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Effects of Common Core Curriculum Standards on High School Students with Disabilities

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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

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2015

Abstract

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MEd, Georgia State University, 1997

BA, Furman University, 1992

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

This case study examined the effect of implementing the Common Core Curriculum Standards (CCCS) on students with disabilities (SWD) in a county in northeast Georgia. The study investigated teachers' perceptions regarding the effect of implementing the CCCS in high school English language arts and mathematics classes on the academic success of SWD and their ability to graduate from high school with a regular diploma. Information was also gathered to determine if teachers offered additional supports to SWD as part of the increased academic expectations of the CCCS. In addition, teachers were asked about the preparation they received prior to teaching the CCCS. The conceptual framework that drove this study was based on Fullan's theory of educational change. The study was conducted using a qualitative case study design. A total of 8 teacher participants were included through a combination of individual interviews and emailed responses to the interview questions. Data were analyzed for common themes using key words generated during the initial round of coding. Findings indicated that these 8 teachers were offering increased accommodations and seeing less academic success among SWD than they had observed prior to CCCS implementation. Teachers also reported feeling inadequately prepared to teach the increased academic expectations associated with the CCCS, especially to SWD. The findings from the study support the need for increased, ongoing, sustainable professional learning related to teaching the CCCS to SWD.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my wonderful family for their support and encouragement through many long hours and for always believing I could reach the end goal, even when I did not.

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I would like to thank and acknowledge the support of the following people without whom, none of this would have been possible. To my husband Erik, thank you for always believing I could accomplish this goal and for being willing to pick up the slack. To my children Emily and Justin, thank you for being patient and being willing to handle things on your own. To my parents, Nancy and Bill Thompson, without your love and encouragement from the beginning I never would have believed I was capable of reaching this goal. To my dear friends Dr. Pam Majerus, Dr. Ashley Fields, and Dr, Heather White, I am thankful you have been my village through this process. To Dr. Deb Dumphy, your words of wisdom when I started this process are repeated often and have meant more to me than you will ever know. Thank you as well to Dr. Jo DeSoto, Dr. Lewis Putnam, and Dr. Paul Englesberg for guiding my efforts through many revisions. Your insight and encouragement were invaluable.

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Section 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

For the majority of students enrolled in public schools throughout the country, the culminating event is high school graduation. For students with disabilities (SWD), the goal may be the same as for students without disabilities but the path to achieving that goal may be different. Students, including those with high incidence disabilities, begin in elementary school, navigate middle school or junior high school, finally reaching high school and the opportunity to graduate with a high school diploma. The diploma received allows students to obtain further training or education and potentially pursue a career of interest. For students with high-incidence disabilities such as a specific learning disability or other health impairment, this process is not always so simple. Changes to academic accountability and the adoption of the Common Core Curriculum Standards (CCCS) nationwide have increased academic expectations for all students in an effort to increase readiness for college or a competitive career (Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2011; Rust, 2012). Research has indicated, however, that increased rigor among learning standards does not increase student performance (Allensworth, Nomi, Montgomery, & Lee, 2009; Nomi, 2012). Teachers are also required to adjust to new academic standards in English language arts and mathematics. Despite professional learning opportunities available through state and local resources, many teachers continue to teach at a level cognitively below that required by the CCCS (Cobb & Jackson, 2011). As graduation requirements increase because of heightened academic expectations, students who have difficulty with academic achievement related to a disability find it more difficult to meet

those demands. These difficulties are compounded if teachers are unprepared to meet the educational rigor of the CCCS.

The purpose of this study was to determine the effect that changing graduation requirements and increased academic expectations associated with the CCCS have on SWD at a high school in northeast Georgia. Teachers' opinions and beliefs about the effect these factors have on the academic success among SWD, and the likelihood these students will graduate from high school with a regular diploma, were evaluated using individual interviews following a descriptive case study format. Research on the CCCS, SWD, high school graduation requirements, and teacher preparation to teach the CCCS in English language arts and mathematics are discussed in more detail in Section 2. The CCCS were fully implemented in high school English language arts and mathematics classes during the 2013—2014 school year; therefore empirical data on student achievement related to the CCCS are still unavailable. However, the concern indicated through conversations with teachers and administrators at the local level is that changes to academic expectations designed to increase student achievement may be having the opposite effect (J. Benvenuto, personal communication, November 7, 2013; D. Cormier, personal communication July 19, 2014; L. Strickland, personal communication, November 6, 2013).

The Problem Statement

A problem exists in which increased academic expectations and graduation requirements in the state of Georgia are negatively affecting the potential for SWD to graduate from high school with a regular diploma. Georgia is one of 45 states and four

territories that have adopted the CCCS (Common Core State Standards Initiative [CCSSI], 2012), and with adoption of the expanded standards, expectations for instructional rigor and higher order processes have expanded as well (Porter et al., 2011; Rust, 2012). Teachers report being unprepared to teach the CCCS in English language arts and mathematics, especially for SWD (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center [EPERC], 2012). Increased academic expectations and teachers' feelings of inadequacy in teaching to the level expected by the CCCS are affecting academic success and the rate at which SWD graduate from high school with a regular diploma.

High school graduation rates in the United States have increased only marginally in the last 20 years. Data from the United Health Foundation (2013) indicated that 72.9% of incoming freshman graduated in 4 years with a regular diploma in 1990, and only 81% met the same criteria in 2014. These data do not indicate how many SWD graduated with a regular diploma versus a certificate of completion in 2014, but in 2010, the latest year for which data are available, only 62.5% of SWD obtained a diploma; 14.6% received a high school certificate (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013a). In northeast Georgia, where this study was conducted, the 4-year cohort graduation rate in 2013 was 89.5% for all students and 63.2% for SWD (Georgia Department of Education [GADOE], 2014a). In 2014, the 4-year cohort graduation rate was 90.3% for all students and 60.3% for SWD (GADOE, 2014b). With the addition of increased rigor expected by implementing the CCCS, the potential for commensurate achievement of SWD with students who are not identified as having a disability is limited (Haager & Vaughn, 2013). Compounding the concern is the limited number of professional learning

opportunities for teachers whose high school English language arts or mathematics classes must now follow the CCCS (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). With limited training comes limited commitment. With limited commitment, teachers are less likely to meet the instructional expectations of the CCCS, thus lessening the potential for SWD to meet the increased academic expectations and graduate high school with a regular high school diploma.

Haager and Vaughn (2013) argued that the increased academic expectations of the CCCS are negatively affecting the ability of SWD to graduate from high school with a diploma compared with their peers. Students who are identified as exhibiting a disability that adversely affects their academic performance are expected to meet the same increased educational rigor that their classmates without disabilities must meet (Kirkland, 2011). Mathis (2010) offered a different perspective, stating that without "adequate professional development and organizational support" (p. 15) efforts at educational reform through the CCCS will be meaningless. Unless teachers are given sufficient training and resources in teaching the increased rigor required by the CCCS, especially to SWD, the likelihood of increased academic success is limited (Tienken, 2011).

Nature of the Study

This study qualitatively describes teachers' perceptions of the effect that the CCCS has on SWD, and whether the increased academic expectations affect their ability to obtain a regular high school diploma. However, additional research is needed to determine whether quantitative reasons exist for the decreased numbers of SWD leaving high school with a regular diploma. When Georgia adopted the CCCS, expectations for

academic mastery in the classroom changed (CCSSI, 2012). High school graduation requirements also changed. Research and other literature regarding high school graduation rates for SWD indicated that several factors affect the ability of SWD to graduate with a regular high school diploma. Two of the most commonly discussed were the effect of increased academic rigor on SWD and the lack of adequate professional learning provided to teachers with regard to teaching the increased rigor required by the CCCS (Mathis, 2010). A descriptive case study, in which perceptions of the participants are considered, was most appropriate to determine which of the causes identified in the literature was affecting the academic success of SWD at the high school level in northeast Georgia. For purposes of this study, academic success is determined by the receipt of a regular high school diploma. By exploring teachers' perceptions of how the CCCS affects the ability of SWD to graduate from high school with a regular diploma and considering the level of preparation teachers received to teach the CCCS, I drew conclusions regarding the factors affecting student success.

Research Questions

The primary research question guided this qualitative study. The subquestion allowed further direction for the study.

Primary Question

What are teachers' perceptions with regard to how implementing the CCCS in high school English language arts and mathematics classes, and subsequent changes to high school graduation requirements, affect the academic success and high school completion for SWD?

Subquestion

What are teachers' perceptions with regard to the professional development or other training they received to prepare them to teach the CCCS in high school English language arts and mathematics classes to SWD?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this descriptive case study was to explore the effects that implementing the CCCS has on the academic success of SWD. Interviews with teachers elicited their perceptions of the effect of adopting the CCCS in English language arts and mathematics, particularly related to the ability of SWD to meet increased academic expectations and graduate with a regular high school diploma. Further, I used information collected in this case study to determine teachers' beliefs about the training or professional development that they received in preparation for teaching the CCCS in high school English language arts and mathematics to SWD. Perceptions of those participants related to the topics indicated above were used to draw conclusions regarding the effect that the CCCS has on SWD. Research determined whether teachers report being prepared to teach the newly adopted curriculum. Research findings also offered insight in to whether teachers perceived any effect of the increased academic expectations on the ability of SWD to meet the requirements of a regular high school diploma.

Conceptual Framework

Education, as a field, has a history of change. According to Fullan's (2007) theory of educational change, it is actually the participants who make the difference. In fact, the author clearly summed up the conceptual framework on which this research project study

is built. Fullan indicated that "the interface between individual and collective meaning and action in everyday situations is where change stands or falls" (p. 9). Educational initiatives that do not involve the participants who will be implementing the new program from the beginning, but are instead developed from the top down are often unsuccessful (Fullan, 2007; 2010). The purpose of this study is to measure teacher perspectives on implementing an educational change by considering how that change affected SWD, as well as teachers' perceptions of how well prepared they are to implement this change for students.

Initiatives implemented from the top down are not necessarily destined for failure, but without motivation, a shared understanding of the goals, and capacity building among participants, change is difficult at best (Fullan, 2006). The CCCS were a top-down initiative, adopted by boards of education in participating states. Georgia adopted its version of the CCCS in 2010 with an implementation schedule that spanned several years (GADOE, 2010). The adoption schedule was published but teachers and administrators in local school districts were not consulted on the viability of the proposed timeline. The state board of education published material that offered support for adopting the CCCS and listed reasons the new curriculum standards would benefit students and teachers in Georgia (GADOE, 2010). However, these were vague and without empirical evidence to support the state board of education's claims (Tienken, 2011). Without communicating a shared vision of the goals the CCCS was expected to achieve, without supporting capacity building among implementing teachers, and without providing evidence to

support the need for educational change, the likelihood of success according to Fullan's theory is limited.

Educational change is a process. Fullan (2007; 2010) described four phases in the progression that are necessary for successfully adopting any new innovation. Initiation is the first phase and includes the steps taken prior to implementing the initiative. The initiation phase also includes the decision made to make an educational change. For this particular event, initiation took place as state level policy makers decided whether to adopt the CCCS. Factors that affected initiation stemmed from the claim that adopting the CCCS would make students in the United States more competitive globally (CCSSI, 2014). Policy makers also argued that implementing the CCCS would allow educators to compare student performance to that of students in other states and provide students the education needed to graduate from high school ready to embark on either college or a career (CCSSI, 2014). These claims included increased opportunities for SWD to receive a more rigorous education in the general education setting, offering comparable academic expectations for all students (Powell, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2013). These goals have been shared with educators throughout the state, yet shared meaning has not been established. Professional learning opportunities were provided at the state and local levels, yet teachers indicated they were not prepared to teach the increased level of academic rigor expected by the CCCS (The Governor's Office of Student Achievement [GOSA], 2013). Fullan argued that processes and procedures need to be developed at all levels to address the question of meaning (2007; 2010). From the district level, to the principal, teacher, student, and parent the concepts of shared meaning, development of skills, and

commitment to the change are needed to embark on the second phase; successful implementation.

Implementation is Phase 2 in the model of educational change. This is the phase through which many states are now working. Fullan (2007) described implementation among the more difficult phases in that the process involves effectively acting on a policy, intervention, or directive to which none of the people exacting the change have been exposed. In the case of the CCCS, teachers were mandated to implement the change. District leaders provided reasons for the adoption and touted the positive attributes and outcomes (GADOE, n.d.). Principals were assigned the role of change agent in supporting the adoption in their local buildings (Forsyth County Schools, 2011). Parents and community members have been informed and offered information on the CCCS (GADOE, n.d.; GOSA, 2013). Even students have been alerted to the change. It is the teachers, however, who are most critical in the model of educational change (Fullan, 2007; 2010). Fullan (2007) stated that "educational change depends on what teachers do and think – it's as simple and as complex as that" (p. 129). Without teacher commitment to the implementation of CCCS and their willingness to increase instruction to meet expectations, SWD may continue to be at risk of leaving high school without a diploma.

The third phase of educational change is continuation. Some districts might be at a level of continuation in which the policy or innovation has become part of the common structure of schools (Fullan, 2007). To achieve successful continuation, teachers and administrators who are committed to the CCCS and have become skilled in teaching to the increased level of rigor must outnumber those who are not. Although teacher

confidence in the CCCS is increasing, only 49 % of teachers who responded to a national survey indicated readiness to teach the expected increased rigor to all students (EPERC, 2012). Less than half of those teachers indicated any readiness to teach the CCCS to SWD (EPERC, 2012; Gerwitz, 2013). Results from a survey of teachers in Georgia indicated that teachers are knowledgeable about available resources but are not comfortable with the instructional rigor required by the CCCS (GOSA. 2013). Such feedback has reached the state governing body. During the 2014 session of the Georgia Assembly, Senate Bill 167 was introduced which supported legislation that would force the GADOE to abandon the CCCS (Jones, 2014). Much of the information and input for this bill came from teachers, which indicated that teachers have not been committed to the idea nor to implementing the CCCS. If teachers feel unprepared to teach at a higher cognitive level, the likelihood of student achievement reaching a higher level of rigor is limited (Allensworth et al., 2009; Nomi, 2012). Teachers are the key factor in affecting educational change (Fullan, 2007). Without teacher commitment and without established guidelines and procedures for moving forward with implementation, continuation may fail, leading to unsuccessful outcomes.

Outcomes, as the final phase of educational change, are harder to identify. Fullan (2007) refers to outcomes as "the degree of school improvement in relation to given criteria" (p. 66). In the case of the CCCS, the outcome would be increased academic achievement for students. For purposes of this study, outcomes would include the number of SWD graduating from high school with a regular diploma. The state of Georgia uses the College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI) as the comparison

measure for outcomes in individual districts. This index applies a set of criteria which includes student achievement scores on a statewide standardized measure, student growth percentiles on that measure from year to year, and indicators of a school's ability to close the achievement gap (GADOE, 2013a). The CCRPI calculations are used to assign each school in the state a letter grade based on those measures. This study sought to interpret and understand teacher perception of students' ability to meet the expectations outlined by the CCCS to achieve the outcome of graduating from high school with a high school diploma despite a diagnosed disability. As states reach a point of continuation with adopting the CCCS as an educational change, they will set their own outcome goals and measures of success, which should include measures of student achievement.

The purpose of this study was to measure teacher perceptions based on the four phases of the change model. Questions posed to teachers in individual interviews asked about their perception of the four phases in the educational change model. Initiation is the phase in which the decision to make a change takes place (Fullan, 2007; Fullan, 2010). Teachers were asked about their role, if any, in deciding to adopt the CCCS in the state of Georgia. Implementation refers to the actual use of the intervention or innovation (Fullan, 2007; Fullan, 2010). Teachers were questioned regarding their understanding of the CCCS, the effect they have seen on SWD based on the increased academic expectations of the CCCS, and the level of support or training they received to begin teaching the CCCS. From the perspective of the continuation phase, teachers were asked about their perspectives on whether or not the CCCS has become embedded in to the structure of schools (Fullan, 2010). To address the outcomes phase, questions asked whether or not

teachers perceive the CCCS to encourage greater opportunities for SWD to graduate from high school with a regular diploma. The phases of Fullan's theory of educational change (2007; 2010) closely match the phases completed by the GADOE in adopting the CCCS. By considering the effect those phases have on teachers and students and measuring teachers' perspectives accordingly, conclusions as to successful outcomes have been drawn.

Operational Definitions

The following terms will be used throughout the doctoral study.

Carnegie unit: Originally proposed by The Carnegie Foundation in 1906 as a measure of completed school work, the Carnegie unit refers to a single course taught for 1 hour, 5 days per week (U.S. Department of Education, 2008a). The state of Georgia requires a minimum of 23 Carnegie units to graduate from high school (GADOE, 2011).

High school certificate: The document provided to students in Georgia who have obtained the minimum number of Carnegie units but have not passed the requisite End of Course Tests or Georgia High School Graduation Test (GADOE, 2011).

High school diploma: The document provided to students who have met all requirements outlined in the State of Georgia Graduation Requirements, which includes passage of state mandated tests, completion of at least 23 Carnegie units, and meeting attendance requirements (GADOE, 2011).

Special education diploma: The document provided to SWD in Georgia that are eligible for support through a special education program. These students have not met the

state assessment requirements but have met the goals established in their IEP (GADOE, 2011).

Individualized education plan: This is a document developed by special education teams to address the unique needs of a student and develop an educational program to meet that student's needs (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Leaver rate: A formula used to calculate high school graduation rates by dividing the number of students graduating with a regular high school diploma by the total number of students enrolled in a given school year (National Center for Learning Disabilities [NCLD], 2013).

Composite rate: An alternate formula used by some states for measuring high school graduation rates. This method is calculated by multiplying the persistence rate between ninth and twelfth grades with the percent of students graduating with a high school diploma (GOSA, 2008).

Persistence rate: Another alternate formula used by some states for measuring high school graduation rates. This method measures students who remain in school from ninth through twelfth grades. Percentages are calculated based on the number of students promoted to subsequent grade levels (GOSA, 2008).

Assumptions, Limitations, Scope, and Delimitations

Assumptions of this study were specific to the participants. Moving from state standards to the CCCS altered not only the pacing of course content but the academic skills that are taught at different grade levels. One assumption was that high school English language arts and mathematics teachers understand the changes the CCCS has

made to the content standards required by their individual courses and have applied them accordingly. Preconceived beliefs about the ability of all students to learn at higher academic levels are indicated as a barrier to implementation of the CCCS (Quay, 2010). Another assumption was that high school teachers would be honest in their perspectives of the achievements of the SWD they teach, basing interview responses on observations rather than previously held beliefs. Finally, an assumption was made that teachers would understand the questions posed through personal interviews and through email correspondence and would provide relevant answers accordingly.

Limitations to the study included the subjective nature of interview responses, including the ability of teachers to base answers on observed phenomena rather than previously held assumptions. Only teachers employed in one district in northeast Georgia were included, limiting the number of potential participants. The participant pool was also restricted to those teachers who taught a high school English language arts or mathematics class affected by adopting the CCCS and included at least one SWD. Only five participants were included in initial data collection, thereby limiting the amount of data collected for preliminary analysis. Additional data were collected through emailed responses to the interview questions, which limited my ability to ask clarifying questions or seek additional input from the email participants. These limitations affected the ability of data collected to be generalized to broader settings. Personal bias could also have affected interpretation of interview responses. Necessary steps were taken to ensure accuracy of responses and opportunities for any potential bias to be removed from data analysis. This will be discussed in more detail in Section 4.

The scope of this study could potentially affect all high school teachers employed in a school district in northeast Georgia. The focus was narrowed by selecting participants who taught a high school English language arts or mathematics course driven by content standards affected by adopting the CCCS. Those teachers who participated in this study also taught at least one class that included at least one SWD.

Delimitations include all courses in content areas other than English language arts or mathematics. Teachers who did not teach any SWD were excluded from study, even if they taught a course affected by adopting the CCCS. Finally, educators who were teaching an English language arts or mathematics class who were not following curriculum standards in line with the CCCS were also excluded from the study.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study was to investigate the effect adopting the CCCS is having on high school SWD. The traditional societal measure of high school success is graduation with a regular diploma and high schools across the country are measured by the numbers of students who graduate (Carnoy, 2005). Since the passage of NCLB (2002) accountability and emphasis on preparing students for more rigorous academic experiences have been forefront. For many SWD though, the higher-order skills and increased academic expectations associated with the CCCS (CCSSI, 2012) are impeding their ability to meet the graduation requirements that lead to a regular diploma. The result is an increase in the number of alternate diploma options offered or an increase in the number of students who drop out of high school (Hamilton & Mackinnon, 2013). Through exploration of teachers' perceptions of the influence adopting the CCCS in

English language arts and mathematics has on the academic success of SWD, one aspect of the factors affecting successful high school completion was examined.

Students serviced in special education for high incidence disabilities, such as SLD or a medical conditions such as ADHD, are leaving high school with a high school certificate or a special education diploma rather than a regular high school diploma. Although national statistics indicate marginal increases in graduation rates for all students (Education Week, 2013), the NCLD (2013) reported that only 68% of students with SLD graduated high school with a regular diploma. This is significant for several reasons. Without a high school diploma, the likelihood that students will be able to enroll in postsecondary educational institutions is limited (Crawford, 2013).

To attend college or technical school, students who do not have a regular high school diploma or have not passed the General Educational Development test (GED) are often required to take a placement test or up to six basic skills classes in order to demonstrate their ability to matriculate. Students who have not been successful in high school are unlikely to meet the expectations of an admissions placement test, nor are they typically willing to participate in additional courses prior to earning college credit (Nelson, 2012). For those students who are able to find a technical or trade school that will admit them without a diploma or GED, federal financial aid is no longer available, increasing the financial burden for students and families (Nelson, 2012).

The potential to earn a salary above the poverty level for these students is also affected by the lack of a diploma (NCES, 2013). In 2011, students graduating with a bachelor's degree earned a median income of almost $45,000 per year. Those students

who had a high school diploma earned a median income of almost 30 thousand dollars per year. Students who did not graduate from high school or did not earn a regular diploma had a median annual income of just below $23,000 (NCES, 2013). With the unavailability of financial aid and the median income more than 8 thousand dollars less, the need for a high school diploma is evident, yet public high schools are not meeting that expectation.

Application to the Local Problem

In 2010, Georgia joined many other states in adopting the CCCS which caused academic expectations and high school graduation requirements to change. The concern at the local level was that these changes will increase the likelihood that SWD will leave high school with a high school certificate versus a regular high school diploma (D. Cormier, personal communication, July 19, 2014). Students with high incidence disabilities such as a specific learning disability (SLD) or medical condition such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) resulting in eligibility for special education, regardless of the accommodations offered through the IEP, are often unable to meet academic requirements of high school courses, resulting in a less than passing grade (Nomi, 2012). Regardless of the number of times a SWD retakes a required course, the scores required to obtain the Carnegie unit for graduation are difficult to obtain (L. Strickland, personal communication, November 6, 2013). Teachers also indicated increased frustration with available professional learning and resources for teaching the CCCS, reporting that only 40% of training focused substantially on the CCCS (GOSA,

2013). Increased academic expectations and limited professional learning for teachers are negatively affecting successful course completion for SWD.

Referred to in Georgia as the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards (CCGPS), these standards, implemented in English language arts and mathematics, require greater rigor and are assessed at a higher level of critical thinking (CCSSI, 2012). Teachers at the high school level report SWD struggling to meet the expectations at greater numbers than in previous years (L. Strickland, personal communication, November 6, 2013; J. Benvenuto, personal communication, November 7, 2013). In the majority of school districts in Georgia, high school SWD are held to the same academic expectations as students who are not supported by an IEP (GADOE, 2007). Students who have an IEP are often academically more than 1 year behind students without a disability (Halladay & Moses, 2013). However, integrity of practice indicates that teachers should be following identical levels of rigor with all students as outlined by the program or curriculum in place (Azano et al., 2011). As related to the expectations outlined in the CCGPS, this requires higher order thinking skills and performance based assessments which many students with high incidence disabilities are unable to master (Powell et al., 2013). The identified problem is teacher perception of the disparate number of students with identified disabilities receiving high school certificates rather than regular high school diplomas as a result of the increased rigor incorporated in to CCGPS alignment (GOSA, 2013). Students who qualify for support through special education are now expected to meet the requirements indicated above, yet the measures of teacher

perception indicate they are doing so at significantly lower levels due to their deficits in academic ability.

Professional Application for Positive Social Change

Professional learning opportunities designed to meet teachers' needs in providing relevant and appropriate instruction, particularly to SWD who must meet the expectations of the CCCS to obtain a regular high school diploma, are limited. Allensworth et al. (2009) found that increasing academic expectations and instructional rigor did not necessarily increase instructional practice and rigorous teaching. In responding to an online survey regarding the implementation of CCCS, 72% of teachers reported having received less than 50 hours of sustained professional learning related to implementation (EPERC, 2012). However, Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) found that positive effect on student achievement was not evident until teachers had participated in over 50 hours of ongoing, sustained professional learning spanning six months or more. The information gained through exploration of teachers' perspectives on the training they received in order to implement the CCCS can be used to develop professional learning opportunities which will meet the future needs of teachers and positively affect student achievement.

Summary

Through adopting the CCGPS, high schools have increased academic expectations. With these increased expectations came expanded rigor on classroom assessments and standardized assessments, as well as increased criteria for receiving a high school diploma (Cobb & Jackson, 2011). Teachers' perception of how these changes are affecting SWD was the focus of this qualitative case study. Subsequent sections

review current and relevant literature related to the topics of high school graduation, the CCCS, and students with disabilities. The proposed research design that drove the study will also be discussed. Research methodologies, sampling procedures, data collection procedures, and the methods for analyzing data are included in Section 3. Results of data collection, findings, and discrepant data are discussed in Section 4, and Section 5 contains a discussion of the findings as well as potential applications for social change.

Section 2: Literature Review

A review of the literature revealed varying perspectives on the effect adopting the CCGPS is having on high school students, especially SWD. School systems seek higher graduation rates, yet students leave high school without a regular diploma for a variety of reasons. Some students may become disengaged from the social structure of school, some students lack environmental support for continued enrollment, and some lack the academic ability to maintain successful school completion (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010; Murnane, 2013). Research on the effect of increased academic requirements adopted by many districts throughout the United States is still inconclusive (GOSA, 2013; Halladay & Moses, 2013). The primary question driving this study considered teacher perception of how the CCGPS is affecting the ability of SWD to graduate with a high school diploma. Secondary questions addressed teacher perspectives on preparation to teach the CCCS through professional learning or other training. Information in this section includes the variables associated with the effect that the CCCS is having on SWD, on teachers' perceptions of the ability of SWD to graduate with a high school diploma, and on how prepared teachers perceive they are to incorporate the CCCS in to their classroom instruction.

I collected research for this section from books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, and other electronic sources. I conducted searches using Google Scholar, ERIC, Education Research Complete, Academic Search Complete, and a database of university dissertations. I used the following terms in my database search: *high school graduation, graduation rates, Common Core Curriculum Standards,*

Common Core Georgia Performance Standards, special education, students with disabilities, and *teacher perception*.

Subsections include the following categories: history of the CCCS adoption and data reviewing the effectiveness of that adoption, the effect of the CCCS on SWD, historical data on high school graduation rates for all students, the effect that CCCS adoption may have on graduation rates for SWD, and professional learning opportunities available to teachers implementing the CCCS in their classrooms. The first section is an overview of CCCS development, research related to adopting and implementing the CCCS, and more specific information on the CCGPS. I discuss the effect that the CCCS is having on SWD in the following section. I include high school graduation options and high school graduation rates based on previous state-specific standards and the move toward the more uniform CCCS. Finally, in the last section, I review information on the teacher preparation and professional learning provided to teachers who are implementing the CCCS in their courses. These categories are then summarized in the conclusion to support the study, which measured teacher perception of how adopting the CCCS affects the ability of SWD to graduate from high school with a high school diploma.

Common Core Curriculum Standards

To increase student academic achievement, many states have adopted the CCCS, which are designed to encourage a higher level of college and career readiness. Developed as a collaborative effort between the National Governors Association's Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), the CCCS were developed over several years to provide uniform learning standards for all students

(CCSSI, 2012). Information provided by the GADOE (2010) explained that the CCGPS would offer students the opportunity to learn the more rigorous skills required in college or for a career. They also indicated that the CCGPS would make student achievement comparable among states, thereby increasing the probability that a graduating senior from Georgia would be just as likely as a student from Massachusetts to be accepted at an Ivy League school (GADOE, 2010). The promises to teachers included "clear, focused expectations" (GADOE, 2010, p. 1) that would support their collaborative work with students in achieving educational goals. Taxpayers were also included. They were offered the opportunity to spend less money on textbooks and curriculum because all states would be teaching the same standards.

Reasons for and Against Implementing the CCCS

Initially, educational researchers were concerned that the CCCS would not be vastly different from current states' standards for academic achievement. However, comparisons of previously accepted state standards used for instruction in mathematics and language arts to the CCCS indicated increased rigor and use of higher-order thinking skills to demonstrate mastery of content (Mathis, 2010; Porter et al., 2011; Rust, 2012). Focusing on fewer standards that follow a more coherent framework among grade levels, the CCCS provide students with academic instruction that helps them be successful in either college or a career after completing high school, and it helps them to compete globally (Haager & Vaughn, 2013; Quay, 2010). In short, the new set of standards increases the learning expectation for students, and proponents claim the standards ensure that students throughout the country are learning at the same levels.

Opponents of the CCCS argued that adopting a national curriculum created a "one-size-fits-all framework" (Halladay & Moses, 2013, p. 33) that stands in stark contrast to the diverse nature of students in schools throughout the Unites States. The standardized nature of the CCCS makes the assumption that all students begin school at the same academic level and will complete school having mastered the same academic standards at the same rate (Tienken, 2011). However, data collected on reading ability using longitudinal data for students with disabilities aged 7 to 17 found this to be unrealistic (Wei, Blackorby, & Schiller, 2011). Although students with high incidence disabilities did show growth in reading ability with time, the rate of growth decreased with age and did not match the growth curves of students considered to be non-disabled (Wei et al., 2011). Students learn at different rates, indicating varied ability to meet academic expectations. Historically though, high schools have created a system of course offerings that often track students by ability (Nomi, 2012). This is in direct contrast to the CCCS, which requires that all students be exposed to the same standards. For teachers, the ability to differentiate instruction to diverse learners becomes critical. Previously identified best practices regarding learning styles and metacognitive strengths are set aside in order to support authentic implementation of the CCCS. Schools must eliminate ability tracking (Powell et al., 2013). Many classroom teachers, however, might argue that all students begin and end their educational journeys at different places on the educational spectrum.

One argument for developing a national curriculum such as the CCCS was to make students more competitive in global markets. Countries with growing or flourishing

economies have populations with an overall higher level of education than that of the United States (Mathis, 2010). Many of those countries have also adopted a national curriculum. However, countries that have national learning standards do not overwhelmingly score higher on international measures of comparison. In fact, 33 of the 39 countries scoring below the United States on international comparisons of academic proficiency have national curriculum standards. Only two of the five top scoring nations have a national curriculum such as the CCCS (Mathis, 2010).

Initial arguments for adopting the CCCS by state policy makers indicated that the CCCS would increase student achievement. Researchers should consider though the level at which individual states have maintained fidelity to the CCCS as they were originally written. Schmidt and Houang (2012) measured states' congruence to the mathematics standards as developed by the CCCS. They found a continuum of results with Alabama, California, and Georgia being among the most congruous. Conversely, Nevada, Arizona, and Iowa showed the most divergence from the CCCS in their mathematics standards. Data were then collected on standard scores from a measure aligning to the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) measure of mathematics for eighth-grade students (Schmidt & Houang, 2012). As a predictor for this study, information on students in eighth grade is valuable as most of those students would be entering high school the following school year under full adoption of the CCCS. Results from the 2009 assessment showed that the higher the state's level of congruence with the CCCS, the higher the scores on the NAEP measure (Schmidt & Houang, 2012). The conclusion

drawn by Schmidt and Houang was that adopting the CCCS with fidelity, particularly in mathematics, would show continued increases in student achievement.

Long-term Results of the CCCS

There is evidence to indicate that the CCCS are not resulting in the longitudinal academic gains given as a reason for their adoption. The 2014 Brown Center Report on American Education (Loveless, 2014) replicated the study conducted by Schmidt and Houang including data through 2013. Data from this study indicated no relationship between congruence to the CCCS standards and student achievement. In fact, states labeled as having mathematics standards most divergent from the CCCS showed the highest longitudinal gains on the NAEP measure for students in eighth grade (Loveless, 2014). By 2011, when 45 states had adopted the CCCS, student achievement should have shown the highest gains, yet in that school year states who had previously indicated full implementation of the CCCS with fidelity measured the highest gains on the standardized measure. Those states that had only recently adopted the CCCS or had the lowest measure of congruence recorded student scaled scores only slightly below those of the states in the fully implemented category, which is in direct contrast to the predictions made by Schmidt and Houang (Loveless, 2014). The global academic achievement gains that were offered as a reason for fully adopting the CCCS seem to be affected by states' interpretations of those educational standards. It is also important to note that full implementation of the CCCS did not take place in many states until school year 2013—2014 (CCSSI, 2012). Information about student achievement that can be specifically tied

to implementation of the CCCS is not currently available (L. Raymond, personal communication, July 20, 2014).

Effect of CCCS on SWD

Other operational changes are also taking effect due to adopting the CCCS. Schools are increasing the rate at which SWD are included in general education classrooms in order to access the CCCS (Goodman, Hazelkorn, Bucholz, Duffy, & Kitta, 2011). Subsequently, data indicated that more SWD are participating in high stakes testing as a result of better inclusive practices (Goodman, et al., 2011; Katsiyannis, Zhung, Ryan, & Jones, 2007). However, increased participation also leads to increased opportunities for failure for SWD. Proponents of the CCCS argue that SWD will have the greatest academic success through exposure to the increased academic standards in an inclusive, heterogeneous setting (CCSSI, n.d.) However, Nomi and Allensworth (2009) found that small, homogenous groups of high school students had the highest increase in achievement in algebra. This is in direct contrast to the proposed outcomes of the CCCS. Little information is included in the CCCS documentation that addresses accommodations for SWD other than to support the need for all students to be exposed to the same standards (CCSSI, n.d.; Haager & Vaughn, 2013). The Committee on Conceptual Framework for the New K-12 Science Education Standards (2012) however does indicate a direct need to differentiate instruction and assessment to meet the needs of SWD. This statement is specific to the development of the CCCS science standards, however. The concern is that the recommended academic expectations in core content areas such as English language arts and mathematics are not meeting the needs of SWD.

Effect of the CCCS on the Local School System

In Georgia, the CCCS are referred to as the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards (CCGPS). Adopted in 2011, the English language arts standards were fully implemented in kindergarten through Grade 12 in school year 2012—2013. The mathematics standards were adopted for kindergarten through Grade 9 in school year 2012—2013, with full implementation for Grades 10 through 12 by school year 2014—2015. The literacy standards for science and social studies or history were also implemented in 2012—2013 (GADOE, n.d.). There is still discussion and debate about the assessment of these standards as Georgia currently plans to develop its own measure to determine student mastery of the CCGPS (Fincher, 2013). Advocates for SWD are divided on the measures Georgia will create. Previously, the state standardized assessment offered a modified version which allowed SWD to be tested on the same content standards but at a modified level. Current plans for assessments indicate no such option, further limiting the ability of SWD to meet the academic expectations (Fincher, 2013). It continues to be a work in progress.

Students with Disabilities

The majority of current research focuses on elementary aged students and the effect CCCS is having on their achievement, yet it is historically understood that poor performance in elementary school is a predictor of academic failure in high school (Eccles, 2008; Murnane, 2013; Powell et al., 2013). For students with a learning disability or some other impairment, increased rigor and expectations have serious implications for success (Haager & Vaughn, 2013). Since the CCCS focus specifically on

English language arts, reading, and mathematics standards, those are the areas reviewed for this study.

The CCCS and Achievement in Reading

At the elementary level, SWD participating in CCCS often fall further behind their peers, especially in the area of reading (Bulgren, Graner, & Deshler, 2013; Castro, 2013; Haager & Vaughn, 2013). The CCCS requires texts at higher Lexile levels for each grade and includes the expectation that all students will read, understand, and be able to interpret nonfiction texts. Yet the exemplar list of texts specifically recommended to meet the increased rigor is largely made up of fantasy works with main characters who are Caucasian males (Burns, Kimmel, & Garrison, 2013). These works, though valuable from a literary standpoint, are not representative of the cultural diversity and global focus represented by developers of the CCCS (Burns, et al., 2013). For students with a disability in reading who are unable to read fiction text at or below their current grade level, the expectation they will meet the higher level demand of CCCS by successfully reading nonfiction text is unrealistic (Haager & Vaughn, 2013; Halladay & Moses, 2013). Reading difficulty has the potential to affect success in all subject areas.

The CCCS and Achievement in Mathematics

Similar results were found for students with a disability in mathematics. Difficulty with reading comprehension affects a student's ability to read and process a word problem even if simple mathematical computation skills are strong (Powell et al., 2013). The mathematics CCCS include language that requires achievement to be measured in terms of higher-order thinking and problem solving. Conversely, basic mathematical

skills instruction is discouraged (Tienken, 2011). For many SWD, it is the basic computational skills that allow some measure of success in mathematics.

At the elementary level, where foundational skills in mathematics have historically been addressed, the CCCS are now requiring more problem solving and less basic computation. The concern from that perspective is research that indicated that kindergarten students who demonstrate limited mathematical ability make smaller overall mathematical gains throughout elementary school (Doabler et al., 2012; Judge & Watson, 2011; Siegler et al., 2012). Butterworth, Varma, and Laurillard (2011) also found that students diagnosed with a specific learning disability in mathematics continued to struggle with mathematical processes in to adulthood. However, Tienken (2011) pointed out that the expectation of the CCCS is that all students graduate from high school having mastered the same level of academic achievement.

Factors Affecting Achievement

Proponents of the CCCS argue that academic success is a matter of providing the correct amount and type of supports and accommodations to SWD (Schifter, 2011). Many SWD already receive a significant amount of academic support, yet the level of support required for SWD who previously struggled with less rigorous learning standards will need to be increased if SWD are to be successful mastering a more rigorous curriculum (Allensworth et al., 2009; Scruggs, Brigham, & Mastropieri, 2013). Supports and accommodations typically seen in the classroom such as having extended time for assignment completion or being able to take a test in a smaller setting may not be sufficient to meet the increased expectations of the CCCS (Allensworth et al., 2009).

Differentiation of both instruction and assessment to meet the different learning styles and methods of SWD, especially those with SLD is critical (Scruggs et al., 2013). The expectation in schools is that the general education teacher provides the majority of the content area instruction (Solis, Vaughn, Swanson, & McCulley, 2012), which places additional pressure on the classroom teacher. The effect of the CCCS is more than simple student achievement in one subject area.

Several external factors that affect achievement for SWD must also be considered. Schools with limited resources have shown diminished ability to implement CCCS (Quay, 2010). Not only do those limited resources affect implementation tools such as access to technology for both teachers and students (Quay, 2010), they also affect access to professional development for teachers in how to best instruct at a more rigorous academic level (Lee, 2011). For SWD, the access to supports and accommodations through technology may be limited, and best practices through the use of evidence based interventions comes through continuous, ongoing professional development (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009). Despite efforts toward inclusion and access for all SWD to the CCCS as supported by the CCCSI (n.d.), districts in poorer regions are also faced with limited personnel due to increasing budget and faculty allotment cuts (Mathis, 2010). Powell et al. (2013) also questioned how schools will find additional instructional time needed to address deficit skills inherent in SWD, especially with budgets and personnel allotments diminishing. The gains in critical thinking and rigor will require additional time and additional instruction, which will require additional personnel and additional funding, neither of which is abundant in the current economic landscape (Mathis, 2010).

Time to address specific learning deficits or educational goals will be more difficult to allocate with the increased rigor and pace of the CCCS. Increasing the rigor of the curriculum does not ensure increased academic performance of students nor does it increase the likelihood that SWD will leave high school with a diploma.

High School Graduation

For the majority of students, the goal is to leave high school with a regular diploma which allows them options for either further education or a career. Changing educational structures such as implementation of the CCCS can affect this goal, though. Modifications to graduation requirements is one factor that affects the ability of SWD to graduate from high school with a regular diploma (Holme, Richards, Jimerson, & Cohen, 2010; Goodman et al., 2011). In Georgia, students who entered high school in 2002 were required to earn a minimum of 22 Carnegie units and pass the Georgia High School Graduation Test (GHSGT) to receive a diploma (GADOE, 2011). For students who began their freshman year in 2008, an additional science credit was added increasing the number of required Carnegie units to 23. Passing the GHSGT was also a requirement (GADOE, 2011). In 2011, with the decision to implement the CCCS, the GADOE made the decision to begin phasing out the GHSGT. Students who entered ninth grade in 2011 were among the first students no longer required to pass the cumulative graduation test, yet were required to pass individual End of Course Tests (EOCTs) as determined by the state department of education (GADOE, 2011). The GHSGT contained sections that could be taken multiple times. This format was of benefit to SWD who were unable to pass the entire test at one time (Wilkinson, 2012). Currently, students must earn at least

23 Carnegie units in specific content areas as determined by the state. The majority of courses in English language arts and mathematics are now following the academic expectations outlined in the CCCS. Students must also take the corresponding EOCTs for a certain number of courses. Passing the EOCTs for specific courses is not required, however the grade obtained on the EOCT is factored in as 20% of the final grade (GADOE, 2011). For SWD, maintaining passing grades and achieving a grade on the accompanying EOCTS, which are designed to meet the educational rigor of the CCCS is increasingly difficult (Holme et al., 2010). Measuring successful high school graduation, particularly for SWD, is difficult given the number of changes to graduation requirements in the past several years.

High School Graduation Rates

Measuring student success is also a factor in measuring the success of individual states' educational systems. However, because of the discrepancy between the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002), which mandates that students graduate within 4 years of entering high school and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), which allows students with disabilities to remain in public school through age 21, states apply varying frameworks to measure their numbers of graduates. Some consider students who complete high school in a given time frame, some consider only graduates who receive a regular diploma, and still others measure numbers of students who are enrolled compared with the numbers leaving (GOSA, 2008). The method chosen often reflects information the state is tracking and may change as data become available to reflect the effect implementation of the CCCS is having on graduation rates.

The leaver rate is used to calculate numbers of students leaving high school with a regular diploma. It is derived by taking the number of students who graduate with a regular diploma and dividing it by the total number of students enrolled (National Center for Learning Disabilities [NCLD], 2013; GOSA, 2008). The concern with the leaver rate is that results typically are skewed toward higher graduation rates and lower rates of students dropping out. However, the leaver rate can be disaggregated by disability area in order to measure numbers of students in special education leaving high school with a regular diploma (NCLD, 2013). There is no reference to increased rigor or adoption of the CCCS included in calculating the leaver rate.

Cohort rates measure the number of students who enter ninth grade during the same year that subsequently leave high school with a regular diploma in 4 years. This rate can account for transfers and retention and tends to be more accurate as a result (GOSA, 2008). This calculation method could benefit from implementation of a national curriculum such as the CCCS because students transferring between states would be exposed to the same academic expectations making comparison easier. Two additional methods, the composite rate and the persistence rate measure numbers of students who either stay enrolled in school until receiving a diploma or numbers of students who are enrolled from ninth grade through 12th grade. Neither method considers transfers or drop outs, and the persistence rate does not take in to account the receipt of a high school diploma (GOSA, 2008). With different states calculating graduation rates using different methods it has historically been difficult to accurately compare data. In addition, none of

these methods specifically accounts for students' exposure to the CCCS, which makes measuring the success of a national curriculum difficult.

As a result of this ambiguity of comparison, the federal government developed a calculation rate to be used by all states that would allow for more accurate comparison of high school graduation rates. Referred to as the adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR), data is calculated by dividing the number of students who graduate in four years with a regular diploma by the number of students who entered as freshmen during the same year four years prior (NCLD, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The primary benefit of using the ACGR is that comparisons are more easily made between states and districts. The ACGR accounts for transfers, drop outs, and additional factors that may skew other methods of calculation. This method can also be disaggregated for subgroups such as students in special education, English language learners, or economically disadvantaged students. Information can also be separated by gender, ethnicity, or other demographic information allowing schools to have a more accurate picture of which groups are at risk (NCLD, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Some states are applying for a 5- or 6-year cohort rate to consider students who may take longer to graduate with a regular high school diploma, yet these adjustments are still under review (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). States were required to begin reporting data using the ACGR for school year 2010—2011, however there has not been any indication that exposure to the CCCS will be included in the ACGR.

There are factors to consider in addition to the methods used by various states when calculating graduation rates. In 2011, Heilig conducted an analysis of longitudinal

data recorded at the student level to determine if educational gains attributed to accountability and high stakes testing were valid. Using a Cox proportional hazard model, various events that contributed to students leaving high school were calculated and compared to previously reported graduation and drop out data. The study determined how students who withdrew, students who disappeared, and students who were still enrolled after four years were reported, in addition to those who graduated within the 4-year time frame and those students who dropped out. Findings indicated that the actual student level data did not validate the success rates reported by the state (Heilig, 2011). Many of the students no longer enrolled in school were not coded as drop outs, thus artificially reducing the dropout rate for the year of reported data.

Even with accurate reporting of data, there continues to be debate about the definition of a high school graduate (Jordan, Kostandini, & Mykerezi, 2011). One category of controversy includes those students who have attained a GED. Graduation rates that include students with GEDs report a disproportionate number of minority students as high school graduates (Jordan et al., 2011). Students served through prison and military programs are often excluded from calculation, further skewing reported graduation rates. There is also argument for using eighth grade enrollment as the benchmark for the ACGR to eliminate bias in calculating students who reach the legal age to drop out prior to enrolling in the ninth grade (Jordan et al., 2011). Despite efforts to standardize the calculation and definition of graduation rates across states, numbers indicate that students still are not graduating at rates proposed by the developers of educational reform (Carnoy, 2005).

High School Graduation for SWD

The NCES reports annual graduation rates and dropout rates as well as other empirical educational data. Data from school year 2011-2012, the first year in which all states were required to use the ACGR, ranges from 59% of students graduating in 4 years in the District of Columbia to 89% in Iowa, with a national average as of yet uncalculated due to several states with unreported or inaccurate data (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). For school year 2009—2010, NCES (2013b) reported that 78.2% of students graduated on time with a regular diploma nationally. This is the highest the graduation rate has been since 1973 (Swanson & Lloyd, 2013). However, only 62.5% of students with disabilities (SWD) graduated with a high school diploma in the 2009—2010 school year (NCES, 2012). Data from the same report also indicated that 14.6% of SWD received a high school certificate and 21.1% dropped out of school, although these numbers are further delineated by age, indicating the adjusted cohort rate was not used in calculation. By comparison, numbers of SWD leaving high school with a regular diploma are low and these measures were calculated prior to implementation of the CCCS in high school English language arts and mathematics courses.

There is a great deal of variation among states for SWD graduating with a high school diploma. One factor with a direct correlation to lower graduation rates is the number of high school diploma options offered by the state departments of education (NCLD, 2013). For the school year 2010—2011, Nevada had the lowest graduation rate for SWD at 23%. Nevada also has seven high school exit options, which is the highest in the United States (NCLD, 2013). Nevada is joined by Mississippi and Idaho in awarding

more SWD certificates of attendance than regular high school diplomas (NCLD, 2013). Offering high school completion options other than a regular high school diploma also increases the possibility that SWD will be tracked in to academic pathways that lead away from typical high school graduation requirements. This is in direct contrast to the expectation of the CCCS, which were developed to ensure that every student graduate from high school ready for college or a career.

The CCCS implementation has challenged educators and administrators in public high schools with the responsibility of meeting the educational needs of SWD and providing them opportunities to meet the requirements for obtaining a regular high school diploma (Repetto, Cavanaugh, Wayer, & Liu, 2010). Reasons why SWD drop out of high school are as varied as the strategies developed to support their continued enrollment. Some students report frustration with content, inability to develop a relationship with teachers, being older than their peers, and low self-esteem (Repetto et al., 2010). Strategies developed to support continued enrollment include opportunities to recover credits for previously failed courses, access to tutors, and instruction provided through a variety of media (Shore & Shore, 2009). None of those factors, though, are considered when calculating high school graduation rates.

Advocates argued that states should use 5- or 6-year ACGR to measure the success of high school programs for SWD (Schifter, 2011). The adjusted ACGR may become a more viable calculation option with the increased rigor of the CCCS affecting successful course completion for English language arts and mathematics courses. When researchers considered the length of time students who are academically challenged took

to complete high school, it is unclear whether students genuinely required additional time to meet the graduation requirements or if the schools were unable to provide the support SWD need in a 4-year time frame (Schifter, 2011). The extended cohort rate, in addition to the 4-year rate, will give a more accurate picture of the number of SWD who graduate high school with a regular diploma, especially if the expectation is the same for all students.

Diploma Options and Graduation Requirements

Georgia offers two alternate options to the regular high school diploma. Students may leave high school with either a high school certificate or a special education diploma (GADOE, 2011). For school year 2010—2011, the ACGR indicated 30% of SWD graduated with a regular diploma compared to a 67% graduation rate for all students (NCLD, 2013). More specifically students identified as having a specific learning disability (SLD) had a 51% graduation rate for school year 2010—2011. Further data indicate that 21% of students identified as SLD received a high school certificate and 28% of students identified as SLD dropped out of high school prior to completion (NCLD, 2013). These data were calculated prior to full implementation of the CCCS. The initial year of CCCS implementation in Georgia was 2012. In the county in northeast Georgia where this study was conducted, the 4-year cohort graduation rate for all students in 2012 was 87.8% and was 63% for SWD (GADOE, 2014a). The following year, with one year of implementation completed, the graduation rate for all students was 89.5% and was 63.2% for SWD (GADOE, 2014b). It is unclear whether or not the change in graduation rate can be contributed to implementation of the CCCS, yet as additional data

becomes available, there are factors that contribute to the dropout rate of SWD that should be considered.

Participation in cumulative assessments such as a high school graduation test also varies by state. As of the 2011—2012 school year, 25 states required students to pass an exit examination of some sort to receive a high school diploma (McIntosh, 2012). Proponents of these exit examinations argue that the requirement offers students an incentive to work diligently throughout their high school courses to attain a passing grade on the graduation test (Papay, Murnane, & Willett, 2010). Those opposing the final cumulative test model argue that it creates stress for students which may lead to increased dropout rates (Papay et al., 2010). In Georgia, the GHSGT is being phased out. Students beginning high school in 2011 will be required to participate in EOCTs but not a cumulative exit examination (GADOE, 2011). Many states that have adopted the CCCS are altering their graduation assessments to mirror the academic requirements found in the new curriculum standards.

The effect of high school exit examinations on students who have documented academic difficulty is pronounced. For students who fall into minority categories such as English Language Learners (ELL) or SWD, there is evidence to support increased dropout rates, but very little evidence to suggest that exit examinations increase academic achievement (Ou, 2009). Data indicate that between 70% and 90% of students pass the graduation tests on the first try and of those, 90% will graduate from high school with a regular diploma (McIntosh, 2012; Papay et al., 2010). Conversely, fewer than 50% of students who fail the graduation test on the first try graduate from high school with a

regular diploma (Papay et al., 2010). States have begun offering remediation programs or alternate methods to achieve passing scores on graduation examinations for groups of students such as those with disabilities (McIntosh, 2012). However, with implementation of the CCCS, those courses which meet the academic requirements of increased rigor and higher order processing will continue to be difficult for SWD to master (Shifter, 2011). Cumulative high school exit testing is yet another factor affecting the ability of SWD to graduate from high school with a regular diploma.

Preparation to Teach the CCCS

Regardless of how graduation rates are calculated or what diploma options are available, the actual work toward high school graduation begins in the classroom. Teachers must be able to educate students at the level expected by the CCCS. Specific training should be delivered not only to ensure that teachers are fully prepared to teach the CCCS and understand the changes those standards have made to the previous academic standards taught in their classes but also to confirm that teachers acknowledge the increased level of rigor expected by the CCCS (Bolen, Davis, & Rhodes, 2012; Rust; 2013). A framework for professional learning is provided by the CCCS, although teachers' access to ongoing development has been limited (EPERC, 2012). Responding to an online survey, teachers answered questions about their perception of the CCCS and their readiness to teach the new standards. Data indicate that 71% received some level of professional learning related to the CCCS, although 59% of those participated in three days or fewer of training (EPERC, 2012). Teachers' responses suggest that only one fifth of the respondents felt prepared to teach the CCCS to all students; one tenth of the

respondents felt prepared to teach the standards to specific subgroups such as SWD or student with limited English proficiency (EPERC, 2012). Bolen et al. (2012) found that the most effective professional learning focused on content specific to teacher needs and took place across multiple sessions, rather than being limited to a smaller number of meetings.

Following the conceptual framework on which this study is based, professional learning for teachers in adopting a new program, policy, or initiative should have been a priority. According to Fullan's theory of educational change (2007), once a policy or program shift has been initiated by decision makers, the next critical step is implementation. For adoption of the CCCS to reach the implementation phase, teachers need to commit to the curriculum and be willing to support its adoption (Fullan, 2007; Fullan, 2010). Professional learning opportunities that would have supported successful implementation, particularly in Georgia, are limited.

On adopting the CCGPS, policy makers began offering professional learning resources. The GADOE partnered with Georgia Public Broadcasting and Regional Education Service Agencies to offer live-streamed videos, face to face training sessions, presentation at local and regional conferences, and additional instructional materials to support teachers (GOSA, 2013). However, a survey conducted by GOSA of over two thousand teachers across the state of Georgia in 2013 found that the majority of teachers received less that the predefined optimal level of training. Findings were more significant for teachers who only teach mathematics and for teachers who teach in a region defined by GOSA as a suburb (GOSA, 2013). Additional findings indicated that teachers reported

resources to be inadequate and reported spending extensive amounts of time either developing or finding useful resources. Teachers who reported access to purposeful professional learning reported using the information learned in their classrooms (GOSA, 2013). This survey is scheduled to be administered by GOSA twice more to support initial findings.

Just as results from the initial survey conducted by GOSA indicated, professional learning is critical to teachers' ability to implement change. In fact, providing professional learning is one of the most effective ways to encourage teachers' efforts in adopting change (Kretlow, Cooke, & Wood, 2012). Another characteristic of successful professional learning is that it be ongoing (Brownell, Billingsley, McLeskey, & Sindelar, 2013). Working toward a common goal in a social situation allows teachers a sense of commonality that supports their efforts and provides a shared vision of the end goal (Fullan, 2010). However, most districts across the United States are lacking the culture of professional learning needed to ensure authentic implementation of the CCCS (Lee, 2011). Participating with peers in structured learning activities across multiple sessions appears to be the most effective way to support implementation of a new initiative, such as adopting the CCCS.

Professional development, also referred to as professional learning, often has a negative connotation among teachers. Commonly understood to be the venue through which information is passed on to teaching professionals through their local school or district, professional development is critical to the success of schools and student achievement (Editorial Projects in Education [EPE], 2011). Yet to genuinely affect the

learning of teachers so that they may affect the learning of students, professional learning must be offered to every teacher, at every level, in every subject area, every school year (Hirsch, 2009). For teachers faced with the implementation of the CCCS, this is especially critical. Professional learning on teaching the CCCS comes in a variety of formats. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) offers professionals the opportunity to join EduCore, a website that offers evidence-based resources, webinars, and other interactive tools to support learning related to the CCCS (2013). Several state departments of education also offer professional learning opportunities related to implementation of the CCCS (California Department of Education, n.d.; Georgia Public Broadcasting Education, 2013; Oregon Department of Education, 2013). The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC, 2010) supports nine studies accepted as rigorously scientific regarding the success of professional learning. However, of those nine studies, none found statistically significant evidence that professional learning affected student achievement. One found that teachers who attended more than 49 hours of content specific professional learning increased the number of activities their students engaged in which required higher order thinking than teachers who had not participated (WWC, 2010). Conversely, Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) found that sustained professional learning which averaged more than 49 contact hours taking place during a 6- to 12-month period of time resulted in increased student achievement of 21 percentage points on average. Professional learning which totaled less than 49 contact hours on average showed no statistical improvement in student achievement (Darling Hammond et al., 2009). The argument for sustained, ongoing learning is clear.

Professional learning experiences should also focus on specific school based initiatives which are tied to the teaching of specific academic content and allow teachers to build strong collaborative relationships (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). Teachers reported that professional learning provided at a local level which directly focused on their individual content area was most useful in supporting their use of CCCS strategies in their classrooms (GOSA, 2013). Participation in professional learning should also be available to teachers during work hours and should encompass at least 50 hours of development on a specific content topic (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) found that only 51% of teachers found content specific professional learning of value. Fewer than half the teachers surveyed found any of the professional development available to them of any value. Teachers acknowledge the need for additional training when it comes to teaching the CCCS to SWD, students who are English language learners (ELL), or students who are economically disadvantaged (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; EPERC, 2012). If teachers feel unprepared to teach the increased expectations required by the CCCS as a result of lacking or inadequate professional learning it is likely that student achievement will be lacking as well.

Summary

There are many opinions surrounding the adoption and subsequent implementation of the CCCS, particularly as it relates to SWD. Historically, the CCCS were adopted to provide a national set of curriculum standards that would provide a more rigorous education for high school students and make them more competitive with high school graduates from other countries (CCSSI, n.d.). However, the increased rigor of the

CCCS is causing SWD to meet the academic requirements for high school graduation at lower levels than other students (Haager & Vaughn, 2013). Teachers also reported being unprepared to teach the CCCS, especially to SWD (GOSA, 2013). Given that high school teachers were required to alter their curriculum standards in English language arts and mathematics to focus on higher order thinking skills and problem solving, their perceptions on how those changes are affecting the SWD they teach are critical to this study. Their perspectives on the level of professional development they received in preparation to teach the CCCS are also important.

Section 2 has been a review of literature related to the topics addressed in the research questions for this study. Given that the study seeks to measure teachers' perceptions of the effect the CCCS is having on the ability of SWD to graduate from high school with a regular diploma, each of those topics has been discussed in turn. An overview of the historical factors leading up to and subsequent adoption of the CCCS began the section. Literature reviewing the effect the CCCS is having on SWD followed. Data pertaining to high school graduation rates was also included. Finally, as a reference to the subquestion of teacher preparation to meet the educational changes made by the CCCS, a section reviewing literature related to professional development was also discussed.

Section 3 includes the methodology used for this descriptive case study. Topics covered in Section 3 include the research design, research questions, ethical issues, the role of the researcher, selection of the participants, data collection methods, and methods of data analysis. In Section 4 I review the findings of data collection and discuss any

discrepant data. Section 5 includes a summary, a discussion of the findings, and implications for potential social change.

Section 3: Methodology

I conducted this study using a qualitative approach to understand the perceptions of teachers who teach SWD in high school English language arts or mathematics courses that follow the CCCS. Qualitative researchers seek to obtain data that describe or provide understanding of the phenomena being studied (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010; Rumrill, Cook, & Wiley, 2011). Descriptive in nature, qualitative research is conducted in natural settings through observations or interviews searching for insight not only into the responses of the participants but also the process applied to data collection (Rumrill et al., 2011). To obtain responses needed to identify teacher perspectives on the ability of high school SWD to graduate with a high school diploma and to determine teachers' perception of the level of training or professional development they received prior to teaching the CCCS, qualitative research was most appropriate.

I conducted research using a descriptive case study. Case studies conduct an empirical investigation of a phenomenon, or case, within a real-world setting (Yin, 2014). The goal in case study design is to document and interpret the pertinent aspects of an event of interest (Rumrill et al., 2011) The event or phenomena I researched in this study was the experience of implementing the CCCS as mandated by the GADOE. For purposes of this research, I included only high school teachers who taught a mathematics or English language arts class whose course standards for learning were changed by adopting the CCGPS. To find common themes and meaning, I studied the perceptions of teachers who experienced the phenomenon of having the curriculum standards associated with the courses they teach altered to meet CCCS expectations.

Research Design

In choosing a research design for this study I considered several methodologies. Although the majority of research in special education is conducted using a quantitative approach (Koch & Gitchel, 2011), a qualitative approach was better suited to address the research questions developed for this study. Given that I was investigating teachers' perceptions, an approach that focused on interpretation and explanation seemed appropriate. The goals of this study were to determine whether teachers believed the CCCS is affecting the ability of SWD to obtain a high school diploma and to consider whether teachers believed they were given adequate training or professional learning prior to teaching the CCCS. I developed both goals to help gain an understanding of a phenomena and offer explanations based on perception, which made a qualitative approach the most appropriate option.

Additional qualitative options for a research design were examined. A phenomenology, which considers shared perspectives of all participants who experienced a common phenomenon, initially seemed appropriate. However, the purpose of phenomenology is to (a) explain the shared experiences from the perspective and with the depth of understanding of those who experienced the phenomenon, and (b) to gain insight in to the "shared essence of the experience" (Lester, 1999, p. 3). Implementing the CCCS did not appear to qualify as a shared phenomenon, thus making the phenomenological methodology inappropriate for this study. Grounded theory design is another qualitative approach through which researchers develop a theoretical basis for the research as information is collected (Glesne, 2011; Rumrill et al., 2011). Grounded theory

researchers collect data for an extended amount of time, continually analyzing it until a theory that can be supported by the data is reached (Creswell, 2014). Time constraints made grounded theory research inappropriate for this study. I developed the research question for this study based on perceived gaps in practice and the need for further understanding of teachers' experiences. That level of exploration led to the definition of the case for this study. Specifically, the high school English language arts and mathematics teachers who were willing to share their experiences teaching SWD in a course with content standards from the CCCS were the identified case. Therefore, I selected a descriptive case study design which provided specific, in-depth information gathered from a limited number of participants (Rumrill et al., 2011; Yin, 2014). This methodology best suited the data sources and topic as determined by the study.

Research Questions

The research questions that drove this study were developed after considering both information from the literature and from personal communication with knowledgeable experts in the field of special education. The primary research question was:

What are teachers' perceptions with regard to how implementing the CCCS in high school English language arts and mathematics classes, and subsequent changes to high school graduation requirements, affect the academic success and high school completion for SWD?

An additional subquestion that further directed the study was:

What are teachers' perceptions with regard to the professional development or other training they received to prepare them to teach the CCCS in high school English language arts and mathematics classes to SWD?

Context of the Study

The context of this study was a high school in northeast Georgia. Enrolling approximately 2,400 students, this high school follows a traditional four year format for students in Grades 9 through 12. Founded more than 20 years ago, this high school employs approximately 200 staff including custodial and food service staff. Of the 200 staff members, 38 teach either an English language arts course or a mathematics course that was affected by the change in curriculum standards which occurred with the implementation of the CCCS.

Selection of Participants

The population included 38 high school teachers who taught an English language arts or mathematics course with academic standards that now align with the CCGPS from a high school located in a county in northeast Georgia. Initially, the superintendent of schools and the director of special education were contacted. The district required documented approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the supporting university prior to granting permission to conduct the study. Once IRB approval was obtained from Walden University, information regarding this study was shared with district personnel along with a written request to seek input from the high school teachers at the identified high school who taught courses affected by the CCGPS. The implementation schedule for the CCGPS was staggered by grade level and academic

year, so all English language arts and mathematics teachers may not have changed their course standards to match the CCGPS at time of participant selection (GADOE, n.d.). Once permission from district level personnel was obtained, the building level principal was contacted. She granted permission for teachers to be contacted and provided a list of teachers who taught courses in which the CCGPS had been implemented as outlined in the implementation schedule. Sampling was purposeful in that participants were invited to complete the interview based on meeting specific criteria required by the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Of the 38 teachers in the population, the minimum number of participants was initially determined to be five per application to IRB, although as many as five additional participants would have been included. All five who agreed to be part of the study were assigned to an individual interview. Ideally, the teachers who were interviewed would have varied in years of experience and subject area taught. After initial data analysis it was determined that additional responses were needed to support the data collected through individual interviews. An email soliciting supplementary responses was sent to the 33 teachers who were not part of the original five interviews. Only three teachers agreed to be part of the group who emailed responses to the interview questions, although all responses would have been included in data analysis. Actual demographics of the participants are included in section four. Eight educators who taught English language arts or mathematics courses with curriculum standards that had been changed due to implementation of the CCCS and who taught at least one SWD were the sample for the study.

Ethical Issues

Privacy and confidentiality of research participants was the primary ethical issue for this study. Teachers were recruited via email in which all identifying information was removed so that potential participants were unaware of other teachers who were also contacted. Those agreeing to be part of the study were provided with information indicating that participation was voluntary and could be declined at any time. Data were collected through one on one interviews or via individual emailed response. Interviews were recorded with participant permission and transcribed later. The interview questions addressed teachers' perceptions only and did not ask identifying questions that would compromise the confidentiality of students. Participants were also reminded of the confidential nature of student information and asked to refrain from mentioning any identifying information that could be directly linked to a specific student. Teacher responses were kept confidential with any identifying information removed to protect their privacy as well. Specific instructions for the design and use of data collected through the recorded interviews was offered to all participants, as was a certificate of confidentiality form for participants to complete. Potential benefits to participants included increased awareness of the effect adoption of the CCCS has on SWD. Potential risks included stress associated with the interview situation and time taken from other activities. Potential benefits to the larger population of educators include increased awareness of the professional learning needs associated with teaching the CCCS to SWD.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in qualitative methodology is different from that of the researcher in quantitative studies. Qualitative researchers serve as the collectors of data through listening, observing, or interviewing (Rumrill et al., 2011). For this study, data were collected through personal responses to the interview protocol. Responses were recorded and transcribed or collected through written emailed response. The researcher had individual contact with all interview participants in as natural a setting as possible. Confidentiality of all participants was protected by assigning respondent numbers to the interviewees rather than including identifying information. I was directly involved in conducting the interviews and collecting data and did so while maintaining as little personal bias as possible. The most challenging role of the researcher was to collect large amounts of information, and then analyze and code the information to determine relevant findings.

Data Collection

Data collection took the form of recorded interviews and emailed responses to interview questions. Yin (2014) suggested collecting six sources of evidence: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observation, and physical artifacts. For purposes of this study, evidence was collected through personal interviews and emailed responses to questions from the interview guide. Interviews were all conducted on an individual basis. Email responses were individual and included the option to answer any of the questions included in the correspondence.

Observations were included but were limited to observing the behavior and non-verbal cues of participants during the interview sessions.

Once permission from the building level principal was granted, high school English language arts and mathematics teachers meeting the participant criteria received an email which described the study and asked for a response via email in return if they were willing to participate. Teachers who replied via email that they were willing to participate received an additional email requesting possible times and locations to conduct the interview. Individual participants were interviewed in a location of their choosing during non-instructional time. Interviews lasted no more than one hour. Subsequent emails requesting additional participation through emailed responses to the same questions asked during individual interviews were also sent with identifying information redacted. An emailed response containing answers to the questions was considered consent to participate in the study. The interview guide can be found in Appendix B. Questions addressed participants' perception of the implementation of the CCCS and how those academic standards have affected the academic achievement of SWD in their classroom.

The amount of data collected was significant. Qualitative researchers seek to obtain detailed descriptions of the phenomena being studied, and the volume of information must be managed carefully (Rumrill et al., 2011). For purposes of data collection in this study, interviews were recorded on receipt of participant permission and then transcribed at a later date. All identifying information of participants was redacted. Those recordings and transcripts were stored electronically on a separate hard drive

dedicated to this study with identifying information removed to protect participant privacy. On completion of the study, recordings and transcriptions of the interviews will be retained for the required 5 years and then destroyed, leaving only the analyzed data.

Data Analysis Methods

In qualitative research, analysis refers to the process through which collected data are arranged and organized so that interpretation of findings will be possible (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Once collected, recordings of the individual interviews were transcribed. To increase validity, interview data were authenticated by asking participants to review their individual transcripts and offer feedback on the accuracy of the collected data (Rumrill et al., 2011). Observational notes collected by the interviewer were also added to the transcribed notes for clarification.

Responses and observational notes were then coded and categorized by topic using the computer program NVivo (QSR International, 2014) and a digital spreadsheet program. Coding refers to the application of "labels that assign symbolic meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 71). During the first cycle of coding, broad categorical topics were assigned which allowed me to discern key words or phrases used repeatedly by the participants (Miles et al., 2014). Evaluation coding was also utilized during early rounds of data analysis to indicate judgments assigned by the participants to the value, significance, or worth of the adoption of the CCCS. Themes that emerged through the initial coding process were stored and reviewed during additional data analysis.

Once all data were coded according to the methods applied during the first cycle, data was reviewed again. During subsequent cycles of coding, pattern codes were developed which condensed the findings from the first cycle to more specific themes (Miles et al., 2014). The responses to interview questions that were emailed by the additional participants did not need to be transcribed. Those answers were entered directly in to the electronic spreadsheet program which allowed them to be coded according to the themes that emerged through analysis of the interview data. Any variation to theme or pattern was noted. Following the conceptual framework on which the study was developed, themes that emerged were applied to the phases of educational change described by Fullan (2010). Discrepant data were analyzed in context and possible explanations were considered. Those explanations will be discussed in further detail in Section 4.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore teachers' perceptions of the effect the CCCS had on the ability of SWD to meet the academic expectations of their classes and to determine their perspective on the level of training or professional development they received related to teaching the CCCS. Information was collected on the experiences of high school English language arts and mathematics teachers in a county in northeast Georgia who taught a course with educational learning standards altered by the adoption of the CCCS by applying the descriptive case study framework. Participants were selected based on the course they taught and the inclusion of at least one SWD in their classes. Data were collected through individual interviews and emailed

responses to the interview questions. Responses were analyzed thematically once all data had been collected. Ethical issues and the role of the researcher are also discussed in this section. Subsequent sections contain discussions of the data collected, any findings or conclusions, and a discussion of potential for social change.

Section 4: Results

Introduction

I conducted this qualitative case to understand teachers' perceptions of the effect that adopting the CCGPS has on high school SWD. Since adoption of the CCGPS in English/language arts and mathematics, multiple changes have occurred in both the instructional rigor expected in the classroom and the level of mastery students must demonstrate when assessed (CCSSI, 2012; Haager & Vaughn, 2013). It was my goal to explain from the perspective of high school English language arts and mathematics teachers the changes to instructional strategies, academic accommodations, and demonstrated academic success of SWD. As a secondary factor, I also sought to understand teachers' perceptions of the amount and kind of professional learning they received prior to implementing the CCGPS. This section contains an explanation of the methods I used to collect data, ways in which I organized the data were, and methods I used to analyze the data. I also explain the findings based on emergent themes related to the research questions posed in this study.

Data Collection Procedures

I collected data by conducting individual interviews with five participants and via emailed responses to questions from the interview guide from three additional participants. Interview questions were open ended and semistructured. A list of interview questions can be found in Appendix B. All of the participants were either English language arts or mathematics teachers in a high school located northeast Georgia. I recorded interviews using a digital recording device and all participants signed a

certificate of confidentiality form. I scanned those forms to a digital format and stored them with the digital recordings of the interviews on a password protected external hard drive dedicated to this study. The original forms were shredded to prevent any potential for the identities of the participants to be revealed. I transcribed the digital recordings and stored them on the dedicated external hard drive as well. I interviewed five teachers for this study. Participants who responded via email sent their responses from a personal email account to a password protected, private email account I created strictly for this study. Responses did not need to be transcribed, but were saved in electronic format. Consent to participate in the emailed response to the interview questions was implied in the participant's return email. I sent a revised version of the certificate of confidentiality to each email participant. To protect the identity of all participants, I assigned them the pseudonyms Amy, Betty, Carol, Donna, Erin, Frank, Grace, and Helen.

After receiving approval to begin data collection from the institutional review board at Walden University (Approval #12-02-14-0309214), I sent the same email to all 38 English language arts and mathematics teachers indicated by the principal of the participating local school as potential research participants. Participants were blind copied on the email to ensure that identities of all potential respondents were protected. I initially received seven responses from teachers willing to participate. All seven respondents received the consent for participation found in Appendix A.

The following were criteria for participation in the study: (a) The participant had to be a high school English language arts or mathematics teacher who had implemented the CCGPS, and (b) the teacher had to have at least one SWD enrolled in his or her

course. One of the respondents to my initial email did not have any SWD enrolled in her courses, so that respondent was excluded from participation. A second participant voluntarily removed herself from the study prior to the interview being conducted. The final group of interview participants included three mathematics teachers and two English language arts teachers, all of whom had at least one SWD on their roster.

When additional data were determined necessary, I requested a change in procedure from the IRB. The request was to seek additional participants through emailed responses to the questions found in the interview guide. Once the IRB approved the change in procedure, an email was sent to all 33 participants who were not included in the five original interviews. Participants were asked to respond to as many of the questions as they were comfortable answering. They were directed to send their responses to a password protected email account which I created specifically for use with this study. Participants were also asked to send their responses from a personal email account rather than their school based account. Schools systems retain the right to review any and all emails sent by employees from their school based account. Asking participants to respond from a personal account was included to protect the confidentiality of their responses.

A table outlining the participant pool can be found below.

Table 1

Demographics of Participants

Identifier	Subject area taught	Years of teaching experience	
		Total	In current subject
Amy	English language arts	23	21
Betty	Mathematics	15	15
Carol	Mathematics	16	9
Donna	English language arts	14	14
Erin	Mathematics	8	8
Frank	Mathematics	9	9
Grace	English language arts	14	14
Helen	English language arts	18	1

Interviews were scheduled during non-instructional time at a location of the participant's choosing. Three of the participants were interviewed in an empty classroom at the local high school. Two of the participants chose to be interviewed at a location away from the school campus. All interviews were conducted one-on-one and were recorded using a digital recording device. On completing each interview, I transcribed the recording and reviewed it for accuracy by comparing the transcription to the audio recording. I also added reflective notes to the interview transcriptions to ensure that the questions were effective and that research bias was not incorporated into the interview. By checking for bias after each individual interview, I was able to minimize the potential for questions or prompts to reflect personal opinion. A copy of the transcribed interview was sent to each individual participant for review. Participants were asked to respond with any inaccuracies to the transcription within 5 days. All five participants responded within the time frame and indicated acceptance of the transcribed interview.

Participants who responded to the interview questions via email were contacted individually. They were asked to consider the questions from the interview guide which was attached to the email they received and answer as many of them in writing as they were comfortable answering. The additional participants were asked to send their written responses from a personal email account to an email account created specifically for the purpose of receiving answers from these additional participants. There was no need to verify the accuracy of the emailed data because responses were sent in writing directly from the participants.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis was conducted by focusing on the research questions developed to guide the study. Those questions are as follows:

Primary Question

What are teachers' perceptions with regard to how implementing the CCCS in high school English language arts and mathematics classes, and subsequent changes to high school graduation requirements, affect the academic success and high school completion for SWD?

Subquestion

What are teachers' perceptions with regard to the professional development or other training they received to prepare them to teach the CCCS in high school English language arts and mathematics classes to SWD?

Data were analyzed using a combination of a digital spreadsheet program and the computer based software program NVivo (QSR International, 2014). All interview

transcripts were entered into the digital spreadsheet which was formatted to sort the information by key word. Data were also entered in to the NVivo program where nodes were created to sort and analyze data. Nodes in the NVivo program are the titles given to categories of data. These nodes can be created by running queries in which the computer based software program searches for words or phrases that match the given criteria or can be created by the researcher based on predetermined criteria (QSR International, 2014). I used the query function to search for terms associated with my research questions by seeking matches to the phrases: *instructional strategies, accommodations, academic achievement, and professional learning*. Those topics then became nodes and additional searches added data to those first categories. I completed two additional searches using the NVivo program and compared the coded data to the data analyzed using the digital spreadsheet program.

The first round of coding using the digital spreadsheet program focused on a broader set of key words taken from the interview questions. That initial round of coding resulted in eight larger themes which included changes to teaching structure, changes to classroom environment, assessments, changing standards, changing supports, and overall classroom success among others. Evaluation coding was applied to those themes in an attempt to discern judgments assigned by the participants to the value, significance, or worth of the adoption of the CCGPS.

The emailed responses to the interview questions were added to data analysis after the original rounds of coding were completed. Information obtained through the emailed responses was entered into the electronic spreadsheet and sorted to determine if it

supported the original themes or offered an alternate perspective. Subsequent rounds of coding sought to combine both sets of data into dominant themes for interpretation. Five rounds of coding were completed before I arrived at the following themes: decreased academic achievement for SWD, increased or sustained academic accommodations for SWD, altered instructional strategies for all students, and a lack of professional development related to teaching the CCCS.

Research Findings

The primary research question was developed in an attempt to understand teachers' perceptions of the effect implementation of the CCGPS in English language arts and mathematics had on the academic success and potential high school graduation of SWD. During the interview teachers were asked to describe their current instructional strategies and address any change in academic accommodations required by SWD in order to be successful in their classes. Academic success was understood to be a passing grade in the course. I also asked questions which encouraged teachers to reflect on the academic achievement of the SWD in their classes and address any perceived changes in their mastery of academic content or the likelihood of those students to meet the requirements which would allow them to graduate from high school with a regular diploma. The questions in the interview guide were deliberately open ended in nature, encouraging teachers to go in to detail and pursue a line of thinking specific to their individual experiences. When appropriate, I asked teachers to clarify or further explain responses by asking for an example or further description. The participants who emailed their responses to the questions in the interview guide were directed to answer as

thoroughly and completely as they felt comfortable. Because results were sent electronically, there was not an opportunity for me to ask clarifying questions or seek examples to support their responses.

Results were organized by category associated with the theme from the analysis of findings. The first identified theme centered around teachers' perceptions of any changes they made to the way they taught in the classroom as a result of the CCGPS in their individual subject areas. A change to instructional strategies for all students, and specifically for SWD, was the broad theme that emerged from data analysis of teachers' responses to the interview questions.

Changes to Instructional Strategies

Teacher responses to questions addressing any perceived changes to their instructional strategies as a result of CCPGS implementation were varied. Amy, Carol, and Donna believed they had changed the way they teach significantly in accordance with the expectations of the increased rigor claimed by the CCGPS. All three had been in the classroom, teaching their current subject area, for a minimum of 14 years. During that time period, content standards changed three times. Amy, Carol, and Donna all used the Quality Core Curriculum (QCC), the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS), and the CCGPS to direct the instruction delivered in their classes. Betty and Erin have been in the classroom for 15 years and 8 years respectively. Both indicated that their instructional strategies had not changed significantly with the implementation of the CCGPS. Betty stated "I have always had high expectations of my kids" and Erin replied "I don't know any other way to teach. I want my kids to think things through and understand more than

just a process. The common core just asks everyone to teach that way." Helen, who had been teaching for 18 total years but had just completed her first year in her current subject area, stated "the CCGPS just gave credence to what I already do as a classroom teacher." This was echoed by Grace who indicated that her "instructional strategies have remained the same." She went on to say:

> I continue to try and differentiate the material and respond to the different learning styles of all my students. The wording of the standards, neither at the state level or nationally, does not change my mode of instruction. I still try to have the students produce standards based items.

Frank observed that he had to be more flexible with his instruction. Having taught for a total of 9 years all in the same subject area, Frank stated:

> I just roll with it on a daily basis. I used to know what I was going to cover each day and now I have to see how it goes with the kids before I can determine whether or not I move on with the lesson.

Conversely, Carol indicated that classroom instruction was much more scripted with the CCGPS than it was prior to adoption of those standards. She said:

> I often feel like I am just following a prepared program. There is very little of my own personality included in my teaching any more. I have had to change the way I teach my students to make sure I get everything in on time.

Donna stated "classroom instruction now includes a lot more emphasis on how the students think rather than just asking students to memorize information." The application of learning is more significant, which has required Donna to alter the level of instruction

in her classroom. Erin noted that the pacing of the CCGPS requires her to move forward with new concepts or content even if she feels her students have not mastered the previous information, which impacts the level of instruction she delivers. She replied to Interview Question 6:

> Sometimes I have to just tell my kids we are moving on. I know some of them aren't ready or don't have the material down, but we just don't have enough time to continue going over that one concept. We have to move on.

Although Betty did not feel that her instructional strategies have changed with implementation of the CCGPS, she did indicate that the amount of academic support required by her SWD has increased significantly.

Increased or Sustained Academic Accommodations

The second theme that emerged through data analysis was related to teachers' perceptions of required instructional or classroom supports as identified by a student's IEP. Academic accommodations are provided to SWD in order to help those students with identified disabilities meet the same expectations as students who are not disabled. I analyzed teachers' responses to interview questions asked about the academic accommodations provided to their SWD to support an understanding of this theme.

When participants were asked about the level of accommodations provided to SWD in their classrooms, the consistent theme identified by all eight teachers indicated a perceived change with the implementation of the CCGPS. There was no significant difference noted between the levels of accommodation provided by the English language arts teachers versus the mathematics teachers. All eight teachers indicated an increase to

either the length of the time accommodations were being offered or an increase to the level of accommodation SWD needed to be successful.

Carol believed the current accommodations provided to SWD in her classroom had not changed in nature, but had significantly changed in level and number. She stated:

> There are so many more students who need accommodations. And they used to kind of outgrow them . . . they wouldn't need as much help the older they got or the longer they were in school. I don't see that any more. The kids who have an IEP seem to require those accommodations for longer in order to be successful . . .

Amy indicated frustration with the nature of current accommodations. For example, SWD whose IEP identifies an accommodation allowing them to have questions and answer choices read orally now must take classroom assessments in a computer lab where a text-to-speech software program conducts the oral reading of the assessment items. Amy replied:

> The scheduling and required class time needed to meet the accommodations of our reads aloud kids has changed the structure of my classroom. I have to include several days in the schedule to make sure the kids get their accommodations, which holds up the rest of the class. We can't move on until everyone takes their test and sometimes the read aloud lab isn't available on the day we originally scheduled. It takes a lot of flexibility on my part.

Frank stated that he "had to give SWD more opportunity for practice and repetition of the skills being learned so they have more opportunities to grasp the content." He also noted that he "had to spend more instructional time over more days covering the same material

to help ensure that the students are moving toward mastery." Helen replied that she "built additional instructional time in to the schedule to allow the special ed kids time to work with [her] one-on-one." She included in her response that sometimes the SWD in her classroom "meet the standard at the most basic level, but they still meet the standard based on all of the accommodations we provide." Overall, responses given by all eight participants indicated that additional differentiation of instruction and scaffolding of prerequisite skills into classroom lessons are needed to support the academic success of the SWD in their classes.

Decreased Overall Academic Success

The next theme that emerged from data analysis was specific to the overall academic success of SWD. Teachers were asked about the academic achievement of the SWD in their classes. Their perceptions of increased class failures and the extended length of time needed for mastery of the academic content, although at a lower academic level for SWD since the CCGPS were introduced, became the third theme included in the findings from this study.

When the participants were asked about any perceived changes to the academic achievement of SWD in their classes, the primary theme identified was a decline in overall academic success. Only Donna did not indicate an overall decline in academic success rates. Grace acknowledged an increase in failing grades for the SWD in her class but believed it to be a "reflection of the teachers' ability to meet their needs, not a function of the CCGPS." Amy, Betty, Carol, Erin, and Frank all responded that the majority of SWD in their classes since adoption of the CCGPS have demonstrated failure

to meet the academic requirements of their course, or failed to meet them in a timely manner. Three participants (Amy, Carol, and Grace) were teaching SWD who previously failed their course and were taking it for a second time in order to earn the Carnegie Unit needed for graduation. Frank observed that "until our special ed kids have enough exposure to the CCGPS, they will never be successful because of the limitations of the teachers to teach the standards." Donna believed that the CCGPS provide more accountability for teachers in meeting the academic needs of their students. It is of note that she was teaching the largest number of SWD as compared to the other participants. Her statement that "SWD will continue to graduate because teachers will find ways to meet their academic needs" was contradictory to the statements made by the other participants. Carol stated "The CCGPS is way beyond the developmental needs of our kids. Some kids, especially those with a learning disability or ADHD, just haven't reached the cognitive level of development that makes this level of math possible." Carol went on to say:

> The students in my class who are retaking it because they failed it the first time are not doing any better the second time. More is not necessarily better in this case. They weren't ready to do the math the first time . . . they didn't suddenly gain the skills or ability to do well in my class the second time.

Carol also responded that "the academic success of our special ed kids is probably different depending on which end of [the local county] you live in." This statement was made based on the differences in demographic data within the local county. The northern end of the county has a lower overall socio-economic status than the southern end of the

county, as indicated by the number of Title I schools in the northern portion of the county as well as listed property values and median annual income (City Data, 2014). The statement made by Carol is indicative of the belief held by many teachers in the local county that because they are in a more affluent area of the county, the schools in the southern portion are more successful than schools in the northern portion of the county. None of the participants had a definitive perception of an overall increase or decrease in graduation rates for SWD, yet Betty indicated a belief that SWD are more likely to drop out of school as a result of academic failure in the courses now following the CCGPS requirements.

The secondary research question addressed teachers' perceptions of the training or professional development they received to prepare them to teach the CCGPS to SWD in their classes. Teachers were asked to indicate their level of involvement in the initiation phase of CCGPS adoption at either the state or local level. Participants were also asked to describe any ongoing professional learning they received specific to the CCGPS in their content area and whether or not any of the training focused on teaching SWD.

Two themes emerged from analysis of the participants' interview responses. The first was related to an overall perception that the professional learning teachers received when the CCGPS was introduced was limited or lacking. This theme focused more on the training given to teachers which helped them move from the previously used academic content standards to the CCGPS which were adopted in 2012.

Limited or Lacking Professional Learning

Two of the eight participants (Betty and Frank) were involved in the initiation phase of the CCGPS adoption as the local district level. Along with a number of other teachers from other schools in the county, they helped develop the modules that would later be presented to all district staff who would be implementing the CCGPS. The county initially provided two full day sessions of professional learning, divided by subject area. English language arts teachers, divided by grade level, completed two full days of training, as did mathematics teachers, also divided by grade level. Betty and Frank were both responsible for redelivery of the information and training to high school mathematics teachers. They were the only participants to be involved in the initiation phase of CCGPS adoption. Amy, Carol, Grace and Helen were involved in those professional learning sessions as classroom teachers who would be expected to implement CCGPS. The other two participants (Donna and Erin) did not receive any of the initial professional learning. Both were teaching outside the local county in 2012 when the CCGPS were adopted. Neither Donna nor Erin was offered any professional learning specific to the CCGPS when hired by their current school.

The six participants (Amy, Carol, Donna, Erin, Grace, and Helen) who were not involved in the initiation phase of the adoption of the CCGPS at the county level all indicated a lack of professional learning overall as related to this topic. Betty believed the level and amount of professional learning provided to teachers to be sufficient for initial implementation of the CCGPS. Frank, who was part of the initiation phase, stated:

> The only true professional development given was a redelivery of what the committee I served on had done. There was no professional development offered by the state for teachers. The only attempt by the state was a video webinar that was monotone and gave no direction for teachers.

Amy, Carol, Donna, Erin, and Grace all indicated that their training specific to implementing the CCGPS in their classrooms on initial adoption was either non-existent or limited. Donna was teaching in an online setting when the local county adopted the CCGPS. She replied:

> I missed the whole thing. The virtual school program stuck with the QCCs (Quality Core Curriculum). When I got hired here, the CCGPS were already in year 2 and no one was doing a lot of training any more. I basically had to learn the standards myself or ask my colleagues how to interpret them. There was no training.

Erin was employed in another county in 2012. She stated:

> In [the other county] we weren't ready to take on the common core but when I came to work here, no one asked if I had been trained on the new standards. I guess they just assumed we were using the common core in [the other county] so I got nothing.

Helen was employed by the county in which the study was conducted during the initial roll out of the CCGPS. She remembers the initial professional learning as "insulting." She stated that the teachers involved in development of the professional learning at the county level "were defensive and did not want to hear any other opinions or suggestions."

She also reported that the principal of the school where she worked during that school year accused her of "being unprofessional for offering a different view of what the standards meant or how they should be taught."

Every school year, the county in which the study was conducted provided professional learning to all teachers during two full day sessions offered during the academic year. All eight participants acknowledged participation in these professional learning sessions every year since being hired by the local county. Carol stated "being able to collaborate with other high school math teachers and hearing how they are teaching the CCGPS has been helpful, especially as our understanding of the standards has changed over time." Grace also indicated value in some of the professional learning. She replied that "meeting together as a vertical English language arts team gave us examples of what other teachers were doing to meet the standards." Four participants (Amy, Betty, Donna, and Erin) did not indicate any value in the professional learning offered by the county on these days dedicated to staff development. Overall, the prevalent theme associated with professional learning was that it has been limited and there are "large gaps" (Amy) in the information delivered.

Lack of Professional Learning Specific to SWD

The second theme that emerged from analysis of data related to interview questions about professional learning was specific to the level or amount of training teachers received explicitly for teaching SWD. The secondary research question that guided this study directly asked about training to teach SWD, but it was important from a data analysis perspective to separate the data about the limited amount of overall

professional development received by teachers and the lack of professional learning teachers received which was precisely directed to teaching SWD.

When participants were asked about professional learning specific to teaching the CCGPS to SWD, the identified theme supported by the data was that it does not exist. None of the eight participants indicated having received any training in this area. Amy, Donna, and Frank had co-teachers who were certified in special education. All three participants noted that they received informal training on the best ways to meet the academic needs of the SWD in their classes from their co-teachers. Amy stated:

> My partner is my biggest resource when it comes to my special ed kids. She helps me with lesson planning and making tests, reminding me of the way we need to include the accommodations of our kids who get them. I have learned so much from her, but no one at the county level has ever offered any professional learning that would help me with my special ed kids.

Erin stated that she had received some training during the initiation phase of CCGPS adoption that was specific to her higher level students but that there were "missing chunks in all of the training that was related to any of our students who struggle academically." She indicated "there are lots of groups, including our kids in special ed, who need extra help. I haven't received any information that would help me be a better teacher to those kids." Training, in her opinion, never included any information that would support general classroom teachers in meeting the needs of those groups of students.

Discrepant Data

During the process of reviewing and coding the collected data, two discrepancies were identified. The first was a difference in perspective one participant shared about the academic success of SWD. Only Donna indicated a belief that the academic requirements associated with the CCGPS have not affected the ability of SWD to demonstrate academic achievement or graduate from high school with a regular diploma. This differed from the viewpoint shared by the other participants. Interestingly, Donna had been teaching the fewest number of years in traditional public high school compared to the other participants. With regards to professional learning, the only discrepant data were the difference in perception between one of the participants who was involved in the initiation phase of CCGPs adoption and the other participants. Betty indicated satisfaction with the training received on initial adoption of the CCGPS; whereas the other seven participants felt the initial professional learning was lacking. Having been involved in developing the professional learning resources that would be presented to other teachers in the county clearly offered Betty a different perspective, although Frank was also involved in the development of those resources and did not share Betty's opinion.

Evidence of Quality

In order to increase the validity and quality of collected data, the following procedures were implemented. After transcribing each interview, I verified the accuracy of the information by comparing each transcript to the recorded interview. Any data that had been omitted initially through transcription error or oversight were corrected. Transcript checks were completed by sending a transcribed copy to each participant and

asking for feedback. All participants replied that the transcripts were accurate based on their perceptions and memory of their individual interviews.

I added observational notes to the transcribed interviews immediately on completion of the transcription. These notes included any non-verbal behaviors I may have observed during the interviews which I interpreted as relevant to the response given by the participant. I also noted any potential for bias on my part as the interviewer in order to eliminate potential bias from future interviews. Prior to conducting the interviews, I also reviewed all interview questions to make every effort to avoid the potential for bias due to wording, tone of voice, or inflection when conducting the interviews.

Responses from the participants who emailed their answers to questions from the interview guide were saved as a word processing document to the password protected external hard drive dedicated to this study. Data from those documents were imported directly into the data analysis spreadsheet without any editing or altering. There was no need to verify the accuracy of that data since it was sent directly to me from each participant.

Summary

Overall themes that emerged from an analysis of the data collected were used to answer both the primary and secondary research questions developed for this study. Teachers indicated a belief that adoption of the CCGPS has changed their instructional strategies on some level with a consistent level of expectation. Even those who did not acknowledge a significant change to their overall instructional level did indicate some

level of change to their general classroom instruction. The majority of participants noted an increase to the accommodations made for SWD. Whether an increase in the level of accommodation or the number of students requiring additional academic support, the consensus was that adoption of the CCGPS has required that teachers provide additional differentiation and instructional scaffolding that was not required prior to implementation of the new academic standards.

Professional learning was perceived to be lacking for the majority of participants. Although one teacher felt as though the initial training on delivering the CCGPS was sufficient, all eight participants agreed that there was no specific training related to teaching the CCGPS to SWD. Participants who were not teaching in the local county where the study was conducted when the CCGPS was initially implemented did not receive any training on teaching to the more rigorous academic expectations, indicating that ongoing professional learning was not offered.

Despite efforts to ensure that all collected data were accurate, it is important to consider the limited scope of this study. Only eight teachers participated in the study, and three of those were through emailed responses. Four were English language arts teachers and four were mathematics teachers which limits the perceptions to those teachers in those subject areas. Science and social studies teachers were not included since the CCCS have not been adopted in their subject areas, but their perceptions of the academic achievement of SWD could offer a different perspective. Additionally, data were collected from teachers at one high school, and though the findings could be used to

support observations and perceptions of teachers in other settings, these findings have a limited ability to be generalized to broader settings or situations.

Section 5 contains a review of the data collected in Section 4, offering a discussion of the findings and recommendations for future action. I also review suggestions for further research on this topic. Implications for potential social change are discussed as I reflect on the data collection and analysis process and my experiences with this qualitative case study.

Section 5: Discussion and Conclusions

I conducted this qualitative case study to explore the perceptions of high school English language arts and mathematics teachers with regard to implementing the CCCS. I obtained the perspectives of the eight participants through individual interviews conducted in a location of the participant's choosing or emailed responses to questions in the interview guide. I analyzed, coded, and sorted interview transcriptions by prevalent themes. Those themes were then reviewed further to address the primary and secondary research questions identified at the outset of the study. This chapter includes a summary of findings, the interpretation of those findings and their implication for potential social change, as well as a reflection on how the findings follow the conceptual framework of the study. I also include personal reflections related to my experiences conducting qualitative case study research.

Summary of Findings

The primary research question for this study was:

What are teachers' perceptions with regard to how implementing the CCCS in high school English language arts and mathematics classes, and subsequent changes to high school graduation requirements, affect the academic success and high school completion for SWD?

In response to this question, the majority of participants believed they changed their instructional strategies or the level of instruction provided since implementing the CCGPS in their classrooms. Overall, teachers believed that instruction was more rushed and that they were often required to move forward to a new concept or academic standard

prior to ensuring mastery of a previous standard for all students. I interpreted the language used by participants as an indication of frustration with the pacing of their instruction. The mathematics teachers expressed more dismay about what they perceived to be a developmental inability of some of their students to master the CCGPS. The English language arts teachers expressed frustration with the "scripted" (Carol) nature their instruction adopted when the CCGPS was implemented. There was a pervasive belief that the more rigorous academic standards and the pacing associated with the CCGPS limited the personalization teachers previously believed existed in their classrooms.

When the participants were asked specifically about the achievement of SWD in their classrooms, the prevalent theme was that academic achievement had decreased. Teachers did not specifically observe changes to graduation rates, but many believed the SWD they taught were at greater risk for dropping out of school due to a higher number of academic failures. Three participants were teaching students who were repeating their specific course. None of the teachers believed the students would benefit from repeating the course, although passing the course is a requirement for graduation. It is of note that this belief was not specific to SWD, but because this study focused on the ability of SWD to meet the academic rigor associated with the CCGPS and their subsequent ability to graduate from high school with a regular diploma, data analysis focused on that category of student.

Another theme that emerged addressed the amount and level of academic accommodation provided to SWD. Overall, teachers indicated that they provided more

accommodation for longer periods of time to support student success in their academic courses. The nature of the academic accommodations changed as well. Teachers observed that accommodations have become more cumbersome for both the teacher and the student. Instructional time was compromised when the format of the needed accommodation required additional class periods or school days. Despite of the increased number of accommodations and the length of time these accommodations were offered, teachers did not indicate increased academic success for the SWD they taught.

The research subquestion developed to further drive this study was:

What are teachers' perceptions with regard to the professional development or other training they received to prepare them to teach the CCCS in high school English language arts and mathematics classes to SWD?

Only two participants were involved in the implementation phase of CCGPS adoption. The other six described limited or no involvement with implementation. The overall perception of teachers related to initial training to teach the CCGPS was that training was limited. None of the teachers interviewed believed that the training they received was adequate. Several teachers mentioned the different interpretations of the CCGPS in their subject area and the evolving understandings of how to teach some of the standards that has occurred with time.

When the participants were asked specifically about training related to teaching SWD, the overall theme was that training was nonexistent. None of the teachers indicated having received any training that addressed teaching SWD to master the more rigorous and academically challenging CCGPS. It should be mentioned that all participants in this

study were general education teachers certified in either English language arts or mathematics at the high school level. Special education teachers were not included as potential participants so the level of training they received is not included in this study. However, the expectation of the local school district is that all students will be taught the CCGPS. As the subject area specialists, general education teachers are typically the primary source of academic instruction for all students, including SWD (Solis et al., 2012). The three participants with co-teachers who were certified special education teachers indicated a reliance on the expertise of their teaching partner in meeting the academic needs of the SWD, which implied that those teachers were more aware of the instructional needs of the identified students. This study focused specifically though on the perceptions of the general education teachers responsible for overall instruction in English language arts or mathematics.

Interpretation of Findings

The findings from this study are discussed from two perspectives. First, the findings are reviewed in relationship to the conceptual framework established for this study. Findings are then reviewed in relationship to the peer reviewed literature which supported the need for the study.

Fullan's theory of educational change (2007; 2010) identified four phases that schools or systems go through when adopting a new program or initiative. The first phase is initiation. During this phase the initial decision is made to adopt the program or initiative (Fullan, 2007; 2010). The decision to adopt the CCGPS was made at the state level, but locally, two of the participants (Betty and Frank) were involved in the initial

introduction of the CCGPS to teachers in the local system. Betty indicated a belief in the initiative as a potentially successful program, although that belief was not evident in her responses to interview questions about the academic success of SWD related to the CCGPS. She was, however, the only participant to indicate a stronger level of satisfaction with the professional learning received by teachers when the CCGPS were initially adopted by the local school system. Having been involved in the development of professional learning modules from the beginning of the local CCGPS adoption likely offered her a different perspective. Potentially, she took ownership of the initiative by being involved from the start. Fullan (2007) indicated that personal involvement of the implementers of change is critical to the success of the program or initiative.

The implementation phase is the phase through which most teachers are currently working. During this phase, participants begin using the new program or initiative (Fullan, 2007; 2010). All eight participants acknowledged full adoption of the CCGPS in their classrooms. They were all teaching the standards identified and all agreed that the standards were more academically rigorous. Training or professional learning received related to implementation was perceived as limited or lacking altogether. Although teachers were seeing support and input from colleagues, there was very little formalized support provided by the local school system which teachers perceived to be relevant to teaching the CCGPS. Implementation is the most difficult of the phases of educational change (Fullan, 2007; 2010). The success of the program or initiative lies solely with the people implementing the change. In the case of CCCS implementation it is the teachers

who deliver academic instruction guided by the English language arts or mathematics standards who determine the success or failure of the adoption of a national curriculum.

The third phase is continuation. During this phase, the school system identifies whether or not the new program or initiative has become an embedded part of the school culture (Fullan, 2007; 2010). Information about continuation was not related to either the primary research question or subquestion identified for this study; however, participants were asked a question to gauge their perception of the continuation phase (see Appendix B). Practices at the local school where research was conducted were consistent with the practices identified by Fullan (2010) as moving toward the continuation phase. All eight participants indicated ways in which the administration at the local school ensured that the CCGPS were being taught with fidelity in all English language arts and mathematics classrooms. These indicators included weekly data meetings in which summative assessment data was reviewed to discuss student mastery of standards and opportunities for teachers of the same subject area to meet weekly to collaborate. Themes that emerged in this study indicated a need for ongoing professional learning in order to successfully reach the continuation phase in adoption of the CCGPS.

The final phase identified by Fullan is the outcomes phase. This is the phase of most interest to me as the researcher. School year 2014—2015 was the first academic year in which all end of course and end of grade assessments specific to the CCGPS were administered to students. As discrete achievement data become available, further research may be able to more effectively evaluate the success of the CCGPS in improving

academic achievement of SWD. I offer suggestions for future research later in this section.

Peer reviewed literature that supported the need for this study addressed the CCCS and how the more rigorous academic standards in English language arts and mathematics affect SWD. Research indicated that the academic standards included in the CCCS require increased rigor and higher order thinking skills (Mathis, 2010; Porter et al., 2011; Rust, 2012). Academic instruction at this level is expected to prepare students for success in postsecondary education or to successfully obtain a career in a globally competitive arena (Haager & Vaughn, 2013; Quay, 2010). Participants in this study clearly indicated a belief that the CCGPS are more rigorous. Although responses varied with regard to changes in instructional strategies, all participants recognized the increased level of academic expectation associated with the CCGPS in their individual subject areas.

Specific to the SWD in their classes, participant responses to the interview questions supported the findings of Wei et al. (2011). The achievement rate of students with a high incidence disability such as SLD or OHI does not meet the same rate of academic growth as non-disabled students. SWD are not able to meet the same level of educational growth in a school year as students who do not have an academic disability (Eccles, 2008; Murnane, 2013; Powell et al., 2013). The participants' responses indicated an increase in the instructional accommodations provided to SWD in the classroom that were needed in order to support academic success. Participants observed more accommodations provided at an increased frequency over longer periods of time. Similar

observations were made in studies conducted by Allensworth et al., (2009) and Scruggs et al., (2013). Both studies indicated the need for increased levels of academic support for longer periods of time for SWD to successfully demonstrate mastery of the CCCS.

Implications for Social Change

This study was conducted under the assumption that findings would further assist education professionals in supporting positive social change. Specifically, it is my hope that this information will be used to support academic achievement for SWD through more effective training of high school English language arts and mathematics teachers who are implementing CCCS in their classrooms. Teachers' perceptions were that the ability of SWD to meet the increased academic expectations of the CCCS was limited. Whether these perceptions were based on actual observed behaviors that indicated an inability of SWD to meet the CCCS or based on preconceived beliefs regarding the academic success rate of SWD is unable to be determined by the data collected in this study. Regardless of the basis of their perspectives, teachers indicated a belief that the CCCS have a negative effect on the ability of SWD to meet the academic requirements and subsequent requirements to graduate with a regular high school diploma. Teachers also answered unequivocally that they were not provided any professional learning related to teaching SWD at a more rigorous academic level as expected by the CCCS. Given those two factors, findings from this study offer a greater understanding of how to move forward with the implementation and continuation phases of educational change (Fullan, 2007; 2010). The local district has the opportunity to affect change through

increased professional learning for teachers and a greater awareness of how SWD are supported in their English language arts and mathematics courses.

Recommendations for Action

I conducted this qualitative case study in an attempt to better understand the effect adopting the CCCS had on SWD based on the perspective of English language arts and mathematics teachers who were teaching these more rigorous academic standards. Although the majority of the participants interviewed did not believe the CCCS to be positively affecting SWD, the decision to implement the CCCS was made by state departments of education. This allowed local school systems very little opportunity for action in that area. The findings from this study did reflect one area for potential action however.

All eight participants responded that they received no professional learning on best practices for teaching the CCCS to SWD. Action that could be taken by the local school system as well as local colleges or universities and the state board of education relate to opportunities for ongoing, sustained professional learning. General education teachers are expected to teach the academic standards developed for their courses to all students. They are charged with ensuring the mastery of content in their classes for every child, regardless of the child's academic ability.

One of the requirements for approval to conduct research in the local school district was an agreement that a copy of the research will be provided to the superintendent's office on completion. From a practical perspective, the findings from this study should be reviewed by decision makers at the county and district levels.

Teachers' perspectives indicated concern that SWD were not able to meet the academic expectations associated with the CCGPS in English language arts and mathematics in order to achieve academic success in their classes. Teachers also reported limited or lacking professional learning related to teaching the CCGPS, and more specifically to teaching these standards to SWD. The decision to adopt the new curriculum was made at a higher level than that of the local district, yet the way teachers are supported in meeting the needs of students can be changed at the local level. The findings from this study can be used to support a change to the way professional learning is delivered, especially with regards to strategies for SWD within the local school district.

Educational support staff at the state and district levels need to be aware of the professional learning requirements of teachers, especially those teaching the CCCS to SWD. Kretlow et al. (2012) determined professional learning to be one of the most effective ways of supporting teachers in making an educational change. In addition to the basic training offered to all teachers, modules which address the increased need for accommodations are warranted. Specific strategies for delivering instruction that incorporate the learning styles of the SWD in their classes and support the prerequisite skills needed to master some of the grade level standards are also recommended. The opportunities for professional learning should be sustained and ongoing. Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) found that the most effective professional learning took place for a period of 6 to 12 months, meeting for a minimum of 49 contact hours. Within the local school district where this study was conducted, typical opportunities for professional learning occur three times yearly for a total of 20 hours (Forsyth County Schools, 2014).

This is clearly not enough to support the needs of teachers in feeling competent to deliver the academic rigor of the CCCS to SWD in their classrooms.

Recommendations for Further Research

School year 2014—2015 was the first year in which end of course tests that reflect the CCCS were administered. It will be impossible to determine the empirical effect of the increased academic standards on student achievement until these assessments have been administered for at least 2 years. At that time, quantitative research should be conducted to determine if SWD are actually failing to meet the academic requirements of the CCCS and if the numbers of SWD graduating from high school with a regular diploma has decreased. Until those data are available, further research on the professional learning opportunities for English language arts and mathematics teachers who teach the CCCS to SWD would support an awareness of the need for increased training in delivering appropriate instructional strategies to SWD. Additional research should also be conducted to consider the need for and availability of the increased academic accommodations to SWD that are outlined in this study.

Science and social studies courses continue to follow academic content standards driven by the GPS which caused instructors of those courses to be excluded from participation in this study. Teachers of those subject areas are expected to address the literacy standards found in the CCGPS (GADOE, 2010) however, so there is some expectation of higher order skills being addressed in those courses. Perceptions of teachers for those content areas should be considered since they are affected by student

mastery of the academic standards in reading and mathematics as well as the literacy standards.

Reflections of the Researcher

Taking on the challenge of successfully conducting research and writing a doctoral dissertation has been an exercise in both personal and professional growth. I chose the topic for this study based on an area of interest and assumed that my interest alone would sustain my determination to complete the project. I discovered that each stage in the process required careful consideration, research, and a renewed determination at each check point. However, I have gained an increased respect for the research process and a reaffirmation of my interest in educational pursuits.

Conducting the literature review proved to be the most frustrating and time consuming part of the initial proposal. I naively believed finding peer reviewed articles that related to my chosen topic would be easy. Instead, I found a maze of information that required careful scrutiny. I have become better at discerning relevant research from this effort. I have a better understanding of the way to conduct a search and an increased ability to discern relevant information. I also have an increased appreciation for the wealth of information that is available. For those like me who enjoy ongoing learning, being able to identify useful information from the variety of research options available is gratifying.

Initially I believed I wanted to conduct research from a quantitative approach. For a variety of reasons, this was not the appropriate option, but in reflecting on the process, I now find that conducting qualitative research allowed me more growth. Interviewing

other teachers using a semistructured format allowed for rich conversation that led to a wealth of data. The process of reflecting on the interviews after they were transcribed to check for bias improved my ability to conduct a semi-structured interview. Analyzing the data took a great deal of time and determination as well. Due to the nature of a semistructured interview, there was a great deal of information to transcribe and sort when looking for themes. It took several rounds of coding to sort through the responses and identify the dominant themes that ultimately related back to the questions driving the study. Those moments of realization were invaluable throughout the process as I became more confident in my own abilities and more comfortable with the process as a whole.

The findings from my research were not altogether surprising to me. The reason I chose to study the effect the CCCS has on SWD came from numerous conversations with other education professionals who voiced frustration with this initiative. What I did not expect to find were the underlying beliefs expressed as expectations teachers perceived to be related to teaching the CCCS to SWD. I assumed there would be some reliance on preconceived ideas held by teachers about the abilities of SWD in their classes. What I found was a pervasive belief that there should be different pathways for different learners. This was not included in the interview questions nor were any of the participants' responses coded for this as it was not an overt theme in the data. However, in reflecting on the research I conducted and my experiences conducting qualitative research in general, I realized that I had understood this to be the case on an unspoken level. My interest in pursuing this as a line of further questioning will be delayed for now as I complete the research at hand.

Conclusion

The pursuit of academic success and subsequent graduation from high school, especially for SWD, continues to be an issue in the field of education. Educators are more aware of the benefits a regular high school diploma offers students and want all students to achieve that goal. However, educational initiatives such as the CCCS may be causing SWD to be negatively affected in their efforts to demonstrate academic success and leave high school with a regular diploma. Findings from this study indicated that teachers believe the implementation of CCGPS in their classrooms has increased both the need for changes to instructional strategies and the number and nature of classroom accommodations provided to SWD. Teachers indicated a viewpoint that in prior years SWD were able to reduce the support they required to show mastery of grade level material, but the adoption of the CCGPS has increased rigor and expectation in the English language arts and mathematics classes. Students were observed to demonstrate the need for more support for longer periods of time to master the content, with many SWD being required to take classes more than once in order to meet the academic requirements indicated to earn the Carnegie unit.

Educational change is difficult. According to Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) “too much educational reform and restructuring is destroying teachers’ confidence, draining their energy, eating up their time and taking away their hope” (p. 3). The decision to adopt the CCCS was made with good intentions, yet the way in which it was introduced and the limited amount of professional learning offered to teachers who would be implementing the new academic standards have caused this change to be perceived by

teachers as less than successful. There appear to be limited options for those students who learn differently or need a different path to success. The success of SWD, particularly in courses with academic standards that changed with the adoption of the CCCS, is perceived by teachers to be at lower academic levels than that of students who are not identified as needing support through special education. Teachers have students in their classes who are repeating a course in which they were not successful the first time. These same teachers do not believe the students will be successful the second time and teachers are unsure of any potential action they can take to change the situation. The future of the CCCS is unclear. News sources and educational groups report regularly on changes, additions, and deletions that vary from state to state. It is clear, however, that professional learning is the key to success for any educational change. When teachers are involved in decision making and believe that they have been provided with the tools and resources to successfully implement a new educational program or policy, the likelihood that all students will benefit increases significantly.

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Appendix A: Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a research study of teachers' perceptions about the effect the Common Core Curriculum standards are having on the ability of students with disabilities to graduate from high school with a regular diploma. The researcher is inviting high school teachers who teach an English or mathematics class that has adopted the academic standards outlined by the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards (CCGPS) to participate in the study. Participants must also teach at least one student who is identified as eligible for special education services. This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by Beth Loedding who is a doctoral student at Walden University. Mrs. Loedding is also employed by the school system as the Graduation Coach at [redacted], but this study is separate from that role.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is to seek an understanding of the perspective of teachers who teach the CCGPS and the effect those curriculum standards have on students with disabilities. The researcher is interested in learning if teachers perceive the CCGPS to increase the possibility that students with disabilities will graduate from high school with a regular diploma. In addition, the researcher is interested in learning if teachers feel they have been adequately prepared to teach the CCGPS through professional learning or other training.

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

- complete an individual interview conducted by the researcher (once, taking approximately 60 minutes)
- conduct a transcript review which includes reviewing your individual transcribed interview and offering feedback as appropriate (once, taking approximately 20 minutes)

Here are some sample questions:
1) How has the academic pacing of your course changed with the adoption of the CCGPS?
2) Have you noticed any difference in the pass to failure rates of your students with disabilities?
3) What professional learning opportunities did you have prior to implementing the CCGPS in your classroom?

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one at the [redacted] will treat you

differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time.

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 stress caused by infringement on time. Being in this study would not pose any risk to your safety or wellbeing.
Benefits of the study include a greater understanding of how teachers perceive the CCGPS to be impacting students with disabilities. Additional benefits may include awareness of professional development needs related to teaching a course which includes the academic standards found in the CCGPS.

Payment:
Financial payment for participation is this study is prohibited. However, participants will be offered light refreshments during or after the interview and a thank you gift of a small house plant which will be received prior to completion of the interview.

Privacy:
Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. The researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. Data will be kept secure by password protected electronic storage and codes used to identify participants to avoid any usage of names. Data will be kept for a period of at least five years, as required by the university.

Contacts and Questions:
You may ask any questions you have by contacting the researcher via email at beth.loedding@waldenu.edu. If you would like to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you may call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is [redacted]
Walden University's approval number for this study is 12-02-14-0309214 and it expires on December 1, 2015.

Please print or save this consent form for your records.

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 replying to this email with the words "I consent", I understand that I am agreeing to the terms described above. A copy of this form will also be provided to each participant in person at the time of the interview or focus group.

Appendix B: Interview Guide for Individual Interviews

The following is a potential list of questions to be asked during individual interviews:

1) What subject area do you teach and how long have you been teaching that content?

2) How many students with disabilities (SWD) do you currently teach?

3) What was your level of involvement with the decision to implement the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards (CCGPS) in to local classrooms?

4) What types of professional development specific to the CCGPS did you receive prior to implementation?

5) Describe any training you received that was directed towards teaching SWD.

6) How would you categorize your level of instruction as related to the expectations of the CCGPS?

7) What changes have you observed in the academic achievement of the SWD in your classroom as a result of CCGPS implementation?

8) Describe changes you have made to your instructional strategies as a result of CCGPS implementation.
What additional accommodations have you made for the SWD in your classes?
How much additional instruction are the SWD in your class requiring in order to master academic standards required by the CCGPS?

9) What steps is your school taking to ensure that the CCCS are fully embedded?
Describe the changes you have seen in your classroom or your department that reflect full implementation of the CCCS.