommended by Creswell (2012). I conducted member checks by providing participants with transcriptions of their interview(s) to ensure accuracy of interpretation and intended response. Samples of transcripts are found in Appendix C. Peer debriefing occurred to ensure that assumptions were not made and that the data codes were accurate. Finally, having engaged in reflexivity in my journal, samples from which are found in Appendix D, further reduced researcher bias. Data that represented a variant perspective were reported. The Word documents containing the transcripts, my comments, and scanned copies of documents were kept in a password-protected computer.

The validity of the study was increased through data triangulation, as demonstrated in Figure 2. As described by Guion, Diehl and McDonald (2011), including different groups of stakeholders of a program as participants in in-depth interviews is the most popular means of data triangulation and applies to the purposeful data, such as document analysis of placement test (NJASK) used for current academic students and of the assessments that were discovered during the interview process, the study also incorporated methodological triangulation (Guion et al., 2011; Patton, 2002).

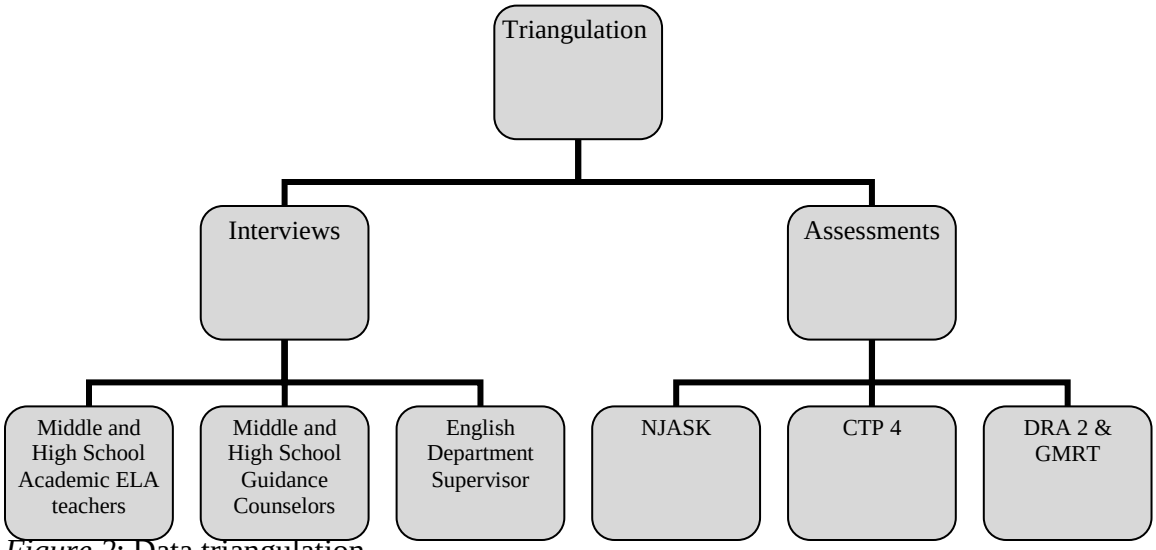

Figure 2: Data triangulation

Findings

The problem in this study was how to place academic level high school freshmen as the transition was made from the NJASK to the PARCC. The interview questions were grouped into three clusters, each cluster relating to a research question (see Appendix E). The research questions were: (1) How do the teachers and guidance counselors of 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th grade academic English language arts (ELA) students describe the characteristics and needs of these academically struggling students? (2) In the absence of the NJASK, what were the assessments being used in the 201--2015 school year that could be used to assist in determining the appropriate academic placement of incoming 9th graders in ELA classes? (3) What types of assessments, if any, are needed to provide a more complete picture of struggling students in order to more accurately place them? The responses to the interview questions resulted in themes that were aligned with the research questions. The data collected were analyzed to clarify

and verify participant statements and gain greater insight into academic students and their placement.

Interviews

After the interview data was analyzed, four over-arching themes were formed. Each theme had several subthemes, as described in Table 2. The findings section incorporates many of the participants' statements verbatim to provide authenticity. Additional excerpts from interviews can be found in Appendix F.

Table 2

Over-arching Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
Characteristics of Academic Students	Emotional Factors Outside Factors Educational Factors
Placement Practices	Who places students into academic ELA classes? How are students placed? Participant opinions
Standardized Testing	NJASK PARCC
Improvements	Conversation and Communication Multiple Measures

Theme 1: Characteristics of Academic Students

The first theme related directly to the first research question, "How do the teachers and guidance counselors of seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth grade academic English language arts (ELA) students describe the characteristics and needs of these academically struggling students?" This theme evolved from the responses to Cluster One of the interview questions, "Characteristics and needs of academic English language arts (ELA) students". Participant responses consistently reflected issues related to emotional

status, outside factors, and educational factors, prompting the creation of these three subthemes. Data saturation was demonstrated in this area, as many respondents seemed to echo previous respondents' sentiments.

Subtheme 1.1: Emotional factors. Participants discussed at great length the impact of emotional factors on academic students. All those interviewed noted the low motivation and low self-esteem of the academic student. Participant 5 explained that for some academic students, academic placement was not needed due to academic students' intellectual ability, "but they [academic students] needed to [be placed in academic classes because they are struggling] emotionally. And they needed to be there because they're just self-discovering. They weren't at the level of maturity yet to understand they were already good students. Their egos were crushed for whatever reason … so this kind of just rebuilt them to be … feeling like a student who can do it." The challenge becomes trying to target and address the factors that impact negatively.

Participant 7 described the difficulty of addressing academic students' low motivation: "I think motivation is one of the hardest things to address. If the kids don't have it within themselves, it's hard to motivate a student, even if the family is pushing them, and the counselor and the teacher, it's just if they don't want to do it, we can't force them to do it." Participant 4 provided one possible explanation for this absence of motivation:

> I think for a long time they've [academic students] been told or had issues with the content areas so that by the time they reach me …they are kind of at this point where they assume that this is not going to be something for them. They *assume*

> they're going to have trouble, they *assume* they're going to hit obstacles. There's already this self-fulfilling prophecy going on as soon as they walk into the classroom. 'Oh, this is English, I've never done well in English. I'm not going to do well here.' So, they are already turned off from the get-go.

Participant 1 felt that for many students, there is a definite shift once they hit adolescence; when faced with difficulty, their willingness to persevere often changes to apathy. Interestingly, several participants expressed concern that the academic setting might be a contributing factor to the noted apathy and low-self-esteem. Participant 3 stated, "I think self-esteem sometimes [might be a factor unique to academic students] because they feel different from their peers, and they might be placed with students that they don't identify with; it almost jeopardizes their high-self-esteem in that classroom." Other participants explained that the academic placement can prolong the apathy by creating a cohort of students who feed off of each other's low motivation. According to Participant 4, such students find themselves traveling to several lower track classes together "and they became so used to the same classroom setting and being with their friends year after year and staying in this academic level, that a large part is that they're not necessarily motivated to go beyond that." Participant 3 echoed this sentiment, "I worry that if a child is placed [in academic] that they're going to be on that track through high school."

This apathy frequently manifested itself in lack of follow through with assignments outside of school, another common characteristic of academic students that most participants mentioned. Participant 5 stated that that lack of follow through is what

landed many students in academic in the first place, because they are "totally not producing, just doing nothing. Usually it's because the kid is – the kid has an F and when asked why he got an F, it's not based on their in-class productivity, it's all about homework." Participant 4 related this low productivity to what is similar to a mob mentality. The students have realized that if so many of the students do not complete a task, there will not be any consequences: "And there is this power in numbers kind of mentality, where they go, "Well, if no one does it [the assignment], than s/he can't – you know, what's s/he going to do to all of us?"

Participant 6 confirmed this when describing those students who "just didn't' want to work, [who] really believed they were going to just get promoted and graduated with their class…and they had not motivation to do *any* work". Even Participant 5, who emphasized that even though work product and motivation increased greatly for students once they were shown that they did have value as students and opportunities in the future that "they still don't work outside of the classroom." This participant wondered "if they're so comfortable that they don't want to leave. So we've made it a little cushy."

Worthy of noting is that more than half of the participants mentioned that for those academic students who did have the motivation and demonstrated proficiency, they were able to move out of the academic track, either during the year or for the following year. As explained by Participant 2, "If a student wants to, and the student passed their academic, there's nothing holding that student from entering the CP [college prep] level course." This process, as explained by Participants 4, 5, and 6, consisted of a student passing his/her academic work and either requesting to be moved in college prep classes

or being recommended to move by his/her academic teacher. This demonstrates that though low motivation and academic indifference might be common characteristics for academic students in general, these characteristics do not define all academic students, as a significant number were motivated to succeed and did move out of this track to college prep classes. As verified by Participant 5's comment, "There is movement, about half and half; half of them will go into CP, or at least CP with in-class support."

Subtheme 1.2: Outside factors. Outside factors which negatively impacted academic student achievement included extra-curricular activities and home conditions. Participants 4 and 5 mentioned that a contributing factor for some academic students who do not work outside of school was their demanding athletic schedules. What also added to the difficulty was that for many, extra-curricular activities that may have negatively interfered with their school work were also areas where these students shone. For example, Participant 3 mentioned that many academic students do well in the performance arts. This presents the conundrum of how to nurture students' strengths in the extra-curricular areas, without interfering with their progress in their academic courses. Too many academic students focused their energy and time on what they enjoyed and excelled at, but to the detriment of their English school work. Participant 4 articulated frustration with trying to find a balance between this when discussing the possibility of an additional remedial class in ELA instead of an elective, which might be helpful, but there is the "risk of saying now we're just taking away what the kids like to do …It seems like you can't win. Why do you want to take away from what the kids like…There's always a Catch 22."

Of greater bearing, as expressed by the participants, was the impact of home life on the achievement of academic students. All participants mentioned home life or parental involvement as a factor to student success, in general terms. Others specified the impact of this factor. Participant 2 explained that parental input about a student, "academically, socially, or otherwise" would be very beneficial for a teacher to have in order to better meet the needs of the academic students. Participants 1, 4, and 5 mentioned the difficulties faced by insecurities of second language learners, who also often have limited help from home due to the language barrier and differing cultural expectations. While academic courses do not have any English Language Learners, for many students English is not the language spoken at home. Participant 6 felt very strongly about this factor, particularly in terms of students from other countries who have trouble adjusting due to parental pressures based on expectations consistent with "living in their old country" which may conflict greatly with the way they see their peers acting.

Still others expressed the problems presented by those students who come from financially struggling homes, where a single parent worked multiple jobs and was rarely home or a student who lived in a two-bedroom apartment with parents and several siblings. Participant 7 generalized these difficulties by stating, "They [academic students] might not have the family dynamics pushing them from home."

Participant 4 also mentioned how outside factors accumulated and influenced one another, so there was no clear way to determine one specific outside factor to explain the academic student: "A majority population [of my academic students] were cultural or ethnic minorities, a lot of single parent homes, lower socio-economic statuses for the area

– there's kind of an amalgamation of stuff at work, so it's a little hard to pinpoint it to one."

Subtheme 1.3: Educational factors. Once again, participants defined the academic students' abilities with great uniformity; all participants pointed to reading comprehension as the overall biggest weakness of these students. In terms of reading comprehension, it was stated that "I think a wide range [of difficulties], BUT, I do think the one common link is that comprehension is the area they struggle the most in terms of that whole blanket that is reading."

Unlike the emotional and outside factors, participants were able to provide specific measures taken to address weak comprehension skills. Such strategies included differentiation, in which tasks were scaffolded with greater modeling and group work than might be found in a regular class before students were given greater individual responsibility to complete tasks without a high level of guidance. As Participant 1 stated, "It is scaffolded differently…As opposed to saying here's a novel, let's talk about it and read it, we kind of go through, 'How do I read a novel?'."

As explained by numerous participants, part of this reading process involves more chunking of material and tasks, to provide definitive benchmarks and more manageable expectations. Participant 2 explained "academic teachers are able to differentiate the content to maybe bring in shorter texts or to vary the text level."

Another factor mentioned by several participants was weak writing skills. According to Participant 1, "It's also getting down their thoughts about literature on paper. I think there's a very big disconnect with that." This deficit was further specified

by Participant 5: “This year I’m finding kids who don’t know grammar, don’t know spelling, don’t know punctuation.”

Similar to reading weaknesses, participants were able to share some concrete means of addressing these deficits. Participant 2 said, “I think the same kinds of scaffolds you might provide for reading comprehension would be similar for writing, so more time to conference with students and scaffold their process.” Participant 5 expressed another strength of the academic students in relation to the writing process, “Upon producing, they are totally willing to revise, they even look at revision in essays like a gift….[they are all] eager and willing and just insecure….”

In terms of reading and writing, the common element presented was greater need for support and encouragement, which most likely stemmed from the previously discussed emotional factors. As expressed by Participant 7, “Sometimes if there’s an extra support that can … help students understand that they can do the work, that they do have the potential.” To do this, “it [the academic class] might go at a slower pace or have less work to build their confidence and show them that they do have the skills to get it done.” This sentiment was reiterated by Participant 5, “[they need] one-on-one deadlines, one-on-one need for how many revisions should be prepared, one-on-one for reinforcing what they’re doing is okay. So there is (sic) all kinds of differentiation and encouragement.”

Finally, weak vocabulary was mentioned by several participants as a contributing factor to the academic students’ weak performance: “Vocabulary is generally lesser than what we might find in a CP or honors level course by far,” and “I think that vocabulary is

a major factor as well." However, unlike reading comprehension and writing skills, once vocabulary was mentioned as a weakness in the early parts of the interview, these participants typically did not mention it again. Perhaps in the face of all the other pressing needs of the students that participants were discussing, this need, though very present, was not as critical as the emotional factors or overall reading comprehension and writing deficits; or perhaps vocabulary instruction was incorporated into reading and writing instruction.

Summary of Theme 1. Overall the participants' responses confirmed much of what was discovered in the literature review regarding this population of struggling adolescent learners. These students are characterized by low motivation and low self-esteem. Academically, they have poor reading comprehension and weak writing skills; they require greater encouragement, scaffolding, and differentiation than CP students to reach their potential and be productive in school. However, despite best efforts, productivity with this population remains largely low for assignments to be completed outside of school. This may be attributed to outside influences, such as extra-curricular demands or challenging situations at home. Some strengths of this population are found in creative and collaborative tasks, their "street smarts", athletics, and ability to follow and internalize step-by-step formulaic structures.

Theme 2: Placement Practices

The second theme related to the second research question, "In the absence of the NJASK, what were the assessments being used in the 2014 – 2015 school year that could be used to assist in determining the appropriate academic placement of incoming 9th

graders in English language arts classes?". This research question influenced the interview questions for Cluster 2, which centered on current placement practices, and Cluster 3, which focused on assessments. In focusing on these areas, it was the researcher's intent to discover what current practices in place were deemed effective and could easily be used to place academic students, and what areas were perceived as not effective, and therefore could be revised during this time of testing transition. Theme 2 was further broken down into three subthemes, which focused on (1) who placed the academic, (2) how they were placed, and (3) participants' perceptions of placement practices.

Subtheme 2.1: Who places students into academic ELA classes? In general, based on participants' responses, the following people were believed to be involved, to some extent or another, in placing academic students: the English department supervisor, guidance counselors, ELA teachers, and the Child Study team. All participants did not state all these people were involved, but each participant mentioned some of these people as instrumental in placing students into the academic level course:

"For academic…those recommendations from the supervisor [are used]…Child Study takes care of the IEP kids for academic scheduling."

"It's always teacher recommendation, following the kid through…and I [guidance counselor] can recommend that they are in academic.…"

"I believe it's the English language supervisor…whether administrative staff has anything to do with that, I don't know, but I know that the English language arts supervisor has a great deal to do with that."

All of these quotes demonstrate the lack of specificity when it came to the participants' perceptions of exactly who was responsible for placing academic students. This lack of specificity might stem from the informal process of or absence of a policy related to the placement of academic students.

Participant 5 expressed the very informal nature of academic placement: "Is it formal? No, it's me communicating with guidance through email. And I'm saying so-and-so needs to stay [in academic] and so-and-so is ready to go…It's very informal."

This was echoed by Participant 4:

> I really do have to make a recommendation – you know, I meet with English language arts supervisor and we discuss where I think kids should fall. If the student has an IEP, I will meet with Child Study…If I need to, informally, if there's a problem I might discuss that same thing with guidance…there is a conversation that we do take the time to do, but it's a bit informal.

Possibly the informal nature of this process contributed to the vague understanding of how exactly students were placed into the academic setting. It is also important to note that those participants who worked in middle school did not emphasize the teachers' role in placement, whereas it was the central factor for those participants who worked in high school. From this, one might conclude that because there is no specific protocol, different schools in this district may have different placement practices for academic level courses.

Subtheme 2.2: How are students placed? Similar to what was discovered in Theme 2.1, there was a range of factors mentioned by participants, in various combinations, related to how academic students were placed. These included grades, teacher recommendations, and district standardized tests. However, what all participants unanimously agreed upon was that the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) was a key component in academic placement. Participant 5 put it as "I think teacher recommendations…and seeing where kids were in terms of their grades in contrast to their peers had something to do with it [placement] too, but at least from what I've seen, a large part of it is the NJASK scores." Another participant stated, "We go by standardized tests scores [NJASK] when we're moving, placing, trying to move a kid around because they've requested it. So I don't know of any other measure." Participant 1 mentioned that placement might be based on "CTP4 [a district used standardized test] too, but I think it's just the NJASK". Participant 2 qualified the use of NJASK: "The standardized test score [NJASK] gives us the first indication of a possible need to be in academic class" and explained that while it was the first factor looked at, it may not be the only one.

The NJASK categorizes students into one of three groups: (1) partially proficient are scores below 200, (2) proficient are scores between 200 and 249, and (3) advanced proficient are scores between 250 and 300. Although participants agreed that the NJASK was a key component to placing students, there was a range of responses in terms of what the cut-off score on the NJASK would be to qualify students for academic:

"Below 200 you may be entitled to an IEP….so you usually find your academic kids between 200 and maybe 215."

"200 seems to be the cut off score. However, I do know that certain kids were slightly above 200, and then there are students that are below 200 that were not placed into my academic class; I don't know if that was just an error, but it seems that 200 is the cut off. I have a couple of like 202s, but I go as low as 164."

In general, responses were in one of these two cut off ranges when stating what NJASK score resulted in academic placement; either at or below 200 or between 200 and 215. Participant 4 explained how s/he came to conclude what the NJASK cut off score was. When asked how students were placed into the academic level, this was the response given:

> It was NJASK. I feel that was the biggest contributing factor, because I had sheets with a layout of all the students, and I could go in and highlight and find my students in the academic placement and see where their numbers fell and… the numbers told me my academic students were partially proficient [partially proficient scores are below 200].

However, in almost direct contradiction of this participant's response, Participant 4 expressed his/her experiences with the use of partially proficient NJASK test scores as a main criterion. As expressed, students who did not compete projects or homework, and/or were behavior problems, were placed in an academic class even though they scored proficient on the NJASK, though it seemed the criteria or process may have changed over time:

> Sometimes it's [NJASK] test scores, but that was totally "bogus", because when I went to look at the test scores, there were kids who passed at the time the New Jersey ASK, while there were many others who hadn't, but it was split, so half of the class I had two years ago were the "bad" kids. And the other half were truly under 200 on the NJASK in language arts. The following year, it was similar, there were many who passed…And this year…I looked at their test scores and they were right there, so they were under 210, but well close to 200.

In addition to the above responses which emphasized the lack of a definitive cut off for academic placement score when using the NJASK, another inconsistency was found: whether or not the academic class is for students with IEPs. Depending on the participant asked, academic classes are not for those students with an IEP, yet others did have special education students in their academic classes. "So the district would define it [academic level class] as a place– and they've even said this – a place where there wouldn't be any IEPs, there would be no 504s, but there would be kids who had not passed the NJASK. But that wasn't true." When Participant 1 was asked whether or not the academic setting has any classified students, the response was, "No, there's not. I have 504s", though the statement was later clarified that during the year, students in academic have wound up being classified. Also as noted in Theme 2.1 section, Participant 4 does have students with IEPs and paraprofessional support. This lack of consistency clearly frustrated some participants, as exemplified in this comment: "And it wasn't supposed to be special ed. because I have no supplemental teacher. I *do* have

IEPs. *And* I have kids who passed the test. So…I just don't know…Really, I don't know how they are picked."

Evidently, this participant's frustration seems to have stemmed from the lack of clarity surrounding placement practices. Similar to the findings of subtheme 2.1, it seemed that the inclusion of special education students in the academic class was more notable in the high school than the middle school. This would also suggest that how students were placed was also subject to change based on which school they attended.

In the course of the interviews with participants at both the middle and high school levels, particularly guidance counselors, there were frequent mentions of rubrics that were used when determining placement. "We rubric all of the students and depending on their total points at the end we see if they get into whichever level of English." However, when asked for further information about how these rubrics were used for academic students, participants clarified that these rubrics were only used for determining placement into enriched courses at the middle schools and honors courses at the high school. No multiple measures rubrics were in place for the placement of academic level students.

Subtheme 2.3: Opinion. Unlike subthemes 2.1 and 2.2, this subtheme was not marked by the variety of opinions. The general consensus was that using a standardized test score, such as the NJASK, as an initial starting point to examine which students would benefit from academic placement was a valid measure, as long as it was used in conjunction with, or followed by, other measures. Without other measures, there was the risk of misplacing students. Participant 1 best explained using a standardized test score

for placement when discussing students s/he was aware of who were struggling the year before and would have benefited from the academic placement in the current year. “But then they may have scored a 205 [and therefore weren’t placed in academic] and who’s to say that that 205 shouldn’t be in where the 200 does. So it’s very capricious, certainly arbitrary, just looking at the numbers.”

Participant 7 stated about current placement practices, “Kids could have been having an off day. I think there are other factors to look at. So, I think it’s pretty accurate, but I’m sure some kids fall by the wayside or are misplaced.” However, Participant 5 puts this notion of those who are misplaced in relative terms, as there is “always some random reason, like someone was sick…but mostly those scores seem appropriate…with the exception of maybe 2%, which is the same percentage of kids who might get – or not get – into gifted when they deserve to.” Across levels of ability, there are students’ whose scores do not seem to reflect their ability. Essentially, then, there is always a risk of misplacing a student, into any level or track that is very difficult to control for. Nothing is 100 percent accurate.

Participant 4 expressed a different concern, that while current practices do target those who are in need, placing them in one course may not be the best way to serve them. “I think the group of students who really do need the help, I think we’ve got that; it’s the way that we’re going about doing it that I don’t know if it necessarily is the most effective.” This is because just “by saying this entire group needs help doesn’t necessarily mean they all need help in the same way.” The premise noted by Participant 5 was also found in the review of the literature on struggling at-risk language arts

learners. Frequently, struggling students are grouped together homogeneously even though they represent a variety of needs.

Theme 2 presented the most difficulty and hesitancy among participants. There were many assumptions made based on personal experiences, but little factual evidence. For example, when discussing academic placement, Participant 6 revealed, "You know, I'm assuming that they use teacher recommendations. That's just an assumption of mine because we do that here." This was echoed by another participant who, when asked if s/he knew that teacher recommendations were part of the process in every school, stated, "No – I think it's just a bunch of assumptions."

This area of placement was also the only area where several participants expressed concerns about answering honestly and at times declined to respond. For example, one participant explained that in the absence of teacher recommendations to support academic placement, s/he was told not to place any students into the academic level. When asked by whom s/he was told, s/he declined to respond. Furthermore, my attempts to verify or clarify information in follow-up questions and through inviting other participants mentioned in interviews believed to have certain knowledge of placement practices proved fruitless.

Summary of Theme 2. In general, it can be concluded that NJASK scores were integral to placing academic level students. Participants did not definitively provide an exact cut-off, but it was at or around the proficiency score of 200. Most responses for Theme 2 revolved around assumptions and generalities, based in large part to the absence of a formal procedure for placing academic students. In the absence of a policy for

placement, participants relied on past-practice experiences, which seem varied, especially by school. Some participants have students who are classified, while others do not. Some have many students above the proficiency score of 200, some do not. Many participants believe placement also was determined by teacher recommendations, and a minority thought that other measures might also be involved, such as CTP4 or grades. Similarly, a variety of personnel were believed to be responsible for placement, including guidance counselors, Child Study team members, English language arts department supervisor and teachers, via recommendations. It was surprising to find so little consistency or lack of unanimous and definitive responses regarding placement practices.

Theme 3: Standardized Testing

The third theme of standardized testing related to the aspect of the second and third research questions that are concerned with "determining the appropriate academic placement of incoming 9th graders in English language arts classes" (RQ2) and means to "more accurately place them" (RQ3). The information from this theme was mainly derived from participant responses to Interview Questions Cluster 2: Current Placement Practices and Cluster 3: Assessments. In focusing on these areas, the intention was to gain an understanding as to the value of standardized testing in terms of placement and in addressing the needs of the academic students.

Subtheme 3.1: NJASK. Generally speaking, participants did agree that the NJASK was a valid measure to use as an indicator of which students might qualify for academic placement. In addition, it was uniformly believed that this should not be the only measure. This belief expressed by the participants of the importance of multiple

measures when placing students was also reflected in the review of the literature. This aspect will be further explored under Theme 4 Improvements, subtheme 4.2: multiple measures. However, all participants did not agree to the accuracy or usefulness of the NJASK.

Those who believed the NJASK was useful felt this way because it was overall "an indicative score of their skills" and it "gives you a heads up on who is a struggling student". However, Participant 2 articulated a problem with using any kind of test scores that are not recent, because the most recent NJASK data is not available until after students are scheduled for the next year. "One of the problems is we are placing kids based on the previous year's data, and then we are trying to meet the deadline to look at the newest data just to make sure the placement is correct." This was echoed by Participant 7, "Also, using test scores from months ago seems to me a little outdated, just because they [the students] could grow so much."

Another problem expressed regarding using NJASK data, or any standardized test data, that was consistently mentioned was the very real issue that a bad test score could just be indicative of a bad day, "I think they [NJASK scores] are pretty accurate, but kids can have an off day or they could be bad test-takers." Participant 6 cautioned the use of one test score for this reason, and that those responsible for placement must be aware of trends in test results to be sure that a bad test score is not an anomaly in the context of several years of good test scores.

Therefore, although participants recognized the value of the NJASK, or any standardized test, in providing the first indication of who might qualify for academic

level classes, all also qualified its use as just one among several measures. As Participant 3 stated, "We have students who bomb the test one year and do really well the next year. It depends on the child's maturity, where they are the day of the test; I think too much emphasis is placed on test results."

Participants did not use NJASK results with any consistency. While placement was based on a raw score, teachers could get access to disaggregated results. This could be used to further pinpoint skill strengths and weakness, but only two teachers mentioned using these numbers to drive instruction. Participant 4 stated, "I see a correlation between the score and ability level…So there's something to be said for its use, but at the same time, I'm very hesitant…because there are exceptions." Some used the scores as an initial indicator of how low or high their students are, another used them as baseline data to gauge individual progress against. This variety in use might be because the accuracy of the numbers, beyond the idea of a student having an off day, is not clear. Participant 2 explained that the NJASK's accuracy in determining ability and thus its usefulness depends according to whether it's being used to determine reading or writing achievement. For writing:

> We are able to look at the students' essays. We get them back from the state in a PDF format, and we get to see what score the students receive in writing, and although we are generally surprised with the essays that score a 5 or 6, there's probably less discrepancy in the students who are scoring in the partial proficiency. There's a definite need to support that student's writing.

However, the situation changes in terms of reading. "We don't ever get to see the reading passages or the actual tests… I have only seen practice materials from text book companies. I have never seen an actual NJASK test to know whether it is accurate." The benefit of the information gathered from participants regarding the NJASK is it can help inform future use of high-stakes standardized tests, which in this district will be the PARCC.

Subtheme 3.2: PARCC. Since the interviews occurred right before, during, and after the first round of PARCC administration in this district, it was brought up by several participants interviewed. Participant 1 summed it up best when stated, "I have a bad taste in my mouth for standardized testing right now." Based on their responses and PARCC's relevance and importance to the study at hand, I asked questions of participants regarding PARCC. Participant 6 noted the gap left without NJASK in placing students and the inability to use PARCC yet as something "they [administration] just haven't gotten to yet. At some point they're going to have to." This highlights the pressing nature of this study as students need to be placed, but as of yet, there is no method to replace the NJASK as a placement tool, for the PARCC cannot be used for placement yet.

Participant 7, in looking forward to the assumed use of PARCC in placement practices, stated, "Now we have the PARCC…I don't know if they [PARCC scores] should be a main factor in their placement, but maybe just a secondary source." The general feeling expressed was that PARCC would pose problems for students, teachers and administrators, and as specifically connected to this study, in terms of morale and placement.

Participant 5's opinion of PARCC's impact was discussed at length: "I think in the long term …the obvious is that they're [students] bogged down with tests, but I was really surprised that they sat down and did what they were supposed to do [for an assigned PARCC test preparation task]. So – I don't know how to answer that question." Participant 5 continued to explain that despite the students doing what they needed in terms of test preparation that the environment surrounding testing is detrimental because it stops the flow of instruction by interrupting the curriculum and, since there is unfamiliarity with the test, there is a lot of uncertainty surrounding the test. Therefore, "it creates an environment where people, the teachers and the students, feel inadequate. Inadequately prepared, not comprehending what's expected of them. I think that's lousy for morale."

Participant 4 agreed that there is confusion surrounding the tests, but was not so optimistic about academic students' ability to succeed on the PARCC. "It's going to be detrimental…the academic level [student] is going to shut down." Participant 4 stated that instead of engaging in test-prep tasks that might be fruitless, "I could be doing something that could motivate them." The biggest detriment seen to PARCC testing is the amount of time devoted to it. As to its accuracy in determining student's strengths and weaknesses, that remains to be seen.

What is also worth noting from the responses is that though New Jersey has stated the PARCC can't be used for placement purposes in the 2015—2016 school year, there is no law as of yet about 2016-2017 school year, or any year after that. What Participant 5 alludes to is that since this test is in its early stages, one year might not be enough to

become acclimated to it and use it for placement with accuracy in coming years; in the long run, it may suit this purpose, but not yet.

Summary of Theme 3. Participants recognized the need to have some sort of screening tool in place to determine academic placement. Most felt that the NJASK was an appropriate screening tool to use, though without other additional measures in place, there may be students who were misplaced. Without other measures, it was hard to determine if a poor score was actually indicative of ability or other factors. In terms of the PARCC, participants had mixed feelings about its success in the future, but the majority felt that in the current climate, testing consumes too much time, and as there is no familiarity with the PARCC, it produces students and staff who are confused and drained by testing. There were no indications that PARCC would be a suitable placement under current circumstances.

Theme 4: Improvements

Theme 4 related directly to the third research question, "What types of assessments, if any, are needed to provide a more complete picture of struggling students in order to more accurately place them?" Based on participant responses, however, this question was broadened in effect to "What types of *data* are needed to provide a more complete picture of academic students" as many responses were not limited to assessments. Responses to questions in all three interview clusters were used to develop this theme and its subsequent subthemes, 4.1 Conversation and communication and 4.2 Multiple measures.

Subtheme 4.1: Conversation and communication. All participants stated, to one degree or another, that dialogue among those involved with academic students would help provide a more complete picture of the individual students. As mentioned in theme 2, many participants were under the impression that conversations were occurring about academic students in the form of teacher recommendations, though these were mainly participants from the high school. Regardless, when asked about information one would like to have on academic students, all participants but one stated teacher input.

"Ideally, I'd like to get some information on certain students and know, you know, what's going on with the students, any information I should know, what worked for the previous teacher." However, the participant against teacher input explained it as problematic when used for placement: "I hope they [administration] don't go for the teacher's opinion, only because the parents get on the teachers. I think that's why they took that out, you know… Recommendations, because parents can be very relentless if they don't agree with what a teacher is doing."

There were other interesting comments that were made by individual participants regarding information that would be helpful:

"In an ideal word, I would love to have an emotional quotient to let me know what's happening with this kid, but we don't get that."

"Sometimes what I think is lacking is input from the child on what they think their strengths and weaknesses are and what they would like to improve upon. We don't have anything for that. We never ask them."

Another common reference was regarding the informal teacher and/or guidance input that used to accompany a child as he or she moved from one school to the next (elementary to middle and middle to high school). However, in the absence of such information in current practices, all participants mentioned how they sought out information from a variety of sources to help them understand their students – guidance, previous teachers, school nurse, child study team, parents, and the students themselves. But generally, this information was sought after a problem presented itself. "I've had students where I suspected things at home are very, very bad. And I'll pick up the phone and call the counselor." Participant 7 suggested a questionnaire could be part of a child's record, where teachers could comment on overall performance, guidance counselors could note if the students were "frequent flyers" – anxious or troubled children. However, Participant 5 pointed out an obstacle in attempting to gain such information on students that didn't exist in past years is the laws that have changed, prohibiting the sharing of some information. "These things aren't made public, and we don't get emails when the kid is going through something at home. Either guidance doesn't know or guidance can't tell us." As a result, "I often don't feel like I know *holistically* what's going on with a child…I can get a picture academically, but I guess on a personal plane, I wish that more were made available to us."

What all the participants' responses, then, pointed to was the way in which they sought information about their students through their conversation with colleagues and others who might have valuable information about the students. All agreed that this process would be much more effective if communication would be formalized in some

way so that a system was set up to receive the information from the various people involved. This would simplify matters and make available permissible information that could assist teachers and counselors more effectively support at-risk learners.

Subtheme 4.2: Multiple measures. Similar to Subtheme 4.1 Conversation and communication, Subtheme 4.2 Multiple measures evolved from the participants' desire to best meet struggling academic students' needs by addressing the whole child. In exploring multiple measures, existing measures were discussed. In addition, participants stated what measures they would like to see put into practice.

To begin, participants were asked about existing measures in place that might help provide information useful to meet academic students' needs. Three participants mentioned the assessments that were administered by the reading specialist if a student is referred, typically through the Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) process. The tests specifically are the Developmental Reading Assessment 2 (DRA2) and the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test (GMRT). Overall, opinions of these assessments were low. "I would think that these would be accurate, but when we looked at it [GMRT and DRA2 data], and they looked at the other data, it didn't really make sense. I don't know if the tests that reading specialist gave are outdated, but it just didn't seem to measure up." Similarly, it was stated, "I know there are a few reading scales that the reading specialist uses, but I've seen that those aren't really indicative of their level."

Participant 2 explained the usefulness of these two assessments in terms of providing "additional data on students' reading achievement." However, if the data provided is not helpful, accurate or easy to determine their accuracy, it may not be

beneficial additional data. Participant 1 stated positives and negatives of the assessments. As a positive, "I think that the running record is actually good because I can see if there are students who have fluency issues and decoding issues, and that's something we can work on." On the other hand, "I find that they have more trouble with the reading comprehension than the DRA led me to believe based on the scoring." Furthermore, this participant explained that the GMRT and DRA2 don't seem to provide similar findings of ability in the same areas, such as vocabulary.

It was further noted by several participants that CTP4 and class grades, along with NJASK, were already current measures used in the rubrics for enriched and honors courses. Regarding the CTP4, most participants did not use CTP4 scores to influence instruction or enhance understanding of academic students' needs. One participant felt this way because the test did not reflect the curriculum that was instructed. However, another participant felt that "it's informative because they [CTP4 reports] show you the norms according to their peers and how they [students] test out on that." This comparison aspect might be beneficial in helping determine where a student falls in relation to his or her peers, and thus useful for placement.

On the other hand, all participants felt that grades were an important measure to include when determining student achievement and progress. It was agreed by all that grades would be an important measure to include when determining academic placement. In fact, several participants mentioned that though not used in any formal process, grades were referred to if academic placement was not certain. Participant 2 expressed hope that in the absence of NJASK, grades will be incorporated into the placement process: "I am

hopeful to continue to have conversations …about what we're going to do without having NJASK scores. I think we have to …make sure that we are using grades as one of those measures." This participant further clarified this statement, "and make sure that we do have a tight enough grade level expectation that those grades are meaningful." What is relevant about this clarification is that it might stem from what is being learned by the participants involved as the issue of academic placement is discussed; that we do not have a "tight enough" system in place currently, and now as we transition, we can tighten up other areas as well.

Another factor that was repeatedly mentioned by participants was teacher recommendations. Although this was previously discussed, it is important to note here as well as all but two participants believed teacher recommendations should be part of the multiple measures included in the placement process.

> I think teacher recommendation and input is important, because there are certain students that I really just think are unmotivated and they will get a D with me and they would get a D with someone else just because they don't do their homework. So I don't know that those students necessarily always benefit from the [academic] class. It would be nice to be able to have a dialogue with the [former] grade teachers to see how they were, and to have the teachers place them.

The two did not want teacher recommendation to be a formal piece of the placement procedure due to the pressure it might put on the teachers. One of these two did not think informal conversations were a problem, but such conversations should not be made part of placement policy.

When discussing the measures not currently in place, but desired, there were several interesting responses. Four participants mentioned the importance of student voice in the process. At the high school level, students currently have the opportunity to state whether or not they would like to be in the academic class, but again, this was based on an informal conversation or request. Participant 3 suggested making students' opinions more of a formal piece to the placement process. "We could do a rating scale. A self-evaluation rating scale and find their strengths and weaknesses."

Others suggested writing and reading benchmark assessments, which were already used as common assessments in the English department. Additionally, portfolios were proposed as a possibility. As Participant 6 said, "I think we need some *thing*, whether it's the student's work, whether the student begins a portfolio of their work, just so we have somewhere to go to."

Summary of Interview Findings

Table 3 summarizes the interview findings. The table demonstrates the common themes repeated by participants, which are then discussed in greater detail. It became apparent that with regards to research question one, "How do the teachers and guidance counselors of seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth grade academic English language arts (ELA) students describe the characteristics and needs of these academically struggling students?" academic students exhibited similar characteristics, marked by:

- -low performance levels on standardized assessments
- -low levels of self-esteem and motivation
- -minimal productivity outside of school.

Of these, the one attribute that participants mentioned repeatedly was lack of or low motivation, often linked to low self-esteem and described as apathy, indifference, and lack of follow through. It was also one that participants expressed as being the most difficult to target and address and as needed for other issues of weakness to improve.

Table 3

Teacher Interview Results

Theme	Participant Response (*n*=7) * = 100%
1.Characterisitcs of Academic Students	* low motivation and low or jeopardized self-esteem 6/7 irresponsibility and/or immaturity * impact of home life * weak reading comprehension 6/7 weak writing skills
2. Placement Practices	* NJASK used to place students (though different cut off scores were provided) 6/7 believed other measures involved, such as recommendations, CTP4 or grades (variety in responses) * need improvement 5/7 mostly accurate
3. Standardized Testing	4/7 problem with data not being recent * low score could be indicative of factors other than ability 5/7 valid as initial screening tool when followed by other measures 4/7 not useful for instruction
4. Improvements	* multiple measures * improved communication 4/7 student input * teacher input (though 2 stressed this should only be done informally, not as part of a placement rubric)

However, it was also repeatedly noted that academic students have strengths as well. Many were involved in extracurricular activities such as sports or the creative arts. Several participants noted that their academic students excelled at tasks that were more creative in nature. Additionally, it was mentioned that many academic level students

possessed traits that were not related to course material. They often possessed important life skills, such as “street smarts”.

It was also consistently noted that despite their similar weaknesses, each student might have a different cause for these elements, such as challenging home dynamics or an inability to prepare for the future. Furthermore, participants noted several factors that influenced students' low achievement, none mutually exclusive, making it difficult to target and address their needs. It was reiterated by the participants repeatedly, as well as reflected in the literature reviewed on struggling adolescents, how such factors influence and in turn are influenced by each other. As Participant 6 stated, “Most of them [academic students] have similar issues. I think the academic kids have lacked something….Once they’re lacking that something…they start veering off in different areas.” Unfortunately, it is tough to determine what that something is for each student, particularly by the time they reach adolescents and negative behaviors have become internalized. It is difficult to determine, for example, if low self-esteem, an Emotional Factor, is the result of poor performance in school, an Educational Factor, or poor performance is the result of low self-esteem.

Connecting to research questions two and three, in discussing placement practices, it became clear that there was no set policy in place and much of what participants felt were the placement practices were based on their assumptions and own personal experiences with academic students. There were difficulties verifying placement practices due to limited participant response and hesitancy of many participants in this area. Many participants believed teacher recommendations influenced

placement. Also mentioned by a few participants were grades and the CTP4 test. Grades can present problems in terms of subjectivity and the absence of a standard grading system between grade levels and schools. The CTP4 is an achievement test, but there is no cut-off score for proficiency levels so one would have to be carefully determined. The only piece of data that was unvaryingly stated by all participants was that the NJASK was a determining factor in placement, though the cut-off score on the NJASK used for placement might vary. In terms of formal and informal assessments, while all participants stated using a variety of measures to get to know their students' ability levels, no particular assessments were mentioned, with the exception of the DRA2 and GMRT used by the reading specialists.

All participants had recommendations for improving current placement practices for academic level students. They all agreed that multiple measures should be used and using outdated test data should be avoided. However, the majority did not have a problem with using the NJASK as one indicator, as perhaps the initial screening tool. Suggested measures to include were student survey, grades, teacher recommendation, a writing sample, and parental input.

Regardless of the measures explored and suggested, what were consistently discovered were the participants' desires to really address their students' needs, socially, emotionally, and academically. It was frequently noted that in order to teach these struggling adolescents, the participants needed to understand them and reach them at their level. For some, in fact, the content became secondary, for it was generally held that no

knowledge would be received and no learning would occur if the student was not open and ready to learn.

Assessment Data

Assessment data was collected and analyzed to provide deeper insight into the academic student and to verify and support participants' statements. The assessment data analyzed included the NJASK Grade 7 scores used to place the current Grade 9 academic students, their NJASK Grade 8 scores, grades, Grade 8 CTP4 and Grade 9 NJPASS scores. Appendix G displays the 2014—2015 school year data for Grade 9 academic students and the data mentioned above.

NJASK Data

As explained by the department supervisor, NJASK 7 data was used to place Grade 9 academic students, as NJASK 8 data was not yet available at the time of scheduling (personal communication, February 23, 2015). NJASK scores below 200 are considered partially proficient. Scores between 200 and 249 are proficient. Scores 250 and above are in the advanced proficient range. Table 4 displays the mean, median, mode and range for each test. For those four students who did not have NJASK data available, it was important to determine what criteria was used to place them in the academic setting. Efforts were made to find this out, but no concrete answer found. It was suggested by interview participants that perhaps such placements were made by the Child Study Team. Other suppositions were that placement occurred as a result of grades and conversations with the teacher.

Table 4

Basic Statistical Analysis for NJASK 7 and 8 Scores

	NJASK 7	NJASK 8
Mean	193	206
Median	188	203
Mode	181 & 188	203
Range	58	44

n=25; scores <200 are partially proficient

In looking at the NJASK 7 data, the lowest score was a 163 and the highest was a 221. There were 14 students who were in the partially proficient range, with scores ranging from 163 to 194. These partially proficient scores were further broken down into three students who scored between 160 and 180, significantly below the proficient cut off score of 200, and 11 students whose scores fell between 181 and 200. Seven students did score in the proficient range, though three of them were just over 200, but under what has been determined to be the academic placement cut off of 205, based on the NJASK 7 data and several participants' responses. The remaining four students' scores ranged from 210 to 221. Similar to those students without scores, it is posited that either these students were placed by the Child Study team or as a result of grades and conversation with a teacher. Again, neither supposition could be verified. At the time of this study, I did not receive consent from Child Study personnel invited.

NJASK 8 data was also provided for the current Grade 9 academic students. No NJASK 8 data was available for three students, nor was it available for NJASK 7 for the same students. The lowest score was 188 and the highest 232. The overall NJASK 8 scores were higher than the NJASK 7, putting the majority in the proficient range. There were seven students who were in the partially proficient range, with scores ranging from

188 to 199. There were no scores between 160 and 180, and seven students whose scores fell between 181 and 200. 16 students did score in the proficient range, though five of them were just over 200, but under what seems to be the academic placement cut off of 205. The remaining ten students' scores ranged from 206 to 232 (See Appendix G).

Based on the NJASK 7 scores used to place students into Grade 9 academic, it seemed that 205 was the NJASK cut off used by the vast majority – all but four students scored 205 or below. However, if the same criteria would have been used with the most recent NJASK test scores, the NJASK 8, 11 of the same 25 might not have been placed in academic, as they scored above the 205 cut off. Figure 3 compares the raw scores of these two tests. This provides credibility to the concerns expressed by many participants and reflected in the review of the literature regarding misplacement when relying on one piece of data that may not be current enough to reflect actual student need.

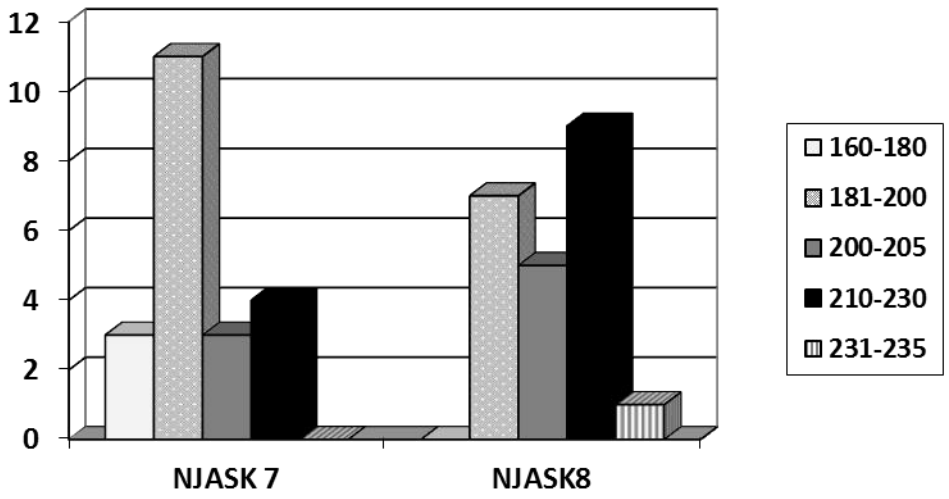

Figure 3: Bar graph showing the number of students (N=25) who scored in each range of proficiency. NJASK 7 depicts the large majority of students below the 205 academic cut-off score, whereas on the NJASK 8, a significant number are above the cut off score.

DRA2 and GMRT

The Developmental Reading Assessment, second edition (DRA2) was administered to the majority of academic students. This test was administered in the students' middle schools by each middle school's reading specialist to academic students in Grades 6 and 7. In Grade 8, if a student has not already been assessed by the reading specialist, a request can be made for this to occur following the Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) process. The Gates- MacGinitie Reading Comprehension (GMRT) assessment would also be administered as part of the referral process.

As explained by the test developer, Pearson (2015), the DRA2 measures reading proficiency through a four-step process designed to pinpoint student strengths and weaknesses for students in Grades K-8. This individually administered test begins with an observation noting student reading habits and preferences. Then there is an oral reading fluency check. Students demonstrate their comprehension of the text through a series of questions. The results are then analyzed by the test administrator, in this case the middle school reading specialist and a report created (Pearson, 2015). It was very difficult to find information about this test for the middle school population. The overwhelming majority of sources review the test for Grades K-3, with a few articles mentioning its use up to Grade 5. Furthermore, it is designed to be a progress monitoring assessment to determine student reading level and growth, not for a screening measure, as it is used in this district (Collaborative Center for Literacy Development, n.d.) It also has been shown to have low validity and reliability (McCarthy & Christ, 2010). This is

confirmed by the participants who mentioned it in this study, who found little correlation between the test results and student performance or other data. While it might indicate if a student is struggling in some cases, it does not provide much additional value, according to participant experience.

The Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test (GMRT) has more information available on its use with the adolescents, though the majority is still focused on younger students. Perhaps one reason for its more successful and widespread use in the lower grades is that for upper grades, information is not provided by individual grade level, but rather clustered in to groupings designated by Grades 7-9 and 10-12 (Guice, 2014), which also was noted as presenting difficulty in its usefulness with this population by the reading specialist. Overall, the GMRT has been found to be an effective measure as both a screening tool and with further analysis, a diagnostic tool (Morsy, Kieffer & Snow, 2010). However, one participant mentioned specifically the inflated vocabulary scores on the GMRT results and difficulty reconciling the results with other pieces of achievement data.

Two participants posited that perhaps the GMRT and the DRA2 might be outdated or not reflective of current educational demands made on early adolescent students. These may be valid claims as the GMRT test used has a copyright date of 2000, for which the last norming sample would have been conducted in 1999. In terms of the DRA2, the Benchmark Assessment books and Teacher Observation guides from 2003 provided by the reading specialist are noted for use in Grades 4 -8, which may present further challenges in assessing their value, as the purposes for reading change drastically

during this grade span, as informed by the literature reviewed, in addition to the recent increase in rigor currently demanded by the Common Core State Standards.

Remaining Data

The inclusion of Comprehensive Testing Program 4th Edition test (CTP4) scores for reading comprehension, verbal reasoning and vocabulary were included because they were available pieces of information already provided by district, as this test is administered every fall to students in Grade 8. In addition, the CTP4 was mentioned by several participants as perhaps being used or useful in determining placement. Finally, the CTP4 is presently part of the placement rubric for enriched/honors classes. (Advanced level classes in the middle schools are called enriched, whereas at the high school they are called honors.) Similarly, grades were included because many participants mentioned the use of grades as being used or useful in placement; they, too, are used in the enriched/honors rubric. In this district, English and Social Studies classes are linked, so that if one is placed in honors English, one is also placed in honors Social Studies. At the middle school level, there are two English courses, Language Arts and Literature Connections.

Lastly, the NJPASS score for Grade 9 students was also incorporated in the data collected and included in Appendix G. This piece of data is used when placing students in Grade 9 into the appropriate track, be it academic CP or honors, in Grade 10. It was also thought that in examining existing data, some trends in skill or achievement might become apparent. Perhaps participants' perceptions regarding academic students' abilities would also be verified by the data. It was also thought that the data could

provide insight into what pieces of data are currently available that are helpful in determining placement, which relates directly to research question 2.

Summary of Assessment Data Findings

The data did not fully provide answers to Research Questions 2 and 3. There seems to be no obvious connection between the data points. Students' scores on one test do not equate to similar scores on other measures, or similar levels of achievement in class, as noted by English grades. However, participants consistently and unanimously pointed out the general weak reading comprehension scores of academic students. This is verified by students' low reading comprehension scores on the CTP4, which are the lowest of the three reading scores the CTP4 provides for more than half of the academic students.

Conclusion

Prior to this study, the placement practices for academic students in this district had not been investigated through the input of personnel involved with this student population and related data. As a result, it can be concluded that placement practices:

- may consist of an unclear, inconsistent policy
- may be based on tradition that may not reflect current findings on assessment and placement
- may vary by school

If there is no standard procedure for placement of academic students, then there may be other problems with the academic level, from identifying and selecting those candidates who will benefit the most from their placement, to selecting the best

curriculum, instruction, and assessments - both formative and summative - that will be the best for each academic student. This absence of a policy can result in teachers and counselors who may be confused and perhaps misguided about which students should or should not be placed in academic classes. This is exacerbated by the finding that placement practices differ by grade level and building and the lack of opportunity for communication between stakeholders within and between schools.

Therefore, the following conclusions can be made regarding the research questions for this study:

RQ1: How do the teachers and guidance counselors of seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth grade academic English language arts (ELA) students describe the characteristics and needs of these academically struggling students? Academically struggling students were characterized as being deficient in several aspects of the ELA, most prominently in reading comprehension, form and structure of writing, and vocabulary. These students typically do not complete tasks outside of the classroom, but when given explicit directions and tasks made manageable by chunked material and specific benchmarks, academic productivity and success in class is manifested. Furthermore, these students share characteristics unrelated to the ELA. They typically have low self-esteem and motivation. Many do not see the relevance of their school work to their futures, or see limited futures for them so that school is irrelevant. These characteristics may be caused by or further exacerbated by challenging home lives and demanding schedules outside of school. Many excel in activities outside of the classroom, such as athletics or the arts.

RQ2: In the absence of the NJASK, what are the assessments currently being used in the 2014 – 2015 school year that could be used to assist in determining the appropriate academic placement of incoming 9th graders in English language arts classes? Several assessments were discovered that are currently in place that might provide additional data to help place academic students. To begin, placement rubrics and data driven charts do exist for other levels and courses. Rubrics containing several data points are used to place middle school students into enriched level courses and high school students into honors classes. The measures used on the existing rubrics include the CTP4 and student grades in ELA and Social Studies classes. There is also a data driven chart to assist in academic placement for students entering Grades 10, 11 or 12, as there existed more data on this population, such as NJPASS and a weighted GPA (See Appendix G). It is important to note this use of rubrics to place students, even though there is not a rubric for the specific population under study. There exists a precedence and familiarity with the process in district. If a future study determined success with these rubrics, one could be designed for the academic students in Grades 6 through 9 to reflect their needs.

Other measures that also currently exist and could be used in the placement of academic students are the DRA2 and GMRT tests administered by the reading specialists. However, these assessments show little connection to one another and seem to be used as isolated data points with assigned cut-off points. They provide little information as to whether or not a student is actually in need of academic placement. This may be due to the format of the test which clusters students by Grade, 4—8 for the DRA2, and 7—9 for the GMRT. It may also be that these tests, designed over a decade ago, do not reflect

current reading practices of this population. This is most prominently found in the absence of targeted content-specific reading skills and critical thinking skills from reading assessments that are the cornerstone of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (Morsy, Kieffer, & Snow, 2010).

As was repeatedly mentioned by all participants and supported by the literature reviewed, poor performance on an assessment may indicate that a student is at-risk, or it may be reflective of other issues not related to ability, such as a bad day or indifference. In order to provide more information, the assessments in use in district should be further investigated to determine the validity and reliability of each for this specific age level and needs of this district, as well as which ones would work best in combination with other measures.

RQ3: What types of assessments, if any, are needed to provide a more complete picture of struggling students in order to more accurately place them? Based on the findings, other measures are needed to more accurately place academic students. The first improvement required would be selecting a screening tool, which must be administered and results received in a timely fashion so that the results are indicative of the student for the coming year. In time, the PARCC may prove useful in this capacity, but as of now, another measure must be found. Other measures that should be included based on participant response and the literature reviewed are student grades, student input, teacher input and a diagnostic assessment for both reading and writing. Table 5 demonstrates the findings in terms of the research questions asked.

Table 5:

Research Questions Addressed

Research Question	Participant Response	Conclusions
RQ1: How do the teachers and guidance counselors of seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth grade academic English language arts (ELA) students describe the characteristics and needs of these academically struggling students?	7/7 low motivation and low or jeopardized self-esteem 6/7 irresponsibility and/or immaturity 7/7 impact of home life 7/7 weak reading comprehension 6/7 weak writing skills 7/7 greater differentiation and scaffolding 6/7 slower pace	CTP 4 verifies low reading comprehension
RQ2: In the absence of the NJASK, what are the assessments/measures currently being used in the 2014—2015 school year that could be used to assist in determining the appropriate academic placement of incoming 9th graders in ELA classes?	7/7 teacher recommendation (though 2 stressed this should only be done informally, not as part of a placement rubric) 3/7 Reading Specialist assessments: DRA 2 and GMRT (used but accuracy questioned) 7/7 grades 4/7 CTP 4	GMRT research supports use as initial screening tool DRA 2, a Grade 4-8 assessment, shows little promise based on literature reviewed Fidelity of grades need to be examined first honors rubric and academic 9 into 10 includes grades and CTP 4 scores
RQ3: What types of assessments/measures, if any, are needed to provide a more complete picture of struggling students in order to more accurately place them?	4/7 student input 4/7 benchmarks 2/7 portfolios 2/7 parental input 7/7 teacher recommendation (though 2 stressed this should only be done informally, not as part of a placement rubric) 7/7 grades	No data collected reflected these areas, other than honors rubric and grade 9 into 10 academic chart, both of which include grades.

Limitations

Although the above conclusions were drawn from the study conducted, there are several important limitations that must be considered. One limitation is the narrow scope of the study. Clearly, the findings relate specifically to the district under investigation.

Moreover, this study only examined placement of incoming academic high school freshmen. Because this is a transition year between schools, the results are limited only to this population and may not be fully generalized or reflective of placement practices at other grade levels in this district.

This is also a very time-specific study. This is the only year of transition between the tests. It is hoped that next year, 2015—2016, when the results of the PARCC are examined, it will provide useful information and be able to fill some of the gaps in placement practices left by the NJASK. However, this is just one unknown. Due to the unstable political climate that surrounds standardization, in the form of CCSS and ensuing high-stakes tests, it is unclear what the future of this test and even the standards themselves will be. These uncertainties may prolong the confusion and transitory nature of testing, which impacts all areas of education, including curriculum, assessment and placement. These aspects make it more important to locate other measures that are independent of the PARCC to use for placement.

More importantly, a major limitation of the study was the low number of participant response. With such low numbers, I could not discuss participant demographics, such as job description, number of years in education or in the district, or grade level and school involved with. To do so would have compromised participant confidentiality. With more participants involved, it is likely that there would have been sufficient overlap in demographics to include this information and perhaps make more detailed conclusions based on these factors.

The number of participants did not seem to affect the findings and conclusions related to Research Question 1, in which responses were largely unanimous and consistent, demonstrating data saturation as to the needs and characteristics of academic level students. However, while I did gather rich information from each participant on the remaining two research questions, having a greater number of responses may have helped verify and specify participants' responses. In particular, it was difficult to get specific information on placement practices, as each participant provided the piece he or she was familiar with, or his or her assumption. Having a greater response rate could have provided verification of responses at the same position and grade level of each participant. Furthermore, no Child Study Team member participated, other than the member involved in the interview question field test. This prevented a fuller understanding as to the inclusion of students with IEPs in the academic setting and any placement decisions made by team members that may or may not follow what was known by other participants in the study.

The low response rate may have been due to the sensitive nature of the study, which was evident with several people who did consent to participate, but were hesitant or declined to provide information about certain aspects of placement and/or assessments. It can be supposed that these professionals did not want to be put in a position where their responses might inadvertently state or suggest that someone was to blame for any negatively perceived comments. Those who participated all had the best interests of the students in mind; problems discovered seem to be more the result of the absence of communication.

A Possible Solution

It seems that different participants hold various pieces of this puzzle of academic placement. A forum where a dialogue can occur to put those pieces together into one cohesive policy of placement would be beneficial. It would be hoped that such a dialogue would result in the formation of a policy that would be developed with the input of all stakeholders involved: guidance counselors, academic ELA teachers, English department supervisor, Child Study Team and building administrators at both middle schools and the high school. The policy would incorporate the multiple measures suggested by participants. The following project study could provide a possible placement matrix for this purpose, or at the very least, a starting point for conversation.

As education seems to be under constant political and public pressure and scrutiny, reforms tend to come and go rather rapidly. In these times of change, communication is of upmost importance. It may seem that there is no time for dialogue among all the other demands, but it is essential that all stakeholders be aware of how educational practices are being carried out. This is especially true when considering early adolescents, particularly those who are at-risk. Adolescent school years are already marked by dramatic social, emotional and academic changes; they may even be the most tumultuous of educational careers. In order to do our best for struggling adolescents, we must commit to consistently and continuously address their needs in order to set them up for a future of success, not failure. The proposed project study genre utilizes a white paper to explain the problem and offer a solution, a placement matrix.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

After examining the academic placement practices and the needs of academic level adolescent students in this district, it was determined that a definitive policy and practice for placement would be beneficial to academic students, their teachers, administrators and guidance counselors. However, this study has found that not all stakeholders are aware of the challenges that surround academic placement. Therefore, the resulting project is a white paper presented to the Assistant Superintendent and English department supervisor that will inform them of the study's findings and conclusions and present possibilities for a solution. It is further requested that a broader audience, all those involved in the placement of ELA academic level students at the middle and high schools, have the opportunity to review the white paper and discuss the proposed solution jointly.

This section includes the goals and rationale of the white paper and a review of the literature which supports the use of a white paper as an appropriate project genre for the study. In addition, the implementation and evaluation of the project itself, a placement matrix, is discussed. Finally, this section concludes with a discussion of the project's implications for positive social change, and its importance to both local stakeholders and in a larger context.

Description and Goals

The genre is the white paper which will be presented to the Assistant Superintendent and English department supervisor, and then circulated to relevant

stakeholders. The white paper contains an overview of the research that was conducted, inclusive of the problem that prompted the study, which was the change in testing implementation that was used to place academic level high school freshmen, the qualitative methods, which incorporated interviews and the collection of assessment data, and the findings and conclusions of the study. In addition, the white paper contains a proposed solution to the problem, in the form of an academic placement matrix that incorporates multiple measures indicated as valuable by both participants and the literature reviewed.

The goal of the white paper is to inform stakeholders as to the challenges in placing academic level ELA students, which are exacerbated by the testing transition. However, this time of transition also provides an opportunity to make needed and beneficial changes to placement practices. It is hoped that the recommendations will be taken seriously and positive change in placement practices will be implemented. This would include a set policy to unify the process of placement, based on consistent use of data and communication.

Rationale

A white paper is an effective choice of project for the problem studied. A white paper's purpose is to provide information about a specific problem and recommend a solution, which is my goal. It is hoped that this document will shed light on the issues surrounding academic students, which though focused on placement, extend to their needs and instruction as well.

The data analysis conducted in Section 2 of the research study demonstrates the need for a set policy regarding academic students' placement. While all participants agreed as to the educational and emotional challenges faced by academic students, the process of determining which students qualify for the academic ELA course, as well as who makes that determination, was not clear. Participants largely relied on their own experiences and assumptions about the placement of academic students, which can be generalized to those of other teachers in all schools in this district. However, these experiences and assumptions, when compared with existing practices, proved to be inaccurate or incomplete. Furthermore, the interviews revealed that there was confusion about the choice, purpose, and use of assessments and the resulting data. For instance, there was a lack of uniformity in the use of assessment data, there was little apparent correlation between the various pieces of assessment data, and some confusion among the participants about what data is used and how it is used. In order to alleviate this confusion and provide continuity, all stakeholders, particularly higher administration, need to be made aware of these challenges. Time must be made available for the various participants to come together to discuss and determine a cohesive policy. This white paper can serve to expedite this process by providing much of the relevant background information in a concise and organized manner, as well as providing a possible solution to be explored and modified as necessary.

The solution proposed is the creation of an academic placement matrix. This matrix is based in part on the placement rubric used in this district for the placement of enriched and honors level ELA classes. It is also informed by a review of the literature

focused on placement and assessments for adolescent readers and writers, and the results of this research study.

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this literature review is to support the use of a white paper as a valid project deliverable and the use of a multiple measures matrix as a viable solution to the problem of academic placement in this district. A variety of sources were used to locate the literature reviewed. Databases included Google, Google Scholar, *Mental Measurements Yearbook*, ProQuest, EBSCO and Education Research Complete. Searching dissertations was particularly helpful in locating information on white papers. Search terms included *white paper, multiple measures, literacy assessments, adolescent literacy assessments, literacy matrix,* and *placement of struggling adolescents.*

White Paper

A white paper's purpose is to address a problem and propose a solution (Purdue, 2015a; Weintraub, 2006; Willerton, 2012). This type of document is often found in government, business and academia (Kemp, 2012; Weintraub, 2006). The format of a white paper falls under the category of grey literature, as it is not material that is commercially published (Matthews, 2004). They are typically working papers and research findings (Boekhurst, Farace, Frantzen, Boor, & Croon, 2004; Jurek, 2009). As such, the dissemination of my research findings to interested stakeholders in the form of a white paper is appropriate.

Moreover, a white paper is created for a specific audience and is geared towards persuading the audience to come to the same conclusions described through the

presentation of data in a logical manner (Graham, 2012; Kemp, 2005). It is my intention to present my findings so that the administration considers the pressing problem of placing academic students and agrees to provide the time and resources required to review, revise if necessary, and implement the proposed placement practice. Although there is no set structure for a white paper, there are generally accepted parameters. Based on readings by Graham (2012), Kemp (2005), and Mattern (2013), a white paper typically introduces a problem and offers a solution. It provides supporting data for both in a way that keeps the audience in mind and is presented in an easy to read and convincing manner, within a limited page length. These parameters work well for my purposes, as I will not be given a lengthy time frame to present the white paper, and stakeholders are more likely to read a brief document that presents the data in a user-friendly way. Another recommendation found in the literature was to include an overview of and background on the problem, which in my white paper consisted of the background on the Common Core State Standards, PARCC testing, and struggling adolescent literacy learners. Finally, white papers which include graphics and change in color and font leave a greater impact and are more persuasive and engaging for the reader than those that do not incorporate such visual aids (Purdue, 2015b). Therefore, my white paper incorporates data with readability geared toward my audience; it mentions academic terms, but does not use unnecessary jargon. It is brief and to the point. Using Microsoft Publisher allowed me to incorporate a variety of visual aids to enhance my points.

Additional advantages of a white paper are that they are generally:

- accessible: Available in all libraries etc.
- convenient: Easy to copy and share, electronically or in hard copy.
- summative: Present all main ideas of the problems and solutions for a study
- adaptable: Can be modified and shortened for staff, parents, media and other stakeholders.

Multiple Measures Placement Matrix

Based on participant response and the review of the literature in Section 1, multiple measures are needed to provide the most accurate information on a student's ability and needs. Therefore, a rubric or matrix must be designed to incorporate multiple measures specific to the needs of the academic student as defined by the district. However, while there is a great deal of research to support the use of multiple measures in deciding placement and instruction, there is no research discovered specifically to demonstrate how to put these multiple measures into one cohesive placement rubric or matrix. Other researchers faced the same obstacle: "While there is general agreement in the literature that multiple measures should be used for placement as a best practice, we could find no published matrix" (TexasToolbox, 2013). Nor could I find research that explicitly supports such a practice for middle or high school students.

It was hoped that research would be found to guide the creation of a placement rubric or matrix. For example, it would have been beneficial to discover if certain combinations of measures had greater success rates in accurately identifying struggling adolescent readers and writers than others, or that certain measures showed stronger

correlations with each other than others. Similarly, it would have been helpful to discover assessments that specifically reflect the literacy needs of struggling adolescent readers and writers in particular, rather than those that work best for elementary students, but could be used with limited success for older students, as was the case. In the absence of such research, this review relies on research on the use of placement matrices at the college level for struggling readers and writers, adolescent gifted or honors identification and placement, and special education identification and placement, as they were the closest sources found related to the project. Additionally, the selection of assessments used in the placement rubric I created relied heavily on the comprehensive review of assessments found in *Measure for Measure: A Critical Consumers' Guide to Reading Comprehension Assessments for Adolescents* (Morsy, Kieffer, & Snow, 2010).

An informative document, the *Manual for the Admission and Placement of Exceptional Students* (2014), provides a comprehensive look at the way one Florida county determines eligibility for exceptional students, which includes those with learning disabilities and those who are gifted, in the form of Exceptional Student Education (ESE) forms and matrices. Relevant to the needs of the students in this study is the comprehensive nature of the information collected and the precise way each piece of data is utilized. Forms are provided that specify the information gathered, how each would be used and how to rate each element. Directions for the use of each form are also included. After each form is completed, the final step is to compile all the data onto one provided scoring sheet. Each component is assigned a number and then the total tallied to result in a range of scores to determine eligibility for placement. Such clear and precise forms and

expectations for use would eliminate the confusion that surrounds academic placement in the district I studied.

Similarly, the Texas Toolbox (2013) provides suggested measures to include to best address the whole student when determining placement, though they are designed for incoming college freshmen. It is their contention that:

> Nothing is more frustrating for classroom instructors than to realize the first week of classes that students have been placed who do not possess the entry level skills required for success in their course. Nothing is sadder for a student than to waste a semester and experience failure because he/she was misplaced. A comprehensive training program needs to be built for counselors, advisers, and faculty doing placement that takes into consideration test scores and other measures of skill levels, multiple measures….

Factors included in their suggestions are GPA, level of previous courses taken, and student input regarding motivation, goals, family education background and resources (i.e. technology) (TexasToolbox, 2013).

Another key component included by TexasToolbox (2013) is the score on the ACCUPLACER. Much research read on college placement of ELA students referenced this test and the ACT Compass placement test (ACT, 2015; South Dakota Board of Regents, 2015; TexasToolbox, 2013). Unfortunately, nothing exists like that for high school placement. The one assessment that may be similar is the ACT Aspire, which is available for students in Grades 3 through 10 (ACT, 2014). Unfortunately, reviews on the ACT Aspire are mixed. There are those who favor it due to it being created by a

long-standing reputable testing company, ACT's use throughout the country, and the ability to have test results in alignment across Grades 3 — 10 (Mazenko, 2014; Zdeb-Roper, 2013). Others express concern over Aspire's initial roll-out, due to technical issues and "chief complaints among school administrators are the longer duration of test administration, the excessive delay in returning scores, and the impractical format of score reports", as well as its expense (Applerouth, 2014). Due to the inconclusive results of a cursory look at the ACT Aspire and the absence of time available to further explore this assessment, I did not include it as an assessment in the created rubric. However, I feel that it does warrant further investigation as a possibility to introduce at a later date, particularly if results from the PARCC do not provide valuable information for academic placement purposes.

Elements of the Placement Matrix

Using knowledge gained from the participants interviewed, the assessment data currently available in the district being studied, and from the literature reviewed, I created a placement matrix for academic ELA students. This matrix drew on the district's existing honor's placement rubric. It was thought that using measures similar to those already in place would be more easily implemented and help maintain continuity between courses.

Initial Screening Tool

A screening tool is an easily administered whole-group assessment that can target students who are falling below grade-level expectation and might benefit from remediation or intervention (Connor et al., 2014; Jenkins, n.d.; SERC, 2012; Torgesen &

Miller, 2009). Two measures currently used in this district can be used as screening assessments. The first is the Comprehensive Testing Program 4th Edition test (CTP4). The second is the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test (GMRT). Another option not currently used in district but favorably reviewed is the Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation (GRADE).

Comprehensive Testing Program 4th Edition Test (CPT4). The CTP4 is a viable choice to use as a screening tool. Data is provided in terms of percentiles and stanines, which deliver information as to how a given student is achieving in relation to their peers (Aristotle, 2013). This could also be used as the screening tool for academic. A cut-off would have to be created based on stanine or percentile. Table 6 demonstrates how stanines and percentiles align.

Table 6

CTP4 Stanines and percentiles

Stanine	Percentile
9	96-99
8	89-95
7	77-88
6	60-76
5	40-59
4	23-39
3	11-22
2	4-10
1	1-3

The CTP4 has merits as a screening tool. For one, it is administered every fall to students as a normal part of educational practices and would not result in any additional loss of time or expense. Based on the data examined as part of the this research study,

the CTP4 reading comprehension scores of the academic students were consistently low, verifying participant claims of reading comprehension as a significant weakness for these students. Furthermore, these scores were largely consistent for all students, unlike the NJASK, NJPASS and provided grades, which demonstrated much greater variability. Additionally, the CTP4 is already used as part of the placement rubric for enriched and honors classes within district, so there is familiarity with using this test for placement purposes. A flaw, however, is that the data provided would be several months old, as the students take the test early in the beginning of the school year, and placement occurs towards the end of the school year. Research and participants both warn against the use of data that is not current for placement purposes (Mandinach & Jackson, 2012).

Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test (GMRT). The GMRT assessment is considered a "screening tool to identify which students struggle with comprehension and/or reading vocabulary" (Morsy, Kieffer, & Snow, 2010). It also is a group administered paper and pencil test (GMRT, 2011). Moreover, this is already a test used in district as part of the Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) process. Its strengths are in its reliability and effectiveness, particularly for students who are close to grade level (Morsy, Kieffer & Snow, 2010). This latest version of the GMRT improves upon an already highly-rated reading assessment and provides strong reliability and validity in its technical report and evidence of its success as both an achievement test and for diagnostic purposes (Collaborative Center for Literacy Development, 2014; Johnson & McCabe, 2005). A weakness of the test is that the brevity of the passages on this test may limit its ability to predict student success on lengthier passages, which was noted by a

participant who was a reading specialist as well (Morsy, Kieffer, & Snow, 2010). It was also noted by several participants that the results of the GMRT do not seem to align with other available information on student achievement, such as CTP4 scores, grades or NJASK scores. It is supposed that this disconnect is mainly because the GMRT has not been revised since the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The CCSS increased the text complexity required for each grade level, so that Lexiles have changed, making the readability of grade level texts harder than they were previously (NWEA, 2013). Perhaps the GMRT would demonstrate greater accuracy if its results were adjusted to reflect the changes in Lexiles brought on by CCSS.

Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation (GRADE). The GRADE assessment is a group administered test that includes a variety of genres and emphasizes inferential skills (Morsy, Kieffer, & Snow, 2010). "The combination of several sub-tests provides more information about component skills than with other group administered tests" (Morsy, Kieffer, & Snow, 2010, p.24). Another benefit is the test can also provide some diagnostic information. Based on the research read, this assessment is more favorably reviewed than the other measures, but an inherent flaw is that there is no familiarity with it in district. It would also be an added expense. Given the time constraints, it may not be a viable option at this time, but should be considered as a possibility as the matrix is reviewed and revised after the first year of implementation.

Measures to Include in the Placement Matrix

Once students have been identified by the selected screening tool, other data points need to be examined to determine if academic placement is truly warranted. As

demonstrated by the research cited in Section 1's review of the literature, by participants' input, and the analyzed data, one score cannot be the sole determining factor for placement. Other determiners are (a) a reflection of what was learned from previous sources, (b) consideration of a balanced approach that encompasses a variety of literacy skills and (c) consideration of the cost, time constraints, and the burden of a new assessment plan for this district (Rabinowitz, 2010). Therefore, it is recommended that the following measures be included in a placement matrix to gain a better understanding of student need: grades, writing benchmark, teacher rating, diagnostic assessment, student and parental input. The Placement Matrix is found in Table 7.

Table 7

Academic ELA Placement Matrix

Measure: Does this student have	Yes	No
A C- or lower in Literature Connections English class?		
A C- or lower in Language Arts English class?		
A score of Novice or Intermediate rating on the Writing Benchmark?		
A teacher rating demonstrating weak ELA skills?		
A Student Inventory (SMALSI) result demonstrating poor work habits?		
Low proficiency on the Diagnostic Tool (GMRT, Achieve 3000 or QRI)?		
Parent/Guardian Input consistent with academic placement?		

If the results of a measure indicate low proficiency or weaknesses in ELA, a "yes" would be placed in the yes column. A total of four "yes" responses would result in recommendation for academic placement. Initially, these measures were placed in a matrix with point values attached to reflect greater similarity to the honors rubric. However, in discussing this with the English department supervisor, it was suggested that this "yes or no" design might be more accurate for the academic population. If a student were to score very low on one of the measures, it might skew the results disproportionately.

Grades. Grade have long been considered a valid measure of student achievement and used to identify students who may need a distinct educational track (Gusky, 1994). In fact, research finds that GPA can be a better indicator of student success than a placement test for those entering college (Fain, 2012). Participants in this research study frequently mentioned the use of grades in determining academic placement. For some, it was thought that this was a good indicator of ability. However, others felt that, like many other data points, a grade may be more reflective of motivation than ability. Another problem with using grades is their subjective nature and the arbitrary cut-off points assigned (Gusky, 1994). This aspect was mentioned by a participant who mentioned if the district is to use grades, then the grading system must be strengthened and made more uniform. Despite these noted flaws, the research supporting the use of grades in placement decisions warrants their inclusion in the placement matrix. Therefore, it is recommended that grades for the both English classes that all Grade 8 students take,

Literature Connections and Language Arts, be incorporated into the placement matrix. It was decided that a grade of C- or lower be used as the cut-off, as this grade reflects below average proficiency.

Writing benchmark. As a district, teachers determine by grade level a writing task to be administered early in the fall for baseline data. Similarly, a standard writing task can be administered in the spring to help identify students who might benefit from academic placement the following year. Several measures were explored for possible inclusion in the matrix, including the California Standards Tests (CSTs) for Grade 8 ELA (California Department of Education, 2009), NAEP 2011 Writing prompts and samples for Grade 8 (NCES, 2013), the Bader Reading and Language Inventory (Wright, 1989) and the Reading and Writing Project (2014). Although these assessments were of the few found that did address the target population, they contained several flaws. The CSTs were too similar to PARCC questions, a practice that Morsy, Kieffer and Snow (2012) caution against as providing limited information about intervention. The Bader Inventory, though seeming like an all-inclusive tool to measure a variety of language skills including writing, demonstrated very weak reliability and validity. The NAEP prompts provided student samples and rubrics, but were not as comprehensive as The Reading and Writing Project's.

The Reading and Writing Project (2014), out of Columbia's Teacher's College, provides an excellent source for a writing benchmark task, which includes, by grade level, a reading passage and writing task, scoring rubric and student assessment sheet, aligned specifically to the CCSS Reading Standard 8 and Writing Standard 2 (The

Reading and Writing Project, 2014). The included rubric provides categories labeled Novice, Intermediate, Proficient and Above Proficient. Therefore, those students who score below proficient might benefit from an academic setting, based on this and other data. In addition, this writing assessment could also be applied to honors placement, for which no writing task exists. Unfortunately, The Reading and Writing Project assessment only goes through Grade 8 and could not be extended for use in the high school, though one might be created with minimal difficulty in the same format. A word of caution, however, is that much like grades, assessing writing pieces is often a subjective practice, even with a standard rubric (Overmeyer, 2007/2008). If resources allow, writing pieces should be scored by at least two people to ensure inter-rater reliability.

Teacher Recommendation. Participants frequently mentioned the importance of the information teachers have about their students. Many participants already believed that teacher recommendation was part of the academic placement process, and seems to be at the high school level. All teachers and most guidance counselors also stated that they frequently asked the previous year's teacher/guidance counselor for information on academic students, either at the beginning of the year or when a specific issue arose. The majority stated having this information provided to them early in the school year, rather than having to seek it out, would be invaluable. Yet two participants cautioned against making teacher recommendation a formal part of the placement process due to parental pressures that might result. To address both these issues, the importance of teacher input and desire to avoid a teacher's recommendation that could be influenced by parental

pressure, I investigated the use of teacher rating scales used for placement purposes. It was thought that if there were a way to use a rating scale, teacher input would be incorporated more as an objective rating than a seemingly-arbitrary recommendation. Unfortunately, no existing rating scale for struggling students could be found. However, there were several for exceptional students. Therefore, I altered the Purdue University HOPE scale (2009) and *Manual for the Admission and Placement of Exceptional Students* (2014) teacher rating scales and questions to address the needs of struggling ELA students (See Appendix H). If there were more time, it would be recommended that this scale be field tested before its inclusion into the placement matrix.

Student Input. Research explains the importance of including adolescents in their educational decisions (Enriquez, 2011; Fletcher, n.d.; Joselowsky, 2007). This was also noted by participants. When included, students have been found to become more responsible and vested in their academic success, which are noted weaknesses of the academically struggling student. Therefore, it was determined that a student questionnaire should be included in the placement matrix. Several measures were investigated as possible choices: the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (Pintrich, 1991), School Motivation and Learning Strategies Inventory (SMALSI) (2006), and Learning and Study Strategies Inventory, Second Edition (LASSI) (2002). The MSLQ is geared toward college students, the LASSI is for students Grade 9 and up, and the SMALSI is divided into two age group, 8-12 and 13-18. As the MSLQ was developed for college students, despite its frequent mention in literature read, it was excluded. LASSI had very unfavorable reviews, with its supporting data coming mainly

from anecdotes (Wright, 2007). Conversely, the "SMALSI-Child and -Teen Forms provide exceptional diagnostic tools for assessing school-related motivation and learning strategies employed by students and for identifying problem areas for students who are academically low performers in school" (Wright, 2010). Based on this review, it is recommended that this group administered student inventory be part of the placement process. The inventory produces a profile of T-scores (M=50, SD=10) that help determine weaknesses in specific areas to be used in terms of cut-offs for the placement matrix (Stroud & Reynolds, 2014). I would further recommend a simple question be asked of students regarding their desire or opinion on being placed in an academic class to help strengthen their areas of weakness.

Diagnostic Tool. Another key component to the placement matrix should be the inclusion of a diagnostic test. A diagnostic test provides more detailed information about the sub-set of skills that influence reading comprehension (Morsy, Kieffer & Snow, 2010; Torgesen & Miller, 2009). Furthermore, this assessment must be geared to the adolescent population to reflect their unique needs and purposes for reading, and not a test that is more suitable for a younger audience (Morsy, Kieffer & Snow, 2010; O'Reilly, Sabatini, Bruce, Pillorisetti & McCormick, 2012; Torgesen & Miller, 2009).

Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI). According to the extensive research conducted by Morsy, Kieffer, and Snow (2010), the QRI is an excellent qualitative tool to determine a wide-range of reading sub-skills, more so than other tools they reviewed. It incorporates a range of text genres, knowledge of text structure and oral reading skills. According to Clark, Kamhi, Nippold, & Boudreau (2014) the QRI is the most frequently

used informal reading inventory. Flaws are that it requires a significant amount of time to administer individually. Results are best when the administrator is familiar with both the test and the student (Morsy, Kieffer, & Snow, 2010). Furthermore, while it is the only inventory to include an assessment on background knowledge, Clark et al.'s (2014) research shows limited impact on prior knowledge to successful completion of comprehension questions on the QRI for Grades 4 and 5.

Achieve 3000. Though many sites dedicated to reviewing literacy programs, such as Adolescent Literacy, found no qualifying studies to use to rate the effectiveness of Achieve 3000, there is research available to support its use. There was difficulty locating studies not conducted by Achieve 3000. However, Gurian, Stevens, and Daniels (2009) cite its effectiveness as part of their study on single-sex classrooms, stating that Achieve 3000 showed a 74.2% achievement gain in its participants. Doe (2006) emphasized the value Achieve 3000 provides as it allows students to access content at their reading ability, provided by a score generated through a LevelSet test to determine appropriate Lexile score. More recently, PRNewsire (20015) found that the use of Achieve 3000 also improves students' writing achievement. Lastly, according to the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (2013), Achieve 3000 has moderate evidence of success in monitoring and evaluating students' achievement and progress.

What is particularly interesting about this program is that it addresses individual factors, such as lack of effort of low commitment to school, which were very significant weaknesses noted by the participants for this population. In addition, it is a newer assessment, which provides reading Lexiles and content that is in alignment to the CCSS.

As such, it includes tasks that require students to evaluate arguments and cite evidence, critical thinking skills required by the Common Core (WHAT'S NEW, 2013). Another benefit is there is familiarity in district with this program, as it was recently introduced for use with several populations and could hopefully easily be extended for use with adolescent academic students. It is worth noting that Magnolia Consulting is currently engaged in an efficacy study of Achieve 3000, from 2014—2016, whose results should be reviewed upon the completion of the study.

GMRT. This assessment was reviewed as part of the discussion of screening tools. What makes it even more favorable as a measure to include is that with further analysis and time taken by the test administrator, it can provide additional information on the students for diagnostic purposes. The GMRT can allow for identification of specific comprehension processes, including where breakdown occurs (Morsy, Kieffer, & Snow, 2010). Johnson and McCabe (2005) further find the norm-referencing useful to determine progress and the inclusion of reading instruction tips helpful to teachers.

Parental Input. Another aspect mentioned in the course of interviews and found in the research reviewed was the importance of parental input. I recommend that parental involvement be initiated as soon as possible. It is beneficial that parents be notified as soon as a child is identified by the screening tool as possibly being placed in the academic setting (*Manual for the Admission and Placement of Exceptional Students,* 2014). It is further recommended that a similar parental notification be made for students who might qualify for enriched or honors level courses to maintain consistency and demonstrate equity in placement practices at all levels. A sample letter based on the one

provided in the *Manual for the Admission and Placement of Exceptional Students* (2014) can be found in Appendix I. The included academic course description in the letter was found on the district studied high school's website. At this time, parental consent should be granted before placement decisions are finalized. It is also at this point that parental input should be given as to any concerns or issues relevant to ability or achievement. Also included in Appendix I is a sample parental consent form for any individual assessment that might be determined as beneficial to be administered before final placement decisions are made.

Implementation

Once the project is complete, it needs to be presented to the Assistant Superintendent of schools and English department supervisor. It is hoped that after this presentation, the white paper will be circulated to other vested stakeholders, such as guidance counselors, Child Study team members and academic level teachers. It would then be beneficial to have time and location provided by the district for these participants to discuss the proposed solution, in terms of practicality and feasibility of implementation. This process would serve as a type of field test for the matrix and some of the provided tools that were created, such as the teacher rating scale. It would be my goal for a committee of the gathered stakeholders to be created (or to be created for the initial meeting) who would begin implementation of the proposed placement matrix.

The first step of implementation would be to choose the screening measure from the options provided. It would be my recommendation to use the CTP4 reading comprehension scores, as they are the only scores already available, requiring no

additional action. I would further recommend that the initial screen use scores below 45%. When the basic statistical analysis was conducted of current academic 9 students' CTP4 scores, the mean, median and mode were all 32%. I would use 45% as screening cut-off due to its proximity to the average, but high enough to reflect those students who scored a bit above the average academic score, but still lower than the majority of students.

Once the initial screen is completed, each student would have to go through the placement matrix process. A letter should be sent home requesting permission to further assess each student, particularly important if the selected measures for the matrix require students to be taken out of class. Again, specific measures would have to be selected from the choices provided and time provided to gather data and determine the results. Once the final pool of students is identified based on the placement matrix results as qualifying for academic placement, letters should be sent home once again notifying the students' parents/guardians of the following year's academic placement.

Potential Resources and Existing Supports

The potential resources that are already in-district include the CTP4, Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test, Achieve 3000 and student grades. The parental letters and teacher rating scales were created and are included in the Appendices G and H. If another screening or diagnostic tool were selected, they would have to be purchased. Additionally, the School Motivation and Learning Strategies Inventory (SMALSI) would need to be purchased and the administering staff familiarized with its administration and scoring. The teen kit, inclusive of scoring sheets and manual is $201.00 (MHS, 2015).

Potential human resources include the reading specialists who would most likely conduct any individually administered diagnostic test and the classroom ELA teachers who would administer the group assessments. In addition, personnel and time would have to be allocated to gather the individual pieces of data and place the results on the matrix, and then determine the final recommendation for placement.

Potential Barriers

The biggest barrier is if the evidence presented in favor of creating a uniform placement practice based on multiple measures is not heeded. Given the many burdens placed on districts at this time, with testing, evaluations and resources challenges, it may be decided that there is no time and/or resources to implement yet another change. Even if it were decided that a committee could be created, these burdens would still exist for the staff members selected, who may not want to invest further time and energy in addition to their other obligations.

Another major concern is the time constraints. It would have been preferable to have more time to engage in field tests or to pilot the placement matrix with a small population of students. However, as there is no existing system this year to place academic students for next year, and the school year has ended, there is no time to engage in such best practices. In effect, it should be considered that the use of any of these measures would be on an interim basis, to be examined and adapted as deemed necessary after a careful review of their use.

Proposal for Implementation and Timetable

Ideally, implementation needs to occur immediately. Time for a dialogue session needs to be provided prior to the beginning the coming school year in order for it to have a practical application. It is hoped that the proposed rubric can be agreed upon, with perhaps minimal revision, so that it can quickly be implemented. The initial screen must be completed so that the other measures can be administered to the qualifying students. If it is decided that revisions are needed, a committee with representatives from each area – an academic ELA teacher form middle school and one from the high school, a guidance counselor from middle school and one from high school, a child study team member and the English department supervisor – could be created and given a few hours over the summer to make the revisions. The same committee could then evaluate those students identified by the initial screening tool. As the academic population is not so large as to be cumbersome, it is hoped that any schedule revisions that would need to be implemented as a result of the rubric's implementation could be handled at the start of the 2015—2016 school year.

However, it is unlikely at this time of the year that this will occur. It is more likely that a significant number of students who would normally have been placed in the academic setting will be placed in CP due to the absence of a measure or policy that can be used to justify their placement. If this is the case, it is still recommended that a committee be created to evaluate the proposed placement matrix for use for next year's students. There will always be a population of students who struggle with ELA. The same problem is likely to remain, even if the PARCC is found to be an appropriate

measure to assist in placement. It would only be one data point; it is hoped that the research presented would prevent the district from merely replacing the over-reliance of one high-stakes standardized test score with another.

Project Evaluation

In terms of the white paper itself, the review and revision process was formative, based in large part on the feedback of my Committee. Throughout the creating of the project, the placement matrix, I frequently discussed ideas with my colleagues and department supervisor, to refine and revise the measures included and my rationale for their inclusion. In addition, reviews of the measures were very influential in my decisions.

Upon delivering the white paper to my assistant superintendent and department supervisor, it is believed that I will receive valuable feedback. I would imagine there would be questions asked that will further help me refine the matrix and my rationale. I also hope that other stakeholders will have the opportunity to read and discuss the white paper with me and each other so that all those involved in academic placement and instruction will have the same understanding of the situation. It is hoped that I will have a significant part in the creation of a set policy regarding academic placement. I look forward to this cyclical process of review, refinement, implementation, and discourse.

Implications Including Social Change

Local Community

This project addresses the needs of learners in this local community by attempting to create a uniform policy to more accurately place at-risk ELA learners. In creating a

policy, students from the two middle schools will be placed using the same criteria, which will also be implemented at the high school, fostering greater continuity of instruction and fidelity of the academic program. It is also believed that in creating a set uniform placement policy, other aspects of the academic program will also be made uniform and part of district policy, such as notification process for parents and guardians of academic students, greater consistency of grading, and more continuity in instructional programs among the schools.

In the creation of these policies, there will be less confusion regarding this program. The research conducted revealed great uncertainty and inconsistencies regarding the particulars of the academic program. Having a written policy to refer to would alleviate this confusion for teachers, supervisors, counselors and Child Study Team members. It would also help to explain the purpose of the program to other stakeholders, such as parents, students, and administrators.

Far-Reaching

In the larger context, this study highlights the dearth of research available on literacy assessment and instruction specifically geared toward struggling adolescents. Furthermore, it demonstrates the need to re-examine assessments that are available for alignment with current standards and purposes for learning, as most assessments found were created over a decade ago. It also provides evidence against the practice of using high-stakes standardized tests for placement decisions. As demonstrated, such practices provide very limited information and do not provide a picture of the whole child. Furthermore, as the climate that surrounds high-stakes testing is very controversial and

mercurial, relying on such tests may prove too transitory, putting districts in constant states of uncertainty and change.

On the other hand, the proposed changes reflect sound research and practical experience. It is hoped that this research could serve as an impetus for positive change by enlightening districts as to the need to review and examine, or create depending on the case, a uniform policy for placement that takes into consideration the specific needs of the targeted population.

Conclusion

Overall, presenting a white paper to the Assistant Superintendent and English department supervisor would benefit this district. The white paper outlines the research conducted and provides the possible solution of a placement matrix for academic ELA students. This would remedy the confusion in placement practices noted by participants, incorporate the multiple measures needed for gaining a better understanding and more accurate placement of these students. Furthermore, it would remedy the problem the district faces as to how to place academic students in the absence of the previously used measure, the NJASK, and inability to use the replacement test, the PARCC.

Moreover, the difficulties this district faces in terms of placement are not unique. The proposed changes could also benefit other districts searching to improve their placement policies as they too adjust to new standards and testing mandates. My reflections as a researcher during this process and future research will be described in the next section.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

As a result of my study investigating participant perceptions of academic students and assessments in district, an analysis of these assessments, and a review of the literature on struggling adolescents, literacy assessments and placement practices, I determined that a viable solution to the placement problem this district faces was to create a multiple measure placement matrix for academic students entering high school. This proposed solution was part of a white paper to be presented to the Assistant Superintendent and English department supervisor.

The purpose of this section is to discuss the strengths and suggest ways to improve the limitations of the project. The intention of the project is to address the local problem of placing academic students in the absence of the NJASK in this district, and thus improve the accuracy and equity with which at-risk students are placed. This is hoped, in turn, to improve the academic program and learning outcomes for these students through greater continuity and communication which will be fostered by this project. Moreover, it is hoped that positive social change will result, as the challenges faced and solutions proposed will also benefit other districts across the nation in similar times of testing transition brought on by the Federal Race to the Top (RttT) initiative's support of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and ensuing standardized tests.

Project Strengths

There are several strengths of this project. First and foremost, it is grounded in research and based on the lived experiences of those vested in the program. In this way,

the proposed solution of a placement matrix reflects both theory and practice and reflects the principles of Design-Based Research (DBR). "Being situated in a real educational context provides a sense of validity to the research and ensures that the results can be effectively used to assess, inform, and improve practice in at least this one (and likely other) contexts" (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012, p. 16).

Additionally, the incorporation of several pieces of data and data sources strengthens the project. Information was gathered from stakeholders in a variety of positions, which include teachers, the English department supervisor, and guidance counselors, at both the middle and high school levels. A variety of assessments were examined, both in terms of participant experience and student outcome, as well as through the literature reviewed. As the research study was conducted, I continually sought information to verify and clarify participants' responses, which resulted in a deeper understanding of the problem being studied. For example, through follow-up and further data collection, I was able to discover that: the rubrics mentioned were used only for enriched and honors courses; teacher recommendations were a common practice at the high school level but not both middle schools; reading comprehension was the weakest literacy skill for the vast majority of academic students, as verified by CTP4 scores; and that 205 was the cut-off score on the NJASK for the majority of academic students.

Having a solid grasp of the population of struggling adolescents, the perceptions of those involved in their placement and of placement practices both in district and in terms of available research, I was able to create what I believe to be a practical solution to

the problem of placing academic students in the coming year(s). In explaining the research study, inclusive of the problem, significance, literature review, methodology and findings, in a white paper to be presented to the Assistant Superintendent and English department supervisor, the proposed solution will have greater merit due to the context and background provided. I do not believe that simply proposing a solution in the absence of such context would have been as meaningful, and perhaps could be easily dismissed.

Recommendations for Remediation of Limitations

A limitation of the project stems from the research limitations. Since the project was created based on the understandings gathered from the research study, any gap in findings limit the project. As mentioned, data was sought to verify information found in the interview process. Whereas such efforts did provide rich and informative data and conclusions, some efforts proved fruitless. There was a lot of variety in responses as to who exactly is responsible for placing academic students. Due to the limited number of participants, I could not come to a definitive response. I attempted to widen my participant pool to discover the answer by submitting change of procedures form to IRB to include Child Study Team members, as they were mentioned as involved by several participants. Unfortunately, while I received IRB permission and invited members of Child Study to participate, no member was able to participate, leaving the questions as to their role in placement and the placement of students with IEPs in academic unanswered. In addition, some interviewees did not provide specific information, such as names, when asked for clarification; reluctance seemed apparent, and I did not force the issue, keeping

the best interests of my participants in mind. Not successfully discovering exactly who does the placement for all academic students, or how all academic students are placed into Grade 9 academic classes is a definite limitation of the study. I have generally described practices based on participants explanations of their experiences, but I could not verify all statements, particularly for those few students whose data (NJASK score) does not conform to what is assumed to be the common placement practice; that is, their NJASK scores exceed the presumed cutoff of 205. It is hoped that upon sharing the white paper, this missing information will be provided and thus this limitation will be remediated.

The problem of limited understanding could also be remedied through another study. One option that might alleviate the discomfort or hesitancy that seems attached to who and how of placement might be to design and distribute a totally anonymous online survey that asks questions regarding placement that have not been sufficiently answered. In this way, participants might feel more comfortable providing detailed information without the possibility of their identity becoming known.

Recommendation for an Alternate Approach

While I feel that the academic track is a valuable and necessary course, as mentioned in the review of the literature in Section 1 the research surrounding tracking is inconclusive. There is evidence to suggest that tracking may be detrimental to students, especially those who are struggling adolescents; during this time, self-perception and social needs supersede educational concerns and the placement in a track seen as "less than" can be damaging to self-esteem and impede overall academic progress (Henk et al.,

2012; Kearns, 2011; Musoleno & White, 2010Spielhagen, 2010). It would be interesting to further investigate the achievement rates of students who qualify for academic placement but are "de-tracked" and placed into a CP ELA class.

Scholarship

According to Dirks (1998), scholarship is the product and process by which those involved with higher learning interact with their environment and engage in professional service. This definition appeals to me because it reveals how scholarship is recursive and dynamic. It is the continuous process of gathering knowledge, generating knowledge, applying it, only to reflect on the application and begin the cyclical process all over again. It implies that scholarship is not definitive but continually evolving.

This definition applies to my experiences in the program and throughout my research study. Although I started with preconceived notions, they were tested by the literature read, changes in the political landscape and data discovered and analyzed. Some notions were confirmed, such as the characteristics and needs of struggling adolescent readers and writers. Others were refuted, such as the value of certain standardized tests (NJASK & CTP4) which I erroneously felt had little value in the placement process. Yet most were refined, such as the importance of teacher recommendation, which I originally may have believed should carry too much weight, but realized that there needs to be structure and greater supporting data to result in a recommendation and to support its inclusion. I further realized that within scholarship there are many shades of grey. Rather than discovering absolutes in response to my queries, I discovered variations and more questions were inspired. Many times I was

struck by how a certain discovery made me think "This would make an interesting research study!". I found that scholarship breeds as many questions as it provides answers.

Project Development

For me, project development is trying to discover the best possible solution in the face of many "What ifs". Throughout the process, I would consider the proposed measure and examine it from as many angles as possible, asking myself a variety of "what if" questions: What if there is no extra funding in district to purchase a new assessment? What if teachers are resistant to using another new test? What if there is no time provide for individual administration? By striving to remain practical while still based in research, I tried to develop a workable solution. What I found is that there may not be any one best solution, that what I created as my project is the best I could develop right now. Much like scholarship, a project should never be considered finished or complete. I think any solution in education should be reviewed and re-evaluated every year, to reflect the changes in educational purposes and modalities (i.e. use of technology, purposes for learning) and student populations.

Leadership and Change

Early on in my coursework, we were assigned Michael Fullan's book *Change Leader* (2011) to read. This book was very instrumental in guiding my thoughts about leadership and change, as well as how I view my administration. What had particular impact for me is the idea that a true change leader creates passion for a cause by example, but also knows when to delegate. Fullan's (2011) ideas of generating success through

respect, shared leadership and active engagement is so contrary to the current state of accountability and rapidly changing panaceas for educational woes dictated by those removed from actual education.

I believe that positive change is possible. The more people who remain committed and unafraid to speak up on the behalf of quality education, the more likely it will occur. I try not to succumb to the negativity that can surround education, but rather focus on the positives. I try to be vocal at meetings in pointing out the reality of our job and the needs of our students. I am also learning that I need to approach each situation accordingly; that is, certain administrators respond more favorably to certain approaches. Having concrete supporting evidence goes a long way in supporting a cause, and I am learning how to gather and present that. I also need to remind myself and those around me that true change is slow and incremental; it is important to be wary of anything that promises a quick fix.

Reflective Analysis

Self as Scholar

I have always enjoyed being a student and being part of a learning environment. During the dissertation process, there were many moments were I was fully vested in my research and enjoyed the discovery process. This was especially true in terms of researching the state of the Common Core State Standards and PARCC testing, a very interesting and mercurial topic now. In other areas, I felt more frustration by the dearth of current research needed on adolescent literacy assessment and placement. Yet I

learned that I can persevere. I can look to widen my search parameters, scour others' references or turn to colleagues and professors for assistance.

I also learned that I am not a particularly patient student. I have always related to my "type A" students who hand in a paper and in the next breath ask what grade they got. I work hard and really appreciate feedback, the sooner the better. Therefore, I was very grateful for the opportunity to participate in the Fast Track Pilot program. This allowed me to work fast and furious towards my goal and get responses as quickly as possible. I was fortunate to have a Chair who understood my nature and provided detailed feedback. That said, there was still a lot of wait time, especially in terms of procedural issues. I realized that I do not like when things are out of my control and this lack of control and impatience negatively impacts my overall attitude.

What I did not realize was my worth as an informed scholar practitioner. Time and again I was surprised by my Chair's comments to me regarding the value I brought to discussions. The more it was said, the more I became comfortable sharing my experiences, giving advice, pointing out solutions or places to find information needed. I learned a lot about navigating through this dissertation process and was able to share it with my classmates, who were at stages preceding mine. I also learned a lot about testing and adolescent learners, and was surprised by those colleagues who came to me seeking my input. I did not falter in my responses, because I have become so familiar with the research surrounding these areas. I feel that as a result, I have grown more comfortable with the idea of myself as a leader. I think that now I will intensify my efforts to reduce high-stakes standardized testing, both locally and nationally, and to improve equity of

program development and implementation through increased dialogue among stakeholders and between schools.

Analysis of Self as Practitioner

In the current political climate in New Jersey, and some would say in the nation, teachers are often the scapegoats for many problems. Yet we are expected to continually do more with less, be teachers, role models, mentors, diagnosticians and counselors, and meet the needs of increasingly diverse students with less time and stricter accountability measures that are often in sharp contrast to what our students need. There is wide spread dissatisfaction with teaching. Fewer students are choosing teaching as a profession and many teachers are resigning (Phillips, 2015; Kushner, 2015). There are many days when going to work can be discouraging at best.

However, while engaged in dialogue with my colleagues and during the interviews, I learned that I am still part of a noble profession. Despite the rhetoric that can be at times vitriolic towards teachers, we are a group of dedicated professionals who have the best interests of our students at heart. Each person I talked with shared insight into their students that went way beyond the surface of what would be found if he or she merely executed the duties listed in his or her job description. I am a part of a group of devoted and vested professionals. I often found their sentiments and frustrations echoing my own, which was also reaffirming. I am not alone in my feelings, particularly regarding the politicizing of public schools, which can be to the detriment of our students and profession. However, instead of it being a disheartening feeling, it was invigorating. Despite problems, each person was willing and eager to find a solution to improve

education for their students. There were a few frustrations relayed regarding the current educational reforms that may detract from teaching and some feelings of having to do things at times that might not be in the best interests of students (i.e. test-prep or too difficult CCSS aligned text), but then other means were found to counterbalance those types of tasks.

I also learned that I am not ready to leave teaching middle school yet. Many people have asked what I plan to do once I have my degree, with the assumption that this advanced degree must mean that I want to "move on" and leave teaching middle school. However, I think that with the knowledge and skills I have gained, maybe I can work harder at improving instruction and learning at this level. I will certainly have more time, and can use that time to put what I have learned about this population and testing to good use. I would like to take on more leadership roles, become more active in my union, and more vocal in my department.

Analysis of Self as Project Developer

As I began the project, I approached it much like the rest of my coursework, dissertation included. I read what was required, read several samples, broke it down into its sequential components and began. The idea of a white paper was one that appealed to me from the very beginning, perhaps also due to its very straight forward approach. This worked very well until it came time for me to actually create the proposed solution, the placement matrix. Despite all the research I had conducted and read, I still did not feel comfortable purporting that I had *the* solution to the district's placement problem. I had very good ideas and definite thoughts about which direction we should go, but I hesitated

to create it myself. In part I believe this is because, while I believe I have learned so much, I know there is still so much more to learn.

My view of myself as project developer is consistent with Fullan's (2011) idea of shared leadership. The inability to feel truly comfortable determining a solution on my own was because I believe that true change is not created by one and disseminated to others. It should be a joint effort and include the knowledge and experience of others.

Reflection on the Importance of the Work

In order to best meet the needs of academically struggling students, proper identification and placement is necessary. The district being studied has created a class, named an "academic" level class, to meet the needs of students who struggle with the English Language Arts in the district's two middle schools and one high school. However, the test used to place these students, the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK), was administered for the last time in the 20013 —2014 school year. This prompted the need to investigate possible options to place students in the absence of this test data. The first option might have been to simply use the replacement state standardized test, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) test. Due to unfamiliarity with the test and its results, and the lack of baseline data, the test is prohibited for use in instruction and placement decisions for the 2015—2016 year. In addition, the Common Cores State Standards (CCSS) and ensuing high-stakes tests is part of a larger, national debate and their future use is uncertain. Furthermore, research cautions against using one high-stakes standardized test to make such decisions, and instead supports the use of multiple measures. Therefore, after a

review of the literature on at-risk adolescents, adolescent literacy assessments and placement practices, and investigating the perceptions of my participants regarding academic students and assessments in district, I concluded that a multiple measure placement matrix would be a worthwhile solution.

This solution could add to the minimal information available regarding adolescent literacy assessment and placement within the last decade. It could provide a meaningful means by which to assess adolescents that are not dependent on the shifting state of high-stakes testing in America, as well as contribute to the research available on the dangers of depending on high-stakes testing data. Finally, it may serve to remind educators that all students do not achieve at the same rates and levels, and do not come to school with the same levels of support and prior knowledge. Therefore, assessments, placement and instruction must be geared to their needs and abilities.

The Project's Potential Impact on Social Change

Through this investigation, being able to talk with colleagues about an important issue was the beginning of positive change. I could see some realizations dawning on some participants' faces as the issues were being discussed. It was clear to me that many participants had not given much thought to the placement of academic students. In articulating their thoughts, many realized that they were not sure just how these students were placed, and how much of what they thought they knew was based on assumptions. Furthermore, I think that asking participants what changes they would like reminded them of ways to improve this situation, rather than just accept it. Several participants actually said they are looking forward to the outcome of this study and were hopeful that

some of their input would result in positive changes. In simply addressing the issue, it made people aware of the problem, of the lack of certainty or communication, or of the reminder that our students need us. It was a rewarding experience.

This positive impact of the realization that there is a problem is hoped to continue as the results of my research are shared with others, beginning with the Assistant Superintendent and English department supervisor. It is believed that once others are made aware of the problem and provided a possible solution, important changes will be made to benefit some of our neediest students, the struggling readers and writers. As stated, the publication of this research will hopefully benefit other districts facing similar problems as a result of the shift in standards and assessments occurring across the nation.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

This project has pointed out many areas for further research. In particular, there was little current research available on the placement of struggling adolescents and literacy assessments especially geared toward adolescents. In terms of placement, it would be worthwhile to conduct research examining what measures should be included which in a specified combination provide for the greatest degree of reliability, validity and accuracy of placement. It was also noted that the grade level expectations for reading have changed since the CCSS, yet many literacy assessments have not been revised to reflect these changes, and thus may provide inflated reading levels or flawed results. Moreover, as the purposes of education are changing and becoming more rigorous and inclusive of technology and multi-media, literacy assessments should be reviewed and

perhaps revised with these factors in mind. Therefore, a re-evaluation of literacy assessments used for adolescents is warranted.

Another issue that came up in writing my findings was the fidelity of grades. There seems to be two purposes for grades. One is to chart student progress on an individual basis and the other is to compare students to a predetermined level of achievement. Teachers generally feel very passionately about one way over the other, or the frustration over the difficulty in aligning the two, especially in the face of the Common Core State Standards. For example, do I evaluate a struggling writer based on the CCSS's grade level expectation, which may result in failing a student who has made significant personal improvement and has been trying hard, but is still not at grade level, or do I grade him/her based on the extent of progress, though this may result in passing a student onto the next grade who is in fact below grade level? It would be very interesting to investigate how to create a system in which grades can reflect both valuable and important reasons for grading, and to see if one system, or what combination, yields greater student achievement.

Similarly, teacher recommendations consistently came up throughout the interviews. Investigating the inclusion of teacher recommendation in placement practices would be beneficial. The participants involved all felt that teachers' opinions were valuable, but not all agreed as to their role in the placement process. It would be helpful to discover to what extent teachers' opinions matter in the process and practice of student placement.

Yet another area for future research would be to further investigate the problematic area of academic students' apathy which seems to have manifested itself in lack of follow through or task completion. Knowing it is such an impediment to achievement, and seems to be a major factor in why several students were placed out of college preparation (CP) level classes and into the academic level, it would be important to determine how to model and encourage task completion outside of school with the academic population of students. Doing so would hopefully improve their achievement and likelihood of transitioning into CP classes.

Conclusion

It is hoped that through this research and project study, the problem of addressing the needs of struggling adolescent readers and writers through proper placement was made clear. This population will continue to need assistance reaching their full potential whether or not a state standardized test is used to evaluate their proficiency levels. All students do not achieve at the same rates and in the same educational settings. Therefore, there will always be students who can benefit from the extra support and scaffolding provided by the academic program. Educators have a duty to make sure that every student who needs help, gets help. This starts with proper identification and placement. Educators are beholden to use the best information and resources at their disposal to ensure that a clear and consistent policy to identify, place and instruct struggling students is created and implemented. The proposed solution, inclusive of dialogue among stakeholders and the implementation of a placement matrix, is an important step in achieving these goals.

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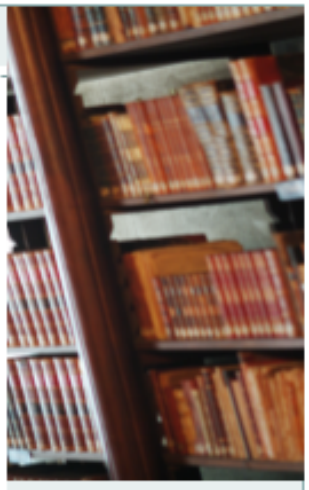
Appendix A: Project Study

Academic English Language Arts Placement

INVESTIGATING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS PLACEMENT OF STRUGGLING FRESHMEN

This qualitative case study addressed the problem of placing academically at-risk freshmen in English language arts (ELA) classes in the absence of the previous instrument, the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) and inexperience with and controversy surrounding the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), the replacement state test administered in the 2014-2015 school year, which is prohibited to be used in placement practices for the 2015-2016 school year. Based on the theoretical frameworks of the Zone of Proximal Development, Cognitive Apprenticeship, and Bandura's Model of Self-Efficacy, the goals were to determine in this school district the characteristics of struggling (labeled "academic") ELA students, to understand placement practices and perceptions of these practices, and to discover what is needed to more accurately place academic level freshmen. A purposeful sample of seven staff members was interviewed, and four themes created: Characteristics of Academic Students, Placement Practices, Standardized Testing, and Improvements. Additionally, relevant standardized test scores, grades, and reading assessments were collected and analyzed.



INSIDE

THE PROBLEM

- Academic placement relied on the NJASK, which has been replaced by PARCC.
- Without familiarity or baseline data for PARCC, it is not a suitable measure to use for placement. Postponing the use of PARCC for instructional purposes is also supported by NJ Senate Bill 2154.
- Dependence on one piece of data does not provide a complete picture of student performance or need.
- Research supports the use multiple measures in placement decisions

Sources: (Brimijoin, 2005; Mandinach & Gummer, 2013; Mandinach & Jackson, 2012; National Association of School Psychologists, 2003; Skalski & Romero, 2011).

The identified gap in placement practices that is occurring as districts move from one standardized state test to another can be viewed as an opportunity to make positive changes in placement practices, beginning with the incoming freshmen in our district.

Students who are struggling in language arts at the middle and high schools are often placed in what is called an *academic* language arts class. It is typically for non-classified students who are deemed "at-risk", based on poor proficiency scores on the state standardized test, which was the NJASK (X.X. personal communication, September 15, 2014).

SIGNIFICANCE

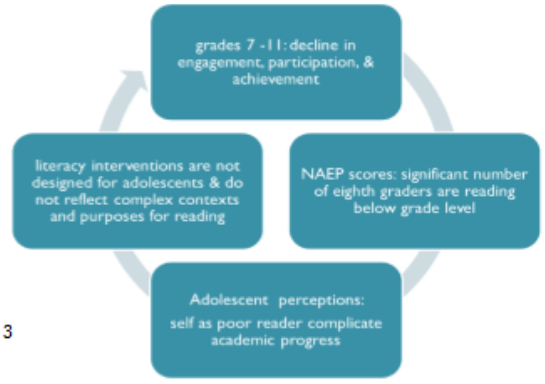
A significant number of early adolescents struggle in the English language arts (Allington, 2011; Dotterer & Lowe, 2011; Kitson, 2011; McDowell, Sweeney & Ziolkowski, 2011; O'Reilly, Sabatini, Bruce, Pillarisetti & McCormick, 2012; Stowe, 2014). As demonstrated by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2013 test, 36% of eighth grade students were reading at or above the proficient level and the rest were achieving at the basic level, having only "partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills" (The Nation's Report Card, n.d.). Struggling adolescent readers' and writers' challenges are exacerbated by the increased complexity demanded in the CCSS (Common Core State Standards, 2014.); students are also required to read much more complex and comprehensive texts in science, math, social studies and other content areas. Therefore, in order to show improvements in adolescents' literacy proficiency, there needs to be an identification of these students' literacy abilities that will enable them to be college and career ready.

THE PURPOSE

By requesting teachers to describe the characteristics of their at-risk students and examining the placement practices and assessments currently in use in district, as well as exploring other measures that might serve to address any needs not currently met, the district will gain insight into how to most accurately place academic students. Proper placement of academically struggling students into appropriate educational settings is a critical step in targeting instruction and closing the gap in literacy proficiency rates.

THE STRUGGLING ADOLESCENT

During early adolescence, many students' academic achievement suffers (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011; Kitson, 2011). At this age, students are no longer learning to read, but rather must read increasingly complex texts of different genres and structures in order to learn. Therefore, those who did not fully grasp the skills and strategies needed to be proficient readers fall further behind their peers (Brasseur-Hock, Hocka, Kiefferb, Biancarosac & Deshlera, 2011; Flynn, Zheng & Swanson, 2012; Kitson, 2011; Snyder, 2010). There is extant research which demonstrates the decline in motivation and decline in reading during this stage of development (McDowell, Sweeney and Ziolkowski, 2011). Therefore, placement for struggling youths must take into consideration the unique nature of adolescent learning (Lindstrom, Nealy, & Stagliano, 2012). Another complication is that most literacy interventions are designed for the elementary level and do not reflect the complex contexts and purposes for reading that adolescents engage in (Flynn et al., 2012). Enriquez (2011) explained that identifying struggling readers is more complex than determining a cut off score on a test. By labeling students, the notion of being "no good at reading" becomes part of their identity.



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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

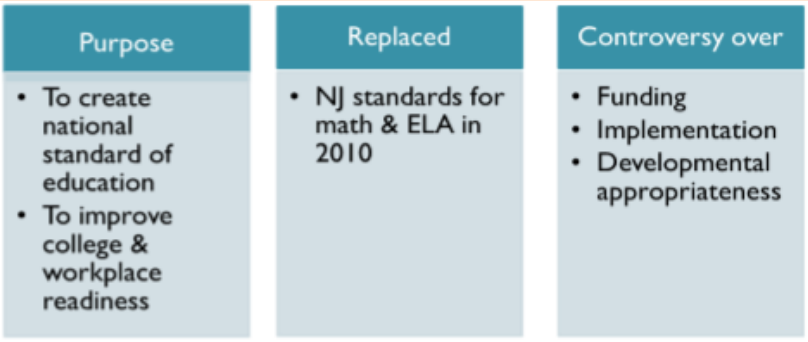
RQ1: How do the teachers and guidance counselors of seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth grade academic English language arts (ELA) students describe the characteristics and needs of these academically struggling students?

RQ2: In the absence of the NJASK, what are the assessments currently being used in the 2014-2015 school year that could be used to assist in determining the appropriate academic placement of incoming 9th graders in English language arts classes?

RQ3: What types of assessments, if any, are needed to provide a more complete picture of struggling students in order to more accurately place them?

Background on Standards:

Federally-Driven Common Core State Standards



Purpose: State school chiefs and governors sought a way to unify across the nation criteria for proficiency at each grade level and for high school graduation. The CCSS are to provide the needed knowledge to "compete successfully in the global economy" (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2014).

Support: 48 states, two territories and the District of Columbia supported CCSS in 2009 (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2014; Porter, et al., 2012) as the solution to today's failing public schools. As of now, four states have pulled out of the CCSS, and six have bills pending the same course of action (Barth, 2014).

Controversy: While the NCTE does not publicly oppose the CCSS, it does not endorse them, either (Gilyard, 2012). A major reason for not endorsing them, as explained in the NCTE's Resolution on Teacher Expertise and the Common Core State Standards, revolves around the risk that the CCSS do not seem to value teacher expertise and judgment, to the detriment of students, and may conflict with the NCTE's own policies (2012). NCTE President Sandy Hayes formally requested that the implementation of the CCSS move more slowly and advocates for a moratorium on standardized tests meant to evaluate the CCSS implementation (DeWitt, 2013)

There is concern regarding the funding and resources required by schools so that their students can meet the high expectations of the standards (Vega, 2013). The 2011 Center on Educational Policy report suggested that the states that won the RttT competition would be at an advantage. As the federal Race to the Top (RttT) funds were set up as a competition, the distribution of funds only to those who won the grants created inequality by design.

Inequality can also be seen in its impact on diversity. Camangian (2011) explained that our current focus on standardization and testing perpetuates social inequalities by forcing a universal curriculum on districts whose students may have vastly different needs. Finally, progressives believe that the CCSS, or corporate education reform, are ill-conceived. Wariness is growing (Au, 2011; Tierney, 2013).

CHALLENGES RELATED TO PARCC

Dwindling Support: Initially, 24 states, DC and VI joined PARCC, including NJ (NCSL, n.d.; Schneider, 2014); however, many have withdrawn (PARCC, 2014; Strauss, 2015). Getting a clear picture of just how many states remain in PARCC is difficult. The PARCC website states there are 11 states and DC (PARCC, 2015). On the PARCC Computer-based Administrator Survey, ten states plus DC are included (HumRRO, 2015). Massachusetts, a listed PARCC state, is allowing districts to choose which test to administer, PARCC or its own state standardized test, the MCAS ; a quarter of districts with a high school are administering PARCC (Gewertz, 2015; Rocheleau, 2015).

Cost of PARCC: Governor Christie proposed $10 per student in PARCC aid (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2014a), which is a nominal amount believed to exist just so PARCC would be considered a funded mandate (Karp, 2014). The actual cost of PARCC in NJ is unclear. It is estimated near $108 million dollars, not including money spent on updating technology, training and adding resources. This cost cannot be determined in part because it depends on how many students take the test, no longer an easy estimate due to parental refusals (Kachmer, 2015). In Montclair, 42.6% of students refused the test (Kaulessar, 2015). The cost of the contracts can increase if other states opt out of their PARCC contracts, a valid concern as support dwindles (Kachmer, 2015).

Concerns: There is growing concern that the tests are too hard, take too much time, cost too much, and infringe on state's rights (Bidwell, 2015; Johnson, 2015; Tatter, 2015). Concerns also exist in the accountability measures that attach students' results on these tests to teacher evaluations and effect school rankings. Finally, there are concerns about the "educational impact of the longer, more difficult tests on curriculum, instruction and student experience in schools" (Karp, 2014). Such concerns have prompted the creation of several bills, all of which have passed in the NJ Assembly, but have not been voted on in the Senate:

NJ BILL	PURPOSE
A3077/ S2765	Requires school districts to provide parents information by October 1 on certain tests to be administered during the school year, including who requires the test
A3079 /	Prohibits standardized tests in kindergarten through second grade.
A4165S2767	Permits parents to refuse participation in certain standardized assessments.
A4190/ S2768	Prohibits student and teacher assessments developed by PARCC for three years.

Sources: Clark, 2015a; govtrack, 2014; D'Amico, 2015; NJSenateNo.2154, 2014; Ujifusa, 2014.

DANGERS OF HIGH-STAKES TESTING AND USING THEM FOR PLACEMENT

PROS: (Center for Public Education, 2006).

- Allows comparisons among students, schools and districts
- Helps target those who need special services (i.e. special education, G & T)
- Demonstrates trends among populations
- accountability

CONS:

- Problematic philosophy—treats students as products, instructed according to standardized tests that drive curriculum (Au, 2012).
- Used for purposes other than intended when designed (questions reliability and validity) (Mandinach and Jackson, 2012; Clark, 2015b; Wall, 2015)
- Results in narrowed curriculum and teaching to the test; puts undue pressure on students; reduces teacher morale (William, 2010).

William's (2010) research reflects Campbell's Law, in which the results of a test that is the focus of political and public attention improve; yet those results do not necessarily improve on related measures, such as SATs or NAEP tests. Campbell's Law stems from the work of Donald Campbell (1976), social psychologist and experimental social science researcher who documented when high-stakes programs are evaluated, the evaluation process can become corrupt to ensure desired results.

Mandinach and Jackson (2012) caution against the use of "dead on arrival" data, since data that can influence crucial decisions such as placement occur months after the testing date and sometimes too late in the school year to be of any use in decision-making. This problem exists with PARCC testing, as the "PARCC consortium will not determine what scores are considered passing for this year's test until the summer, so students and schools won't receive scores until October" (Clark, 2015b). Mandinach and Jackson (2012) explain the distinction between assessments *for* learning, and assessments *of* learning; a state standardized test is a summative assessment *of* learning test that is best used for accountability measures, whereas assessments *for* learning are specifically designed to help drive and inform instruction.

A concern regarding testing validity was revealed when Pearson, the PARCC test developer, discovered students posting information about the test. Validity could be compromised by the sharing of testing content. More importantly, perhaps, was the extent of student apathy found; if a large number of students are not trying to answer the questions correctly, an accurate baseline cannot be found (Wall, 2015).

BENEFITS OF MULTIPLE MEASURES

- Provide greater depth and range of student ability and need (Mandinach & Jackson, 2012; Spielhagen, 2010; WestEd., 2014).
- Use formative and summative data (Brimijoin, 2009).
- Include student input (Enriquez, 2011).
- Result in greater equity and accuracy of placement, based on research at the college level (Ngo, Kwon, Melguizo, Prather, & Bos, 2013;Texas Toolbox, 2013; Hodara, Jaggars, and Karp, 2012).

Multiple measures should be used to inform decisions that impact instruction, such as determining student placement. To accurately employ multiple measures and get a better picture of student ability, both formative and summative assessments should be used. Another largely absent piece of data is the student. One must first understand the students' goals and perceptions of reading and of themselves as readers. Reading success is not just a cognitive process. It is also an emotional process, particularly for adolescents.

While it was difficult to find research on multiple measures and placement practices for the age group of this study, there were many studies on this topic at the college level. In order to reflect the inability of one standardized test to accurately place students, California forbids the practice of basing community college developmental placement decisions on one standardized test score (Ngo, Kwon, Melguizo, Prather, & Bos, 2013). The rationale behind the benefits of using multiple measures to better place college freshmen could also apply to the placement of high school freshmen, such as those involved with this study.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

THE INTERVIEWS

- Prior to conducting interviews, the interview questions were field tested.
- 7 participants were interviewed. These participants included English language arts (ELA) academic teachers and guidance counselors from both the middle and high school levels, and the English department supervisor. Participants were coded as Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3, and so on, to safeguard their identity.
- Questions were asked about the current measures that are being used to evaluate and determine the strengths and weaknesses of the academic students, what the current placement practices were and their perceptions of these placement practices, and finally, if there were any other information they would like to have on their academic students and any changes they would like made to placement practices.
- Field notes were completed after each interview, and the recorded interview transcribed. This produced transcripts totaling 85 single-spaced pages, with individual responses ranging from eight to 19 single-spaced pages of transcription.
- Member checking process was initiated to verify accuracy of transcriptions.
- Transcripts were then coded for initial themes. During this phase, interview field notes, reflective journal research log and transcripts were used to further develop emerging themes.

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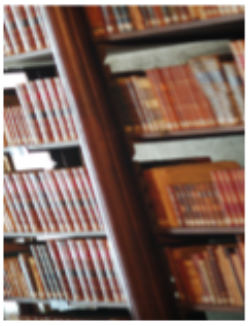
Data collected were triangulated through the incorporation of several methods and sources of data:

- Interviews of staff in various positions at both middle and high schools.
- Grade 7 NJASK summative scores. NJASK Grade 7 scores were used to place current academic Grade 9 students since NJASK 8 scores are not available until after schedules are made.
- Current Grade 9 students' Grade 8 NJASK score.
- NJPASS9 score.
- Grade 9 English grades for current 2014-2015 academic Grade 9.
- The DRA2 and GMRT reading assessments.
- Comprehensive Testing Program 4th Edition test (CTP4)
- The honors English 9 placement rubric.



INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Regarding research question one, academic students exhibit similar characteristics, marked by weak reading and writing achievement, low levels of self-esteem and motivation, and minimal productivity outside of school. It was consistently noted that despite these similar effects, each student might have a different combination of factors contributing to these elements, such as challenging home dynamics or an inability to prepare for the future. There are often several factors influencing their low achievement, none mutually exclusive, making it difficult to target and address their needs. It was reiterated by the participants repeatedly, as well as reflected in the literature reviewed on struggling adolescents, how such factors influence and in turn are influenced by each other. It is difficult to determine, for example, if low self-esteem is the result of poor performance in school, or poor performance is the result of low self-esteem.

Connecting to research questions two and three, it became clear that there was no set policy in place and much of what participants described as being the placement practices were based on their assumptions and own personal experiences. There were difficulties verifying placement practices due to limited participant response and hesitancy of many participants in this area. Many participants believed teacher recommendations influenced placement. Also mentioned by a few participants were grades and the CTP4 test. The only piece of data that was unvaryingly stated by all participants was that the NJASK was a determining factor in placement. In terms of formal and informal assessments, while all participants stated the use of a variety of measures employed to get to know students' ability levels, no particular assessments were mentioned, with the exception of the DRA2 and Gates-MacGinitie used by the reading specialists.

All participants had recommendations for improving current placement practices for academic level students. They all agreed that multiple measures should be used and using outdated test data should be avoided. However, the majority did not have a problem with using a standardized test, in this case the NJASK, as one indicator, as perhaps the initial screening tool. Suggested measures to include were student survey, grades, teacher recommendation, a writing sample and parental input.

It was consistently discovered that the participants addressed their students' needs, socially, emotionally and academically. It was frequently noted that in order to teach these struggling adolescents, they needed to understand them and reach them at their level. For some, in fact, the content became secondary, for it was generally held that no knowledge would be received and no learning would occur if the student was not open and ready to learn.

INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Theme	Participant Response
1. Characterisitcs of Academic Students	*low motivation and low or jeopardized self-esteem: "I think for a long time they've been told or had issues with the content areas so that by the time they reach me ...they are kind of at this point where they assume that this is not going to be something for them." * irresponsibility and/or immaturity: "totally not producing, just doing nothing. Usually it's because the kid is – the kid has an F and when asked why he got an F, it's not based on their in-class productivity, it's all about homework." * impact of home life: ""A majority population [of my academic students] were cultural or ethnic minorities, a lot of single parent homes, lower socio-economic statuses for the area – there's kind of an amalgamation of stuff at work, so it's a little hard to pinpoint it to one." * weak reading comprehension: "that comprehension is the area they struggle the most" * weak writing skills: "It's also getting down their thoughts about literature on paper. I think there's a very big disconnect with that."
2. Placement Practices	* NJASK used to place students (though provided different cut off scores):"200 seems to be the cut off score. However, I do know that certain kids were slightly above 200, and then there are students that are below 200 that were not placed into my academic." * believed other measures involved, such as recommendations, CTP4 or grades (variety in responses): "I think teacher recommendations...and seeing where kids were in terms of their grades in contrast to their peers had something to do with it, too, but at least from what I've seen, a large part of it is the NJASK scores." "And it wasn't supposed to be special ed. because I have no supplemental teacher. I do have IEPs. And I have kids who passed the test. So...I just don't know...Really, I don't know how they are picked." * need improvement: "By saying this entire group needs help doesn't necessarily mean they all need help in the same way." * mostly accurate: "I think it's pretty accurate, but I'm sure some kids fall by the wayside or are misplaced."
3. Standardized Testing	* problem with data not being recent: "One of the problems is we are placing kids based on the previous year's data, and then we are trying to meet the deadline to look at the newest data just to make sure the placement is correct." * low score could be indicative of factors other than ability: "I think they [NJASK scores] are pretty accurate, but kids can have an off day or they could be bad test-takers." * valid as initial screening tool when followed by other measures: it "gives you a heads up on who is a struggling student." * not useful for instruction: "So there's something to be said for its use, but at the same time, I'm very hesitant...because there are exceptions."
4. Improvements	* multiple measures: "I am hopeful to continue to have conversations ...about what we're going to do without having NJASK scores. I think we have to ...make sure that we are using grades as one of those measures." * improved communication: ""I often don't feel like I know holistically what's going on with a child... I can get a picture academically, but I guess on a personal plane, I wish that more were made available to us." * student input: "Sometimes what I think is lacking is input from the child on what they think their strengths and weaknesses are and what they would like to improve upon. We don't have anything for that. We never ask them." * teacher input (though 2 stressed this should only be done informally, not as part of a placement rubric) : "I think teacher recommendation and input is important."

ASSESSMENT DATA

Basic Statistical Analysis for NJASK 7 and 8

	NJASK 7	NJASK 8
Mean	193	206
Median	188	203
Mode	181 & 188	203
Range	58	44

Based on the NJASK 7 scores used to place students into grade 9 academic, it seems that 205 was the NJASK cut off used by the vast majority – all but four students scored 205 or below. However, if the same criteria would have been used with the most recent NJASK test scores, the NJASK 8, 11 of the same 25 might not have been placed in academic, as they scored above the 205 cut off. This provides credibility to the concerns expressed by many participants and reflected in the review of the literature regarding misplacement when relying on one piece of data that may not be current enough to reflect actual student need.

DRA2 and GMRT

The DRA2 is administered to the majority of middle school academic students by that middle school's reading specialist Research and participants both agree that this test has low reliability and validity (Collaborative Center for Literacy Development, n.d.; McCarthy & Christ, 2010). Therefore, its use for placement is discouraged. The Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test (GMRT) is also administered to students by the middle school reading specialist if referred by I&RS. Information is not provided by individual grade level, but clustered by grades 7-9 and 10-12 (Guice, 2014), which was noted as a weakness. One participant mentioned inflated vocabulary scores on the GMRT and difficulty reconciling the results with other pieces of achievement data. However, the GMRT is considered an effective measure as both a screening tool and a diagnostic tool (Morsy, Kieffer & Snow, 2010).

Two participants posited that perhaps the GMRT and the DRA2 might be outdated or not reflective of current educational demands made on early adolescent students. These may be valid claims as the GMRT test used has a copyright date of 2000, and the DRA2 books and Teacher Observation guides are from 2003. The purposes for reading have changed drastically, as informed by the literature reviewed, due to the recent increase in rigor demanded by the Common Core State Standards.

Remaining Data

The CTP4 scores are available pieces of information already provided by district, as this test is administered every fall to students in grades 3-8. In addition, the CTP4 was mentioned by several participants as perhaps being used or useful in determining placement. Finally, the CTP4 is presently part of the placement rubric for enriched/honors classes. Similarly, grades are included because many participants mentioned the use of grades as being used or useful in placement; they, too, are used in the enriched/honors rubric. Lastly, the NJPASS score for grade 9 students is also incorporated. This piece of data is used when placing students in grade 9 into the appropriate track, be it academic CP or honors, in grade 10. It was also thought that in examining existing data, some trends in skill or achievement might become apparent, perceptions regarding academic students' abilities might be verified by the data. It was also thought that the data could provide insight into what pieces of data are currently available that are helpful in determining placement.

The data did not fully provide what was hoped. There seems to be no obvious connection between the data points available. Students' scores on one test do not equate to similar scores on other measures, or similar levels of achievement in class, as noted by English grades. However, participants consistently and unanimously pointed out the general weak reading comprehension scores of academic students. This is verified by students low reading comprehension scores on the CTP4, which are the lowest of the three reading scores the CTP4 provides for more than half of the academic students.

CONCLUSIONS

Prior to this study, the placement practices for academic students in this district had not been investigated through the input of personnel involved with this student population and related data. As a result, it can be concluded that placement practices:

⇒ may consist of an unclear, inconsistent policy

⇒ may be based on tradition that may not reflect current findings on assessment and placement

⇒ may vary by school

If there is no standard procedure for placement of academic students, then there may be other problems with the academic level, from identifying and selecting those who will benefit the most from their placement, to selecting the best curriculum, instruction, and assessments that will help each academic student. This absence of a policy can result in teachers and counselors who may be confused and perhaps misguided about which students should or should not be placed in academic classes. This is exacerbated by the finding that placement practices differ by grade level and building and the lack of opportunity for communication between stakeholders within and between schools.

Therefore, the following conclusions can be made regarding the research questions for this study:

RQ1: How do the teachers and guidance counselors of seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth grade academic English language arts (ELA) students describe the characteristics and needs of these academically struggling students? Academically struggling students were characterized as being deficient in several aspects of the English language arts, most prominently in reading comprehension, form and structure of writing, and vocabulary. These students typically do not complete tasks outside of the classroom, but when given explicit directions and tasks made manageable by chunked material and specific benchmarks, academic productivity and success in class is manifested. Furthermore, these students share characteristics unrelated to the English language arts (ELA). They typically have low self-esteem and motivation. Many do not see the relevance of their school work to their futures, or see limited futures for them so that school is irrelevant. These characteristics may be caused by or further exacerbated by challenging home lives and demanding schedules outside of school.

RQ2: In the absence of the NJASK, what are the assessments currently being used in the 2014 – 2015 school year that could be used to assist in determining the appropriate academic placement of incoming 9th graders in English language arts classes? Several assessments were discovered that are currently in place that might provide additional data to help place academic students. Placement rubrics and data driven charts exist for other levels and courses. Rubrics containing several data points are used to place students into enriched or honors level courses. The measures used on the existing rubrics include the CTP 4 and student grades in ELA and Social Studies classes. There is also a data driven chart to assist in academic placement for students entering Grades 10, 11 or 12. It is important to note this use of rubrics to place students, even though there is not a rubric for the specific population under study. There exists a precedence and familiarity with the process in district. One could be designed for the academic students in Grades 6 through 9 to reflect their needs.

CONCLUSIONS CONTINUED

Other measures that also currently exist and could be used in the placement of academic students are the DRA2 and Gates-MacGinitie tests administered by the reading specialists. However, these assessments show little connection to one another and seem to be used as isolated data points with assigned cut-off points. The DRA2 provided little information as to whether or not a student is actually in need of academic placement. Flaws of both tests are they cluster students by grade, 4-8 for the DRA2, and 7-9 for the GMRT. It may also be that these tests, designed over a decade ago, do not reflect current reading practices of this population. This is most prominently found in the absence of targeted content-specific reading skills and critical thinking skills from reading assessments that are the cornerstone of the CCSS (Morsy, Kieffer, & Snow, 2010). However, the GMRT does have research to support its use (Morsy, Kieffer, & Snow, 2010).

RQ3: What types of assessments, if any, are needed to provide a more complete picture of struggling students in order to more accurately place them? Participants and the literature reviewed stated that poor performance on an assessment may indicate that a student is at-risk, or it may be reflective of other issues not related to ability, such as a bad day or indifference. Thus, other measures are needed to more accurately place academic students. The first improvement required would be selecting a screening tool whose results are received in a timely fashion so that they are indicative of the student for the coming year. In time, the PARCC may prove useful in this capacity, but as of now, another measure must be found. Other measures that should be included based on participant response and the literature reviewed are student grades, student input, teacher input and a diagnostic assessment for both reading and writing.

LIMITATIONS

While the conclusions were drawn from the study conducted are accurate and helpful, there are several important limitations that must be considered. One limitation is the narrow scope of the study. Moreover, this study only examined placement of incoming academic high school freshman. Because this is a transition year between schools, the results are limited only to this population and may not be fully reflective of placement practices at other grade levels in this district.

This is also a very time-specific study. This is the only year of transition between the tests. It is hoped that next year, 2015-2016, when the results of the PARCC are examined, it will provide useful information and be able to fill some of the gaps in placement practices left by the NJASK. However, this is just one unknown. Due to the volatile political climate that surrounds standardization, in the form of CCSS and ensuing high-stakes tests, it is unclear what the future

LIMITATIONS CONTINUED

of this test and even the standards themselves will be. These uncertainties may prolong the confusion and the transitory nature of testing, which impacts all areas of education, including curriculum, assessment and placement. These aspects make it more important to locate other measures that are independent of the PARCC to use for placement.

More importantly, a major limitation of the study was the low number of participants. With such low numbers, I could not discuss participant demographics, such as job description, number of years in education or in the district, or grade level and school involved with. To do so would have compromised participant confidentiality. With more participants involved, it is likely that there would have been sufficient overlap in demographics to include this information and perhaps make more detailed conclusions based on these factors.

The number of participants did not seem to affect the findings and conclusions related to Research Question 1, in which responses were largely unanimous and consistent, demonstrating data saturation as to the needs and characteristics of academic level students. However, while I did gather rich information from each participant on the remaining two research questions, having a greater number of responses may have helped verify and specify participants' responses. In particular, it was difficult to get specific information on placement practices, as each participant provided the piece he or she was familiar with, or his or her assumption. Having a greater response rate could have provided verification of responses at the same position and grade level of each participant. Furthermore, since no Child Study Team member was able to participate (other than the member involved in the interview question field test), input into the academic placement of high school freshman prevented understanding as to the inclusion of students with IEPs in the academic setting and any placement decisions made by team members that may or may not follow what was known by other participants in the study.

The low response rate may have been due to the sensitive nature of the study, which was evident with a majority of those who did consent to participate, but were hesitant or declined to provide information about certain aspects of placement and/or assessments. It can be supposed that these professionals did not want to be put in a position where their responses might inadvertently state or suggest that someone was to blame for any negatively perceived comments. Those who participated all had the best interests of the students in mind; problems discovered seem to be more the result of the absence of communication. It seems that different participants hold various pieces of this puzzle of academic placement. A forum where a dialogue can occur to put those pieces together into one cohesive policy of placement would be beneficial.

Educators have always faced the challenge of how to get all students to meet grade level expectations. There is evidence to justify that today's more challenging standards and high-stakes tests put at-risk adolescents in further jeopardy, and due to increased accountability measures, the stakes are higher than ever to ensure that these struggling students succeed. Yet despite the pressure and good intentions to improve learning outcomes, there is little research or evidence to actually guide teachers on how to accurately place struggling adolescent readers and writers so these at-risk students can receive the instruction they need. However, it is known from research that relying on one piece of summative data for placement does not provide a complete picture of ability or provide sufficient data for proper placement; multiple measures are needed for that analysis.

A SOLUTION

Using knowledge gained from the participants interviewed, the assessment data currently available in the district being studied, and from the literature reviewed, I created a placement matrix for academic ELA students. This rubric drew from the district's existing honor's placement rubric. It was thought that using measures similar to those already in place would be more easily implemented and help maintain continuity between courses.

"Nothing is more frustrating for classroom instructors than to realize the first week of classes that students have been placed who do not possess the entry level skills required for success in their course. Nothing is sadder for a student than to waste a semester and experience failure because he/she was misplaced. A comprehensive training program needs to be built for counselors, advisers, and faculty doing placement that takes into consideration test scores and other measures of skill levels" (Texas Toolbox, 2013)

A carefully chosen screening tool followed by other measures has better success rates of accurately placing students by ability.

SCREENING TOOL:

A screening tool is an assessment that can be administered easily and quickly to a large population for the purpose of determining which group of students might benefit from remediation (Connor et al., 2014; Jenkins, n.d.; SERC, 2012; Torgesen & Miller, 2009).

Two measures currently used in this district can be used as screening assessments. The first is the Comprehensive Testing Program 4th Edition test (CTP 4). The second is the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test (GMRT). Another option not currently used in district but favorably reviewed is the Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation (GRADE).

REVIEW OF POSSIBLE SCREENING TOOLS

◊ **Comprehensive Testing Program 4th Edition Test (CTP4)**

The CTP 4 is a viable choice to use as a screening tool. Data is provided in terms of percentiles and stanines, which deliver information as to how a given student is achieving in relation to their peers (Aristotle, 2013). A stanine results from dividing all scores into 9 parts, with 5 being the midpoint (ERB, 2014). This could also be used as the screening tool for academic. A cut-off would have to be created based on stanine or percentile. The merits of using the CTP4 as a screening tool are:

- administered every fall to students as a normal part of educational practices and would not result in any additional loss of time or expense.
- reading comprehension scores of academic students were consistently low, verifying claims.
- consistent for all students, unlike other pieces of data which demonstrated much greater variability.
- used as part of the placement rubric for enriched and honors classes within district, so there is familiarity with using this test for placement purposes.

A flaw, however, is that the data provided would be several months old, as the students take the test early in the beginning of the school year, and placement occurs towards the end of the school year. Research and participants both warn against the use of data that is not current for placement purposes.

◊ **Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test (GMRT)**

The GMRT assessment is considered a "screening tool to identify which students struggle with comprehension and/or reading vocabulary" (Morsy, Kieffer, & Snow, 2010). It also is a group administered paper and pencil test (GMRT, 2011). Its strengths are:

- reliability & effectiveness, particularly for students close to grade level (Morsy, Kieffer, & Snow, 2010).
- provides strong reliability and validity in its technical report and evidence of its success as both an achievement test and for diagnostic purposes (Johnson & McCabe, 2005).

However, the weaknesses of the test are:

- brevity of the passages may limit ability to predict student success on lengthier passages, noted by a participant who was also a reading specialist (Morsy, Kieffer, & Snow, 2010).
- several participants noted that the results do not seem to align with other available information on student achievement. It is supposed that this disconnect is mainly because the GMRT has not been revised since the CSS, which increased the text complexity required for each grade level making the readability of grade level texts harder than they were previously (NWEA, 2013).

- **Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation**

The GRADE assessment is a group administered test that includes a variety of genres and emphasizes inferential skills (Morsy, Kieffer, & Snow, 2010). "The combination of several sub-tests provides more information about component skills than with other group administered tests" (Morsy, Kieffer, & Snow, 2010, p.24). It is also has sound technical qualities (Fletcher et al., 2009). Another benefit is the test can also provide some diagnostic information. This assessment has the strongest review .

RECOMMENDATION:

Based on the above reviews, I recommend that the CTP4 reading comprehension scores be used as the screening tool, with a cut off of 45%, or stanine below 5. (The mean, median and mode of the data examined was 32%.)

SUPPORT FOR A PLACEMENT MATRIX

Once students are identified by the screening tool, other measures need to be considered to ensure proper placement. While it was difficult to find research on multiple measures and placement practices for the age group of this study, there were many studies on this topic at the college level.

- California forbids the practice of basing community college developmental placement decisions on one standardized test score (Ngo, Kwon, Melguizo, Prather, & Bos, 2013). Instead, developmental placement decisions must be based on multiple measures, as it is believed equity and accuracy in placement practices will improve as a result (Ngo, et al., 2013;Texas Toolbox, 2013).
- In Ngo et al.'s (2013) study to test this belief, it was found that the students who were placed into higher level courses based on the results of multiple measures, but who would have been excluded based on their standardized score alone, achieved the same rates of success as their peers who had the standardized scores to place in the same course.
- Hodara, Jaggars, and Karp (2012) found that using one standardized test score as a criterion for placing incoming college freshmen in certain classes was not as valid as a predictor of achievement as considering the students' GPAs.
- Despite these flaws, however, many schools continue to rely on one standardized test score for placement because it is efficient to do so. It is true that standardized tests do have a role in placement practices, as long as they are part of other metrics (Texas Toolbox, 2013). Many educators recognize that using multiple measures is more effective, even though the measures may be too cumbersome to administer and interpret. (Hodara et al., 2012). The rationale behind the benefits of using multiple measures to better place college freshman could also apply to the placement of high school freshmen, such as those involved with this study.

THE PLACEMENT MATRIX

As demonstrated by the research, by participants' input, and the analyzed data, one score cannot be the sole determining factor for placement. The measures included in the proposed placement matrix reflect what was learned from the previous sources and also tries to consider a balanced approach, encompassing a variety of literacy skills as well as consideration to the cost, time constraints and burden of a new assessment plan for this district (Rabinowitz, 2010). Therefore, it is recommended that the following measures be included in a placement matrix to gain a better understanding of student need: grades, writing benchmark, teacher rating, diagnostic tool and student input.

Grades: a valid measure of student achievement and used as a means of identifying students who may need a separate educational path (Gusky, 1994). Research finds that GPA can be a better indicator of student success than a placement test for those entering college (Fain, 2012). Participants frequently mentioned the use of grades in determining academic placement. A problem with using grades is their subjective nature (Gusky, 1994). Therefore, it is recommended that the grading system must be strengthened and more uniform. It is recommended that grades for both English classes, Literature Connections and Language Arts, be incorporated into the placement matrix, using a grade of C- or lower as the cut-off, which reflects below average proficiency.

Writing Benchmark: As a district, grade level writing tasks are administered uniformly for baseline data. Similarly, a standard writing task can be administered in the spring to help identify students who might benefit from academic (or honors) placement the following year. Several measures were explored for possible inclusion in the matrix, including the California Standards Tests (CSTs) for Grade 8 ELA (California Department of Education, 2009), NAEP 2011 Writing prompts and samples for Grade 8 (NCES, 2013), the Bader Reading and Language Inventory (Wright, 1989) and the Reading and Writing Project (2014). Of these, the Reading and Writing Project (2014), out of Columbia's Teacher's College, provides an excellent source for a writing benchmark task, which includes, by grade level, a reading passage and writing task, scoring rubric and student assessment sheet, aligned specifically to the CCSS Reading Standard 8 and Writing Standard 2 (The Reading and Writing Project, 2014). Students who score below proficient might benefit from an academic setting, based on this and other data. A word of caution, however, is that much like grades, assessing writing pieces is often a subjective practice, even with a standard rubric (Overmeyer, 2007/2008). If resources allow, writing pieces should be scored by at least two people to ensure inter-rater reliability and strengthen the validity of the results.

THE PLACEMENT MATRIX CONTINUED

Teacher Recommendation: Participants frequently mentioned the importance of the information teachers have about their students and many already believe that teacher recommendation is part of the academic placement process, and seems to be at the high school level. All teachers and most guidance counselors also stated that they frequently ask the previous year's teacher/guidance counselor for information on academic students, either at the beginning of the year or when a specific issue arises. The majority stated having this information provided to them early in the school year, rather than having to seek it out, would be invaluable. Yet two participants cautioned against making teacher recommendation a formal part of the placement process due to parental pressures that might result. To address both these issues, the importance of teacher input and desire to avoid a teacher's recommendation that could be influenced by parental pressure, I investigated the use of teacher rating scales used for placement purposes. It was thought that if there were a way to use a rating scale, teacher input would be incorporated more as an objective rating than a recommendation. Unfortunately, no existing rating scale for struggling students could be found. However, there were several for exceptional students. Therefore, I altered the Purdue University HOPE scale (2009) and Seminole County Public Schools Exceptional Student Support Services (2014) teacher rating scales and questions to address the needs of struggling ELA students. If there were more time, it would be recommended that this scale be field tested before its inclusion into the placement matrix.

Student Input: Research explains the importance of including adolescents in their educational decisions (Enriquez, 2011; Joselowsky, 2007). This was also noted by participants. When included, students have been found to become more responsible and vested in their academic success, which are noted weaknesses of the academically struggling student. Therefore, it was determined that a student questionnaire should be included in the placement matrix. Several measures were investigated as possible choices: the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MLSQ) (1991), School Motivation and Learning Strategies Inventory (SMALSI) (2006), and Learning and Study Strategies Inventory, Second Edition (LASSI) (2002). Based on research reviewed, the SMALSI is being recommended (Wright, 2007; Wright, 2010). The SMALSI inventory produces a profile of T-scores (M=50, SD=10) that help determine weaknesses in specific areas to be used in terms of cut-offs for the placement matrix (Stroud & Reynolds, 2014). I would further recommend a simple question be asked of students regarding their desire or opinion on being placed in an academic class to help strengthen their areas of weakness.

THE PLACEMENT MATRIX CONTINUED

Diagnostic Tool

Another key component to the placement matrix should be the inclusion of a diagnostic test geared to adolescents to get more detailed information about the subset of skills that influence reading comprehension (Morsy, Kieffer & Snow, 2010; O'reilly, Sabatini, Bruce, Pillorisetti & McCormick, 2012; Torgesen & Miller, 2009).

Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI): According to the extensive research conducted by Morsy, Kieffer and Snow (2010), the QRI is an excellent qualitative tool to determine a wide-range of reading skills, more so than other tools they reviewed. It incorporates a range of text genres, knowledge of text structure and oral reading skills. According to Clark, Kamhi, Nippold, & Boudreau (2014) the QRI is the most frequently used informal reading inventory. Flaws are that it requires a significant amount of time to administer individually. Results are best when the administrator is familiar with both the test and the student (Morsy, Kieffer & Snow, 2010).

GMRT: This assessment was reviewed as part of the discussion of screening tools. With further analysis by the test administrator, it can provide additional information on students for diagnostic purposes, such as identification of specific comprehension processes, including where breakdown occurs (Morsy, Kieffer, & Snow, 2010). Johnson and McCabe (2005) found the norm-referencing useful to determine progress and the inclusion of reading instruction tips helpful to teachers.

Achieve 3000: Achieve 3000 has moderate evidence of success in monitoring and evaluating students' achievement and progress and addresses individual factors, such as lack of effort or low commitment to school, which were very significant weaknesses noted by the participants for this population (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2013). It is a newer assessment, which provides reading Lexiles and content that is in alignment to the CCSS. As such, it includes tasks that require students to evaluate arguments and cite evidence, critical thinking skills required by the Common Core (WHAT'S NEW, 2013). Another benefit is there is familiarity in district with this program. If made accessible for Grade 8, I recommend Achieve 3000 be used as the diagnostic tool.

Parental Input: Another aspect mentioned by participants and found in the research was the importance of parental input. I recommend that parental involvement be initiated as soon as possible and parental notification be made for students who might qualify for academic or honors/enriched courses to maintain consistency and demonstrate equity in placement practices at all levels. A sample letter based on the one provided in the *Manual for the Admission and Placement of Exceptional Students* (Seminole County Public Schools, 2014) was created. It is at this point that parental input should be requested as to any concerns or issues relevant to ability or achievement.

THE PLACEMENT MATRIX

Below are the measures I recommend for use for the initial use of the placement matrix. The measures included are all readily available, either as part of current district assessments or created by this research practitioner. Parent/Guardian input would also be considered.

If a student demonstrates partial proficiency in four of the listed areas, he or she qualifies for academic placement.

Measure	***Evaluation***
GRADES: *Grades for both English classes, Literature Connections and Language Arts are incorporated. A grade of C- or lower should be used as the cut-off, as this grade reflects below average proficiency*	valid measure of student achievement (Gusky, 1994) better indicator of student success than a placement test (Fain, 2012)
WRITING BENCHMARK *Teacher's College (TC), The Reading and Writing Project writing benchmark*	grade level writing task, scoring rubric and student assessment sheet, aligned specifically to the CCSS Writing Standard 2 (The Reading and Writing Project, 2014) ; District familiarity with TC writing at the elementary level.
DIAGNOSTIC TOOL: *Achieve 3000*	demonstrated success monitoring and evaluating (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2013), ; used in district
TEACHER RATING *Adapted Purdue University HOPE scale (2009) and Seminole County Public Schools Exceptional Student Support Services (2014) teacher rating scales and questions to address the needs of struggling ELA students*	scholar-practitioner created rating tool—no evaluation available.
STUDENT INPUT *School Motivation and Learning Strategies Inventory (SMALSI) (2006)* 21	SMALSI is divided into two age group, 8-12 and 13-18; provides "exceptional diagnostic tools for assessing school-related motivation and learning strategies employed by students and for identifying problem areas for students who are academically low performers in school" (Wright, 2010).

PROPOSAL FOR IMPLEMENTATION AND TIMETABLE

Ideally, implementation needs to occur immediately. Time for a dialogue session needs to be provided prior to the end of the school year in order for it to have a practical application. It is hoped that the proposed matrix can be agreed upon, with perhaps minimal revision, so that it can quickly be implemented. The initial screen must be completed so that the other measures can be administered to the qualifying students prior the end of the year. If it is decided that revisions are needed, a committee with representatives from each area – an academic ELA teacher form middle school and one from the high school, a guidance counselor from middle school and one from high school, a child study team member and the English department supervisor – could be created and given a few hours over the summer to make the revisions. The same committee could then evaluate those students identified by the initial screening tool using the placement matrix. As the academic population is not so large as to be cumbersome, it is hoped that any schedule revisions that would need to be implemented as a result of the implementation of the matrix could be handled before the start of the 2015-2016 school year.

However, it is unlikely at this time of the year that this will occur. It is more likely that a significant number of students who would normally have been placed in the academic setting will be placed in CP due to the absence of a measure or policy that can be used to justify their placement. If this is the case, it is still recommended that a committee be created to evaluate the proposed placement matrix for use for next year's students, as the same problem is likely to remain, even if the PARCC is found to be an appropriate measure to assist in placement. It would only be one data point; it is hoped that the research presented would prevent the district from merely replacing the over-reliance of one high-stakes standardized test score with another.

IMPLICATIONS

This project address the needs of learners in district by attempting to create a uniform policy to more accurately place at-risk ELA learners. In creating a policy, students from the two middle schools will be placed using the same criteria, which could also be implemented at the high school, fostering greater continuity of instruction and fidelity of the academic program. It is also hoped that other aspects of the academic program will also be made uniform and part of district policy, such as the notification process for parents/guardians of academic students, greater consistency of grading, and more continuity in instructional programs between the schools.

The research conducted revealed great uncertainty and inconsistencies regarding the particulars of the academic program. Having a written policy to refer to would alleviate this confusion for teachers, supervisors, counselors and Child Study Team members. It would also help to explain the purpose of the program to other stakeholders, such as parents, students, and administrators.

In the larger context, this study highlights the dearth of current research available on literacy assessment and instruction specifically geared toward struggling adolescents. Furthermore, it demonstrates the need to re-examine assessments that are available for alignment with current standards and purposes for learning, as most assessments found were created over a decade ago. It also provides evidence against the practice of using high-stakes standardized tests for placement decisions. As demonstrated, such practices provide very limited information and do not provide a picture of the whole child. Furthermore, as the climate that surrounds high-stakes testing is very controversial and mercurial, relying on such tests may prove too transitory, putting districts in constant sates of uncertainty and change.

On the other hand, the proposed changes reflect sound research and practical experience. It is hoped that this research could serve as an impetus for positive change by enlightening districts as to the need to review and examine, or create depending on the case, a uniform policy for placement that takes into consideration the specific needs of the targeted population.

FINAL THOUGHTS

It is hoped that through this research and proposed solution, the problem of addressing the needs of struggling adolescent readers and writers through proper placement was made clear. This population will continue to need assistance reaching their full potential whether or not a state standardized test is used to evaluate their proficiency levels. All students do not achieve at the same rates and in the same educational settings. Therefore, there will always be students who can benefit from the extra support and scaffolding provided by the academic program. It is our duty to make sure that every student who needs help, gets help. This starts with proper identification and placement. We are beholden to use the best information and resources at our disposal to ensure that we create and implement a clear and consistent policy to identify, place and instruct our struggling students. The proposed solution, inclusive of dialogue among stakeholders and the implementation of a placement matrix, is an important step in achieving these goals.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pamela Burke-Haug is currently a Grade 8 English Language Arts (ELA) teacher in New Jersey, though she has taught most grades, preschool through middle school, in her 18 years as a teacher. She has earned a B.A. in English, M.Ed. in Reading, Ed.D. in Reading and Literacy Leadership, and certifications as an Elementary Education teacher, Teacher of English, K-12, and Reading Specialist. In her teaching career, she has taught in a variety of settings, including: collaborative, alongside a special education teacher; advanced ELA classes; all subjects, with reading, writing and social studies concentration; regular education courses; and classes designed for struggling students. It is this last population she finds the most intriguing, yet perhaps the least emphasized, thus prompting her research focus. Having two children of her own who have required her advocacy at times in their own education, she felt it was important to be an advocate for her – and other – struggling students. This became even more important in the face of educational reform movements resulting in a push for national standards and increased standardized testing and accountability measures, of which Mrs. Burke-Haug is opposed to in their current state, believing that these standards and tests are not based on educationally sound research and practice, nor do they foster environments conducive to meeting the needs of all students. It is hoped that her research will improve learning for students, especially those who struggle with reading and writing, and downplay the importance given to high-stakes standardized tests when placing and instructing students.

Appendix B: Letter of Informed Consent

CONSENT FORM

You are invited to take part in a research study to examine the placement of ninth grade academic English language arts (ELA) students at our district's high school.

The researcher is inviting all faculty involved with the instruction and placement of academic ELA students in Grades 7 through 10 to be in the study. 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 Pamela Burke-Haug, who is a doctoral student at Walden University. You may already know the researcher as a Grade 8 ELA teacher, but this study is separate from that role.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is to determine the unique needs and characteristics of academic students, what assessments we may currently have that could be used to help accurately place them, and if there are any other assessments or measures we should include to ensure proper academic placement.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Answer interview questions, either in person or on the phone. This will occur at the onset of the study and take approximately 30- 45 minutes.
- Be available to answer any follow up questions that may arise after the initial interview questions. It is anticipated that follow up should take 15-20 minutes.
- Provide any formative or summative assessments used to determine academic students' strengths and weaknesses. Only the assessments would be collected, not actual student performance on them.
- Check the researcher's findings for accuracy upon completion of data collection and analysis by determining whether or not the information reflects your perceptions and statements.

Here are some sample questions:

- How would you define an academic level student?
- If you believe any changes are needed in current placement practices, what are they? Please be as specific as possible.
- Is there any other information you would like to have on academic students to better address their needs? If so, please explain.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one at the school district or any employee of the school district will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time, without any penalty.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:
Being in this type of study involves some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as fatigue, stress, fear of saying the wrong thing, or feeling pressed for time. Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing. The potential benefits of this study include learning more about struggling readers and writers, better understanding placement practices for this population, and perhaps improving the accuracy of academic level placement which is hoped to improve learning outcomes.

Payment:
There will be no compensation for participating in this research study.

Privacy:
Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. Data will be kept secure on the researcher's password protected computer. Data will be kept for a period of at least five years, as required by the university.

Contacts and Questions:
You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via email at pamela.burke-haug@waldenu.edu. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is **#02-04-15-0361757.**

<u>Please print or save this consent form for your records.</u>

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement.

I can sign and return this document or reply to this email with the words, "I consent"; either demonstrates that I understand that I am agreeing to the terms described above.

Printed Name of Participant _____

Date of consent _____

Appendix C: Transcripts Samples

Interview 1: Participant 1.
The following is a transcription recorded on February 13, 2015.
So I am just going to begin reading through my first group of questions:
Okay.
And answer them the best you can. And if you need me to clarify anything…
Mmhmm
Okay, the first thing is going to revolve around the characteristics and needs of academic English language arts students. So how would you define an academic ELA student?
So are you talking like my section of the class or are you talking about someone who would be like uhh….
I'm talking about you, like how would you define- what do you think are the characteristics or what qualifies a student to be academic?
To be an academic, Umm. I honestly tend to find that these students tend to be reluctant readers. I think they are people who, or students who feel not confident in their skills as a reader to read on their own. They don't necessarily love to read on their own. Umh, they definitely struggle with writing. I think that that is a major factor as well…vocabulary …things like that.
Okay. In thinking about the academic students, in what areas specifically do they have difficulty? (Pause – no immediate response) You mentioned vocab.
Mmhmm
So is that decoding, accessing, context (participant begins speaking as last words are said)
I have not found so far that decoding is much of an issue, you know, fluency is not really a problem with the students I've had thus far. I think it can be depending on the reader. I think that it's definitely more comprehension. I think that it's, um, it's also getting down their thoughts about literature on paper. I think there's a very big disconnect with that.
Do all students have similar difficulties, or do some students – or do the students demonstrate a wide range of difficulties?
I think a wide range – BUT – I do think the one common link is that comprehension is the area that they struggle the most in terms of that whole kind of blanket that is reading. I think that is the hardest part with them.
In what areas do they do well?
(pause) I think decoding. I think fluency. They're okay, um, that hasn't been something that we've focused on. They can be very creative, too, which I've noticed. Things like creative writing or narratives, poetry, where I don't have to necessarily give them that much direction for it or it doesn't link directly to a text, they have a lot of fun with that. So they're creative.
Do all students have similar strengths, or again, is there a wide range or variety in their strengths?
I think definitely a wide range. Umh, you know there are definitely students who are better writers than others, um, there are students who are more creative…it's … it ranges.
In addressing the needs of your students, what factors, like 3 to 5, are critical to address.

What - you mean like…
I guess, like you had mentioned the comprehension. So would you think that is one of the main factors?
Yes
Okay, so in the area of comprehension, what would you-(participant begins speaking)
So I tend to focus on with *my* kids, especially this year, we go over a lot of active reading strategies; so we talk a lot about what it means to actively read and to think while reading, which I know sounds kind of silly, but I think that often times they'll read a text but not really read, like they're thinking of something else. So, um, I do a lot of think-alouds, we do a lot of annotating the text, we talk about pre-reading, you know making predictions, thinking what the text might be about before they tackle it… um, asking the right questions. So that is what we focus on the most - I don't know if that answered the question, but…
……
How are the academic students placed into the academic class; What's the criteria?
NJASK.
Okay.
(little laugh) There's CTP 4, too. But I think it's just NJASK.
Do you think there's a cut off score that's used?
Umm 200 seems to be the cut off score. However, I do have certain kids that were slightly above of 200, and then I have- there are students that are below 200 that were not placed into my class; I don't know if that was just error but it seems that 200 is the cut off. I have a couple of like 202s but I go as low as 164.
There are no IEPs? No classified students?
No, there's not. 504's. I have a couple of 504's, but there's kids that I've – I had one student last year that I went – he is now classified so definitely with the at risk population- so they are on the radar. So, like, the 164 needs a bit watching.
What is your opinion on the current placement practices; how accurately do you believe that the practices are placing students? You had mentioned some students below are not in academic, some students above are, some students may be classified –
You know to think – to be honest – I think that NJASK can be used as one of the indicating factors in terms of where they're placed, but I don't personally think that it's the best way to decide. Umm, I think teacher recommendation and input is important, because like I said with some of my __ graders there are certain students that I really just think are lazy and they will get a D with me and they would get a D with someone else just because they don't do their homework. Umm, so I don't know that those students necessarily always benefit from the class –and I don't really know from ___ grade to ___ you know, it would be nice to be able to have a dialogue with the ___ grade teachers to see, you know, to have the teachers place them. But that might open up this whole thing, so I don't know. But I think that it's one factor. I think that looking at their grades is definitely, you know, would be a factor. But their writing I think is a factor, so there's a lot of ways that you can look at the whole picture as opposed to just the NJASK scores. Because I know there were students last year who I tested that we were convinced that were going to be in my class, and I would have liked them to be in my class. I could see

that they're below grade level, that we should watch them. But then they may have scored a 205 and who's to say that that 205 shouldn't be in where the 202 does. So it's very capricious, certainly arbitrary, just looking at the numbers.
Okay, that's great because you just answered my next question, which is if you believe any changes needed to be made to current placement practices, what they would be.
To have a first cut off like who do we look at, we can look at NJASK and then do an investigation with other measures.
All right. What assessments or measures of student achievement, if any, do you use to determine the needs of you academic students formally or informally?
Well, at the beginning of the year, I DRA them and the Gates-MacGinitie test. Umm, again, it helps me to get a picture of them to get to know them. I think that the running record is actually good because I can see if there are students who have fluency issues and decoding issues, and that's something we can work on. Umm, I don't love it for reading comprehension. I don't know that the test are – I don't want to say they are challenging – that they're not challenging enough, but I almost feel like, you know, the one story that the kids always pick is "Froggy and Princess" because the story is kind of open and they can kind of, you know…. I don't think that it's that challenging. I think that sometimes I find that they have more trouble with the reading comprehension than the DRA led me to believe based on the scoring. Umm, the Gates test is pretty good, but what I noticed though is that of times there is a discrepancy, so if they don't have issues with vocabulary because the way it is the Gates test will put them at like oh it's grade, 9th grade vocabulary level but then on the DRA they're lower, so it's a matter of looking at the two and then kinda figuring out what the real issue is.
Okay. Uh, so the running record you mentioned. I wanted to get an idea -the premise was for fluency?
Um hum.
The Gates would be more for –
The Gates would be -- it's a multiple choice test; vocabulary and then reading comprehension but it's different because whereas the DRA they have open ended responses and the test is longer, the Gates is multiple choice and it's like short reading passages, so it's like a couple of paragraphs and then there are questions that follow. Umm, and that one is timed the DRA I don't usually time them, so that's something I look at, so if it takes a student 4 class periods to finish the DRA, that's something that would indicate that there is some sort of disconnect there. Uh, whereas if the student rushes through it and gives me one sentence that's also something as well. So I look at, you know, the timing of the test.
Do you ever look at the CTP4s?
(Pause – quieter tone) I don't really like the CTP4s.
Okay, I just know that's another test.
(starts talking while I am- little laugh) I've had parents that were concerned last year, the parents would email me when the scores come in, umm, and then it's just, you know, a matter of reassuring them, but I don't love the CTP4. I think it's a little outdated, the analogies and such that we don't really teach that.
So it doesn't really reflect what they know because its concepts that haven't been taught.

Yeah, I don't really…(tapers off).
Are there any data that are available to you that's helpful in instructing academic students?
When they're coming from ___ grade, there's the card that we get from ____ grade teachers. That is always interesting to me because then I have found out that there were certain students who were in the process of being classified and parents that don't - they stopped it or things like that so you kind of learn their background a little bit, so that to me is actually pretty helpful. Umm, to see how motivated they are, the teachers will give a bit of a picture, and then typically what I will do this year if there were students in the ___ grade class that I didn't have I always go back and talk to the teachers that they had the year before, and I find that to be helpful.
Do you receive any data that did not help? You had mentioned the CTP4.
Yeah, I think the CTP4s and the NJASK help to a point, but I don't think it's everything. So, it's helpful but its - there's more.
There's nothing else that you are provided with for the students?
No.
Is there any other information that you would like to have on academic students to better address their needs?
You know, I think for me the best thing is to talk to their teachers, so I tend to do that on my own. Uh- be provided their grades to see how they did the year before. I think that NJASK history is important, you know, to see the history of the test because… which I actually do have access to. Umm, a few years back, I don't get the whole entire ___ grade on, but it's interesting to see, you know, did a student do well in ___ grade and then all of a sudden plummet in ___ grade? You could find out did the parents get divorced or what happened, you know, there's more that you can discover about the actual kid you know.
So when you talk to the previous year's teacher, are there certain questions that you ask or do you just let them-
(begins to talk)- I usually just say, you know, I'll say I have this student and usually the teacher is "oh I am not surprised!" and then we'll kind of go through, so what was he or she like in class.
Are there other typical issues that come up or is there -
(begins talking before I end the question) I think it's a wide picture. I think some of them, you know, the teachers will say that the student didn't really grasp or it seemed like they were lost the entire year. Sometimes you find out that there are behavior issues, you know. I think that could be a problem with the academic section, that sometimes you'll get kids who are there because they lack that motivation or that you know that dynamic at home, so that they're behavior problems. And then there are those real easy kids to help, because they try. Then I definitely find that out, too, every once in a while, "He's in your class!", you know, "Good luck!" kind of thing. But not necessarily for academic reasons.
And never, no access to if they were I&RS before?
Uh, I'm not told that. I'm sure I could figure it out. I could ask if they have been, umm, but I am not given that information, no. That would actually be good to have, though.
Right. Other than hunting down all the teachers, is there another way to have this information provided to you?

I think it would be great to just be told that. You know once my class is made up, and it seems there's a lot of care taken as to who I get, so it would be nice then to hear from maybe guidance that this is your class let's talk about each of these kids because- my function, and maybe I shouldn't assume it, is if they're in the academic section, they've probably been on the radar. You know, either in ___ grade or in ___, so it would be nice to be told. You know, it would be nice to – I'm just given my class list and that's what happens.

If you did want or you were able to be provided this other information, when would you want it by?

I would think before school starts off – in August that would help for sure.

Okay. Is there anything else that you might want to add about placement that I didn't ask a question about or the academic students, the structure of the class?

No.

Okay. All right

That was quick!

Thank you.

Is that good? Did we hit everything?

We hit everything. But I did want to follow up on one thing you mentioned. You had mentioned that because the NJASK is no longer being administered and now we have the PARCC, so there is nothing to use as a cut off or a base line or for placement.

Yeah, so next year I think it will be interesting to see what will happen in terms of how the students will get chosen, I think that that's going to be interesting to see because we don't have the NJASK scores now, so I think there's going to have to be- it's going to have a more well-rounded picture. You know I've said teacher recommendations. Um I know that it seems as though they want more of that- you know- that *data* that we can provide. I don't know if that's gonna mean that once teachers recommend students that I'm going to have to DRA them or give them the Gates test at the end of the year, so that there's more data saying that this why [identifying information removed]

MmmmHmm

You know, I don't know, umm…

And that wasn't a problem to do it that way [use recommendations for placement] or you think that also had flaws?

There's always flaw. I mean we would have it even the other way, for the honors' kids, if a kid wasn't recommended than it was like, you know, parents got involved. But we would also do writing assessments, too, so we would assess – so if for some reason they weren't recommended and the kid wanted to get in we would have them sit down, analyze a piece of literature and write something on the spot – they couldn't take it home. And that was a factor to see. So I can see the point in me having to do some sort of assessment. I just don't love the DRA, and I wish that I could find something that I thought was more appropriate.

For the adolescent population.

Yes, for that.

Okay. So you think that is more of an elementary or that it doesn't coincide-with the NJASK.

(Interrupting) I don't know if it coincides with the Common Core to be honest. They're being expected to do so much more now, and I don't know that the DRA does that, you know. It might ask questions like – they're very like- there's one question that will be a recall question, there's one questions that will be theme- thematic question. You know, to base it on one question of a text that I don't know if – that I don't think is a text that is all that challenging compared to what they're being expected to read.

Participant 4. The following is a transcription recorded on March 10, 2015.
The first cluster is based on the characteristics and needs of academic English language arts students.
Okay.
So my first question is how would you define and academic level ELA student?
I would say on the whole most of the academic level students, if not all, um, struggle with the content area itself. Most of them are low achieving, at least on the NJASK that we used in past for tracking – now that's all beginning to change with PARCC. But that's generally how we based placement, a large amount of it, in addition to that they tend to be a little bit less motivated than your CP tracked students so there's a motivation issue. Um, there is a kind of an issue with just the content area itself, they tend to be a little bit lower performing coming in which we see, um, in their NJASK scores. In a lot of cases I have a lot – well not a lot, but a large – you know I would even say – in my last year's class, a majority population were culture/ethnic minorities. A large Hispanic, African-American population, a lot of single parent homes, lower socio-economic statuses kind of for the area coming – things like that, so there's kind of an amalgamation of stuff at work, so it's a little hard to pinpoint it to one.
MhhHmm
So I think it's just this soup of a few different things at play, uh with the students I've seen.
Okay. In thinking about the academic student, where specifically do they have difficulty, like if you could find a common weakness (as I say last word, participant starts speaking)
Reading comprehension in general is very weak. Motivation is very weak. I felt that from what I've seen, none of them – not none of them – a large percentage are not self-motivating, especially in content areas. I think for a long time they've been told or had issues with the content areas so that by the time they reach me in ___ grade they are kind of at this point where they assume that this is not going to be something for them. They *assume* they're going to have trouble, they *assume* they are going to hit obstacles. There's already this kind of self-fulfilling prophecy going on when they walk into the classroom. Oh this is English, I've never done well in English. I'm not going to do well here.
Right.
I know what – you know – I know that this going to be like. SO they are already turned off from the get go. Which is challenging. SO- reading comprehension definitely is an issue. The numbers reflect that and the assessments right from the beginning uh reflect that . Vocabulary is generally lesser than what I might find in a CP or honors level

course by far. Umm (pause) I'm just trying to think if there's anything else I want to …..(tapers off).

So do you find that generally the academic students (bell rings) uh- there are typical achievement levels or is there a wide range where there's someone who might be a grade level below and another might be (three grade levels below – as I say this last phrase, he begins speaking)

I think it's relatively wide. My academic level class changes in terms of me losing or gaining students more so than any other class that I teach. What I mean is I started this year with 12 students. I now have three extra students. I probably am going to be losing a student after IEP meetings are finished this year. Umm getting the placement right, working with child study- a lot of them either have 504 or IEP classified….

So you have academic students starting the year with who are classified?

I do. I have a couple, not many – I think I have a student with a 504 as well.

Is it a supported class?

I have a para, but for the most part it's me. Which is fine. But it's working with Child Study, working with guidance especially, it gets tricky, placing the kid. Because we want - the purpose of the academic, at least as I found it, is we want to strengthen the basic skills necessary to get the student into the college prep class.

Right.

Our goal, ideally would be to move everybody up.

Right.

It won't happen you know, because this is not an ideal world, but the idea is that this is a supported class at a lower speed. We're working with the same cannon of texts

MhhHmmm,

I'm just differentiating. Usually I don't give much homework, I don't give outside projects, most stuff gets done in class. But the idea is to work on these basic skills to get the students up to that level. By the end of the year last year I had one student who I felt could move up out of academic, this year I might have another one, but for the most part getting them up to that level is tough. And I've collaborated that with other teachers who have been teaching academic longer than I have.

Right.

And the problems is – I'm getting off topic – (laugh) but

That's okay.

The problem I found, too, is what winds up happening is the kids wind up traveling together and after – by the time they hit junior, senior year they're still in academic, still in academic, still in academic, still in academic- some of them then wear it like a badge of honor and since they're with the same kids in academic English a lot of them are also in academic social studies, some of them are in academic math or – Common Core math – or an academic level science. And for those core kids – it's not necessarily all of the kids in my academic class, but for those kids, they'll find that they'll all start to travel together, and they became so used to the same classroom setting and being with their friends year after year and staying in this academic level that a large part is that they're not necessarily motivated to go beyond that.

Right, it's like it breeds indifference.

Yes. And that's also one of my issues with tracking in general because it does breed – especially in the academic level – it breeds a lot of indifference and they know what to expect, and they know that if they move up, they're going to be challenged more. Even the students who can move up are extremely hesitant, and I think a large part of that is to do with knowing there's going to be more work.

Is there a big jump from the academic to the CP?

Yes and no – it depends on the teacher. The way I run an academic class may be different than the way someone else runs the same academic class. It's the same cannon texts, umm…

Right – same curriculum, slower pace.

Yes, same curriculum, slower pace, much less outside work, I move much slower. Usually I'm a couple days behind in my academic than I am in my CP. Um – you know I do almost no homework because it's not going to get done. I do almost no outside projects because I know it's not going to get done. I've been down that road and it's a very stressful one. I'm tracking every single kid down for every little piece and if I find myself working harder than any of the other students combined, then I know that there's a problem.

Mmhmm

Um, so that's a major difference is the outside work. Um, you know, I've also spoken with students and I know that there's stuff going on outside of school, too. Mom works 3 jobs, no dad. You know – they have problems from the get go. The student doesn't read outside of school at all. That's a huge difference, especially from a reading & literacy stand point. Um especially when it's not being reinforced at home. (…pause)

Right.

Or when English isn't the first language and English isn't being spoken at home. That's a big problem. SO like I said there's this whole of mess of stuff going on. For certain kids, the kid with an IEP and a single mother, umm, you know, no support at home that they should be getting and all those kinds of things come together, and it really makes for a problem or at least a major barrier.

Okay. Are there areas that they do well?

(Little laugh & smile) What I like about my academic kids is that they will cut to the chase. They're very much – more so – motivated- you know if I set up benchmarks, and they are reasonable benchmarks that I can expect them to meet, they are going to get right to work. They jump to it. They are very much, you know, "Okay here's a job let me go." At least for the academic kids, which is nice because I can always plan when they are ready to get working, um, that they are going to finish quite quickly. Which then also becomes a problem, because I have to make sure that they are really doing the work necessary and taking the time to do it right. But they are a cut to the chase kind of bunch. They are like, "Alright, we get it, let's go, let's do this thing", which is nice. You know, they get to class and they are just ready to work, in a kind of weird way, which can be nice. Umh …other strengths for the academic kids…they are very willing, I don't even want to say willing, what I've found is they hold onto things that have worked from the past. I had a lot of kids come in from the ____ grade that do the text-to-text, text-to-self, text-to-world connections that they do in [earlier grades] and at a certain point I have to

start kind of – especially with Common Core, I have to wean them off with the text-to-text, text-to-self, text-to-world but they will hold fast to those types of things that will …
A formula.
Yes, because it's formulaic and that's the way they are, that's the way their brains work, especially when we write our essays. I have to give, you know, this is what you are doing here, here, here and here. This is the step, these are the types of words to use, etcetera. Which - you know, getting back to the benchmarks, once that is set up for them, they are ready to go and they'll work and they'll get it done, but the trouble becomes when it's not as clear cut, and especially at this second half of the year where I start, you know, loosening the chain and giving them that little bit more opportunity to work and think more for themselves. That becomes challenging. So you know it's great because as soon as I say text or text-to-text, text-to-self, text-to-world anything like that they (snaps fingers) they know exactly what I'm talking about because they really do hold onto those things, but then it's a double-edged sword because breaking them of that becomes even more difficult than with the CP or an honors level class because its comfortable.
Right. Okay. In addressing the needs of the students, what factors are critical to address?
A large part of it is I do, I actually push more vocabulary with my academic level students. I push more independent reading with my academic level students. Um, I feel that I have to, to a certain extent. I feel that it helps a great deal. Um, I devote more independent class time to that kind of stuff because I know it's not getting done at home.
MhhHmmm
I can assign a piece of reading to a CP level class and 75% of the kids are going to do it whereas in an academic level, no one, and I mean that literally when I say that, I mean no one because once again, because the expectation is – they know, you know, "We're *not* going to do this, who is he kidding? He can assign it, but we're not going to do it", you know. And there is this power in numbers kind of mentality, where they go, "Well, if no one does it, than he can't – you know, what's he going to do to all of us?". And there at that point where they've figured that out, you know?
Right.
So, it's really – (little laugh) I really have to be a psychologist and really kind of figure that kind of stuff out. So I do a *lot* of independent work in class because I have to make up for the things that are not getting done outside of class, which is great because I'm there for instruction, um, but at the same time, once again, it's losing instructional time. Um, (pause) I'm sorry, could you repeat the question? I just want to make sure I'm answering…
What factors do you need to address that are critical, maybe 3-
Yeah, so you know they can be autonomous when the benchmarks are there and they know exactly what it is they have to do. It's really, um, giving the freedom to think for themselves where I don't have to spoon feed them bit by bit. You know, "What is the next sentence supposed to say? What do I need to put here? What should I put in this sentence? How many paragraphs should it be, should it be 2 paragraphs, and what should

I put in them?" – It's really getting them to the point – at his point in the year with my CP, I can kind of just let them go, the academic still are not there
Okay.
So just kind of taking the opportunity to understand that he can be right and she can be right and you don' necessarily have to do the exact the same thing, and you both can be right in your own way, and that subjectivity I think is what they struggle with a lot. Um and I've talked to ___, ____, ____ grade academic teachers and it's still- they still have that issue.
Right
"I don't know what to write." And they'll give up, throw their hands up, you know?
Yes.
Where the academic level, once again, I feel a lot of the kids are really in the same boat with that. They really don't want to push through, um, as much….You know, I'm generalizing, but um that's kind of what I've seen. SO giving them that encouragement is big, you know, even with high school kids, you have to do as much encouragement, especially with these kids, you know, or else they throw their hands up and they shut down.

……
I'd like to move on into the current placement practices.
Okay.
So how would you define the class- like, if you were to see academic English language arts in a syllabus, what would the definition be?
(Sigh) Ummm, I would probably use the word or phrase practicing basic skills, um, you know because that really …I think one of the large parts of what we're trying to do in essence with academic is foster student growth and facilitate students to really get them to work on basic skills in order to bring them up to that CP level. I think that's really the push in theory.
That's funny, because one of my other questions is do you think there is a disconnect between what it is able to do in theory and what it is able to do in practice.
Absolutely, because you know – and I've mentioned a lot of this before – (seems to search for words) and I don't even know if I necessarily have an answer, but I can point out the problem and it's not even necessarily a problem with tracking, but the problem is maybe its accountability? Maybe it's a motivation issue? Um, or….you know it's tough to say. Maybe it's simply keeping the same curriculum is the problem within itself, maybe the academic curriculum needs to be a much more altered curriculum. It's tough to say.
MmmHmmm.
All I can tell you is there is definitely a disconnect. I can tell you that on paper the point of an academic class is a slower paced course meant to push students to the next level or with the hope of getting students up to that level. It rarely happens. And like I said, self-fulfilling prophecies, as time goes on, students tend to sit in that level more.
So there's not a lot of movement
And as time –
Or maybe movement in more than out?

There's more - I would say there's probably an equal amount, in or out. Most of the movement I feel is more 9th maybe 10th grade, and by the time it gets to the upper levels, the movement stagnates a bit. Um, you know, for a multitude of reasons, but um, you know there are times when students are moved into academic, and then they need to moved back out and vice versa. But that's kind of what it's been, what I've seen.
You had touched upon this before with the NJASK scores, but how are students placed into the academic level?
It was NJASK, I feel that was the biggest contributing factor, because I had sheets with a layout of all the students and I could go in and highlight and find my student in the academic placement and see where their number fell umm and they were, I mean the numbers at least in that sense - but then I can get in the debate over standardized testing – Just in terms of what I had, the numbers told me my academic students were partially proficient, and that's really a large part of it. I think teacher recommendations, too, at the middle school level and seeing where kids were in terms of their grades and reflective contrast to their peers had something to do with it to, but at least from what I've seen, a large part of it is the NJASK scores.
Do you know who places them, who would gather that information to place them?
I believe it's the English language supervisor. Our K through 12 supervisor in the English language arts.
Okay.
Whether the middle school administrative staff has anything to do with that, I don't know, but I know that the English language arts supervisor has a great deal to do with that.
And do you give recommendations-
I do, yeah, I do.
So it's not just score or –
No, I do give a recommendation, which is why I would assume… to be honest, I don't know as much from the middle school level to the high school level, I just assume if I'm doing it and I know that they do it [in other grades in the high school] , then I assume that they'd do the same thing. –
There's no set- (start talking before participant finished)
-In addition to the score
-sorry. There's a set procedure for that? Or is it an informal conversation?
It's more – it's a little bit of both. Because I have to, I really do have to make my recommendation – you know, I meet with English language arts supervisor um and we discuss where I think the kids should fall. If the student has an IEP, I will meet with child study and they will also depend on – but that's really because of the IEP, but if they happen to also be in the academic level they'll ask. If I need to, informally, if there's a problem I might discuss that same thing with guidance, especially if a kid needs to be moved midyear which they avoid, but if needs to be it done, or if I bring it to someone's attention, if I feel that there's a major issue that needs to be addressed, if I feel a kid is floundering here or if I feel that the kid is miles above the academic level, I could reach out at any time. Um, but in between grade level, there is a conversation that we do take time to do but it's a bit informal.

Okay. And what's your opinion on the current placement practices? How accurately do you (he laughs a little) believe they place – you mentioned this before, and I agree it's hard to determine if it's ability or motivation.
That's it. It is such a grey thing, um, and it's really kind of a spectrum, with the students and I think that's true to a certain extent for all students but it's very obvious here. Um, certain students it's ability, and certain students it's mostly ability, and certain students it's more of a social thing and- or if, like I said, English isn't spoken at home or if English is second language type thing, it could be mom works three jobs, I didn't go to bed last night because no one was home and now I'm exhausted every day, or I'm moving around a lot, it could be a million different things, it could be both, it could be a 504, an IEP, to be honest it's so hard to say…. I'm sorry- what was the original question?
What was your opinion on the current placement practices? Are they accurate?
So I want to say that there's a lot that probably could be done to make them more accurate.
MmmHmm.
I think that the students I do get in my academic level due to one extent or another need the extra help. I think that in the CP – I know that in the CP level they would flounder. I don't know, however, if that's necessarily the best way to go about doing it. I think that they're finding the kids who need the help, however I don't necessarily know if we're getting them in a place that's going to maximize their chances of becoming as successful as they could be.
Right. Because by saying this entire group needs help doesn't necessarily mean they all need help in the same way.
Exactly. You know – exactly. You know it's funny, too, because I've read a lot of literature about untracking the classroom…
MmHmmm.
And I'm torn on that, too, you know a lot of it is because I've lived with the tracking system for so long, and I've been teaching it, but then on the flip side, I could see something like that working. But uh – I – I think that's exactly what it is we've targeted. I think the group of students who really do need the help, I think we've got that, um, it's the way that we're going about doing it that I don't know if it necessarily is the most effective – if that makes any sense.
Yes, it does.
Okay…
Because they don't have the same needs, just the same end result.
Exactly. How we would go about differentiating between them –I don't know. They are experimenting with a new program that one of the academic teachers is using in the school, called Achieve …
3000?
3000. um –
300? Or 3000?
(little laugh) Not sure. But which could potentially – could work because then that's really supposed to be testing students simply being able to read a text, pull information

form a text, make connections and then their given a score. Um, once again standardized testing and testing it can never be a true indicator of a student, but at least in that case we have a student who is failing and then really does well on the test, well, then we can understand that it is not student ability thing, but something else – Maybe.
Right.
But that's one thing I am interested in learning more about.
……
(brief pause while I locate where I am in my questions as he has answered consequent questions as part of previous responses) Along similar lines, how accurate is the NJASK in measuring their ability?
(sigh)…I'm very anti-standardized test all around, so there's going to be my bias there. I do now that for the most part, it tends to be a pretty good predictor of where a student might be in terms of ability level. That being said, they took the NJASK the year before. Prior to that I don't know what's happening outside of school, I don't know what kind of support they're getting and I don't know if they're taking the test seriously the day they take or if they're really tired or they're not trying. That I don't know, so I can – once again, speaking in generalities, I see a correlation between the score and ability level, based on my own assessments, both formative & summative. So there is something to be said for its use, but at the same time I'm very hesitant – I take it with a grain of salt. You have to, because there are exceptions.
…..Okay. I think that answers it. What measures of student achievement, if any, do you use formally or informally to get a feel for your students?
In my academic we do more project-based assessments – have to. It really works for the students. A lot of them are really more hands-on. They're more tactile or visual, they're not going to sit through a ten minute lecture or note taking session the same way a CP student might.
MmHmm.
They really need project-based stuff, collaborative-based stuff. So I do more of that in the academic level. Um .. and you know for example, a project that may take a CP level one full period, if I say by the end of the period that's it, the academic might take a period and a half, because they're struggling. So I have to differentiate that way, but it's much more project-based Um… we do our summative assessment type stuff, um...you know after reading a text or something, but even those types of assessments I have to alter to one degree or another, and it's much more comprehension based.
Okay.
I do very little, like I said, homework and you know no reading outside of class, because it's not going to get done. Um, so that's kind of where I'm at with that. I'm a big project person, I'm all about the projects, really, so -which is nice for me because then I get to do that kind of stuff in class. Um, class participation and class work grading, too, because its effort based, too.
MmmHmm.
And at some point I have to just make sure they're putting the effort in, more so than at the CP level, and then I can kind of grade that, so you can see a lot more class work, a lot more project base stuff being done in class that's being graded, whereas at the CP level,

we're doing more …summative assessments um, you know study for this particular quiz, know this content, have this stuff ready to go by this date, whereas the academic level, it just doesn't quite work the same. I have to kind of monitor in class stuff, are you putting in the effort into classwork, stuff like that.
Okay. Is there any other data available to you that are helpful in instructing academic students? Do you receive any other information?
Not really. …Um… I speak to the supervisor and he kind of tells me, but he doesn't know the kids individually.
Right.
Umm – I – I've never really – I've never reached out nor have I really spoken to any _____ colleagues about the students that are coming in.
Is there a forum that's available for that?
No, no. Um, which once again, I think I touched upon this earlier, I really don't know what's happening before.
Right.
So I'm kind of on the dark on what's coming, with academic…..But – no, there's no communication other than through the supervisor and the test scores.
Okay. Is there information you'd ***like*** *to have?*
Ideally I'd like to get some information on certain students and know, you know, what's going on with the students, what's, what's – is there anything, any information, that I should know. Things that worked for the previous teacher with this particular student. You had this student last year for English, tell me about him, tell me about her. What's the deal? The nice things about the certain students who have IEPS that I get, I can read the IEPs and get all the information from past years, and I can learn a little about the student, but that's only for students with IEPs.
Right.
I don't have that with any of the other kids, so….
You had mentioned that placement is based mainly on NJASK, but also teacher input. Do you receive any of that-
I don't get any of the teacher input, no.
Okay. Umm, is there anything other than teacher input?
(pause) Well, I mean other than the test scores & teacher input, I mean… ideally – the funny thing is, too, in this is from what I've seen, at back to school night, which is really the only time we get direct interaction with parents, unless they want to set up a conference, or email me, um I have a very low number of parents who attend back to school night.
Mmmhmm.
Specifically in academic. I get the least there than anywhere else. In terms of attendance. So you know that's kind of a time when I get at least a brief moment to speak to parents, but at that point it's really early on in the year, so I don't really know the kids, it's usually only the first few days of school and we only get ten minutes and then they have to shuffle out and get to the next class, so it's almost as if …(pause) there's no interaction. So I'd say parent involvement, but I don't know how practical or, not even necessarily practical, but how effective that would be.

Okay.
Umm, so other than that, so the best thing I think we could have would be more dialogue between the teachers maybe.

……
For the grading, you had mentioned you have different assessments.
MmHmm.
Is it on a grading scale, the academic and the CP, is it on a different scale?
Uhh, well, here's, -it's a very subjective thing.
Okay.
It's incredibly subjective. Umm….what I have in mind that's an A in CP is a very different A in academic. I can't, to a certain extent – and some people will fight me on this, and some people will agree with me one hundred percent on this – what you are expecting as the benchmark for success, you know the "A" in CP, is probably going to be of a higher quality than what I'm seeing in the academic. The problem is not really fair to the student if I were to say, you now, compare them and say, if this is my grading in CP, this is the exact same standard I'm going to hold you to in academic. And I'm going to see a large amount, to be completely honest, of D's and F's, and C's. It's just not fair to the students, so a large part of it subjective. I know that if this, like I said, I don't have – there is no written grading scale, we're not given anything that says "This is the academic grading scale, use this". I'm coming up with it on my own, and it's a very kind of subjective process. Umm, you know when I use a PARCC rubric or something to grade writing assessments, I know that at the CP level if the student scores a 20, that's a 100%, that's an A. But at the academic level, if the student gets a 17, that's an A, like a 100%. SO I have to kind of shift that down, is essentially what it becomes.
But it would be based on, again, those motivational factors and self-esteem issues – so that a low self-esteem is not further pushed back.
A large part. Yeah, that's exactly what it is, because I know if I did that – you know I made a lot of mistakes at the beginning when I had never done academic before, in trying to hold them to the same standard, and it doesn't work.
Right. Like saying "I'm glad you tried, but you still failed".
Right. And they will shut down.
Right.
And that's it. And they are the type, for the most part where ….it's not that they don't care, but they're not going to go that extra step to achieve a higher level. They are very comfortable with where they are. So if I start throwing out F's and D's, F's and D's, and Cs it's gonna really squash the self-esteem early on. So you kind have to shift accordingly and know to a certain extent what to expect.

……
Actually, I did want to ask one other thing (little laughter from both) With the PARCC, umm, how do you see that impacting the academic level – or even the Common Core?
It's going to be detrimental. I'll use the word on *record* - it's detrimental. My academic kids were finishing first and I was proctoring. I got the sense it was because they weren't even going to bother, they are going to shut down so quickly. (tone becomes more serious) And I took the 9th and 10th grade level practice tests, and I'm telling you right

now, there are honor students who struggle with them. And I'm telling you right now the academic level is going to shut down. And I did test-prep, and we did how to formulate these three different essays, how to do a literary analysis and how to do a compare/contrast essay and how to do this and that, and uhmm.. . just no good (little chuckle)

Right.

Just no good, and its more testing, taking away that class time where I could be doing something that could motivate them.

Do you have a lot of students below grade level?

Umm..you know on paper below grade below?

They are reading ability is-

I, oh yeah, absolutely. I mean – once again I don't have numbers to necessarily back that up right now, all I have are NJSK score, but if you were to ask me is this kid on reading level, I would say in my professional opinion, a lot of them are not.

Okay-

How many are not on grade level? I don't have an assessment – I don't have a way to asses that. The Achieve 3000 that they're starting to use…

I think that's like Lexile test?

I think it is like a Lexile base so that would indicate better, um, but I could tell you right now I think the majority are not reading at grade level.

So when you're reading in class and you let them pick their independent reading, they can read at their level, not necessarily – (starts talking as I finish sentence) what is considered their grade level?

They can, I have to – and they also for the majority of them they are not going to pick a book on their own, so I work very closely with the librarian in the school and we have a day when we go up and look and I allow students to start perusing and looking through the books to choose one for them. But I also let the librarian know ahead of time that I have an academic level class coming up can we pull some stuff that we might normally see in a middle school curriculum just to pepper that in. Because I don't want them to be all like that, because they are likely to take the easier road, they will not elect to challenge themselves. So, but I have to have it there in case, for the opportunity. That way it's something they feel comfortable reading, because I do have some students who are low reading level, very low.

And the last thing I had made a note –

Yes?

You had mentioned a different curriculum. I know for different levels, like the honors class, it's a separate curriculum, but if it's an academic class…

Right, well, the problem with that is it becomes, it puts more pressure on us the teachers, if I teach, you know, an honors class, a CP class, and an academic class, with separate curriculums, then it becomes 3 separate preps. And it really becomes how much do you want to differentiate the curriculum. Umm you know are we differentiating instruction, which is kind of what I'm doing now, or if we're differentiating the curriculum, then it's a whole new set of assessments to be prepared, a whole new set of texts to be explored – it's a **whole** different world, which is fine. You know, we create curriculum, that's what

we do, um, it's just I could see it becoming, uh, definitely a struggle at first to get that stuff together, but I think it could pay off in the long run. Um, because then we could maybe choose texts that we know are going to work a little better. To be completely honest with you, if I could elect not to do _____ with my academic class, I wouldn't. I think it's too challenging a text, if you want my honest opinion. But it's the curriculum, so that's what we're going to do. If we have to do it, we're going to do it. Um, so I think if you write different curriculum, it could be something to explore, it – just the challenge would be how different, how do we go about setting this course up. Do we mirror the CP curriculum or does it mirror more of a middle school curriculum? Because then that raises another problem. Are we downplaying the rigor of the course, which then in the long run would do a disservice to the students. They might love it because it's more accessible and easier, but that's not necessarily what we are trying to do either. So, (little laugh) that that would be the challenge.
Okay, thanks again. I am really done this time.
(both laugh a little)
No it's fine, really. Did I answer, is there anything else or – I hope I didn't give you too much. (Laughs)
No- no, this was great, thanks again.

Appendix D: Journal Excerpts

Interview 3 Notes: March 4, 2015

At first, this participant expressed reservations about participating due to confidentiality concerns and possibility of negative consequences. Once consented, another problem arose in finding time. Finally, we were able to meet today at 12:55. Knowing that the participant might be pressed for time, we just jumped right into the interview. I asked if it were okay that I record and explained the process. There were questions as to the purpose of recording, as to who would have access to it. I explained that as part of the data collection I needed to have transcriptions of the interviews for my final paper, which would be published, but that they are noted as Participant 1, 2, and so on. At first, the interview felt like I was checking things off a list, and I didn't like that tone it set, so I tried to slow down a bit and engage in responses more, rather than simply move on to the next. This helped a bit, but by the end of the interview, the participant seemed to want to wrap it up.

The flow of the interview was natural, without any awkward pauses. The participant answered the majority of the questions readily, with little hesitation, nor was their hesitation in asking for clarification or if the answer was sufficient (which only occurred in terms of one question - defining the academic level English language arts class) At the conclusion of the interview, it was requested that the recording be stopped so that additional information could be shared more freely, using a specific student (no name given) in which the typical procedure for placement was being disregarded due to parental pressure. Overall, I was impressed by the participant's knowledge of classroom practices and the needs of academic students, as the participant's role is in guidance. There were a few areas that I want to follow up on areas that seemed contradictory to me (mentioned at different times a rubric for academic, yet at others stated none for academic level, just honors; still confused as to who selects students for academic, because several people mentioned – guidance, supervisor, teachers). I did not ask for follow up right there, in the interest of time and so as not to seem like my purpose was to "catch" the participant in any way. (Follow up - March 19)

There are also specific notations made within the individual interview transcriptions.

Participant 2 Follow-Up Questions:

It has also been stated that there is teacher input made by Grade 8 teachers regarding academic placement into Grade 9, yet others have no knowledge of this taking place. Can you also clarify this? Do teacher recommendations only occur in certain schools or in certain situations?

As far as I know, there is no formal process for Grade 8 teachers to make specific recommendations for Grade 8 students into Grade 9. Of course, some teachers may offer data and/or opinions and/or some guidance counselors may ask for teacher data/opinions.

In explaining placement, you stated: "So, initially, the standardized test score is used, and then if there were another child that somebody else had a concern with, that child could be brought into it, or if there were a child who were placed and there was a

concern that it was the wrong placement, guidance, child study, or a parent could initiate a change – its' not set in stone." How often or likely is it that such a change would be initiated during the year?
I can only think of a handful of instances when a student moved in or out of academic placement. Changes are not that likely because there is always the option of completing the year and making a change the next year. However, I generally support fluid movement- especially when it is not disruptive to a student's overall schedule.

On what basis is the change usually made?
Some mid-year changes occur when a student no longer requires support based on an IEP or if a student moves out of ELL. They may be placed in an academic class. New (to the district) students sometimes enter a class mid-year. I can recall one instance when a student was placed in CP and was moved to academic shortly after. In this case, we did not have a lot of data from the student's previous school. However, it only took a few weeks to realize the student could benefit from academic support.

How do you see PARCC impacting academic students' instruction and placement?
I'm not sure yet. However, I do know that we are not permitted to use PARCC data for placement next year. My impression is that we are supposed to get more specific reading and writing achievement data, so that could be a good thing to share with teachers. In terms of instruction, I would still expect standards-based instruction with the additional academic scaffolds to be maintained.

Interview 5 Notes: March 12, 2015
This was the first interview in which I went to the participant rather than participant coming to me. I arrived about 5 minutes before the scheduled time of 11:15. At the scheduled time I peeked in the room, but saw that the participant was occupied with a student, so I just made it known that I was there and waited outside the door. After a few minutes, the participant then requested a few minutes to make a call on behalf of a student who was having trouble getting a physical required to play a sport. After another seven minutes or so, the participant asked if I would like to talk in the back of the room, but it seemed like a noisy area without sufficient privacy so I asked if there were another place we could go. We then went to a semi-private staff lounge area.
On the way to the area, thanks were made for agreeing to participate and a little more background provided. Since the participant had agreed about a month prior, some details were foggy. I re-capped the purpose of the doctoral study again. After, I re-confirmed that the participant was still willing to be part of the study. Brief talk about juggling work, school & personal commitments ensued.
Once settled in at a table, I asked and received permission to record. An easy and natural flow, as noted in the transcription also, was evident immediately. The participant seemed to respond readily to most questions and asked for clarification if needed. There were a few moments hesitation speaking on the record, in terms of noting certain teacher's names or discrepancy between what was said about proficiency scores and what were actual student scores.

It is worth noting that in this interview I became aware of the different ways people define the same terms. Specifically, in previous interviews, I would ask about student ability, or participants would talk about students' ability, all seeming to define ability as student achievement. While I was interviewing this participant, several of her responses surprised me as they differed from others quite a bit. However, while transcribing the interview, I realized that – and will confirm in my follow-up with the participant – that this participant seemed to define ability as not how a student currently achieved on any given measure, but rather as a given student's *potential* to achieve. Therefore, when most other participants referred to low ability, they meant low achievement, yet this participant spoke of the students having the same ability as others, because it was meant as their potential to achieve and succeed that was there, just not yet actualized. This perspective, of these students as just as capable of other students, ran through the course of the interview.

At the conclusion of the interview, we spoke a little about the experience, and the participant stated it was a good experience to discuss things in a concrete way. Many aspects had been considered or wondered about previously, but in no specific frame work as the interview provided. The participant was glad that this was being looked into and was hopeful to see positive outcomes. I was glad to know that at least this participant did not feel like this was a burden of lost time but rather a worthwhile experience and that my perception of placement practices being a worthy area of investigation was echoed by another staff member. I left at approximately 12:20.

Appendix E: Interview Questions

The Interview questions will be clustered by purpose and related directly to the research questions. Some questions will be phrased differently depending on if they are being asked to administrators, guidance counselors or teachers.

Cluster 1: Characteristics and needs of academic English language arts (ELA) students

1. How would you define an academic level ELA student?
2. In thinking about academic ELA students, in what areas specifically do these students have difficulty?
3. Do all students have similar difficulties or do students demonstrate a wide range of difficulties? Please be as specific as possible in your response.
4. In what areas specifically do these students do well?
5. Do all students have similar strengths or do students represent a wide range of strengths? Please be as specific as possible in your response.
6. In addressing the needs of these students, what factors (three to five) are critical to address? Please provide a brief explanation for each factor.

Cluster 2: Current Placement Practices

1. How would you define the academic level English language arts class?
2. How are students placed into academic level ELA classes? What are the criteria?
3. What is your opinion on the current placement practices? How accurately do you believe current placement practices are in placing academic students?
4. If you believe any changes are needed in current placement practices, what are they? Please be as specific as possible in your response.
5. What do you believe the purpose of the academic ELA classes is?
6. Do you believe there is a difference in what the academic ELA class is intended to do in theory and what it is able to do in practice? If so, please explain why you think this difference exists.

Cluster 3: Assessments

1. Please explain the usefulness of the NJASK score in instructing academic ELA students.
2. Please explain how accurately you believe the NJASK measures academic students' ability.
3. What assessments or measures of student achievement, if any, do you use (this would be changed to "are used" for guidance & administration) to determine the needs of your academic students, either formally or informally, in your ("your" would be omitted for administration & guidance) academic ELA class? These can be those used for whole class, small group or individually. Please list the purpose for each assessment – i.e. what information it provides about the students, when it is typically administered, and if it is repeated, how often.

4. Are there any other data available to you that are helpful in instructing academic students?
5. Do you receive data that does not help in instructing academic students?
6. Is there any other information you would like to have on academic students to better address their needs? If so, please explain.
7. If you answered yes to number 6, how could this information be provided to you? When would you need this information?

Appendix F: Excerpts of Dialogue from Interviews by Theme

Theme 1: Characteristics of Academic Students

Regarding problems with tracking at the academic level:

"The problem I found, too, is what winds up happening is the kids wind up traveling together and after [years go] by the time they're still in academic, still in academic, still in academic, still in academic- some of them then wear it like a badge of honor, and since they're with the same kids in academic English a lot of them are also in academic social studies, some of them are in academic math or – Common Core math – or an academic level science. And for those core kids – it's not necessarily all of the kids in my academic class, but for those kids, they'll find that they'll all start to travel together, and they became so used to the same classroom setting and being with their friends year after year and staying in this academic level, that a large part is that they're not necessarily motivated to go beyond that…. And that's also one of my issues with tracking in general because it does breed – especially in the academic level – it breeds a lot of indifference."

Regarding the structure of the academic level class:

"It is scaffolded differently…As opposed to saying here's a novel, let's talk about it and read it, we kind of go through, 'How do I read a novel'. Like how do you *read*. So it's almost like teaching them the reading process that I don't know if that necessarily happens in the regular classroom."

Regarding impact of outside factors:

"That's [in academic classes] usually a kid who probably was struggling…and they may have problems at home. And you add all that other adolescence on top of that, and who knows, the kid might be doing drugs now, it – everything is so different. There's a slight common thread, but not one thing that is so strong."

Theme 2: Placement Practices

Regarding who places students into academic classes:

"Guidance counselors and Child Study team could look at grades or other information they know from meeting with students or parents [to place academic students]."

"We'll talk several times with the guidance department and with Child Study – because I have [students with] IEPs – and with the supervisor."

Regarding the use of NJASK:

"Some kids in the academic level are right there. At the cusp of being proficient [NJASK score of 200], and some are low, low at the very bottom."

"I think that NJASK can be used as one of the indicating factors in terms of where they're placed, but I don't personally think that it's the best way to decide...I know there were students last year who we were convinced that were going to be in my [academic] class, and I would have liked them to be in my class. I could see that they're below grade level, that we should watch them. But then they may have scored a 205 and who's to say that that 205 shouldn't be in where the 200 does. So it's very capricious, certainly arbitrary, just looking at the numbers."

"I think that they're finding the kids who need the help, however I don't necessarily know if we're getting them in a place that's going to maximize their chances of becoming as successful as they could be. By saying this entire group needs help doesn't necessarily mean they all need help in the same way. But I think that's exactly what it is we've targeted. I think the group of students who really do need the help, I think we've got that; it's the way that we're going about doing it that I don't know if it necessarily is the most effective."

Theme 3: Standardized Testing

Regarding relying on one year's test for placement:

"So if you are going to use that as a benchmark and put some in academic and some in CP if only you're using that test, then it's up to the teacher to decide, you know, is this kid motivated, if the kids really motivated then the chances are maybe they just had a bad day for NJASK…Because I've had kids have just bad days. And you're gonna see up, up, up –boom. Up, up, up - boom (gestures with hands to demonstrate rising in steps, and then falling rapidly down at once). And you say to them, 'What happened here?' 'Oh, I was so sick that day' If a teacher or somebody is not gonna look at that whole picture and say that kid needs to stay where they are in CP, why are we dropping them down for one test?"

Regarding PARCC:

"….because of the long duration in which we're pulling them out of classes and we're in testing mode. …So it just creates an environment that's not as energetic and

optimistic as it could be. So we're bogged…It impacts the curriculum, it stops, for the worse. It interrupts the curriculum and … this particular test, because it's in the baby stages, is really confusing. So it creates an environment where people, the teachers and the students, feel inadequate. Inadequately prepared, not comprehending what's expected of them. I think that's lousy for morale. So it affects morale.

"It's going to be detrimental. I'll use the word on record –it's detrimental. My academic kids were finishing first and I was proctoring. I got the sense it was because they weren't even going to bother, they are going to shut down so quickly. And I took the 9th and 10th grade level practice tests and I'm telling you right now, there are honor students who struggle with them. And I'm telling you right now the academic level is going to shut down. And I did test-prep and we did how to formulate these three different essays, how to do a literary analysis and how to do a compare/contrast essay and how to do this and that, and ... just no good…Just no good, and its more testing, taking away that class time where I could be doing something that could motivate them.

Theme 4: Improvements

Regarding DRA2 and GMRT:

"It helps me to get a picture of them to get to know them. I think that the running record is actually good because I can see if there are students who have fluency issues and decoding issues, and that's something we can work on. I don't love it for reading comprehension.… I think that sometimes I find that they have more trouble with the reading comprehension than the DRA led me to believe based on the scoring. The Gates test is pretty good, but what I noticed though is that a lot

of times there is a discrepancy, so if they don't have issues with vocabulary because the way it is the Gates test will put them at like oh it's grade, 9th grade vocabulary level but then on the DRA they're lower, so it's a matter of looking at the two and then kind of figuring out what the real issue is."

Appendix G: Grade 9 Academic Data

Student	NJASK 7	NJASK 8	CTP4			NJPASS 9	English9 Grade
			RC	VR	V		
	X	192	X			25	B
2	185	203	55%	56%	54%	27	D
3	180	198	X			31	C-
4	181	195	X			27	C+
5	191	219	25%	46%	44%	33	B+
6	205	197	22%	46%	54%	30	C
7	194	206	32%	46%	54%	29	C-
8	188	218	44%	69%	40%	27	B
9	X	203	22%	24%	44%	27	B
10	181	213	40%	64%	30%	33	B
11	188	218	25%	29%	44%	30	B-
12	X	X	X			25	C+
13	218	211	32%	60%	63%	16	C
14	181	203	22%	32%	50%	22	C
15	187	199	13%	24%	30%	25	C+
16	163	188	25%	60%	30%	26	D
17	221	201	51%	56%	63%	31	A-
18	180	213	8%	41%	50%	34	A-
19	188	199	71%	51%	86%	29	B+
20	X	X	X			26	B+
21	214	232	40%	24%	40%	39	B
22	210	207	32%	29%	34%	33	B+
23	194	214	36%	29%	17%	33	B+
24	202	208	X			24	C
25	202	201	32%	60%	44%	29	B

X = no data available

Three percentage scores in CTP4 represent achievement in reading comprehension (RC), verbal reasoning (VR) and vocabulary (V) sections of the test. Partial proficiency: NJASK – below 200; NJPASS – below 23. CTP4 – below 40% is considered at–risk)

Appendix H: Teacher Rating Scale

Teacher Rating Scale

CHECKLIST- GRADES 6-12

STUDENT'S NAME_____ **Grade:** _____

Evaluating Teacher: _____ **Subject:** _____

Please rate each of the characteristics the above named student exhibits.
1=Never 2=Seldom 3=Occasionally 4=Often 5=Continuously

OBSERVABLE CHARACTERISTICS OF AT-RISK CHILDREN

1.	Difficulty articulating responses verbally	1	2	3	4	5
2.	Difficulty articulating responses on paper	1	2	3	4	5
3.	Limited vocabulary	1	2	3	4	5
4.	Reads below grade level	1	2	3	4	5
5.	Difficulty with creative use of language	1	2	3	4	5
6.	Difficulty with higher level tasks (Inference, cause/effect, synthesis, evaluation, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
7.	Inattentive to detail	1	2	3	4	5
8.	Poor mastery of and easy recall of facts	1	2	3	4	5
9.	Difficulty with symbolism/abstract ideas	1	2	3	4	5
10.	Is unable to "think outside the box"	1	2	3	4	5
11.	Unable to use a variety of methods (relies on rote/formula)	1	2	3	4	5
12.	Avoids leadership roles	1	2	3	4	5

13. Behaves immaturely	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
14. Lacks motivation to learn	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
15. Low personal standards and goals	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
16. Short attention span	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
17. Narrow range of interests	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
18. Difficulty completing tasks in class	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
19. Difficulty completing tasks outside of school	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
20. Performs below grade level expectation	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

SCORE TOTAL:_____ Scores above 60 reflect difficulty with ELA skills and abilities.

Have you observed any other weak areas which should be considered?

_____

_____

_____

Please indicate areas where the student shows talent.

_____

_____

_____

Please provide additional information concerning this child's ability:

_____

_____

_____

Based on the above rating scale, student is recommended for academic placement (please circle one): yes/no

Rating adapted from the Manual for the Admission and Placement of Exceptional Students (2014) and The HOPE scale, Purdue University (2009).

Appendix I: Parent/Guardian Permission Letters

PARENTAL PERMISSION FOR ACADEMIC PLACEMENT

NAME OF STUDENT: _____
DATE OF BIRTH: _____DATE: _____
SCHOOL:_____

A variety of information is maintained on students in this district to ensure that all students are making progress and receiving the educational placement best suited to their needs. It is our policy to look at these measures to determine what placement is optimal to meet your child's needs. Based on the review of your child's educational data, the academic level course is recommended. This course parallels English CP in context, but emphasizes the acquisition of reading and writing skills. The focus is placed on reading comprehension, vocabulary development and expository writing. Other skills include note-taking, analysis of various literary genres, and development of managerial skills in a multi-task classroom.

Information related to your child's ability and achievement is helpful. We would like your input and permission to consider any health, social, emotional and/or behavioral aspects along with the educational data. We believe it is important to understand the whole child when considering placement and instruction.

I hereby grant permission for communication both oral and written, regarding the above named student and information:

BETWEEN:
SCHOOL NAME:_____
ADDRESS:_____
TELEPHONE: _____
AND:
PARENT/GUARDIAN:_____
ADDRESS:_____
TELEPHONE: _____

All information will be kept confidential and only accessed by authorized personnel.

Please indicate your decision regarding this matter by checking the space provided; sign and date this form.

_____I give my permission for communication only.

_____I give my permission for communication and academic placement.
_____I give my permission for academic placement only.

_____I do not give my permission for communication or academic placement.

Parent Signature _____ Date _____

Health, social, emotional, educational and/or behavioral aspects you would like to share:

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Form if individual assessment is required:

PARENTAL PERMISSION FOR STUDENT ASSESSMENT
FOR PLACEMENT PURPOSES

Please print or type
Student _____ School _____
Grade _____ DOB _____
Parent/Guardian _____
Address
_____
Phone (Home) _____ Phone (Work) _____
Parent's Email Address _____

An individual assessment is being recommended for your child to assist in the best educational planning. The proposed assessment is based on your child's educational performance and review of other evaluations, reports, and records listed here:

_____
_____
_____

Other factors considered:

_____
_____
_____

You will be notified of the results of the assessment. These results will assist the school personnel and the parent in developing and implementing appropriate instructional placement.

The assessment may include, but is not limited to: (list selected assessments chosen)
_____
_____
_____

Should you have any questions regarding this request for permission for assessment, please contact:
School Contact _____ Phone Number _____

Please indicate your decision regarding this matter by checking the space provided; sign and date this form.

_____Yes, I give my permission for assessment.

_____No, I do not give my permission for assessment.

Parent Signature _____ Date _____

Letters adapted from the Manual for the Admission and Placement of Exceptional Students (2014)