

2015

Teacher Perceptions of Common Core-Based Evaluations for Students With Cognitive Impairments

Pamela Marie Majerus
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Pamela Majerus

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2015

Abstract

Teacher Perceptions of Common Core-Based Evaluations for Students With Cognitive

Impairments

by

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MA, University of Tennessee, 1996

BS, University of Tennessee, 1993

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

August 2015

Abstract

Education reform in schools has focused on inclusion of all students in general education environments and accountability measures. Students with cognitive impairments are mandated to participate in standards-based alternate assessments. Special education teachers in a school district in a southeastern state in this study have been faced with the challenge of implementing these assessments. A bounded case study design was used to examine their perceptions of the use of standards-based alternate assessments for students with cognitive impairments. Guiding research questions focused on the nature and process of implementing alternate assessments. Resistance to change was the conceptual framework. The bounded case included 3 elementary, 1 middle school, and 4 high school special education teachers who have taught students with mild to moderate cognitive disabilities in self-contained classrooms in the district. Teachers were interviewed and data were coded and analyzed for common themes. Results included implementation concerns such as time for administration, scoring issues, lack of usefulness of assessment results, inappropriate expectations for performance, and lack of validity of assessments for cognitively impaired students. Recommendations included decision makers' reconsideration of the procedures for implementation and establishing validity and usefulness of standards-based alternate assessments. Findings in this study reflected teachers' resistance to change, but were informative in providing local decision makers with an opportunity for social change that includes examination of where current policy fails to accommodate students with cognitive impairments and creation of appropriate policy and assessments that actually benefit those students.

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Dedication

This doctoral study is dedicated to the professionals working with students with cognitive disabilities who participated in this study. The work you do is important. Thank you.

Acknowledgments

First, I must thank Dr. Derek Schroll. As one of my first professors and the Committee Chair for my doctoral study your leadership and guidance have been instrumental throughout the completion of this program. Thank you Dr. Schroll for always answering my random questions and your continuous support. I would also like to thank Dr. Marvin (Lewis) Putnam. As my second committee member and former professor, you provided essential guidance I needed to complete this program. Dr. Putnam, you gave me one of the best compliments I've ever received on an assignment and your kind words were encouraging long after I left your class. In addition to my committee, thank you to Dr. Karen Hunt whose expertise and critical review of my work were instrumental in the completion of this study.

Thank you to my family: Dad & Sandy, Mom & Steve, Linda, Larry & Rosalie, and Alyson, Tim & Meri. I will be glad to get back to family visits, Sunday Supper, and other fun things again. Thank you, Alyson, for an unending supply of Super Bubble. In addition to my wonderful family, I am blessed with brilliant and supportive friends who provided constant words of affirmation. I love and appreciate you so very much: Val, Mitzi, Cira, Marsha, Charley, Carla, Sandra, Caitlin, Mary, Russell, David, Carrie, Debi, Suzanne, Mindy, JB, Beth, Heather, and Ashley.

Finally, thank you to my husband, Randy, and our daughters, Molly and Maggie, who sacrificed a great deal so I could pursue this degree. On top of that, no athlete has had better cheerleaders than I had in my husband and daughters. I love you with all of my heart and then some.

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Section 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Since the early 1980s, U.S. public schools have been in a constant state of reform. An early published report by Gardner, Larsen, Baker, and Campbell (1983) exposed the poor state of education for many students across the United States. When lawmakers and policymakers mandate change for the public schools, teachers are ultimately responsible for implementing much of this reform at the local school and classroom level. It is in the nature of change that there will be elements of resistance to change throughout the change process (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). Resistance to change is considered informational and critical to creating a successful change implementation (Zaltman & Duncan, 1977; Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006).

As a result of educational policy changes in recent years, special education teachers, specifically those working with students with significant cognitive impairments, have been tasked with assessing a highly diverse population of students with disabilities and basing these assessments on grade level standards created for their grade level peers (Flowers et al., 2005; Johnson & Arnold, 2007). In 2013 and 2014, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have been implemented and are currently being incorporated into the assessments for all students (National Governors Association for Best Practices [NGA] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010). Following the adoption of the CCSS in Georgia, the GADOE (2013a) named the standards the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards (CCGPS). The focus of this case study has been the special education teacher perceptions of the implementation of CCGPS-based alternate assessments and grade level standards-based report cards for students with cognitive

disabilities. The primary goal of the study was to produce an improved understanding of implementing the CCGPS-based assessment process in evaluating academic progress for students with cognitive impairments. Once stakeholders better understand special education teachers' perceptions of the process of implementing CCGPS-based assessments, more appropriate assessments can be created. A second goal of the study was to explore and understand such resistance that may exist to CCSS-based assessments by special education teachers regarding the implementation of such assessments.

Background

In recent decades, federal and state policies have resulted in major reforms in the public schools. One such reform was the inclusion of students with disabilities into the general education environment as opposed to isolating these same students from their grade level peers (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 1997). According to Browder et al. (2007), students with cognitive disabilities benefit from inclusion in the general education environment by improving social skills and acquiring segments of general education curriculum.

Increased accountability requirements for all students, including those with cognitive disabilities, have resulted from recent education legislation as well. Alternate assessments options were created for students whose Individualized Education Plan (IEP) teams recommended them (Towles-Reeves, Kleinert, & Mohumba, 2009). These alternate assessment options were mandated in all states in the United States by the year 2000 (IDEA, 1997; Karvonen & Huynh, 2007). In creating the alternate assessments for students with cognitive disabilities, most states used portfolio assessments (Zatta &

Pullin, 2004). Other options for alternate assessments were performance tasks or checklists.

While standards-based assessments are relatively common in the public schools, the most recent change to standards-based assessments was the implementation of the CCSS (NGA & CCSSO, 2010). Forty-five states in the United States agreed to adopt the CCSS. These standards were created to assess skills necessary for college and career readiness as identified by the NGA and the CCSSO (NGA & CCSSO, 2010). According to the Common Core State Standards Initiative website, the intended benefits of the CCSS were (a) a clear statement of expectations for student success, (b) a realistic set of expectations, (c) preparation for college and career, and (d) students who were prepared to compete in a global economy (NGA & CCSSO, 2010). Recent education reforms have resulted in a variety of changes in teaching and assessment practices in special education environments. In this case study, I investigated special education teacher perceptions of the process of implementing the CCSS-based assessments of academic performance for students with cognitive disabilities. Secondly, I explored the nature of special education teacher resistance to the implementation of CCSS-based assessments. Additional information related to alternate assessments, education legislation and policy, the CCSS, and resistance to change will be discussed in Section 2.

Statement of Problem

Most students in the subject Georgia school district who were served in Mild Cognitive Impairment/Moderate Cognitive Impairment (MI/MO) classrooms participated in the Georgia Alternative Assessment (GAA) and were assessed using a grade level standards-based report card (Georgia Department of Education [GADOE], 2013a). Both

the GAA and the standards-based report card were based on the recently implemented CCGPS. Historically, students educated in MI/MO classrooms had limited exposure to the grade level curriculum (Kampfer, Horvath, Kleinert, & Kearns, 2001; Kim, Angell, Obrian, Stand, Fulk, & Watts, 2006; Ruppard, Dymond, Gaffney, 2011). Similarly, two special education teachers in the local school noted that their students had minimal exposure to grade level curriculum (C. Stauf & M. Phillips, personal communication, November 13, 2013). One of the district level special education facilitators expressed that many teachers with whom she worked were frustrated with the process of implementing standards-based assessments for students with cognitive impairments as well (L. Burton, personal communication, May 8, 2014). These conversations prompted me to question whether this issue existed across the district. I wondered what the other special education teachers in the district perceived concerning the implementation of the CCGPS-based assessments for students with cognitive impairments. I was curious as to whether their perceptions reflected resistance to change and, if so, whether the details of this resistance would benefit the stakeholders involved in the process.

In Georgia, the alternate assessment was a portfolio assessment and was based on alternate academic standards, which aligned with the students' grade level standards (GADOE, 2013a). Teachers determined the alternate standards they would address based on the academic ability of the student. Students who met eligibility requirements for alternate assessments in 3rd through 8th grades or 11th and 12th grades took the GAA in the 2012-2013 school year. The GAA included assessments in English language arts (ELA), math, science, and social studies. The GAA student performance data were reported on the GADOE website and they presented the percentage of students that performed in one

of three *Stages of Progress* for each academic area (GADOE, 2013a). The three *Stages of Progress* (the term of art for performance levels) were *Emerging Progress*, *Established Progress*, or *Extending Progress*. Emerging Progress on the GAA corresponded to Basic/Does Not Meet Expectations on the regular assessment. Established Progress corresponded to Meets Expectations while Extending Progress corresponded to Advanced/Exceeds Expectations on the regular assessment. Trained raters scored the GAA portfolios. According to the GADOE (2013a), during the 2012-2013 school year, 13% of 3rd grade students taking the alternate assessments in ELA performed at the Emerging Progress level (up from 9%), 52% performed at the Established Progress level (up from 42%), and 35% performed at the Extending Progress (down from 39%). During the 2012-2013 school year, 14% of fourth grade students performed at the Emerging Progress level on the Math GAA (up from 8%), 50% performed at the Established Progress level (up from 44%), and 35% performed at the Extending Progress level of performance (down from 48%).

One of the complaints related to the GAA registered by special education teachers in the local school was that students with cognitive impairments may capably perform the requested task for any given standard but if the task is deemed inadequate by the state rater, then the student may not pass that standard (M. Phillips, personal communication, November 13, 2013). She said the GAA often seemed to reflect teacher performance instead of student performance. Another colleague echoed the same sentiment (L. Silvers, personal communication, June 11, 2014). She said that even though she was qualified to work in any area of special education, she would prefer not to work again in a classroom that served students taking the GAA. She stated that in her experience of giving the

GAA, the assessment reflected her choice of activity rather than students' academic performance, and that implementing the GAA took too much time and effort away from instruction.

During the 2013-2014 school year, the local district requested that special education teachers who taught students in MI/MO classrooms assign grades for students with cognitive disabilities based on the CCGPS for each student's grade level with consideration given to the instructional level of the student (GADOE, 2014). The district administration asked special education teachers to assign grades based on a minimum of four activities related to a course using 40% of the information based on the standards and 60% of the information based on IEP objectives. In assigning grades for students with cognitive disabilities, administration required the teachers to note on the report card that they had based the grade on instructional level and not the grade level.

The State of Georgia adopted the CCGPS during the 2012-2013 school year. Following the adoption of the CCSS, all states began creating new assessments to evaluate student academic performance. In Georgia, state leaders created assessments based on the CCGPS to be used during the 2014-2015 school year (Liebttag, 2013). Students with cognitive disabilities participated in assessments based on the CCGPS. Special education teachers created developmentally appropriate assessment activities for use in the GAA portfolios that supported the grade level standards. The foci of this case study were twofold. The first was special education teachers' perceptions of the process of implementing the CCGPS-based GAA and report cards in evaluating academic performance for students with cognitive impairments. The second focus was information

related to the nature of CCGPS-based assessments reflected in special education teacher resistance.

Nature of the Study

As with the case study tradition, I gathered qualitative data by conducting interviews with special education teachers from MI/MO classrooms across a geographic domain of the study, which was a single Georgia school district. The subjects for the study were special education teachers from this Georgia district. They taught students with mild to moderate cognitive disabilities. The district administered both the CCGPS-based GAA and a grade level standards-based report card. The interviews with participating teachers included discussion of process, results, resistance, and other pertinent information related to CCGPS-based evaluations of academic progress for students with cognitive impairments. The researcher contacted participants through email and phone calls to schedule the interviews. The interviews took place in a neutral and private location. The researcher arranged for audio recording and transcription of the interview data. Using the transcriptions as source material, the researcher coded the data by theme. After conducting the interviews and performing an initial analysis to identify preliminary themes, the researcher performed a member check on the data and the preliminary analysis by asking the participants to reflect on the findings through the preliminary analysis of their own data. The researcher provided written documentation regarding findings via email to participants. Within a week of sending these findings to participants, the researcher discussed the findings with each participant in a 10- to 20-minute phone call. Following member checking, the researcher further analyzed the data

to discover themes that completed the picture of teacher perceptions of the two research foci.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided the case study were:

RQ 1. What are the perceptions of special education teachers regarding the process (i.e., training, expectations, and results) of implementing the CCGPS-based assessments (GAA and standards-based report cards) for students with cognitive disabilities?

RQ2. What does special education teacher resistance to the implementation of the CCGPS-based assessments in evaluating academic progress for students with cognitive impairments reveal about the nature of the assessments?

Purpose of the Study

Academic performance was evaluated for students with cognitive disabilities using the CCGPS-based GAA and report cards. The purpose of the case study was to describe special education teacher perceptions of the process of implementing CCGPS-based assessments for students with cognitive disabilities. Additionally, the purpose of the study is to derive information relative to the nature of CCGPS-based assessments regarding special education teacher resistance to the implementation of the CCGPS-based GAA and report cards in evaluating academic progress for students with cognitive impairments.

Conceptual Framework

Change is a continuous process in U.S. public schools (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006). The introduction of the CCSS has been a large-scale change that has affected

millions of students and educators across the United States (NGA & CCSSO, 2010). Zaltman and Duncan (1977) described the change process in *Strategies for Planned Change*. They suggested that resistance to change is a healthy part of the change process and an expected reaction to a newly implemented change. The authors also stated that resistance to change could be positive when a change is not beneficial or even harmful to a group. Resistance to change was considered to be informative and had the potential to reveal the organization's concept of its own identity, its resources or lack thereof, its values, or its attitudes regarding outsiders. Thornburg and Mungai (2011) conducted a study of teachers and the effects of recent education reforms and echoed the idea that the resistance of teachers communicated information that stakeholders usually need to know.

Zaltman and Duncan (1977) defined resistance to change as “any conduct that serves to maintain the status quo in the face of pressure to alter the status quo” (p. 63). Their idea that resistance to change is informational provides the conceptual framework for the case study. The researchers categorized resistance to change into four categories: cultural, social, organizational, and psychological resistance. The four categories of resistance to change were utilized to organize and describe elements of special education teachers' resistance to the implementation CCGPS-based assessments in evaluating academic performance for students with cognitive disabilities.

Cultural Resistance

Zaltman and Duncan (1977) saw cultural resistance to change as rooted in ideologies, traditions, social relationships, economic factors, and health conditions. An example of cultural resistance to change was the lack of willingness to adopt new technology because of a preference for traditional methods. In their view, another

example of cultural resistance is cultural ethnocentrism, which could result in the change recipient perceiving an innovation as inferior to status quo methods. Culture itself could have a major impact on teacher resistance to change or innovation.

Social Resistance

Instances of social resistance are those that result from group solidarity and conforming to norms (Zaltman & Duncan, 1977). Conflict between those who completely accept an innovation and those who see value in the status quo are also viewed as a social barrier. When innovation is rejected because those mandating or proposing the change are perceived as outsiders, Zaltman and Duncan (1977) also considered this to be a demonstration of social resistance.

Organizational Resistance

Zaltman and Duncan (1977) described organizational resistance to change in several ways. In their view, one example of organizational resistance was the threat to influence, which occurs when a group in an organization feels its identity threatened by change. The authors also described organizational structures that possibly prevented change, such as leadership, communication processes, rules, and procedures. When upper level leadership resists change and causes others to resist the innovation, the result is an organizational barrier. They also mentioned the lack of a climate for change as an organizational barrier.

Psychological Resistance

As described by Zaltman and Duncan (1977), psychological resistance is the final category of resistance to innovation. Psychological resistance to change is based on perception of the individual. The perception of a lack of need for change can cause

resistance. Another example of psychological resistance occurs when all parties agree a change was necessary but the groups disagree on the solution or innovation. The researchers also saw personality, conformity, and commitment as examples of psychological resistance to change.

Definitions of Terms

Accountability: Accountability is the expectation of increased achievement for all students supposed by the idea that all stakeholders have a vested interest in student achievement (Roach et al., 2007).

Change: The term *change* refers to the tendency to move away from equilibrium (Lewin, as cited in Foster, 2010) or to conditions that alter the status quo (Zaltman & Duncan, 1977).

Cognitive impairment: This is a disability category characterized by decreased intellectual functioning that negatively impacts educational performance; for eligibility purposes, such an intelligence impairment one assessed at a level below 70 (GADOE, n.d.).

High stakes assessment: These assessments are those that demonstrate student achievement and reflect both teacher and school system functioning (Roach et al., 2007), allowing for district comparisons.

Resistance to change: This term refers to the tendency to maintain the status quo (Zaltman & Duncan, 1977). Resistance to change can occur at the individual level within change recipients (Kotter, 1995) or in a dynamic and multidimensional manner that includes both change agents and recipients (Lewin, as cited in Foster, 2010; Dent & Goldberg, 1999).

Standards-based assessments: These are assessments that are linked to grade level standards and which are used to evaluate student learning (Scruggs, Brigham, & Mastropieri, 2013).

Assumptions

The assumptions applicable to this study are the following:

1. Teachers who participated in the one-on-one interviews had administered the GAA and completed standards-based report cards for students with mild or moderate cognitive impairment.
2. Teachers who participated in the interviews would provide the researcher with truthful and detailed information related to interview questions.
3. Students given the GAA were placed in self-contained classrooms due to eligibility based on mild cognitive impairment (Intelligence Quotient [IQ] ranging between 55 and 70) or moderate cognitive impairment (IQ between 40-55).
4. Resistance to change was informational and valuable for decision makers in the implementation of change (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006; Zaltman & Duncan, 1977).

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study was the perceptions of special education teachers: (a) regarding the implementation of CCGPS-based assessments in evaluating academic progress for students with cognitive impairments, and (b) their reasons for resistance, if any, to such assessments. I interviewed eight special education teachers who wished to participate in the case study. In the interview, I inquired about demographic information, information related to the process of GAA implementation (i.e., administration, training,

and scoring), information related to the process of assigning grades, and reasons for special education teacher resistance to the implementation of CCGPS-based assessments in assessing academic progress of students with cognitive disabilities. The interview questions were primarily open-ended to allow for descriptive responses. Special education teacher interviews were transcribed and data was coded into themes. Following coding, preliminary analysis occurred and the special education teachers reviewed the initial findings from their respective data. Discussions were conducted regarding the initial findings primarily through email correspondence. I did speak with two teachers on the phone. If special education teachers found discrepancies in the findings from their interviews, I addressed and repaired those discrepancies, revising the findings in the process.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

When examining qualitative research, the ideas of credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability could have affected the quality of the study (Morrow, 2005). In this study, there was the possibility of the following limitations:

1. I was a speech-language pathologist (SLP) working in the school district and my attitudes towards standards-based assessments for students with cognitive impairments could have influenced my findings.
2. The case study was completed in a relatively short period of time, which disallowed collection of longitudinal data.
3. My personal relationships with two of the teachers who participated in the case study might have influenced the information shared with me during data gathering.

4. Teachers participating in the interviews might have been concerned about privacy or repercussions regarding information shared, which could affect the quality of the data.

Suggestions for increasing the quality of the data acquired in qualitative inquiry included: (a) utilizing of peer reviewers, (b) implementing member checks, (c) providing detailed information regarding the context and processes of the study, (d) disclosing researcher/participant relationships, (e) keeping an audit trail of the research process and the activities of the study, (f) ensuring consistency in the activities and participants of the study, and (g) maintaining objectivity by allowing the data to determine the findings (Morrow, 2005).

For this study, the delimiting factors were the following:

1. The study was conducted with participants who met specific criteria.
2. Teachers who did not implement both the GAA and standards-based report cards were not included in the study because they did not have the pertinent base of experiences.
3. Once data were gathered, coded, and analyzed, participants member checked the findings from the initial analysis of their own data.
4. An audit trail was created to detail the process of the research study and a peer reviewer was secured to confirm the themes, decisions, and findings in the audit trail.

Significance of the Study

Programmatically including students with cognitive impairments in high stakes accountability measures is a recent development in public education (IDEA, 2007; No

Child Left Behind Act of 2001 [NCLB], 2002). With the incorporation of the CCGPS in the GAA and the process of assigning of grades for students with cognitive disabilities, special education teachers are now required to assess students based on grade level standards while keeping in mind student instructional level (GADOE, 2014). Better understanding of implementing CCGPS-based GAA and report cards in evaluating academic progress for students with cognitive disabilities and special education teacher resistance could provide valuable information for decision makers leading to better assessment models for students with cognitive impairments.

Implications for Social Change

Social change is the idea that individuals use their knowledge and abilities to benefit others. According to Walden University (2014) in the *Social Change Impact Report*, social change happened when individuals used their knowledge to improve the lives of groups both locally and globally. Analysis of the data reflected the perceptions of 8 special education teachers who work with students with cognitive impairments in the local district. Students with cognitive impairments require specialized instruction and continuous monitoring to maximize their strengths and to accommodate for their areas of weakness. With the information that this study has provided, social change is achieved in several ways. Teachers who specialize in working with students have been able to describe their experiences and create an opportunity for other stakeholders to grasp the issues associated with applying CCGPS for students with cognitive disabilities.

Additionally, according to several authors, resistance to change can be informative and beneficial for decision makers (Thornburg & Mungai, 2011; Zaltman & Duncan, 1977). Consequently, from the analysis of the interviews, and the presentation of this doctoral

study, stakeholders interested in special education assessment benefit from information regarding the sources of resistance from classroom practitioners to such programs as the CCGPS-based GAA and report cards with students affected by cognitive disabilities.

Summary

In Section 1, I introduced and highlighted the goals, the nature, the significance, and several other structural elements of this case study. Then, in Section 2 I review the literature that touches on policy and legislation, alternate forms of assessment, relative studies, and conceptual frameworks for this study. In Section 3, I explain and justify the research methodology for the study, including the research design, the data collection methods, the data analysis procedures, the role of the researcher, and ethical issues. In Section 4, I outline the findings. Finally in Section 5, I summarize the study and reflect upon areas of social change.

Section 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The goal of this study has been (a) to explore how special education teachers perceive the implement of CCGPS assessment with cognitively disabled students, and (b) to identify the reasons, if any, for these teachers' resistance to this program. The literature review includes descriptions of recent legislation, standards-based education reform, and the assessment of students with cognitive disabilities using alternate assessments. The review is organized into the following sections: (a) recent legislation in public schools, (b) assessment of students with cognitive disabilities, (c) studies reflecting teacher perceptions of alternate assessments, (d) Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI), (e) change and resistance, (f) conceptual framework options, (g) possible themes, and (h) related studies. The researcher explored these topics using the Walden University Library database and acquired other references to enhance the database-derived information. The following key words were used in database searches: *cognitive disabilities, standards-based education, special education law, Common Core State Standards, alternate assessment, assessing students with disabilities, resistance to change, and educational change.*

Recent Legislation in Public Schools

Recent federal legislation coupled with state policy in education brought great change in the education and assessment of students with disabilities. Through the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA, 2004) schools that were not serving disabled children to the same standards expected of non-disabled students were required

henceforth to do so. NCLB required that all students perform at grade level proficiency for reading and math by 2014 (Supovitz, 2009).

Under NCLB and IDEA, approximately 7 million students from birth to 21 years of age receive services in special education (Bradley et al., 2011). Historically, students with disabilities participated in functional curriculum focusing on daily life skills but the enactment of current education law requires the curricular targets for students with disabilities to be more academic in nature and mirror the standards-based general curriculum (Ayres, 2012; Collins et al., 2010; Hunt & McDonnell, 2012). Students with disabilities in the public schools are expected to receive instruction, perform academically, and undergo assessments in an equivalent manner to their general education counterparts.

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001

Following implementation of NCLB, accountability became a paramount challenge for public schools. According to Maleyko and Gawlik (2011), NCLB aimed at improving student performance by increasing accountability through utilizing common state assessments. The authors stated that the purpose of NCLB was to close the achievement gap between low-performing students and high-performing students. The Act required the states to demonstrate increased accountability for educating students with disabilities as well. One way in which accountability was achieved was through mandated statewide assessments for all students in grades 3 through 8 (Roach, Elliott, & Berndt, 2007). Originally, with the passage of NCLB, all students were expected to demonstrate reading and math proficiency by the year 2014, but over 30 states have since been granted waivers from this expectation (Peterson & Kaplan, 2013). Even though the

reading and math proficiency requirements have been lifted, high expectations for the education of all students regardless of ability remained paramount in public schools.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004

Following the passage of NCLB, IDEA required revision and was reauthorized in 2004 (IDEA, 2004). According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities (n.d.), the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 not only maintained the original purpose of the law, which was to ensure appropriate education for students with disabilities, but also went a step further by aligning the law with NCLB. The reauthorization of IDEA provided several initiatives, namely, it (a) outlined different criteria for identifying students with learning disabilities, (b) required school districts to plan and implement post high school transition plans for each student, and (c) defined the professional requirements for teachers who provide instruction for students with disabilities. These two key pieces of legislation, IDEA and NCLB, established academic accountability for all student learning and held the states responsible for adequately teaching all students.

State Standards

In response to NCLB and the reauthorization of IDEA, which mandated increased accountability in education, states adopted new academic standards. Standards-based practices were implemented in schools through curricula that aligned with standards fostering better outcomes for students in general education (Scruggs et al., 2013; Thompson, 2009). As these changes unfolded, teachers aligned curricula to the newly articulated standards as these standards reflected priority content (Polikoff, 2012). The standards were not only used for day-to-day instructional targets, but were also used in

the development of statewide accountability assessments. In this way, standards-based accountability became the norm in public schools.

Concerns regarding standards-based education. As states began their efforts to improve school performance, concerns arose from stakeholders in the education community regarding standards-based education. Baines and Stanley (2006) warned of negative effects of standards-based education that included (a) the creation of a fixed curriculum, (b) a decreased focus on the individual students, (c) an undermining of teachers, (d) a hyper-focus on numerical data, and (e) an increased expense diverted from instruction and towards an enlarged bureaucracy. They also suggested that focusing on large-scale assessments favored academic efforts for *average* students but prejudiced focus on students who were in the top or bottom ranges academically. Nonetheless, these criticisms did not stop the momentum of standards-based education or the associated assessments.

Alternate academic standards. With increased accountability, concerns arose regarding how the standards and the resulting assessments would apply to students with significant cognitive disabilities. Loeb, Knapp, and Effers (2008) described the inability of the standards to meet the needs of students with disabilities and their diverse needs. Many states accommodated students with significant cognitive disabilities by creating alternative academic standards (AAS). According to Towles-Reeves et al. (2009), AAS were required to (a) align with the state's academic standards, (b) reflect at least three levels of possible achievement, (c) include descriptions of performance expectations for each level of achievement, and (d) reflect student achievement by clearly defined scores. Restorff et al. (2012) found that teachers of students with cognitive disabilities believed

that the AAS allowed them to better align instruction to standards and that the standards were useful in communicating with parents and in writing goals. The AAS appeared to help students with cognitive disabilities demonstrate improved academic performance (Restorff et al., 2012).

Assessment of Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

In order for states to be in compliance with federal and state legislation and education policy, students with cognitive disabilities were required to participate in high stakes testing. If state assessments were not deemed appropriate by the IEP team, alternative assessments were an option under NCLB (Browder et al., 2007; Roach et al., 2007; Towles-Reeves et al., 2009). Students participating in alternate assessments accounted for approximately 2% of students in public schools (Roach, Elliott, & Webb, 2005; Thurlow, Quenemoen, & Albus, 2013). Alternate assessments were not necessarily intended for all students with disabilities and some suggested that students with eligibility for Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD), Other Health Impairments (OHI), and Learning Disabilities (LD) should not participate in alternate assessments unless a cognitive impairment complicated the eligibility (Cho & Kingston, 2011). Even using alternative assessment options, assessing students with significant cognitive impairments was considered a very difficult task for school districts (Browder et al., 2003; Haager & Slocum, 2011; Halladay & Moses, 2013). Students identified as having significant cognitive impairments demonstrated a wide variety of abilities, which made standardization of assessments nearly impossible (Flowers et al., 2005; Johnson & Arnold, 2007; Lemons et al., 2012). According to Weigert (2012), high stakes testing for

children with disabilities required a better understanding of the specific nature of disabilities rather than the broader definitions of disability.

Concerns Regarding High Stakes Assessments for Students with Cognitive Disabilities

As part of the accountability requirements in following NCLB, students with disabilities participated in alternative assessments if standard assessments were deemed inappropriate by the IEP team. There was criticism of including students with cognitive disabilities in high-stakes accountability assessments at all. Wei (2012) concluded that simply including students with disabilities in high accountability measures did not improve their performance on high stakes assessments. Sanzo, Clayton, and Sherman (2011) suggested that high stakes assessments measured academic gains in curriculum that the students served in self-contained classes did not experience. Kettler et al. (2010) stated that assessing students with cognitive disabilities was characterized by lack of agreement in the education community as to whether these students should be assessed based on general education academic standards or a modified set of academic standards. Another difficulty in assessing students with cognitive disabilities was described by Zebehazy, Zigmond, and Zimmerman (2012), who indicated that in some cases alternative assessment test items needed to be explained and the students might need to be oriented to test materials so that the intent of the question was communicated. Lemons et al. (2012) indicated that a problem with alternative assessments was the possibility that students were deemed proficient in an area on the assessment but they did not actually demonstrate proficiency with the specific standard. Haager and Slocum (2011) described performance targets that included independence, generalization, and demonstration of

skill. Goldstein and Behuniak (2012) also mentioned that there was an inconsistency in rating students in alternative assessments with given scores indicating different levels of proficiency across states.

Validity concerns. Some have questioned whether alternative assessments were valid measures of academic performance for students with cognitive disabilities and whether including their scores with students from the general education pool was a valid comparison. DeLuca (2008) suggested that if the results of assessments were not valid indicators of student academic performance then the resulting scores could cause funding misappropriations and work to the detriment of students with disabilities. Johnson and Arnold (2007) expressed concern regarding the narrow representation of tasks demonstrated in portfolio assessments and the resulting lack of evidence of general education exposure. The authors also stated that it was questionable to include alternate assessment scores with those in the general education population because of the variability of the tasks. They gave the example of a 10th grade student who demonstrated counting to twenty proficiently being compared to a 10th grader who took a general education math assessment. According to Johnson and Arnold (2007), the comparison of those two 10th graders was not a valid comparison.

Even though alternative assessments were typically the assessments of choice for students with cognitive disabilities, many state level education leaders encouraged districts to assess all students with the general assessment (Lazarus & Rieke, 2013). It remains unclear whether alternative assessments will continue to be used for students with significant cognitive disabilities and whether general assessments were more valid for assessing students with cognitive disabilities.

National Report on Alternative Assessments

Accountability was not limited to the demonstration of student outcomes. The federal government assessed states on their implementation of the processes related to student assessments, which included alternative assessments for students with cognitive disabilities. Cameto et al. (2009) stated that the goal of alternative assessments was to include students with the most severe disabilities in state educational accountability, which reflected a small number of students. They also indicated that alternative assessments should utilize different formats such as portfolios, IEP reviews, and checklists. Depending on the state, alternative assessments were used for different purposes, including (a) evaluating programs, (b) guiding classroom instruction, (c) evaluating student performance towards state standards, (d) assessing access to general curriculum, (e) assessing students areas of strengths or weaknesses, and (f) measuring student performance towards IEP goals. States were allowed flexibility in how they implemented the alternative assessments, but they still had to demonstrate compliance with federal and state mandates.

The manner in which the states implemented standards-based assessments varied. Cameto et al. (2009) reported that states typically used eight or fewer of the general education standards for each content area. When creating the alternative assessments, states generally relied on state agencies or independent contractors. While the majority of states reported that the special education teacher administered the alternative assessments, in most states an independent group scored them. Fifty-three percent of states reported that their alternative assessment evidence gathering occurred during the regular school day activities. Twenty-four percent of states indicated that their evidence

gathering occurred at a certain time set aside for the purpose. Education legislation was not specific regarding how the states incorporated assessments into the school day, thus allowing variability in administration. The federal government did not dictate to the states what types of evidence was required for the alternative assessments. According to Cameto et al. (2009), in most cases, each state's Department of Education (DOE) had the largest influence on the administration of alternative assessments. The state DOE provided instructions and descriptions of the evidence that was required for the alternative assessments. Forty-five percent of states required evidence in the forms of videos, data sheets, student work samples, and other forms of evidence to support student performance towards the standards. Thirty-one percent of states did not require any evidence to support student performance towards standards. Consequently, depending on the state, evidence for the demonstration of academic performance towards the standards could differ.

Studies Reflecting Teacher Attitudes on Alternate Assessments

Several studies were conducted that examined teacher perceptions of alternate assessments based on grade level academic standards. Many researchers investigated teacher perceptions of alternate assessments using surveys. Some researchers focused on one specific state while others crossed states lines and gathered information from a variety of teachers implementing alternate assessments. The federal government also examined teacher perceptions of alternate assessments. As part of education legislation, the federal government sought to examine teacher perceptions of the alternative assessments. Cameto et al. (2010) completed a descriptive research study where they surveyed teachers in three states to assess their opinions related to the alternate

assessments in their states. They surveyed over 400 special education teachers. Almost all of the teachers who participated in the survey were certified in special education and most of them had been teaching at least five years. Forty percent of the teachers surveyed worked with students from Grades 3 to 5. Teacher opinions regarding the alternative assessments varied. The Cameto et al. (2010) survey catalogued teacher opinions regarding many elements related to the alternate assessment. Over 50% of the teachers reported that the alternate assessment results had a great deal of influence on academic instruction across subject areas. When asked whether the results of the alternate assessments had an impact on resource allocation, over 40% indicated that the results did not affect resource allocation. Most of the teachers surveyed believed that their state had high expectations for students with cognitive disabilities. Interestingly, 54% of teachers disagreed with the idea that students with significant cognitive disabilities received benefit from inclusion in the statewide accountability system. Around 30% of teachers agreed that the alternate assessment reflected actual student achievement and progress. Over 90% of teachers surveyed agreed that academic instruction was important for students with significant cognitive disabilities. The teachers surveyed had confidence in their ability to identify learning characteristics of their students and were prepared to identify instructional methods. Finally, another finding was that the alternate assessment results did little to help develop the annual IEP. Roach et al. (2007) investigated teacher perceptions of alternate assessments in a quantitative survey design. Their findings indicated that implementing alternate assessments required 15-25 hours of time outside of regular instruction time to complete. The authors found that there were three barriers in effectively implementing alternate assessments, namely, (a) having to incorporate the

activities necessary as part of the alternate assessments into their daily workload, (b) having to manage the time requirements within the mandated small testing window, and (c) having to provide evidence that the results were meaningful in demonstrating student skills and knowledge. Flowers et al. (2005) surveyed 983 special education teachers in five states to examine perceptions of alternate assessments. Findings from the Flowers et al. study indicated that teachers agreed on the importance of including students with cognitive disabilities in large-scale accountability programs, but did not agree that alternate assessments were beneficial. The researchers also reported that teachers did not believe students with cognitive deficits were receiving a higher quality education by being included in high stakes assessment population. Two additional findings from the survey were (a) that the majority of teachers surveyed indicated there was increased paperwork and (b) that extra time outside instruction was required in order to implement alternate assessments. Many teachers who participated in the survey indicated that the alternate assessments were indicators of teacher performance rather than student performance and that teacher knowledge, not student knowledge, was more significant in affecting student outcomes on the alternate assessments. According to an additional research study, there were differences in teacher perceptions of evaluating students with significant disabilities and giving them grades (Kurth, Gross, Lovinger, and Catalano, 2012). They described a study that focused on teacher perspectives of giving grades for students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings. Elementary school teachers indicated that grades for their students should be based on the demonstration of improvement from a previous examination of performance while secondary teachers indicated that grades should be based on performance on certain tasks. Special education

teachers assigned grades based on effort and by utilizing special rubrics for student assignments while the general education teachers rarely gave grades based on effort and typically did not use special rubrics.

Common Core State Standards Initiative

The most recent large-scale reform effort in public schools is the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Forty-four states and four U.S. territories agreed to the implementation of the CCSS, which were developed by the NGA and CCSSO (NGA & CCSSO, 2010). According to the Common Core State Standards Initiative website, the intended benefits of the CCSS were (a) clear expectations for student success, (b) a reflection of real-world expectations, (c) preparation for college and career; and (d) preparedness for competition in a global economy (McLaughlin & Overturf, 2012; NGA & CCSSO, 2010; Saunders, Spooner, Browder, Wakeman, & Lee, 2013; Steadman & Evans, 2013). The CCSS has promised to prepare students in public schools for college and future work environments. In addition to the standards implementation, CCSS-based assessments are being created to evaluate student performance for the 2014-2015 school year (Liebtag, 2013). The CCSS requires increased technology access for the assessments (Saine, 2013). The proposed benefits of the CCSS spurred commentary from various education entities regarding the pros and cons of the new standards.

Comparison and Contrast of Differing Opinions Related to the Common Core

While there were no specific recommendations or mention of students with disabilities on the CCSS site, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) commended the NGA and CCSSO for creating the CCSS and expressed gratitude for participating in

the development of the standards so that the inclusion of students with disabilities was a possibility (CEC, n.d.). The CCSS builds upon state standards and accountability established by NCLB and IDEA.

With no mention by CCSS of the specific needs of students with disabilities, there have been questions as to how to apply the CCSS to the education of students with disabilities. Research has suggested that aligning curriculum to the CCSS would be challenging to professionals working with students with disabilities (Constable, Grossi, Moniz, & Ryan, 2013; Powell, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2013). There was concern for students who were already struggling with previous standards and who were then expected to perform to the more rigorous set of standards of CCSS.

Ohanian (2013) suggested that money was a primary factor for many states and organizations adopting and supporting the CCSS. She reported that the CCSSO alone received \$71,302,833 from the Bill & Melinda Gates foundation in order to create and promote the CCSS. She went on to report that many other organizations received funds to garner support and promote the CCSS. Examples of organizations receiving funds to promote the CCSS included the National Parent Teacher Association that received \$2.0 million and the National Writing Project that reportedly received \$2.6 million. Ohanian's concern was that the initiative to implement the CCSS was driven by money and not sound educational best practice. Burns (2012) echoed a similar sentiment in that the private interests of the organizations developing the standards dictated the criteria for student outcomes.

Abadiano, Turner, and Valerie (2013) described differing opinions regarding the CCSS. They indicated that proponents of the CCSS would purport that society is

changing therefore requiring change in education. These changes were warranted so that students would be prepared for college and career in the future. The authors also reported that detractors would argue that the CCSS is simply another change being implemented in the ever-changing environment of public schools. Stewart and Varner (2012) indicated that rural school districts lacked the resources needed to implement the CCSS effectively. They stated that student performance would not improve as a result of evaluation changes and that the needs of rural districts had to be considered in implementing the CCSS. Browder (2012) criticized the new standards and noted that the academic standards of the CCSS were not created from philosophical or theoretical bases, but were instead derived from the skills needed by adults in the workforce. In contrast to Browder, Peterson (2014) questioned the critics of the CCSS by stating that families do not recognize the need for change in their own schools and instead assume that the changes need to occur elsewhere. He suggested that parents need to be made aware of the problems on a local level so they can be better informed and support new reforms rather than oppose them. He believed that the CCSS was a critical step in allowing families to be better informed concerning their own schools and teachers.

Common Core State Standards in Georgia

Georgia is one of the participating states in the adoption of the CCSS. Anderson, Harris, and Lewis (2012) outlined the intended process of implementing the CCSS in the some of the southern states—Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina and South Carolina. In Georgia, CCSS was implemented initially during the 2012-2013 school year for elementary schools. The GADOE (2013b) developed the CCGPS-based on the CCSS for ELA/Math and the Georgia Performance Standards for science and

social studies. Originally, Georgia was part of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) consortium of states developing an assessment based on the CCSS. The PARCC consortium was one of two groups of partner states developed and funded by U.S. Department of Education grants to create assessments that reflected student ability related to the CCSS (Conley, 2011). In 2012, Georgia decided to leave PARCC and develop a comparable measure for assessment based on the CCGPS (Georgia Department of Education [GADOE], 2013c). These assessments included most students with disabilities. As of the 2014-2015 school year, students with cognitive impairments will participate in the Georgia Alternative Assessment based on the CCGPS (Georgia Department of Education, 2013d).

There is little research supporting or criticizing the CCSS related to students with disabilities, but there have been articles written recently to discuss some components of the standards. Graham and Harris (2012) suggested that the effects of the CCSS would not be known for many years to come. Even with the limited research, some warn that students with disabilities of all different types may need specific attention in order to demonstrate progress with the CCSS (Bulgren, Graner, & Deshler, 2013). Another warning was issued from Haager and Vaughn (2013) cautioning that simply raising the standards with the CCSS and expecting high performance on standards-based assessments may not result in increased performance for students with disabilities. Troia and Olinghouse (2013) examined the CCSS specifically for writing standards and found both strengths and weaknesses in the standards. They recommended that school psychologists be more proactive in supporting teachers with evidence-based practices in writing but there was no mention of students with disabilities. Drew (2012) expressed

concern regarding digital literacy and the fact that the CCSS left out many of the critical components common in today's digital environment.

In 2013, the State of Georgia examined teacher attitudes as the CCGPS was being implemented during the 2012-2013 school year. Brundage, Shearer, and Tully (2013) from the Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement conducted a survey study of over 1,000 teachers regarding the recently implemented CCGPS. The findings from the survey indicated that many teachers had engaged in professional development related to the CCGPS. The teachers who participated in the survey preferred the CCGPS resources to the professional development related to the CCGPS. Math teachers and teachers from the suburbs reported little CCGPS-related professional development and had increased negative perceptions of the support they received for CCGPS implementation. Another finding was that teachers used tasks related to the CCGPS in the 2012-2013 school year more than in the previous year. This study did not provide any information related to students with disabilities.

Change and Resistance

Theories abound regarding effective change—change related to organizational change, the components of effective change, leadership necessary for change, and large-scale change. A critic of school reform in the United States, and especially a critic of NCLB, Fullan (2010) described the process of successful large-scale education reform efforts in *All Systems Go*. Fullan (2010) outlined school reform efforts in terms of the components that are essential for success, which included (a) accepting the idea that all children can learn, (b) narrowing focus to a small number of key priorities, (c) fostering determined leadership, (d) accepting the idea of collective capacity which is the idea that

all stakeholders are responsible for educating every child, (e) implementing strategies with precision, (f) utilizing intelligent accountability, and (g) accepting the idea that all means all. He focused on the element of collective capacity as the driving force in large-scale change. Other key elements in educational change described by Fullan (2010) were high quality leadership, meaningful change, purposeful and intelligent accountability, and implementing research-based strategies that work in a comprehensive fashion.

While Fullan (2010) outlined processes for successful change implementation, there were others who investigated or documented ideas relative to the idea of resistance to change. Lewin (as cited in Foster, 2010) was one of the first to discuss resistance to change in the 1940s. He described the status quo as the equilibrium between the barriers that inhibit change and the pull towards change. In order for change to occur, there had to be a decrease in the factors that inhibit change or an increase in the pull towards change. Resistance to change was a possibility on either side of the balance, but was often the great force holding the equilibrium in place and keeping change from occurring. Kotter (1995) implied that resistance to change occurred on the individual level and must be addressed in preparation for change implementation. Dent and Goldberg (1999) looked at the idea that resistance to change occurred in change recipients and that management (change agents) needed to overcome that resistance. They argued that individual resistance to change did not exist. They suggested that the expectation that resistance to change would occur created failure in change processes. Szabla (2007) described resistance to change as a multi-faceted phenomenon and indicated that response to change or innovation by individuals can vary in positive or negative ways across the dimensions of beliefs, emotions, or intentions. Ford, Ford, and Amelio (2008) examined

research related to change and found previous research had favored managers and/or change agents while casting the change recipients as the cause of barriers or resistance to change. Focusing on the resistance to change by the change recipients took the burden of accepting leadership failures and poor management of change process off the shoulders of those who were facilitating the change. Essentially the researchers believed that the responsibility for resistance to change could not solely lie on the change recipients because managers and/or change agents created their own resistance. They went on to suggest there are many ways in which change agents cause the advent of resistance to change. One way was by damaging trust. When managers or people in authority failed to keep promises or broke the trust between themselves and those who were the change recipients, then the responsibility for the resistance was placed on the managers. Another way that change agents created resistance to change in change recipients was by failing to demonstrate the instrumentality of an innovation to the change recipients. If change recipients were left to assess the instrumentality and began to critically examine the innovation, questions arose and the questioning behaviors might be considered to be resistance to change when realistically the change recipients were engaging in the process of change and drawing conclusions. Another form of manager- created resistance described by Ford et al. (2008) was misrepresentation or deception. Essentially, misrepresentation meant that the change agent coerced the change recipient to participate in some way, which ultimately resulted in resistance by the change recipient. Ford et al. (2008) suggested resistance was not necessarily a problem, but in fact could be informational. They went on to indicate that resistance might be critical to the success of an innovation because resistance helped reveal weaknesses, misinformation, and missing

resources necessary for successful change implementation. Ford et al. (2008) suggested that questioning an innovation was a sign that change recipients were asking questions because something they valued was possibly threatened. Instead of being seen as resistance, questioning behaviors were simply people demonstrating a higher level of commitment and engagement in a process that might affect someone or something deemed as valuable.

Zaltman and Duncan (1977) described the idea of implementing change in *Strategies for Planned Change*. The authors devoted one chapter to the discussion of resistance to change and to what such resistance meant for change implementation. The authors suggested resistance to change was informational and beneficial if resistance revealed characteristics of an innovation that were detrimental to an organization. The authors categorized resistance to change into four categories: cultural, social, organizational, and psychological. According to the authors, cultural resistance to change was rooted in the history of an organization. Cultural resistance to change was governed by the traditions, previous social relationships and other historical influences. Cultural ethnocentrism occurred when the change recipient believed that the innovation was inferior to traditional or current methods. Social resistance resulted from unified opposition between two opposing groups, where one group supported the innovation while the other group preferred the status quo. These opposing groups could generate conflict, which resulted in social resistance. Another form of social barrier or social resistance to change could occur when the proponents of the change were viewed as outsiders with foreign ideas that needed to be rejected in the interests of the insiders. Zaltman and Duncan (1977) described organizational resistance to change in several

ways. Organizational resistance was the threat to influence, which occurred when a group in an organization felt the identity that they had established was threatened by the change. Sometimes organizational resistance occurred when organizational structures prevented change such as leadership, training, poor planning, and ineffective processes. When leadership failed to embrace a change or when the need for change was not clearly established, organizational resistance to change could occur. Psychological resistance was the final category of resistance to innovation described by the researchers (1977). Psychological resistance tended to occur on the individual level and was characterized by the change recipients' feeling that the change was not needed. Personality, conformity, and/or commitment were also considered examples of psychological resistance to change.

Possible Themes in the Research Study

This case study revealed many themes relating to aspects of the implementation of CCGPS-based assessments that were expected, such as time involvement in assessments, concerns about validity, the lack of curricular exposure, and the importance of including students with disabilities in accountability systems (Cameto et al., 2009; Cameto et al., 2010; Flowers et al., 2005; Kohl, McLaughlin, & Nagle, 2006; Roach et al., 2007). Basing a conceptual framework on Zaltman and Duncan's (1977) idea that resistance can be informative and upon their categorical definitions as outlined in *Strategies for Planned Change*, this researcher was able to plan a case study that would productively generate certain unique themes directly relating to special education teachers implementing CCGPS. The implementation of the CCGPS has been the result of large-scale sweeping change in public schools in the United States (NGA & CCSSO, 2010). The change recipients were any state or district level personnel who were responsible for

implementing the CCGPS. In the case study, the data related to resistance to change was organized into themes based on the categories described by Zaltman and Duncan (1977). The initial categories that were applied in analyzing special education teacher perceptions of the CCGPS-based assessments were (a) cultural resistance, which is the influence of tradition and history on acceptance of the CCGPS-based assessments; (b) social resistance, which is the idea that different groups might have different ideas and be in conflict with other groups regarding the CCGPS-based assessments; (c) organizational resistance, namely, the result of barriers within the organization itself including lack of resources, training, or communication; and (d) psychological resistance, which includes the beliefs held within each individual that might prevent the acceptance of the CCGPS-based assessments.

Literature Related to Study Methodology

Stockall and Smith (2013) conducted a qualitative case study to investigate three teachers' perceptions of the process of implementing alternate assessment portfolios. There were four themes that arose from the data analysis: manufacturing portfolios, authenticity of portfolios, portfolio time, and conceptualizing student achievement. According to their findings, the target academic skill required extensive modification in order for the students to demonstrate the skill and, as a result, the content of the standard was then lost. In order to create the portfolios, the efforts of many people, including special education teachers and administrators, were required. The consensus among the three teachers was that the portfolios did not adequately reflect student academic performance. They also found that the time required to compile the portfolios was

extensive. Overall, Stockall and Smith found that the alternative assessment portfolios actually misrepresented student progress.

Cho and Kingston (2012) conducted a case study and investigated the reasons behind teachers' decisions to assign alternate assessments for students with mild disabilities. Based on interviews with six teachers, they found that low teacher expectations accompanied by lack of student exposure to a grade level curriculum contributed to students being assigned to alternate assessments.

Musson, Thomas, Towles-Reeves, and Kearns (2010) conducted a qualitative study related to alternate assessments. They investigated alternate assessments from the standpoint of state guidelines for implementing alternate assessments. They examined state guidelines from fifty states for factors related to student eligibility for alternate assessments and discovered that (a) most states did not mention an IQ as a qualifying measure for the alternate assessment, (b) most states considered significant cognitive disability as a requirement for participating in the alternate assessments, (c) a majority of states required the student to have difficulty with generalizing skills, (d) students participating in alternate assessments were working towards a certificate of completion instead of a diploma, (e) students eligible for alternate assessments were required to have an IEP, and (f) poor adaptive student behavior prevented them from participating the general curriculum or regular assessments.

Kohl et al. (2006) also conducted a qualitative study to investigate the process of implementing alternate assessments. One state-level education representative from each of 16 states was interviewed over the phone and was asked open-ended questions regarding the process of assessing students with cognitive disabilities. Kohl et al. (2006)

found that the process of implementing alternate assessments based on grade level standards was a continually changing process. The state-level representatives described positive outcomes from the alternate assessments, but they also recognized the complexity for teachers of the process for implementing the alternate assessment. Another conclusion drawn by Kohl et al. was that the conflict between the functional skills curriculum and the academic skills curriculum caused problems for teachers who implemented alternate assessments. Most of the states reported that they applied grade level standards to the alternate assessments, but in actuality the content assessed was adjusted to reflect primarily functional content skills related to the standards. Most of the states left the final decisions of which standards to target up to the teacher. Kohl et al.'s final finding was their observation that implementing the alternate assessments in terms of teacher training, preparation for assessment implementation, and scoring the assessments came at high cost.

Stillman (2009) conducted a qualitative multi-case study that investigated teacher perceptions of standards-based assessments. Three teachers who specialized in teaching students who were English Learners (ELs) served as the three different cases in this multi-case study. The study examined teacher perceptions of standards-based teaching—specifically, language arts standards as these related to ELs. The researchers found that the actual standards did not present a direct problem as the standards gave teachers academic targets and made it clear what was to be taught, but that, according to teacher perceptions, (a) there were too many standards, (b) the standards were useful when the teachers felt free to adapt their pedagogical knowledge to implement them, and (c) the

standards needed to be culturally relevant. Another theme identified by Stillman was the need to prioritize standards.

Hargreaves and Goodson (2006) conducted a qualitative study investigating teacher perceptions of change implementation over the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. They conducted over 200 interviews and observations of teachers from eight high schools in New York and Ontario, Canada. They interviewed new teachers and teachers who had been part of multiple periods of change. Their goal was to understand the perceptions and experiences of teachers who had been through many cycles of change during their employment as teachers in the public schools. Hargreaves and Goodson found five forces of change that influenced teacher perceptions of change. The first change force was what they called “waves of reform.” For teachers who had been teaching for many years, the multiple instances of school reform left them ambivalent to change, and contradictory reforms left the teachers less committed to change efforts. “Leadership succession” was the second change force. Prior to the 1980s, school administrators were typically charismatic leader who worked in a school for almost the entirety of their careers. In the 1980s and 1990s, principals stayed in a school for five years or less before moving on, which prevented them from becoming fully accepted and integrated into the school and community. The constant revolving leadership left teachers feeling devastated when people-focused, dynamic leader left the school and took the best teachers with them to the next school assignment. The continual state of change resulting from new leadership left teachers feeling disconnected from both the leadership and the constantly changing goals within the school. The third change force was *student and community demographics*. Schools that had once been smaller and community-driven became larger

and more diverse. Social factors such as racial and residential segregation and gaps between affluence and poverty created different types of students. Teachers who had taught in the idealistic community schools of the 1960s were left frustrated by teaching to widely differentiated student populations. Another change force was *teacher generations*. Teachers who were teaching in the 1960s and continued their careers into the 1990s felt a sense of loss. They lost the community, culture, and their career's creative improvements to the standardization and centralization of the schools in the 1990s. Newer teachers did not have that sense of loss, but they did not appreciate reforms that threatened their professional image or working conditions. One new teacher commented that there was "no joy in teaching—only a paper trail of grief" (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006, p.26). The feelings of frustration left many new teachers searching for alternate career paths and seasoned teachers looking to retire as soon as possible. The final change force was "school interrelations." Schools that were once independent or even considered innovative due to magnet status were criticized and compared to each other with increased standardization. Teachers grew demoralized by comparisons with teachers from other schools, which they thought resulted from elements of change out of their control, such as legislative policy, shifting demographics, and economic constraints. Hargreaves and Goodson (2006) suggested that future change efforts in the schools consider the historic attempts at change. They also urged that the experiences of teachers be viewed as assets to be drawn upon instead of obstacles that must be overcome.

Literature Related to Different Methodologies

Along with qualitative studies, there were several related studies that utilized either mixed methods or quantitative methods. Kim et al. (2006) conducted a mixed-

methods study in Illinois to investigate special education teacher perceptions regarding the Illinois Alternate Assessment (IAA). Two hundred thirty-four teachers were surveyed as part of the study. While much of the data was gathered through the surveys, several themes emerged from the content analysis of the comments provided by the teachers. The teachers indicated that the IAA (a) does not reflect students educational needs, (b) requires a great deal of time, (c) reflects teacher performance rather than student performance, (d) does not provide information of value, (e) is an unreliable assessment method, and (f) added to teacher workload.

Karvonen, Wakeman, Flowers, and Moody (2013) investigated the effects of teacher beliefs regarding the alternate assessments on instructional decisions for students who participated in alternate assessments. Over 400 teachers were surveyed and scores from the 2010-2011 alternate assessments were analyzed. The researchers found that there were three variables that had the greatest impact on students' proficiency ratings on the alternate assessments. These were symbolic communication, teacher beliefs regarding the alternate assessments on academics, and validity of the alternate assessment. A finding of the Karvonen et al. study was that teachers generally believed there were benefits in implementing the alternate assessments, but did not in general believe that the scores on the alternate assessments reflected students' academic achievement.

Roach et al. (2007) investigated teacher perceptions of alternate assessments using a quantitative design. Their findings indicated that implementing alternate assessments required 25-30 hours of time outside of regular instruction time to complete. The authors found that there were three barriers in implementing alternate assessments effectively, namely, (a) incorporating the activities necessary as part of the alternate

assessments into their daily workload, (b) managing the time requirements within the mandated small testing window, and (c) providing evidence that the results were meaningful in demonstrating student skills and knowledge.

Flowers et al. (2005) surveyed 983 special education teachers in five states to examine perceptions of alternate assessments. Findings from the quantitative study reflected that teachers agreed on the importance of including students with cognitive disabilities in large-scale accountability, but they did not agree that alternate assessments were beneficial. The researchers also reported that teachers did not believe students with cognitive deficits were receiving a higher quality education by virtue being included in high stakes assessments. One of the most significant findings from the survey was that the majority of teachers surveyed indicated that there was increased paperwork and that extra time outside of instruction was required in order to implement alternate assessments. Many teachers who participated in the survey indicated that the alternate assessments were indicators of teacher performance as opposed to student performance and that teacher knowledge, not student knowledge, was more significant in influencing student outcomes on the alternate assessments.

Ruppar et al. (2011) conducted a study using descriptive and inferential statistics in order to examine teacher perspectives on literacy instruction. The study also considered the barriers to including students with cognitive disabilities in general education classrooms for literacy instruction. Ruppar et al. indicated that the reading level and the content of reading material in the general education classrooms were considered to be the most significant barriers in providing literacy instruction for students with

cognitive impairments. Students with cognitive impairments could not comprehend grade level reading material.

Kurth et al. (2012) conducted a research study using an online survey with teachers to examine modifications to the general curriculum and grading practices for students with disabilities. After surveying 139 teachers in both special education and general education, they found:

(a) general and special education teachers used different practices and have different preferences for grading students with disabilities; (b) general and special educators also reported differences in their level of comfort and training for grading with special educators feeling more prepared to grade students with disabilities; (c) elementary teachers were more likely to accept modified work than secondary teachers; and (d) secondary teachers report using modifications to instruction less frequently than elementary school teachers. (p. 41)

Kurth et al. (2012) also suggested that better collaboration was needed between general education and special education teachers to achieve increased effective inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education curriculum.

In relation to resistance to change, Foster (2010) examined the relationships among individual resistance, organizational justice, and commitment to change following organizational change implementation. Organizational justice referred to the degree to which employees believed that management was fair in its endeavor to lead and, in this case, to implement change. The quantitative analysis of 218 surveys completed by employees regarding change yielded that (a) organizational justice was significantly

related to commitment to change, and (b) individual resistance had little impact on commitment to change.

Conclusion

Recent federal legislation and policy have resulted in changes affecting all teachers and students in U.S. public schools (IDEA, 1997; IDEA, 2004; NCLB, 2001; NGA & CCSSO, 2010). One major change was the inclusion of students with cognitive disabilities in high-stakes accountability assessments. However, alternate assessments are utilized across the country in an attempt to provide standards-based assessments for students with cognitive impairments who are not adequately assessed using assessments created for peers without disabilities. Special education teachers and researchers in the field have described difficulties in appropriately assessing students with cognitive impairments due to the diverse range of ability within the group of students with cognitive disabilities (Lemons et al., 2012; Weigert, 2012). There were doubts even at the time of implementation regarding the likelihood of effectiveness of alternate assessments. Some suggested there was a need to create specific assessments based on the specific needs and abilities of students with cognitive disabilities (Goldstein & Behuniak, 2012; Weigert, 2012). Doubts notwithstanding, current federal legislative reform and the adoption of the CCGPS in Georgia have led to the requirement that special education teachers must assess students with cognitive disabilities at a more rigorous level that is more in line with typical peers. The transition to the CCGPS-based GAA and report cards in evaluating academic progress for students with cognitive impairments provides the background and intellectual basis for this case study. Insight into the nature of implementing CCGPS-based assessments in evaluating academic progress for students

with cognitive impairments is critical information for decision makers challenged to improve assessments for students with cognitive disabilities in the future.

Section 3: Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of the case study was to investigate special education teacher perceptions of the implementation of the CCGPS-based assessments for evaluating academic performance for students with significant cognitive disabilities and to garner information relative to the nature of CCGPS-based assessments from resistance to such assessments by special education teachers. Assessing students with a significant cognitive impairment is challenging and previous researchers have described the diverse abilities within the population of students with cognitive impairments as one of the primary challenges (Lemons et al., 2012; Weigert, 2012).

The framework supporting the study was based upon the idea of resistance to change outlined by Zaltman and Duncan (1977) in *Strategies for Planned Change*. A major concept related to resistance to change was that resistance was informative. They identified several different types of resistance, in particular, (a) cultural resistance that results from traditions and history affecting the implementation of change, (b) social resistance that occurs when opposing groups are unable to decide on the appropriate avenue for change, (c) organizational resistance that is the result of organizational failure of some kind (e.g., lack of resources, poor communication), and (d) psychological resistance that stems from any idea or belief that causes an individual to reject a change.

Similar to Zaltman and Duncan (1977), the informative nature of resistance to change was described by Firoozmand (2013), who styled resistance to change as practical, logical, and possibly requiring process adjustment in order for the change to be implemented. Ford and Ford (2009) also described resistance to change as being

informative and relevant to change leaders who were wise to use that information to improve the change process. Bareil (2013) noted that, historically, resistance to change was considered the enemy to change but, currently, such resistance is seen as a resource that can be utilized to improve the process of change implementation. It is the idea that the resistance to change can be informative that drove this study and that prompted several questions. Following discussions with several colleagues regarding the CCGPS-based GAA and report cards for students in MI/MO classrooms, I began to wonder what do other teachers in the local district think about implementing them. Would other special education teacher descriptions reveal resistance that might be informative regarding CCGPS-based assessments? For purposes of pursuing such a question, Section 3 presents a research design, methods for data collection and analysis, the selection of participants, and the steps taken to inform the human subjects and protect these human subjects' rights.

Research Design

A case study tradition guided the study. Such research is qualitative in nature. Yin (2013) described a case study as an “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p. 16). The subjects participating in the case study were eight special education teachers from a Georgia district who taught students with mild to moderate cognitive disabilities and who administered the CCGPS-based GAA and report cards. Special education teacher perceptions of the CCGPS-based assessments were revealed through interviews that involved open-ended questions and prompts (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012).

I analyzed transcriptions of the interviews in order to create complete descriptions and reveal themes present in the data (Hays & Wood, 2001). Other qualitative designs were considered but were rejected for a variety of reasons. Participatory action research (PAR) was rejected because it is a form of qualitative inquiry that results in specific actions to be taken once the data have been analyzed (MacDonald, 2012). In this study, I planned to describe the overall experiences of the special education teachers assessing students with cognitive deficits and explore areas of resistance to the assessments based upon the CCGPS. Ethnography was also rejected as a design for the study. Ethnography focuses on identifying patterns in a cultural group and requires prolonged engagement. In other words, ethnography did not lend itself to my focus and was a practical impossibility (Hays & Wood, 2011). Quantitative design was also not appropriate for the study because there was no way to quantify the experience of the special education teachers.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided the case study were:

RQ 1. What are the perceptions of special education teachers regarding the process (i.e., training, expectations, and results) of implementing the CCGPS-based assessments (GAA and standards-based report cards) for students with cognitive disabilities?

RQ2. What does special education teacher resistance to the implementation of the CCGPS-based assessments in evaluating academic progress for students with cognitive impairments reveal about the nature of the assessments?

Context of the Study

A qualitative study's context influences whether the reader of the study can make judgments regarding the transferability of findings from the study (Merriam, 2009). The case study was conducted in a school district that included the school in which I worked. The district was comprised of 20 elementary schools, 9 middle schools, and 5 high schools. Within the district, there were approximately 40,000 students. Special education teachers participating in the case study implemented both the GAA and standards-based report cards for students with cognitive disabilities. Participating special education teachers worked in one of three environments, which were elementary, middle, or high school. Special education teachers who taught in MI/MO classrooms made up the case in the case study. Eight volunteers were identified from a pool of 25 special education teachers in the local district. The local school district served approximately 5,000 students under some type of special education eligibility. Students participating in alternate assessments were typically educated in self-contained classrooms and participated in a modified curriculum. The special education teachers working in these classrooms had specific certifications from the State of Georgia that allowed them to teach a modified curriculum. Special education teachers working in the self-contained classrooms with students with cognitive disabilities met with their peers regularly to discuss pertinent issues related to teaching, assessment, and upcoming changes. District level personnel supported special education teachers working in self-contained classrooms in areas related to IEPs, behavior management, technology support, medical issues, and other related concerns. Despite the district level support provided for special education teachers and collaboration efforts among peers, there seemed to be resistance

to the implementation of the CCGPS-based GAA and report cards for students with cognitive impairments.

Ethical Issues

In order to identify special education teachers who might be eligible to participate in the study, I contacted the MI/MO Facilitator at the district office. She provided the names of the MI/MO teachers then currently teaching in the school district. Initially, I contacted special education teachers by email to inform them of the study and provide copies of the informed consent (Appendix A), interview questions (Appendix B), and a copy of the study document upon request. The informed consent (Appendix A) outlined participant rights, the expectations for the interview, and the option to participate in the study. The informed consent also included the goals of the study, my role in the process, and the teacher's right to discontinue participation at any time. Prior to conducting interviews, I provided the participants with my contact information and copies of the interview questions via email. Once the data were gathered, analyzed, and member checked, I shared the results of the study with all participants and with the local school district Superintendent's Office.

Protection from Harm

When conducting research, protection of human subjects is the highest priority of the researcher. In considering protection from harm, researchers refer to both emotional and physical harm. As part of the informed consent, participants are encouraged to discontinue participation at any time he or she deems necessary. In the present study, the option to discontinue participation was discussed at the beginning of each interview. There are other ways that participants were protected from harm. One way participants

are protected in the case study was through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Walden University. The IRB is responsible for ensuring that student research complies with ethical standards and federal legislation. Once IRB approval is acquired, I sought district level approval for the study.

Researcher Bias

I was aware of my own bias towards CCGPS standards-based assessments for students with cognitive disabilities as I conducted the study. According to Stake (2010), one element of credibility is to be forthright with one's own bias or viewpoints prior to conducting research. Merriam (2000) described this as reflexivity. In an effort to expose my own biases, I acknowledged that I believe most special education teachers working in MI/MO classrooms work diligently to maximize student abilities and improve student weaknesses. In my opinion, the CCGPS-based GAA and the standards-based report cards reflected limited information regarding the academic abilities of students with cognitive disabilities. In an effort to minimize influence of my bias, I was mindful of my own bias as I conducted the interviews and analyzed the data. One way to limit bias in the research was to use bracketing as I conducted my research. Bracketing is the process of acknowledging one's views and theoretical viewpoints as research is conducted (Tufford & Newman, 2012). In bracketing, researchers separate their opinions and views from the data collection and analysis processes. Bracketing may occur over time during the entire study or at certain times, such as during data analysis (Gearing, 2004). In order to minimize researcher bias influence in my research, I practiced bracketing throughout the study.

Researcher's Role

Currently, I am a speech-language pathologist (SLP) at an elementary school. I have worked in the local school system for a total of five years. Two of the participants in the case study work at my current elementary school and I have had past working relationships with one special education teacher who works in another elementary school. I do not occupy a supervisory position with anyone who participates in the study, and, therefore, data collection should not be affected. I have not administered the GAA or completed a standards-based report card for any students with cognitive disabilities, but I have been in the classroom for the process of gathering evidence for the portfolios. For the case study, I wrote open-ended questions and used prompts without bias to elicit honest and complete answers so I could create thorough descriptions of the teacher experiences.

Trustworthiness. In conducting a qualitative study, trustworthiness is a term that applies when discussing the quality of one's work. Klehr (2012) described keys to establishing trustworthiness, which included the ideas of process validity and democratic validity. Process validity is the degree to which the methods match the research question, the systematic action in the research process, and triangulation of data. In planning the study, I aligned the methods with the research questions and approached the process of conducting the study in an organized and systematic fashion. Democratic validity is the process of acquiring different viewpoints regarding a situation. It was my goal further to ensure trustworthiness by acquiring several different opinions in order to get a clear and in-depth picture of how the assessment of students with cognitive deficits appeared from the vantage point of special education teachers.

Credibility. Credibility, which is often considered synonymous with internal validity, is an important consideration in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). Credibility is the idea that the research findings reflect reality and what is actually occurring in a given situation. Merriam (2009) suggested member checks for ensuring credibility. Member checks occur when participants review initial findings from the analysis of their own data (Stake, 2010). Consequently, following data analysis, I conducted member checks with participating special education teachers to help ensure credibility. Researchers can also facilitate credibility by demonstrating reflexivity, which is the process of revealing their viewpoints regarding the study at hand. In disclosing viewpoints or personal theories regarding the study, a researcher can give an explanation for how the data were interpreted (Merriam, 2009). For the study, I used member checking and reflexivity to ensure credibility.

An audit trail is a process that allows researchers to track their activities in the process of conducting research and further insuring credibility (Merriam, 2009). The audit trail provides a format for the researcher to describe “how the data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry.” (p. 223). In order to create an audit trail, researchers must develop a journal that contains questions, ideas, decisions, ideas and reflections when they collect data. The journal is also used to document researchers’ interactions with the data as analysis occurs. I used an audit trail performing the case study, and it provided the opportunity to authenticate findings following data analysis. I engaged a peer reviewer to review the audit trail and help assure the occurrence of logical development of themes and conclusions. Prior to conducting the peer review of the data analysis of each interview, the peer reviewer

signed a confidentiality agreement in order to protect the privacy of participants and the district (Appendix F). Merriam (2009) described the functions of a peer reviewer as (a) discussing the process of the study, (b) evaluating the emerging findings from raw data, and (c) confirming or questioning researcher interpretations. For the case study, a colleague in the school district agreed to serve as a peer reviewer. Both her background in special education and her understanding of the process of conducting research made her a qualified peer reviewer for the initial data analysis of each special education teacher interview. The peer reviewer had a Bachelor of Arts in Special Education and a Master of Science in Behavioral Disorders and Learning Disabilities. Working in special education for over 20 years, she held both a Level 6 Teaching Certificate in the State of Georgia, which is the Specialist Equivalent, and a Leadership Certificate. At the time of her service in this research, she served as a Graduation Coach as part of an administrative team in a local middle school. She was also in the process of completing her doctorate at Walden University.

Another activity that promotes credibility is the use of a panel of experts to review the research questions to be used in interviews. I asked three educational professionals to review the research questions and give feedback on them as part of the process of readying the questions for use in the interviews. One member of the expert panel was a National Board Certified Teacher who served as the expert related to the CCGPS. The second member of the expert panel was a retired facilitator and teacher for students with cognitive impairments. The final member of the expert panel was a representative from the GADOE who oversees programming for students with cognitive impairments.

Participants

In planning for the case study, I made contact with the Director of Special Education for the district via email to inform her of my intention to complete a research study and I identified the topic of my study. She explained via email that once I obtained Institutional Research Board (IRB) approval from Walden University, I would be required to complete a research request for the local district (S. Taylor, personal communication, February 3, 2014). As part of the requirements for completing the study in the district, I was required to have a participant agreement for the district from the Superintendent's Office, the Director of Elementary Education, and the Director of Secondary Education since my study was being conducted with participants from multiple schools. Once I received IRB approval and district approval for my study, I sent an email to all teachers of MI/MO classrooms in the district to ask for volunteers for the study. During the initial contact via email, I explained my study, provided an informed consent form, and provided a copy of the interview questions for the special education teacher to review. The study document was made available to any teacher who wished to review it as well. If the special education teacher agreed to participate in the study, she could give consent for participation in the study through email or by printing, signing and returning the informed consent to me. Informed consent forms were provided to each participant at the time of the interview. The first eight respondents were chosen as participants in the study and I made arrangements for the initial interview. I decided to seek eight participants because that number represented one-third of the special education teachers who administer the GAA and standards-based report cards. Asking for eight participants gave me the opportunity to broaden the scope of the study beyond the

elementary school in which I worked. My goal was to conduct the interview at a time and place that was the most convenient for the special education teacher. Therefore, I made every effort to be flexible and open to each special education teacher's needs.

Participants had to meet certain criteria. First, they had to be able to state that they implemented the GAA to at least one student. Second, they had to be able to state that they had implemented a CCGPS standards-based report card for students who had mild to moderate cognitive disabilities and who participated in a modified curriculum.

Data Collection Procedures

Special education teacher interviews were scheduled individually and at the convenience of the interviewee. The interviews occurred in a location chosen by the special education teacher but outside of my classroom and that of the interviewee. The planned time for the interview was one hour with the interview beginning and ending on time. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Following transcription, each interview was analyzed for initial findings and the special education teachers member checked the findings from the analysis of their own interviews. Documentation from the preliminary analysis of participants' data was provided to them via email. Participants provided feedback via email if they so wished. I planned to contact the participants by phone to discuss preliminary findings but all of the participants responded via email. The data gathered from the interview was coded by theme. Participants were identified by pseudonyms for protection of privacy. The data was kept private and secure on a flash drive and will be locked in a filing cabinet in my home for five years.

In order to collect the desired type of data, interview questions are written to garner the greatest amount of information. Jacob and Furgerson (2012) made several

suggestions for creating quality interview questions in qualitative study. Their recommendations were to (a) pick an interesting topic, (b) using questions that were guided by research, (c) use scripts, (d) create open-ended questions, (e) begin by asking basic questions, (f) start with easier information and work towards more potentially controversial topics, (g) use the phrase “tell me about...,” (h) create questions that allow the information to flow, (i) prompt for more information, (j) be prepared to adjust and transition on demand, (k) honor the hour allotted for the interview, (l) practice interviewing with a friend, (m) set aside a time in the future for transcript review and clarification, and (n) clear project with school Institutional Research Board (IRB). The authors’ suggestions were used as a guide in writing the interview questions and conducting the interviews. The interview questions are provided in Appendix B.

Data Analysis Procedures

Following the interviews and data gathering, the data was analyzed for emerging themes. The data were gathered and imported into an Excel document for analysis. There were findings that seemed to be discrepant or inconsistent with the main ideas discovered through data analysis. Any discrepant findings were considered to be informational and reflective of multiple realities (Shenton, 2004). Data analysis created a thematically descriptive process of implementing the evaluation of academic performance and elements of special education teacher resistance in implementing the CCGPS-based GAA and report cards for students with cognitive disabilities.

Expected Themes

There were some expected themes related to the process of implementing the CCGPS-based GAA and report cards based on previous research such as: time

involvement in assessments; validity concerns; lack of curricular exposure; and the importance of including students with disabilities in accountability systems. Possible themes related to teacher resistance to the CCGPS-based assessment implementation for students with cognitive impairments include: (a) cultural resistance or the historical and traditional influences that might cause resistance to a change; (b) social resistance which occurs when groups are unable to agree on the direction or change strategy; (c) organizational resistance which can result from lack of leadership, communication or resources; and (d) psychological resistance that results from an idea or belief causing an individual to reject change.

Summary

The purpose of the case study was to examine teacher perceptions of the process of implementing the CCGPS in assessing students with cognitive disabilities. In addition to understanding the process, another goal of the study was to illuminate special education teacher resistance to the CCGPS-based assessments in evaluating academic progress for students with cognitive disabilities. The sample of teachers, researcher's role, interview process, data collection, and analysis were discussed in this section. The methods used to ensure credibility and protections of participants' rights for the proposed study were also described.

Section 4: Results

Introduction

There were two goals of this case study. The first goal was to understand special education teachers' perceptions of the process of implementing the CCGPS-based GAA and standards-based report cards for students with significant cognitive impairments. The second goal was to identify elements of teacher resistance to the CCGPS-based assessments and reflect upon what that resistance revealed about the nature of the GAA and standards-based report cards for students with cognitive impairments. Eight special education teachers, who work with students with mild/moderate cognitive impairments, participated in one-on-one interviews. The research questions guiding the study were:

RQ 1. What are the perceptions of special education teachers regarding the process (i.e., training, expectations, and results) of implementing the CCGPS-based assessments (GAA and standards-based report cards) for students with cognitive disabilities?

RQ 2. What does special education teacher resistance to the implementation of the CCGPS-based assessments in evaluating academic progress for students with cognitive impairments reveal about the nature of the assessments?

Zaltman and Duncan's (1977) idea that resistance to change is informational provided the conceptual framework for the study. The findings from the study provided descriptive information to add depth to the current research on teacher perceptions of the implementation of standards-based assessments for students with cognitive impairments.

Data Gathering

In order to improve the validity of the interview questions, a panel of experts, consisting of a variety of education professionals reviewed the interview questions. Hyrkäs, Appelqvist-Schmidlechner, and Oksa (2003), supported the use of an expert panel. The expert panel provided feedback on wording or created new elements in order to improve content validity. A representative from the GADOE, a former teacher/district facilitator who specialized in working with students with cognitive impairments, and a National Board Certified general education teacher participated in the expert panel. The researcher contacted each member of the panel via email and asked her to review the interview questions for the study. Once they consented, each member of the panel received the questions and responded with feedback via email. The researcher considered feedback from the panel, and made minor wording changes to the questions. Overall the feedback from the expert panel was positive regarding the interview questions.

On December 17, 2014, Walden University's IRB issued conditional approval for the case study with the approval number 12-17-14-0310064. The IRB approval was conditional upon approval from the local district where the study took place. The local district issued approval to conduct the study on January 9, 2015. Following final IRB clearance on January 12, 2015, special education teachers working with students with mild/moderate cognitive impairments received emails requesting their participation in the study (See Appendix H). The participant request email included: (a) an informed consent attachment; (b) an explanation of the voluntary nature of the study; (c) the purpose of the study; and (d) a description of participant expectations. The first eight special education teachers who responded to the invitation served as participants in the case study.

Following the receipt of the consensual emails, I immediately sent a follow-up email to schedule the interviews.

Data Generation

I conducted all special education interviews in a neutral and private location between January 19, 2015 and January 30, 2015. The interviews were semi-structured, and the questions requested both demographic information and open-ended responses (See Appendix B). The questions centered on information regarding the implementation of CCGPS-based assessments for students with cognitive disabilities and resistance to those assessments. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed. Once the transcriptions were complete, initial data analysis occurred. Each participant reviewed her own initial data analysis for member checking. Member checking was the process of reviewing one's own data and providing feedback, corrections or clarifications to aid in ensuring credibility (Stake, 2010). One of the participants requested some wording changes in a portion of the initial analysis. Consequently, I noted the comment on the transcript and changed the wording of the phrase. Another special education teacher requested some possibly identifying information be excluded from the study. The identifying information was not relevant to the study and had no impact on the findings. As a result, I re-assured her that I would not include it in the study. Following the member checking, I imported the transcripts of the interviews into an Excel spreadsheet and removed the names and identifying information from the Excel spreadsheets. Pseudonyms were utilized in place of participants' names from that point forward in the case study. The pseudonyms chosen for the participants included: Caroline, Charlotte, Sandra, Debbie, Amanda, Emily, Jenny, and Susan.

Participants

Eight special education teachers who work with students with mild/moderate cognitive impairments participated in the case study. The participants had a wide range of experience with students with cognitive impairments. Most of the teachers taught in other areas of education such as interrelated special education or general education before working with students with mild/moderate cognitive impairments. The one exception was one teacher who taught students with mild/moderate cognitive impairments for all of her twenty-three year teaching career. Four teachers taught in MI/MO classrooms for 8 -16 years, and three teachers taught in MI/MO classrooms for 1-4 years. The participants worked in one of three public school environments: four in high school, three in elementary school, and one in middle school.

Data Recording

The data were gathered and imported into an Excel document for analysis. The six columns on the spreadsheet reflected the following components of analysis: (a) bracketing; (b) theme identification (three columns), (c) resistance identification, and (e) notes. Bracketing provided an opportunity to keep in mind my views on the GAA and report cards while analyzing the data. Tufford and Newman (2010) described bracketing as a flexible process that allowed researchers to keep personal theoretical viewpoints in check and help prevent researcher views from influencing the data. In the bracketing column of the spreadsheet, I noted instances where my thoughts or actions might have influenced the data. For example, in one of my interviews, a participant made a comment that was exactly the same as a comment made in a previous interview. I grinned when the similar statement was made because I found it fascinating that the words were the same.

My reaction had the potential to influence the data and I made note of it. In the audit trail notebook, I also made notes regarding my limited personal thoughts about CCGPS-based assessments. Throughout my interviews, I reflected on my opinions and carefully considered the manner in which I asked questions as to prevent influence over the data. I found that I did not use the notes column at all. The only notes I made were in the audit trail notebook.

According to Creswell (2012), in qualitative analysis, themes were derived from the review of the data. Morse and Field (1995) described traditional content analysis and reading every word of the data to generate codes. From the initial coding, the researcher identified categories or meaningful clusters (Patton, 2002). Examination of the data occurred four times during the initial analysis. For the first research question, two additional examinations of the data occurred. One final examination of the data occurred when confirming findings for the second research question. In the case study, following the fourth consideration of the data, themes were clustered into the categories of process and resistance.

Findings

My first goal was to understand special education teacher perceptions of the process of implementing the CCGPS-based GAA and standards-based report cards for students with significant cognitive impairments. Analysis of one-on-one interviews and field notes provided information related to teacher perceptions of CCGPS-based assessments. The first research question was:

RQ 1. What are the perceptions of special education teachers regarding the process (i.e., training, expectations, and results) of implementing the CCGPS-

based assessments (GAA and standards-based report cards) for students with cognitive disabilities?

Participants who were interviewed for the study were required to administer both the GAA and standards-based report cards for students with cognitive impairments during the 2014-2015 school year. The participants described both the process of assigning grades and implementation of the GAA.

Implementing Standards-Based Report Cards

Standards-based report cards were not a new concept in Georgia, but assigning grades to students with mild or moderate cognitive impairments who were served in self-contained classrooms, was a new process during the 2013-2014 school year in the local research setting. Three major themes were reflected in the data regarding CCGPS-based report cards implementation: (a) lack of training, (b) inconsistent process of assigning grades, and (c) ability level reflected in grades.

Lack of training. All of the participants described a lack of training related to CCGPS-based report cards for students with cognitive impairments. According to all eight of the participants, Local district personnel sent an email with an attachment that described the process of assigning grades for students with cognitive impairments. When asked about the training provided by the district regarding assigning grades for students with cognitive impairments, Emily said, “That was an email.” Jenny confirmed what Emily expressed by saying, “There wasn’t much of a training. It was just a procedural document that we were given as to how to assess the students to give them grades.”

Jenny described the procedure for assigning grades which was outlined by the district,

For grades they get--either get a 75, 85, or 95% based on how much support they need on their IEP goals and that is 60% of the final grade—whatever that percentage is. Then the other 40% is the average of work samples that we choose based on a standard in that subject. For example, if it was their ELA grade, we would probably take two GAA samples, average them together for the 40%. That's the procedure the county gave us.

Inconsistent process of assigning grades. The second theme reflected in the data regarding assigning grades for students with cognitive impairments was the inconsistency across teachers in the process they used. Susan assigned grades to her students with mild cognitive impairments based on work samples created on the child's ability level. She stated,

I started giving my students real tests and real report card grades about five years ago. Now it's a mandatory thing for self-contained teachers. The mandatory grading scale is 75 for the student if they attempt it at all, 85 if they do well with help, and a 95 if they do well on their own—pretty much independently. I have one student now who is on that baseline. My other students can do the level of work we do in here where they can actually get a grade.

Debbie, like Susan, indicated that assigned grades were based more on the functional academic level of the student being graded when she said,

Our grades are based on lessons we created around our kids' IEPs. I would say our grades are based on performance on their level of ability—lessons on their level—not standards.

Emily described assigning grades based on independence level when she stated,

Ninety-five was that they could access the standard independently. Eighty-five was that they could access the standard with supports. Seventy-five was accessing the standards with maximum support--physical or verbal. That's what we use. Charlotte used a combination of the GAA and independence to assign grades for students with cognitive impairments. Charlotte stated,

When we have to come up with our grades for our students we look toward our GAA work samples...we take those samples that we used and we get a percentage. In addition to that, we have to look at how did that student perform the task ... so with a very independent student--like some of our students might be almost hundred percent independent--so in that case I might actually give them 100% for performance on that task. They got an 80 on the work sample the score that I assigned them...and they did it almost a hundred percent independently. Then I would take the 100 and I would take the 80 and I would average those together.

Ability level reflected in grades. All students in MI/MO classrooms participate in a modified curriculum and do not engage in daily activities based on their assigned grade level standards. When asked what grades reflect related to academic progress, Debbie stated, "Their grades reflect academic performance. It has nothing to do with GAA and has nothing to do with the standards." Sandra went on to compare her grades to those of students in general education programs, "An A in this class is not an A in a regular English class or a regular history class. We are working on a third grade reading level versus a ninth grade level." When asked what grades on the report card reflect related to academic progress, Jenny stated,

The grades do not reflect where the students perform at all because our students are not performing on grade level. They might have a 92% in math where a typical student who has no support and has a typical IQ might have an 85. On paper our kids look like they're doing far better than typical students when in fact they're not even doing the same work. We are assessing them on a much, much lower standard but giving them credit for the same work.

Susan explained the activities she created for assigning grades, "We make the tests in here, based on their academic functioning. We wouldn't make something that you would give to a gen ed student."

Implementing the Georgia Alternate Assessment

When the participants implemented the GAA, the process was similar across settings with the exception of who took the assessments in high school. Students with cognitive impairments in 3rd through 8th grades participated the GAA but in high school, only 11th grade students participated in the GAA. The district recommended standards for the GAA portfolios and each portfolio reflected student performance towards two English Language Arts standards, two Math standards, one Social Studies standard, and one Science standard. Special education teachers conducted the first collection of evidence for the portfolios, which consisted of pre-assessment activities that supported the standards. For at least two weeks, special education teachers provided instruction and followed up with the second collection of post-assessment activities. According to all of the participants, between the first and second collections for each standard, the state required students to demonstrate progress towards the standard in one of three ways: improved accuracy, reduced prompting, or generalized performance. If, after the initial

two-week instruction period, the student did not demonstrate progress, then re-teaching occurred followed by the repeat second collection. For each collection, the participants described documentation that accompanied the work sample evidence in the portfolios. GAA portfolio documentation related to each standard included: an entry sheet outlining the standard information; an annotation sheet reflecting on the activity and prompting needs of the student; and a progress statement sheet describing the type of progress demonstrated by the student. Special education teachers, building level administrators, and district level facilitators reviewed the portfolios prior to sending them to the GADOE for scoring. Five major themes, related to special education teacher perceptions of the process of implementing the CCGPS-based GAA for students with cognitive disabilities, emerged from the data. The major themes were: (a) time, (b) validity, (c) scoring, (d) support, and (e) emotion.

Time. Roach et al. (2007) conducted a quantitative study and found that teachers spent from 15-25 hours of time outside of the workday completing activities related to alternate assessments. This was the case in the current study because all eight of the participants in the case study described excessive time requirements to complete the GAA. Caroline stated, "I have to take my day off and I've got to go home and go through all the stuff because there's a ton of paperwork." Susan described working on GAA at home when she stated,

I used to take home all of the paperwork over the Christmas holiday and I would literally spend twenty plus hours typing up stuff. Last year, I decided I wasn't going to take stuff home over the holidays and every weekend. You can ask my family, I would spend hours...10 hours a week. Finally, this year, I decided I

would do it in class. People thought I was crazy. My parapro, who is fantastic, does the class, while I sit and type.

Charlotte echoed Susan's sentiments regarding the time required for the GAA including paperwork when she stated,

It's way too much work to do after school or in the evenings...often times it's the students that suffer because the teachers have to get it done. I particularly work on a great deal at home but I can tell you that we have families too. We have daughters and sons and husbands and we owe some of our time of them as well.

Jenny explained paperwork taking too much time, "I definitely don't think that we are given enough time to work on the GAA at the school level because of how much paperwork our county in particular requires to do." One special education described the time required to create the materials and rubrics for the assessments. Sandra stated,

We've spent hours making rubrics just to grade them, so it's appropriate and we have a consistent method of grading. We are looking at things – scrutinizing. We are changing our systems multiple times. We've even done the assessments and come back and reassessed because we didn't like it.

Five participants described time away from instruction. Debbie said, "Are we honestly teaching? No. We don't have time to teach because all of our time is spent filling out forms and preparing notebooks." Charlotte explained frustration with the time away from instruction:

I'll tell you honestly, the portfolios are taking teachers' time away from the students that they are there to serve. When we have to do 12 portfolios and each one of those has six areas that have four different pieces of work that have to go

in there as evidence--then we are required by this county to do additional four typed sheets to explain those four pieces of work. Then we have to compare them. We have to type all of this information up including entry sheets, which take up to two pages. The process is so long and it's so time-consuming that the end result is that the students really are the ones who lose out...because there's no way the teacher can do this during her 30 minutes of planning—if she even gets one-- which often times she doesn't, if she's a teacher who works with kids with significant disabilities. Often times, it's the students that suffer because the teachers have to get it done.

Validity. The participants described concerns regarding the validity of the GAA. DeLuca (2008) suggested that if the results of the alternate assessments were not a valid evaluation of academic progress the results might be a detriment for students with cognitive impairments. All eight of the participants who participated in the interviews described the assessments as providing little to no information regarding academic progress for students with significant cognitive impairments. Five teachers described frustration in assessing students based on grade level standards when the students did not have the pre-requisite skills to achieve the standard. Charlotte stated,

You have a child that doesn't know their address; doesn't know where they live; can't articulate how to go anywhere in the small community they live in; but you are required [to teach] them the five major rivers of the world or the US. We are spending all of this time and energy to try to teach them – and they are never going to learn where the Rio Grande is.

When I asked Emily what the results of the GAA reflected in relation to academic performance for students with cognitive impairments, she simply said, “Nothing.”

When asked what information related to academic progress was reflected in the results of the GAA, Caroline stated,

I don't really think it tells me anything. I'll be honest with you. All it does is show the state that we are teaching them grade level standards and they made progress. Nothing happens if they don't pass, but it's documented. The information I get back from the GAA...it's not going to determine what I teach them next year. It's not going to help me with planning. I'll do that myself through my IEP goals.

This is really just something the state is making me do.

Amanda described the difficulty her students had retaining information when I asked her what the GAA reflected in relation to academic progress for students with cognitive impairments, “Nothing. Absolutely nothing. The reason I say that is because as I said--the GAA--is testing us. It's not really testing the child. It makes no sense.” Sandra indicated there was little relationship between the GAA and reflecting academic progress. She said, “A doesn't have anything to do with B.” She described teaching and re-teaching for the GAA because the students in her classroom had difficulty learning and retaining information. She went on,

I am huge on academics. I want them to learn...I mean, we can make Geometry fun and interesting and relevant but the standards that they give us--and how it comes about--doesn't tell me anything. An example...I can come in on Monday and I can teach 10 words. I am a good teacher and I can teach and teach and teach. Tuesday I can teach the same 10 words and I am doing a different activity every

day. We are matching them. We are talking about them. We are finding the definition. I can do it Wednesday. I can do it Thursday. Then, on Friday, I can give them a very basic 10 question test and 90% of them make a 60 or below. No matter how much I've taught it and made it simple. They just can't remember it. Seven participants indicated the GAA assessed teacher ability to create an effective portfolio and reflected little ability on the part of the student. I asked Debbie what do the results of the GAA reflect related to academic performance for students with cognitive impairments. She said, "Nothing...what the teacher knows...how well a teacher can make a binder. It has nothing to do with the kids' performance. Nothing." Charlotte explained her perception of the GAA in reflecting academic performance,

The GAA has nothing to do with what our students need to learn on a daily basis to live as functional members of this society. Nothing. They do not need to learn the curriculum that our third, fourth, and fifth grade graders are learning [by having] these random standards pulled out and taught in isolation.

Susan also described the test as assessing the teacher and not the student. She said, "It shows if the teacher can write a good enough test, that has the right words...and write it up with all the right words, that match what they want and...it's how good you can make a test and teach what your students need to know to show progress."

Scoring. According to four of the participants, contractors hired by the state scored the GAA portfolios. The sections were rated on a scale of 1-4. One was a failing score and any score of two or higher was passing. A concern related to scoring was the failure of the portfolios for lack of alignment of the activity to the standard. Seven of the participants described failure of the portfolio as based on lack of alignment and not

student progress. Amanda described her biggest frustration with the GAA, which was the scoring process. She said,

I had to retest a young lady. Her ELA failed. I ended up doing it three times. All three times it failed. These are the exact same activities I had used with seven other students that passed with twos, and threes, and fours. Hers failed. One or more pieces of evidence did not align to the standard.

She went on to describe the scorers, “They are not educators. One person says yes it aligns. So by virtue of who you get, is your score...is how the binder goes.” Emily described the scoring process,

It does not make sense to me at all. All of our students participate in very similar activities that are adapted for them individually. So on very similar activities, with kids that had very similar needs, one person got a three and one person got a one.

Charlotte also described frustration with the scoring process,

It’s not the child who has failed. It’s the teacher who failed to align or present the information according to the way this arbitrary book tells how they want to present it—or the person who is scoring the binder might feel you did alright aligning that standard and may understand where you are going with it but somebody else didn’t. It’s just very arbitrary.

Jenny indicated scoring was very subjective. She said, “Similar students with similar prompting could get vastly different scores.” Susan explained her perception of the scoring of the GAAs,

It’s very subjective. When I gave five students the tests—they are all testing on that same test. They are all being written up with the same wording because you

have to have it approved by your facilitator. You'll have one student fail one set of tests and you have no clue why. You are at the mercy of whoever grades your portfolio and whether they get what you did. I've had one test literally come back on one student and everyone else got it right.

Failure of the portfolio was a concern for all of the participants. Sandra explained her concerns regarding the portfolios, "Did we pick the right standards? Did we choose the right activity? Did we align it the right way? Did we cross all our T's? Did we dot all our I's? Susan described failing because of wording,

We have to make sure that everything is perfect with the wording...Are they looking for a book *or* [emphasis added] pen and pencil or are they looking for book *and* [emphasis added] pen and pencil?

Similar to Susan, Debbie described failures due to a paperwork error, "One year all of the kids failed in science because we didn't click a box."

Support. The process of implementing the GAA required input and support of professionals in addition to the special education teachers. All eight of the participants described resource supports, which were in place to help teachers with the GAA that included: webinars provided by the GADOE, resource boards for activity suggestions, a district level GAA administrator, and GAA work sessions at the district office. In addition to resource supports, many participants described specific personnel who were encouraging and helpful in the implementation of CCGPS-based assessments. Seven of the participants described their facilitator as being instrumental in the process of implementing the GAA. A facilitator is a liaison between the district and the school who provides a wide range of support for special education teachers. Seven special education

teachers positively described different levels of support. Amanda described the administration at her school as “amazing.” Caroline described the support for GAA at her school,

I am very blessed to be at a school where I have very strong administrative support. I will say...I do believe [the district] does a good job providing the support. Do I feel like we are kind of thrown in there and a little more training is needed? Probably. I also know that I can go to any of those people at the county and they are there to help me.

Emily believed she was well supported by school administrators, and her facilitator. She stated,

I feel very supported by our administration and our facilitator as well...I can't imagine we would be more supported than we already are now.

When asked how well she was supported in implementing the GAA, Susan was also complimentary of her facilitator when she said,

We are probably pretty adequately supported by...well on the school level our facilitator is our support system. The people or admin of the school are not immersed in it. Our facilitator does an incredible job of that.

Emotion. The participants conveyed strong emotions when describing their experiences with the CCGPS-based GAA. In describing the process of implementing the CCGPS-based GAA, the participants used words like: brutal, infuriating, nerve-racking, stressful, and grueling. Amanda described implementing the GAA as causing “pain and suffering.” Amanda also mentioned the math standards, which were new this year. Implementing the new standards required extra work to compile the activities;

create the rubrics; and prepare the materials for the math portion of the GAA. She was concerned that the activities would not be deemed appropriate by the state when she said, “I mean we are literally—every single one of us—petrified that it’s not going to work.” Susan called the process of implementing the GAA laborious and a necessary evil.” Susan went on to express her feelings about the next school year when she said, “the biggest excitement for me for next year is for the first time in years, I won’t have a GAA student.” Sandra said the GAA “really makes us nervous” and Charlotte called the process of implementing the GAA “absolutely insane.” Emily described her reaction during her first year implementing the GAA, “I was laying on the floor last year crying at one point. It is that overwhelming.” Debbie said the GAA, “makes me not want to be a teacher. To me it’s degrading to do it...to take away my energy and my joy of teaching.”

Resistance to Standards-Based Assessments

After identifying the local problem, I expected the findings to reflect resistance and negative perceptions, but I did not expect the degree of resistance I found. All eight of the participants held strong negative perceptions of the CCGPS-based GAA and standards-based report cards, which was reflected throughout the data. The second research question was:

RQ 2: What does special education teacher resistance to the implementation of the CCGPS-based assessments in evaluating academic progress for students with cognitive impairments reveal about the nature of the assessments?

According to Zaltman and Duncan (1977), resistance was not only informative but resistance conveyed information that was beneficial. The information conveyed by resistance to change benefitted a group when the change was detrimental or harmful to a

group. Zaltman and Duncan separated resistance to change into four different categories, which included cultural resistance, social resistance, organizational resistance and psychological resistance.

Cultural Resistance

In general, resistance to innovation resulting from a preference to traditional methods defined cultural resistance (Zaltman & Duncan, 1977). Cultural ethnocentrism and incompatibility of a culture trait with a proposed innovation were also examples of cultural resistance. Cultural resistance was present in special educators' perceptions of the implementation of the CCGPS-based GAA and report card.

Five of the special education teachers described the incompatible nature of the CCGPS-based assessments with the students placed in self-contained MI/MO classrooms. Caroline stated, "You're doing this GAA thing that's based on the Common Core...supposed to be related to standards and the Common Core...when you're really not part of that world anymore." She went on to comment on the ELA and Math standards, "I think that's kind of silly...making a child do 7th grade reading. I'm not sure that is effective. To me...that should be based on their ability level." Jenny described teaching her students rote memorization, which prevented the CCGPS-based GAA from being appropriate for her students. She stated,

I don't think that the GAA in most cases shows any true progress for any of the students. In most cases all you're showing is that you are able to teach them a skill. It's not as if they can apply it to anything else in life or that they will use it in the functional sense--which is the point of our programs. We're simply teaching them rote memorization, which benefits them very little.

Amanda also echoed Jenny in explaining the lack of skill retention in her students,

It's unrealistic to give us the same set of standards that they give to the general ed kids and expect them—yes they can be exposed to it—but to expect them to show progress when they can't remember from this morning what they did. They can't retain it. I'm struggling with students who don't understand [the concept] put this below...put this beneath. They can't even understand that much and yet I'm supposed to be testing them on a biology standard, a physical science standard, or history standard.

Susan described the high school curriculum and how the GAA is incompatible with the program the students in her class follow. Students in self-contained classrooms in the high school follow a four-year sequence for Math, Science, and Social Studies that mimics the curriculum a typical peer might follow throughout their career. For example, in the MI class, the science sequence is: Biology, Physical Science, Earth Science and, finally, Environmental Science. Susan said,

This year, I'm teaching environmental science. Well, that's not being tested. We are testing biology and physical science...so I'm having to pull those kids out. I'm having to teach stuff that's not in my curriculum to teach.

Social Resistance

In addition to cultural resistance, social resistance was reflected in participants' perceptions of the CCGPS-based GAA and report cards. Social resistance occurred when group solidarity prompted the resistance (Zaltman & Duncan, 1977). Rejection of outsiders, conformity to norms, and conflict were also elements of social resistance described by Zaltman and Duncan. There were elements of social resistance reflected in

the data. All eight special education teachers believed the other teachers resisted the CCGPS-based GAA and report cards, which was considered group solidarity. I asked each teacher what other teachers thought about the CCGPS-based assessments. Amanda responded, “My buddies are pretty much in line. We vent – from the start of August until we send those books off. We are venting, screaming, yelling, and gnashing of teeth.” Debbie, very simply stated, “They all hate it.” Sandra reflected a similar sentiment to Debbie when she said, “They all hate it and they do it because they have to.” Susan said, “I don’t know anyone who thinks that it’s worth their time or the students’ time. If you can find somebody, let me know.” Like Susan, Jenny described her experience with other teachers, who administer the CCGPS-based GAA and report cards,

I think every teacher I’ve ever talked to feels like GAA is more of an assessment of the teacher’s ability to—it’s more of an assessment of the teacher’s ability to put together a portfolio than it is a true assessment of the students’ work.

Charlotte expressed her opinion on what other special education teachers thought about the CCGPS-based GAA and report cards when she said, “I have never, in the 10 years I’ve been associated with this process, heard one positive comment from any teacher who is responsible for doing these portfolios.”

Organizational Resistance

The third type of resistance described by Zaltman and Duncan (1977) was organizational resistance. Organizational resistance occurred when group influence was threatened by change or when poor leadership, communication, rules, and/or procedures prevented change. Included in Zaltman and Duncan’s characteristics of organizational

resistance was lack of a climate for change, reward structure, and technology.

Organizational resistance reflected in the data analysis was a lack of training.

Having been part of the school district since GAA began, Charlotte indicated current training for the GAA is primarily in the form of webinars provided by the GADOE. All eight participants reported no training for the CCGPS-based report cards. They all received a document via email that explained the formula for assigning grades. As for the GAA, five teachers indicated the training was inadequate in some way. Caroline described her training, “At the beginning of the year, we had a two-hour meeting—literally—on the GAA. You were just kind of thrown in. There were webinars that you were required to watch that are put there by the state.” Susan said, “The manual was 200 pages of instructions. What are we supposed to do with that?” Sandra expressed frustration with the training.

They required us to watch one webinar after another. I did not get ground up [training]. I’ve formed my own questions and taken them to my facilitator and [my co-teacher]. I still have gaps in my training and knowing exactly what they are looking for.

Debbie indicated she received a great deal of training when GAA was initially implemented in the district she believed current teachers received “no training.” When asked what type of training the district provided, Amanda said,

None...in one word. County does provide a manual. I was taught by my mentor teacher and that was basically it. Little to no training and nobody sat down and said, this is what they’re looking for. I had to figure it out on my own. It was kind of a fly by the seat of your pants kind of thing.

Psychological Resistance

Finally, the fourth type of resistance was psychological resistance (Zaltman & Duncan, 1977). Individual perceptions such as personality, conformity, and commitment resulted in psychological resistance were types of psychological resistance according to Zaltman and Duncan (1977). Another example of psychological resistance was the agreement that there was an issue needing intervention but disagreement regarding the best solution.

Inclusion of students with cognitive impairments in high-stakes assessments was a concern following the passage of NCLB (NCLB, 2002). The GAA was the GADOE's solution to the need for an assessment for students with significant cognitive impairments. The participants in the case study agreed that students with cognitive disabilities benefitted from exposure to grade level material. In contrast, the participants did not perceive the CCGPS-based GAA and report cards were the appropriate means of including students with cognitive impairments in grade level assessments. Four teachers explained that exposure to the standards was beneficial but assessing the students based on standards was not beneficial. Susan commented, "Exposure to the standards is great. We have to expose them to the standards. This GAA is not really testing what they're learning." Caroline expressed her thoughts regarding assessment based on grade level standards,

I can understand parts of it but I think that we could...there's got to be a way to make it more meaningful. I don't know what the answer is but if they were to sit down and listen to some special education teachers, we could come up with something.

I asked each special education teacher if there was anything she wished to add and Charlotte shared,

I would just like to say that we've gone from one extreme over the last 23 years to the other. Students with significant cognitive disabilities used to, either, sit and play games--or with even severe or profound disabilities--those kids were still lying on the floor on mats. So we went from where we weren't doing what we needed to do for these children in the classroom to where now we are expecting them to be typical children--and to be exposed to the same standards that a child who has not only a normal—but these days needs to have an above normal IQ to understand all of the work that's thrown at them—and it's not right. These kids have IEPs and they're on modified curriculums for a reason. It isn't so we can present them with standards that are not linked to any prior knowledge and that [they] have no reference within them whatsoever. There has to be something right down the middle. There has to be. Not just for the kids but for the parents and for the teachers.

Discrepant Findings

With all of the negative perceptions and elements of resistance, there were instances of positive reflection related to the CCGPS-based GAA and standards-based report cards. Caroline described a specific situation with one of her students,

I think one thing that has been really cool...my student goes into a 7th grade co-taught science class even though he's MI and on a modified curriculum. One of the things I chose for him for the GAA for science was to tell about some of the organ systems of the body. Now regular 7th graders, they learn about every single

system, respiratory, circulatory—the whole thing. I picked two. If we can teach him a little bit about the digestive system and maybe a little bit about the respiratory system...and he knew nothing when we first started. Now we can say, “Where does your food go?” He points to his stomach. You can go, “How do you breathe? He knows where his lungs are.

Jenny explained her thoughts on the positive nature of exposure to the standards but also questioned the benefits of the GAA,

I think the positive piece of it is...it’s fun as a special ed teacher to teach some of the standards. It’s fun to come up with a creative way to teach them the rivers across the United States. So it’s fun to think outside the box on some of that stuff we don’t normally do. So I like that part of it.

Even considering their positive statements regarding inclusion and exposure to grade level material, both Jenny and Caroline indicated that the CCGPS-based GAA and report cards held little to no benefit for the students in their classes with significant cognitive impairments. Jenny followed up her positive statement with, “It’s just too much time...too much time for something that we don’t use.”

Evidence of Quality

Credibility was a priority in conducting the case study. According to Merriam (2009), credibility and internal validity were considered synonymous. One way to maintain credibility was to utilize an expert panel to review the interview questions. Field notes were also used to aid in data collection and describe idiosyncrasies that occurred during the interviews. Following the transcription and preliminary analysis of each interview, member checks occurred. Member checking was the process of allowing each

interviewee to review her own data (Stake, 2010). Member checking further ensured credibility. Following member checking, a peer reviewer reviewed the data and initial analysis to enhance credibility. The peer reviewer confirmed the initial findings and also made comments on several of the interview transcripts. The peer reviewer's comments alerted me to connections between interviews. I made note of the peer review comments when conducting the analysis, which allowed me to better connect the findings across participants. Finally, I maintained an audit trail that included my field notes, peer reviewer notes, color-coding for themes, resistance,, and other notes related to the study. The peer reviewer used the audit trail for reflection and comments. According to Merriam (2009), an audit trail was another process that facilitated credibility of a study.

In an effort to minimize researcher bias, I implemented bracketing. Bracketing was the process of acknowledging one's views and theoretical viewpoints as research was conducted (Tufford & Newman, 2012). I utilized bracketing to separate my bias from the data collection process and analysis process. Prior to conducting the interviews I made thoughtful notes reflecting my opinions regarding CCGPS-based assessments as applied to students with cognitive impairments and made notes in the audit trail notebook. I also noted a few instances of personal influence over the data in the data analysis spreadsheet. In Appendix F, I included a portion of a transcript along with the columns used to bracket and code that data.

Summary

This section focused on the findings reflected in the data analysis from one-on-one interviews of special education teachers who worked with students with cognitive impairments. In addition to the findings, I described data gathering, reporting and

analysis methods. The data analysis revealed themes related to special education teachers perceptions of the process of implementing CCGPS-based assessments and resistance to the assessments. Finally, I revealed discrepant cases and described methods to insure quality of the study.

Section 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Overview of Study

There were two purposes of the qualitative case study. The first purpose was to investigate special education teacher perceptions of the process of implementation of the CCGPS-based GAA and standards-based report cards. The second purpose was to derive information from evidence of special education teacher resistance to the CCGPS-based assessments for students with cognitive impairments.

The conceptual framework that guided the study was the idea that resistance to change was informative by Zaltman and Duncan (1977). In their book, *Strategies for Planned Change*, Zaltman and Duncan dedicated a chapter to resistance to change and they categorized change into four categories. The four categories of resistance described by Zaltman and Duncan were cultural resistance, social resistance, organizational resistance, and psychological resistance. Cultural resistance resulted from traditions and history affecting the implementation of change. Social resistance occurred when opposing groups are unable to decide on the appropriate avenue for change. Organizational resistance was the result of organizational failure of some kind (lack of resources, poor communication, etc.). Finally, psychological resistance was any idea or belief that caused an individual to reject a change.

Eight special education teachers were participants in the study. All eight participants worked with students with significant cognitive impairments. I conducted one-on-one interviews of each participant, which were audio-recorded. During the interviews, I asked questions regarding demographic information, GAA administration, grade assignment, assessment results, and teacher resistance. I transcribed and coded the

interviews. Following my analysis, the participants member checked their own initial analysis and a peer reviewer confirmed the initial findings. The peer reviewer's comments provided insight to connections between the interviews and suggestions for themes within the data, which I referred to many times during the data analysis. The data reflected both special education teacher perceptions of the process of implementing the CCGPS-based GAA and report cards for students with significant cognitive impairments and special education teacher resistance to the assessments.

Research Questions

Special education teachers' responses to the interview questions reflected their perceptions of the CCGPS-based GAA and report cards. I gathered data from the interviews in order to answer the guiding research questions. The research questions were:

RQ 1. What are the perceptions of special education teachers regarding the process (i.e., training, expectations, and results) of implementing the CCGPS-based assessments (GAA and standards-based report cards) for students with cognitive disabilities?

RQ 2. What does special education teacher resistance to the implementation of the CCGPS-based assessments in evaluating academic progress for students with cognitive impairments reveal about the nature of the assessments?

Interpretation of RQ 1

Analysis of the data reflected many themes. In relation to special education teacher perceptions of the implementation process for CCGPS-based report cards, the data reflected the following themes: (a) lack of training, (b) inconsistent process of

assigning grades, and (c) ability level reflected in grades. Data analysis related to special education teacher perceptions of the process of implementing CCGPS-based GAA reflected these themes: (a) time, (b) validity, (c) scoring, (d) support, and (e) emotion. The findings from this case study indicate there are several problems in implementing CCGPS-based assessments for students with cognitive impairments.

Assigning Grades for Students with Cognitive Impairments

Analysis of the data revealed the lack of training for teachers in assigning grades for students with cognitive impairments. All of the participants stated that an email attachment instructed them on how to assign grades. Special education teachers also reported inconsistencies in the process of assigning grades and indicated that assigning grades based on ability level posed problems with effectively communicating academic progress. Jenny stated, “On paper our kids look like they’re doing far better than typical students when in fact they’re not even doing the same work.” In other words, grades for students with cognitive impairments do not reflect performance towards grade level standards. The lack of accurate reporting of academic performance contradicted recommendations made by Guskey and Jung (2009) when they described the functions of grades. Guskey and Jung indicated that grades should reflect areas of strength and weakness so it was clear what areas needed work.

Implementing the Georgia Alternate Assessments

Several themes related to the implementation of the GAA for students with cognitive impairments arose from the data. The participants’ descriptions revealed time requirements, validity concerns, scoring inconsistencies, supportive personnel, and strong emotions related to GAA implementation.

Time. The first theme related to implementing the GAA was time. Participants described the unreasonable amount of time required to create, implement, and prepare the GAA portfolios. Time was a concern reported in other studies investigating alternate assessments as well (Kim et al., 2006; Roach et al., 2007; Stockall & Smith, 2013). Participants explained that the time to complete the activities related to the GAA required work outside of typical work hours and time away from instruction with the students in their classes. Three of the participants lamented the conundrum of spending so much time implementing the GAA when the results of the GAA provided no useful information.

Validity. Participants reported problems with the GAA reflecting academic ability in students with cognitive impairments. According to Jenny the “results of the GAA reflected information equivalent to End of Course Tests (EOCTs), which were administered to students in general ed.” While the EOCTs and GAA were viewed as equal, several participants discussed the fact that the GAA did not reflect any pertinent information related to the academic functioning of students with cognitive impairments and were not a true reflection of the student’s ability to perform at academic grade level standards. Seven of the participants described the GAA as an assessment of special education teachers’ ability to create the assessment. Current research confirmed participants concerns related to validity of the GAA. Flowers et al. (2005) found that alternate assessments were indicators of teacher performance rather than student performance. Karvonen et al. (2013) found that special education teachers perceived the alternate assessments as reflecting no information related to academic achievement.

Scoring. Inconsistency across evaluators in scoring the portfolios was a concern of the participants. Zatta and Pullin (2004) confirmed difficulties scoring the portfolios

and despite the fact that scorers used rubrics, the scoring of the portfolios had the potential to be too subjective. Independent scorers, hired by the state, evaluated the GAA portfolios. Students participating in the GAA achieved scores of four, three, two, or one for each of the evaluated standards. A score of one reflected *Emerging Progress* which was considered a failing score. Achieving a score of two, which meant *Established Progress*, a three, which was *Extending Progress*, or four for *Generalization* were passing scores. All eight participants described frustration with the GAA scoring process for several reasons. Several participants described submitting multiple portfolios, which were virtually the same in presentation. Despite the similarities in portfolios, only one or two portfolios failed. The inconsistency of the scoring suggested that training for scorers at the state level might be beneficial.

All of the participants indicated that students were required to show progress in the portfolio but even when progress was evident between the first and second collections of evidence, the portfolio had the potential to fail. The portfolio failed when a student received a score of one on any of the evaluated standards. In high school, if an 11th grade student failed the standard, then the student had to retest and pass the failed standard in order to graduate. Instead of the lack of student progress causing failure of the portfolio, failure on the GAA typically occurred when the teacher chose an activity that was not adequately aligned with the target standard. While the failure of the GAA was attributed to the student, the participants indicated that a GAA failure was actually a teacher failure. Paperwork errors, which were not related to the alignment of the activity to the standard or demonstration of student progress, resulted in scoring failures as well. The participants' frustration with scoring connected to research in that Flowers et al. (2005)

found that special education teachers questioned the reliability of scoring and believed alternate assessment scores reflected teacher performance instead of student performance. The participants' perceptions of scoring inconsistency and confirmation in research indicated that more training for state raters might improve the process of scoring alternate assessments.

Support. Most of the participants reported being well supported by school administration and district level facilitators in administering the GAA. Zatta and Pullin (2004) highlighted the importance of state education leaders providing support for special education teachers implementing alternate assessments so that the difficulties in conducting the assessments do not result in lower scores on the portfolios. In the case of the local research site, special education teachers received a certain level of support from school leaders and district leadership. By support, the participants appeared to mean encouragement, understanding, and empathy. Leadership, at the building level, also supported teachers by providing one or two days of substitute teacher support so the special education teachers could complete GAA related paperwork. Several participants described having a great deal of GAA support from district/school liaisons known as facilitators. Facilitators provided support in the form of: identifying appropriate activities; reviewing GAA portfolios for errors; and aiding in completion of the paperwork. Towles-Reeves, Garrett, Burdette, and Burdge (2006) explained that school level and district level administrative support was critical in successful alternate assessment implementation. In this case study, even with school and district supports, participants did not perceive positive success with GAA implementation.

Emotion. Based on the local problem, I expected an element of negativity in participants' perceptions of implementing the GAA but I did not anticipate the degree to which the responses reflected negative emotions. Participants expressed frustration, stress, anxiety, and other emotions in their descriptions of GAA implementation. Frustration was the most frequently used feeling in relation to the GAA. Frustration resulted from the time required to administer, prepare, and document the GAA. Participants described stress and anxiety related to the submission of the portfolios and anticipation of the scores. One participant commented that the GAA robbed her of the joy of teaching. While there is little research describing emotional responses to the alternate assessments, Kleinert, Kennedy, and Kearns (1999) reported a finding related to surveys investigating special education teacher perceptions of alternate assessments. Kleinert et al. gave teachers the opportunity to leave additional comments related to alternate assessments beyond their answers to the survey items. Thirty percent of the teachers volunteered information and most of their responses were negative. Kleinert et al. speculated the negative responses were the result of the timing of the surveys in that they were sent out just after scores were reported and the respondents who made the negative comments were frustrated with the scores. In contrast, the timing of this case study was during the process of implementation of the GAA activities and yet the overall responses were still negative.

Interpretation of RQ 2

This case study revealed resistance of special education teachers in adopting and implementing CCGPS-based assessments for students who have significant cognitive impairments. One of the primary goals of this study was to reveal the nature of the

assessments through special education teacher resistance. Based on the findings of this case study, the implementation of CCGPS-based assessments for students with significant cognitive impairments resulted in difficulties for special education teachers and provided a foundation for resistance. Analysis of the data reflected all four elements of resistance outlined by Zaltman and Duncan (1977), which included: cultural, social, organizational, and psychological resistance. Participant resistance reflected problems in the policies, assessments, and implementation of the CCGPS-based assessments.

Cultural Resistance

Cultural resistance occurred when an innovation is incompatible with the group or culture. According to Browder et al., (2003) creation of alternate assessments purported to increase exposure of students with cognitive impairments to grade level curriculum but participants in the study believed CCGPS-based assessments were largely incompatible with students with cognitive impairments. While the participants indicated the CCGPS-based assessments reflected little relevant information, their resistance to the assessments reflected problems with policies mandating inclusion of students in high-stakes accountability. Including students with cognitive impairments in accountability measures (specifically alternate assessments) endeavored to: (a) provide input towards policy changes as they relate to students with disabilities, (b) increase expectations of academic performance for students with disabilities, (c) increase students' exposure to grade level curriculum, and (d) improve instructional programming (Browder et al., 2003).

According to the findings of this case study, alternate assessments fell short of expectations. While federal, state, and district education leadership expected higher performance of students with disabilities and exposure to general education curriculum

increased for students with disabilities, the assessments had little effect on curricular improvements (Elliot & Roach, 2007). Special education teachers in this case study believed there was little consideration given to the specific needs of students with cognitive impairments when utilizing alternate assessments. In order to overcome cultural resistance to CCGPS-based assessments for students in MI/MO classes, better connections need to be made between grade level standards, MI/MO curriculum, and the assessment of academic performance of students with cognitive impairments.

Social Resistance

In addition to cultural resistance, analysis of the data reflected social resistance. According to Zaltman and Duncan (1977), social resistance occurred when group solidarity influenced negative responses to change. In the case study, participants believed other teachers were resistant to the CCGPS-based assessments for students with cognitive impairments. In addition to the participants indicating that special education teachers collectively resisted the CCGPS-based assessments, there was one main reason for the resistance. According to the data analysis, special education teachers resisted the CCGPS-based assessments because the time and effort required to complete the assessments occurred in stark contrast to the lack of benefit to students. Research supports this finding in that special education teacher perceptions of alternate assessments indicated the standards-based assessments provided no benefit to students (Flowers et al., 2005; Kleinert et al., 1999). According to Elliot and Roach (2007), high quality assessments need to be useful. Usefulness was characterized by: ease of administration, time to implement the assessment, ease of interpretation and low cost. Participants in this case study perceived no usefulness in conducting CCGPS-based

assessments for students in MI/MO classrooms. Without perceived benefit of stakeholders, implementation of any process will likely fail (Fullan, 2007). Consequently, special education teachers need better information and greater support in realizing the intended benefits of the CCGPS-based assessments or more useful assessments are needed.

Organizational Resistance

The third type of resistance described by Zaltman and Duncan (1977) was organizational resistance. Organizational resistance resulted from such things as poor leadership, lack of communication, and inadequate rewards. Participants described lack of adequate training for CCGPS-based assessments and poor communication from the GADOE regarding expectations for portfolios. While the participants in this case study were concerned about avoiding portfolio failure (student receiving a score of one on any of the standards), the findings indicated they were more concerned about: determination of scores, inconsistency in the scoring process, and lack of usefulness of the scores.

Organizational resistance of participants reflected problems in policy implementation. NCLB required equitable comparison between alternate assessment scores and regular education assessment scores (Elliot & Roach, 2007). Comparing the performance of a student in a regular fifth grade classroom to a student with mild or moderate cognitive impairments who is classified as a fifth grade student is far from an equal comparison due to the vastly different abilities of those students. While decision-makers likely functioned with good intentions in creating policies including all students with disabilities in school accountability measures, participants in this case study

believed that little consideration was given to the specific needs of students served in MI/MO classrooms.

Psychological Resistance

Zaltman and Duncan (1977) described the fourth type of resistance as psychological resistance. Psychological resistance occurred within the individual when a belief or idea prevented the implementation of an innovation. Psychological resistance also occurred when stakeholders agreed there was a need for change but the proposed innovation was perceived as inadequate or faulty. Implementation of IDEA raised expectations for schools to include students with cognitive impairments in accountability programs (IDEA, 2001). NCLB required special education teachers to provide evidence of academic achievement (relative to language arts, math, science and social studies) for students with cognitive impairments (NCLB, 2001). According to Browder et al. (2003), alternate assessments helped in providing opportunities for students with cognitive impairments to be exposed to grade level standards.

Participants agreed that exposing students with cognitive impairments to grade level material was beneficial to their academic growth. In contrast, the participants disagreed with decision-makers in that the CCGPS-based GAA was the answer to the problem of including students in high stakes accountability. One problem was that exposing students to grade level material and assessing them on grade level standards did not necessarily reflect academic progress for students with cognitive impairments. Another problem was that policy makers seemingly neglected to consider the specific characteristics of students with cognitive disabilities (Zatta & Pullin, 2004). Recent changes in education policy seemed to disregard special education teachers and others

who were responsible for implementing the policies and the children who are affected. Policy makers who aimed at improving education through accountability, alienated special education teachers working with students with cognitive impairments and, according to the participants in this study, negatively impacted educational opportunities for these same students. Fullan (2007) described the process of educational change as multidimensional and when one or more of the components of the change process is ineffective, the change process fails. Based on the findings of this case study, one cannot determine whether the current educational policies are failures but in the local research setting, there are definite problems in implementing the assessments for students with significant cognitive impairments. Special education teachers perceive the problem exists within the assessment process for students with cognitive impairments based on grade level standards

Implications for Social Change

Implications for social change are limited because of the small scope of the case study but the information resulting from the study is powerful. Special education teachers who participated in this case study expressed vast displeasure with utilizing CCGPS-based assessments in assessing students with significant cognitive impairments. Education policies resulting from the passage of both IDEA and NCLB resulted in the inclusion of students with cognitive impairments in high stakes accountability but the findings of this study reflected several shortcomings in the process of implementing CCGPS-based assessments for students with significant cognitive impairments.

Implications for Social Change – Policy Makers

Social change is possible in making assessments more appropriate for students with cognitive impairments. Doing so requires policy-makers to write inclusive policies that take into account the specific learning characteristics of students with significant cognitive impairments. Historically, students with cognitive impairments were evaluated based on daily living skills and not academic functioning (Hunt & McDonnell, 2012). With the enactment of IDEA and NCLB, grade level standards provide the bases for evaluation of students with cognitive impairments (IDEA, 2004; NCLB, 2002). Research reflected special education teacher beliefs that students with cognitive impairments benefitted from being exposed to grade level content while also reflecting negative teacher perceptions of implementing standards-based assessments (Karvonen et al., 2013). Analysis of the data for this case study revealed problems with implementing CCGPS-based assessments for students with cognitive impairments such as: lack of effective training for assigning grades; inconsistent processes for assigning grades; poor reflection of standards-based ability in grades; increased time in implementing the GAA, invalid assessment of ability, inconsistent scoring of the portfolios, and negative emotional response to GAA.

Since the 1980s education reform resulted in multiple changes. Change for any group can be difficult. In the public schools, large-scale changes occurred with the adoption of NCLB and the revision of IDEA (IDEA, 2004; NCLB, 2002). Students with disabilities were required to receive a similar education experience as their general education peers. In order to include students with significant cognitive impairments in state accountability measures, students with cognitive impairments began participating in

alternate assessments. Finally, the CCSS was implemented in the majority of states in the U.S. (NGA-CCSSO, 2010). The process of including students with cognitive impairments in school accountability measures resulted in frustration and disillusionment of special education teachers working in MI/MO classrooms (Zatta & Pullin, 2004). In order to move forward, changes need to be made in the process of assessing students with significant cognitive impairments. If changes are made, decision-makers need to consider the specific learning characteristics of students who have cognitive impairments; write inclusive policies taking those learning characteristics into consideration; and create appropriate assessments.

Implications for Social Change – Special Education Teachers

Social change in revising current academic assessment processes would benefit special education teachers working with students with cognitive impairments. Attrition is already higher than average for special education teachers working with students with cognitive impairments (McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004). The findings from this case study reflected resistance and negative perceptions to implementation of the CCGPS-based GAA and standards-based report cards for assessing academic progress of students with cognitive impairments. Participants described a desire to work with students with cognitive impairments but the greatly negative connotations associated with the GAA and standards-based report cards might eventually force teachers away from the field of special education. Creating positive social change for special education teachers working with students with cognitive impairments requires decision-makers to evaluate the benefits and the costs of implementing the CCGPS-based GAA and standards-based report cards. Decision-makers must consider whether the time and resources used to

implement CCGPS-based assessments for students with cognitive impairments is worth doing considering that the assessments provide little to no valuable information. Fullan (2007) described the implementation of educational reform as both simple and complex. He described educational change as technically simple but complex in relation to the social systems involved. He said that even when the schools desired a change, it had the potential to fail but that failure might not be attributed to resistance but poor planning and failure to address the multiple layers of social processes occurring within the school system.

Implication for Social Change – Students with Cognitive Impairments

Examining CCGPS-based academic assessment practices provide an opportunity to affect social change by enhancing the learning environment of students with cognitive impairments. Historically, students with cognitive impairments received little academic instruction. With recent legislation, specifically NCLB and the revision of IDEA, secluding students with cognitive impairments is no longer acceptable practice. With ever increasing accountability and academic expectations, came increased academic curricular exposure for students with cognitive impairments. Findings from the case study revealed special education teachers believe they spend too much time working on GAA-related activities when they could be addressing the individually unique academic needs of students in their classrooms. Special education teachers described the CCGPS-based assessments as irrelevant and having no benefit to students with cognitive impairments. Instead, participants suggested using already academically driven IEP goals and progress reports in assessing academic functioning for students with cognitive impairments.

Improvements in the educational experiences of students who have cognitive impairments occurred following recent legislation but the process was flawed. Few would argue that the idea of having high expectations for all students is a critical concept in education. Fullan (2007) described another idea, collective capacity, which was the idea that it is the responsibility of all stakeholders in education to educate all students in schools. That being the case, when policy makers propose making changes in education, the specific abilities of all students must be taken into consideration.

Recommendations for Action

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate special education teacher perceptions of implementing CCGPS-based assessments for students with cognitive impairments and to reveal the nature of CCGPS-based assessments based on special education teacher resistance. The intended result of the study was to inform decision-makers of critical information related to assessing students with cognitive impairments and provide an opportunity to consider changes that might be made in future assessments for these students. Recommendations for action are based on findings from the analysis of the data. Based on the findings from the data, the next steps include: consider information reflected in special education teacher resistance; provide training and collaboration opportunities for special education teachers in implementing the current CCGPS-based assessments; and reduce time requirements for CCGPS-based activities.

Recommended Action – Consider Special Education Teacher Resistance

In light of Zaltman and Duncan's (1977) idea that resistance to change was informative and even valuable, education leaders must thoughtfully consider how to move forward in assessing students with cognitive impairments. The analysis of the data

revealed that special education teachers resist CCGPS-based assessments for students with cognitive impairments because CCGPS were irrelevant in evaluating abilities of students with cognitive impairments. If so, decision-makers need to determine what measures are relevant for assessing students with cognitive impairments. Elliot and Roach (2007) suggested that performance assessments and checklists tend to yield more reliable results than portfolios. Another finding from the data indicated there was no benefit to the students in implementing the CCGPS-based assessments. That being the case, one might wonder for what reasons states implement these assessments. Fullan (2007) maintained that accountability was important but the accountability had to be meaningful. He went on to state, “It will be a wise and courageous politician who declares that capacity building is more important than accountability” (p.235). Accountability is part of the current education reality but if there is little to no benefit of CCGPS-based assessments for students with significant cognitive then other options need to be explored.

Recommended Action – Provide Training and Collaboration Activities

Findings from the study reflected ineffective training opportunities related to CCGPS-based assessments for special education teachers working with students with cognitive impairments. Browder et al. (2005) found that training related to alternate assessments improved scores. Researchers investigating change processes also recommended training for effective change implementation (Fullan, 2007; Kotter, 1995; Zaltman & Duncan, 1977).

Another recommendation for improving the process of implementing CCGPS-based assessments is to provide collaborative activities for special education teachers.

One way to provide teachers with collaboration opportunities is to utilize established professional learning days for teachers to collaborate and prepare for CCGPS-based assessments. Fullan (2007) described the importance of professional learning communities. He challenged teachers to become a highly intellectual and suggested that in order for that to happen, policy-makers and decision-makers must prioritize quality professional learning communities. He went on to suggest that the knowledge needed to create professional learning communities has been available since the 1980s but largely ignored by leaders in education. Another group needing training is the team of individuals who score the assessments at the state level. Research supports the findings from the case study, which suggested that alternate assessment scorers were inconsistent in scoring the portfolios (Browder et al., 2005). Apparently, scorers need to learn more about the population of students with cognitive impairments. Scorers also need more understanding regarding the nature of the curriculum implemented for students in MI/MO classrooms.

Recommended Action – Reduce Time Requirements for Assessment

Implementation

Participants in the case study echoed information presented in alternate assessment related research (Karvonen et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2006; Kleinert et al., 1999). Implementing standards-based alternate assessments required a great deal of time. In order to decrease the time required to implement alternate assessments, several activities need to be addressed. Creation of the assessments activities requires time because the activities must align with the students' grade level standards. In fact, one of the complaints of teachers was that general education teachers do not create their own

assessments for accountability measures. Another activity that requires time is collecting evidence for the portfolios. A third activity that requires time is the paperwork. The GADOE requires entry sheets but the local district requires additional paperwork. The time to complete GAA related paperwork inspired much ire on the part of the teachers for several reasons such as time away from instruction and lack of usefulness of the information. In completing the GAA, decision-makers need to consider making the associated work more manageable and the results more useful.

Recommendations for Further Study

Future research is needed regarding appropriate assessment measures to assess academic functioning for students with cognitive impairments. The population of students who are eligible for special education services under mild/moderate cognitive impairments is diverse in terms of ability (Johnson & Arnold, 2007). High expectations are beneficial to students with cognitive impairments but based on the findings from this case study, current measures are inappropriate for including students with cognitive disabilities in accountability measures.

Future research into the benefits of education policies and the effects on students with cognitive disabilities is warranted. Recent reforms resulted from inclusionary laws meant to improve education for all students (NCLB, 2001; IDEA, 2004). While the intent was to include students with disabilities in educational opportunities similar to those of their general education peers, future research might investigate whether or not those policies actually benefitted students with disabilities.

Future research investigating the relevance and application of the CCSS in assessing students with cognitive impairments is needed. Most current research regarding

alternate assessments is based on earlier versions of standards and as a result, very little is known about the CCSS and its effects on students with cognitive impairments. Questions related to appropriateness, validity, and usefulness of both inclusionary and CCSS-based assessments need to be investigated as they relate to students with cognitive impairments.

Future research is recommended in examining parent perceptions of academic assessments for students with cognitive impairments. When discussing the CCGPS-based assessments with special education teachers in the case study, I began to wonder what parents perceived in relation to the assessments. One might investigate the relevancy, appropriateness, and usefulness of the information gained from CCGPS-based assessments from parents' perspectives.

Reflection

When I began this case study, I had no idea what I would learn but I was very interested in my topic and I looked forward to interacting with special education teachers across the local district. Having been an SLP for many years and having worked in the public schools for 6 years, I was familiar with the students with cognitive impairments but I knew very little about alternate assessments. I enjoyed conducting the interviews and learning from the special education teachers. I enjoyed meeting new people and I am grateful for their candid responses to my questions.

While I enjoyed conducting the case study, I came to believe that the participants found value in my efforts. Two of the participants expressed gratitude to me for conducting the study in the hopes that it might bring about change. While interviewing the participants, I found them to be intelligent, caring, and dedicated. They were also staunch advocates for students with cognitive impairments. In my opinion, the

participants conveyed powerful information related to CCGPS-based assessments and I found myself sympathizing with them.

Completing this case study was unlike any other endeavor I have undertaken. I believe assessing academic progress for students with cognitive impairments is vital for academic success of the students but it is apparent special education teachers need better assessments. I am hopeful this case study might provide a foundation for future inquiry, which would bring about much needed change.

Summary

Federal legislation requires students with cognitive impairments to receive instruction similar to their grade level peers and to be included in high stakes accountability measures (IDEA, 2004; NCLB, 2002). Current CCGPS-based assessments appear to be inadequate in assessing academic progress for students with cognitive impairments but this population must not be omitted from accountability measures. While reform in public schools occurred in the last twenty years, more change is warranted. For reform efforts to be more effective, collective capacity and effective change implementation should drive the process (Fullan, 2007). Based on findings from this case study, stakeholders need to find a middle ground between the inclusion of students with cognitive impairments in high stakes accountability measures and effectively assessing academic achievement. Education leaders also need to consider whether or not policies including students with cognitive disabilities in high stakes accountability measures actually benefit the students those policies were meant to help.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent

You are invited to take part in a research study of special education teacher perceptions of the process of implementation of Common Core Georgia Performance Standards (CCGPS) based Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA) and report cards for students with cognitive disabilities. The research study is open to any special education teacher who has given the GAA and issued a report card based on the CCGPS in the last school year. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” which allows you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

My name is Pamela (Pam) Majerus and I am currently a doctoral (Ed.D.) student at Walden University. I am also a speech-language pathologist in the school district. While you and I may or may not know each other, this study is being conducted outside my role as a speech-language pathologist for the school district.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to examine special education teacher perceptions of and resistance to the process of implementation of the CCGPS-based GAA and report cards in evaluating academic progress for students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Procedures:

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

- Review interview questions prior to a one-on-one interview;
- Participate in a one-on-one interview that will last no more than one hour and will be audio-recorded;
- Review findings document from the initial data analysis of your interview.

- Provide feedback from initial analysis of your interview via email and/or phone conversation within a week following your receipt of the analysis document.

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 Forsyth County Schools or your local school 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 participation at any time.

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. Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or well-being. The benefit in participating in this research is to have the opportunity to describe your personal/professional experiences in implementing CCGPS-based assessments (GAA) and report cards.

Payment:

There will be no compensation for your participation in this study.

Privacy:

Any information you provide will be kept completely 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 by being stored on a flash drive and locked in a filing cabinet in my home. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by Walden University.

Contacts and Questions:

You may ask me any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me via email at pamela.majerus@waldenu.edu or by phone at 678-697-8711. 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. The faculty advisor for this study is Dr. Derek Schroll. Walden University's approval number for this study is **IRB will enter approval number here** and it expires on **IRB will enter expiration date.** I will give you a copy of this form to keep.

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. By signing below, I understand that I am agreeing to the terms described above.

Printed Name of Participant:

Date of consent:

Participant's Signature:

Researcher's Signature:

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Teacher Perceptions of Common Core Based Evaluations for Students with Significant Cognitive Impairments

Introduction and Guidelines

I am Pam Majerus, a doctor of education (Ed.D.) student at Walden University.

Currently, I am conducting research regarding special education teacher perceptions of implementing Common Core Georgia Performance Standards (CCGPS) based assessments, which includes both the GAA and standards-based report cards, for students served in MI/MO classrooms. Your answers to these questions will give insight into the process of administering the CCGPS-based GAA and standards-based report cards for students with cognitive disabilities. As part of my investigation, I will also be looking for elements of resistance to the change in the implementation of CCGPS-based assessments and what that resistance reveals about the nature of the assessments. Thank you for being here and volunteering to participate in the interview. The interview will last for no longer than an hour. You may choose not to answer any question for any reason. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. You will be asked to confirm the findings from the data analysis of your interview, once the data are analyzed. Do you have any questions for me before we start the interview?

Interview Questions

Demographic Information

1. How many years have you been a teacher?
2. What certifications do you currently hold?
3. How many years have you worked with students with cognitive impairments?

Student Demographics

4. How many students are in your classroom?
5. What grade levels are represented in your classroom?

Assessment Process for GAA and Report Cards

6. Describe the training provided by the district for special education teachers in assessing students with cognitive impairments using the CCGPS-based GAA and standards-based report cards.
7. Describe the process of assessing students based on the CCGPS using the GAA.
8. Describe the scoring process for the GAA.
9. What do the results of the GAA reflect related to the academic performance of students with cognitive impairments?
10. Describe the process of assigning grades to students based on the CCGPS.
11. What information do the assigned grades reflect in relation to academic performance of students with cognitive impairments?

Resistance to CCGPS-based GAA and Report Cards

12. What types of assessments were used to assess academic progress for students with cognitive disabilities prior to the CCGPS-based GAA and or standards based report cards?
13. How was information provided by traditional assessments different from that provided by GAA? Provide pros and cons of each.
14. Based on your experience, how do other teachers feel about the CCGPS-based GAA and standards-based report cards?

15. Are special education teachers adequately supported by school, district, state, and federal education leaders in implementing the CCGPS-based GAA and standards based report cards? Why or why not?
16. To what degree are the CCGPS-based GAA and standards based report card adequate in assessing academic progress for students with cognitive impairments? Please explain.
17. What are some reasons you think you or other special education teachers might resist the implementation of CCGPS assessments for students with cognitive impairments?

Probes for further information

1. Tell me more about _____.
2. Are there examples of _____?
3. Why do you think that is?

Appendix C: Sample Letter of Cooperation from a Research Partner

Superintendent's Office

September 1, 2014

Dear Pamela Majerus,

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give permission for you to conduct the study entitled *Teacher Perceptions of Common Core Based Evaluations for Students with Significant Cognitive Impairments* within Carrier County Schools. As part of this study, I authorize you to:

- contact special education teachers to participate in the study
- interview special education teachers
- follow up with the teachers to ask them to review the findings from their interviews
- share results from research with participants

Individuals' participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion.

We understand that our organization's responsibilities include:

- allow researcher to contact special education teachers to ask for their participation
- recognize that district email will be used for correspondence.

We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting and that this plan complies with the organization's policies.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the student's supervising faculty/staff without permission from the Walden University IRB.

Sincerely,
Authorization Official
Contact Information

Walden University policy on electronic signatures: An electronic signature is just as valid as a written signature as long as both parties have agreed to conduct the transaction electronically. Electronic signatures are regulated by the Uniform Electronic Transactions Act. Electronic signatures are only valid when the signer is either (a) the sender of the email, or (b) copied on the email containing the signed document. Legally an "electronic signature" can be the person's typed name, their email address, or any other identifying marker. Walden University staff verify any electronic signatures that do not originate from a password-protected source (i.e., an email address officially on file with Walden).

Appendix D: Confidentiality Agreement

Name of Signer:

During the course of my activity in functioning as a peer reviewer for this research: “Teacher Perceptions of Common Core Based Evaluations for Students with Significant Cognitive Impairments” I will have access to information, which is confidential and should not be disclosed. I acknowledge that the information must remain confidential, and that improper disclosure of confidential information can be damaging to the participant.

By signing this Confidentiality Agreement I acknowledge and agree that:

1. I will not disclose or discuss any confidential information with others, including friends or family.
2. I will not in any way divulge, copy, release, sell, loan, alter or destroy any confidential information except as openly authorized.
3. I will not discuss confidential information where others can overhear the conversation. I understand that it is not acceptable to discuss confidential information even if the participant’s name is not used.
4. I will not make any unauthorized transmissions, inquiries, modification or purging of confidential information.
5. I agree that my obligations under this agreement will continue after termination of the job that I will perform.
6. I understand that violation of this agreement will have legal implications.
7. I will only access or use systems or devices I’m officially authorized to access and I will not demonstrate the operation or function of systems or devices to unauthorized individuals.

Signing this document, I acknowledge that I have read the agreement and I agree to comply with all the terms and conditions stated above.

Signature:**Date:**

Appendix E: Email Requesting Participants

Dear *Special Education Teacher Name*,

My name is Pam Majerus. I am a doctor of education (Ed.D.) student at Walden University. Currently, I am conducting research regarding special education teacher perceptions of implementing Common Core Georgia Performance Standards based assessments, which includes both the Georgia Alternative Assessment and standards-based report cards, for students served in Mild/Moderate Cognitive Impairment (MI/MO) classrooms. As part of my investigation, I will also be looking for elements of resistance to the change in the implementation of Common Core Georgia Performance Standards based assessments and what that resistance reveals about the nature of the assessments.

Would you consider participating in my research study? Participation in the study would require that you: (a) participate in a one-on-one interview and (b) review the findings from the analysis of your interview. I will interview the first eight special education teachers who respond to this email. Participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may discontinue participation at any time. Also, you, your students, school, and your district will not be identified in the final report.

Attached is the informed consent that outlines the specific participation requirements. You may respond to this email and give your consent to participate in the study. Once I receive your response, I will contact you to schedule the interview. Thank you in advance for your time.

Sincerely,

Pamela M. Majerus

Appendix F: Data Analysis Spreadsheet

Response	Bracketing	Themes			Resistance
<p>...I don't agree with the standards so I don't really think too much about them. I mean I don't. Not for our kids. It makes no sense. They serve no purpose for our kids. All this serves to do is ...we are assessing the teacher and her ability not to break under pressure.</p> <p>[Laughs] This makes no sense and serves no purpose. Tests only the teacher. I know it's federal. All students regardless have to be assessed in some way form or fashion...but like we said earlier come sit in the classroom with us...for an hour...come sit for two hours...we spend 90% of our time doing behavior management...stop doing this...stop picking your nose...stop talking...stop touching that kid...stop doing this...stop doing that...no this is a better choice. You know how many times a day I say, "Make a better choice"?</p> <p>Where does a standard fit in? For these kids. These are the kids that need to be taught a hands-on, they need sheltered workshops, they need folks that are devoted to getting them employable.</p>		Standards do not apply.	Validity Assess Teacher	Illogical	Psychological
	Decision makers out of touch with what's happening in the classroom.				Organizational
					Cultural