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A Case Study of Middle School Teachers' Preparations for High-Stakes Assessments

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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MA, Piedmont College, 2008

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Students, educators, and schools across the country have been presented with challenges as a result of rigorous standards and high-complexity tests. The problem addressed in this case study was that teachers in a rural middle school in a southeastern state were preparing students to take a new high-stakes state-mandated assessment in English language arts with very little information about what should be done to best prepare students to perform well. Danielson's work on instructional leaders, Webb's work on alignment of standards and assessments, and Tankersley's research on alignment of instruction and assessment provided the frameworks for the study. The participants were 6 teachers and 2 administrators at a local rural middle school who either taught English language arts or supervised those teachers before the first administrations of the new test. The research questions were designed to gather through interviews, local educators' descriptions of their test preparation methods, activities, the information and training provided to them prior to the new tests, and their views about what was needed to better prepare students. Interview data were coded and analyzed for common themes. Findings were that participants felt they had limited prior information about the tests, that their previous instructional methods were ineffective, and that local teachers needed training in order to design and implement effective reading instruction aligned with test objectives to better prepare students for more rigorous academic tasks. This study and the resulting professional development project for teachers have the potential to affect positive social change at the local level by helping teachers improve literacy instruction aligned with standards and assessments. Consequently, students will be better prepared to access the increased rigor of the standards and the assessments.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my wife, Pam, whose continued and unflinching support, including tough love as needed, for all my pursuits was critical to its conclusion.

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The doctoral journey is not a solitary endeavor. Many people helped me in both large and small measures along the way. I especially thank my committee members, Dr. Michael Jazzar, Dr. Richard Flor, Dr. Karen Hunt, and Dr. Susan Whitaker, whose guidance and inspiration kept me on the right road to my destination. I must single out Dr. Flor, who taught me what it means to think and write at the doctoral level, and Dr. Jazzar, who was my first Walden professor and who through the years has been a consistent source of the encouragement and support necessary to successfully conclude the doctoral program. I also thank my wife and family, whose patience and understanding allowed me to devote the time and effort necessary to complete the trip.

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Section 1: The Problem

Introduction

The past 15 to 20 years have become known as the era of accountability in education as politicians, citizens, and other stakeholders became concerned about the quality of education in the United States as compared to other countries (Koyama, 2012; Lauren & Gaddis, 2016). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) included mandated, "high-stakes" testing of students in reading and math in Grades 3 through 8 (Lee & Reeves, 2012). These assessments were not only used to measure the progress of students, but also as a platform from which to judge the quality of schools and teaching (Schochet & Chiang, 2013). Schools that consistently failed to meet the requirements for Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP) faced the loss of federal funding and other sanctions, including takeover by an outside agency or closure of the school (Wei, 2012). These requirements and the potential consequences of failing to meet AYP had an effect on curriculum and instruction as teachers perceived that they had no choice but to adapt instructional practices specifically to prepare for high-stakes testing (Jennings & Sohn, 2014).

In 2011, the Obama Administration began issuing waivers to states relieving them of many of the requirements of NCLB (United States Department of Education, 2015). In addition, the U.S. Department of Education began offering Race to the Top (RttT) grants to states in exchange for initiating educational reforms (Porter, Fusarelli, & Fusarelli, 2015). States hoped to increase their chances of receiving waivers and RttT funding by adopting the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The purpose of the

CCSS is to provide a common set of English language arts and math standards from state to state, as well as increasing academic rigor to better prepare students for colleges and careers (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Although AYP and other possible sanctions are set aside, states are still required to administer high-stakes testing. These new tests are aligned to the more rigorous Common Core standards and require students to demonstrate mastery through written responses. In addition, these tests are administered in a computer-based format (Doorey, 2012).

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify the instructional methods and test preparation activities used by the English language arts faculty of one northeast Georgia middle school to prepare students for the new high-stakes state assessment in English language arts. Additionally, the purpose of this study was to learn how teachers and administrators described the effectiveness of those methods, what changes, if any, they would recommend for future years, and what additional training and resources they feel they need to better prepare and deliver instructional activities to prepare students for the assessment. The ultimate goal was to allow district, school, and faculty leadership to understand what modifications in instruction and other preparatory activities educators deemed effective or ineffective, and to provide a knowledge base from which to make changes and adjustments to instructional methods and activities in preparation for the future assessments.

In Section 1 I describe the purpose of this study in connection to a problem faced by local educators and the educational community at large. I also identify the research

questions aligned to the problem statement, and I connect the themes of this study to scholarly literature. I also discuss the significance and possible implications of the study.

In Section 2, I describe the research methodology that I selected for this study and why that methodology, a single case study, was appropriate to answer the research questions and address the research problem. I also relate how and why I selectedinterviews and documents as the sources of data for this study. Further, I describe how I collected and analyzed the data. Finally, I present the findings of my data analysis, including emergent major themes.

I describe in Section 3 the project created as a result of the data analysis. The project is a series of five professional training sessions for all teachers in the school, designed to address reading and writing. The sessions include content-area literacy, text-based reading and writing, vocabulary development, text complexity, and resources for assisting ELA teachers in supporting teaching of the new reading standards. In addition, I show how the project is supported by scholarly literature. Finally, in Section 4, I present the strengths and limitations of the project, offer suggestions for further study, and reflect on the lessons learned from the doctoral study process

Definition of the Problem

Responding to changes in federal and state educational policies is a common problem faced by school systems, and the teachers and administrators who must with implement those policies (Papola-Ellis, 2014a; Priestley, 2011). Among the more recent policies has been the CCSS. In 2010, the state of Georgia, along with 44 other states, adopted the CCSS in reading and math (Georgia Department of Education, 2013a; Porter,

McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2011). In 2012, the CCSS replaced the reading and math Georgia Performance Standards in all grades (Anderson, Harrison, & Lewis, 2012). States that adopted the CCSS also agreed to replace existing state reading and math assessments with national assessments developed by one of two federally-backed consortia: The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Chingos, 2013; Doorey, 2014).

Initially, Georgia joined the PARCC consortium but withdrew in 2013 to have more control of the assessments aligned to Georgia standards (Georgia Department of Education, 2013b). Beginning in 2014-15, Georgia administered the Georgia Milestones Assessment System, a set of assessments for Grades 3-12 developed by CTB/McGraw-Hill on bid from the Georgia Department of Education (Georgia Department of Education, 2014c). These new assessments replaced the previous tests' multiple-choice-only format with the addition of written response items (Georgia Department of Education, 2014d). In addition, the Georgia Department of Education (2014a) mandated that administration of the tests be converted to an online format in order to take advantage of advances in technology-based testing and provide consistency with the format of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. In spring 2015, the state required that 30% of the student body of each school take the new tests in an online format (Georgia Department of Education, 2014a). By the 2016 round of assessments, all students in the system that is the subject of this study took the assessment online.

Faculty members received information provided by the Georgia DOE, as well as resources aligned to the similar PARCC and Smarter Balance assessments prior to and during the school year. However, because Georgia first administered the test in 2015, school and district leaders had no released versions of the actual test to use as a model as they did with previous state tests. In addition, students had no experience taking the state test in a computer-based format.

The prospect of a new, more rigorous assessment increased teachers' anxiety over high-stakes testing, especially considering that local students exceeded state and regional averages in all three middle school grades in reading and language arts on the final administration of the Georgia Criterion-Referenced Competency Test, which the Georgia Milestones assessment replaced. Local teachers were concerned that student scores would be lower on the new test based on results from states that had already administered similar tests. According to one local grade-level language arts subject-area leader, "every time there is a change in an assessment, there is a drop in scores. With so much changing with this assessment, it would be foolish to think we won't see a tremendous drop in scores." In New York and Kentucky, the first two states to administer Common Core-aligned assessments, scores were significantly lower than on previous assessments (Kentucky Department of Education, 2012; New York State Education Department, 2013). Likewise, Georgia's initial test results dipped sharply (Georgia Department of Education, 2015d). Local educators were therefore facing declining test scores at a time when student test results were used to inform a student growth model that constitutes up to 30% of teacher evaluations (Georgia Department of Education, 2016). In addition,

results of the assessment are a key component of the College and Career Ready Performance Index, the primary matrix upon which Georgia school systems are evaluated (Georgia Department of Education, 2014b).

The results of the first administration of the new state test demonstrated that local teachers and administrators had reason to be concerned. Over the last five administrations of the previous test, the Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT), the local school never had a combined reading/English language arts passing percentage lower than 91.65% (see Table 1; Georgia Department of Education, 2015a). In 2014, the final year of the CRCT, the school's students in Grades 6-8 passed at a 96.6%rate on the multiple-choice only test, allowing the school to rank in the top third in reading/ELA among the state's public schools (Georgia Department of Education, 2015a). However, when results of the first Georgia Milestones Assessment were released in November 2015, the school's Reading/ELA passing rate dropped sharply to 36.8% (Georgia Department of Education, 2015d). With the new tests, Georgia also changed to four achievement levels, rather than the three levels of achievement associated with CRCT scores (Georgia Department of Education, 2015d). Even adding in students scoring in the third tier of achievement, the school still only managed a 72.26% achievement rate (see Table 1). In addition, although statewide test scores dropped, the rate of drop at the local level was greater than the state average (see Table 2; Georgia Department of Education, 2015d).

Table 1

Comparison of local middle school reading/ELA state test scores (2010-2015)

	Criterion Referenced Competency Test					Georgia Milestones Assessment
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Percent passing or exceeding	91.68%	91.65%	93.38%	93.58%	96.2%	-
Percent proficient or distinguished	-	-	-	-	-	36.8%
Percent developing, proficient, or distinguished	-	-	-	-	-	72/2%

Note: Adapted from "CRCT statewide scores," by Georgia Department of Education, 2015a, and "Spring 2015 end of grade system summaries," by Georgia Department of Education, 2015d.

Table 2

Rate of change: 2015 Georgia Milestones Assessment compared to 2014 Criterion Referenced Competency Test

	Percent of students proficient and distinguished (2015 GMA)	Percent of students developing, proficient, or distinguished (2015 GMA)	Percent of students meet or exceed (2014 CRCT)	Rate of change 2015 GMA proficient and distinguished vs. 2014 CRCT	Rate of change 2015 GMA devel., prof., and distinguished vs. 2014 CRCT
Local school	36.8%	72.2%	96.2%	-59.4	-24
Statewide	38.13%	71.5%	94.5%	-56.37	-23

Note: Adapted from "CRCT statewide scores," by Georgia Department of Education, 2015a, and "Spring 2015 end of grade system summaries," by Georgia Department of Education, 2015d.

In response to the changing testing and accountability climate, leaders and faculty on the local level formulated and implemented several instructional activities designed to help prepare students for the new assessment. Teachers made and are making instructional plans to prepare students for the new test without much information about the design of the test itself, what testing formats (i.e., multiple choice, extended response, typed responses on the computer, etc.) will be emphasized in scoring the test, whether students are adequately prepared for the computer-based platform of the test, or what should be done instructionally to better prepare students to attain a high achievement level on the new test.

The problem is that local English language arts teachers are not certain whether or not the instructional plans and activities that they have developed are adequately preparing students for that new test. The school's ELA curriculum is aligned to the Georgia Standards of Excellence, and the Georgia Milestones assessments are reported to be aligned to the standards (Georgia Department of Education, 2014d). However, because the format, content, and the method of delivery of the assessment are new, teachers had to make assumptions to guide instruction and test preparation. One teacher stated, "As a middle school educator, I feel that even though the results of the first Milestones have come in, teachers have not really had an opportunity to fully examine the scores to determine if the current instructional practices are effective or not in relation to the Milestones test."

A gap in practice exists in that the results from the first round of the state assessment suggest that students were not adequately prepared for the test (See Tables 1

and 2). This gap can be addressed by gathering data about teachers' perceptions of what was done, what was most effective, and what else needs to be done to prepare students for the test. In addition, administrators and leaders need data to determine if teachers feel they received the training and resources they need to prepare instructional methods and activities adequate to prepare students for the test.

The information from this study will help local teachers and administrators make more informed decisions on what instructional methods and test preparation activities should be used for teaching the required content prior to future administrations of the tests. Leaders must also make decisions about professional development opportunities and the allocation of resources to teachers based on the stated needs of the teachers. According to a local administrator, "The scary thing for all of us right now is that we have no way of knowing if our preparations are on track. We think they are, but we won't know until after the first administration of the test." Therefore, I interviewed English/language arts teachers and administrators to gather and analyze their perceptions regarding the effectiveness of their activities to prepare students for the test and their recommendations for what to do to best prepare students in the future. In addition, I analyzed documents to triangulate interview statements, verify the alignment of instruction to the standards, and to establish what information and support teachers had prior to the administration of the first test.

Rationale

The rationale for conducting this study is threefold. First, with current policies' emphasis on student, teacher, and school accountability, instructional leaders and faculty

need to know if their instructional methods and activities related to test preparation are adequately preparing students for the new high-stakes tests which drive value-added school and teacher accountability programs. This determination includes not only whether the quantity and quality of test-preparation instructional methods and activities were deemed appropriate, but also whether the amount of time spent in test preparation activities was considered by the stakeholders to be an effective use of instructional time and what changes they would recommend. Second, instructional leaders and faculty must examine the qualitative data about the effectiveness of test preparation to drive future decision-making about instructional methods and activities related to test preparation. For example, faculty and administrators need to know if the balance between traditional test preparation and preparation for computer-based testing was adequate to prepare students for the test and whether or not the amount of time spent on test preparation activities was appropriate in order to plan for future instruction.

Finally, instructional leaders, faculty, and, in particular, administrators need to know whether the teachers feel that they received adequate and accurate information about the test and whether they were adequately trained to understand the nature of the new assessments and whether they feel they received adequate support, such as professional development, to effectively prepare students for the new test. Leaders need to know teachers' level of understanding regarding the state standards that the tests are designed to assess, as well as their comfort with both their own knowledge and their access to resources to help them create lessons and activities aligned to the standards and

the test. I will further examine each of these three aspects of the rationale for the study at both the local level and from the professional literature in the next sections.

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

Each of the three aspects of the problem is in evidence on the local level. Local leaders and faculty need to understand the effectiveness of their instructional methods and activities because of the impact of student performance on high-stakes testing on system, school, student, and teacher accountability. The results of the Georgia Milestones Assessment make up a key component in the College and Career Ready Performance Index (Georgia Department of Education, 2014b), which is the key accountability measure for schools and systems. In addition, Georgia Milestones Assessment results constitute up to 30%of teacher evaluations through the student growth model (Georgia Department of Education, 2016), and in the near future eighth-grade test results will again be used to determine promotion to high school (Georgia Department of Education, 2014d).

Meanwhile, local leaders and faculty are also faced with the philosophical and ethical problem of how much test preparation is enough and what influence high-stakes testing has had on curriculum and instruction. Leaders and faculty need to know the perceptions of members as to whether testing has narrowed curriculum and devalued certain standards as opposed to those that are more rigorously assessed. According to one faculty member, “I understand that it is important to address all the standards, but I don’t think I can honestly ignore the need I feel to focus on the test.”

The second aspect of the problem evident in the local setting is the issue of the effectiveness of instruction in preparing students for both the rigor and the format of the new test. Local leaders and faculty have no empirical data about the quality and effectiveness of their instructional methods and activities regarding test preparation upon which to make determinations about future instructional programs and plans. The use of data has been shown to be an effective tool for driving decision-making (Allensworth, 2012; Depka, 2006). Quantitative data about student performance on the state assessment would admittedly be preferable to the qualitative data gathered in this study. However, such quantitative data will not be available until long after local leaders and faculty will need to make decisions about instructional plans for test administrations in the near future. For this reason, faculty and administrator perceptions and opinions of the ELA instructional methods and activities local educators provided a qualitative data set upon which decisions may be made.

Local leaders and faculty are faced for the first time with preparing students for a computer-based assessment. Studies have shown a vast difference in students' attitudes and performance on computer-based assessments versus pencil and paper tests (Fletcher, 2013; Flowers, Kim, Lewis, & Davis, 2011), and local students have no previous experience with taking major and high-stakes assessments on computers. Local leaders and faculty provided students with multiple opportunities to interact with computers, including state-provided practice tests, but those leaders and faculty cannot be sure the right amount of opportunities were provided, if computer-based activities were fully aligned to the assessment methodology, and whether instructional methods and activities

prepared students for the unconventional twice daily testing sessions necessitated by computer availability.

A third aspect of the problem appearing in the local setting is that local teachers and administrators spent significant portions of their weekly data team and subject area meetings discussing their test preparation instructional activities and methods. Now that the assessments have been administered for the first time, faculty and administration had thoughts and perceptions about whether the methods and activities used to prepare students the new tests were aligned to both the state standards and the format of the state test (in as much as they were aware of that format).

Perhaps the most acute concern on the local level is the format of the new assessments. Prior to 2014-15, state tests consisted entirely of multiple-choice items. In response to this testing format, teachers began to emphasize content standards deemed most likely to be tested over those less likely to appear on tests. Teachers also shifted focus on methods of taking standardized tests which do not require an increase in student knowledge of content (Jennings & Bearak, 2014). The CCSS and the tests aligned to them require students to demonstrate understanding through both higher-level multiple-choice items and constructed response (paragraph-length writing) and extended response (essays; Doorey, 2012; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010; VanTassel-Baska, 2015). In response to the new format and content of the Georgia Milestones Assessment, the ELA teachers met to develop new instructional plans and activities that they hoped would prepare the students for the assessment. Neither the teachers nor the district administrators have had

the opportunity, however, to examine whether or not they believe the plans and activities were adequate or what changes need to be made for future administrations of the test.

The results of the first administration of the new tests clearly indicated that the problem on the local level may be even more acute than predicted prior to the first assessment (see Table 1 and Table 2). Therefore, local teachers, leaders and administrators have even more need to know how teachers feel about their understanding of, and their state of preparedness for, the new standards and assessments and what changes they would recommend for the following year. A crucial factor in continuous institutional improvement is the scope and quality of professional development (Rieckhoff & Larsen, 2012). Local administrators need to know if teachers feel they received enough professional development, including information and resources about the standards and the assessment, in order to provide the supports the teachers need to implement the new testing policies and procedures.

Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature

The same issues that local educators face in implementing the Georgia Common Core State Standards (now known as the Georgia Standards of Excellence) and the new assessments aligned to them can be found broadly throughout schools in the United States. First, the rigor of the CCSS and the new assessments aligned to them has caused accountability concerns for teachers nationwide (Gill, English, Furgeson, & McCullough, 2014; Musoleno & White, 2010; Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2012). Students are asked to demonstrate knowledge and understanding in new ways (Doorey, 2012). At the same time, the results of those tests will be used in many states as part of teacher evaluation

(Amrein-Beardsley, Berliner, & Rideau, 2010). The new standards have changed the way teachers approach teaching and learning. Brooks and Dietz (2012) noted that the rigor of the new standards have the potential to inhibit creativity in creating lessons and delivering instruction. Frey and Fisher (2013) and Hollenbeck and Saternus (2013) pointed out that the CCSS require teachers to explicitly teach reading comprehension strategies, particularly in the content areas, and require students to support claims based on texts. Meanwhile, Kist (2013) bridged test content with test format by stating that the need for students to be able to read and comprehend text on screens rather than in print presents a particular challenge to educators.

At the same time, the content and format of the new assessments is causing educators to look at how best to prepare for the new assessments. Doorey (2012) observed that the new generation of high-stakes tests requires students to interact with more complex texts while also asking students to respond in deeper, more thoughtful ways. In addition, Dougherty Stahl and Schweid (2013) noted that the procedures and methods teachers used in the past to prepare for assessments would not be sufficient for the new tests, specifically because the new tests assess standards as integrated units rather than by isolated skills.

Secondly, the new assessments, and the new forms of accountability that accompany them, are causing systems and schools to revisit what data they use and how they use data for instructional decision-making (Hosp, 2012; Pella, 2012). Typically, school personnel have used broad quantitative data as the basis for decision-making. The current emphasis on achievement gaps and demographic subgroups requires that schools

and systems look beyond the overall numbers to drill down to results on an almost individual level (Sharratt & Fullan, 2013). Since no detailed quantitative student performance data will be available for some time, local leaders must turn to qualitative data sources in order to make data-based curriculum and instruction decisions at the local school level.

The third aspect of the problem that systems nationwide are coming to terms with is the issues related to computer-based assessments (Fletcher, 2013; Ogletree, Ogletree, & Allen, 2014; Webb, Gibson, & Forkosh-Baruch, 2013). At the same time that educators must revisit their instruction in relation to the revised content for the new assessments, they must also contend with planning for a revised format for the assessments. There is a major fairness and legal issue with high-stakes, computer-based, and online assessments in regard to compliance with individualized educational programs for students with disabilities (Christensen & Rogers, 2013). Bathon (2013) noted concerns about the ethical and legal ramifications about teachers' lack of training in accommodations on computer-based assessment platforms for students with disabilities. Furthermore, Magliano and Graesser (2012) identified problems with integrating computer-based assessments as a part of the curriculum, including the complexities and problems with scoring open-ended student responses. Redecker and Johannessen (2013), in a meta-analysis of studies on computer-based assessments, found reliability and validity concerns about technology-based assessments. Redecker and Johannessen suggested that computer-based and pencil and paper tests, even if over the same content and same design (i.e., multiple-choice) may actually test different skills. Teachers and

leaders, therefore, must not only understand the best ways to prepare students for computer-based assessments, but also how to mitigate the issues that are inherent in a technology-based assessment platform (Christensen & Rogers, 2013; Magliano & Graesser, 2012).

Finally, the concern about the impact of assessment on curriculum and instruction is extensive in the literature (Haertel, 2013; Kane, 2013; Lane, 2013; Xie & Andrews, 2012). For example, Jennings and Bearak (2014) used an archival data analysis of items on assessments from three states and found that the construction of the assessments, through their emphasis on testing some standards over others, encouraged teachers to narrow instruction to those highly-assessed items. Reich and Bally (2010) found in their examination of the instructional practices of teachers in New York City that the emphasis on only the content assessed by high-stakes testing was causing teachers to be "less able to make informed curricular adjustments that address the needs of their particular students" (p. 181). Whether a leftover from NCLB or a natural consequence of high-stakes testing in general, educators are taking a hard look at whether assessment or standards should be the driving force for instruction (Musoleno & White, 2010), and whether the emphasis on test preparation is positively affecting student achievement (Berliner, 2011).

Definition of Terms

The key terms included within this study are accountability, college and career readiness, College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI), Common Core Georgia Performance Standards (CCGPS), Common Core State Standards (CCSS),

computer-based testing, Georgia Milestones Assessment, high-stakes testing, and student growth model.

Accountability: The concept that systems, schools and teachers are responsible for the achievement of students, usually as evidenced by performance on a standardized test or series of tests or some other matrix and largely based on test performance. Accountability includes the potential for significant penalties to the system, school, and teacher if performance levels are consistently not met (Lee & Reeves, 2012).

College and career readiness: The expected outcome from completion of a K-12 education has evolved from acquisition of a high school diploma to an expectation that high school graduates are prepared to enter the workforce or college with little or no additional basic skills training (i.e., remedial skills classes in college). This concept is the driving force behind the movements to reform instruction standards, in particular the Common Core State Standards (Jones & King, 2012).

College and Career Ready Performance Index: The Georgia Department of Education uses the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) as the primary indicator of school and system performance for accountability purposes. The index includes factors such as state testing data, graduation rates, success in closing gaps in subgroup performance, measures of school climate, and student participation and performance on college entrance exams and Advanced Placement (AP) courses. These factors are entered into a matrix designed to construct a numerical rating for all public schools and districts (Georgia Department of Education, 2014b).

Common Core Georgia Performance Standards: The set of standards based on the Common Core State Standards that drive English language arts and math instruction and assessment in the state of Georgia (Georgia Department of Education, 2013a). These standards were renamed the Georgia Standards of Excellent in 2015 (Georgia Department of Education, 2015c).

Common Core State Standards: In 2010, 45 states, the District of Columbia, and several United States territories adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in place of existing state standards (Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2011). According to the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief (2010), the agencies credited with developing the CCSS, the standards are designed to insure students graduate from high school ready for colleges and careers. Although political pressures have caused some states to rescind their adoption of the standards, the CCSS, or a slightly modified version of the CCSS, remain the standards in force in the vast majority of states (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

Computer-based testing: Although the use of computers as an assessment tool is not new, the use of computers as the platform for the administration of state assessments has risen only with the adoption of the Common Core State Standards. Prior to 2015, Georgia high-stakes tests were administered in a paper and pencil format. Computer-based testing requires students to respond to questions on a computer using proprietary software designed and constructed by the testing company. The software performs many of the testing functions previously performed by humans, including read-aloud, visual

accommodations, and test pacing. The online administration of the assessment will gradually phase out its paper and pencil version, beginning with 30 percent of students taking the test on computers in 2015-16. This use of computer-based assessment has presented new challenges for schools and systems. In addition to preparing students for the content of tests, computer-based administration of high-stakes testing also requires teachers to prepare students to interact with the hardware and software of the test (Doorey, 2012).

Georgia Milestones Assessments: Beginning with the 2014-15 school-year, Georgia schools began administering the Georgia Milestones Assessment as the end-of-the-year summative assessment in grades 3 through high school (Georgia Department of Education, 2014d). These assessments replace the previous Georgia Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests and the high school end of course tests. The new assessments are aligned to the GSE in English language arts, mathematics, and science, and include both selected response and written response elements (Georgia Department of Education, 2014d).

High-stakes testing: The era of accountability ushered in by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 led to the term "high-stakes testing" to refer to any state or local assessment used to evaluate systems, schools, teachers, or students (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2012). Failure to meet performance standards on these assessments could mean sanctions or loss of employment for systems, schools, and educators, or denial of promotion to students (Schochet & Chiang, 2013; Wei, 2012).

Student growth model: For most of the so-called accountability era, concern was only placed on students achieving a specific, pre-determined performance level. In an effort to determine the impact of specific teachers on student performance, many states have adopted student growth models, which are also referred to as value-added models. In Georgia, the student growth model measures the growth each student demonstrated in relation to his or her demographic and achievement-level peers (Georgia Department of Education, 2014f). In 2016-17, the student growth model is scheduled to account for up to 30% of a teacher's evaluation.

Significance

Standards have been adopted in most states that their creators claim will better prepare students for colleges and careers (Dove, 2012; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010; Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2011). The adoption of these standards brings with it rigorous new assessments and new ways of evaluating teachers. In Georgia, the new assessments will eventually be a factor in student promotion and retention (Georgia Department of Education, 2014d). In addition, beginning with the 2015-16 administration, test results will be the key component in a student growth model that will constitute up to 30% of a teacher's evaluation (Georgia Department of Education, 2016).

Students must post proficient scores on the state assessment for promotion and class placement (Georgia Department of Education, 2014d). Teachers must have their students pass the test and show growth as a major part of their annual teacher evaluations (Georgia Department of Education, 2016). Schools and systems need students to perform

well in order to avoid potential sanctions (Schochet & Chiang, 2013; Wei, 2012). Given these potential undesirable consequences for so many stakeholders, the significance of this study to local teachers and leaders is to provide data to help them understand how teachers and administrators perceive the effectiveness of previous instructional methods and activities in preparing students for the new assessments in order to determine what changes, if any, are needed for future assessments. Furthermore, the results of this study may allow school leaders to know how teachers perceive the resources, time to prepare, and the supports provided to them in preparation for the new state tests in order to plan for what teachers will need in future years. By examining teacher and administrator perceptions of their test preparation activities and their recommended changes, administrators and teachers can use the data to better prepare students for future administrations of the test and thus improve student achievement and raise the passing rate for the school.

This study may facilitate positive social change at the local level. This study is aligned with Walden University's commitment to positive social change (Walden University, 2014) in that the results of this study can be used to improve conditions for students, teachers, and the local educational organization by driving informed curricular and instructional decision-making and policy change and adoption leading to an improved educational experience for all stakeholders. Teachers may find their instructional programs improved or enhanced by the findings of this study. Improved instruction should result in improved student performance on the state test, and improved student scores on state tests will allow teachers to score higher on the accountability

portions of their evaluations. In addition, the identification of teacher training opportunities, the potential allocation of instructional or teacher support resources, and the greater dissemination of information on standards and assessments may be driven by the findings of the study.

By extension, these results could lead to improved educational opportunities for students by improving their level of proficiency on the state assessment. State test scores are widely used to make student placement decisions. Students must meet performance criteria on both the ELA and math portions of the test for promotion to the next grade level in grades 3, 5, and 8 (Georgia Department of Education, 2014d). Schools also use scores to determine class placement for all grades. Students who do not meet performance criteria are potentially placed in support and remediation classes. On the other hand, local requirements allow students who exceed on the test to be eligible for advanced and honors classes, which place them in a better position for college and employment following high school graduation.

In addition, this study has the potential to increase the body of knowledge and have an impact beyond the local level as the conditions and issues identified and studied are common to all school systems in Georgia and to many school systems across the country. Although the methodology of this study does not strictly allow the findings to be generalized to other educational locales and situations, leaders and faculty members in other districts may, nonetheless, find in the results of the present study situations and issues that are familiar. To date, there are in the literature articles predicting the impact of curriculum reforms, such as the CCSS and their related assessments (Schmidt &

Burroughs, 2012; Stewart & Varner, 2012; Tienken, 2011); however, this study gathered data from local teachers and leaders responsible for curricular and instructional decision-making, in order to make recommendations for future actions on the local level with the possibility of assisting other schools and systems facing the same policy implementations.

Research Questions

Educators, both locally and at large, are concerned about the content and methods used to administer the next generation of high-stakes assessments. The problem addressed in this study is that teachers and administrators are not sure of the effectiveness of the instructional methods and test preparation activities they used and what future measures should be taken to improve those instructional methods. In order to understand the problem of a gap in practice due to a lack of knowledge of the effectiveness of instructional methods and activities taken in preparation for the new state assessments, I gathered and examined data related to eight research questions.

Research Question 1: What information, resources, training, and supports did ELA teachers and administrators receive from local sources and the state to help them implement the new policies prior to the first administration of the assessment?

Research Question 2: How were the information, resources, training, and supports (such as administrative guidance) used (or not used), and why?

Research Question 3**:** What instructional methods and activities did the ELA teachers develop and implement in preparation for the 2015 state tests based on prior

information or specifically focused on or driven by the new tests or standards (or the assumptions they made about the tests or standards)?

Research Question 4: What assumptions did teachers and administrators make about the new tests and/or standards, and how did these influence their instructional or curricular decisions?

Research Question 5: In what ways, if any, did instructional methods and activities differ from those used in previous years and why did teachers make those changes?

Research Question 6: How do teachers and administrators perceive the effectiveness of the instructional methods and activities they developed and implemented in preparing their students to perform well with the new state standards and on the new state assessments and to what extent were those methods and activities aligned with the standards and the assessment, given that teachers have now seen the new tests?

Research Question 7: What changes in instructional methods and activities do teachers and administrators recommend, if any for the following year to better prepare students to score well on the state assessment?

Research Question 8: What additional training or resources do teachers and administrators state are needed to improve instructional methods and activities to prepare students to score well on the assessment?

Yin (2014) stated that research questions clarify the boundaries of a case by naming “the time period covered by the study; the relevant social group, organization or geographic area; the type of evidence to be collected; and the priorities for data collection

and analysis" (p. 34e). The research questions above define the time period (the 2015 state test administration, the testing policy implementation environment of one Georgia school, and the instructional activities that preceded the 2015 test administration), the relevant social group (the middle school ELA teachers and the school and district administrators associated with curriculum, instruction, and assessment), the type of evidence collected (interview responses and relevant archival documents), and the priorities for data collection and analysis (teacher and administrator descriptions and perceptions of instructional methods and related activities at the local level in preparation for the implementation of new policies and procedures regarding the new state test).

The problem addressed by this study is that local educational leaders are not certain that they are adequately preparing students for the new state ELA assessment. The research questions were designed to address the research problem by gathering the perceptions of the teachers and administrators involved about the implementation of the new state policies related to the end of year test and the test preparation instructional methods and activities, as well as teacher views on the dissemination of information and the extent and effectiveness of teacher supports, including professional development. According to Creswell (2012), research questions are essential to understanding the research problem. By using questions that seek to elicit responses from participants about multiple aspects of the assessment preparation activities, the expectation is that a deeper understanding of those activities has closed the gap in knowledge about the effectiveness of test-preparation instruction and what steps local educators feel are needed moving forward to implement the new curriculum and assessment policies.

Review of the Literature

There were six issues that were an integral part of the research problem and the research questions. These six issues are joined together by the underlying conceptual frameworks of teachers as instructional leaders and the link among standards, assessments, and instruction as they relate to educational policy. I will describe each of these topics in the following review of literature.

The first of the six topics is teacher leadership, the extent to which teachers are in control or should be in control of curricular and instructional decisions. Related to the first topic is the second topic of the role of policy in shaping decision making and the role of administration in implementation of policy. Next are three highly related issues: high stakes testing, curriculum narrowing and teaching to the test, and accountability. These three topics, both individually and collectively, have changed the face of education over the past 15 years. The final topic is that of computer-based testing, an uncharted and potentially problem-filled testing methodology.

I conducted a literature review focused on the six major topics related to my study using the following keywords: *teacher leadership, educational policy, principal leadership, high-stakes testing, curriculum narrowing/teaching to the test, accountability,* and *computer-based assessment.* I obtained the articles for my literature review from hard-copy educational journals, books, and Internet research article databases, including Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), SAGE Premier, PsycARTICLES, PsycBOOKs, PsycINFO, EBSCO ebooks, Google Scholar, and Education Research Complete. I also used reference lists from key articles found in my search to identify

additional sources related to my topic. This section includes a synthesis of the literature review, as well as an explanation of the conceptual frameworks that underlie this study. The review is divided into subsections based on each of the six major topics and concludes with a summary linking each of these topics to the study.

Conceptual Framework

The framework of my study rests primarily on three concepts. The first concept is that teachers, working individually or collaboratively, are primarily responsible for the content of instruction and its associated activities (Danielson, 2007). The second connected framework is that there is a two-way connection between standards and assessment and that these two aspects must be aligned in rigor as well as content to allow for student, teacher, and school success (Webb, 2007). Finally, the third concept is that instruction and assessments should be mutually aligned to maximize instructional effectiveness (Tankersley, 2007). In the next sections, I will further explore each supporting concept of the conceptual framework, and I will discuss how the concepts relate to form the conceptual framework of the study.

Teachers as instructional leaders. Teachers, as trained and licensed professionals, are charged with the duty and responsibility of designing and implementing instruction that is aligned with applicable standards, is grounded in student data, and best serves the learning needs of students (Danielson, 2007; James-Ward, Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2013). This framework relates to my study in that teachers often include decisions about the design and implementation of instruction related to testing

preparations as part of their duties and responsibilities (Berliner, 2011; James-Ward et al., 2013).

Danielson (2007) identified four key components of professional practice, including planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction, and professional responsibilities. Danielson based these components of professional practice on the work of Madeline Hunter. Hunter (1985) argued that the key to effective instruction was the front-line classroom teacher making instructional decisions based on and in reaction to sound research principles and valid student data. This became the foundation for the work of Danielson, who aligned the four key components of professional practice with the Hunter framework.

Danielson's (2007) framework is aligned to my research problem and study in several ways. First, planning and preparation are important to the study as they relate to how teachers and administrators planned and prepared for both the state assessment itself and the instructional activities aligned to the assessment. Also, classroom environment is an issue locally, particularly as it relates to students' attitudes toward and exposure to computer-based assessment. At the heart of the study are the views of the teachers and administrators toward the implementation of instruction to prepare students for the state assessment. In addition, how teachers demonstrated professionalism in their reflection on practice, collaboration with peers, and consistency in maintaining the alignment of instruction to both what was planned and the shared beliefs about the nature of the assessment has a significant impact on the perceived effectiveness of the instructional activities. Teachers also have specific perceptions as to what degree test preparation

should be considered a part of their professional duties. Finally, I aligned the semistructured interview questions used for data collection to this framework in that each question addresses one or more of the four domains identified by Danielson, and I conducted the data analysis through the lens of this framework.

Other authors and researchers have used teacher leadership as the guiding conceptual framework in studies of instructional practice similar to my study. Lai and Cheung (2014) used the work of Danielson as part of the guiding framework in their case study of teacher participation in the implementation of a new curriculum. Furthermore, Ippolito, Dobbs, and Charner-Laird (2014) used teacher leadership as the basis for their qualitative examination of teacher actions in the implementation of a literacy program at a Massachusetts high school. Ippolito et al. (2014) used teacher interviews to describe the steps taken by the teachers to implement the program and to make recommendations for further actions. Finally, Gordon, Jacobs, and Solis (2014) used teacher leadership to ground their qualitative study of the professional learning needs of teachers.

The alignment of standards and testing. Another concept that undergirds this study is the concept of alignment between standards and testing. The alignment between assessments and standards is an extremely complex issue that has been studied by several researchers. Among those who have presented a framework for evaluating the alignment between standards and assessments is Webb (2007). Webb's framework compares assessments against standards in four areas: consistency in content, level of thinking and knowledge, breadth of coverage, and weighting of the test items.

The breadth of coverage and weighting of the test items have the potential for significant influence on curriculum and instruction, and, therefore, the interview data in this study. The point of the breadth of coverage analysis is to determine if the assessment tests the entire range of standards and standard objectives (Webb, 2007). Webb pointed out that alignment in this category becomes particularly problematic when there is a large number of standards and standard objectives to be measured by a single assessment. The Georgia Standards of Excellence for ELA consist of 41 standards per grade in Grades 6-8 (Georgia Department of Education, 2014e).

The balance of representation, or weighting, of the assessment items analysis determines if more assessment items are aligned to some objectives more than others within the same standard. Perfect balance would be if each standard objective were addressed by the same number of assessment items (Webb, 2007). For example, an analysis of assessment items for a mathematics standard addressing computation may find that more items were linked to multiplication of decimals than multiplication of any other number types. If the alignment analysis shows that some standards and objectives are not represented at all or only rarely by test items, then Webb argued that teachers and curriculum professionals could be expected to ignore or only briefly address these standards and objectives in favor of standards and objectives that appear more often on the assessment. At the same time, if the analysis shows that some standards and objectives are represented by more test items than others, then teachers and curriculum leaders may be more likely to devote more instructional time and activities to these standards and objectives, possibly ignoring or devoting less time to other standards and

objectives that may be more important to the students' future success but not emphasized on the test.

Alignment of instruction and assessment. The alignment between instruction and assessments is important, particularly in the current high-stakes testing and more rigorous assessment climate. Tankersley (2007) argued that 21st century assessments, such as those designed by the two main testing consortia and, later, by the state of Georgia and other states opting out of the consortia, require a higher order of thinking than is present in classrooms that adhere to the multiple-choice mentality propagated by NCLB (pp. 10-11). Tankersley's concern was that the level of cognitive challenge in the classroom should be at least as high, if not greater, than that on the state test. Her concern holds significance for my study in that the participants' perceptions of the rigor of their instructional activities and methods will be a key finding to drive the related project and potential recommendations for future actions.

Although Tankersley's (2007) work predates the CCSS and their related assessments, her concepts of instruction-assessment alignment and constructed response as the primary testing technique to assess higher-order thinking are consistent with the CCSS and state tests such as the Georgia Milestones. Tankersley argued that constructed response items are one of the best ways to determine if the student can read and assimilate ideas and concepts and then synthesize and apply those ideas and concepts in writing. A major point made by Tankersley is that students must have frequent opportunities in the classroom to learn and practice the skills and techniques needed to create effective constructed responses, including how to read critically, find evidence to

support claims, and how to organize and present ideas in clear and organized writing. These skills and techniques are consistent with the Georgia ELA standards and the Georgia Milestones test (Georgia Department of Education, 2014d; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) but will be a new form of assessment for the teachers and students.

The leadership-alignment connection. The concepts of Danielson (2007), Webb (2007), and Tankersley (2007) connect to form the framework of this study. Danielson positioned teachers as the primary instructional decision makers, while Webb and Tankersley argued that concern for the alignment of standards and assessment and the alignment of instruction and assessment must be a key consideration in those decisions. The role of teachers in instructional decision making and the degree of alignment between instruction and assessment are concepts that run throughout the problem statement, purpose, and research questions of this study (see Table 3). The role of teachers as instructional leaders as presented by Danielson, and the need for alignment of instruction, standards, and assessments described by Webb and Tankersley are the hub of this study.

Table 3

Alignment of Conceptual Frameworks to Six Major Themes of this Study

	Danielson's Four Key Areas of Practice (2007)				Webb (2007) Depth of Knowledge Framework	Tankersley (2007)
Themes from the literature	Planning and preparation	Classroom environment	Instruction	Professional responsibility	Alignment of standards & assessment	Alignment of instruction & assessment
Teacher leadership	X	X	X	X	X	X
Policy and Administrator Influence	X	X	X	X	X	X
High-stakes testing	X	X	X	X	X	X
Curriculum narrowing & teaching to the test	X		X	X	X	X
Accountability	X			X		
Computer-based testing	X	X	X			X

Note: Adapted from Danielson, C. (2007). *Enhancing professional practice: A framework for teaching* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: ASCD; Webb, N. (2007). *Criteria for alignment of expectations and assessments in mathematics and science education* (Council of Chief State School Officers and National Institute for Science Education Research Monograph No. 6). Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin–Madison, Wisconsin Center for Education Research, and Tankersley, K. (2007). *Tests that teach: Using standardized tests to improve instruction.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

The six topics to be addressed in the remainder of this literature review are connected to the research problem and questions and to each other through the three central concepts of teacher leadership, alignment of standards and assessments, and alignment of instruction and assessment (see Figure 1).

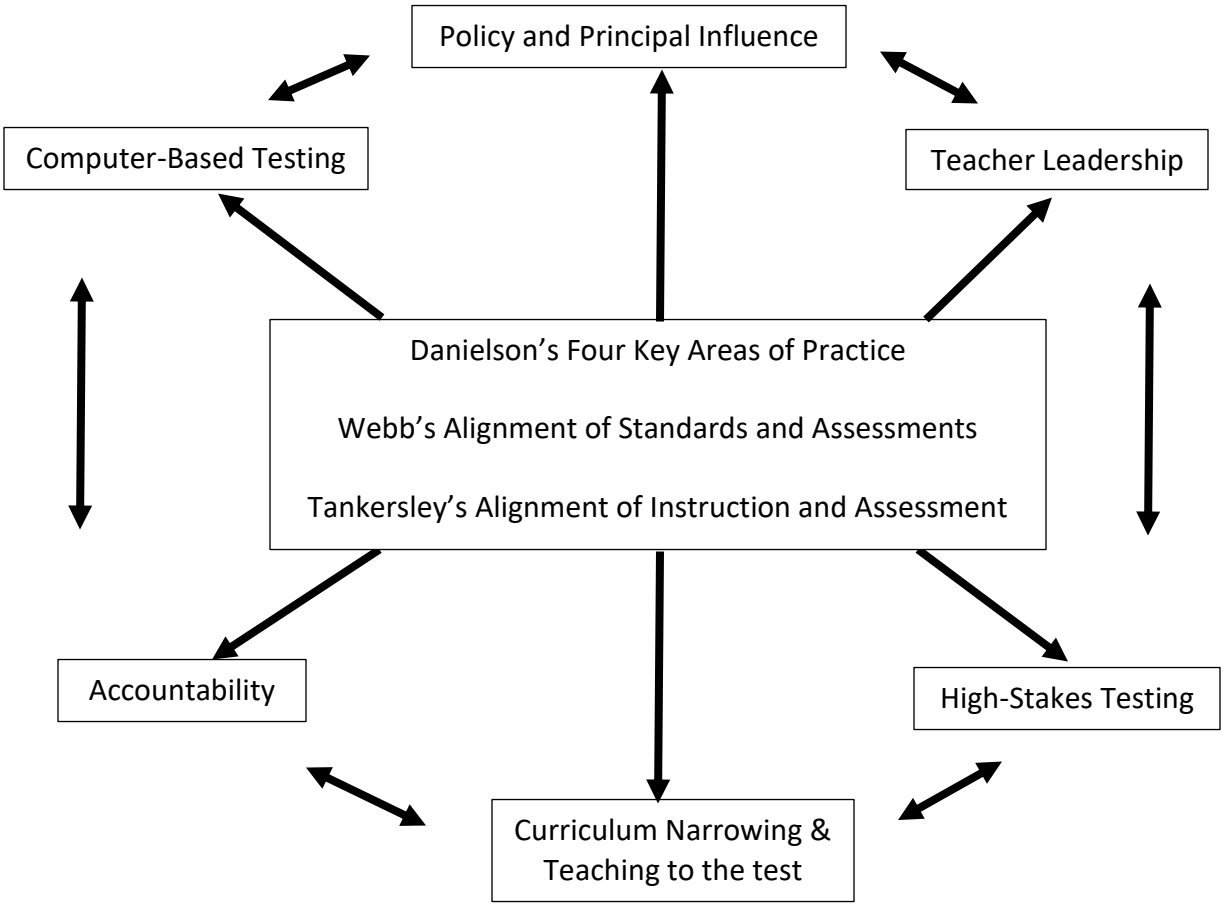

Figure 1. Relationship between and among the six key elements of this study and the central conceptual frameworks of Danielson (2007), Webb (2007), and Tankersley (2007). Adapted from: Danielson, C. (2007). *Enhancing professional practice: A framework for teaching* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: ASCD; Webb, N. (2007). *Criteria for alignment of expectations and assessments in mathematics and science education* (Council of Chief State School Officers and National Institute for Science Education Research Monograph No. 6). Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin–Madison, Wisconsin Center for Education Research, and Tankersley, K. (2007). *Tests that teach: Using standardized tests to improve instruction.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Teacher Leadership

Authors and researchers have recognized the role and impact of teacher leadership in quality instruction through instructional decision-making, professional collaboration, and creation of a positive school climate. Besley (2013), in a historical analysis connecting the philosophers and educators of ancient Greece to modern times, demonstrated that the tradition of the teacher's influence on the student can be traced to Socrates, who was eventually tried and executed for his perceived seditious influence on his students. In their book on teaching practice that has now reached its 10th edition, Good and Brophy (2008) portrayed the teacher as the central figure in the classroom and provided research-based guidance for the various leadership roles of the teacher, including designer and presenter of instruction, classroom manager, and student motivator. Central to the themes of this study, Good and Brophy showed that teachers must be able to make informed decisions about curriculum and instruction, must be continuous learners, and must be willing to reflect on their practice.

Finally, one quantitative study addressed the theme of teacher leadership while researching the issue of value-added teacher evaluation. Hamre et al. (2013) recognized that teacher evaluation methods require an understanding of what constitutes effective teaching. They decided to test the validity of a three-pronged teacher effectiveness measure by applying the measure to classroom observational data conducted during the course of seven research studies in more than 4,000 elementary classrooms. After conducting content analysis, confirmatory analysis, and multigroup confirmatory analysis on the data, Hamre et al. concluded that the three-pronged evaluative concept was

superior for teacher evaluation than two other observational frameworks. While their study validated the evaluation framework, of importance to the context of my study was that the Hamre et al. study also served to confirm the importance of the teacher as an instructional leader. Specifically, the study affirmed that the most important factor in student achievement is the relationship between the teacher and the student. Central to this relationship building, Hamre et al. argued, is a teacher who has built and provided emotional and instructional supports and who has designed and presented instructional content in effective ways. As will be seen in the data analysis, such supports and relationships have been developed and presented by local teachers, in the context of high-stakes test preparation.

Teacher leadership in research and commentary. The importance of teacher involvement in curriculum and instruction decision-making and creation has been the subject of both research and commentary. In a comparative analysis of the content of four teacher leadership preparation programs, Berg, Carver, and Mangin (2014) compared the curriculum of the programs to the Teacher Leader Model Standards, a set of guidelines designed to delineate the basic skills needed for effective teacher leadership. They found that the teacher preparation programs were consistent with the standards, in particular in regards to the teacher's role in the construction and delivery of instruction. Meanwhile, Collay (2013), in a practitioner-focused article aimed at principals, presented research that showed that teachers' judgments and decisions based on their knowledge and experience make them highly qualified instructional leaders. Finally, Conley (2011) in another practitioner-focused article also directed toward school

administrators argued that teachers should design instruction integrating the standards, rather than teaching the standards in isolation, to allow students to achieve the higher-level thinking skills that are the stated goal of the CCSS (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

The importance of teacher leadership in instructional design has also been confirmed by research. Beaver and Weinbaum (2015) conducted a qualitative case study of 11 Pennsylvania schools, nine of which had not met AYP and two that were considered proficient. The purpose of the study was to determine how schools used data from high-stakes tests. Beaver and Weinbaum identified 15 distinctive data-driven strategies in their analysis of interview responses of 97 teachers from the 11 schools involved in the study. Among the top five most common strategies, three were related to instruction. Specifically, Beaver and Weinbaum found that teachers, working together in data teams, were taking the lead in developing curricula and instruction by using data to create test-preparation instructional activities, to design instruction to meet the specific needs of individual students through differentiation of instruction, and to determine student placement by academic ability or eligibility for pullout periods to address student academic deficiencies.

The increased use of high-stakes test data to drive teacher evaluations would seem to have a predictable impact on teachers' curricular and instructional decision-making. However, while Beaver and Weinbaum (2015) did find in their study that high-stakes testing was driving some teaching to the test, they did not uncover evidence of

curriculum narrowing, or ignoring some curriculum components in favor of those likely to appear on high-stakes tests.

Collaboration in teacher leadership. Teacher leadership extends beyond the individual teacher making classroom decisions. The literature supports that collaboration among teachers and between teachers and administration is an important factor in school improvement and climate. Duff and Islas (2013) conducted a year-long study of 12 school districts selected for a two-year, Gates Foundation-supported teacher effectiveness initiative. The schools participating in the initiative were given resources, guidance, and training to help prepare and integrate teachers into all aspects of school and system leadership, including school, district, state, and national leadership teams. The training presented during the initiative was focused on preparing teachers for leadership roles beyond the scope of their individual classrooms. The authors conducted interviews, reviewed records, and examined testing data and determined that this immersion of classroom teachers into the entire educational leadership process was a major factor in school improvement, along with whole-school collaborative teacher training and administrative support. Specifically, Duff and Islas found that teacher collaboration was effective because the skills and expertise of the individual teachers could be combined to determine better solutions for instructional problems and issues. Concerns about bias in the Duff and Islas report arise from the fact that the authors work for a Gates Foundation-supported organization, which could color their reporting of the results of a Gates Foundation initiative.

Another report that suggests the importance of collaborative teacher leadership is the work of Sacks (2013), who found in a single case study of a New York middle school that teachers working together presented the best chance for improved decision-making and problem-solving because teachers are the professionals closest to the issues and problems. Teachers in the study reported that they had become discouraged and troubled by the lack of time to address individual student academic issues during the school day. When teachers were empowered to collaborate in order to make decisions about the instructional schedule, which provided for a dedicated student assistance period, teacher morale and student performance improved. Concerns about the reporting of this study are two-fold. First, the study was not conducted scientifically or using any traditionally accepted research methodology and was more a personal reflection of the school situation. Furthermore, the study lacks generalization to other schools and situations given that the research was a single-case study. However, the Sacks report does suggest that teacher-driven decision making and teacher collaboration was instrumental in turning around school achievement in at least one school.

Teacher leadership and school culture. Finally, teacher leadership has also been shown to be important in changing school culture, and how the participating teachers and administrators describe and evaluate the impact of their actions on school climate and culture will warrant discussion in this study. Studies (e.g. Anderson, Steffen, Wiese, and King, 2014; Wells, 2012) have shown that teachers feeling empowered and recognizing their role as leaders and the dedication of time for professional leading and development of collaborative and leadership skills are highly important factors in

teacher-driven improvement in instruction and learning. Anderson, Steffen, Wiese, and King (2014) found in their five-year case study of a Midwestern high school with low-achieving students that teachers understanding their role as instructional leaders and administrators working with teachers to empower them to lead the school improvement effort, as well as providing the time and support for professional development, were the most important factors in changing the school's culture and student achievement. Ironically, Wells (2012) conducted a mixed-methods study of 25 school district superintendents and found that the respondents viewed teacher leadership as the most important factor in making a positive change in school culture, but at the same time those superintendents found the greatest challenges to effective teacher leadership were teachers' lack of understanding or desire to increase their role as leaders and the lack of time for professional development.

The literature shows that the role of the teacher as an instructional leader is of tremendous importance. In my study, the teacher's function as a designer and implementer of instructional methods and activities provides the basis through which teacher and administrator perceptions of their test preparation activities have been examined. The literature also shows the importance of teacher leaders working together and in concert with administration in order to create or change school culture and increase student achievement. An important result of this study shows how the participants described their positions as leaders of curriculum and instruction. Of particular interest and relevance are their views on the effectiveness of their collaboration

in driving high-quality instructional decision-making related to the high-stakes assessment.

Policy Implementation and Administrator Influence

The basis of my research is the role of teachers as leaders in creating and implementing instruction. However, also of importance is the influence of educational policy on decision-making and instruction. This includes the responsibility of administrators in the implementation of policy and to provide teachers with instructional supports, in particular professional development. How teachers and administrators describe the training and supports provided to teachers for their decision-making activities are important issues related to this study.

The effect of policy on decision-making and instruction. Over the past 50 years, educational policy has more and more been shaped by federal mandates and requirements, often attached to federal funding of educational programs (Brady, Duffy, Hazelkorn, & Bucholz, 2014; Shanahan, 2014). The intent of most of these programs is to broaden and improve students' access to a high-quality education (Shanahan, 2014). However, these policies have affected classroom instruction in both expected and unexpected ways (Brady, Duffy, Hazelhorn & Bucholz, 2014).

Falabella (2014) conducted an analysis of the educational policies of several countries in the Western Hemisphere, including the United States, as well as reviewing the research literature about the effect of those policies on schools. Falabella found that the pressures of heightened accountability policies have created a climate of competition in schools wherein administrators and teachers feel they must market their schools much

as a business in a free-market economy. This competitive atmosphere is particularly troubling as Falabella concluded that such competition favors schools that may be selective in their enrollment (i.e., private and parochial schools). Falabella argued that this places most public schools at a disadvantage and serves to widen achievement gaps among schools and students, particularly those in high-poverty or high-minority communities, and creates de facto segregation and discrimination. Falabella demonstrated how the implementation of policy can affect the culture of schools and systems at the management and administrative levels, yet other authors and researchers have been more concerned about the effect of policy implementation on a more grassroots, classroom level.

Bengtson and Connors (2014) found in a longitudinal qualitative study conducted at two U.S. middle/junior high schools that educational policy, specifically standards-based curriculum and instruction, can affect how teachers and administrators approach their students and their schools. Bengtson and Connors followed two first-year teachers at schools in the early stages of implementation of the CCSS. Bengtson and Connors focused their study on the perceptions of the teachers about their feelings of independence in instructional decision-making. The authors found that one teacher felt that, while operating within the umbrella of the standards, he did have independent control of what and how instruction occurred in his classroom. Conversely, the other teacher indicated that she felt she had no control of either what or how lessons were taught in her classroom. Bengtson and Connor concluded from their findings that the pressures, or the reaction to pressures, from external policy mandates affected the

leadership styles employed by the administration of the two schools, and, in turn, shaped the way the teachers felt about themselves and their profession. While Bengtson and Connor's (2014) research was admittedly limited in scope, the study holds significance to my study in its assertion that the reaction of administrators to external policy requirements has great influence on teaching and instructional decision-making. With the finding that one teacher felt he had control over curriculum and instruction in his classroom while the other teacher felt just the opposite, the questions I am asking in my study become even more relevant in determining whether the teachers in my study feel obligated to make instructional changes based on the new testing policies and procedures.

The effect of policy pressure on leadership style has also been observed in other studies. For example, Gosnell-Lamb, O'Reilly, and Matt (2013) found in their survey of 218 principals from across the United States that, from 2001 to 2011, concern for test scores, compliance, and student achievement replaced instructional issues and teaching quality as the highest priority indicated by the principals. Gosnell-Lamb, O'Reilly, and Matt concluded from their data analysis that this change in priorities carried with it a shift in leadership style, with principals taking less of a role as instructional leaders and more of a role as managers.

How the teachers and administrators described the reaction to educational policies in the local school is of interest. For instance, the data showed no disagreement between teachers and administrators on the leadership style present in the school, or the impact of that style on instruction. This stated attitude bodes well for the potential success of the project derived from this study. This also leads into another subarea of teacher

leadership: the role of administration in the implementation of policy, specifically curriculum and instruction policy.

The role of administrators in implementing policy and teacher supports. Administrators, as essentially the chief operating officer of their schools, take on many responsibilities and roles. Of relevance for this study are three primary administrative tasks shared by all principals: the establishment of school culture, the implementation of curriculum and instruction policy, and the transmission of knowledge and teacher supports. Although administrators certainly wear many other hats as part of their job descriptions (for example, interacting with stakeholders such as parents, community leaders, and district-level administration), these three areas have an impact on teacher leadership and how teachers design and present instruction (Neumerski, 2012).

Researchers have studied extensively the leadership styles of school administrators, particularly during the current era of schools and educator accountability (Jackson & Marriott, 2012). Although these styles often have been described as falling into one of two camps: prescriptive, rigid transactional leadership, or distributed, collaborative leadership (Leithwood, 2007; Schlecthy, 2009; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001), there has also been research indicating that principals frequently adapt their leadership styles based on situation and need (Urick & Bowers, 2014). Regardless of the leadership style employed, the importance of the principal in establishing school climate, and the importance of climate on school performance is well documented (Fuentes, Switzer, & Jimerson, 2015; Neumerski, 2012; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012).

Sebastian and Allensworth (2012) demonstrated the importance of school climate to positive school performance. Sebastian and Allensworth combined surveys of Chicago area teachers and ACT testing results to determine the most influential traits of principals. The researchers found that principals can have the greatest influence on instruction and achievement by taking steps to create a safe school environment where the value of a quality education is continually emphasized. Although Sebastian and Allensworth conducted their research at the high school level in a school system more urban and diverse than the local school in this study, if and how participants describe the degree of perceived safety and high academic expectations present in the local school could greatly influence the project resulting from this study.

Another important aspect of school climate is the leadership style employed by the school principal. Jackson and Marriott (2012) analyzed data from surveys conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics of more than 37,000 school personnel and placed the 3,750 schools represented by the personnel into four leadership categories. These categories ranged from a school climate of completely shared administrator and teacher responsibility for school management to responsibility for school management completely centered on either administrators or teachers. Jackson and Mariott found in the course of their study that fewer low performing schools fell into the category of shared leadership. Although the researchers found higher performing schools (particularly charter and private schools) had higher levels of shared leadership responsibility, Jackson and Marriott argued that the perpetuation of the achievement gaps

is more a function of the nature of school leadership climate, rather than the demographic characteristics of the school.

The importance of the principal's influence in creating a collaborative school climate was also found by Szczesuil and Huizenga (2014). Szczesuil and Huizenga conducted an interview and observation-based qualitative study of two New England schools to determine what teachers described as their principal's role in fostering collaborative teacher interaction at their schools. Szczesuil and Huizenga found that providing time for teachers to meet and plan was both a common and desirable trait. However, the researchers also found that principals can be most effective in facilitating collaboration that leads to positive student outcomes when they provide direction and oversight to the collaborative effort. Administrator support is a theme in both the research and interview questions of this study.

In addition to their role in establishing school climate, administrators also take an active role in implementing curriculum and instruction policy. In some cases, this responsibility results in administrators interpreting policy. For example, Koyama (2014) conducted an interview-based qualitative study of New York principals to determine their reactions and actions related to implementation of NCLB. Koyama argued that, because they often must contextualize policy to fit local school conditions and needs, in effect principals become curriculum and instruction policymakers. Koyama noted that principals indicated that they often pick and choose which aspects of policy are implemented at their schools.

Similarly, Urick and Bowers (2014) found in their analysis of surveys taken from 7,650 principals from across the United States that the degree of influence principals exert on curriculum and instruction is often based on the perceived current needs and the current circumstances of the school. For example, Urick and Bowers noted that many principals indicated that they adjust their leadership style or choose their degree of participation in instructional decisions based on factors such as their level of accountability to district policies. Urick and Bowers did find that the majority of the principals in the survey reported using distributed or shared responsibility for implementation of curriculum and instruction policy. The major concern about the results of this study is that the data set used was from a survey conducted prior to NCLB, and the increased school accountability that accompanied that legislation may influence principals' responses to the survey.

Meanwhile, Neumerski (2012), in an analysis of educational leadership literature, noted that studies have shown that schools where the principal is actively and strongly involved in curriculum and instruction perform better than schools with less principal involvement in instruction. Specifically, Neumerski argued that principals who establish school vision, establish a climate of expectation for high academic performance, and frequently observe and critique instruction enjoy more personal and institutional success. While acknowledging the importance of the principal in curriculum and instruction, Neumerski's primary argument was that more research is needed into how the interaction and combination of principal, teacher, and academic coaches influence and improve instruction and school performance.

A third major influence of principals on curriculum and instruction policy implementation is the degree to which they provide teachers with instructional supports. These supports may vary based on the leadership style of the administrator. Typically, such supports consist primarily of providing meaningful professional development. However, other influences can also include vision and mission setting, coaching, and filtering tasks that obstruct or inhibit instructional improvement (Szczesiul & Huizenga, 2014).

Fuentes et al. (2015) conducted case study research on two principals and argued that principals must provide supports that strengthen teachers' knowledge and abilities. They described these supports as including team building, dissemination of information, and formal training and classroom supports, such as providing academic coaches. However, a major finding from their work was that when principals are not provided with resources and access to supports, they must engage in personal development so that they can be a source of teacher development.

Finally, Long, Barnett, and Rogers (2015) demonstrated the association between educational policy and responsiveness of principals to providing teacher support. Long, Barnett, and Rogers conducted a qualitative case study of gifted policy implementation in 10 Australian secondary schools. An interesting and relevant finding from their research was that principals faced with policy mandates were much more likely to provide teacher supports, especially professional development. Although Long, Barnett, and Rogers conducted their research in Australia, the similarities between the structure of United

States and Australian schools, including the implementation of government policies, suggests that the findings are likely transferrable to the local setting.

A stated purpose of this research study is to determine both teachers' and administrators' perceptions of instructional activities and methods, as well as their recommendations for changes, including the allocation of additional resources or teacher supports. This section of my literature review shows that how principals create school climate, take an active role in curriculum and instruction implementation, and provide instructional supports such as professional development is a major theme of this study.

High-Stakes Testing

"High-stakes testing," the use of standardized testing to evaluate students, teachers, schools, and systems, is the underlying topic of my study. How teachers view instruction in preparation for high-stakes testing is the basis of my inquiry. Although standardized tests have long been used in education, only since the implementation of NCLB have these tests been used for accountability purposes (Au, 2011). The use of testing for purposes other than the evaluation of the mastery of content on the part of the student has become a central theme in the discourse surrounding educational reform (McCormick, 2013) and is the fundamental issue that undergirds my problem statement and research purpose. Regardless of how teachers and administrators philosophically view test preparation (a topic to be discussed later in this literature review), instructional leaders have no choice but to make some accommodation to prepare students for high-stakes tests.

Marginal effects of high-stakes testing. A premise behind high-stakes testing is that the assessments will lead to student and school performance improvement (Lane, 2013). However, empirical studies and data analyses comparing student scores on high-stakes state assessments and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicate that high-stakes tests have had little effect on student achievement. An example is the work of Dietel (2012), who found in an analysis comparing items on state assessments to those found on the NAEP that the cognitive demand on the students presented by state test items was far inferior. The point that Dietel (2012) made is that state assessments will be of little value as an impetus to drive school improvement until the rigor of the items on the tests is raised at least as high as that by the two Common Core assessment consortia.

Another study that demonstrated empirically that a strong causal relationship between high stakes testing and increased student achievement does not exist was research conducted by Nichols, Glass, and Berliner (2012). The authors had conducted research shortly after the enactment of NCLB using correlational analysis of the demographics of 25 states, the NAEP reading and math scores for fourth and eighth graders in those states, and an index of indicators of testing pressure in those states. As NCLB neared 10-years old, the researchers conducted a follow-up study using the same methodology. The authors analyzed that data in various ways including in aggregate, by subject (reading or math), by student demographics (White, Black, Hispanic), and by socio-economic status. Although some subgroups did show improvement over the four administrations of the NAEP (2003-2009) covered by the study (for example, White,

affluent students showed statistically significant gains in both grades and subjects), the researchers were unable to make any generalization about a positive causal relationship between high-stakes testing pressure and student performance (Nichols et al., 2012). In fact, some of the findings of the study were troubling in terms of the effect of high-stakes testing pressure on some student groups in terms of their testing performance. For example, Nichols et al. found that Black and low-income students in states where pressure was highest actually showed a decrease in test scores. The ethical issues associated with high-stakes testing have been noted by other researchers and will be discussed in detail later in this section.

The Nichols et al. (2012) findings are particularly strong for two reasons. First, the student testing data came from the NAEP, which remains the only assessment of student progress administered in every state (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015b). Unlike state administered tests, the NAEP provides a consistent framework from which to judge student achievement. Second, the study emulates a previous study conducted by Nichols et al. in 2006 which had similar findings. A possible challenge to the study is the age of the instrument the researchers used to judge the level of accountability pressure exerted by the states. The instrument was developed prior to the original study, and the authors admit that time and the changing climate of accountability could affect the index they developed. Regardless of the limitations of the accountability index, of prime importance to the discussion of the efficacy of high stakes testing is that NAEP reading scores did not change significantly from 1992 to 2012 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015a; Nichols et al., 2012).

The inconclusive relationship between high-stakes testing and student achievement was further confirmed by Dee and Jacob (2011). Dee and Jacob also used NAEP data as the primary data set to describe student performance. However, Dee and Jacob expanded their analysis by expanding their frame of reference to the 10 years before the enactment of NCLB in order to separate states into two categories: those that had accountability systems in place similar to NCLB prior to 2002 and those that established such systems only after NCLB became law. By doing this, the authors hoped to be able to establish the impact of NCLB by comparing the scores of the two groups. Like Nichols et al. (2012), Dee and Jacob found some areas in which performance improved (fourth grade math, for example), but overall results were mixed. Also, consistent with the other study, Black and low-income students appear to have been negatively impacted by NCLB's high-stakes accountability (Dee & Jacob, 2011). That Nichols et al. and Dee and Jacob had similar results is not surprising since both studies used NAEP data as the measure of student achievement. In addition, the inability of Dee and Jacob to make a definitive determination, either for cause or correlation, between NAEP results and NCLB accountability is also a weakness of the study.

The findings of these two studies (Dee & Jacob, 2011; Nichols et al., 2012) are consistent with a data analysis of testing items conducted by Dietel (2012). Dietel found strong evidence that high-stakes tests have at best led to only mixed improvement results. In addition, Dietel argued that the pressures exerted on teachers, schools, and students by those tests have had a negative effect. Of note in my study, some participants did indicate that they did feel some pressures as a result of high-stakes testing.

Validity of the use of high-stakes testing data. In addition to the issue of the effect of high-stakes testing on student achievement, other researchers and authors have pointed out that high-stakes tests have serious validity concerns related to unintended uses of the data. For example, Berninger (2015) argued in his chapter on tests and assessments and their appropriate uses, that high-stakes test results can be valid for evaluating school system's ability to effectively deliver curriculum. However, Berninger also points out that test validity can be easily lost through the application of an arbitrary assignment of the pass/fail point, which is a common practice with high-stakes state tests. Setting arbitrary cut points also limits the usefulness of the test as a factor in instructional decision-making since the pass-fail scores do not take into account measurement error, seriously affecting test-retest reliability (Berninger, 2015, p. 55).

Both Berninger (2015) and McCormick (2013) recognized that testing conditions can also create validity concerns associated with high-stakes testing. For example, Berninger (2015) noted that high-stakes tests that are administered in the traditional group setting or in a computerized format have little validity in evaluating individual performance since the test administrator cannot possibly know the level of effort or engagement the student has put into taking the test. McCormick (2013) extended the idea of uncertainty of student engagement in the test-taking process to question the validity of high-stakes tests as not only a vehicle to evaluate student performance, but also the effectiveness of teachers. McCormick pointed out that the level of concern on the part of the student for test performance could not be as high as that of the teacher. McCormick argued that students generally do not have as high a set of consequences,

particularly in the near term, as their teachers when it comes to test performance. This lack of student concern, coupled with other factors such as timing and duration of the tests, can create conditions that call into question the validity of the tests as instruments to evaluate both the test-takers and, especially, teachers (McCormick, 2013).

Ethical and moral issues with high-stakes testing. Ethical and moral issues also have arisen over high-stakes testing. Head-Dylla (2012) presented a single-case study describing how a student with a learning disability had been denied high school graduation due to a low high-stakes test score even though the student had met or exceeded all other graduation requirements. Similarly, Willis (2011) found in his case study examination of a charter school that some low achieving students were being excluded from testing due to their potential impact on school high-stakes test scores. Lai and Berkeley (2012), in their analysis of testing accommodations for students with learning disabilities, discovered that the extent and application of accommodations from state to state was inconsistent. Furthermore, many of the common accommodations they studied were not effective at mitigating learning disabilities (Lai & Berkeley, 2012). An ethnographic case study also uncovered ethical concerns linked to English Language Learners (ELLs) (Ruecker, 2013). Ruecker found that ELLs in one school system had been denied access to college-preparatory instruction in favor of instruction linked solely to high-stakes testing. While each of these studies examined ethical and moral issues for a limited number of students in very specific situations, the studies do suggest that for at least some students, the high stakes test may not fairly assess what the students know and

are able to do and that the high stakes tests may unfairly limit educational opportunities for some students.

Finally, research has also raised ethical questions for schools and teachers. Amrein-Beardsley, Berliner, and Rideau (2010) found that more than 50% of the 3000 teachers they surveyed had participated in or were aware of others' participation in some form of cheating related to high-stakes testing. Cheating incidents ranged from giving or changing student answers to providing instruction to students based on illegally-gained knowledge of testing content (Amrein-Beardsley et al., 2010). Interpreting this percentage is somewhat problematic, however, as all of the teachers who indicated that they had participated in or were aware of others participating in cheating could be indicating that they are all aware of the same one or two incidences of cheating by a teacher. From the data provided, there is still no way to tell how widespread the actual cheating is, although the data do support that half of the teachers have participated in or are aware of some cheating. In addition to unethical practices perpetrated by teachers and schools, some schools have been the victims of questionable reactions to high-stakes testing. For example, Koyama (2012) studied a high-achieving New York school that nonetheless was labeled as failing because the school, through a technicality, did not meet the minimum percentage of students taking the high-stakes test in fourth grade. The negative rating for the school could result in adverse actions such as loss of funding or takeover of the school by an outside agency. Such reactions could have a disproportionate negative impact on school programs that have proved successful (Koyama, 2012).

The research literature demonstrates wide-spread concern about the utility and ethics of high-stakes testing. Another important issue is the effect of the assessments on teaching practice. This effect is often referred to as "curriculum narrowing," or "teaching to the test." I will discuss these phenomena of assessment in the next section.

Curriculum Narrowing and Teaching to the Test

Although the terms are often used separately, "curriculum narrowing" and "teaching to the test" will be used together in my paper to refer to any curriculum and instruction decisions that are driven by high-stakes testing. Curriculum narrowing refers to the disproportionate amount of class instruction spent on preparing for high-stakes testing rather than on other skills and concepts not regularly found on the assessments (Berliner, 2011). Similarly, teaching to the test is an increasingly common teaching practice in which instruction is designed specifically to address standards, content, and formats most commonly found on high-stakes tests (Au, 2011). These concepts are of particular importance for my study in that I examined teachers' perceptions of their instructional methods and activities to prepare for high-stakes tests.

The issue of curriculum narrowing. A survey and interview-based qualitative case study of Ohio social studies teachers summed up the issues of curriculum narrowing. Misco, Patterson, and Doppen (2011) surveyed 1,000 randomly-selected Ohio high school and middle school social studies teachers and found that, while teachers were by and large supportive of curriculum standards, the teachers reported that the high-stakes tests associated with those standards have a negative effect on curriculum and instruction. Specifically, Misco et al. found that teachers said that they were forced to by-pass some

standards in order to devote more time to standards they felt would be addressed on the test. In other words, the state test was driving the decisions teachers and leaders made about curriculum and instruction, rather than the students' content and instructional needs vis-à-vis the content standards (Misco et al., 2011). While Misco et al. did limit their examination to social studies teachers in the state of Ohio, it is not a difficult stretch to generalize that such conditions could also exist in ELA, given that more accountability pressure is assigned to the ELA test as compared to the social studies test.

Negative effects of teaching to the test. Teaching to the test can also have a negative effect on curriculum and instruction. Welsh, Eastwood, and D'Agostino (2014) noted a gap in the literature in that no recommendations for test preparation had been proposed during the standards-based reform era (roughly since 2001). The authors sought to create a hierarchy of test-preparation practices from most to least desirable. They then examined 32 third and fifth grade mathematics classrooms from 12 suburban schools located in the same Southwestern United States school district.

Welsh et al. (2014) used a mixed-methods approach consisting of teacher interviews and teacher responses to a rating scale that measured teacher perceptions of the alignment of test items to state standards. The researchers sought to discover what test preparation activities were taking place, and what, if any, gain in student test scores was the result of test preparation activities. The hierarchy ranged from the most desirable test-prep activity: teaching the content standards without regard to the state test, to the least desirable: using an actual test in preparation activities. The authors went on to collect qualitative data to identify test preparation activities in the 32 math classes and

then used a pre-existing correlational model to judge the effectiveness of the activities in improving student test scores.

Welsh et al. (2014) found no correlation between test preparation activities and student results on high-stakes tests. The authors determined that their findings were consistent with earlier studies that showed that test preparation, particularly when instruction is removed from the context of the standards and focused solely on test items, has little to no impact on student performance. Although the study is limited by the scope of its context and participants, the finding that dedicated test preparation activities have little to no effect on student achievement certainly provides a basis for further research and had implications for research that examines test preparation activities, such as this study.

The efficacy of teaching to the test has also been questioned in regards to the alignment of state standards to the high-stakes tests designed to assess them. Polikoff, Porter, and Smithson (2011) used a framework developed by Michigan State University to gauge the alignment of standards and assessments for 19 states participating in the Surveys of Enacted Curriculum. Using the framework, the researchers plotted the state standards on one graph and the assessment items on another and found an average of 19 percent alignment of standards and assessments tests for ELA and reading and a 27 percentage of average alignment for math. In other words, less than 20% of the items on the tests were in alignment with the standards (for example, one state's math standards were heavily weighted on linear and non-linear concepts, but the majority of assessment items were centered on evaluation of formulas, expressions, or equations) (Polikoff et al.,

2011). While this study had limitations (for example, data for only a few states were available and there were many variables that could not be accounted for in the methodology such as the variability in state standards and accountability policies), the findings, coupled with the research of Welsh et al. (2014), make a strong case for the importance of alignment of standards, instruction, and assessment in improving student academic performance in general and on high-stakes testing in particular.

Impact on instructional decision making. Palmer and Snodgrass Rangel (2011) conducted an ethnographic study of 16 teachers in 3rd to 5th grade bilingual Texas classrooms and found in their analysis of the data that teachers claimed their instructional decision-making was impacted by high-stakes testing, including decisions about what was taught, how it was taught, and to whom it was taught. However, Palmer and Snodgrass Rangel also found that teachers were able to mitigate the pressures of high-stakes testing by collaborating to construct lessons that took into account student differences, culture, and academic needs. Ironically, one of the limitations of their study was that the researchers were unable to triangulate their findings by conducting classroom visits to observe differentiated lessons in operation. The researchers were either denied access to the classrooms or chose to forego the observations because teachers were involved in high-stakes test preparation and such differentiation would not be observable. These studies show that high-stakes testing does impact teachers' instructional decision-making, but they also show that teachers understand the impact and dangers of teaching to the test and have made accommodations to mitigate these effects.

Finally, two qualitative studies similar to my research found that the implementation of a new state assessment had a profound effect on curriculum and instruction. Cho and Eberhard (2013) interviewed the teachers at a Wyoming elementary school to obtain their views on the implementation of a new state-wide assessment and how that implementation affected their decisions about classroom instruction. The findings showed that teachers devoted more class time to test preparation (Cho & Eberhard, 2013). This study holds additional relevance to my study in that the new Wyoming test is administered primarily on computers. Similarly, Pinder (2013) interviewed four Maryland high school science and math teachers and found that those teachers felt pressure to teach to the test at the expense of teaching deeper content or taking time to ensure that students fully understood covered standards. While these studies examined elementary and high school conditions in Mid-Atlantic and Western states, my study sought to bridge a gap in knowledge about practice in middle schools and in a Southeastern state.

Benefits of test preparation practices. Although the literature appears to support the negative aspects of curriculum narrowing and teaching to the test, there are authors and researchers who describe ways these practices could be beneficial. Kontovourki and Campis (2010) conducted a year-long ethnographic study of a third-grade classroom and found that teachers were able to incorporate sound reading strategies into test preparation instruction. For example, released copies of previous state tests were used as the text to practice critical reading strategies (Kontovourki & Campis, 2010). It should be noted that this practice goes strongly against the findings of Welsh et al. (2014)

in their hierarchy of appropriate test preparation activities. Longo (2010) studied middle school science classrooms in Connecticut and found that teachers were able to satisfy the need for test preparation by integrating scientific inquiry into instruction. One technique Longo observed was students and teachers collaborating to transform the language of a standard into a series of questions that students could answer through independent inquiry. This technique allowed the students to achieve mastery of the content of the standard while at the same time anticipating the nature of questions that might appear on the state assessment aligned to the standard (Longo, 2010).

The literature seems to indicate, with limited exceptions, that teaching to the test is an unproductive use of class time, although some teachers appear to have found instructional strategies that combine teaching to the test with effective instruction. Part of my study examines the extent of teacher's focus on test preparation and how teaching to the test did or did not influence instructional decision-making and whether teachers and administrators perceive that more or less focus needs to be placed on specific test preparation activities.

Accountability

As a result of the Race to the Top initiative, states, including Georgia, have had to develop accountability systems that link teacher evaluations to high-stakes testing (Baker, Oluwole, & Green, 2013). These evaluation systems are also known as value-added models or student growth models (Goldhaber, 2015). Such accountability methods and systems have been a subject of study in the literature. This is a topic addressed in my

study of the instructional methods and activities of teachers preparing for new high-stakes tests.

Validity of accountability use in teacher evaluations. One major concern about using student high-stakes test performance data as part of teacher evaluations is the inability to conclusively link teacher performance to student achievement. Ballou and Springer (2015) used statistical probability and error measurement procedures to show how errors could occur in evaluation systems. For example, they found that measurement error, changes in teacher performance ratings based on emerging information, and inconsistencies in testing conditions and verifications of teacher rosters were among the possible variables that could sway teacher accountability scores. Of particular interest to my study is that the student growth model to be used for teacher evaluation in Georgia has been found to have a high rate of error (Ballou & Springer, 2015).

Similarly, Schochet and Chiang (2011) used existing student data and statistical probability models to test value-added and student growth models and found error rates as high as 35% with only one year of data available. The rate of error did go down slightly to 25% with three years of data. However, when the authors applied the accountability measure on the school rather than individual level, error rates dropped remarkably to less than 10% (Schochet & Chiang, 2011). This decrease in error rate is of little value to the educators who are the focus of this study given that Georgia intends to use student growth models in the evaluation of individual teachers, and some teachers interviewed for this study did say that the use of test scores for teacher accountability

influences their instructional decisions. What did not come to light in my study is whether local teachers are aware of the fallibility of value-added systems and whether this knowledge has in any way affected their instructional methods and activities addressing test preparation.

Negative effects of accountability. Despite concerns over reliability and validity of value-added and student growth models for teacher evaluation, the use of such accountability measures is a reality teachers are addressing in classroom instruction. However, some studies show that concerns over accountability outweigh curriculum narrowing and teaching to the test in terms of the negative effect on instruction and students. Jennings and Sohn (2014) conducted a five-year longitudinal study of sixth through eighth graders in Houston to determine the impact of accountability on inequality in educational practices. The researchers studied the reading and math scores of more than 6,800, middle school students on the 2001-2004 Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills and the Stanford Achievement Test. The results of the study showed that the effect of high-stakes accountability on student achievement was mixed, but that the effect on instruction and educational policy were profound (Jennings & Sohn, 2014). Specifically, Jennings and Sohn found that in response to high-stakes accountability, teachers were focusing instruction on students nearest to reaching proficiency, often at the expense of students on opposite ends of the proficiency scale. In addition, Jennings and Sohn also found that high-stakes accountability concerns were also causing instructional leaders to focus instruction on test-specific skills, rather than higher-order thinking skills. Interestingly, the results of the study indicated that some groups of

students showed improvement under these conditions on reading tests, but these actions widened achievement gaps in math (Jennings & Sohn, 2014).

Similar results were found in a two-year observational study of 23 second and third grade classrooms. Plank and Condliffe (2013) used the Classroom Assessment Screening System (CLASS) to conduct 348 classroom observations during January and May of the same year. CLASS is a tool that allows evaluation of classroom quality in three domains: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional supports. Plank and Condliffe found that there was no significant change in emotional support and classroom organization from grade to grade or time of year. However, the quality of instructional supports (i.e., introduction of new topics, focus on higher-order thinking skills) dropped in third grade in the observation period prior to the administration of the high-stakes test (Plank & Condliffe, 2013). The authors noted that the focus of instruction changed from the introduction of new skills to practice for test taking as third grade is the first grade in which test results are used for student, teacher, and school accountability. The results of the study seem to indicate that the overall quality of instruction was lowest in classrooms where accountability pressures were highest (Plank & Condliffe, 2013).

A conclusion that can legitimately be drawn from the literature is that accountability pressures have a profound influence on teacher and leader activities, including instructional decision-making. The literature suggests that teachers are changing their instructional methods and decision-making to reflect the increased pressure placed on high-stakes testing as a result of value-added teacher evaluation

models. The validity of these evaluation methods has been called into question, but the inevitability of such methods has been showed to lead to increased curriculum narrowing and teaching to the test. Although the focus of my study is on how teachers and leaders describe and evaluate the instructional methods and activities they used to prepare students for the state test, the role accountability pressures and new educational policies played in teachers' and leaders' decision-making should not be ignored.

Computer-Based Assessments

Although issues such as high-stakes testing, teaching to the test, and accountability are central to my study, of no less importance are local teachers' views on the use of computers as the mode of delivery for the assessments. Using computers as the platform for high-stakes assessment is entirely new in Georgia as well as in many other states, and many of the issues associated with this form of assessment were not realized until the first administration of the test (Ogletree, Ogletree, & Allen, 2014). How teachers described and evaluated the activities and instructional time spent preparing for computer-based testing was particular interest in the data analysis for this study.

Preparation for computer-based testing. There does seem to be some agreement in the literature about how best to prepare students for tests administered on computers. Fletcher (2013) argued that states and districts need to upgrade hardware and infrastructure beyond the minimum requirements for testing to ensure that computers are an integrated part of instruction. Meanwhile, Redecker and Johannessen (2013) examined the ways computers were being used in European classrooms and argued that

teachers should regularly integrate computers into instruction in order to best prepare students for the use of computers as a platform for high-stakes testing. Schaffhauser (2013) examined data on the technology readiness of states for online testing and found that schools need to explicitly prepare students to take tests on computers, especially in Grade 3 (the first grade in which students take a high-stakes test). Finally, Webb, Gibson, and Forkosh-Baruch (2013) conducted a meta-analysis of research into technology and learning and argued that technology should be used as an assessment tool beyond the high-stakes evaluation of students, teachers, and schools. Students can use technology to demonstrate learning to satisfy the need for accountability, but also as a platform to create meaningful individual and collaborative high-level thinking assessment artifacts (Webb, Gibson, & Forkosh-Baruch, 2013).

Effects of computer-based testing. The research on the effects of computer-based testing is limited. In one study, Flowers, Kim, Lewis, and Davis (2011) examined test performance of 450 seventh and eighth graders with read aloud accommodations to determine if students with disabilities performed better with a traditional pen and paper and human reader format or with a computer-based electronic reader format. An equal number of students took a test using pencil and paper and a human reader as those taking the same test using computers and a speech replication program.

Flowers, Kim, Lewis, and Davis (2011) found that students in the paper and pencil testing environment scored slightly higher on the test than those taking the computer version. The authors followed up their data analysis with a survey of 607 students in 3rd through 11th grade. The survey showed that 89% of the students

responding said they preferred computer-based testing to the pencil and paper counterpart (Flowers, Kim, Lewis, & Davis, 2011). However, there are problems with making any generalizations from this research. For example, and as the authors pointed out, the data used to conduct the analysis was not gleaned from a controlled situation or from a randomly-selected sample. Instead, test scores from the same southern state for 225 students with disabilities and 225 students with no testing accommodations were selected to represent the entire state seventh and eighth grade population.

Although the researchers attempted to have the sample mimic the demographics of the total population, selection of participants was not randomized. Furthermore, and echoing issues mentioned in earlier sections of this literature review, the authors noted that any scores taken from testing situations that involve human administration have inherent validity concerns from extraneous variables (Flowers et al., 2011). Moreover, even if all other validity concerns were mollified, questions about the generalization of the findings of this study to other populations (students without disabilities and accommodations, for example) would remain.

Similarly, Yurdabakan and Uzunkavak (2012) administered an attitudinal scale survey to 784 Turkish 3rd through 5th grade students and found that the students significantly preferred computer-based assessments to traditional pencil-and-paper tests. The findings showed no difference in this preference between the genders or the grade levels (Yurdabakan & Uzunkavak, 2012). The researchers made no attempt to determine if computer-based assessment led to improved student results, and there is concern over the generalization of the results to United States students and schools. However, the key

utility of both this article and the work of Flowers et al. (2011) is not in what the researchers found, but, rather, in what they did not find. These studies point to the uncertainty and general lack of knowledge about computer-based testing in general and strongly support the contention of this study that a significant gap in knowledge and practice on the local level exists regarding the use of computers in testing.

Conclusion

In this review of literature, I have shown how the principle topics of my local study – teacher leadership, high-stakes testing, curriculum narrowing and teaching to the test, accountability, computer-based testing, and implementation of educational policy at the local level – have been widely discussed in the literature at large. Despite standardization of curricula and instructional practices, teachers still have the primary responsibility for teaching and learning. However, the literature is clear that the implementation of educational policies associated with high-stakes testing and accountability are greatly influencing the instructional decisions of teachers and administrators at the local level, in some cases with ethical and moral implications. In addition, teachers must also contend with a new way of administering the state tests through the use of computers, which the literature shows opens up a complete set of other issues including students' unfamiliarity with the testing platform, fairness of computer-based testing for students with disabilities, and the lack of adequate testing facilities within schools.

Project Derived from the Findings

I used the results of my data analysis as the basis for my doctoral project. There were several possible projects depending on the data. Given that curriculum leaders and other decision-makers have little empirical data upon which to base instructional decisions for the 2015-16 school year, the findings in this study could prove invaluable as an instructional planning tool and a suggested curriculum plan would be in order. For example, the data may indicate that a four-to-six-week unit plan outlining explicit test-preparation instruction is in order, and then my project might be to develop such an instructional unit. The results might suggest that moderate to major changes are needed to the instructional methods and activities teachers used to implement the new educational policies related to assessment and accountability. In this case, I would prepare a policy-related paper detailing the findings of the study and making specific recommendations for changes and additions to the instructional program examining how the new educational policies could best be implemented at the local level. On the other hand, the responses of the participants suggested that additional teacher training was needed. Therefore, I constructed a professional development curriculum and materials plan.

Summary

In Section 1 I described a significant problem in that local educators will be administering a standards-aligned "high-stakes" state assessment to their ELA students without any empirical data to validate the instructional methods and activities teachers used to prepare students for the test. This problem is exacerbated in that the results of these tests are used to evaluate teachers, administrators, schools, and systems. In

addition, these tests are in a format not previously used for state assessments, and students will be taking state tests for the first time using computers. With no other means to evaluate the effectiveness of instructional methods and activities in preparation for the test, teachers, administrators, and other educational leaders must turn to the views and perceptions of the teachers and administrators to drive instructional decision-making in preparation for the future assessments.

In Section 2, I will describe the qualitative research methods used to conduct this study. I also discuss how the research design is in alignment with the problem statement and research purpose. This description includes the research design, instrumentation, materials I employed and how I collected and analyzed the data. I also include details of the role of the researcher and steps I took for the protection of participants.

Section 2: The Methodology

Introduction

The problem addressed by this study is that local teachers are having to prepare students for new state assessments without much information or understanding about the design of the tests, how the tests will be scored, and how to best prepare students for the tests. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gather the perceptions of one northeast Georgia middle school's teachers and administrators, the people most responsible for policy implementation at the local level, about the nature and effectiveness of the test preparation instructional methods and materials they used, what professional development and other resources used to prepare for the test they deemed effective or ineffective, and what additions and changes to the test preparation program participants indicate they need for future assessments. The research methodology I used was a descriptive, single-case qualitative case study. In the remainder of this section I will describe and defend the research design/methodology chosen for this study, I will outline the data collection procedures, and I will present the methods of analysis that were applied to the data.

Methodology/Research Design

I chose the qualitative case study methodology based on three factors present in this case. First, a gap in practice exists in that currently there are no quantitative data available for local educators to evaluate the effectiveness of instruction to prepare students for the assessment. Second, although student scores from the first administration of the new test may be useful in determining alignment of instruction and assessments to

the standards, the test scores, due to many extraneous variables, are not valid and reliable data upon which local educational leaders may base decisions about future instructional methods and activities. Although state testing has been in place for decades, the new state assessments are based on the new standards, require written student responses, and are administered in a computer-based format. Because the test is new, there is no valid frame of reference for comparing current scores to previous test scores. Third, there are no data available to help district and school leaders determine the effectiveness of teacher supports, including professional development, related to preparation for the new assessments.

For these reasons, local educational leaders may turn to and rely on the perceptions of teachers and administrators about the instructional methods and activities used to prepare students to score well on the new assessment. Leaders can base curriculum and instruction decisions on what instructional methods and test preparation activities teachers and administrators believe were most effective for teaching the required content prior to the first administration of the tests, what was not effective, and what changes they would recommend. Leaders may also turn to the views and opinions of teachers about what supports and professional development they need to better prepare students for the tests.

Therefore, in alignment with the research questions of this study, I conducted a single case study using interviews of teachers and administrators to gather data about their perceptions regarding the effectiveness of their activities to prepare students for the test and their recommendations for what to do to best prepare students in the future.

Stake (2010) stated that one of the traits of good qualitative research is that the data are well-triangulated. In that regard, a review of lesson-planning documents and state and locally-produced teacher test preparation materials supplemented the interviews. I used these documents, particularly in regard to the first three research questions, to verify the data collected from the interviews, and to determine the alignment of instruction to the standards.

Case Study Design

A case study is distinguished from other methods of qualitative research by its focus on a particular context or bounded system (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). Descriptive case studies are designed to examine and relate a case within its context (Yin, 2014). A bounded system is defined as a specific situation, population, phenomenon, or program (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). In my study, the bounded system I examined was the ELA faculty in Grades 6-8 at a single northeast Georgia middle school, along with the school administrators who work most closely with the faculty in instructional decision-making, training, and the assessment of students. This bounded system was appropriate for this study as the population that makes up the case is the most likely source of data to address the research purpose and research questions.

Case studies have been shown to be particularly useful in examining and analyzing the work of a specific population (Creswell, 2012). In addition, Yin (2014) provided three criteria that a situation must meet in order to qualify as being appropriate for case study research: The research questions must be what, how, and why questions; the problem must be a contemporary one; and the researcher must have no control over

behavioral events (Yin, 2014). This study meets all three criteria in that I sought to illuminate the what, how, and why of the perceptions and decisions local teachers and administrators made regarding test preparation. Furthermore, the research problem is of current, local interest, and the design of the study is focused on past events and local teachers' and administrators' perceptions of those events. Finally, I had no control over the behavior of the participants.

Case Study Versus Other Methodologies

I considered other forms of qualitative research for this study. However, each of the other major qualitative approaches had aspects that made them unsuitable for this study. For example, ethnographies examine a community, institution, or culture on a day-to-day basis and often require the researcher to become deeply involved in the community, institution or culture to be observed and to conduct the study over an extended period of time (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Freebody, 2006; May, 2002). This study did not require me to be embedded in the community, institution, or culture under study, and the overall concept was retrospective in nature as participants were asked to reflect and comment on their actions and decisions in the past.

Grounded theory research, another common type of qualitative inquiry, was also not suitable for this study. The purpose of grounded theory research is to examine a particular situation and attempt to produce a theory that can be generalized to other, similar situations (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 2009). The purpose of this study was to obtain a deep understanding of a local situation and develop a project that addresses a local need or a local gap in practice. While the findings and project

associated with this study may hold some value in similar locations, creating a theory that can be generalized beyond the location of the study was not a goal of the study.

The final methodology meriting consideration was action research. Just as in some case study research, the researcher of action research seeks to develop an answer to a significant problem in a particular situation without concern for generalization to other locations or situations (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). However, unlike the case study, the researcher conducting action research often examines his or her own practice and has a predetermined action plan prior to the research or a predetermined outcome or intervention following the research in mind (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006; Koshy, 2005). In addition, the researcher and local members of the affected population are highly involved in the application of the action plan and the examination of its results (Creswell, 2012; Koshy, 2005). My study did not fit this model, as I gathered the reflections of practitioners on their prior practice and documents related to their practice in order to determine an appropriate recommendation for further action to implement effectively the new policies in curriculum and assessment so that students are prepared to score well on the test.

Theoretical Orientation of the Study

Like much qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 1994), the theoretical orientation of this study aligns with the social constructivist viewpoint. The social constructivist philosophy of educational research adheres to the belief that the views of the participants (i.e., the constructed knowledge of the participants about their experiences or feelings) are the most important aspect of qualitative research (Charmaz,

as cited in Creswell, 2012). The focus of this study was on how the participants perceive their experiences with preparing their students for the new state tests, rather than on experimental techniques attempting to evaluate the effectiveness of their actions such as one would expect in experimental or other forms of quantitative inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). I assumed that it is possible to construct knowledge, or specifically, to collect knowledge, about the perceptions of the participants in regard to their instructional methods and activities. I also assumed that the teachers and administrators interviewed as part of this study are the most qualified to provide the knowledge needed to evaluate their activities. Furthermore, I considered the semistructured interview is the most effective way to collect these views and experiences. Finally, the methods of data analysis I employed in this study provided information that was useful and enlightening to both myself and the participants.

Data Sources

Two types of sources were available to provide the data needed to address the research problem and research questions associated with this study. First, I gathered the perceptions of participants about the instructional methods and activities associated with test preparation, along with their views on teacher training, preparation, and resources, through interviews and provide the bulk of the data. In addition, I examined relevant documents, such as planning documents and state produced testing information for administrators and teachers, to verify interview responses, to initiate follow-up inquiries, and to expand the overall data base. In the remainder of this subsection I will describe in detail both of these data sources.

Interviews

Interviews are a useful and widely accepted method of gathering qualitative data directly from participants (Flick, 2007). According to Merriam (2009), interviews are useful when data are independently unobtainable or unobservable. This is the case when examining individual perceptions and attitudes. Since my goal was to discover the perceptions of the participants in regard to the effectiveness of their test preparation activities, I constructed and used a semistructured protocol as the primary method of data collection directly from the teacher and administrator participants. Hatch (2002) suggested that semistructured interviews, which he referred to as "formal interviews" (p. 94), are particularly effective when the researcher desires an in-depth examination of the feelings and perceptions of the participants.

Documents

Although the use of interviews as the single source of data is not uncommon in case study research (Hatch, 2002; Yin, 2014), I supplemented the interviews of the participants with a review of archival documents. Yin (2014) argued that documents are a strong, stable source of data and that the use of multiple sources of data, such as interviews and documents, is a particular strength of the case study research design. For this study, those documents consisted of teachers' lesson planning documents and state provided teacher training and testing information documents. In Research Question 1 of this study, I sought to understand the resources, training, and understanding the participants had about the test prior to the first administration of the assessment. Along with related interview questions, these documents provided an understanding of what

knowledge local teachers had prior to the first test. I used these documents were used as a means of triangulation to verify, support, supplement, or refute statements made by the participants to all applicable interview questions. These documents also led to additional inquiry as additional themes or discrepancies emerged.

Participants

The participants in this study provided the descriptions and opinions of their test preparation instructional methods and activities through semistructured interviews. The participants also described their own preparation and training for the state assessments. They also shared their recommendations for changes to instruction and any additional training or resources. In this subsection, I describe the selection of participants, the procedures for accessing the participants, procedures for establishing a researcher-participant working relationship, and protections for participants.

Selection of Participants

Across the country, teachers, administrators, and district leaders are grappling with the issues of high-stakes testing and teacher and school accountability tied to those tests (Amrein-Beardsley, Berliner, & Rideau, 2010; Bush, 2013; Liang & Akiba, 2015). As shown in Section 1, educators on the local level are feeling the pressure from new state tests and new accountability programs. In order to address the research problem and research questions associated with this study, the sampling frame for my case study was all members of the ELA faculty of a northeast Georgia middle school, the school administrator who is the ELA liaison and the school testing administrator, the other two assistant principals of the school, the head principal of the school, the district-level

testing administrator, and the district secondary level curriculum director. This sample frame included 12 content teachers, three special education co-teachers, three assistant principals, one head principal, and two district administrators. These teachers and administrators were included in the sample frame as they were the individuals responsible for curriculum and instructional decision-making, were responsible locally for the dissemination of information about the Georgia Milestones Assessment, or were in charge of the scheduling of both the test practice sessions and the actual administration of the assessment.

Therefore, the inclusion criteria were that the teachers taught ELA at the local middle school for the entire 2014-15 and/or 2015-16 school year and that the administrators were responsible for curriculum and instructional decisions made related to ELA and/or were responsible for the implementation of educational policies related to curriculum, instruction, and assessment at the local middle school during the 2014-15 and 2015-16 school years.

Exclusion criteria were that the staff member did not teach at and/or was not responsible for decision-making related to teaching and/or assessing at the local middle school during the entire 2014-15 or 2015-16 school years. The sample was then the eight teachers and administrators who agreed to participate in the study (see Table 4). From this volunteer, convenience, and purposeful sample of teachers and administrators I obtained rich insights and perceptions from which deep knowledge of the situation was constructed (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). This sample was appropriate as the participants are the individuals with the direct knowledge of instructional methods and activities used

to prepare for the test and are the individuals who stand to receive the most benefits from the results of this study. In addition, the number of potential participants (21) and the actual number of participants (8) was within the recommendation of Kvale (2007), who suggested that the number of subjects required for a qualitative case study is dependent upon what it is the researcher needs to know, but in general, the number of interview subjects required to answer most questions is 15, plus or minus 10.

Table 4

Participant Descriptors

Participant	Gender	Role	Years of Service
1	Female	Assistant principal and school ELA administrator	26
2	Male	Assistant principal	20
3	Male	Special education co-teacher	12
4	Female	Sixth grade ELA teacher	3
5	Female	Seventh grade ELA teacher	17
6	Female	Seventh grade ELA teacher/subject area chair	26
7	Male	Eighth grade ELA/SS teacher	15
8	Female	Eighth grade ELA teacher	7

Description of the local setting. The local site for my study was a middle school located in northeast Georgia. As of the October 2015 count, the school has 1,107 students, of which 64.32% qualify for free or reduced meals and 24.6% are minority students (Georgia Department of Education, 2015b, 2015e, 2015f). The school is the only middle school in a rural county school district of 4,855 students. The school is fed by five elementary schools and feeds one high school, although that high school includes a college and career academy and a charter school for students with non-traditional needs, such as flexible school hours. The system in which the school is located borders on the sixth largest city and 19th largest county by population in Georgia (United States Census Bureau, 2015). The system spends above the state average per pupil for both instruction and total expenditures (Georgia Department of Education, 2015d).

Procedures for accessing participants. I obtained permission from the local district to contact and solicit the participation of the local middle school ELA teachers and the administrators identified in the sample frame. The local district provided the names and contact information. I contacted the members of the sample frame by school e-mail. I explained the nature of the study and, for those agreeing to participate, I obtained their informed consent.

I encouraged potential informants to agree to participate by focusing on the extrinsic and intrinsic benefits they may gain through the study. The extrinsic benefits were the study's purpose of taking the participants' thoughts and beliefs about their test preparation activities to drive a project that could lead to positive modifications to instruction, additional training, or an allocation of additional resources. Intrinsic factors

were the ability of participants in the study to have an opportunity for self-reflection, for expression of thoughts and ideas, and for participation in a project that could lead to greater good in the future (Wolgemuth, Erdil-Murphy, Opsal, Cross, & Kaanta, 2015). In the end, eight members of the sample frame agreed to participate. These participants include two teachers from both seventh and eighth grades, a sixth-grade teacher, a special education co-teacher, and two school-level administrators, including the administrator who serves as both the testing coordinator and ELA supervisor for the school (see Table 4). The sample size met the recommendation of at least six participants to achieve saturation when interviewing generally homogeneous groups (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Establishing a Researcher-Participant Working Relationship

Since the researcher was once a member of the faculty that represents the participant pool for this study, a pre-existing working relationship was in place. In interview-based qualitative research, a close researcher-participant relationship is desirable in order to obtain responses that allow for deep understanding of participants' views and feelings (McGinn, 2008). McGinn, however, also warned that such close relationships are not without difficulties and dangers. In the remainder of this subsection, I describe my role as the researcher, how I established the close relationship with participants needed to gain rich and thick interview data, and the procedures I used to mitigate researcher bias.

Role of the researcher. A fundamental principle of qualitative research is that the researcher has an integral part to play in the research (Merriam, 2009). Yin (2014)

was explicit in describing the need for the researcher to be aware of his or her role in conducting case study research in order to avoid dangers of bias and misinterpretation of data. At the same time, Fontana and Frey (2008) argued that the concept of an unbiased researcher is little more than a pipe dream, and that researchers should be more conversationalists than interviewers for the data gleaned in the interview to have value. Like Yin, Fontana and Frey called for the researcher to be aware and careful but emphasized that interviews can never be considered "objective data" (p. 144).

Relationship with participants. My plan for establishing a close relationship with the participants centered on my former working relationships and communication of the potential benefit of the study. I was a member of the English Language Arts faculty at the school in this study for nine years, including time spent as a faculty member in two of the three grade levels. During this time, I worked closely and collaboratively with members of the faculty, and the familiarity and rapport established during this time opened the door to the interview sessions, which seemed to assist in developing a feeling of ease and comfort on the part of the interviewees and appeared to lead to deeper and richer responses.

I also attempted to put participants at ease by explaining the potential benefits of the study. These benefits include an increased level of knowledge teachers and leaders will have about their practice, and this knowledge can be used to drive instructional improvements, teacher training, and additional allocation of resources. In addition, the study gave participants a safe outlet to express views on instructional and leadership

practice, and participants may also have felt that expressing their views may lead to outcomes that add value for students.

Mitigating bias. The primary factor in mitigating researcher bias in this study was that I no longer have a vested interest in the results and project outcome. I have moved on to an elementary school in the system, and I am no longer involved in or have any influence on curriculum, instruction, and assessment decisions or actions of the faculty of the school that is the subject of this study. I am not now and have never been in any supervisory capacity with any of the potential participants. Furthermore, the results of this study and the project driven by this study have no direct or indirect impact or influence on my current teaching practice.

In the interviews, I worked to divorce my previous familiarity of the situation and the participants from the questioning in order to avoid the inhibiting of verbal participant responses described by McGinn (2008). In addition, I attempted to maintain neutral body language and facial expressions so as not to bias responses. I also worked to avoid asking leading questions, and I practiced interviewing with several non-participants in the study, asking for feedback on any potential biases that I displayed or expressed. In addition, I identified one other potential personal bias. My position as a former member of the faculty of the study school with my own opinions on test preparation activities could have influenced both the nature of my questioning and my interpretation of the responses. However, I attempted to mitigate these biases through independent reviews and member checking of interview and document data. These attempts to avoid bias further add to the trustworthiness of the data.

Protection for Participants

I put in place and maintained measures for the protection of human subjects as required by both Walden University and the school system. In addition, I completed National Institutes of Health (NIH) Protection for Human Subjects training and certification, and these protections are consistent with the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1978) for the protection of human subjects. The ethical principles for the protection for participants outlined by the Belmont Report include respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Beneficence and justice are addressed in the potential risks and benefits of this study described earlier in this subsection. Respect for persons includes the full disclosure to the potential participant of all aspects of the research, including potential risks and benefits, and receiving informed consent from the potential participants.

Disclosure and informed consent. Protection for the participants included completion of informed consent forms prior to any interviews taking place. Furthermore, I informed participants at the beginning of data collection and throughout data collection that their participation in the study was purely voluntary and that they had the right to terminate their participation in the study at any time in the process. No apparent or reported adverse event or reaction occurred during the data collection.

Protection of identity. Prior to the recording of each interview, each participant was assigned a code name. The participant was only referred to by that code name during the recording of the interview, transcription of the interview, and data analysis.

Data from the interviews, including the actual recording and transcriptions of the interviews, are stored at the residence of the researcher, but the key to the code names assigned to the participants is stored electronically on a portable data device kept physically separate from the data. The key will be destroyed as soon as possible in keeping with university and local system requirements. Any printed and written documents will be maintained in a locked file cabinet at the home of the researcher.

All quotes and statements gathered in the interviews and transcribed in the study were examined to ensure that participants cannot be inadvertently identified by the nature or content of the response. In addition to Walden University Institutional Review Board approval, I obtained permission for the study from the local school district, and each participant completed a consent form.

Risks and benefits of participation. The primary risk to the participants in this study was disclosure of their identity in regards to interview responses. Rose and Pietri (2002) identified the primary risk to participants in research in the workplace as loss of job and loss of privacy. In order to lesson these risks, Rose and Pietri suggested a rigorous review of the research proposal by the institutional review board of the sponsoring institution and complete and candid disclosure of the nature of the study and the risks and rewards associated with the study. The measures I took to address these risks included securing the approval of the Walden Institutional Review Board (IRB approval number 04-29-16-0167551) before proceeding with the research and the use of the Informed Consent for full disclosure of the risks and rewards associated with this study.

The primary benefit for participants associated with this study is an increase in their knowledge and understanding of teacher perceptions of test preparation instruction, resources, and teacher training. Through their participation in the study, teachers and leaders may receive benefit in that the project that was derived from this study may lead to improvements in test preparation instructional methods and activities, additional or improved teacher training, the allocation of additional resources, and potential changes in local policy.

Data Collection

The focus of the data collection for this study was in two areas. First, semistructured interviews provided the bulk of the data as participants described and evaluated their test preparation instructional methods and activities and the resources and training provided to teachers to prepare them for presenting test preparation instruction. Second, the interview data was triangulated by a review of archival documents, including planning documents related to test preparation, as well as state-provided teacher training and assessment preparation materials.

Interviews

Semistructured interviews provided the participants' descriptions and opinions of their test preparation instructional methods and activities and their own preparation and training for the state assessments. In this subsection, I will describe the interview protocol, the recording of responses, and the location and timing of the interviews.

Interview protocol. Semistructured interviews were conducted using a self-developed interview protocol (see Appendix B), which includes a series of pre-

determined questions aligned with the literature review, the conceptual framework, and the research questions. Follow-up questions were asked as determined by responses to the predetermined questions. Yin (2014) stated that the main purpose of predetermined questions is to keep the interviewer on track, and this will be no less the case in my study. Ayers (2008) also noted that semistructured interviews are particularly well suited and useful when the topic of discussion is a well-known concept. Instructional decision-making, high-stakes testing, and test preparation are topics familiar to teachers and administrators. For this study, questions aligned to the research problem, research questions, and conceptual framework were developed. These questions were designed to elicit responses from the participants about their feelings and perceptions of the assessment preparations. All participants were asked the questions in the protocol with follow-up and deeper-probing questions as driven by the participants' responses to the primary questions.

A self-developed protocol was used because an existing protocol that addresses the topics raised by the research purpose and research questions of this study was not readily available. The protocol was based on the recommendations of Jacob and Furgerson (2012) in that the protocol was driven by the research problem and questions, was grounded in the conceptual frameworks and the literature supporting this study, and had a beginning and ending script, consisted of open-ended questions, began by asking personal and demographic questions, and followed a pattern of increasingly deeper probing questions as the interview moved along.

Concerns about the credibility and trustworthiness of the instrument can arise from self-developed interview protocols. However, Kvale (2007) argued that validity and reliability (credibility and trustworthiness) in qualitative research is centered on the appropriateness of the instrument to the research purpose. Since the major predetermined questions in the protocol were derived directly or indirectly from the research questions, the conceptual framework, and the literature supporting this study, the validity of the protocol was supported. Kvale also argued that an excellent method to achieve and maintain validity through the data collection process is to have the researcher's instruments examined by persons knowledgeable about the subject matter of the study. To that end, a local education professor with knowledge of and experience in developing interview protocols reviewed the interview protocol. The reviewer's suggestions were incorporated into the final version. Furthermore, two ELA teachers who are not members of the faculty of the school site in this study reviewed the interview and discussion protocols, and revisions were made based on their recommendations before data collection began.

Recording of responses. In order to facilitate accurate and detailed record-keeping, I recorded participant responses using a small digital audio recorder. The effectiveness of audio recording has been widely recognized (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). The audio recordings were supported with handwritten notes as a backup for the tape and to note key points in the interview. I used the time between the interviews to reflect on each session and begin a preliminary data analysis as recommended by Hatch (2002). I also made preliminary personal and interpretive

notations on the sessions during this time. In addition, I used hand-written notes to record non-verbal reactions, such as body language and the general demeanor of the interviewees. Qualitative researchers must make notes as the data are collected (Galletta, 2013). Watching body language and facial expressions allowed me to monitor the interviewee's nervousness, confusion, or understanding of the question and make adjustments as needed (Kinnair, 2011).

Accuracy of responses. I used two methods to assure the accuracy of interview responses prior to data analysis. First, a person familiar with interview-based qualitative research but not affiliated in any way with this study compared the audio recordings to the transcripts of the interviews for accuracy of the transcription. Next, each participant received a copy of the transcription of his or her interview for member checking. Member checking took place in an additional 30-45-minute session with the researcher. Participants also had an opportunity to review the transcripts of their interview session (and, if necessary, hear the recording of the interview). They then had an opportunity to explain, correct, or expand their responses. Only two participants made minor modifications to their original statements during the member-checking process. Those modifications were to ensure clarity of their response and became part of the data prior to analysis. Since no participants had any objection or other issues about their transcribed interviews, all responses were used in the data analysis.

Interview locations and timing. The location of the interview has been shown to have an influence on the quality of interview responses (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). For this study, all but one interview took place away from the subject school setting. I

conducted only one interview on campus at the participant's request. I conducted the interview outside of school hours and in the office of a school administrator when no other school employees were present in the area of the school in which the interview took place. The remainder of the interviews took place in a meeting room of the local public library, in a school away from the study site, or, in one case, at the request of the participant, by phone. There were no interruptions during any of the interviews nor inadvertent identification of the interviewees.

Jacob and Furgerson (2012) argued that lengthy interviews are less effective than shorter, well-paced sessions. Therefore, I allotted no more than 45 minutes for each interview, and only once did a participant desire to extend the conversation beyond 45 minutes. The average interview lasted slightly more than 30 minutes, and, since the interviews were conducted over a three-day period, there was at least one hour between interview sessions. Although it was desirable that all interviews be conducted in-person, it was necessary that one phone interview was conducted. Vogl (2013) demonstrated that phone interviews can be as effective as face-to-face interviews. However, Irvine, Drew, and Sainsbury (2013) found that the researcher must be prepared to provide greater stimulation to participants to provide elaboration in question responses in telephone interviews as opposed to face-to-face interviews.

Review of Documents

Documents are among the six sources of data used in case studies and are effective as a means to confirm or refute data gathered from other sources (Yin, 2014). Documents are also a stable source of rich data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Hatch, 2002;

Merriam, 2009). Hatch (2002) argued that documents are useful beyond the ability to verify or refute statements made in interviews in that documents can be used as an independent data source. In this study, the documents examined included teachers' instructional planning documents, state-supplied teacher training materials, and guidebooks provided to teachers about the test from state sources. The review of these documents did not lead to any follow-up questions for interviewees due to discrepancies or themes that warranted greater examination (Hatch, 2002).

Lesson planning documents. The school in this study does not require teachers or grade-level teams to submit formal lesson plans. However, I was provided the planning documents and pacing calendars constructed by teachers to guide instruction. These documents outlined the general instructional activities to be used and referenced applicable standards to be addressed in the lessons. I examined documents from three months in the fall of 2014. The purpose of this examination was to obtain a basic understanding of the amount of instructional time devoted to test preparation, as well as to have further verification of the types of instructional activities teachers scheduled to prepare students for the test.

Teacher training documents. The teacher training documents I examined included state-produced presentations and guidebooks provided to individuals and groups of teachers to familiarize them with the standards addressed by the new test, the format and content of the new test, methods of evaluation of student responses on the new test, and suggested resources to help teachers prepare students for the test. As with planning documents, I used these documents as both a means to verify participant responses and as

a source of additional and follow-up questioning, particularly questioning related to the participants' views about the quality of these documents in regards to their intended purpose.

Permissions and accessing the documents. I obtained permission from the local system to access and use local data. These documents included lesson planning materials. Although the school and system does not require teachers and teams to turn in formal lesson plans, documents such as planning calendars were available. These calendars referenced applicable ELA standards and give general lesson details including teacher and student actions, location of instruction (i.e. classroom, computer lab, etc.), and methods of assessment. Training and resource documents that I reviewed were archived documents provided by the local district and/or documents available online from the state board of education that were used by the system.

Data Analysis

The researcher in a qualitative study must organize data in ways that can be useful for data analysis and as a vehicle for answering the research questions (Creswell, 2012). Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) noted that qualitative data collection may result in many pages of text, which can present challenges for the researcher in handling the volume of response data. For this reason, it is essential for the researcher to have specific plans in place for managing and analyzing the data that is collected. I conducted the data collection for this study during the spring semester 2016 with interviews conducted in May. I conducted the document analysis immediately after the interviews were completed.

Analysis of Interview Data

In order to facilitate the analysis of the interview data, I used a combination of procedures suggested by Creswell (2012), Freebody (2006), Hatch (2002), Miles and Huberman (1994), and, primarily, Saldaña (2013). I first made complete transcripts of each session for ease of coding and sorting data (Hatch, 2002), saving each document by participant and research question number. Following the procedures described by Saldaña (2013), I conducted preliminary coding by dividing the data analysis pages into three columns. The first column contained the transcript of the interview, the second column contained an initial, or "analytic memo" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 20) of a subsection of the transcript, and third column contained an interpretive summary of the subsection based on the initial coding. This preliminary coding was supplemented by placing field notes side-by-side to the transcripts to note any clarifications or additions (Freebody, 2006).

After finishing the preliminary coding of the interview data, I then further analyzed the data using the structural coding technique described by Saldaña (2013). Structural coding allows the researcher to codify interview data into categories based on responses to interview questions based on the guiding research questions (Saldaña, 2013), which is a match for the interview process used in this study. Saldaña suggested grouping the emergent coded ideas into dominant themes for further analysis. Although other forms of analysis might have been used for further examination of the data, the structural coding technique was used because this method is well-suited for sorting and categorizing data collected through semistructured interviews (Saldaña, 2013).

During the structural coding process, I used a spreadsheet, placing each research question in a row and the responses from each participant in columns below each row. This format was in part drawn from the organizational procedures presented by Miles and Huberman (1994). Once all data was entered into this matrix for all eight research questions, I examined each column under each research question for recurring themes. To determine the number of times a theme appeared in the data, Saldaña (2013) recommended a focus on the number of participants who mentioned a theme, rather than the number of times the theme occurred overall in the text of the interviews. By using this method, I identified dominant themes across all the responses, rather than a theme appearing to be dominant due to its mentioning multiple times by the same respondent. For this study, I used a row and column format to present research questions side-by-side with the emergent themes, the number of participants who responded with each theme, and the subthemes related to the more general theme (see Table 5).

Analysis of Document Data

I used triangulation, or the collection of data from multiple sources to help understand a theme or perspective, to further establish the trustworthiness of the data and expand the depth of this study (Bowen, 2009; Creswell, 2009; Farmer et al., 2006). I supplemented data from interviews with a review of planning documents, training materials, and other testing resources in order to provide a backdrop for the interview data, expose areas that need further probing through follow-up interviews, expand the knowledge base related to the research problem, and corroborate or contradict interview responses. I employed protocols established by Bowen (2009) and Farmer et al. (2006)

in the analysis of documents (see Appendix C). The three sources of data were local teacher planning documents, training documents provided by the State of Georgia, and testing resources also provided by the state. In keeping with the analysis protocol suggested by Farmer et al. (2006), I compared these documents with the dominant themes that emerged from the interview data to determine alignment between the data sources and data triangulation.

Background for the Data Analysis

The three aspects of the conceptual framework for this study provided the background for the data analysis. First, I examined interview responses to determine the degree to which the teacher participants felt they had responsibility and control of instructional decisions. All four of Danielson's (2007) key components of instructional practice – planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction, and professional responsibility – were evident in the participants' responses. For example, all the participants either mentioned or implied in their responses that teachers were responsible for planning and delivery of instruction. Likewise, the alignment of standards and assessment (Webb, 2007) and instruction and assessment (Tankersley, 2007) provided a lens for the analysis of interview and document data. Interview responses and lesson plans indicated that instruction was aligned with the standards and the assessment to the extent teachers were familiar with the make-up of the assessment.

Findings

The analysis of the data resulted in findings from both the interviews and the documents. However, interviews of local ELA teachers and building administrators

made up the bulk of the data collection, and the analysis of documents was in large part based on the interview results. Therefore, I coded and summarized interviews first. That coding document was the basis for cross-referencing what was found in the document data. While the responses were coded to identify dominant themes, I also reviewed the responses to determine their association with the conceptual framework that is the basis for this study. In the remainder of this section I will describe the key findings of my data analysis through the lens of the conceptual framework and the eight research questions of this study.

Findings and the conceptual framework. The conceptual framework that undergirds this study focuses on three areas. The first area is the concept of teachers as instructional leaders (Danielson, 2007). The second area is the alignment between standards and assessment (Webb, 2007), and the third area is the alignment between instruction and assessment (Tankersley, 2007).

The findings support that the teachers in the local school were primarily responsible for the planning and implementation of instruction, including instruction related to test preparation. For example, Participant 3 stated that "teachers made the decision to focus on writing tasks, rather than so much on reading." In addition, Participant 6 noted that teachers also had control of the materials provided to students, such as a monthly magazine geared toward practice of skills related to the standards. Responses from Participants 4, 6, and 7 explicitly supported that teachers were the primary decision-makers in regards to classroom instruction.

The responses also supported that alignment of instruction to assessment and standards to assessment was a critical issue for the participants. In fact, it can be argued that these alignments (or lack of alignment) are the major issue confronting local teachers when it comes to decisions about how to best prepare students for the test. For example, Participant 8 expressed concern about the alignment of the standards and assessment. She stated, "What is missing is information about how the test itself, what standards are going to be assessed." Meanwhile, Participant 3 noted that teachers' perceptions about the alignment of instruction and assessment may have led to faulty assumptions. Participant 3 said, "Teachers have an understanding of what is being taught, but there is still doubt about the alignment of instruction and the test."

Interview data. The interview protocol and, therefore, the analysis were based on the eight research questions. Although the teachers interviewed varied by grade level and teaching assignment (one participant was a special education co-teacher), and even though the two administrators participating have dissimilar involvement in the ELA program, the responses were remarkably consistent. The preliminary coding of the responses resulted in dominant themes (i.e., more than half the participants had responses consistent with the theme) occurring for six of the eight research questions (see Table 5). For example, all eight participants agreed that the primary source of pre-assessment training for teachers was through state-provided resources (Research Question 1).

Training and information. The training and information content was delivered either through faculty and subject area meetings or through e-mails to teachers.

According to Participant 1, who was a primary disseminator of information of information provided by the state to faculty members,

> I viewed a webinar, and I got information from a meeting with our district testing coordinator. I also received information from a conference I attended. I brought back all the information that I received. We were limited in the information we received, but whatever was provided I shared with teachers.

In addition to the information provided by Participant 1, the Fall Georgia Milestones Assessment Conference Parts I and II presentations and the Georgia Milestones EOG Assessment guide were provided to teachers both as a group and individually through e-mail.

Prior methods and activities. Participants also indicated strong agreement on two themes that emerged from the responses to Research Question 3 (What instructional methods and activities did the teachers develop and implement prior to the test?). All eight participants mentioned that student writing was a focus of pre-test instruction. However, the subthemes behind the theme of student writing were varied. For example, half the participants mentioned that the focus was primarily on students practicing writing constructed responses to questions. Student self-evaluation and critique, emphasis on narrative writing, writing extended responses (i.e., essays), and collaborative and computer-based writing were also mentioned. According to Participant 4,

> We spent a lot of time working on constructed response and extended response, for reading paired text, citing text, and learning to explain their answers. So, I would say we spent a great deal of time focusing on the writing.

Table 5

Emergent Major Themes

Research Question	THEMES	Number of Participants (N = 8) THEME/Subthemes
Research Question 1 – What information, resources, training, and supports did English Language Arts teachers and administrators receive from local sources and the state to help them implement the new policies prior to the first administration of the assessment?	STATE PROVIDED RESOURCES	8
Research Question 2 - How were the information, resources, training and supports used (or not used), and why?	WRITING	4
	Writing on computers based on state-provided information	3
	Writing prompts similar to information provided about the state tests	1
	CLASS ASSESSMENTS	2
	Class assessments connected to state test	1
	Benchmarks based on information provided	1
	PRINTED MATERIALS	2
	Scope magazine subscriptions	1
	Common Core-aligned workbooks	1
Research Question 3 – What instructional methods and activities did the English Language Arts teachers develop and implement in preparation for the 2015 state tests based on prior information or specifically focused on or driven by the new tests or standards (or the assumptions they made about the tests or standards)?	WRITING INSTRUCTION	8
	Practice on constructed responses	4
	Student self-evaluation and critique of own work	1
	Emphasis on narrative writing	1
	Extended responses	1
	Collaborative and computer-based writing	1
	READING INSTRUCTION	5
	Non-fiction texts: Using evidence from reading	3
	Novel study	1
	Literary comprehension	1
Research Question 4 – What assumptions did teachers and administrators make about the new tests and/or standards, and how did these influence their instructional or curricular decisions?	TOO MUCH TIME WAS SPENT ON WRITING AT THE EXPENSE OF READING	4
	INSTRUCTION WAS BASED ON STANDARDS	3

(Continued)

Table 5 (continued)

Research Question	THEMES	Number of Participants (N = 8) THEME/Subthemes
Research Question 5 – In what ways, if any, did instructional methods and activities differ from those used in previous years and why did teachers make those changes	COMPUTERS USED TO MODEL ONLINE TESTING	5
	ASSESSMENTS BASED ON CONSTRUCTED AND EXTENDED RESPONSES	3
	INSTRUCTION FOCUSED ON THE STANDARDS	3
	USE OF EVIDENCE-BASED QUESTIONING	3
	INSTRUCTIONAL RIGOR INCREASED	3
	Instruction was balanced between constructed response and narrative writing.	2
	Previous test was not as rigorous because of the lack of a writing component.	1
Research Question 6 - How do teachers and administrators perceive the effectiveness of the instructional methods and activities they developed and implemented in preparing their students to perform well with the new state standards and on the new state assessments and to what extent were those methods and activities aligned with the standards and the assessment, given that teachers have now seen the new tests? – In what ways, if any, did instructional methods and activities differ from those used in previous years and why did teachers make those changes?	METHODS AND ACTIVITIES WERE INEFFECTIVE	8
	There is competition for computer access	2
	Online tools available to students are not identical to those on the test.	1
	The state practice test was hard to use.	1
	More time should have been spent on teaching reading and understanding the prompts.	1
	ELA teachers feel pressured to get in all aspects of the standards.	1
	Students are getting “burned out” on computer programs.	1
	There is doubt about the alignment of instruction and the test.	1
	METHODS AND ACTIVITIES WERE EFFECTIVE	6
	Instructional alignment was correct.	2
	Practice in taking online writing assessments appears effective.	1
	Teachers duplicated the test as much as possible.	1
	Students performed well on writing.	1
	Scope activities helped address the standards and computer skills.	1

(Continued)

Table 5 (continued)

Research Question	THEMES	Number of Participants (N = 8) THEME/Subthemes
Research Question 7 - What changes in instructional methods and activities do teachers and administrators recommend, if any for the following year to better prepare students to score well on the state assessment?	SCHOOL CULTURE AND METHODS	5
	Teachers need instructional time to react to the data.	2
	All teachers should be responsible for their students' ELA performance.	1
	Instructional focus should be on individual student growth.	1
	Local assessments can provide data about current students.	1
	READING AND WRITING INSTRUCTION	4
	More instruction needs to focus on text-dependent writing.	2
	Reading and writing instruction needs to be blended.	1
	More instructional time should be spent on reading.	1
Research Question 8 - What additional training or resources do teachers and administrators state are needed to improve instructional methods and activities to prepare students to score well on the assessment?	UNDERSTANDING OF THE TEST	8
	Teachers need a complete practice exam and computer tools that are similar to those on the actual test.	3
	Teachers need to understand the types of questions on the test.	2
	Teachers need to understand the formula used for scoring the test, including Lexile scores.	2
	Teachers do not receive enough detailed information about reading performance on the test.	1
	INSTRUCTIONAL FOCUS	4
	There is a need for a dedicated reading class for all students.	1
	There needs to be more time to remediate deficient reading skills.	1
	Students need an understanding of the expectations of the test and how to answer specific questions.	1
	Students need more exposure to testing on computers.	1
	PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	4
	Trainers need to be more qualified.	1
	Teachers need to be more unified in teaching practice.	1
	Teachers need additional training on classroom management.	1
	Teachers need training on how to use the resources available.	1

(Continued)

Table 5 (continued)

Research Question	THEMES	Number of Participants (N = 8) THEME/Subthemes
Research Question 8 (Continued) - What additional training or resources do teachers and administrators state are needed to improve instructional methods and activities to prepare students to score well on the assessment?	SCHOOL CULTURE AND METHODS	2
	Data team activities need to have relevance to classroom instruction.	1
	The structure of the school and the grouping of students could be revised to better facilitate instruction and student achievement.	1
	STANDARDS AND CONTENT	2
	ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES	2

Note. Adapted from Saldana, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

A second dominant theme that emerged from Research Question 3 was an instructional focus on reading, which was mentioned by five of the participants. Three participants indicated that reading instruction was focused on finding evidence from non-fiction texts. Participant 3 described the reading instruction activities as "a bigger focus on non-fiction reading and writing using textual evidence." Participants also mentioned novel study and literary comprehension when describing reading instruction.

Another question that resulted in a dominant theme mentioned by all participants was Research Question 6 (How do teachers and administrators perceive the effectiveness of their instructional methods?). All eight participants described their methods as ineffective for a variety of reasons. Two participants reported competition for computer seat time for student use as a downfall of their instructional preparations. Participant 3 stated,

> As for the district level, they supported us with computer time and making sure that we had access to computers so that our students could practice as much as we needed them to. But, even though they have been adding them as much as they

> can, there is still competition between grade levels. We just don't have as much computer time as we need yet.

Among the other six responses, one participant listed the discrepancy between the computer tools used on the test and those available to teachers on a daily basis as a shortcoming of their instructional preparations. Another noted that the practice program provided by the state (which was designed to familiarize students with the computer platform, not actual questions on the test) was difficult for students to use. Participant 3 noted that the results of the first administration of the test seemed to indicate that teachers spent more time teaching writing than reading, and that resulted in overall lower scores. Participant 3 stated,

> I feel like the time we spent practicing for writing and the time we spent practicing for reading that perhaps we didn't have enough practice with reading because we focused too much on the writing aspect for the test because the writing was a new component.

Participant 8 mentioned that testing on computers, along with instructional time spent on other locally-required computer-based instructional programs, was causing student "burn-out" on using computers. Participant 8 stated, "My biggest concern with seventh graders and possibly eighth graders is buy in, getting them to take it seriously. I'm not a big fan of computer-based teaching where the computer does the teaching."

The point made by Participant 8 on the surface seems inconsistent with the literature previously reviewed in this study that demonstrated the effectiveness and usefulness of computer-based assessments. It is important to make a distinction between

computer-based assessments and computer-based instruction. The literature supports the dedication of some instructional time for students to interact with high-quality computer-based assessments. There is also literature in favor of the use of computers as an instructional tool (for example, Francis, 2012). However, in large part these studies and reports address the use of computers to assist students with disabilities to access content or to provide the platform for all students to complete project-based or research-based instructional tasks. In response to a follow-up question, Participant 8 clarified that the use of computers at the local school primarily consisted of students completing district-mandated assignments on a third-party platform. Participant 8 commented that these tasks, which require students to complete up to 90-minutes of interaction with the program each week, were taking away from valuable time students could be spending in classroom instructional activities.

Finally, Participant 3 expressed doubt as to whether the instructional program as a whole was aligned to the test, particularly in relation to how the test is scored.

> From the weighting of the Georgia test, it is unclear how they weight the writing as to the multiple choice. They tell us the point value of stuff, but we don't know if all points are created equal, and how much certain items count and don't count.

While it is clear that all the participants had concerns about the effectiveness of their instructional methods and activities for test preparation, a majority of the participants also found some good in the instructional program. For example, two participants mentioned that they felt that the alignment between instruction and the standards and the test was correct. Participant 1 said,

> I'm comfortable with the alignment, from what I can gather. I think as best it can be. It's aligned more than not aligned. In talking to teachers who talked to students, the students felt comfortable with it.

Participant 5 felt that the locally-produced online practice assessment was effective, even though it was not an exact match for the state test. Participant 2 stated that teachers were doing a good job of emulating the test and test conditions in their instruction as was possible with the tools and resources available. Participant 6 was encouraged that students did seem to be performing better on writing, which, as the responses to Research Question 3 indicated, was a major focus of instruction. Participant 8 also gave credit to the use of individual student subscriptions to an educational magazine and its related activities as an effective instructional method.

Additional training and resources. The responses to Research Question 8 (What additional training or resources do teachers and administrators say are needed to improve instruction?) also resulted in one theme that spanned all eight participants, but the question also elicited the most major responses of any of the eight questions. All eight participants agreed that teachers need a better understanding of the test. Participant 8's statement was representative of the feelings of the group:

> We need just more information about the test itself. We need more information about what percentage of this standard is going to be covered on the test and how much is it going to count. How much percentage do these writing standards count? How much of a percentage do these language standards count?

Three participants suggested that their understanding could be improved through the release by the state of a complete practice test and the actual computer interface tools used on the test. Two participants also stated that teachers need to have a better understanding of the types of questions asked on the test, and two others indicated that teachers need to understand the formula used to score the test, as well as a better understanding of the individual student reading level scores generated from the results of the test. Finally, one respondent indicated that teachers need more detailed information about students' reading performance on the test.

While all participants referred to a better understanding of the test as an area for further support or training, two other responses to Research Question 8 appeared in half the interviews. Four participants indicated that there is a need for a change of instructional focus in the school. Four participants also mentioned that the scope and quality of professional development needs to be improved. Of those mentioning that a change in instructional focus was needed, two mentioned reading instruction as needed to be enhanced at the school. Participant 7 mentioned that teachers need to be better prepared to instruct students as to the expectations of the test and how to answer specific types of questions. Participant 4 stated that students more exposure to testing on computers.

The theme of professional development as an area for improvement resulted in four varied subthemes. For example, Participant 2 indicated that the presenters and facilitators of professional development need to be better qualified to provide those services. Participant 2 stated,

> You know all the experts they bring in to teach the others how to do it aren't in the classroom any more. Every expert we've had in our county over the past four or five years hasn't taught in four or five years.

Participant 7 indicated that teachers needed training and support to be more unified in their teaching practice. That participant said,

> If we are going to reach our students, we need to do it together as a team, so one recommendation would be to make sure everyone in the department or the grade level understands where their students are so that we can best attack their deficiencies.

Participant 7 also stated that development focused on teachers needing training on classroom management and maximizing instructional time was needed. Participant 7 stated,

> I see a lot of class time wasted with a lack of control of students in particular classrooms, which then takes away from instruction and learning time. Do I think we have professionals in the building who can do their job? Yep. I think we can have people that teach just fine, just well, and can do their job. However, when it comes to classroom management and discipline they are shooting themselves in the foot by losing time focusing so much on the classroom interruptions and behavior issues that if you add up 10 minutes a day, per class, that's going to be a lot of minutes for the year that you lost just trying to manage your classroom.

The other response about professional development concerned teachers needing more training on the instructional tools already available to them. Participant 8 stated,

> We've got resources, and we still have good materials with our textbook stuff. And all those different workbooks, and all that. And those are good materials. We just need to know how to leverage those materials to best spend our time with our students.

Three other themes appeared from two interviews each in response to Research Question 8. One of those themes included a focus on school culture and methods. Participant 2 noted that data team activities need to be more aligned to and impactful on instruction. Participant 7 mentioned that regrouping students by need could aid in differentiation of instruction and improve student success. Another theme was to increase teacher awareness of standards and content. Participants 1 and 8 called for additional training for teachers on how the tests are scored, what types of questions will be on the test, and how standards are weighted on the test. Finally, Participants 2 and 4 responded that teachers need additional training in constructing, administering, and responding to classroom assessments.

Changing instructional methods. Although it did not appear in all eight interviews, a dominant theme also arose from the responses to Research Question 5 (In what ways did instructional methods prior to the new test differ from instructional preparations for previous tests?). Five of the participants stated that computer-based activities were the biggest change in their test preparation methods. According to Participant 6, "We got to the computer lab, which was also an important element of preparing them for the test. Many of them are fairly computer illiterate. Keyboarding is not one of their main skills."

Minor themes that arose from responses to Research Question 5 included assessments based on constructed and extended responses, instruction focused on the state standards, the use of evidence in responding to questions, and an increase in instructional rigor. Test-taking skills integrated into daily instruction, activities based on a subscription to an instructional magazine, and teachers returning to their previous methods appeared in one interview each in response to Research Question 5.

Recommendations for instructional changes. Research Question 7 (What changes in instructional methods and activities do you recommend?) was the other question that generated a dominant theme in the analysis of the responses. Five participants recommended changes related to school culture and instructional philosophy. Two of those five participants recommended that teachers receive time to use data to guide instructional decisions. This idea was summarized by one of the administrator participants in the study:

> We talk about differentiating and then we mandate everyone to do the same thing. (We need) to take the data and have it be built into what the teachers are doing in the classroom, not just something we pulled out to go through a process.

Three subthemes related to the dominant theme appeared in the data. One subtheme was making student performance on the ELA test a school-wide responsibility. Another subtheme was placing an instructional focus on student growth (as opposed to attempting to get all students to a specific performance level). Finally, a subtheme emerged that called for developing local assessments to measure current student performance rather than relying on results from the previous year's state test).

Although not a dominant theme by definition, one other theme arose in the responses to Research Question 7 that appeared in multiple interviews. Four participants responded that the approach to reading and writing instruction needed to be changed. For example, two participants responded that text-dependent reading and writing needs to be emphasized. Another participant called for the blending of reading and writing instruction, and another recommended additional instructional time be devoted to reading instruction. According to Participant 1, "We need more time focusing on a global picture, incorporating conventions and mechanics, including vocabulary developed in the context of students' reading and writing instruction. A more global approach as opposed to laser focus."

Minor themes. Neither Research Question 2 (How were training and supports used?) nor Research Question 4 (What assumptions did teachers and administrators make about the test?) elicited responses common to more than half of the interviews. In addition, nine different themes emerged from the responses to Research Question 4. Only responses to Research Question 5 resulted in so many different themes.

In responding to Research Question 2, four participants indicated that training and other information and resources were used to drive writing instruction. Participant 4 stated, "We did receive some training about what the writing portion of the test would look like, so we were able to reference that for when we were about to prepare." Two other participants mention that the information and resources were used to construct classroom assessments, two participants mentioned that test-driven resources such as workbooks and magazines were incorporated into instruction, and one participant found

the training, information, and resources of little use in the classroom. Participant 3 stated, "They told us some percentages of what questions could to be on it (the test), but other than that it wasn't very useful."

Reflecting on assumptions. Half the participants responded to Research Question 4 by stating that assumptions about the test led teachers to spend too much time preparing students for the writing portions of the test at the expense of reading instruction. Participant 6 summarized those feelings: "I feel like this year we arrived at the conclusion that perhaps we spent and divided our time excessively to the writing portion." Three participants indicated that instruction was based on and aligned to the state standards, two participants mentioned that assumptions were based on assessment data and were aligned to that data, and two participants stated that assumptions led to teachers having students spend more time interacting with computers. The remainder of the themes arising from Research Question 2, occurring in one interview each, consisted of incorrect assumptions about the nature of narrative writing, presumed correct assumptions about the make-up of writing tasks on the test, incorrect assumptions overstating the expected rigor of the new test, incorrect assumptions about the school's focus resting on getting students to "pass" the test rather than demonstrating individual performance growth, and that assumptions were correct based on the information available to teachers.

Document data. Prior to analyzing the document data, I determined which of the eight research questions would generate dominant themes that could be verified and/or supplemented by a review of documents. The determination was that an analysis of

document data would be most appropriate and useful for Research Questions 1, 2, and 3. Since responses to Research Questions 4, 6, 7, and 8 were based on participants' opinions, it followed that documents were not appropriate nor useful for data analysis and triangulation. Likewise, Research Question 5 is inappropriate for document data analysis since responses to that question were related to events that occurred outside the time frame of the documents requested for this study.

For the three research questions subject to document analysis, I obtained state and local documents. For Research Question 1, materials and documents available from the state department of education and distributed to administrators and teachers prior to the test were examined. The primary training materials provided to systems by the state department of education either directly or through administrator associations were a pair of PowerPoint presentations entitled *2014 Fall Assessment Conference Assessment Program Update 2014-2015 Parts I and II* (Georgia Department of Education, 2017a) and the *Georgia Milestones GAEL 2014* (Georgia Department of Education, 2017b) presentation presented at the 2014 Georgia Association of Educational Leaders conference. These presentations gave a general outline of the assessment philosophy adopted by the state (to provide a single, coherent, and standards-aligned summative/formative end of grade assessment), the differences in both content and rigor of the new test as opposed to the assessment it replaced, and an overview of the structure (i.e., number and type of questions) of the tests. The presentations also offered limited general questions as examples of the type of items to be included on the English language

arts and math tests. These sample items were not referenced to any particular standard, but were offered as an illustration of how the test format would differ from previous tests.

The primary informational document I examined was the seventh-grade edition of the Georgia Milestones Assessment Guide (Georgia Department of Education, 2017c). This guide, which is also produced individually and specifically for grades 3 through 8, provided more detailed information than either of the presentations. Among the content including in the guide were exemplars of selected response items, rubrics for writing tasks, and sample scored responses to assist teachers in understanding the expectations of each writing task. The document provided detailed and specific guidance about the writing tasks but included only eight examples of reading questions.

Although the school does not require formal lesson plans to be submitted by teachers, I did obtain working lesson planning documents used by two of the three grade levels from teachers. The documents examined included a weekly pacing guide and a monthly planning calendar. Both documents included descriptions of specific instructional activities and referenced applicable standards. Those descriptions also detailed the resources and materials needed for each lesson. Although not specifically referenced to the pre-assessment information, the influence of that information (for example, the use of the state-provided writing rubrics) was evident. These documents were used for the analysis for Research Questions 2 and 3. State materials were also included for the analysis of Research Question 2.

Based on the analysis, I reached conclusions about the degree of consistency between the data sources. For Research Question 1, the finding was that a strong

consistency exists between the dominant interview theme (training documents were provided by the state) and the state-supplied training documents provided to administrators and teachers. Given that only one dominant theme emerged from the Research Question 1 interview responses, and that the documents supported those statements, the consistency between the data sources appears full and complete.

Research Question 2 also produced one dominant theme: Writing instruction was based on state-provided resources. In the examination of the state-provided resources related to the state test and the local teacher planning documents, evidence indicated that information from the state-provided documents was incorporated in writing instruction and assessments. For example, according to the planning documents, teachers were to use the state-provided 2-point scoring rubric to evaluate students' constructed responses. In addition, at least one planned lesson was to have students complete a compare and contrast essay based on an activity closely modeled on the example paired-text activity found in the state-provided assessment handbook that was provided to teachers and administrators. A third example of the incorporation of state-provided resources into instruction was a planned lesson on narrative writing. Both the prompt to be used in the lesson and the scoring rubric to be used to score the writing were modeled after the examples found in the state-prepared guidebook provided to teachers. Based on the comparison of these data points within their associated themes, the determination was that the interview and document data were in full and complete alignment.

The interview data for Research Question 3 resulted in the dominant themes of writing instruction and reading instruction in preparation for the state tests and new

standards. I reviewed the lesson planning documents looking for evidence that instruction had been designed based on the information provided about the state test or the state standards. For the theme of writing instruction, evidence of alignment between the interview responses and the planning documents was apparent. In addition to the writing tasks and scoring rubrics mentioned in the analysis for Research Question 2, the planning documents also indicated that teachers intended to have students use computers to produce their responses in preparation for the online state assessment. The planning documents also indicated that teachers prepared reading instruction activities, although these activities were aligned to the state standards, rather than directly to the test. For example, the documents indicated that teachers planned to have students read an article in a magazine and answer critical thinking and close reading questions, use evidence from the text to support their conclusions about the passage, and construct a summary of the text. As with the analysis of the documents related to the first two research questions, the documents provided enough support to determine that full and complete alignment existed between the interview responses and the documents.

Summary. The problem that guided this research study was that that teachers in a rural Georgia middle school must prepare students to take a new high-stakes assessment in English language arts with very little information about what should be done to best prepare students to perform well. The research questions and the interview questions derived from the research questions examined how local educators described their previous test preparation methods and activities, the information and training provided to teachers prior to the new tests, and the participants' views about what is needed to better

prepare students for future administrations of the test. The analysis of the interview data in this study confirmed that the local educators were and continue to be unsure about how to best prepare students for the new state language arts tests. Moreover, the participants agreed that their instructional methods and activities were ineffective, largely due to an emphasis on writing instruction at the expense of reading (Research Questions 2, 3, 4 and 6). Also emerging from the interview data was that the majority of the participants feel that they need more information about the state test in order to better prepare students for future administrations of the test (Research Questions 7 and 8).

The findings were consistent with themes found in the relevant scholarly literature. For example, within the participants' responses were concerns about the impact of high-stakes testing, computer-based assessments, teaching to the test, and teacher, school, and student accountability. In addition, the findings confirmed the alignment of the local school with this study's conceptual framework in that teachers are directly responsible for the planning and implementation of instruction (Danielson, 2007). Also, both interview and document data confirmed that the local educators attempted to align instruction with the state assessment (Tankersley, 2007), and that the training and other materials that were provided to the educators supported the alignment between the state standards and the state assessment (Webb, 2007).

Evidence of Quality/Ensuring Trustworthiness of Data Analysis

In order to assure the credibility and accuracy of the data analysis, the findings were member checked (Flick, 2007). I provided copies of the preliminary data analysis to each of the participants in the study, and I addressed any discrepancies participants

indicated. I made any corresponding adjustments and addenda to the data analysis, including modifying and updating the coding documents.

A local college education faculty member with expertise in qualitative data analysis examined a coded sample of the interviews to ensure that the codes were clear and that there was a high level of agreement in the coding to further ensure accuracy and to help avoid researcher bias. The reviewer affirmed a confidentiality agreement prior to participating in any activity related to this study. Since copies of the training and lesson planning documents used in this study were provided by the local system, the accuracy of the documents was assumed.

Transferability of Results

Although this study is specific to a local school and its administration and faculty, there is potential transferability of results to other settings. For example, all schools and systems in Georgia have implemented the state standards and all must administer the Georgia Milestones Assessment following the new educational policies from the Georgia DOE (Georgia Department of Education, 2014d; Georgia Department of Education, 2013a). Similar tests are in place in most states (Frey & Fisher, 2013; Kist, 2013; Schaffhauser, 2013). Likewise, teachers in all other Georgia systems are to be evaluated on the same student growth model as local teachers (Georgia Department of Education, 2014a). All Georgia schools and systems are evaluated on the same accountability formula (Georgia Department of Education, 2014b). Similar value-added evaluation programs are in place across the United States (Baker, Oluwole, & Green, 2013; Gill, English, Furgeson, & McCullough, (2014); Goldhaber, 2015). Finally, policy and

practice issues such as teaching to the test and curriculum narrowing are found in many American schools (Jennings & Bearak, 2014; Lauren & Gaddis, 2016; Longo, 2010; Palmer & Snodgrass Rangel, 2011). While the focus is on the local problem and local solutions to the implementation of the new state policies, there may be implications for other similar school districts facing similar challenges.

Summary

The research problem driving this study was that educators, including teachers and administrators, in a local middle school were not certain that the instructional methods used by the school's English language arts faculty were effectively preparing students for the new state ELA assessment. After determining that quantitative methodologies would not adequately address the problem, I chose a qualitative, case-study research design using semistructured interviews as the primary source of data. I used document data consisting of lesson planning documents, including unit and lesson plans, and state-provided training resources to triangulate the interview responses. Eight participants were interviewed, including six teachers and two administrators. I employed a structural coding method to analyze the interview data. From the data analysis, several major themes emerged. Participants responded unanimously that they believed their methods to be ineffective, that what little information about the new tests they had upon which to base those methods came from state sources, and that the best resource to drive instructional improvement would be more information about the nature of the test. Most participants also agreed that too much of the school's ELA instruction focused on writing

at the expense of reading instruction and that a school-wide change in the way reading is taught is needed.

The issues addressed by this study will likely exist well into the future, as, despite some recent assessment and accountability reforms, high-stakes testing, test preparation, and teacher-driven decision-making seem to be integral parts of the modern educational system. In the future, empirical data and quantitative methods should be available to help evaluate instructional methods and activities related to high-stakes test preparation. Currently, those data and methods either do not exist or what do exist lack the scope and validity to adequately address the research problem and questions in this study. In the interim, the qualitative data collected and analyzed in this study may be used as a vehicle to drive instructional changes with the potential to lead to improved student performance in mastering state standards and, consequently, increasing test scores. In the following section, I will present plans for a professional development project designed with the potential to effectively address the themes identified in the data analysis.

Section 3: The Project.

Introduction

The problem addressed by this case study was that educators in a rural northeast Georgia school district were not certain whether or not their instructional methods and activities were adequately preparing their students for the new state ELA test. The purpose of this study was threefold. First, I interviewed local teachers and administrators to identify the instructional methods and activities used to prepare students for the first administration of the new test. Those interviews also gathered those educators' opinions about the effectiveness of their methods and activities. Finally, I asked the participants to relate their recommendations for changes to the instructional program and/or additional training or allocation of resources.

The data analysis of responses to Research Questions 7 and 8, when taken together, revealed that the majority of the teachers and administrators interviewed favored receiving additional information about the content and nature of the test as their first choice for additional training. However, information about the test can only come from state sources. The information released previously by the state board of education has been discussed at length in faculty, subject area, and data team meetings. No additional information about the nature of the test, including sample test items or a released version of the test, has been provided by the state. For that reason, I have chosen the second most prevalent response to form the basis of my project.

Teachers indicated that some form of foundational change in instructional and assessment methods, particularly when it comes to the school's reading program, is most

needed to affect a positive change to allow students the opportunity for increased performance on the state test. These recommendations ranged from a substantial overhaul of the school's reading curriculum to changes in specific instructional methods, such as instruction in text-dependent writing. In this light, I developed a professional development plan to address the themes revealed by the data analysis.

In this section, I will provide the rationale for choosing a professional development plan as the project associated with this study. In addition, I will connect the plan to relevant literature. I will then describe the professional development plan in detail, including the methods and procedures for evaluating the effectiveness of the plan. Finally, I will describe the possible implications of the plan to drive positive change in the local school and in teaching practice generally.

Rationale

The data analysis from this study indicated that teachers and administrators at the local school believe a fundamental change in reading curriculum and instruction is a priority to better prepare students for the new state assessment. Teacher training and development is the key factor in improving curriculum and instruction overall (Wiles, 2009). Furthermore, professional development focused specifically at improving teachers' abilities to help students improve their reading is vital to improving student performance across all academic areas of the school (Fisher, Frey, & Nelson, 2012). For these reasons, I produced a professional development program addressing reading instruction both for ELA teachers and all content area teachers in the school.

For professional development to be effective it must be in tune with the expressed needs of teachers and relevant to the local setting (Bubb & Earley, 2013; Caddle, Bautista, Brisuela, & Sharpe, 2016; Desimone & Garet, 2015). The majority of the participants in this study indicated that improvement in the scope and quality of reading instruction in their school was what they felt was most needed to better prepare their students for the new state test. The professional development plan I will present in this section is aligned with needs-based professional development in that the training content derived directly from the analysis of the interview responses gathered in this study. The plan is centered specifically on the responses to Research Questions 7 and 8, which asked teachers and administrators what additional training or resources they felt were needed to improve instruction to better prepare their students or themselves for future administrations of the Georgia Milestones Assessment in ELA.

All eight educators indicated that they needed a better understanding of the nature of the Georgia Milestones Assessment, including sample test items or a complete released previous test. Unfortunately, that information is not currently available and would only be obtainable from state sources. Instead, the professional development project derived from this study is focused on improving reading instruction at the local school, an area that appeared in a majority of participant responses. Teachers participating in the study responded that more instructional focus needs to be placed on reading instruction, including making reading instruction a priority in all content areas in addition to the ELA classroom. These views are supported by the school's Georgia Milestones Assessment results, which indicate students in all three grades in the school

are performing far below the proficiency levels they attained on the previous state ELA test and at a level below the level of decrease in ELA scores of all schools statewide (see Tables 1 and 2).

The content of the professional development program will address five specific area of reading instruction. All teachers will receive instruction in content-area literacy, text-based reading and writing, vocabulary development, and understanding text complexity. ELA teachers will receive an additional session on research-based interventions for struggling readers. In the following section, I will discuss how each of these five areas, as well as the efficacy of professional development in general, are reflected in the scholarly literature.

Review of the Literature

For this review of scholarly literature, I gathered and evaluated peer-reviewed journal articles and reports related to five themes connected to this project. These themes included content area literacy, text-based reading and writing, vocabulary acquisition, text complexity, and reading interventions. I obtained articles from databases such as ERIC, Education Source, SAGE Journals, Taylor and Francis Online, ProQuest Central, PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, and Google Scholar. Search terms that I used included: *content area literacy, literacy, text-based reading and writing, close reading, vocabulary acquisition, text complexity, Lexile, reading cognition, reading instruction, reading remediation, reading motivation, reading interventions, reading curriculum, reading problems*, and *reading programs.*

Content Area Literacy

Content area literacy, the reading and writing skills needed to access content in areas other than ELA, has been known to hold significance for academic achievement for many years (Adams & Pegg, 2012; Kinniburgh & Baxter, 2012; McCulley & Osman, 2015; Reed, Petscher, & Truckenmiller, 2016). As part of a comprehensive professional development program aimed at improving students' reading skills, content area must be addressed. The following research articles describe the importance of dedicated literacy instruction in content area classes, particularly social studies and science and describe the state of content area literacy instruction in classrooms.

A recent quantitative experimental study that demonstrated the importance of literacy teaching in content classes was the work of Vaughn et al. (2013). The researchers conducted a 2-year integrated study of 419 eighth-grade students divided into 261 students in the treatment group and 158 in the control group. All students were administered both general reading and content knowledge preassessments and received the identical basic content instruction over a period of three, 10-day cycles. However, the treatment group also received specific literacy instruction. This instruction consisted of text-based reading activities, unit-specific vocabulary instruction, and collaborative investigative activities. The same reading and content assessments were administered following the end of the third cycle, and the results showed that the treatment group significantly performed better on both assessments than the control group ($t = 2.34$, $df = 274$, $p = .019$). While this study indicates the efficacy of dedicated literacy instruction,

the study was limited by the brevity of its scope. Further research, such as longitudinal studies, could provide validation for the findings of this study.

Another study that found a direct link between reading ability and performance in content classes was research by Reed, Petscher, and Truckenmiller (2016). The researchers conducted a correlational study of data from state assessments in reading and science in Grades 5, 8, and 9 in one Florida school district. In total, more than 4500 data points were examined from the testing data. The data were analyzed using multiple-group confirmatory factor analysis, structural equation modeling, and quantile regression. Using a structural equation model, the researchers found a standardized effect of .84, which indicated that up to 70% of the variance in student performance on standardized science tests could be explained by reading ability. The study appears to confirm the importance of instruction in specific content-based reading, such as disciplinary vocabulary and interaction with science texts. However, while indicating that a correlation appears to exists between reading ability and performance on science tests, the study did not attempt to isolate what types and topics of instruction best serve to increase reading ability.

A quantitative, single group test-retest study that did link a specific reading strategy to improvement in science performance was research conducted by Kinneburgh and Baxter (2012). Kinneburgh and Baxter tested the efficacy of the Question-Answer Relationship (QAR) strategy in improving the reading performance of 10 fourth graders who were either struggling readers or had a specific reading disability. A comparison of results from a reading skills inventory administered before and after the QAR

intervention showed that all students in the study increased their performance from pretest to posttest. While encouraging as a validation of the QAR strategy as a reading intervention, the study was limited by its small sample size and its focus on a single intervention strategy. However, the study has relevance to my project in that interviews conducted with teachers associated with the study indicated that teacher training in the strategy was integral in its success.

Teacher push-back. Dresser (2012) also examined an elementary reading strategy, specifically a popular strategy known variously as scripted reading or guided reading. Dresser studied the effects of adding two specific reading strategies, reciprocal teaching and narrow reading, to the standardized reading program. Dresser found that inclusion of the additional strategies resulted in better student performance in reading. However, of greater interest to the project associated with my study is information Dresser discovered in interviews with the teachers employing the reading strategy. During their training, the teachers participating in the study indicated disillusionment with the strategies when they learned that much of the burden of constructing lessons using the strategies would fall to them. Most of these objections were related to the time needed to construct the lessons, and only an agreement by Dresser to produce and present the lessons saved the study. It seems clear that the time and work burden to be placed on the teachers involved in my project must be a consideration.

Professional development implications. Ness (2016) observed the teaching habits of eight social studies and science teachers in middle and high school and found little to no reading comprehension instruction taking place. Subsequent interviews of the

teachers involved in the study uncovered that the reason for the lack of dedicated reading instruction centered in three areas. The teachers indicated that they felt that teaching reading would decrease instructional time for content delivery, that they felt unqualified to teach reading, and that they felt that incorporating reading instruction into their practice would take up too much of their preparation time. While the Ness study was limited to a small sample size and a specific location, it seems reasonable that social studies and science teachers participating in the profession development project of this study will have similar feelings about reading instruction.

Another study that sheds some light on content area teachers' attitudes about literacy instruction was a qualitative study conducted by Harmon et al. (2016) in North Carolina and Texas. Harmon et al. interviewed five high school reading teachers and the 13 students they taught. Although the researchers found significant discrepancies between the comments of the teachers and students, themes did emerge that have potential impact on the professional development project of my study. First, the data indicated that teachers exhibited tremendous variability in their reading instruction and teachers reported very few researched-based strategies in use. In addition, students indicated that they needed more frequent, specific feedback on their reading performance. Finally, the data indicated that instruction focused on complex texts and high levels of student engagement helped to develop the students' perception of themselves as readers.

Follow-up to training. Finally, another study with particular relevance to my project is a 2-year study of content area teacher practice by Adams and Pegg (2012). The qualitative study involved 26 secondary social studies, math, and science teachers who

received training in implementing content literacy strategies. Data collected included observations, document reviews, and interviews. Although the findings served to validate the content literacy strategies incorporated into the program, an additional finding appears to have greater relevance to my project. Adams and Pegg, in their observation of practice, found varied degrees of implementation of the strategies and surmised that follow-up by instructional leaders, administrators, or training providers is essential to the implementation of strategies.

Content area literacy is essential to the success of students as they prepare for college and careers (McCulley & Osman, 2015; Papola-Ellis, 2014a; Wendt, 2013). With such an emphasis on college and career readiness in both the Georgia Standards of Excellence and the College and Career Readiness Preparedness Index system used by the state of Georgia to evaluate schools and districts, content area literacy occupies an understandable high place in the project associated with my study. While this review of literature shows the value and importance of reading instruction in content classes, it has also demonstrated key areas that must be addressed in the content and evaluation of the professional development program, specifically providing "delivery-ready" instructional strategies and frequent classroom follow-up to verify the fidelity of implementation.

Text-Based Reading and Writing

The ability to read and analyze a text and write critically about that analysis is a cornerstone of the CCSS (Cummings, 2013; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). This skill extends to both literary and non-fiction texts and across all subject areas (Fisher & Frey, 2013;

Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012). However, as pointed out by Fisher, Frey, and Lapp (2012), the teaching of such new ways of interacting with text can pose a challenge to some teachers. The following research articles describe the connection between reading and writing and provide guidance for the inclusion of a text-based reading and writing component in the professional development project presented in this study.

The reading and writing connection. Although the participants were English language learners, a study demonstrating the connection between reading and writing was the work of Lee and Schallert (2015). Lee and Schallert conducted a year-long, three-pronged control-treatment study of 300 South Korean middle school students. The students were divided into three numerically and demographically equivalent groups. One group received regular English instruction and an additional once-weekly extensive reading session. A second group received the regular instruction and a once-weekly extensive writing instruction session. The remaining group received the regular instruction only. Using a pretest-posttest methodology, Lee and Schallert determined that both the reading-extensive and writing-extensive groups posted gains in reading comprehension above the level of the control group. The researchers concluded that dedicated reading and writing instruction can have mutually positive effects on student performance. However, this study should be viewed within its main limitation of having been conducted at a single middle school outside the United States.

Feldman (2012) also examined the connection between reading and writing in a stepwise regression study using multiple data sources from 307 middle and high school students and 10 teachers. Feldman used surveys, testing data, and demographic

information about the student participants in the study. Each form of data was analyzed based on student demographics, grade levels, and instructional tasks. The results of the study indicated that age and ethnicity were major factors in reading proficiency, but also that the direct instruction of reading and writing positively impacted the reading scores of all participants. The primary limitations of this study were that student-participants were not selected randomly and that extraneous variables such as fidelity of instruction across the participating teachers was not verified.

A longitudinal study conducted by Ahmed, Wagner, and Lopez (2014) sought to determine the level of connection between reading and writing. Specifically, Ahmed, Wagner, and Lopez wanted to understand if and how reading supports writing, if and how writing supports reading, and if and how reading and writing support each other concurrently. The researchers followed 260 Florida students through four years of elementary school. Each year, the students were assessed on four components of reading and three components of writing. The analysis of the data indicated a significant impact of reading on writing tasks, but writing had less of an impact on reading proficiency. However, Ahmed, Wagner, and Lopez did conclude that more research is needed in the bidirectional relationship of reading and writing. Though limited because students with disabilities and other demographic variables were not included, this study has implications for my professional development project in that teachers must be made aware of how reading and writing are connected and that connection's influence of student performance.

A study which did include students with disabilities was a task-based examination of 602 middle school students by Fidalgo, Torrance, Aris-Gundín, and Martínez-Cocó (2014). Fidalgo et al. presented a text to the students and had them summarize the text, then complete a comprehension check following their summarization. Although they found differences in performance based on age and overall ability, Fidalgo et al. determined that the most significant finding was that complex reading strategies must be taught to students on all grade levels, but in particular to those with learning disabilities or just entering the secondary level. Though this study was limited to one reading and writing strategy, the implication for my study is that professional development on text-based reading and writing must provide teachers strategies for presenting specific reading strategies, which are skills linked heavily to critical thinking in all academic areas (Fisher & Frey, 2015).

Implications for instruction. The studies above support the connection between the cognitive processes involved in reading and writing. These studies were supported by previous research demonstrating the connection between reading and writing. With the emphasis on reading and writing present in the state standards, how teachers and instructional leaders leverage these connections is vitally important. The following articles present research demonstrating how interventions involving text-based reading and writing can improve student mastery of the new state standards.

Collins, Lee, Fox, and Madigan (2017) tested a specific writing strategy to determine its impact on students' reading performance. Collins et al. conducted a cluster randomized experimental study of 1,062 fourth and fifth grade students, along with

observations of their 50 teachers, from 10 urban schools over a period of three school-years. The experimental group received a writing support strategy designed to assist students with reading comprehension. The control group received instruction using the standard district curriculum only. Data analysis indicated that the experimental group showed greater gains from pretest to posttest on an assessment of reading comprehension than did the control group. While the results of the study indicated that writing tasks can support improvement in reading comprehension, qualitative data collected by Collins et al. have equal relevance to my professional development project. Specifically, although all teachers instructing the experiment group received the same professional development pertaining to the intervention, the fidelity of implementation as indicated by the observations varied from teacher to teacher. In addition, the data showed that decreased implementation fidelity resulted in less substantial gains in student performance. This finding supports the importance of evaluation and follow-up following the presentation of teacher training.

While other studies have demonstrated the connections between reading and writing, research conducted by Denton et al. (2015) sought to discover the ways students interact with texts. Specifically, Denton et al., as a part of a larger study on reading comprehension, conducted experimental research on 325 secondary-level students in four schools located in a southern United States city to learn how both on-level and struggling readers access informational texts. Using a think-aloud protocol, the researchers collected data about how the students processed the texts, as well as quantitative data drawn from tests of comprehension based on the texts. Denton et al. found that, for readers of all

ability levels, sequencing texts from most accessible to most challenging resulted in greater gains in comprehension. The implication for my project is that the training should include methods for teachers to provide informational text reading and writing tasks of increasing difficult over time.

Finally, a study that holds particular relevance to teacher training on the topic of text-based reading and writing was a longitudinal qualitative study of 27 fifth-grade classrooms in a large, urban school district in Maryland conducted by Matsumura, Correnti, and Wang (2015). The purpose of the study was to determine the quality of the text-based writing tasks used in the classrooms. Matsumura, Correnti, and Wang examined 149 writing tasks, collected surveys completed by the 27 teachers, and administered a text-based writing assessment to 793 students. The researchers found that the majority of the writing tasks required only minimally complex analytic and reasoning skills. Matsumura, Correnti, and Wang concluded that writing tasks must be more rigorous in order for students to achieve mastery on new state standards, such as Common Core. These findings suggest that ways to construct higher-level writing tasks that lead to deeper student analysis of texts is an essential part of professional development programs, such as the professional development project driven by my study.

Vocabulary Development

The importance of vocabulary acquisition to reading comprehension has been well documented (Manyak et al., 2014; Rimbey et al., 2016). However, many aspects of vocabulary instruction continue to be subjects for current research. For example, questions remain as to the place vocabulary instruction should hold in overall reading

instruction. Also, with the emphasis placed on reading and vocabulary in the new state standards, educational leaders need to know what methods of vocabulary instruction are most effective. The following research articles address these topics and provide guidance for the professional development project connected to my study.

The place of vocabulary in reading instruction. Vocabulary acquisition is just one part of reading comprehension, along with other skills such as decoding, text fluency, and syntactic and morphological awareness. However, researchers such as Brinchmann, Hjetland, and Lyster (2015) argue that that vocabulary is essential to overall reading comprehension. Brinchmann, Hjetland, and Lyster conducted a quasi-experiemental study testing the effectiveness of a vocabulary development intervention in improving the reading comprehension performance of 118 Norwegian third and fourth grade students. The intervention was presented to the students over a 10-week period. The reading performance of the experimental group was compared to a similar control group during the intervention period. Brinchmann, Hjetland, and Lyster found that linguistic comprehension, morphemic knowledge, and decoding ability were all enhanced by the intervention. Limitations of the study include its small sample size and the lack of a randomly-selected participant pool. However, the impact of the intervention on the participants was statistically substantial.

Another study addressed the importance of vocabulary instruction in improving reading comprehension of informational texts by both struggling and proficient readers. Liebfreund (2015) conducted a linear regression analysis of multiple tests of reading ability administered to 177 third through fifth grade students in a southeastern United

States urban school district. Liebfreund analyzed the data to determine the impact of various reading skills such as decoding, vocabulary, prior knowledge, and self-motivation on information text comprehension. Liebfreund found that vocabulary knowledge had the most consistent impact on comprehension performance, particularly for proficient readers. Although limited by a small sample size and the possible influence of other factors (quality of instruction, for example), the study does suggest that vocabulary acquisition techniques should make up a prominent part of a professional development program addressing literacy, particularly content area literacy.

Finally, the importance of vocabulary instruction in content area classes was supported by the findings of a synthesis and analysis of reading comprehension research. Wright and Cervetti (2016) conducted a meta-analysis of 36 studies of vocabulary interventions focused on improving reading comprehension. Wright and Cervetti found that using instructional strategies to teach specific content vocabulary was highly effective in improving comprehension of texts containing the specific vocabulary but did little to improve the overall reading comprehension. This finding suggests that vocabulary instruction used by content-area teachers should look different that vocabulary acquisition in the English language arts classroom. For example, a science teacher might present scientific terms specific to a unit of study and greatly assist students in comprehending the reading tasks in that unit. However, that instruction will not substantially affect those students' ability to understand other, non-related words. On the other hand, the vocabulary instruction delivered by language arts teachers might involve more general vocabulary skills, such as entomological, morphological, and

syntactical awareness, that can be applied to unfamiliar words in any contexts. Wright and Cervetti's study was limited in that it did not contain any original research and that it did not provide any insight into any particular instructional strategies. The study does indicate the need for professional development programs addressing vocabulary development and acquisition to provide content area teachers word building techniques that are quite different than those used in English language arts classrooms.

Vocabulary instruction strategies. While research supports the value of vocabulary instruction as a support for reading comprehension, other studies have examined what methods and strategies are best employed to improve reading performance. For example, a study conducted by Khamesipour (2015) found that teaching using implicit word learning techniques is more effective in vocabulary development than explicit vocabulary instruction. Khamesipour presented explicit (i.e., word meanings presented prior to reading) and implicit (i.e., word meanings were derived from the reading of the text without any prior introduction to the words) to 30 English language learners at an Iranian university. Pretests and posttests were administered to the participants prior to and following each instructional technique. Although Khamesipour found increases in test performance for both methods, the teaching of the vocabulary words implicitly resulted in greater gains in test scores. The study was limited by its small sample size and that its participants were both English language learners and college students. However, the findings suggest that teachers should be trained in methods that help students learn new vocabulary in context.

As important as the method students learn new words is what students do with the words once they are learned. Zou (2017) conducted experiments testing the effectiveness of three student tasks designed to use new vocabulary words: cloze activities, sentence writing, and essay writing. Zou randomly divided 147 college students into three experiment groups, each received one of the three tasks. In the cloze task, students received a reading passage with the key vocabulary removed. Drawing from a word bank, students selected the appropriate word for each blank. For the second task, students received the same target words with their meanings, and students were to compose sentences using the words. Finally, the third group received the words and meanings and were required to compose an essay using all the words correctly and connectedly. Following the tasks, a test of vocabulary knowledge was administered to all participants. Results of the evaluations showed that the cloze activity was only marginally effective in vocabulary development. The students who composed sentences performed better than the cloze group on the posttest, but the group that wrote essays significantly outperformed the other two groups on the test. This study was also limited by its scope and target participant group. However, the study does support that teachers should be trained in methods that allow students to use new words in authentic tasks to better retain vocabulary knowledge.

Finally, one study with similar findings to Khamesipour (2015) and Zou (2017) was a three-year-long evaluation of a vocabulary development program by Manyak et al. (2014). The researchers introduced a vocabulary development program to fourth and fifth grade teachers in a Colorado elementary school. The teachers were trained in the

instructional techniques associated with the program. Manyak et al. then conducted qualitative research involving classroom observations and interviews. Based on the data, Manyak et al. found four dominant themes of effective vocabulary instruction. The themes included introducing the words in context, providing multiple opportunities for students to be exposed to the target words, providing struggling students with additional experiences using the words, and requiring that students use the words in writing. The study supports implicit instruction in vocabulary, as well as the need for students to use the words in writing to foster retention. The study was limited, however, by its focus on a single location and the lack of experimental data to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies employed in the project.

Implications for professional development. Research shows that word knowledge is essential to reading comprehension and that teachers should provide instruction in vocabulary acquisition that is implicit and embedded in reading and writing tasks. The research also addresses how teachers should be trained to best present vocabulary instruction. Two studies support that professional development to train teachers to teach word knowledge effectively must address changes in conventional instructional practice. In addition, these studies suggest that follow-up to the training activities is essential to the success of the training program.

First, Kennedy, Rogers, Romig, Lloyd, and Brownell (2017) found that teachers need to move away from traditional methods of teaching vocabulary, such as teacher-provided word-definition lists and direct presentation of word meanings, especially with the requirements of new state and national science standards. Kennedy et al. based these

findings on the results of their evaluation of a professional development program addressing science teachers' vocabulary instruction. The study was conducted over a five-month period and included observations of the vocabulary instruction practices of three middle school science teachers, both prior to and following the presentation of the training program. After conducting the classroom observations, the researchers returned to further observe the classrooms and collect interview data from the participants. Kennedy et al. concluded that the professional training had a positive impact on vocabulary instruction. However, the researchers also concluded that the success of the program was in large part due the frequent follow-up and specific and intensive feedback provided to the teachers involved in the program. This suggests that the professional development program associated with my study must include provisions for observing and revisiting with teachers to discuss their implementation of vocabulary strategies presented in the training.

Rimbey, McKeown, Beck, and Sandora (2016) also presented teacher training in vocabulary instruction and conducted classroom observations to examine the implementation of the training. Rimbey et al. recruited 12 teachers in a Pennsylvania elementary school to participate in the nine-week long training and related study with the purpose to gather interview data about the teachers' perceptions of the training program. Rimbey et al. found that the teachers implemented the training with fidelity and that they indicated overall satisfaction with the training. Like Kennedy et al., Rimbey et al. discovered that the crucial element in the program was the frequent and specific feedback the observers/researchers provided teachers about their practice. Also like Kennedy et

al., and although the study also supported content-embedded vocabulary instruction and high levels of student engagement, the key finding related to my study is that provisions for follow-up and classroom observation are key to the success of the training.

Text Complexity

The issue of text complexity (i.e., the relative difficulty of a reading passage) became a major issue for educators with the widespread adoption of the Common Core State Standards and state standards derived from the Common Core (Fang, 2016; Franz, Starr, & Bailey, 2015). Text complexity, or, rather, students' ability to read and comprehend increasingly complex text, is a key element of college and career readiness (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). The emphasis on text complexity presents new challenges to teachers who have, by and large, operated under the assumption that students should be able to read and comprehend grade-level texts, but experience and assessment results have demonstrated the fallacy of this assumption (Wixson & Valencia, 2014). The following articles present research and syntheses of research providing evidence as to how teachers should best address text complexity, particularly in the content areas.

Building up to higher levels of text complexity. Allington, McCuiston, and Billen (2015) conducted a review and synthesis of research on the impact of text complexity on learning to read stretching back as far as 70 years. Based on their analysis, Allington, McCuiston and Billen concluded that students perform better in general and content-area reading when "the text can be read with a high level of accuracy and comprehension" (p.492). The authors also concluded that the research supports that

student motivation to read and student engagement in the learning process are decreased by interaction with texts above their independent reading level. Allington, McCuiston, and Billen did caution that longitudinal studies are needed on the effects of text complexity, as well as further research on the effects of difficult texts in secondary-level instruction.

Papola-Ellis (2014b), in an ethnographic study of three teachers at an urban elementary school, found that starting with texts on the reading level of the individual student served as a springboard toward comprehension of more complex and grade-level text. Papola-Ellis also found that teachers need to provide extensive supports and scaffolding to allow readers, particularly struggling readers, to comprehend complex texts. The Papola-Ellis study is limited by its scope and lack of experiential data. However, taken with the analysis provided by Allington, McCuiston, and Billen (2015), the Papola-Ellis study points to the need for professional development in both how to best address the diverse reading levels of students, as well as methods and practices designed to assist readers to access increasingly complex texts.

Further implications for professional development. Elsewhere in the literature the implications of text complexity to instruction, and, therefore, professional development have been discussed. Reed and Kershaw-Herrera (2016) examined text complexity with an emphasis on how readability and language affects comprehension. Similarly, Frantz, Starr, and Bailey (2015) looked at text complexity as addressed in the standards, readability measures, and in the research and argued that language, particularly content-specific language, must be included as a part of text complexity.

Reed and Kershaw-Herrera (2016) conducted experimental research to determine the effect of two aspects of text complexity. Texts were selected based on readability (i.e., reading level) and cohesion, which the authors defined as the "lexical, semantic, and syntactic features used to relate ideas and aide the reader" (p.77). The texts were presented to 103 randomly-selected seniors at a southwestern urban high school. Each participant read and was assessed on one of four randomly assigned social studies or science reading tasks. The reading passages were constructed and grouped based on four criteria: high complexity and high cohesion, high complexity and low cohesion, low complexity and high cohesion, and low complexity and low cohesion (Reed & Kershaw-Herrera, p. 81). Results of the study indicated that the students performed better on the post assessment when the text they read was of lower complexity and higher cohesion. Reed and Kershaw-Herrera concluded that students comprehend best when texts are at a readability level at or close to their reading ability and when the texts contain the syntactical, semantical, and lexical clues (cohesion) needed to assist them in understanding the text. The implication for the professional development program developed for this study is that teachers must be trained to select or develop texts and passages that are at the student's reading level and contain the language features that assist in comprehension.

Frantz, Starr, and Bailey (2015) broke down the elements of text complexity found in the Common Core State Standards and in several common measures of readability. The authors found that syntax and grammar, particularly as they relate to disciplinary language, were missing. In addition, Frantz, Starr, and Bailey conducted an

analysis of language research and found that academic disciplines such as science, math, and social studies, have individual grammatical and syntactical constructions. In addition, the analysis indicated that these structures also vary by grade level. The suggestion based on these findings is that teachers must take into account the linguistic constructs specific to their subjects. Therefore, professional development addressing text complexity must address these academic language issues.

Reading Interventions

The fifth theme of reading instruction relevant to the professional development project of this study is reading interventions for non-proficient readers. While the first four themes pertain to all subjects, the theme of reading interventions, and the resulting professional development, is exclusive to the ELA teachers. Although also responsible for specific subject matter, ELA teachers are best placed to make an impact on the performance of struggling readers (Guthrie, Klauda, & Ho, 2013). The following research articles provide insight into how teachers can use interventions that increase reading performance, as well as guidance for professional development.

Reading engagement and motivation. An element of reading interventions that appears repeatedly in the literature is engagement and motivation. Guthrie and Klauda (2014) used a pretest-posttest design to study the effects on reading comprehension of a four-week long social studies-specific informational text reading intervention on 615 7th Grade students. The researchers found that the intervention increased student reading motivation and engagement and that student performance on the posttest improved significantly. Although the study suggests a correlation between reading motivation and

engagement and comprehension, Guthrie and Klauda did not conduct a correlation analysis to confirm this.

A connection between motivation and engagement and comprehension was found in research conducted by Rennie (2016). Rennie conducted a study of the effects of a reading intervention on 12 students in year eight at an Australian school. The students were specifically selected to receive the intervention based on their prior struggles with reading. Posttest results following the intervention showed some improvement in reading performance. However, the key finding in the study came from interviews with the student-participants following the implementation of the intervention. Rennie discovered that the students' self-image as readers was significantly improved and that their motivation to engage in reading activities increased. Although both have limitations in scope and generalization to other settings, both the Rennie and Guthrie and Klauda (2014) support that teachers need to be trained in ways to increase student motivation and engagement.

Interventions and professional development. While the literature supports the training of teachers to help motivate readers, there is also research indicating that professional development must extend beyond the initial presentation of training. For example, Berkeley et al. (2012) conducted a year-long experimental study of 79 students enrolled in remedial reading classes at a rural middle school located in the southeastern United States. The findings of the study indicated that the reading proficiency of the students in the program did improve over the course of the year. However, the rate of improvement for the students in the intervention was not greater than the improvement

shown by students not in the classes. The researchers were able to explain much of the inability of the program to achieve its goals through their observations of instructional practice. Berkeley et al. documented numerous incidences of teachers failing to follow the procedures required by the program chosen as the basis for classroom instruction. The Berkeley et al. study suggests that regular follow-up and verification of instructional practices will be vital to the success of my professional development program.

Cantrell et al. (2014) also studied a middle school reading intervention. Cantrell et al. followed 462 struggling middle school readers in 12 schools over a 3-year period. Pretest-posttest data was collected to determine the effectiveness of the intervention on improving students' reading proficiency. In addition, the groups of the participating students were surveyed and interviewed to determine their motivation and thought processes when reading. Like Berkeley et al. (2012), Cantrell et al. reported results that were mixed in terms of improvement in reading proficiency. However, the interview and survey data did indicate that the intervention did change students' attitudes about and engagement with reading. Cantrell et al. argued that the results of their study indicate the potential of interventions to have positive outcomes over time. In terms of professional development, the study points to the need to encourage teachers that interventions may not have immediate effects, but that reading improvement strategies implemented with fidelity should provide long-lasting positive effects for struggling readers.

Project Literature Review Summary

The five themes identified for the professional development plan connected to my study were content area literacy, text-based reading and writing, vocabulary

development, text complexity, and reading interventions. These themes are supported by research and scholarly literature. Addressing these themes with training should provide teachers with a greater knowledge and skill base from which to address the reading problems the data analysis identified at their local school. In the next section, I will provide details about the nature, structure, and content of the professional development project.

Project Description

The data analysis associated with this study indicated that English language arts teachers felt that reading instruction in the school was an area in need of improvement and modification. Central to this was the concept that the responsibility for reading instruction extends beyond the ELA classroom. The professional development project I have designed addresses five important themes found in the state standards and, as has been shown, in the literature. Professional training related to four of the themes will be presented to all academic teachers in the school in four training sessions. The fifth theme, reading interventions, will be presented to ELA teachers only in a separate session.

Resources for training. I will present the four, 75-minute professional development sessions for all teachers in the school media center during one of the four pre-planning days provided to teachers before each school-year. The media center has an area of suitable size (able to accommodate up to 50 persons) dedicated to large-group meetings. The area is secluded and includes tables and softback chairs. In addition, a projector and interactive whiteboard are permanently mounted in the area. The tables and

chairs are easily arranged to allow attendees to be grouped by subject area and grade level. The interactive whiteboard has a connection for a laptop, which will be provided by the presenter.

In addition to the meeting space, some printed materials will be required. The school will provide these materials through school and district professional development funds. For all sessions, I will provide copies of the Georgia Standards of Excellence for science, social studies, and ELA. Teachers will also need local curriculum maps, pacing guides, and district calendars. These materials will be used as teachers plan units and lessons based on the training materials. Print-outs of the presentation slides will also be available. Finally, teachers will need notepads and writing utensils in order to take notes during each session.

Training materials will also include texts and informational materials available from state and private sources. Three of the five sessions will also require texts to be purchased by the school using professional development funds. Nine copies of each text will be needed so that at least one copy of each text will be available for each subject/grade group. For the session on content area literacy, I will use *Teaching Students to Read Like Detectives* (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012) as an anchor text. The text for the session on text-based reading and writing will be *Close Reading and Writing from Sources* (Fisher & Frey, 2014). Finally, I will base the vocabulary session on *Teaching Vocabulary in All Classrooms* (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2010). Following training, the school will retain all copies of the texts in the professional learning section of the school's media center for future reference by teachers.

The remaining two training sessions will be based on informational materials available from state and private sources. For text complexity, the cornerstone will be a presentation on Lexile levels developed and distributed by the Georgia Department of Education (2017). This presentation covers the basics of the Lexile measurement of text complexity. It also provides tips and resources for using student Lexile measures in the classroom. Finally, the presentation describes the alignment of the Georgia Standards of Excellence and the Georgia Milestones Assessment to the Lexile framework. I will provide teachers with a printout of the most relevant slides from that presentation, along with copies of a document from MetaMetrics (2008), the company that produces and oversees the Lexile framework. This document includes a guide for matching students to texts based on Lexile and using the Lexile measures in the classroom.

The final session that is not text-based will be the ELA-only presentation on reading interventions. The purpose of this session will be to provide ELA teachers with access to resources to help them address students with reading difficulties who are not otherwise served by special education or resource classes. For this session, I will provide an electronic document to teachers with links to the resources. In addition, during the session, teachers will receive samples of the interventions to preview and evaluate.

Existing supports. Each subject/grade level group will also need access to at least one laptop. Teachers will use these laptops to complete lesson and unit plan templates based on each training session. The training area in the school media center is designed and well suited for training of this type. Teachers are familiar and used to attending training in this area. The interactive whiteboard, Internet and Intranet access in

the area is strong and reliable. The media center is centrally located in the school, so teachers may easily reach their classrooms to obtain any materials they find they need during the lesson planning portion of the training.

Potential barriers. The primary potential barrier to this project comes from the dispositions of the participants. Traditionally, as shown in the literature review, content area teachers have been resistant to changes in practice. Since the purpose of this professional development project is to engender changes to instructional practice that will help students perform better in reading, it is reasonable to assume that some teachers will be reluctant to embrace the changes proposed by this training. In addition, the professional development program will be scheduled during one of the four pre-planning days teachers receive each year. Some teachers may be uneasy about giving up most of one of these days in order to attend training.

Potential solutions to barriers. There are two solutions that offer relief from the potential barriers to this professional development project. First is the demonstration of the potential benefit to the teachers that they may gain from participation in the training and the implementation of the key literacy strategies presented. In addition, teachers will be shown how incorporation of the literacy strategies and methods can be done within the context of their current instructional methods. Second, during the portions of the training sessions devoted to practical application of the strategies and formulation of lesson plans, teachers will be encouraged and gradually moved to taking ownership of the process. It is important to the sustainability of the goals of this project that teachers are able to maintain the initiative within their own practices, as well as provide training and support

for new staff as they come on board. Finally, school administration will be encouraged and expected to demonstrate support for the training program and explain how teachers will be accountable for implementation of the methods and strategies. Moreover, teachers are used to having at least one day during pre-planning devoted to training. That this training program has significance in addressing a need identified by their fellow teachers should help alleviate concerns about the lost planning time.

Implementation and timeline. The professional development program will be presented in two phases. The first phase will consist of the four, 75-minute sessions to be presented to all content area teachers. The second phase will be the reading interventions session presented only to ELA teachers during one of their 50-minute weekly subject-area meetings. The first phase will be scheduled for one of the four days devoted to pre-planning by the school district each year. The first day of pre-planning is usually devoted to a district-wide convocation and faculty meetings setting the tone and objectives for both the pre-planning days and the school-year as a whole. The fourth day of pre-planning is typically used to prepare for that evening's school open house and to make final preparations for the opening of school the next day. This leaves two ideal days for the first phase of training presentation. Since the training has the potential to influence other lesson planning activities in which the teachers may engage, I propose that the best day for the training would be the second day of pre-planning.

I will schedule the first phase of training to be presented in a pair of 2½-hour sessions. The first session will include approximately an hour for the presentation on content area literacy and an hour for the presentation on test-based reading and writing.

The remaining time will be spent as teachers, with the assistance of the presenter and the administrators present, prepare units and lessons based on the information presented in training. Following a lunch break, the afternoon session will include the presentation on vocabulary instruction and text complexity. The day will conclude with teachers continuing to work on unit and lesson plans.

The second phase of the training for ELA teachers only will be held on one of two possible times. If convenient for the school and the teachers, the session could be held the day following the presentation of phase one. On the other hand, the school provides teachers with 100 minutes of planning time each day. This planning time includes a daily subject/grade level meeting. Since each subject/grade level team meets at a different time each day, it is possible that all three groups could receive the training on the same day during their planning time. This option is attractive in that it provides the least disruption to pre-planning time. In addition, this option allows the presenter to provide resources specific to each grade level and allows the teachers to receive the training in a familiar setting (usually one of the team member's classroom) and have more time for specific questions.

Roles and responsibilities of participants and others. The primary role for the participants in the professional training will be to receive and apply the information presented in the training sessions. Teachers will be expected to participate in discussions and activities and to join in unit and lesson planning with their peers. To help facilitate the training and pave the way for teacher participation, I will have a meeting with the nine subject/grade level chairs. The purpose of this meeting will be to familiarize these

leaders with the training objectives and preview the activities, particularly unit and lesson planning. In addition, this meeting will be used to gain the support of the chairs in both the presentation and implementation of the training. Finally, I will be the primary presenter/facilitator of the training sessions although administrators and the system literacy coach will be asked and encouraged to support the training, including taking the lead in some aspects of the presentation as appropriate or deemed necessary.

The role of administration in the project is two-fold. First, it is expected that the head school principal will address the group to stress the importance of the training to performance of all stakeholders, including the teachers, students, and the school as a whole. Next, it is expected that the administrator responsible for English language arts in the school will be a full participant in the program, as well as providing input from an administrative point of view. The remaining two administrators in the school will be welcome to attend and participate in the sessions as their time and schedule allows. Secondarily, the media specialist will also be involved in helping to secure the meeting space and providing technical support, as needed. The school technology specialist may also be called on to help address any computer/Internet issues that may arise.

Project Evaluation Plan

The evaluation for this project will be formative based. Implementation fidelity is a key factor in the success of instructional changes resulting from professional development (Berkeley et al, 2012; Collins et al, 2017; Kennedy et al., 2017; Rimbey et al., 2016). Therefore, the primary method of evaluation for this project will be classroom observations, supported by lesson and unit planning documents.

Observations of instructional practice will be conducted by both the trainer/facilitator and the administrator assigned to each of the three content areas (social studies, science, and ELA). Prior to the first round of observations, the trainer/facilitator will meet with the administrators to go over the observation tool, which is the Georgia Department of Education's Georgia Literacy Instruction Observation Checklist (2012). This document will be used for two 20-minute observations conducted by the appropriate administrator and a class-period long observation conducted by the trainer/facilitator. These three observations will occur within the first two months of instruction following training. The observation checklist is designed to provide guidance to the observer in two areas: Features of effective instruction and indicators of appropriate strategies. Effective instruction includes observations of practice that involve vocabulary, comprehension strategies, fluency, writing, or content area literacy instruction. Indicators of appropriate strategies include efficient use of time, student collaboration, immediate teacher feedback, student engagement, and differentiated instruction.

After all observations have been completed, I will meet with each administrator to compile the results, reconcile any discrepancies, and prepare a summative report. I will then return to meet with the subject/grade level faculty to review the results and present any retraining or further supports needed based on the observations. I will conduct follow-up observations to confirm that the modification and changes to instruction have been implemented. These follow-up observations will be conducted using the same instrument as the initial observations. Although the primary purpose of the follow-up is to confirm the modifications and changes, both major sections and all descriptors within

those sections will be observed and noted. Additional follow-up meetings and observations will be conducted as needed. Finally, a summative report including meeting notes, observation records, and recommendations for next steps will be presented to school administration at the conclusion of the implementation/observation process.

Project Implications

The professional development project developed from this study has implications for positive social change at the local level. Primarily, the project has the potential to improve literacy instruction in the local school. Improved instruction should result in students who are better prepared to meet the challenges of reading and writing in the academic and personal settings.

Immediate implications. The data analysis from this study showed that teachers in the local setting feel that changes in reading instruction are needed. These changes are needed to help students succeed in achieving the rigor of the new standards in both ELA and in the content areas. The problem addressed by this study was that teachers were uncertain if their instructional methods and activities were adequately preparing students for the new state tests connected to the new standards. By extension, improvements in instruction based on the standards should result in students who are better prepared for the tests aligned to those standards. The literature indicates that content area literacy, test-based reading and writing, text complexity, and vocabulary development are key aspects of the new standards. The professional development project associated with this study is designed to address those aspects.

Future implications. In addition to the implications for immediate academic and testing performance, this professional development project has implications for future positive social change. The changes in instructional practice offered by the project are designed to assist students in performing and succeeding on academic tasks as they progress through high school, college, and careers. The framers of the CCSS, upon which the Georgia Standards of Excellence are based, claim that the standards were constructed on research and data showing the skills and abilities students need to possess in order to be successful in college and careers. Since the standards increase in rigor as students move through the grade levels, the changes associated with this professional development project should help prepare teachers to provide improved instruction to assist students in succeeding with future literacy tasks.

In addition to the implications for positive change for students, the project may also benefit both local teachers and the local school and system. Both the instruments in the state of Georgia that are used to assess the performance of both teachers and schools have significant components based on student achievement on the Georgia Milestones Assessment. Currently, 20% of a teacher's evaluation is based on student performance growth on the state test. Similarly, the instrument used to evaluate schools and systems, the College and Career Readiness Performance Index, is in large part based on student results on the Georgia Milestones Assessment. Improvements in instruction such as those in this professional development project that increase student performance on state tests have clear positive implications for local teachers, the school, the students, and the system.

Conclusion

The data collected and analyzed in this study indicated that teachers in the local school believed that changes were needed in reading instruction to help students perform better academically and on the state tests. The professional development project derived from the data analysis is designed to address five key areas of the new state standards for reading, writing, and literacy. The project addresses content area literacy, text-based reading and writing, text complexity, vocabulary development, and reading interventions. A formative and summative evaluation plan based on observation, discussion, and additional training is in place to assure the content of the training is implemented consistently and with fidelity. Finally, the project has implications for positive social change both in the near term and the future. Local students, teachers, school, and system stand to benefit from the results of this project.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

In this section, I will reflect on this study and the resulting project. I will describe the strengths of the study and project, as well as their limitations. I will also enumerate and comment on possible alternatives approaches. I close this section with a discussion of the process and its impact on me as a scholar and practitioner, as well as the opportunities for future research.

Project Strengths and Limitations

The primary strength of this project is that it was based on qualitative data gathered from participants best placed to provide that data and most likely to benefit from the results of the study and project. Professional development based on need as perceived by classroom teachers has been shown to be more effective in producing positive instructional change (Desimone & Garet, 2015; Glover et al., 2016). Another strength of the project is that it addresses an issue identified in both the local setting and K-12 education at large. The CCSS, and state standards such as the Georgia Standards of Excellence that are based on the CCSS, place an increased emphasis on literacy (Fisher, Frey, & Nelson, 2012; Reed, 2009). I designed this project to address several key areas found in the reading, writing, and content area literacy standards. The themes presented in the professional development project are based on research and are aligned to the state standards. The authors of the conceptual framework that undergirds this study argue that alignment among standards, instruction, and assessment is essential (Tankersley, 2007; Webb, 2007). Given that this project is driven by and aligned to these standards, the

results of the professional development project should serve to improve instruction and, therefore, provide students an increased opportunity to master the standards and improve performance on the state tests.

In addition to strength of content, the project also has strengths derived from its design. First, the training sessions included in the project does not require a significant investment in time on the part of teachers or school administrators. Dresser (2012) observed that teachers often "pushed back" against professional development when that training required a significant investment of time or effort on the part of the teachers. Furthermore, the training sessions present modifications and additions to instruction that are reasonably easy to incorporate into existing instruction. Additionally, the faculty of the local school is used to professional learning sessions during pre-planning.

Observations of professional practice designed to assess the impact of professional development have been shown to be vital in the success of the training in producing desired results (Berkeley et al., 2012). The formative and summative evaluation plan for the project is based on a classroom observation document specifically designed to assess literacy instruction. The document is easily completed as part of classroom observations of instructional practice administrators are currently making as part of their regular duties. Follow-up conferences and retraining sessions help address implementation fidelity, which the research shows is critical to the success of teacher training programs.

Limitations. The primary limitation of the project is that it must, by necessity, address the research problem and the findings of the study by somewhat indirect means.

The purpose of the study was to ascertain the views and opinions of local teachers about their instructional methods in relation to preparing students for the new state test. Through interviews, I successfully gathered those views and opinions. However, when asked what was needed to better prepare students for the test, the overwhelming answer was more information about the test. Since specific information about the test can only be released by state sources, the project could not address that finding.

Other limitations to the project. There is one other major limitation to the project. The size of the sample has been shown to be a potential limiting factor in educational research (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). The project could be limited by the sample size of the study upon which it was based. Only six classroom teachers, one of whom is a special education coteacher, and two administrators, agreed to participate in the interviews. It is possible that interviews with more potential participants could have resulted in ideas not expressed by those who did participate. Additional data perhaps could have changed the nature of the project, both in content and in design.

Mitigating the limitations. While the project was unable to address the most prevalent theme that emerged from the data analysis, the theme of reading that was in the project is no less important. First, as shown in the data analysis, a significant number of participants mentioned reading as an area of the school's instructional program that needed improvement. Second, an argument can be made that targeting reading in a teacher training project offers the potential for a more beneficial outcome than training designed to improve preparations for the state test. Studies have shown that instruction

dedicated to or driven by test preparation have little long-term value (Palmer & Snodgrass Rangel, 2011; Welsh, Eastwood, & D'Agostino, 2014). In addition, the authors of the conceptual framework that is the basis of the study support the alignment among standards, instruction, and assessment (Tankersley, 2007; Webb, 2007). The project provides teachers with training on how to better present instruction based on the reading standards. Better standards-based instruction should lead to improved student performance on the state test, but, more importantly, also have a better opportunity to succeed in current and future academic tasks.

The concern about the sample size of the originating study is also mitigated. The number of teachers agreeing to participate in the study represents 42% of the teachers meeting the criteria for inclusion in the study. The two assistant principals who agreed to be interviewed are half the administrative staff of the school. These numbers are well within the criteria for an acceptable sample size posited by Kvale (2007) and Merriam (2009). Furthermore, the participating teachers came from all three grade levels, and one teacher represented the special education faculty. The themes addressed in the project occurred in a majority of the responses. Additional major themes, though possible, seem unlikely to emerge given the representative nature of the participants and the prevalence of the themes in the data that did emerge.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

There are other ways the research problem and the findings of the data analysis could be addressed. One possibility is that, rather than a professional development project, a white paper could have been produced. White papers generally are used to

present a recommendation for action based on research findings. In this case, a white paper could have been used to suggest major changes to the school's reading philosophy and program of study. For example, the school does not have a dedicated reading class or reading period in its current schedule. Adding such classes or periods would be consistent with the findings of the study.

Another possibility might have been to design a professional development project targeting a specific faculty group in the school. One possibility is that there are many other issues in content area literacy and disciplinary reading specific to either social studies or science beyond those addressed in my project. For example, the vocabulary development portion of my professional development project provides guidance to science and social studies teachers on methods to incorporate vocabulary instruction. However, the project does not address what words students need to know specific to either subject or any grade level. Similarly, my project does not address specific topics or issues to be addressed by text-based reading and writing in science and social studies. Rather, the project describes ways teachers can assist students in reading texts and ways they can respond to those texts as they address those topics and issues.

Personal/Professional Reflections

There are many expected outcomes of the doctoral process. I would argue that foremost among them is the development of the doctoral candidate into a scholar-practitioner. As I move forward with my practice, I have now developed certain scholarly skills that make me a better teacher, faculty member, and proponent of research-based changes in instructional practices, particularly when it comes to reading

and writing instruction. I now have a greater understanding of how schools and school cultures work. For example, I understand that real, sustained cultural and methodological change within a school requires extreme amounts of dedication, perseverance, and, often, guile. Not only must teachers, and, often, administrators, be shown how change is in the best interest of themselves and their students, but they must also be provided with clear, simple, and relatively stress-free methods to achieve that change. The workload and time constraints placed on today's teachers mandate that teachers not only be informed about the why of what should be done, but they must also be provided with the information and support about how to do it, with the emphasis on support. By and large, teachers know what they would like to see happen in their classrooms and in their schools; I feel the doctoral experience has better prepared me to help them (and me) make that happen.

From a practical standpoint, I have now learned the methods of accessing, analyzing, and reporting on scholarly research. I understand how topics and issues can be multi-faceted and require library searches beyond the educational databases. I now seek literature from databases in psychology, social work, and cognitive development. I am now aware and watchful of how the researchers, the research method, and the study participants can bring bias into a study, and I can evaluate with confidence the transferability of the findings of those studies based on those factors.

My study of the form and craft of scholarly discourse has positively affected my own writing, and I have already seen how this increased skill in scholarly argumentation has led to increased respect and acceptance of my point of view on key issues. As an example, my school and system has made reading and writing the key area for focus in

the school and system continuous improvement plan. Using the library research and scholarly discourse skills I have learned, I was able to locate relevant research and prepare a summary and proposal that has led to a significant change in the amount of time devoted to and the methodology used for reading and writing instruction in my school.

Coursework lays the groundwork for the doctoral study process, and I felt well prepared to tackle the challenges of the study following the completion of the lead-in courses. The first skill I gleaned was the ability to locate, evaluate, analyze, and present relevant scholarly literature. As issues of students' academic literacy have arisen at my current school, I have turned again and again to these skills to support my stance on those issues. On more than one occasion, I have been able to initiate change in my current practice by constantly searching and reviewing the literature found in library databases. Often, I have been able to assist colleagues by relating what is contained in the latest research on literacy. The library research skills have also allowed me to argue successfully for a fundamental change in how reading and writing are taught in my grade.

A companion skill to research is the ability to create effective scholarly writing. Again, my attainment of this skill began in coursework. However, it was only through the lengthy process of constructing the research proposal – through continuous drafting, critique, and revisions -- that I truly felt I understood and was able to execute effective expository writing, particularly when it comes to scholarly discourse. I am particularly appreciative of the guidance of my two committee chairpersons and, especially, my methodologist, who I give full credit for any success I have had in learning to craft a doctoral study report.

Above all, I feel the impact of this study and project on my scholarship has been on my attitude. One thing my methodologist repeatedly stressed during the proposal process was the higher levels of thought, analysis, and discourse expected at the doctoral level. I call this the "doctoral attitude." It is a way of presenting yourself, your opinions, and your knowledge in a scholarly fashion. By scholarly fashion I mean the expression and promotion of ideas for changes in school vision, philosophy, and methodology based on evidence from scholarly sources, rather than an unsupported personal opinion. This attitude has translated itself into a new way that I look at myself as an educator. For example, I am now considering other employment opportunities, such as the district literacy coordinator.

Project Development and Evaluation

While the project I designed as a result of my study was based on the data analysis, there are developmental influences that can be traced to my experiences as an ELA teacher. For example, I knew going into the project that literacy, and particularly the impact on literacy driven by the new standards and tests, was an important issue at the local level. The data also confirmed my feeling that literacy extends beyond the ELA classroom. Many of the participants in the study shared this attitude. Finally, I have always been a champion of the principle of alignment among standards, instruction, and assessment. This was the conceptual framework of my study. Moreover, addressing standards-based instruction is the only legitimate way to influence students' performance on state tests. These ideas provided the backdrop as I designed my project.

Additional ideas went into the design of the project. Perhaps the most important of these was the concept that appeared again and again in the literature, that the key to successful professional development is fidelity of implementation. For that reason, I sought to make the presentation and implementation of the training as easy as possible for the teachers involved. I have often heard colleagues bemoan the efficacy of training. Therefore, I resolved to present content that was highly relevant and easy to implement. In addition, I reasoned that the training sessions needed to be concise and well-paced. This was the major reason the training is scheduled to be completed in one day for the majority of the teachers involved.

Finally, I knew that the support and influence of school administration would be vital to the success of the training. The leadership of the local district, partially in response to student performance on state tests, has made literacy a major part of the district improvement plan. Therefore, I knew a professional development project designed to address literacy beyond ELA classrooms would be attractive to local administration. I also felt that local administrators would be receptive to participating in the evaluative portion of the project due to the district directive.

Development of project content. Once I had determined the direction of the project, the next step was to determine the nature of the content to be included in the training. For several years, the local school has used professional learning communities to address issues of importance. Usually, the activities of these communities were based on a relevant text provided to the team members. For this reason, I knew the local teachers would be comfortable with training supported by a book. However, since I

determined that the training must be concise and targeted to be effective, I decided that only specific chapters and concepts in the books would be a part of the presentations. Copies of the book would be retained in the school's professional development library for teachers who desired to read further.

Choosing training texts. I reviewed several potential texts on the topics of content area literacy, text-based reading and writing, and vocabulary development. To guide my review, I determined some key aspects and features the texts must possess to address their related topics. The texts must also be applicable to all subject areas beyond ELA. In addition, the books needed to be concise and clear in presenting principles and techniques to the be implemented by the teachers in all content areas.

For content-area literacy, the text must include some instruction in the basics of the technique of close reading. Although ELA teachers received training in close reading of a text during the s implementation phase of the new state standards, not all content-area teachers received such training. In addition, the text must present research-based strategies and techniques to help students access content-area texts. Furthermore, these strategies must be easily implemented by teachers. The text I chose was *Teaching Students to Read Like Detectives* (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012). Features that were particularly attractive about this text were its emphasis on cognitive strategies, its focus on argumentation and discussion as comprehension strategies, and its examination of various text types and purposes.

Fisher and Frey were also the authors of the book I chose for the text-based reading and writing segment of the training. *Close Reading and Writing from Sources*

(Fisher & Frey, 2014) expands on the close reading technique to include methods of finding and using evidence from texts in students' discussion and writing on content area issues and topics. In addition, the text also includes techniques in writing based on multiple texts and strategies to guide students' revision of their text-based writing. Also of interest is the text's focus on methods for students to note and annotate what they have read.

The research indicated that highly relevant areas of vocabulary instruction related to my project were defining words in context and word meaning strategies specific to the content areas. The text I selected with the 4th edition of Teaching Vocabulary in all classrooms (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2010). This text is comprehensive in its presentation of methods of teaching vocabulary. However, the chapters on learning words in context, learning words in content-area settings, and approaches for vocabulary instruction for diverse learners specifically led me to choose book. There are other chapters of interest in the book which are referred to but are not cover in depth in the training presentation. These chapters include the theoretical basis of vocabulary acquisition, using reference works, and methods of vocabulary assessment.

Selection of non-text resources. Although there are trade books on the subject, for the presentation on text complexity I chose to use information available from the Georgia DOE and MetaMetrics, the company behind the Lexile measure of text complexity. The Georgia DOE has produced a training presentation explaining the Lexile measure of text complexity, how to use the Lexile measure in the classroom, and how to understand how student Lexile levels are reported in the Georgia Milestones

Assessment score report. The state presentation is lengthy and highly detailed, so I decided to incorporate the most relevant portions into my training session. The ELA teachers are familiar with the basics of Lexile scores and the principles behind text complexity. However, none of the local teachers have had any training on how to use the Lexile scores to match students with texts that are accessible, yet challenging.

The second non-textbook source of information for my presentation is an information handout from MetaMetrics. This handout briefly defines the Lexile measure and ways the measure can be used in the classroom. In addition, the handout provides guidance for teachers on how to select texts to be used in the classroom. Each teacher will receive a copy of this handout during training.

Reading interventions session. The final session of the training is on reading interventions. Rather than focusing on one particular intervention, I reasoned that teachers would be better served by an overview of some of the variety of interventions available to them. I envisioned this session starting with an overview of possible classroom interventions, followed by a short catalogue of materials available to support the interventions. To prepare for this session, I searched for research-based or research-aligned commercially available materials. In the resulting presentation, I start with a description of each intervention. I then detail the materials that could be used to implement the intervention in the classroom.

Evaluating the project. After reading the literature about professional development, I knew that the most important element of my project would be the evaluation plan. I also knew that I was more concerned about how the training was

affecting classroom practice. Although I am certainly concerned about student outcomes, I believe that positive outcomes will be realized if the elements in the project are implemented consistently and continually. I also knew that it would be difficult for me in my present position to conduct multiple observations of all of the nearly 40 teachers involved. For those reasons, I looked for an observation instrument or instruments that could be used by myself and the school administrators that would not involve significant amounts of time to complete.

As part of their administrative duties, school principals and assistant principals are required to conduct regular walkthroughs of classroom instruction. The document that is produced from these walkthroughs has elements that do align with my training project. However, results of those official walkthroughs may not be disseminated by individual. Although they could be used to make an overall evaluation on the progress on implementation, they would not provide information about specific teachers or specific aspects of the training. To provide that information, I found a literacy observation checklist available from the Georgia DOE. I was able to adapt that instrument to fit the critical aspects of my project, as well as make it brief enough to be completed during the administrative walkthroughs.

Leadership and Change

For this project to have any hope of producing positive change on the local level, the support of local leadership is essential. This includes leadership at the district and school level, including school administration and teacher leaders. The impact of district and school administration on school mission and vision is well documented (Bengtson &

Connors, 2014; Gosnell-Lamb, O'Reilly, & Matt, 2013; Jackson & Marriott, 2012; Wiles, 2009). The importance and role of teacher leaders in the transferring of mission and vision into action as described by Danielson (2007) is a significant part of the conceptual framework of this study. Fortunately, these school leaders have intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to aid in the success of my project.

As has been previously stated, local district leadership has made reading and writing, particularly in the content areas, a priority area for improvement. For this reason, all leaders at all levels and all teachers have a professional obligation to help improve reading and writing instruction in the district. Along with this, performance on the state assessments is directly influenced by literacy through the alignment of standards, instruction, and assessment. Student performance on those assessments directly affects accountability measures for teachers, administrators, the school, and the district. Finally, local leadership is also intrinsically motivated by student success. The vast majority of educators at all levels entered the profession with the aim of helping students succeed academically, emotionally, and socially. Supporting this project with both management and oversight (such as a strong presence at subject-area meetings and taking time to debrief teachers after the follow-up observations) are ways leaders can address these goals.

Reflection on Importance of the Work

For many years, ELA teachers have argued that reading instruction must extend beyond the ELA classroom. The implementation of the Georgia Standards of Excellence, which were based on the CCSS, provided great support for that view. In 2016-17,

Georgia adopted more rigorous standards in science and social studies which added even more emphasis on literacy across content areas. Much of the resistance to reading and writing instruction across content areas has been broken down not only by the new standards, but also by changes in teacher and school accountability measures. With these events as a backdrop, the timing of my project could not have been better.

While teachers' willingness to incorporate reading instruction into their practice may have increased, to date there has been little assistance on how to make those fundamental changes. Even ELA teachers received only minimal information about the new standards and new techniques for teaching reading, and as they stated in the interview data, ways to address the challenges of the new assessments. My project has the potential to provide, for the first time, detailed, specific information about how teachers can use research-based techniques to address key issues such as reading complex expository texts, text-based writing, vocabulary development, and using text complexity as an instructional tool. In addition, ELA teachers will be provided access to reading interventions and resources for implementing those interventions that would be difficult for them to obtain individually due to time constraints. In the end, this project has the potential to be so effective that it may appear again in versions for both high school and elementary teachers.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

Logically, students' performance on state assessments should improve over time as teachers and schools become more proficient at presenting and assessing instruction based on the state standards. However, students who have been taught under these

standards from Grade 1 will not enter middle school for at least two more years. In addition, the diverse backgrounds from which students come assures that students will continue to have varying levels of success in meeting reading and other language arts standards. For these reasons, among others, the project I have developed has the potential for immediate and long-lasting effects.

The current educators and students in the local school stand to benefit from the project, but so too will future teachers who join the faculty. The training presentation and materials will be available to be incorporated into the orientation of new faculty members. Teachers, administrators, and instructional leaders, such as the newly-hired system literacy coordinator, may potentially use this project as a stepping stone to drive further internal discussion and collaboration on how best to address the literacy needs of the students in the school. Also, the training may be modified and extended to faculties at local elementary schools and the local high school.

Finally, the project may also lead to further research in a number of ways. First, further research designed to evaluate the effectiveness of individual reading interventions by quantitative means may be initiated. It is also possible that this project could drive an additional qualitative study involving teachers from all subjects at the school to determine their views and attitudes about content-area literacy and the state of content-area literacy instruction in the school. Similarly, a qualitative study could also be conducted to examine the state of the "literacy culture" present at the school. A study of this type could focus on how administrators perceive and are perceived to have promoted literacy in the school. There is also the potential for further related research conducted to

evaluate and suggest improvement steps for a specific aspect of this project, such as text-based writing or vocabulary instruction. This study and the resulting potential project have but scratched the surface of avenues for additional digging into the state of reading and writing instruction at the school. Additional research can reveal ways that ELA and content-area literacy instruction can be better designed to assist students in mastering the new standards and, consequently, performing better in state assessments.

Conclusion

The movement to increase the rigor of state standards and, thereby, increase the quality of instruction in the nation's schools, is nearly a decade old. Still states, systems, and schools still struggle with the implementation of those standards and with improving student performance on the assessments driven by those standards, particularly in reading and language arts. The problem that drove this study was that local middle school administrators and teachers were unsure that their instructional methods were adequately preparing students for new state tests in ELA. The data from the first administrations of the new assessments support that changes and improvements are needed in the school's reading program to better serve students.

With an absence of experimental data to identify the deficiencies in the local ELA program, I turned to the teachers and administrators involved in the school's reading and language arts curriculum to explore where the opportunities for positive change lay. The purpose, therefore, of this study was to gather the views and opinions of these educators about what changes or additions they felt were needed to improve instruction to better prepare students for those tests. I conducted semistructured interviews with eight

teachers and administrators at the school, and I viewed and evaluated unit and lesson planning documents to verify and expand on the interview data. The results of the analysis of the interview data demonstrated variability in the responses. I identified 26 major themes emerging from the responses to the eight research/interview questions.

Key findings from the data were that teachers received most of their pre-assessment training from state (rather than local) sources, that writing instruction was the dominate focus of their methods, and that all the participants agreed that their instructional methods were ineffective at least to some extent. The findings demonstrated that teachers and administrators felt that an important change that could lead to increased student performance on the state tests was for the teachers to receive more information about the nature, weighting, and scoring of the items on the state English language arts test. In the absence of more information about the nature of the test from state sources, the majority of the participants agreed that changes in the philosophy and methods the school uses to teach reading would be most beneficial. A key element of those responses was that the ELA teacher felt that the responsibility for teaching reading should extend beyond the ELA classrooms. The participants felt that reading and writing instruction needed to be a school-wide initiative if students were to be successful in mastering the new standards and, therefore, performing better on the state assessments.

Based on those findings, I developed a professional development project to address reading and writing in science, social studies, and English language arts classrooms in the school. The project includes five, 75-minute sessions designed to be presented during the pre-planning days prior to the school year and during ELA subject-

area meetings once school begins. The pre-planning sessions consist of four modules specifically targeted toward teachers in science and social studies with support from ELA teachers. The sessions are practical in nature, providing content-area teachers with teaching methods and resources in the areas of content-area reading and writing, text-based reading and writing, vocabulary development, and text complexity. The fifth session, designed to be presented to ELA teachers during one of their regular, 50-minute subject-area meetings, focuses on resources available for teachers to use as interventions in the classroom to support reading and writing, particularly for, but not limited to, struggling readers.

The project also includes an evaluation plan designed to insure the success of implementation. The evaluation plan involves the three school assistant principals and includes observations of practice. The administrators will be trained on how to use a classroom literacy observation checklist based on such an instrument developed by the Georgia DOE. The evaluation plan also calls for observations and follow-up by the program presenter. In addition, the presenter and the administrators will join in discussions about the observations during subject-area meetings. Successful implementation of the project has the potential to lead to positive social change in that local students will be better prepared for reading tasks in and out of school, both currently and in the future. This includes tasks related to the state assessment.

This study also has the potential to lead to further opportunities for investigation at the local school and at other schools with similar academic and accountability situations. For example, while many teachers in this study felt too much time was spent

on writing instruction at the expense of reading, assessment data indicates that writing is still a struggle for many students in the school and the system. Further research into how reading and writing are currently taught could uncover opportunities for instructional improvement that potential could lead to greater student success, both in class and on tests, in both areas. In addition, the idea of reading and writing instruction becoming a responsibility for all teachers in the school is new to the school. Additional study could be conducted both in how content-area teachers are faring with the addition of a reading component to their practice. A study could also be made as to how the structure of the school day and class schedule could be modified to include more time for reading and writing instruction and the potential for the addition of additional classes to address these areas.

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Appendix A: Literacy Professional Development

As a result of the data analysis component of my research study, I determined that a professional development program addressing reading was in order. Further analysis and review of relevant literature led me to expand that program to include literacy practices in English language arts, science, and social studies classrooms. What follows is a detailed description of this program, including agendas, presentation slides, handouts, and evaluative instruments.

Project Scheduling

Time was the key element in the scheduling of the delivery of the project. In order to provide adequate time to present the content to the attending teachers, and to cause the least disruption to educators' various other tasks, I designed the bulk of the project to be delivered during a single pre-planning day. Two presentations are scheduled before the lunch break, and two more for the afternoon. The fifth and final session of the training is designed for English language arts teachers and has an option for delivery the following day or at another time early in the school year.

Agendas

Session 1 – 9:00 a.m. to 10:15 a.m.

- Welcome
- Overview of Today's Training
- Why This Training is Needed
- Goals and Intended Outcomes
- Examining Content Area Literacy

- Introducing Our Text
- Ideas and Strategies
- Putting the Strategies to Work
- Group Work on Sample Lesson Plans

Break (10:15 a.m.-10:30 a.m.)

Session 2 (10:30 a.m. to 11:45 a.m.)

- What is Text-Based Reading and Writing, and How is It Different?
- Beyond Close Reading: Text-Based Strategies
- Looking at the Support Text
- Putting the Strategies to Work
- Group Work on Sample Lesson Plans

Adjourn (11:45 a.m.)

Session 3 (1:00 p.m.-2:15 p.m.)

- Vocabulary Acquisition: A Key Skill
- Looking at Our Text
- Vocabulary Development: Context, Content, and Diversity
- Putting Strategies to Work
- Group Work on Sample Lesson Plans

Break (2:15 p.m.-2:30 p.m.)

Session 4 (2:30 p.m.-3:30 p.m.)

- What is Text Complexity and What Does It Mean for Me and My Students?
- Understanding Text Complexity Measures
- Using Text Complexity in the Classroom
- Understanding the Georgia Milestones Score Report
- Training Wrap-Up
- How Will We Know Where We Are Going?
- Next Steps
- Questions and Concerns

Adjourn (3:30 p.m.)

Session 5

(Date and Time to Be Determined – 50 Minutes Maximum Duration)

- Welcome
- Why Do We Need to Change What We Are Doing?
- Research-Based Reading Intervention Strategies
- Adapting the Strategies to Our Classrooms
- What's Out There to Help Us?
- Next Steps
- Questions and Concerns

Adjourn

Presentation Slides

Literacy Professional Development

Welcome – Today's Agenda

- Four Sessions Today
- Two Morning Sessions
- Breaks Between Sessions
- Lunch – 11:45-1:00
- Two Afternoon Sessions
- Wrap-Up No Later Than 3:30

Today's Topics

Session 1 – Content Area Literacy

Session 2 – Text-Based Reading and Writing

Session 3 – Vocabulary Development

Session 4 – Demystifying Text Complexity

Why We Are Here

- New standards in English language arts, science and social studies have raised the bar for students
- Georgia Milestones results indicate students are struggling with more rigorous reading and writing tasks
- Research conducted at MCMS indicated that reading was a concern for teachers
- Students need advanced literacy skills to be successful in colleges and careers

Goals and Objectives

- Teachers will increase their knowledge of and ability to incorporate content area reading strategies into instruction.
- Teachers will learn advanced strategies for teaching text-based reading and writing.
- Teachers will acquire techniques to help students access content-area vocabulary.
- Teachers will have a better understanding of text complexity and how it can be used in the classroom.

Session 1

Content Area Literacy

Reading and Writing in Science and Social Studies

Introducing Our Text

- Fisher, Frey, & Lapp. (2012). *Teaching students to read like detectives*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press
- We will focus on Chapters 1, 2, and 4.

A Different Mind Set

Reading in disciplinary subjects looks different than reading literature or reading for pleasure. There are specific methods to approach content area literacy.

Approaches to Content Literacy

- Cognitive Approach
- Socio-Cultural Approach
- Linguistic Approach

- (Fang, 2012)

The Cognitive Approach

- Based on quantitative and experimental research.
- Involves explicit instruction of cognitive techniques.
- Using a combination of cognitive strategies has proven highly effective.

Cognitive Strategies

In Chapter 1, Fisher, Frey, and Lapp (2012) identified several cognitive skills students must possess to successfully interact with texts. Four of these skills specific to content area literacy are:

- Questioning
- Predicting
- Inferring
- Summarizing

Questioning

- Teachers have two options when incorporating questioning into content area reading:
  - The teacher provides questions to guide reading
  - The student creates questions while reading

Teacher Created Questions

- Questions can target specific ideas & topics.
- Questions can activate prior knowledge.
- Questions can drive student writing.
- Questions can drive class discussions
- Questions can be used to scaffold text for struggling readers.

Student Created Questions

- Questions create student engagement.
- Questions open the door to collaboration.
- Questions can expose gaps in learning.
- Questions can confirm understanding.
- Questions prepare students for discussions.

Predicting

- Predicting promotes student engagement.
- Predicting bridges prior knowledge and the text.
- Predicting is the key skill in “reading like a detective.
- Predicting is a companion skill to inference.

Inferring

- Inferring is one of the most complex reading skills.
- Inferring requires a strong connection between prior knowledge and the text.
- Inferring is driven by evidence from the text.

Summarizing

- Summarizing requires returning to the text.
- Summarizing requires accuracy and ownership.
- Summarizing reveals student understanding.
- Summarizing exposes gaps in understanding.

Argumentation

- Creating and presenting arguments is the key skill students need to mastery as they advance their education.
- Argumentation requires a deep understanding of the text.
- Argumentation requires students to write and speak clearly and concisely, using evidence from the text.

Argumentation

- The key to improving student skills in argumentation is to expose students to the way arguments are constructed and presented in a variety of texts.

Argumentation

- Argumentation starts with three questions about the text:
  - Who is the author?
  - What is the author's purpose?
  - What is the genre of the text?

Argumentation

- In Chapter 2, Fisher, Frey, and Lapp provide a scaffolding graphic organizer to assist students in making a claim, providing evidence, asking for evidence, offering a counterclaim, inviting speculation, and reaching consensus. (See pages 44-45).

Expository Texts

- Have been called "the literature of fact."
- Can contain both fact and opinion.
- Have a variety of purposes.
- Can target student interests.
- Are difficult to comprehend due to "content load" and specialized vocabulary.

Expository Tests

- The keys to students successfully accessing expository texts are:
  - ✓ Understanding expository genres
  - ✓ Understanding text structures
  - ✓ Understanding text features
  - ✓ Understanding specialized vocabulary

Taking action

- Each content/grade group has been asked to bring a current lesson plan.
- In the time remaining, each group will work together to incorporate cognitive strategies (at least two), argumentation, or expository text analysis into the plan.

For Further Review

- Copies of *Teaching Students to Read Like Detectives* are available from the Professional Learning Library.
- All teachers should revisit Chapters 1, 2, & 4
- ELA teachers should also read Chapter 3 about narrative texts.

Reflections

- Please share with the group a reflection on the content, process, or outcome of this session.

References

Fang, Z. (2012). Approaches to developing content area literacies. Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 56(2), 103-108. doi:20.2002/JAAL.00110

Fisher, D., Frey, N., & Lapp, D. (2012). *Teaching students to read like detectives.* Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press

Session 2

Text-Based Reading and Writing

Introducing Our Text

Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2014). *Close reading and writing from sources*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association

We will touch on all five chapters.

It's All About That Text

Comprehending and writing about complex texts is the key skill students need to be successful in colleges and careers.

National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers (2010)

Show Me the Evidence

- Finding and using evidence is the key to successful text-based reading and writing.

Finding the Evidence

- First teach students how to annotate.

Annotations

- They can be as simple as underlining, highlighting, and margin notes.
- They can be as complex as a specific annotation method (Cornell notes, for example).
  - (Fisher & Frey, 2013a)

Annotation

- Let's watch annotation in action:
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QE9YbeCkLeQ&t=26s

Annotation

- You can find various annotation styles in Chapter 3.
- You should choose the style which best suits the instructional purpose.

Close Reading

- After choosing an annotation style, the next step in finding evidence is close reading.

Close Reading

- Teachers have been trained previously on how to conduct close readings.
- Close reading has been in place in English language arts since the implementation of the Georgia Standards of Excellence.
- Reading in the content areas requires very close reading of complex texts.

Very Close Reading

- Very close reading goes beyond basic close reading for a deeper analysis of the text.
- Very close reading requires re-reading at the word, phrase, and sentence level to get at the central ideas of the text.
- Very close reading requires activating of the cognitive strategies we mentioned in Session 1.

(Lapp, Grant, Moss, & Johnson, 2013)

Close Reading

- Let's watch close reading in action:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXc85d2b_p8&t=19s

Close Reading Tips

- Avoid the temptation to pre-teach. Deeper understanding comes from struggle and discovery
- Do be sure that students are familiar with the various informational text types (see Chapter 1).
- Be sure to emphasize to students the importance of details over general ideas and concepts.

Teacher Procedures

- Select short texts or passages that can be read multiple times.
- Relate the purpose of the close reading and be ready to support the reading with text-dependent questions.
- To assist in future reference in writing and discussion, number lines, paragraphs, and/or stanzas.

Teacher Procedures (Continued)

- Remind students of the appropriate annotation procedure to be used while reading.
- Continue to introduce text-dependent questions to extend and deepen the analysis.

(Lapp, Grant, Moss, & Johnson, 2013)

Close Reading Steps

- First read – Share only purpose and process (no pre-teaching of content or vocabulary. Remember to emphasize the proper annotation technique.
- Buddy Chat – Partner sharing of responses and annotations
- Re-reading – Introduce addition text-dependent questions moving students toward reaching the lesson's purpose.
- Demonstrating understand – As individuals, partners, or groups, students engage in a task to demonstration of understanding, such as an argumentative composition.

Writing with Evidence

- Currently, middle school students have only limited experience in writing using evidence (Frey & Fisher, 2013b).
- This should change as students come to us with more previous instruction based on the GSE.
- More information on writing from evidence is located in Chapter 5.

Types of Evidence in Writing

- Statistical evidence
- Testimonial evidence
- Anecdotal evidence
- Analogical evidence

Text-Dependent Questions

- Text dependent questions should require the student to provide details from the text (evidence) to support a more overall argument about what the text is about (analysis).
- See Chapter 2 for more on text-dependent questions.

A Few Cautions

- Use pre-teaching only when absolutely necessary to accomplish the instructional task.
- Use guiding questions, prompts, and cues to avoid "doing the work" for the student (Frey & Fisher, 2011).

Taking Action

- In our remaining time today, revisit your lesson to include a very close reading with annotations task and a writing task using evidence.
- Refer to Chapters 1, 2, and 5 for additional guidance.

For Further Review

- Copies of *Close Reading and Writing from Sources* are available from the Professional Learning Library.

Reflections

- Please share with the group a reflection on the content, process, or outcome of this session.

References

Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2014). *Close reading and writing from texts*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association

Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2013a). Annotation: Noting evidence for later use. *Principal Leadership, 13*(6), 49-52.

Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2013b). Show me the proof: Requiring evidence in student responses. *Principal Leadership, 13*(7), 57-61.

Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2012). The perils of preteaching. *Principal Leadership, 12*(9), 84-86.

Frey, N., & Fisher, D. (2011). Guided learning: Questions, prompts, and cues. *Principal Leadership 11*(5), 58-60.

Lapp, D., Grant, M., Moss, B., & Johnson, K. (2013). Students' close reading of science texts. *The Reading Teacher, 67*(2). doi:10.1002/TRTR.1191

Session 3

Vocabulary Development

Introducing Our Text

Blachowicz, C., & Fisher, P. (2010). *Teaching vocabulary in all classrooms* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon

We will focus on Chapters 2, 3, and 5.

Academic Language

- Vocabulary development is a broad topic that extends across all content areas.
- Vocabulary can roughly be divided into two categories: General (Tier 1 and Tier 2) and academic (Tier 3).
- Academic language requires different instructional processes than general vocabulary learning (Fisher & Frey, 2011).

What the Research Says

- Studies consistent show that implicit (i.e., in context) teaching of content vocabulary is more effective than explicit teaching (Khamesipour, 2015) .
- The use of word lists, glossaries, and dictionaries has been proven ineffective (Kennedy, Rogers, Romig, Lloyd, & Brownell, 2017).

What Does Work

- Connections to students' prior knowledge (such as through vocabulary K-W-L)
- Providing context for new words (such as cloze activities)
- Text-based questions focused on new, unfamiliar, or content-specific words
- Additional strategies are found in Chapters 2 and 5.

A Proven Effective Technique

- Sentence frames are an excellent way to drive focused vocabulary instruction (Fisher & Frey, 2011).

Sample Science Frame

- Frame:

An example of a _____ is _____.

- Example:

An example of a law is Newton's First Law of Motion.

Sample Social Studies Frame

- Frame:

A _____ is similar to a _____.

- Example:

A republic is similar to a democracy.

Follow Up

- Sentence frames can drive follow-up activities to deepen understanding such as evidence-based writing.

Sentence Frames for Writing

- The evidence shows that…
- I believe this because…
- Ultimately, I believe that…
- I reached this conclusion because…
- I would even add that…

(Fisher & Frey, 2011)

The Versatility of Frames

- Frames can be used to activate cognitive strategies while also addressing content vocabulary.
- Frames can be used on all levels of the depth of knowledge scale.
- Frames are particularly useful as a scaffolding technique for struggling readers and English language learners.

Other Techniques

- Sentence frames are just one proven and versatile method to assist students with vocabulary.
- Additional strategies can be found in Chapter 5.
- Teachers should test methods in their classes to determine which ones work best for them and their students.

Final Thoughts

- Implicit, rather than explicit, teaching of vocabulary is more effective.
- Techniques such as cloze activities and sentence frames can drive student understanding of content-specific words.
- Using content vocabulary in evidence-based writing helps “seal the deal” on acquisition of new terms.

Taking Action

- In our remaining time in this session, revisit your lesson to include a vocabulary development activity.
- Refer to Chapters 3 and 5 for additional guidance.

For Further Review

- Copies of *Teaching Vocabulary in All Classrooms* are available from the Professional Learning Library.

Reflections

- Please share with the group a reflection on the content, process, or outcome of this session.

References

Blachowicz, C., & Fisher, P. (2010). *Teaching vocabulary in all classrooms* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon

Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2011). Academic language in the secondary classroom. *Principal Leadership, 11*(6), 64-66.

Kennedy, M., Rogers, W., Romig, J., Lloyd, J., & Brownell, M. (2017). Effects of a multimedia professional development package on inclusive science teachers' vocabulary instruction. *Journal of Teacher Education, 68*(2), 213–230.

Khamesipour, M. (2015). The effects of explicit and implicit instruction of vocabulary through reading on EFL learners' vocabulary development. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies, 5*(8), 1620-1627. doi:10.17507/tpls.0508.11

Session 4

Text Complexity

Beyond Reading Level

- Text complexity under the new standards has expanded reading ability beyond the basic measures used previously.
- Previous measures used word counts, sentence lengths, and numbers of syllables to determining text complexity.
- These measures did not account for the difficulty of concepts, text features, and background knowledge needed.

(Fisher & Frey, 2012)

New Measures

- New measures of text complexity evaluate texts in three areas:
  - Qualitative measures
    - Levels of meaning, structure, language, etc…
  - Quantitative measures
    - Readability measures
  - Matching reader to text task
    - Motivation, knowledge, experience

(Fisher & Frey, 2012)

The Lexile® Framework

- Matches a student's reading ability with difficulty of text material
- Interpreted as the level of book that a student can read with 75% comprehension
- 75% comprehension is the level identified by experts as offering the reader a certain amount of comfort and yet still offering a challenge

(Georgia Department of Education, 2017)

Lexile® Measures for Texts

- Matching students to sufficiently challenging texts is a fundamental principle behind the Georgia Standards of Excellence (GADOE, 2017)
- Lexile® levels for texts can be found at https://lexile.com/
- In addition, portions of texts can be uploaded on the site to obtain a Lexile® score.

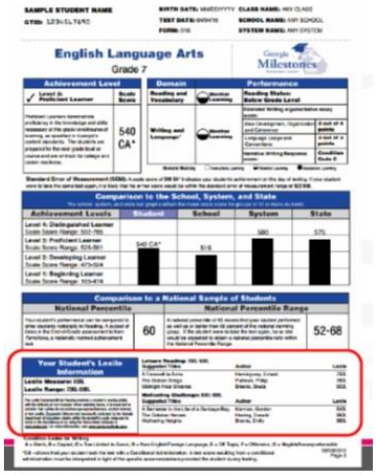
Lexile® Measures for Students

- Students in Grades 6-8 should have a Lexile® score between 925L to 1185L.
- Students should be reading texts from 50L above and 100L below their reported score.
- Although students should be reading in the band of 925L-1185L, not all students have attained that level entering middle school.

(GADOE, 2017)

Finding Students' Lexile® Scores

- Scores are reported for students on the Georgia Milestones Assessment score report.



Finding Students' Lexile® Scores

- The Istation program also reports a Lexile® score as part of the monthly ISIP reading comprehension assessment.
- Both the GMA and Istation Lexile® reports can be used to match students to texts.

Avoiding the Lexile® Trap

- It is important to remember that, while students are expected to have a Lexile® score within the grade-level range, that is not always the case.
- Teachers must find ways to assist struggling readers to access grade-level texts.

Helping Struggling Readers

- Build background knowledge by regularly exposing students to related texts (at their current proficiency level).
- Use vocabulary building strategies such as those we discussed in the previous session.
- Help students recognize and understand the text structures common to a content area text

Helping Struggling Readers

- Help students understand how the words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs are related to achieve coherence in the text.
- Model the process of reading complex texts.
- Frequently expose students to multiple genres and forms of informational texts.

(Fisher & Frey, 2012)

Other Ways to Address Complexity

- Pose a central question – Give students a purpose for reading.
- Modify the document – Simplify vocabulary, conventions, and sentence structures to allow students to access the meaning of the text.
- Give frequent opportunities for students to interact with shorter texts.

(Reisman & Wineburg, 2012)

Final Thoughts

- The Georgia Standards of Excellence and college and career readiness requires that students read increasingly complex texts.
- Teachers must meet students "where they are" in terms of their reading level in order to begin the process of improving their reading ability.

Final Thoughts

- Teachers must address background knowledge, vocabulary, text structures, and coherence to assist readers.
- Teachers can use questioning, text modification, and frequent exposure to help students access complex texts.
- Teachers in all subjects should be aware of student Lexile® Lexile® scores and how to match students to appropriate texts.

Final Thoughts

- Students should participate in setting goals for Lexile® improvement, and

Celebrate successes!

Taking Action

- In our remaining time in this session, discuss how you might use Lexile® scores in your practice.
- Refer to the handout from MetaMetrics to guide your discussion.

For Further Review

- All teachers will be provided electronically the Georgia Department of Education presentation on text complexity.

Reflections

- Please share with the group a reflection on the content, process, or outcome of this session.

References

Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2012). Text complexity. *Principal Leadership, 12*(5), 62-65. Retrieved from https://www.nassp.org/news-and-resources/publications/principal-leadership?SSO=true

Georgia Department of Education. (2017). Lexiles: Making sense of a reading measure. Retrieved from http://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Assessment/Documents/Milestones/Lexile/Lexile_Presentation_Jan_2017.pdf

Reisman, A., & Wineberg, S. (2012). "Text complexity" in the history classroom: Teaching to and beyond the Common Core. *Social Studies Review, 51*, 24-29. Retrieved from http://www.ccss.org/Review

Session 5

Reading Interventions

A Shared Benefit

- If English language arts teachers help content area teachers, they will ultimately help themselves.
  - The skills need in content area classes are the same skills present in the Georgia Standards of Excellence in ELA for informational texts.

Continuing to Grow

- ELA teachers made a tremendous shift in how they address reading when the GSE were implemented several years ago.
- We now know that additional modifications to practice in the ELA classroom are necessary for students to experience success with the new standards.

Possible Changes

- One thing we can't make is more time, so we must be more efficient with the time we have.
- While it is important that students read long narrative texts, students and teachers can no longer afford to spend large amounts of times reading in class.

Possible Changes

- Class time would be better served providing students with frequent opportunities to practice essential reading skills.
- In the remainder of this session, we will take a look at some resources that can be used to implement this change.

Addressing Comprehension Skills

- Comprehending Text Using Literal, Inferential & Applied Questioning
- Targeting Comprehension Strategies for the Common Core
- Daily Warm-Ups: Nonfiction Reading

Evaluating the Resource

- Examine each of the three samples
- What do you like about each resource?
- What do you dislike about each resource?
- How is each resource unique?
- What is missing?
- Which resource(s) would you likely use?
- How would you use the resource(s)?

Vocabulary Instruction

- Mastering Vocabulary
- 101 Lessons: Vocabulary Words in Context
- Use A Better Word

Evaluating the Resource

- Examine each of the three samples
- What do you like about each resource?
- What do you dislike about each resource?
- How is each resource unique?
- What is missing?
- Which resource(s) would you likely use?
- How would you use the resource(s)?

Writing Instruction

- Expository Writing, Grades 6-8 (Meeting Writing Standards Series)
- Nonfiction Writing for the Common Core
- The Write Stuff Grade 6+

Evaluating the Resource

- Examine each of the three samples
- What do you like about each resource?
- What do you dislike about each resource?
- How is each resource unique?
- What is missing?
- Which resource(s) would you likely use?
- How would you use the resource(s)?

Language Instruction

- Daily Warm-Ups: Language Skills
- Laugh and Learn Grammar
- How to Use Parts of Speech, Grades 6-8

Evaluating the Resource

- Examine each of the three samples
- What do you like about each resource?
- What do you dislike about each resource?
- How is each resource unique?
- What is missing?
- Which resource(s) would you likely use?
- How would you use the resource(s)?

Next Steps

- Use any or all of the samples in your classrooms over the next few weeks.
- We will discuss your results at our next meeting.

Handouts

Presentation Sessions 4 and 5 will be supported by handouts and samples of commercially available lessons. The Session 4 handout is a front and back sheet available from MetaMetrics Inc., the company that produces the Lexile framework for reading. The handout, used by permission of MetaMetrics Inc., covers tips and techniques for using the Lexile measure in the classroom. The other handouts are for Session 5 and are a series of sample lessons designed to assist English language arts teachers in helping students with reading skills. These evaluation samples are freely provided by Teacher Created Resources. The teachers in the training will evaluate the lessons and will pilot selected lessons in their classrooms in keeping with the vendor's terms of use of the samples. Once the participating teachers have evaluated the free samples, the school will be asked to purchase complete sets of the selected lessons from the vendor.

Lexile Handout (Session 4)

The Lexile Framework for Reading

Lexile Measures IN THE CLASSROOM

Lexile® measures defined

The Lexile® Framework for Reading is a scientific approach to measuring text difficulty and reading ability, putting both texts and readers on the same scale to accurately match readers with reading materials. A Lexile measure for either a text or a reader is a simple number followed by an "L" (e.g., 850L). The Lexile scale ranges from below 200L for beginning readers and beginning-reading text to above 1700L for advanced readers and text. Both the Lexile measure and Lexile scale are integral parts of the Lexile Framework.

The Lexile Framework is not an instructional program any more than a thermometer is a medical treatment. But just as a thermometer is useful in managing medical care, Lexile measures are useful in managing instructional programs and resources.

How Lexile measures work

All major standardized reading tests and many popular instructional reading programs report students' scores as Lexile measures. Each year, more than 28 million Lexile measures are reported from national and state assessments, classroom assessments and reading programs, representing about half of U.S. students. Lexile measures allow you to connect students with books and articles at the same Lexile measure with the confidence that they will find the texts appropriately challenging. Lexile measures can be used both to promote reading progress and to assign the right level of reading materials in other curriculum areas. Lexile measures are flexible enough to be used as part of any type of reading program.

Manage your students' reading comprehension

Lexile measures allow you to manage comprehension. Matching a reader's Lexile measure with a text with the same Lexile measure leads to an expected 75-percent comprehension rate—not too difficult to be frustrating, but difficult enough to be challenging and to encourage reading progress. You can further adjust anticipated comprehension simply by choosing more or less difficult texts within a student's Lexile range, which spans 50L above and 100L below his or her Lexile measure.

Track progress on a day-to-day basis

Lexile measures tie day-to-day work in the classroom to critical high-stakes tests that also report students' scores as Lexile measures. This commonality allows you to provide interim assessment and feedback while using the same consistent measurement. Lexile measures help you set measurable goals, monitor and evaluate reading programs, and easily track progress without additional testing.

Apply Lexile measures across the curriculum

More than 150 publishers have Lexile measures for their titles, enabling you to link all the different components of the curriculum. You can use a student's Lexile measure to connect him or her with tens of thousands of books in the Lexile Book Database (at www.Lexile.com) and tens of millions of newspaper and magazine articles (through popular periodical databases) that also have Lexile measures.

Easily communicated to families

The Lexile Framework provides a clear, nonjudgmental way of communicating a student's reading abilities to parents. It allows you to generate lists that help parents guide their children to appropriately challenging reading materials. Lexile measures can also be used to promote summer reading,

For more details on using Lexile measures in the classroom, call 1–888–LEXILES or visit www.Lexile.com.

MetaMetrics.

Lexile Measures in the Classroom

and to select books that will provide more easily understood background information for school assignments. When standards and scores are reported as Lexile measures, families can be provided with examples of student goals or achievements by converting the Lexile measure into a range of familiar texts for outside reading.

Using Lexile measures in your classroom

- Develop individualized reading lists that are tailored to provide appropriately challenging reading.
- Enhance thematic teaching by building a bank of titles at varying Lexile levels that not only support the theme, but provide a way for all students to successfully participate in the theme.
- Use as an additional organizing tool when sequencing materials. For example, you might be choosing one book a month for use as a read-aloud throughout the school year. In addition to considering the topic, you could increase the difficulty of the books throughout the year. This approach is also useful if you are utilizing a core program or textbook that is set up in anthology format. (You may find that you need to rearrange the order of the anthologies to best meet your students' needs.)
- Develop a reading folder that goes home with students and comes back for weekly review. The folder can contain a reading list of books within the student's Lexile range, reports of recent assessments and a parent form to record reading that occurs at home.
- Choose texts lower in the student's Lexile range when factors make the reading situation more challenging, threatening or unfamiliar. Select texts at or above the student's range to stimulate growth when a topic is of extreme interest to the student, or when you will be adding additional support such as background teaching or discussion.
- Use the free Lexile Book Database (at www.Lexile.com) and "Find a Book" Web site (at www [illegible] to support book selection and create booklists within a student's Lexile range to help the student make informed choices when selecting texts.
- Use the free Lexile calculator (at www.Lexile.com) to gauge expected reading comprehension at different Lexile measures for readers and texts.

The Lexile Framework for Reading

The Lexile Framework for Reading, developed by educational measurement company MetaMetrics®, Inc., is an indispensable part of any reading program. Lexile measures give educators the confidence to choose materials that can improve student reading skills and take the guesswork out of connecting readers with appropriate texts. If you know a student's Lexile measure, you can tell with a great deal of accuracy which books are appropriate for their reading ability. To find out more about The Lexile Framework for Reading, visit the Lexile Web site at www.Lexile.com.

MetaMetrics, Inc., a privately held educational measurement company, develops scientifically based measures of student achievement that link assessment with instruction, foster better educational practices and improve learning by matching students with materials that meet and challenge their abilities. The company's team of psychometricians developed the widely adopted Lexile Framework for Reading; El Sistema Lexile para Leer, the Spanish-language version of the Lexile Framework; The Quantile® Framework for Mathematics; and The Lexile Framework for Writing. In addition to licensing Lexile and Quantile® measures to state departments of education, testing and instructional companies and publishers, MetaMetrics delivers professional development, resource measurement and customized consulting services.

For more information on using Lexile measures in the classroom, call 1–888–LEXILES or visit www.Lexile.com.

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www.Lexile.com

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Interview Script:
Ms. /Mrs. /Mr. _____. I appreciate you agreeing to participate in this interview. The purpose of this study is to determine the perceptions and opinions of teachers about the instructional methods and activities they used last year to prepare students for the first Georgia Milestones ELA Assessment, as well as your philosophy about testing and test preparation. The results of this study will be used to make a recommendation or recommendations to district and school administration for future actions (for example: additional professional development, additional instructional supports, or additional allocation of resources). The exact nature of the recommendation or recommendations will not be determined until after data collection and analysis. We will start by asking some background questions about your background in education and your experience as an English Language Arts teacher. We will then continue with questions about the instructional methods and activities that you used (supervised) last year in preparation for the state assessment. All information shared in this interviewed is confidential. The identity of the participants in the study will be protected through the use of pseudonyms and code names. If you do not feel comfortable answering a question you may skip it. As mentioned in the consent form, the interview will last approximately 45 minutes. It may run a little longer depending on the course of our conversation, but remember that you have the right to terminate the interview at any time. The interview will be recorded using a digital voice recorder, and I will be taking a few notes. May we continue? Do you have any questions or concerns before we start? (The Informed Consent will be explained and the participant will sign before the interview begins).

FOR TEACHERS

Background and demographics questions for teacher participants (these are for identification of the participant and to insure that the participant meets the requirements for inclusion in the sample):

1. Please share some information about yourself: your gender and years of experience in teaching?

2. What grade level and subject do you teach?

Questions related to the Research Questions for teacher participants:

1. What information, resources, training, and supports did you receive about the new tests prior to the first administration of the Georgia Milestones Assessment? Follow-up: How would you describe the accuracy and utility of the prior information you received? Now that you have seen the results, what, if any, information do you feel was missing or was inadequately explained prior to the first test?

2. What instructional methods and activities did you develop and implement in preparation for the 2015 state tests based on prior information or specifically focused on or driven by the new tests or standards (or the assumptions you made about the tests or standards)? Follow up: Were these methods and activities created and implemented individually or collaboratively by teachers? What, if any, outside materials or assistance was received? If teachers worked collaboratively, was this limited to your grade level or was any of the work done vertically (i.e., did sixth and seventh grade teachers work together)? What, if any was the role of the district administration? School administration?

3. Please describe the instructional methods and activities you used to prepare your students for the first Georgia Milestones Assessment by responding to these questions:

- Approximately what percentage of your total instructional time do you feel was devoted to direct preparation for the Georgia Milestones Assessment? Do you feel the time spent on test preparations was too little, just right, or too much? Follow up if the participant responds "too much:" You said that you felt the percentage of instructional time spent on test preparation was too much. Why do you feel this way and what problems do you see with this level of time devoted to test preparation? Follow up if the participant responds "too little" of "just right:" What makes you think that? Would you do anything different to prepare for the next test administration?

- Do you feel that the proposed use of the student growth model in teacher evaluations influenced your instructional preparations? If so, in what way?

- To what extent are these methods and activities used by all members of your grade level faculty? Please explain the nature and rationale for any differences.

4. What assumptions did you make about the new tests and/or standards, and how did these influence your instructional or curricular decisions? Follow up: Now that the first test administration cycle is complete, do you feel the assumptions you made were accurate or, if inaccurate, in what ways were they off the mark? On what did you base those assumptions? Would you do anything different to prepare for the next test administration?

5. How did the test-preparation procedures you used in 2014-15 differ from those used to prepare for the Georgia Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) in prior years? If so, in what way and why? If not, why not.

6. How do you perceive the effectiveness of the instructional methods and activities that were developed and implemented in preparing students to perform well with the new state standards and on the new state assessments? To what extent were your assumptions accurate, given that you now have information from a complete administration cycle of the test? Follow up: Would you do anything differently next time and why?

7. As I said earlier, the primary purpose of this study is to make recommendations for future actions in regards to test preparation. What recommendations would you make to improve test-preparation activities and instruction and/or to better prepare you to prepare your students for the new tests? What would you recommend to your fellow ELA teachers?

8. How would you describe the support you received from district and state sources to prepare you both to create and implement test preparation activities? Follow up: What additional training or resources do you feel are needed to improve instructional methods and activities in order to prepare students to perform better on the assessment?

FOR ADMINISTRATORS

Background and demographics questions for administration participants (these are for identification of the participants and to insure that the participant meets the inclusion criteria for the study):

1. Please share some information about yourself: your gender and years of experience in education?

2. What is your role in the school (district)?

Questions related to the Research Questions for administration participants:

1. Please describe how instructional decisions are made in district schools, including the role of the state administrators, district administrators, and the local school staff.

2. What information, resources, training, and supports did you receive about the new tests prior to the first administration of the Georgia Milestones Assessment? What information, resources, training, and supports did you provide or you believe were provided to teachers about the new tests prior to the first administration of the Georgia Milestones Assessment? Follow-up: How would you describe the accuracy and utility of the prior information you and the teachers received from the state? Locally? Now that you have seen the results, what, if any, information do you feel was missing or was inadequately explained prior to the first test?

3. What instructional methods and activities did you observe or help develop and implement in preparation for the 2015 state tests based on prior information or specifically focused on or driven by the new tests or standards (or the assumptions you made about the tests or standards)? Follow up: Do you believe these methods and activities were created and implemented individually or collaboratively by teachers? What, if any, outside materials or assistance was received? If teachers worked collaboratively, was this limited to one grade level or was any of the work done vertically (i.e., did sixth and seventh grade teachers work together)? How effective were these processes for creating and implementing instructional methods and activities in

preparation for the new test? Would you make any changes now that you have seen the results of the first test?

4. How would you describe your perceptions of the instructional methods and activities ELA faculty used to prepare your students for the first Georgia Milestones Assessment?

- Approximately what percentage of total instructional time do you perceive was devoted to direct preparation for the Georgia Milestones Assessment? Do you feel the time spent on test preparations was too little, just right, or too much? Follow up if the participant responds "too much:" You said that you felt the percentage of instructional time spent on test preparation was too much. Why do you feel that way, and what problems do you see with this level of time devoted to test preparation? Follow up if the participant responds "too little" of "just right:" What makes you think that? Would you do anything different to prepare for the next test administration?

- How would you describe the level of pressure, if any, placed on faculty to focus instruction on test preparation? If so, what do you feel is the source of this pressure? What role do you perceive the proposed value-added teacher evaluation model and the College and Career Readiness Performance Index have in creating this pressure?

- What is your perception regarding the degree to which the same methods and activities were used by all members of each grade-level faculty and across grade levels? How would you describe the importance of consistent test-preparation activities among teachers and classes?

5. What assumptions do you feel were made about the new tests and/or standards by teachers and administrators, and how did these influence instructional or curricular decisions? Follow up: Now that the first test administration cycle is complete, do you feel the assumptions made were accurate or, if inaccurate, in what ways were they off the mark? What changes would you like to see prior to the next test administration? How would you suggest implementing those changes?

6. Were the test-preparation procedures used in 2014-15 different from those used to prepare for the Georgia Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) in prior years? If so, in what way and how? If not, why not?

7. How do you perceive the effectiveness of the instructional methods and activities that were developed and implemented in preparing students to perform well with the new state standards and on the new state assessments? To what extent were any assumptions accurate, given that you now have information from a complete administration cycle of the test? Follow up: Would you do anything differently next time and why?

8. As I said earlier, the primary purpose of this study is to make recommendations for future actions in regards to test preparation. What recommendations would you make to improve test-preparation activities and instruction and/or to better prepare students for the new tests?

9. How would you describe the support that was provided by district and state sources to prepare teachers both to create and implement test preparation activities? Follow up: How would you describe the value of these supports? Would you make any changes for another year?

CLOSING FOR ALL PARTICIPANTS:

Thank you for taking time to meet and be interviewed regarding your thoughts about your instructional methods and activities in preparation for Georgia Milestones Assessment Your opinion is very valuable to me as a researcher. I will send you a copy of the transcription of this interview for you to read. If the transcription does not reflect your views accurately, please let me know so that I can correct it.

Appendix C: Document Review Protocol for Triangulation

Based on Farmer, T., Robinson, K., Elliott, S., & Eyles, J. (2006).

Step 1: Interview data will be coded and sorted by theme

Step 2: Two-weeks of lesson plans from one or more of the subject grade levels will be selected at random from all lesson plans that include test preparation activities.

Step 3: Lesson plan data will be coded and sorted by theme

Step 4: Interview and document data will be compared to determined alignment based on the following scale*:

- Full agreement: interview and document data are consistent
- Partial agreement: interview and document data share some aspects
- Silence: Theme is found in one source but not the other
- Dissonance: The data sources are in disagreement on the theme or aspects of the theme

Step 5: Alignment assessment: A generalization will be made about the extent and degree of alignment between the data sources.

Step 6: Completeness assessment: The areas of agreement and areas of silence or disagreement will be combined to construct a complete description of the alignment and issues of alignment.

Step 7: Obtain feedback: Results of the review will be shared with participants for comment and clarification.

*Emphasis will be placed on themes that directly address test preparation activities, instructional decision making, and the Georgia Milestones Assessment