Special Education Teacher Perceptions of Changes in Student Outcomes Due to Current Assessment Practices

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ABSTRACT

The national movement towards standards-based public school education and accountability has deeply affected the professional lives of America's educators. As states have wrestled with complex issues surrounding instruction and assessment, researchers have developed measures to monitor the attitudes and beliefs of those who teach America's students. To that end, this research used interview methods to investigate special education teacher perceptions of the effects of statewide assessment and accommodations on student academic outcomes. Participants included 10 elementary and middle school special education teachers. Results indicated that teachers shared common perceptions related to the value and fairness of accountability assessment, including the use of accommodations, and that these feelings influenced educator decision making, assessment viability, and a desire for new and more effective instruments.

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DEFINITION OF TERMS

AYP – Adequate Yearly Progress: All public schools must measure and report AYP as outlined in the federal No Child Left Behind law. AYP measures the yearly progress of different sub-groups of students at the school, district and state levels against yearly targets in reading and mathematics. Target goals are set for attendance and graduation rates as well. If a school misses even one target, it does not make AYP.

ESEA – Elementary and Secondary Education Act: This is the principal federal law affecting K-12 education. When the ESEA was reauthorized and amended in 2002, it was renamed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act.

IDEA – Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: This federal law, reauthorized in 2004, is designed to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free and appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living.

IEP – Individualized Education Program: The individualized education program (IEP) is a planning process and tool used to ensure that each student with disabilities receives the individualized services, supports, and specialized instruction that are required to access and make progress in the general curriculum. System accountability in a standards-based system holds schools accountable for ensuring that all students, including those students who have disabilities, are being given appropriate opportunities to learn the general curriculum. Thus, the IEP process and system accountability under standards-based reform work together to improve outcomes for students with disabilities.

NAEP – National Assessment of Educational Progress: Also known as the "Nation's Report Card," NAEP assesses the educational achievement of elementary and secondary students in various subject areas. It provides data for comparing the performance of students in each state to that of their peers in the nation.

RTTT – Race to the Top: A $4.35 billion United States Department of Education program designed to spur reforms in state and local district K-12 education. It is funded by the Department of Education’s appropriation of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

RTTTAP – Race to the Top Assessment Program: Provides funding to consortia of states to develop assessments that are valid, support and inform instruction, provide accurate information about what students know and can do, and measure student achievement

against standards designed to ensure that all students gain the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college and the workplace.

GSEG – General Supervision Enhancement Grant: Under Sec. 616(i)(2) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the U.S. Department of Education may make awards to provide technical assistance to improve the capacity of states to meet data collection requirements under IDEA.

AA-AAS – Alternate Assessment based on Alternate Achievement Standards: For students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. These assessments are based on the grade-level content covered by the general assessment, but at reduced depth, breadth, and complexity. These assessments describe achievement based on what a state determines is a high expectation for these students.

AA-MAS – Alternate Assessment based on Modified Achievement Standards: Assessments that some states may use to evaluate the performance of a small group of students with disabilities. AA-MAS is an assessment option for some students with an IEP whose progress to date, in response to appropriate instruction, is such that the student is unlikely to achieve grade-level proficiency within the school year covered by the IEP. Students qualifying for AA-MAS may be from any disability category. Regulations on modified academic achievement standards were finalized in April, 2007.

TCAP – Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program: The state accountability system that measures districts, schools, and educators in the state of Tennessee in reading, language arts, mathematics, science and social studies.

TCAP MAAS - Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program Modified Assessment: The new assessment that is part of the state accountability system. only students with disabilities are eligible for an AA-MAS,. Students taking the TCAP MAAS previously were tested on the regular TCAP assessment. They no longer take the regular TCAP assessment.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the United States Department of Education has simultaneously supported a movement towards standards-based public school education while implementing a system that holds schools, districts, and states accountable for student progress towards these standards through large-scale assessment. More recently, some state departments of education and district administrators have begun to tie educator evaluations to these scores. Further, there are often high stakes decisions made about students based on their performance on these assessments. This is also a time of vast change in large-scale accountability assessment as four consortia of states are developing the next generation of these assessments for use across all states, rather than within just one state. Experts expect that student results from these new assessments will influence teacher evaluations and school, district, and state accountability. Because the results of state accountability systems deeply affect American educators, hearing their perspectives can enrich stakeholder conversations about the future of these systems.

Federal mandates such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), re-authorized as No Child Left Behind (2002), call for annual testing of students in English language arts/reading, mathematics, and science with the use of large-scale assessments developed by state governments. These assessments are to expose the occurrence of disparities in education, especially for historically disadvantaged groups of students. Stakeholders hope that greater standardization of instruction and accountability for student learning will drive all learners to attain greater outcomes during their time in public education.

Researchers have studied statistics for outcomes such as graduation extensively in the past, and data have exposed disparities between some groups of students. For example, at one point, less than 50 percent of enrolling ninth grade students ended up graduating in the largest cities in America (Balfanz & Legters, 2001). Students of an ethnic minority have historically lagged behind white students in graduation rates (Cavanagh, 2002), and although students who are African-American closed gaps preceding the 1990s (Cavanagh, 2002), a difference at every level of education attainment persists for students who are African-American or Latino (U. S. Department of Education, 2000). Students with disabilities enrolled in public schools are also more likely to enter high school performing below grade level, to have higher absence rates, less rigorous course loads and study habits and are thus less likely to graduate on time with their peers (Gwynne, Lesnick, Hart, & Allensworth, 2009). As a result, as few as 8 percent and typically less than 70 percent of students with disabilities within American states graduate from high school, a rate that is stagnant for the most part (U. S. Department of Education, 2009).

Another educational outcome is college enrollment and completion, highlighted in the newest education reform's push for college and career readiness. Lifetime earnings figures now show more than a million dollar difference depending on college completion (Joftus, 2002). Historically underserved students need help from higher education partners to bridge the "different worlds" in looking beyond minimum-wage jobs that are available to high school dropouts (Sandy & Holland, 2006). In addition, students and parents of potential high school graduates may be unaware of preparatory steps such as applying for admission, scholarships, or financial aid (Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003) that are important in college acceptance and enrollment. Should they have the

wherewithal to submit college applications, a full sixty percent of students do not have the minimum coursework recommended for college (Venezia et al., 2003). The result is a double-digit percentage point difference in college enrollment percentages between high- and low-income students (Venezia et al., 2003). For those who do enroll, those from disadvantaged backgrounds are two times less likely to earn a bachelor's degree (Carnevale & Fry, 2000).

Students with disabilities are even less likely to matriculate into post-secondary education. Outcome measures, referred to as post-school engagement, involve the number of students attaining college enrollment and/or gainful employment. Numbers for students with disabilities on this marker show that just more than three in four students are meaningfully engaged following high school. Not engaged is 25 percent of the population of students with disabilities even though less than 10 percent of all students with disabilities have any kind of significant cognitive disability or multiple disabilities that impact access to meaningful employment or continuing education. Previous research has identified the percentage of students with disabilities enrolling in post-secondary education at 19 percent in 1996 (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). For those who are attending school, research has shown they are often not receiving services in high school to help them prepare for the disability-related challenges they will encounter during the post-school years (Brinckerhoff, 1994; Izzo, Hertzfeld, & Aaron, 2001).

Even students with disabilities who graduate experience a lag in outcomes. On average, students with disabilities who finish postsecondary education take twice as long to complete their degrees as their non-disabled peers, yet special provisions for financial aid are not in place (National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports,

2000). Research has shown that fewer young adults with disabilities possessing a Bachelor of Arts degree work full time when compared with people without disabilities holding the same degree (National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports, 2002). However, for those who do not progress into post-secondary education, quality of life as an adult may suffer. Of those people with disabilities who are employed, the vast majority work at low-paying, non-professional jobs that lack prestige and come with no security, room for advancement, or significant medical or retirement benefits (Stoddard, Jans, Ripple, & Krauss, 1998). As a result individuals with disabilities are more than twice as likely to live below the poverty line as those without disabilities (New Freedom Initiative, 2001)

Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 2001

At first, some groups, such as students with disabilities, participated minimally in large-scale assessment (Thompson & Thurlow, 2001), or their successes and failures were not taken seriously (Moody, Vaughn, Hughes, & Fisher, 2000). However, over time participation rates have increased. Presently, the participation rate of students with disabilities exceeds the ESEA target of 95% of all students in the subgroup (Altman, Thurlow, & Vang, 2010). In addition, virtually all students are now tested at their academic grade level and many with the support of accommodations. As policy makers and testing companies further refined testing processes, the participation of all students in this group has become more meaningful as stakeholders value and document their scores.

Even as participation has increased, state governments have placed some districts on watch lists or forced them to restructure under the tenets of ESEA 2001 due to low

proficiency rates among some subgroups. Thus, the performance of low performing subgroups has gained importance. In the efforts of states and school districts to satisfy an important accountability marker termed adequate yearly progress, all of these subgroups must meet proficiency targets on a yearly basis. Very often the performance of these subgroups, such as students with disabilities or students who are minorities or students with poverty status, compared to their targets lags behind the performance of students who are white, without disabilities, and living without poverty. For example, researchers noted as many as 46% of districts across the U. S. did not meet a recent target for adequate yearly progress in proficiency for students with disabilities (Altman, Rogers, & Bremer, 2010). For this reason, the teachers of these students may feel a certain scrutiny as they take tests and their results are released.

As the federal government and other stakeholders have pushed for more reform, they have met resistance from educators and unions. For example, television and print media recently documented clashes between teachers' unions and state departments over connecting teacher evaluations to student test performance, a requirement in "Race to the Top" applications (King, 2010; McNeil, 2010). This competition also called for an end to tenure and other items that teachers value. At the same time, state education departments are currently moving forward with decision making regarding new shared standards in core content areas (see www.corestandards.org) and a new generation of assessments (see http://www.achieve.org/PARCC, http://www.k12.wa.us/smarter/).

Context of Study

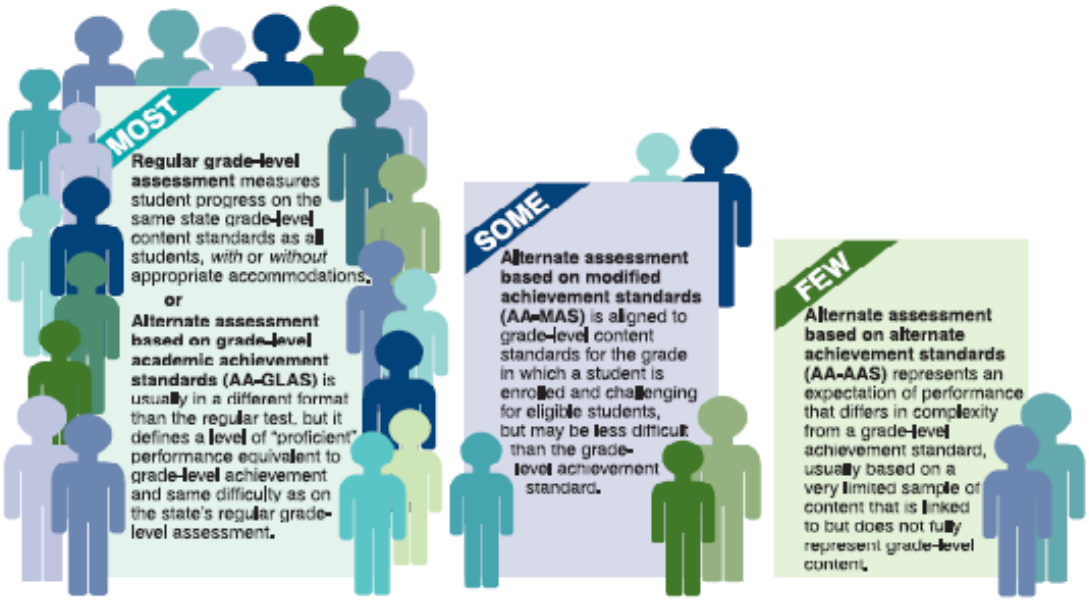
The Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) serves accountability needs in the state. The TCAP is a paper-and-pencil criterion-referenced system of assessments across the content areas of math, reading, science and social studies in grades 3 through 8, which are supported by a connected high school end of course assessment. The state also assesses students with disabilities using this assessment, sometimes with the use of accommodations. Students with significant cognitive disabilities take the alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards, called the TCAP-Alt.

In April of 2007, the federal Office of Elementary and Secondary Education Act issued regulations for the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), known as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). These regulations allowed for an assessment option that states could consider for the inclusion of students with disabilities in state assessment systems. This option is the alternate assessment based on modified achievement standards (AA-MAS), which states could use to count up to 2% of the total student population as proficient. States were not required to develop this assessment, but it afforded states additional flexibility alongside existing options that included taking a state's regular assessment with or without accommodations, or an alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards.

This assessment's initial purpose was to provide a more appropriate means of measuring the skills of a student with a disability who had previously struggled to show proficiency on the regular statewide accountability assessment. The flexibility option for assessment was released, and assessments were developed and disseminated within states amid

controversy surrounding the efficacy and research support for the need for such an assessment. During assessment development, state departments were permitted to add two percentage points to their reported proficiency levels when they reported scores to the federal government. Following development and dissemination, students' scores of Proficient or Advanced on the modified assessments may be included in AYP calculations, subject to a cap of 2% of all students assessed at the state and district levels. In 2009, 14 states had participation guidelines posted for an AA-MAS (Lazarus, Hodgson, & Thurlow, 2010). As such, Tennessee was one of the first states to adopt such an assessment, calling it the TCAP-MAAS (for modified academic achievement standards). States that intend to use an AA-MAS for accountability purposes must submit the assessment to a peer review process led by the U.S. Department of Education and receive approval for its use for accountability. As of November 2010, Kansas, Louisiana, and Texas had been approved to use an AA-MAS for NCLB accountability purposes; Tennessee had not received approval (Albus, Thurlow, & Lazarus, 2011). Figure 1 is a diagram of a state assessment system typical of the assessment system in many states including the state of Tennessee (Cortiella, 2007).

Figure 1. Cortiella's Diagram of a Typical Three-Assessment Accountability System



At the same time, the state of Tennessee had embarked on a new initiative to bring performance standards on state assessments into the national norm, while also tightening diploma standards (Wallace, 2009). Previously, student proficiency rates on the TCAP assessments were some of the highest in the nation. Students with disabilities routinely scored proficiency rates of 80 percent or higher, with students without disabilities achieving even higher rates of proficiency (Altman, Thurlow, & Vang, 2010). However, at the same time, the scores of students in Tennessee on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) ranked among the lowest in the nation, especially in math (*Tennessean*, Oct. 25, 2009). The scores of Tennessee high school students were also dismal, as only 16 percent met benchmarks in English, reading, math and science on the American College Testing Program assessments, commonly referred to as the ACT (Ragland-Hudgins, 2011).

The new standards called for more depth of knowledge, requiring students to think critically and apply knowledge to real-life problems, rather than just memorizing facts (*Tennessean*, Apr. 17, 2009). As a result, proficiency results dropped to 25-40 percent for all students and even lower for students with disabilities in spring of 2010 testing (Altman, in press). The results of these new assessments will account for 15 to 20 percent of student grades in the spring semester starting with Spring 2011 testing (Giordano, 2011).

Soon after, Tennessee was an early recipient (with Delaware) of federal award dollars, as winners of the first round of the Race to the Top competition. The approximately $500 million award is tied to several activities and changes detailed in the state's competition proposal. Among them were improvements in educator use of technology to track student growth, eliminating current tenure rules, and investments in systems enabling the connection of educator evaluation with the assessment results of their students. In fact, the state and the state education association eventually settled on a plan that called for up to 35 percent (the state had wanted 51 percent) of an educator's job evaluation to be based on students' standardized test scores (Locker, 2010).

In 2007, the Tennessee Department of Education, and specifically the special education and assessment divisions, participated in a General Supervision Enhancement Grant (GSEG) collaborative to support the development of the TCAP-MAAS. The initiative included development of a modified academic achievement assessment, support, and training for LEA implementation of the TCAP-MAAS and standards-based IEPs, data analysis, and ongoing program improvement activity. The other states in the consortium spent a good deal of time investigating the needs of these persistently low performers

(Lazarus, Wu, Altman, & Thurlow, 2010) and eventually embarked on efforts to shore up accommodations use, opportunity to learn grade level content, differentiated instruction for students with disabilities, and mapping content to be taught across grade levels. It was during this collaboration that the author made the contacts within the state to make this research possible.

The Study of Teacher Perspectives

This is a time of heightened awareness of teacher perceptions of education decisions made top-down by state and federal governments, and non-teaching educators and policymakers must understand the lived testing experiences of those whose effectiveness will eventually be rated on new assessments. Teachers can help policy makers come to evidence-based decisions that play out as intended within schools and local education agencies (LEAs). Teacher perceptions do have their place in existing literature, typically gathered using survey or interview methods. The following two sections outline some of the existing research in the past decade using these methods. This section highlights works related to accountability, assessment, and accommodations, and the inclusion of a diverse group of participants, including students with disabilities. All literature included in this review pertains to these subjects and used survey or interview methods. This review of literature was developed using an on-line database located at a major university, the National Center on Educational Outcomes' Accommodations Bibliography, and working back through references using key pieces of literature that were recent, influential in the field, and captures teacher perceptions about accountability, assessment, and accommodations.

Accountability and standards-based reform have affected those who teach America's students. Teachers reacted to the reform both positively and negatively depending on the characteristics of the teachers surveyed. For example, teachers surveyed who had left teaching in 2001 listed accountability as the primary reason for ending school employment (Tye & O'Brien, 2002). In addition, a study of urban educators found that accountability measures resulted in teacher frustration, anger, and increased attrition (Crocco & Costigan, 2007).

The present accountability system contends that individual classroom teachers bear the ultimate responsibility for implementing the ideals of reform associated with the standards-based movement, and their views of and experiences with implementation are of interest (Donnelly & Sadler, 2009). Such studies have included investigations into large-scale test preparation (Lai & Waltman, 2008), student motivation (Hardre, Davis, & Sullivan, 2008), and standards-based teacher appraisal systems (Batchelor, 2008).

Researchers have also turned to interview methods in an effort to gauge instructor beliefs on a variety of issues surrounding assessment and accountability. As expected, samples in these cases were noticeably smaller than in the studies that used survey methods. However, by targeting a specific population, researchers were able to get a deeper understanding of teacher perceptions. One such example involved interviews with teachers who worked specifically with students with visual impairments (Johnstone, Altman, Timmons, Thurlow, & Cahalan-Laitusis, 2009). Although they teach a low-incidence population, these teachers offered a unique portal into the issues faced by a group of students who typically struggle on statewide assessment. In this study researchers found that stakeholders must revisit accommodations policies for students

with visual impairments because of their need for assistive technology, that available resources must be considered when creating a test, that proficiency is defined by independence and fluidity, and that teachers valued maintaining grade level rigor.

Large-Scale Assessment

Teacher perceptions of state accountability assessments, the large-scale assessments given for the purposes of reporting according to the provisions of ESEA 2001, are informative. Researchers and other stakeholders have painstakingly gathered the opinion, motivation, and reaction of those teachers who are ultimately responsible for providing students with the knowledge on which they will have to show mastery during testing. This section presents examples of this research.

Teachers tend to regard testing with increasing frustration no matter how positive their feelings may be regarding standards (Shaver, Cuevas, Lee, & Avalos, 2007). Beginning teachers are even more susceptible to this concern during their first year (Certo, 2006), as well as teachers who work at low performing schools (Finnigan & Gross, 2007), who were found to have decreased motivation and weakened morale in schools facing increasing probationary measures. Research has also shown that teachers are worried about instruction aimed strictly at material to be tested (Shaver et al., 2007) and the elimination of non-tested material from the curriculum (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003). Further, some teachers seemed to perceive themselves as playing the "game" of testing as they attempted to prepare their students for assessment (Donnelly et al., 2009).

Researchers also surveyed teachers regarding the release of a new assessment within their state (Altman, Cormier & Lazarus, in press). Most states designed this assessment with

students with disabilities who had previously struggled to show proficiency in mind and incorporated several changes that made the achievement standards easier. These data showed that although teachers typically did not see student outcomes affected in a positive way by the new test, they saw the test as less burdensome and a reason for initiating communication with their students, as well as with the parents of their students. This study also tested participant knowledge of the new test and found that teachers lacked knowledge about the new test despite multi-faceted state training efforts.

Another researcher interviewed teachers who taught students who were English Language Learners (ELLs). In this case researchers found that teachers felt pressure to help their ELLs to succeed on the state assessments and thus adjusted or abandoned what they knew to be best practice in selecting classroom assessments (Regalado, 2007). Researchers have also used interview methods to hone in on the perspectives of teachers in a certain geographic area. Teachers in New York were interviewed about their statewide examinations and issues surrounding the history examination in particular (Grant, Derme-Insinna, Gradwell, Lauricella, Pullano, & Tzetzo, 2001). Findings here indicated that while teachers were not necessarily adverse to change, they did confront difficulties due to a new curriculum and assessment.

Accommodations

Researchers have also highlighted the perception of appropriate accommodations use and implementation as an important consideration in research on the effects of accommodations in the classroom and in testing situations (Cormier, Altman, Shyyan, & Thurlow, 2010). To gather information on the perceptions of students, teachers, and

parents with respect to accommodations, researchers have often relied on survey instruments or interviews.

Although it has been reported that teachers and parents view testing accommodations as fair and valid for students with disabilities (Brown, 2007; Lang, Kumke, Ray, Cowell, Elliot, Kratchowill, & Bolt, 2005), there have also been instances where the definition and use of certain accommodations appeared to be unclear to teachers, for example, in the case of scribing and preferential seating (Byrnes, 2008). However, further research has shown that teachers reported being generally confident in their management of accommodations (Woods, 2007) and knowledge of accommodations, although they admitted to lacking proper training (Brown, 2007). Furthermore, Lazarus, Cormier, and Thurlow (2010) suggest that accommodations may play a role in state decisions toward policies involving the implementation of an alternate assessment based on modified achievement standards.

In a study with similar methodology to that used in this research, Rickey (2005) interviewed teachers regarding their awareness, attitudes, knowledge and skills specifically related to accommodations for assessment. Findings showed first that general and special education teachers recognized special educators as the people most responsible for suggesting accommodations and that classroom accommodations were only loosely connected to decision making. Second, the factors considered most frequently when making accommodations decisions were previous accommodations and the desire to reduce stress and anxiety. Third, district and state guidelines and inefficient use or lack of training in the use of accommodations resulted in a general inability to cite guidelines. Altman et al. (2010) also investigated teacher decision making and found that

increasing the likelihood of a student's passing a new modified assessment caused teachers to change decision-making criteria the first year that the state disseminated the test. Participants also reported that they made the decision for a remarkably high percentage of their students to use the read-aloud accommodation, controversial to those who value decoding as an integral part of reading.

Alternate Assessment for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

Researchers have used survey methods extensively with teachers of students with disabilities regarding alternate assessment. During these types of assessment, teachers are likely to provide a portfolio (Elliot & Fuchs, 1997) or a rating scale or checklist (Altman, Lazarus, Quenemoen, Kearns, Quenemoen, & Thurlow, 2010). Due to the hands-on nature of this assessment approach, researchers have gained a wealth of information from this population. In one of the more in-depth efforts, researchers investigated the variables of Illinois teachers' perceptions regarding alternate assessment processes and results (Roach, Elliot, & Berndt, 2007).

Participants in this study were all special education teachers identified by district personnel identified by the state department of education (Roach et al., 2007). Districts provided six cases each, two from fourth-grade, eighth-grade, and tenth-grade. The analysis included the results of 113 surveys. The major finding indicated that student grade level accounted for the small amount of variation in teachers' positive perceptions of the alternate assessment. Specifically, as students advanced through grades, teachers reported less positive perceptions. In another study researchers surveyed 234 special education teachers in the state of Illinois regarding their experience in developing

assessment portfolios (Kim, Angell, O'Brian, Strand, Fulk, & Watts, 2006). The teachers expressed negative perspectives about their practices related to the alternate assessment system and noted few benefits of the state alternate assessment system for teachers and students.

Research in the state of Kentucky also involved a survey of teacher perceptions of alternate assessments. There, survey responses indicated that teachers responded that alternate assessments required as much as 35 hours to complete (Kampfer, Horvath, Kleinert, & Kearns, 2001) and that teachers perceived these time intensive assessments as taking away too much time from instruction (Kleinert, Kennedy, & Kearns, 1999). Respondents questioned the content and focus of the portfolio process, feeling that it actually documented the creativity of the teacher, not the skills of the student. Across both studies, teachers questioned whether the skills and concepts covered were appropriate for the student population tested (Kampfer et al., 2001; Kleinert et al., 1999). Respondents on another survey did not feel that alternate assessments should be measuring academic content that they were not able to access in instruction, but rather grooming, social skills, communication, choice making, and problem solving (Browder & Cooper-Duffy, 2003).

General themes borne out of this review of literature tended to be more negative than positive towards accountability assessment. In general, teachers viewed assessment as frustrating in its implementation for both students with and without disabilities. They still valued testing, but had a desire for something different, less time intensive, with more benefits to the educator, with better content that matched what they teach, and that did not require them to narrow the curriculum. Also, accommodations, the one thing

designed to help students with disabilities access these assessments in a meaningful way, appeared to be applied unevenly and often for the wrong reasons. The purpose of this study and its interview methodology was to measure similar perceptions in a deep manner from a small sample of special education teachers in a state where the state department of education contracted with a testing company to create a new test to alleviate some of these concerns and to require fewer accommodations.

A student researcher developed this study in concert with the State Department of Education in Tennessee. Research questions included the following:

1. To what extent were statewide accountability assessment results used by educators participating in this study?
2. What were the participants' initial reactions to a new assessment, the TCAP-MAAS, disseminated to students for the first time in spring 2010?
3. To what extent did the participants say the students had additional educational needs unsolved by the TCAP-MAAS, and what strategies had been developed to provide full access?
4. What were participant knowledge levels and attitudes about accommodations, and how did they relate to teacher responses to the above questions?

This study occurred during the winter of 2010-2011 with the support of the Tennessee Department of Education and the National Center on Educational Outcomes. The study would not have been possible without the cooperation of Tennessee educators, who were thoughtful and giving of their valuable time. This and previous reviews of literature as well as work experience led the researcher to expect that educators would use assessment

results, although they would wish the results were available to them by the end of the school year of assessment. The researchers also expected educators to say they prefer the TCAP-MAAS to the regular assessment, that for a segment of the student population *no* assessment was preferred, and that they received training on and implemented accommodations in accordance with state policy.

METHOD

Single person interview methods were preferred to other available research methodology such as surveys, group interviews, or focus groups for this research project. The rationale was that the researcher was not well enough aware of what participant responses might be to construct survey items. In addition, just months prior, a survey of nearly 200 educators had been completed in the state on a similar topic, and these responses provided the base for the development of interview questions (Altman et al., in press). The study did not involve group interviews and focus groups as the researcher desired individual opinions from a variety of educators in different locales. This research sought to get at inner perspectives in agreement with Patton's (2002) suggestion to use interview methodology when perspectives are meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. It also involved sensitive personal feelings about an educator's employment and students that should not be shared with a group, as well as emotionally charged issues, consistent with Krueger's and Casey's reasons when not to use focus groups or group interviews (2000).

The researcher asked participants a series of structured interview questions. Structured interviews allowed the researcher to create a standardized data set for particular questions, but allowed research participants to elaborate on particular points that were most salient to their work (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The researcher developed questions (included in Appendix A) in cooperation with state department personnel in Tennessee and based on the results from a previous survey of educators within the state (Altman et al., in press). The goal was to gather specific information about the perceptions of special education teachers in the state of Tennessee about accountability testing,

accommodations, and assessment's relationship to instruction and important educational outcomes for students with disabilities in the state.

Participants

Tennessee State Department of Education personnel selected the sample of participants for the researcher using district administrator contacts. The department selected 12 special education teachers, four each from the east, central, and west parts of the state. The sample also included educators who taught at the elementary level and those that taught at the middle school level. High school teachers were not included in the sample as high school students did not take the new assessment in its first year. The researcher contacted participants through an initial email and a follow-up phone call when necessary. The research team was unable to include two expected participants from the western part of the state who dropped out of the study, and thus this study includes the results of ten participants. Respondents received a $35 gift card for their participation.

Of the participants, five actively participated in co-teaching models in inclusive classrooms, while the other five worked primarily out of their own rooms, such as a resource room. Five of the educators taught only students in grades six and below and identified themselves as elementary school teachers. The other five taught students above grade six and identified themselves as middle school teachers. Participants had a range of teaching experience from just more than 1 year to 38 years as an educator. The mean number of years spent as an educator for the sample was 11.7 years. Four participants had taught for seven or fewer years, and five participants had taught for between 10 and 15 years. Six participants had experience teaching in a different district than the one in

which they currently taught, and three of these five had experience teaching outside of the state in which they currently taught. Five of the participants were trained in undergraduate studies to be a special educator, three of them began training as a special educator in graduate school, and two of the participants began working as paraprofessionals or assistants and had achieved certification from the state in special education. One of the participants was male, and nine participants were female. Participant characteristics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of Study Participants

Participant Number	Classroom Setting	Students Grades Taught	Teaching Experience	Out-of-District Experience	Out-of-State Experience	Pathway to Special Education
1	Resource	5-8	38	■	■	Undergrad
2	Inclusion	6	11			Undergrad
3	Inclusion	5-8	7	■		Certificate
4	Inclusion	7	12			Graduate
5	Resource	3-5	4			Undergrad
6	Resource	6-8	15	■		Undergrad
7	Inclusion	8	14	■	■	Graduate
8	Resource	6-7	5	■		Graduate
9	Inclusion	6-12	10	■	■	Certificate
10	Resource	K-6	1			Undergrad

Research Activity

The researcher conducted four interviews in person and six interviews by telephone after a pilot interview with an educator in a Midwestern state. Following the first in-person interview with a middle school teacher, the researcher removed the final planned interview question in an effort to maximize data collected on other interview questions

and minimize total length of interviews into the length of a typical school class period. However, because there were no changes to other questions, data from the first interview were included in the analysis. In all cases, there was one researcher present during in-person and telephone interviews. All interviews were recorded for review at a later time. Interviews ranged from 48 to 68 minutes in length.

The student researcher has worked extensively with the Tennessee State Department of Education in regular job duties as an academic researcher at the National Center on Educational Outcomes. He may use results of this study for future development of a product at the National Center on Educational Outcomes under a multistate GSEG (General Supervisory Enhancement Grant).

The student researcher edited interview data for themes using Microsoft Word and its coding, highlighting, and review features. The researcher merged data from individual interviews in Microsoft Excel by theme and analyzed them in this software. From these data, a concept map was drawn (see Appendix B), and an Excel sheet structured by theme was crafted. Using this sheet, the researcher analyzed and interpreted the data. Counts of statement types and examples of participant responses were marked for later inclusion in written results. The researcher then wrote the results section using the concept map as a template for section headings.

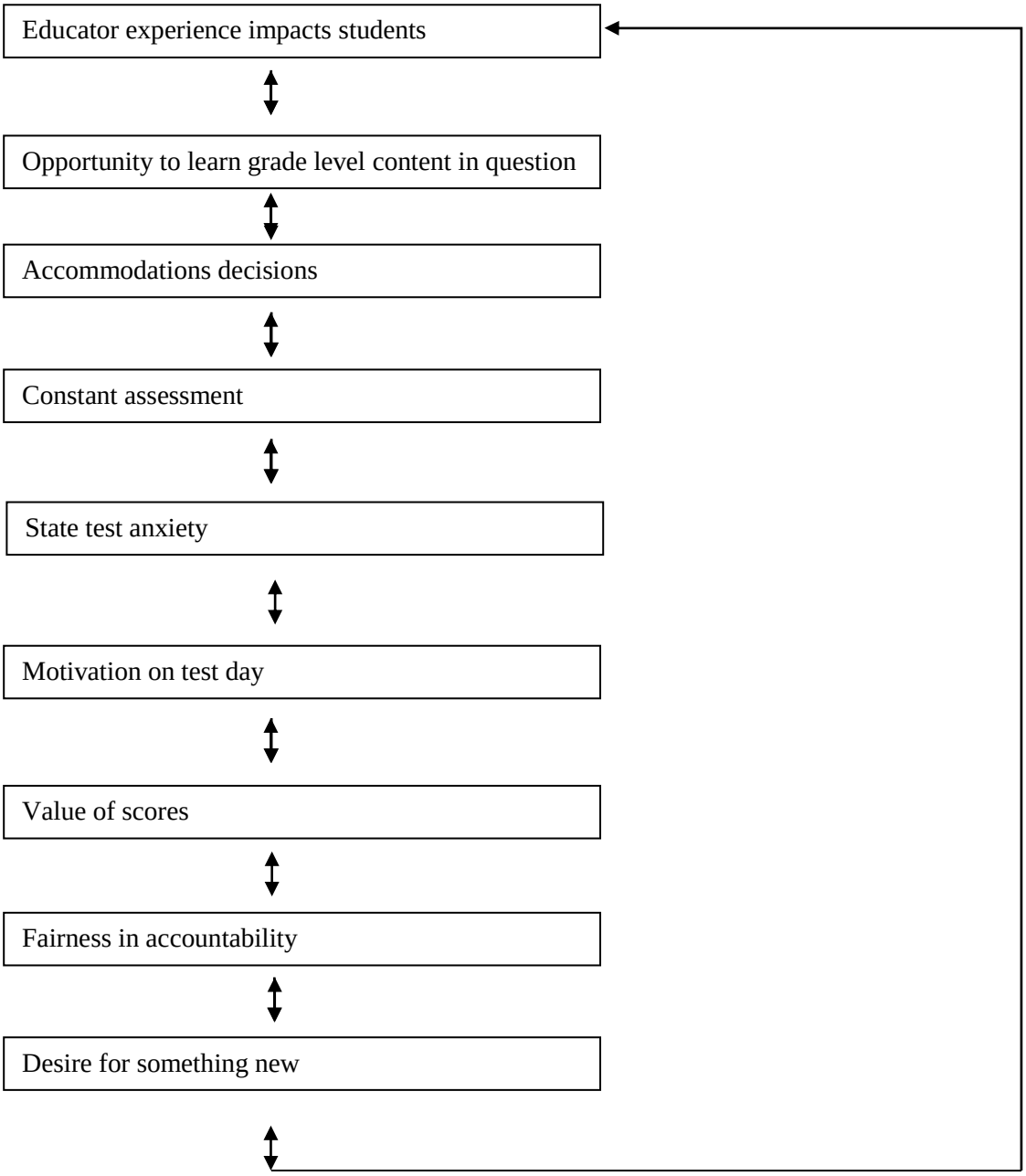
RESULTS

In speaking with educators about a variety of topics related to instruction, assessment, and accountability, the student researcher developed a concept map due to the clear responses and unique perspective of study participants. The researcher organized their thoughts in line with this concept map, shown in Figure 2 (see Appendix B for a more detailed description of concepts), and they are displayed in this results section headed by nine major themes. These sections are titled, in order: "educator experience impacts students," "opportunity to learn grade level content," "accommodations decisions," "constant assessment," "state test anxiety," "motivation on test day," "value of scores," "fairness in accountability," and "desire for something new." Many educator statements played across categories and were included in any places they were relevant.

Educator Experience Impacts Students

The first theme, past educator experience working with students who have struggled on statewide assessment, provides a lens through which teachers view the assessment system. For any number of years they have seen their students make gains during the school year that the end of the year statewide assessments could not measure. They said they feel pressure to live up to rigid expectations and feel a sense of loss at the creativity and art that used to be associated with teaching that they thought had positive benefits for students. As one teacher put it, "We are told what to teach, when to teach, and now, how to teach." This teacher spoke of not being able to be herself in the classroom and that the experience is not as enjoyable as it used to be.

Figure 2. Display of Concept Map and Flow of Paper



Another teacher spoke of the importance placed on teaching a broad set of standards to each student. This teacher, a self-identified perfectionist, spoke of working to target instruction for each of her students and the difficulty in navigating that desire in the context of getting to each standard. In this effort, she said, there was a severe loss of the depth of knowledge that students gained, which she thought negatively impacted future outcomes for her students. As she said in reference to her instructional approach with students who struggle to show proficiency on the statewide test, "We are told over and over in teacher training and graduate school to not teach to the test, but in the end it is what we have to do for them to be successful."

Others spoke of the importance that they place on the testing systems in place in their school. Though burdensome in some ways, they saw value in the results that they received. At the same time, teachers often spoke of students lacking important foundational skills. Educators noted that these skills, which many students build from early in elementary school, prevent the student from keeping pace with classmates and showing proficiency in grade level content on state tests. Very frequently, it seems that these deficits are in the area of reading and affect learning across all content areas as a student gets older. One teacher gave the example of a student who may not have received special education services until a wide gap in ability was already present and it was too late.

Participants discussed social promotion during interviews as well. Students who are struggling in the elementary grades have a tendency to be promoted to the next grade level while lacking the skills necessary to succeed in that next grade level's challenging

curriculum. This only serves to widen annually the gap between the knowledge and skills developed and retained by the struggling learner and that learner's peers. One teacher described a scenario in which a student who had trouble reading in the early elementary grades did not receive a reading intervention, but instead educators relocated her to art class during reading instruction where the student could be more successful. Administrators later promoted the student to the next grade level.

Teachers also spoke of the strategies that they used in the classroom and how these were not available to support their students in showing exactly what they know and can do on assessment. They mentioned the effort to provide targeted instruction to these students. In doing so teachers sometimes need to provide instructional accommodations aimed at getting grade level content to a student who might be reading below grade level. However, teachers also understand that many of these strategies are not available on statewide assessment. This only serves to increase teacher views of a lack of connection between the way they instruct some students and the way that students are tested.

Teachers also opined on general statewide assessment. One lament was the loss of instructional time to assessment and the loss of teachable moments. As one teacher stated, "We are teachers. That is what we want to do. We don't want to be test proctors all the time." Or as another said, "As a teacher we [sic] just can't stand assessment week." They spoke of caring so much about their students and feeling pain and disappointment as students are "pushed down more and more by things that they can't do," including assessment on grade level without the proper supports allowing them to participate meaningfully in the experience.

Opportunity to Learn Grade Level Content in Question

The second theme, opportunity to learn grade level content, investigates complications that go far beyond test design, structure, or systems: the fact that educators admit that they are not able to teach every student every standard at his or her grade level every year. For this reason, question presentation on the test and how a student might feel interacting with it are of little consequence. Quite simply, if students do not have the knowledge and skills necessary to answer test questions, they will be guessing the answer to that question on test day. In discussion with educators, there was a consensus that all students have the opportunity to learn the grade level curriculum in most, if not all, subject areas. However, educators said that students who persistently perform poorly on statewide assessment have less success in attaining the knowledge presented to them, retaining it throughout the school year, and displaying it on test day. Said one educator, "The regular learners need to hear something 3 times to remember it; my kids seem to need to hear it 100 times."

Pressure is on teachers to move quickly from standard to standard in order to hit them all during a school year, and they sometimes follow strict pacing guides that do not allow much time for remedial learning in the general or special education classroom. This key lack of alignment between exposure and learning requires special educators to do a lot of "filling in the gaps" as one educator said. This would not be a problem, however, at the same time educators spoke of rising caseloads and models designed to differentiate instruction, such as co-teaching or resource rooms, in just reading and math. On this note,

one educator said, “It is frustrating as a teacher, when understaffed, to deliver that individualized instruction to every student.”

On the notion of subject area differences in instruction, educators sometimes made it very clear that not all subjects are equal. Math and reading appeared to be the focus in the schools where many of our participants worked. One educator said, “We do more in math and reading because those are the ones that right now count for our AYP, and plus if you can read, you can do anything, and they need math for life skills as well.” One educator said that students get more opportunity in the general education classroom in social studies and science, but they do not get the same support as they do in reading and math. One mentioned that students might succeed more in social studies and science even without the extra help because they have spent so much time with remedial reading and mathematics efforts that by the time they get to his classroom, “they just turn it off.” They expect to fail and so they quit trying. For students who also struggle in social studies and science and other non-core subject areas, one educator spoke of failure to modify and accommodate in the classroom and the difficulty of learning through reading when the text is not a match for a student’s potential below-grade reading level.

Accommodations Decisions

The third theme, accommodations decisions, consists of educator comments about how they provide access to instruction and assessment for the students with disabilities whom they teach. The teachers interviewed proved to have a consistent definition of accommodations and seemed to understand the reasons for their use. They also seemed to agree upon the accommodations available to them for assessment while at the same time

being able to rattle off a virtual cornucopia of options they use during instruction. Nearly all teachers mentioned the state online tool they use in developing student Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). They noted the ease of using drop down tabs for the assessment accommodation section in particular. In addition, they spoke about the "tons of choices" that are listed for instruction and behavior in the classroom. Teachers perceived this as a boon to making decisions easily and accurately. One said he did not always get a lot of support in this area from administrators, as most of them were former general educators. "So our ideas don't always gel, 'though they are always supportive," said one participant.

One common thread during discussion was how teachers relied on each other to build knowledge and try new ideas in the classroom. Teachers mentioned brainstorming together and rotating activities. They said they learned new things they could bring back to their classes at conferences and from teachers at other schools. They talked about sharing their ideas with others and learning from both special educators and general educators. One teacher said, "It's usually just trial and error, with collaboration."

More than one educator mentioned the Internet as a resource for accommodations ideas, performing Google searches, using "Teacher Tube" and logging in to a site called "intervention central." DVDs that accompanied instructional materials were also a resource for teachers.

Another common thread was a desire for more input and involvement from the state department of education. Participants suggested written explanations of what accommodations are available, which are successful, and documents that are widely

disseminated. Participants suggested formal in-service training to aid in interpretation of what accommodations are and how to give them properly. As one teacher said, “Give it to me in black and white, and show me the hoop to jump through.” Also commented on was the lack of test proctors on test day as a result of many students being tested on the new modified assessment or receiving accommodations in which they are pulled from the general education classroom for testing. Participants requested that the state department of education aid districts in finding test proctors.

All participating teachers felt that accommodations were beneficial to the students who use them, although they all spoke of certain accommodations having more value. Educators credited often-used accommodations such as oral presentation, extended time, and flexible scheduling and setting with giving some students a chance to show their skills during assessment. They mentioned the calculator accommodation as providing a positive testing experience for students as well as some of the changes that are inherent in the modified assessment like one question per page.

As one teacher stated, “I would hate to know that tomorrow these accommodations would go away.” Another, in speaking about the testing in a small group or as an individual accommodation, said, “If these kids couldn’t be pulled out of the room, I don’t know what they would do.” The benefits are not limited to just large-scale assessment. A third teacher explained peer-to-peer interaction that can provide benefits to both students during instruction, specifically with note taking. The teacher could then use this same student helper as a scribe during classroom assessment if necessary.

Teachers also mentioned that they would like to expand the reach of accommodations. Although testing all students using accommodations is not practical, they noted that herding all of the students into one room and testing them "en masse" is not the most effective strategy either. One teacher said, "I always feel bad for the student…who isn't special ed. Who couldn't benefit from a very small group?"

Educators expressed mixed opinions on the extent to which they included students in decision making about accommodations for instruction and assessment. Some discussed communication being open, frequent, and consistent, and others talked about educators and parents best holding decision making in their hands.

One educator discussed how she made this communication feel important to the student, saying, "The students understand that I am not going to waste my extra time going the extra mile if they don't provide any feedback." One stressed the importance of communication between those who support the student at school, "I have a set of students transitioning every year…. There are definitely open lines of communication between teachers as to what is best." Another discussed the added element of parent wishes, "Any student can be involved, it's fine with me, but some parents don't want their students involved in IEP meetings, and I try to respect the wishes of parents."

Others mentioned that including students in decision making was more frequent as the students progressed through grade levels towards high school. Younger students just are not prepared, or as one educator said, "I have students who don't even know that they have an IEP." At the same time, educators also noted that if students are not included in these conversations early on, that they cannot build the capacity needed to make educated

decisions in the later middle school and high school years. Some of this involvement can be informal in nature, as exemplified by one educator saying, "I'm constantly asking my students: Did you feel rushed? Was that too hard? Or let's use our best handwriting. I am getting feedback even though they don't necessarily know that they are telling me."

It also became apparent that what holds true for instruction does not necessarily hold true for assessment in that educators make decisions for assessment more frequently *for* the student based on educator insight, state policy, and test day feasibility. Also true is student involvement increasing in the case of accommodations that make it obvious to all that they are receiving something different such as the read aloud accommodation. As one educator said, "This just happened with a student who didn't want the read aloud anymore; he went home and talked to his mother, and we had a meeting and took it off the IEP."

Constant Assessment

Educators discussed the types of testing they do in their classroom in addition to the regular statewide end-of-the-year test, and their comments make up theme four, constant assessment. Many teachers discussed practice assessments meant to prepare their students for the end-of-the-year test. One said, "We practice this every Wednesday, and we use different prompts to mimic assessment." Others discussed actually developing all classroom tests to imitate the format and structure of the statewide test. One teacher stated that it was important to instill in students methods and strategy that could carry over into statewide testing situations, such as "how to read between the lines and disregard the answers that don't make sense." Finally, teachers discussed the formative

assessment that educators give across the state called the Think Link and its role in providing educators, parents and students valuable information in addition to preparing students for spring accountability testing.

Although teachers understood the importance of developing student capacity to succeed in large-scale assessment, they also reported they understood that there are trade-offs that stakeholders must consider such as student fatigue with frequent testing scenarios. One educator said, "When I work with kids on activities that will help for the test, I don't even call it TCAP prep. They are so tired of those words." One thought to ease this feeling of over-preparation was to move some test prep onto a computer consistent with the Think Link test. However, in one case the educator actually tested students using paper and pencil on the Think Link, which students usually take in a computerized platform. Administrators had decided to give the students yet another chance to practice their paper and pencil testing acumen. Either way there appears to be a chance that the students are just being tested too much to take much enjoyment from the experiences. As one educator said, "They get the Think Link discovery test, and they are going, 'ICK.'"

State Test Anxiety

Perhaps in response to the amount of testing that students do in direct or indirect preparation for the end of the year state test, educators overwhelmingly discussed issues of test anxiety surrounding the spring testing window. Their discussion is summarized in theme five, state test anxiety. They were quick to mention that students and teachers alike shared this anxiety and that it tended to bounce back and forth from one group to another, as it gradually generated more emotional drain with each day. One educator said, "It

makes us anxious as educators so the kids get anxious, too." Another said, "I have always worried so much about the test. There is so much talk about it." Respondents shared additional concern regarding a recent development in which the state, which won Race to the Top and received additional federal funds, had instituted for the first time an evaluation system for teachers that included the performance of their students on statewide assessment. One teacher said, "I don't think we can give one standardized test to a student and have it truly be able to fairly assess what a teacher is capable of doing."

Also mentioned was the difficulty of being in the room on test day during negative testing experiences. One educator said having to go through a negative experience with the students was difficult. This educator said, "It is very stressful to see the stress on their faces and the confusion when they don't understand." One educator mentioned that actually getting these feelings out in the open could be cathartic for both the students and the adults in the school. This educator said, "In some ways students dread state testing in the spring. I know some teachers who have in the first week or two before the tests talked through their anxiety with the kids."

Another educator summed up her feelings,

> My kids are so stressed out, and you and I would be the same way. It would be like taking a test in a different language. I'm stressed because I've worked so hard to teach them a skill and yet they still don't have it, they are stressed because they don't have that skill, and then there is the whole thing with the Race to the Top; I am going to be rated to see if my kids are making progress and they are taking one test, one that is not even taken in my classroom.

Motivation on Test Day

Motivation on test day, theme six, explores teacher agreement that student motivation plays a huge role in test success, including on the statewide assessment in the spring (not to mention every day in the classroom). They also provided a strong message that there is a definite population of students among those who are persistently low performing who are unmotivated for statewide assessment. For some students, educators mentioned lack of interest in taking yet another test on a nice spring day. For others, they just are generally defeated in their schooling, and their motivation to succeed is non-existent both on the assessment and in the classroom. Others know that the test will not have any bearing on their school grades and approach the day with a bit of whimsy. As one teacher stated, "Teachers even say that as kids they didn't care about assessment." The state education department has intervened in an effort to motivate students to perform well on its statewide assessment: in Tennessee 2011 TCAP results will count for 15 percent of student course grades in core content areas for the spring semester.

From educator comments, it is clear that student motivation can originate in a number of different places. In some cases, the educator herself felt directly involved in the student success that day. She said, "Some kids want to do well for the teacher; some don't do well on purpose just to spite the teacher." One strategy is to provide encouragement and make the students aware that the scores are important to the educator: "I have my kids who I can build up and say, 'Please show me exactly what you've learned this year so I can help you next year.'" Others provide incentives such as pizza parties to classrooms that meet their goals. However, for others there is little that teachers can do on or near test day to change attitudes. As one teacher noted, "If they don't taste academic success a

lot, it's just another failure to expect. "These students are likely to sit down with their test for 5 minutes, draw a Christmas tree on the answer sheet, and be done," said one educator.

Another reason for poor student motivation, as noted by educators, is that the students do not see the results quickly enough. In addition, for those who receive accommodations, they might receive the extended time accommodation, either in concert with other accommodations or as a standalone support. For those taking extra time on the test, they will be sitting for the test after their peers have returned to the classroom, missing instructional time, as well as social time. One educator said, "They have to come back, and they are like, 'I can't do this, I don't want to.' You have to push them through it because it has to be done." Another educator highlighted the lack of a match between test expectations and skills as a reason for lacking student motivation, saying, "Think about it this way: I'm not a math major and I'm not smart at medical things, and if you gave me a test that a doctor would take, then I am going to get really discouraged."

Educators did not report a difference in student motivation between those taking the regular assessment and those taking the new modified assessment. In fact, more than one teacher noted that the students probably did not even know that they were receiving a different assessment than the student sitting next to them on test day. This teacher said, "Honestly, I don't think that they know they are taking a modified assessment." Another group of educators highlighted the waning motivation as testing week draws to a close. One educator said, "I see a lot less [sic] pictures being bubbled in on bubble sheets at the beginning of the week."

A number of educators mentioned a close connection between student motivation and parent perceptions, attitudes, and involvement. They mentioned that on test day, for some students, motivation has just as much to do with what happened in the home that morning as it does with the pending assessment. Also mentioned was that in some cases parents are generally unsupportive of school initiatives. One teacher said, "The parents usually didn't like and weren't successful in school either." Another teacher cited lack of parent attendance at a school event designed to provide information about the new modified assessment option (only five parents attended) as further evidence of a lack of connection with parents of the students who perform poorly on statewide assessment.

At the same time, some parents do stay connected and supportive of student educational efforts, including those in statewide assessment. One educator said, "You have got to give it up for those parents who work hard, because that helps me. It is so great to have those." Another said, "Every meeting or conversation I've had, the parents are all about it once I've explained the new test. They want what they feel is best for their child."

Value of Scores

There was a lack of educator consensus on the value of the scores obtained from statewide testing. Theme seven, the value of scores, consists of their thoughts on this issue. Most educators suggested, at the least, that some modifications to the data available could make the impact on their teaching that much greater. For example, one teacher spoke about the variability of scores, even for one student from year to year saying, "One year you might see they are extremely low, and the next year you might see that they are proficient because they guessed 20 out of 40 right."

Another mentioned the recent state change to more challenging content standards on the assessment as having an impact on the importance of the results attained from the testing in spring 2010. Others mentioned that the presentation of test results is just not descriptive enough and mentioned that it would be nice if an educator could see on which standards a student was proficient. Due to these challenges, some educators spoke of how they like to use assessment results as part of an evaluation of their teaching and the learning of their students. One educator said, "I see some correlations with how well they do on the TCAP, but I don't rely on it because there are so many aspects; it's just kind of a piece of the puzzle."

Others brought up the availability of results and a direct correlation with the value of the scores received. In all cases, the teachers spoke of not receiving the test results until after the start of the 2010-2011 school year for the previous spring's assessments. At this time, the results were less easy to incorporate into educator planning for the school year. Further complicating the use of state assessment results was the fact that by the time educators received results for a student, that student had progressed a grade in school and quite possibly worked with another special educator or even attended another school. So attaining test results for the students on an educator's current caseload involves an extra step in speaking with the educator who worked with the student the previous year.

Another comment had to do with how stakeholders made decisions for which assessment a student would take. One educator said that because of angling students either towards or away from the modified assessment at the last second, they felt the student scores were less valuable as everything the previous spring had just felt like a scramble. At the same

time, said one participant, special educators have such a small sample from which to derive meaning from the results. As opposed to a general educator who might have test results from 100 or more students, special educators have to draw information that they can use from the test scores of the small number of students on their caseload.

Nearly all educators felt that there was inherent value in test scores despite the difficulty in getting exactly what they want out of the assessment results. One educator said, "It helps us when we ask ourselves, 'Are we teaching the right things? Is it on the same track as testing?'" Educators spoke of looking at what students mastered in a broader sense the grade level before and using that information to tailor instruction for their students. Another educator said, "I look for obvious areas of weakness in our planning for co-teaching, IEP planning, and daily goal planning. For example, in math, basic computation is a problem, and having them use a calculator may help." Others spoke of the ability to focus on certain subject areas of need, how they make refinements in knowledge and skill in those subject areas based on the data attained from assessment. One educator said, "If a student does poorly in math and it's word problems in math, well, it may have been because they had a hard time reading those words; then maybe it would be a good idea to have some sight words up in the class." Another said, "I dive in and see what category, is it writing or is it grammar, and see where they missed the most, and then I focus more on those areas for that child."

In addition, educators did seem to feel that the scores from the new modified assessment were more valuable than those for students who did not show mastery on the regular assessment. Said one, "For a kid who took the regular assessment, they were of no value.

I taught this student who was the highest achiever in class a couple of years ago. There was nothing there to score." Another reinforced this attitude: "As far as showing student progress, it showed me nothing. A child at second grade reading level testing at sixth grade level isn't going to show me anything." On the other hand, one educator said, "I feel much better about the [modified assessment] than I do for the alternative for certain students. I think it's a fair enough assessment of student abilities and what they've learned."

Fairness in Accountability

Educators also had firm beliefs about the fairness of using these test scores for accountability measures, both for district/school judgments, but also for their own professional evaluations. Theme eight, fairness in accountability, is a summary of these beliefs. Most educators understood the need for and saw power in an accountability system for schools and districts and their own abilities; they just had reservations about these systems holding them accountable using a test that they have a good idea students would not pass before the testing window began. Said one educator, "Sure it is fair, as far as showing what the students have learned in sixth grade content. It's as fair as can be considering I don't actually teach them at that grade level and might be teaching them second grade content."

One of the main complications highlighted by educators was the assessment system's lack of sensitivity to improvements in knowledge and skill for those who are performing below the proficiency level. One educator said, "Even if they made tremendous progress, they are still two years behind and are not even close to the level of the test that they have

to take." Respondents also remarked that it is this inability to show growth that takes a good deal of the power away from accountability generated through these assessments, as they show progress only in the number or percentage of students moving past that proficiency cut point. One educator said, "I can be in one school one year and look unsuccessful, and then move to another school and teach the same and be seen as successful. It's luck of the draw each year."

Another complaint was that the accountability system bases ratings off the results from a test that shows only what students are able to show they can do on one day out of the 180 or more days that they spend in school. One educator spoke of the changes in accountability systems within the state and within her district in the past twenty years, all of which she has spent in the same school. "At first I didn't test my students, and then 11 years ago we gave them off-of-grade level tests," she said. "But then 10 years ago the standards started and tests had to be on-grade level, and here I am giving a kid a test who can't even hold a pencil."

Here again, educators saw the changes made on the new modified assessment as a start towards building a better system for accountability. They thought the new test was more fair and better captured what the students know and can do, at least in the 45 minutes or so that it takes to complete one of the state assessments. One educator said, in speaking of the important differences that allow for a student to show what he or she knows on the modified assessment that are not available on the general assessment:"I don't want to be judged on student performance when they clearly have issues that keep them from performing as well as their grade level peers."

Desire for Something New

Theme nine is titled desire for something new. Educators discussed the particulars of testing that they thought worked and specific changes that they thought would make for better tests and for a better accountability system as a whole. One improvement in general that nearly all participants spoke about was the barrier presented by total time, length, and time limits on current tests. Another improvement mentioned by several educators was the notion of measuring student growth from year to year, but also within year. Educators also mentioned the density of the testing experience during the short state-testing window as holding students back in showing what they know and can do in every content area.

Many educators spoke of how shorter tests have benefitted and would benefit their students in the future. One educator said, in speaking about the materials handed out currently on test day, "The kids look down at that book and they are completely overwhelmed." In addition to tests that had booklets that simply contained fewer pages, other changes that respondents noted would shorten the time it took for students to complete the test included: less verbose language in question stems, three answer choices, and shorter passages. Said one educator about the amount of effort her students put into finishing one of the current assessments, "The test is so long I think it takes longer than the test that I needed to pass to be able to *teach*." In addition, educators noted that the issue of time could be quite discouraging, as students must stop when they hit time limits for certain sections of the test. When they do not finish and leave blank answers on their test forms, they are less likely to start the next section feeling motivated and confident, something that builds as they progress from section to section towards the end of the test.

Educators also spoke of how much more beneficial a series of tests would be for them, in an effort to capture performance on multiple days, and also to possibly be able to measure growth for an individual student over the course of the year. Said one educator, "We have got to have something that these students have a chance to show that 'Hey, I'm making progress, I'm doing well, I'm moving up there.' These kids are making tremendous progress in certain areas, and this is just one test, and it doesn't show anything unless they are lucky enough to get a few answers right." An example that the educators drew some of their knowledge and comments from was the Think Link assessment given with a pre-test and then post-test structure across the state each year for formative purposes. On the topic of growth, the ability to show student improvement from the state-defined proficiency levels of "below basic" level to a "basic" level was important for a number of educators. Related to this was another suggestion to allow teachers to decide where the instructional level for each student was on each standard and to select questions for that standard on the appropriate level for their student to be able to show growth over the course of the year.

There was agreement across all participants that the current structure of the state assessment system where districts and schools must administer all tests within a two-week period does not work for some students. Some students complete their testing on four consecutive days, which can be a herculean task for a student who might be using an accommodation that requires extra time each day. Not only do teachers lose most instructional time normally available to them on test days, but also the students lose the ability to have the typical social interactions with their peers and teachers that help make the day enjoyable. One educator, referring to her instructional practices on test day, said,

"We just play games because the kids are wiped out; there is no way that I'll get anything out of them." Moreover, nearly all participants mentioned that the rest of the school year often becomes a wash because of the effort it takes from students and teachers alike to get through assessment week.

Other suggestions made by participants during interviews may hold some possibilities for improving the assessment experience for students who typically struggle to achieve proficiency on the regular assessment. One teacher mentioned making test re-takes more common and mentioned the lack of resources on test day that the students might normally have access to in their classroom: dictionaries, encyclopedias, wall charts, etc. Another group of educators mentioned online or computer tests and how they mimic the way the students work in real life, likely better allowing students to show their competencies on test day. Another summed up her thoughts about the lack of flexibility in assessment when she said, "We are taught all day long to create differentiated instruction; that we have to tap into all different learning styles. But yet we only have an assessment that is for one learning style in that it is only multiple choice." In reference to linking assessment back in with student IEPs, one educator said, "I should be able to write an individualized *assessment* plan."

Some of these changes were present on the initial dissemination of the modified assessment, and educators viewed them positively. In general, educators stated that the changes implemented in the modified assessment provided students the opportunity to have more success on test day and increased the value of scores for students, parents, and teachers alike. Educators made direct connections between specific changes and students

for whom those changes provided key access points. For example, for students with attention deficits, the shorter test length and fewer answer choices helped student-test interaction. One teacher made the comparison of fewer questions on the statewide test being more similar to her classroom tests that are typically 25 to 30 questions in length. They also mentioned the positive benefits of the simplified language when the construct tested was not vocabulary and having just one test question on a page. As a result, one educator said that the students were less "antsy" during testing, and another said, "I'm so for this modified test; I think it's a great thing because some of them [the students] are right there with that extra boost."

In summary, participant opinions ranged across nine themes: educator experience impacts students, opportunity to learn grade level content in question, accommodations decisions, constant assessment, state text anxiety, motivation on test day, value of scores, fairness in accountability, and desire for something new. In general, participants said including the students they teach in accountability systems was important in maintaining or raising high standards for all students. However, they questioned the ability of the students they teach to accurately show what they know and can do on the traditional paper and pencil regular assessment, even with the help of accommodations. Instead they preferred some of the characteristics of the TCAP-MAAS, the new modified assessment in their state. In addition, they shared some thoughts about other changes to assessment that they felt would lead to more meaningful inclusion of the students that they teach in statewide testing and accountability systems.

DISCUSSION

Thanks to the time and efforts of the educators who participated in these interviews, it is possible to merge the collective perspectives of this group with those in works previously published. It is also possible to merge these perspectives with those expressing the correlated interests, but also sometimes the competing and tangential interests, of policy makers and researchers. This dialogue is important as we move into an era of K-12 education with national content standards and new assessments designed to measure how those standards are being taught to America's children in all states. The discussion section of this paper will focus on the four research questions presented earlier and will include additional themes emerging from the research. The author will compare results from this study to those found in previous research. Lastly, this section will discuss the limitations of the current study and suggestions for future research.

Use of Accountability Results

Discussion with the educators who participated in this study revealed uneven use of accountability assessment results. Though some educators found ways to incorporate the results into daily and targeted instruction, others did not, often because of an ineffective presentation of results to teachers and the lack of timeliness in which educators received the results. Participants stated that educators would more effectively use results if they were available in real time or early in the summer so that they could use them to differentiate instruction within the same year or at least use them to plan instruction for the coming year. Educators also stated that they expected that students would also show increased motivation if they could receive their results at the completion of the test or at

least while still enrolled in the grade tested. Displaying the types of data that educators need is also vital to the capacity of assessment design, administration, and interpretation to influence properly instruction as explained in the assessment sequence of Gong and Marion (2006). [This sequence is included in Appendix C.]

The results obtained from the 10 participant interviews in this study indicate a lack of total teacher buy-in to current accountability systems, especially because *participants* are held accountable for student test results. Most of the educators who participated in this study were not averse to accountability measures and evaluation. In fact, their responses suggested a desire for accountability measures that are more sensitive to the improvements made by all students. Results suggest potential for computer adaptive testing, if properly applied, to be able to measure accurately the specific abilities of those who may only show test proficiency on a small number of items in current formats. Here also, the importance of multiple measures to encourage the tracking of growth both between years and within years was noted by study participants as something that could improve accountability measures. That being said, these 10 educators recognized a need for accountability and appreciated efforts made by the state to raise expectations for the students that they teach, as they too have the same high expectations.

Reaction to the TCAP-MAAS

The TCAP-MAAS was first released to students during the accountability testing window in the spring of 2010. The educators who participated in this study expressed mixed opinions regarding its effectiveness, ‘though most said that the TCAP-MAAS more effectively measured what their students know and can do than the regular assessment.

These educators stated appreciation for the effectiveness of some of the differences found in the TCAP-MAAS in providing access for their students, even those who still were not able to test as proficient. Among the changes, study participants preferred untimed tests with and without certain accommodations, one item per page, and three answer choices per item stem. Although participants clearly stated they hoped for different assessments for their students, there was debate regarding how, when, and with what instrument states can properly assess students on what they have learned.

Especially important to consider is the issue with developing an assessment that provides the necessary feedback desired by different groups of stakeholders, such as the differing values and desires of state education department personnel, policy makers, and the parents of students with disabilities. Caught in the middle are the needs of a significant portion of students in every state who are not currently able to show mastery on existing tests (Lazarus, Wu, & Altman, 2009). These students are quite a heterogeneous group consisting of students receiving services for English Language, students who are minorities, students of low socio-economic status, and students with disabilities, but also students who are Caucasian, without low socio-economic status and without disabilities. Developing measures that capture the abilities of *every* student should be important to all, and trends in current assessment work may yield good ideas moving forward.

At this time, some states have developed additional large-scale assessments for use within their existing accountability systems aimed at more effectively capturing the proficiencies of this population of students. However, due to federal regulation regarding these Alternate Assessments based on Modified Academic Achievement Standards (U. S. Department of Education, 2007), only those students who are currently served with an

Individualized Education Program (students with documented disabilities) who are being instructed on grade level content are eligible. Not eligible are those students served with 504 plans or with no documented disability at all.

Further, proficiency rates for students with disabilities who take this new assessment in other states are not noticeably different from previous proficiency rates on the regular tests that students may have taken with accommodations (Altman et al., 2010). As most states are currently working towards a next generation of student assessment, it is vital that these working consortia consider the needs of *all* potential test takers from the very beginning for *every* possible test platform or method.

Additional Needs and Strategies to Provide Full Access

As far as assessments used for accountability are concerned, the 10 participants in this study have unique perspectives on improvements that test developers could make to existing measures. Many of the participants surveyed have served as test administrators for students taking the TCAP-MAAS or regular assessments using accommodations. They also have a wealth of related knowledge based on their own test creation and accommodations strategies for classroom assessments. Granted, the desires of educators and the needs of policy makers and test creators are not a perfect fit. For example, some suggestions offered by educators may have a positive impact on the testing experience of students with disabilities, but could also lead to a loss in standardization, connection to the construct being tested, or the validity of inferences that can be drawn from the instrument. Some suggestions may also be very specific to their student or classrooms and quite possibly could have no impact, or even a negative impact if scaled up on a

district-wide, or statewide level. At the same time, suggestions for changes and improvements to the density of testing within the testing window, test length/timing issues, and providing resources to all students that do not affect the construct being measured (such as a calculator on an item not measuring computation) could be of great benefit to the field.

One issue discussed at length with these educators is the lack of success that many educators have in teaching their students grade level material before the test. Obviously, students will surely fail to score well on tests of material they have little to no exposure to. Educators mentioned hitting the standards they thought were most important, missing the depth of knowledge that general education students receive. It is acquired knowledge to this depth that is measured on many large-scale assessments now. Questions require students to think critically, weave understanding from multiple sources, and, in some cases, to perform activities that express not only understanding of concepts, but also how to use them. A student who has received a lack of depth of knowledge across standards stands little chance to show performance on these items.

Also of issue is the fact that grade level reading skills are needed to access items on tests in every content area. Unanimously, the educators in this study mentioned that they have students on their case loads who do not read at grade level, and in fact many of them read far below grade level. These students receive heavily accommodated assessment experiences in many cases, including extra time, individual setting, and the read aloud accommodation. However, if a student's comprehension skills are at issue, none of the above accommodations will serve the student well in testing. And even if the read aloud

helps the student with fluency or decoding issues, the jury is definitely still out on its potential benefits to the scoring of students with disabilities (Cormier et al., 2010).

Both of these issues speak to the fact that professional development is needed for all educators, including special educators, with regard to students who are persistently low performing on assessment and just as difficult to instruct in the classroom. Educators who are able to get at both breadth and depth of knowledge with their students and who bring students up to grade level reading are necessary in changing student outcomes. The federal mandate has caused districts and states to collect data that have made it clear that America's public schools are failing a group of students who perhaps need education most. The tenets of ESEA reauthorized as NCLB have exposed certain districts, schools, and subgroups of students within these schools as low test achievers. However, federal and state education dollars have fallen short in providing the professional development necessary for educators to meet the needs of these challenging students. Providing states the support and strategy necessary in passing on best practices to all of their educators is one possible step towards eliminating these disparities in educational outcomes.

Accommodations: Knowledge and Attitudes

The 10 participating educators in this study were united in their comments about the potential accommodations have for providing access for students during instruction and assessment. However, some of these participants acknowledged that the accommodations that they chose to use or were allowed to use according to state guidelines, resulted in uneven or no improvement in access.

It became apparent in speaking with educators that teachers pick up knowledge related to accommodations in many ways. Participants named an impressive number of strategies for working towards directed instruction for their students, even though it did not seem that there was any kind of formal channel available for them to increase their working knowledge. It appears that peer interaction, both communication with other special education teachers and brainstorming with the general education teachers working with their students influenced the decisions teachers made about accommodations for their students and influenced their capacity to carry them out effectively. At the same time, educators turned to the Internet for additional support when encountering situations for which they did not have a ready-made solution.

Use of the Internet has likely increased the number of accommodations strategies used by these 10 participants, however, it may have resulted in initiating practices not proven to be effective. At the same time, many of the classroom accommodations mentioned by participants were not the same as or aligned with the statewide testing accommodations state policy permits them to provide. If educators throughout the state share the opinions of these 10 participants, there appears to be a need for statewide education department personnel to provide leadership on best practices, organized training, and accommodations mentoring models.

One strategy that is commonly accepted as an effective way to make intelligent decisions about accommodations that benefit both the teacher and the student is to involve the student as a stakeholder in decision making (Christensen, Thurlow, & Wang, 2009). It became clear in talking with these 10 educators that those working with younger students do not think their students have the maturity to contribute to these decisions, while those

who work with older students may not think they have developed the capacity to be involved. In effect, neither the educators of younger students nor the educators of older students considered themselves as responsible in building a student's capacity to self-advocate for accommodations. Since this sample is too small to support implications from this particular finding it would be of interest to investigate this phenomenon on a larger scale.

Constant communication about what is working in the classroom can lead to nimble, efficient, and effective decisions regarding accommodations for students, in which evaluations for need are individualized (Edgemon, Jablonski, & Lloyd, 2006). It is also vital that students be included and provided opportunities to contribute to decisions about instructional and assessment. The literature tells us that allowing students to balance personal desires for access against state participation and accommodations policies can lead to better accommodations decisions and also help to build important self-advocacy skills that will be necessary later in life (Christensen et al., 2009).

Additional Themes

Additional themes also emerged from the analysis of participant interviews that did not apply directly to the four major research questions. These themes were either ancillary or supportive of, but not directly identified as one of the nine themes shown earlier that apply directly to the four major research questions. One such theme was the existence of competing job duties such as planning instruction, differentiating instruction, assessing, and using data to shape future instruction, especially as it pertains to struggling learners. It was also clear that there was a direct connection between job satisfaction and having

time available to carry out initiatives developed for individual students. The educators in this study reported that the assessment piece of the puzzle, including the large-scale and high stakes assessment portion of the educator's daily life, takes away from this time, especially when a student uses additional time testing or the educators see their students struggle to succeed in testing situations. Moreover, the inability to appropriately provide access to students due to state participation and accommodation guidelines increased frustration among participants. Balancing the need for time to tailor individualized instruction with the need to acquire data through testing procedures remains a complex issue.

Another theme that arose during discussion with participants was that of anxiety caused by the statewide assessment and accountability system. It is clear that the statewide assessment looms over the educational decisions made by the educators included in this sample, especially as the spring testing window approaches. The participants in this study discussed a palpable sense of angst within the walls of their schools, perhaps because the state recently tied educator evaluations to student performance on these assessments. The results of this study suggest that it is important for policy makers to understand the best practices in large-scale assessment and to ask themselves whether tests created for accountability at the school and district level should also be used for accountability at the individual educator and student level.

All of this begs the question of whether or not we can salvage any utility out of current assessment systems while we await this new generation of assessments. And further, will we realize new assessments that are able to accurately assess students strengths and weaknesses in a way that enables all stakeholders to extract the data they need to make

decisions? Is an accountability system of any use when we are not sure that we know how to fully include all students (including those who are difficult to assess or are students with disabilities) in a classroom where effective teaching of grade level standards occurs? Are we putting the horse before the cart in judging districts, schools, and now educators (see Tennessee's new teacher evaluation system) in their success in educating all students, before the field has proven it even knows what the so-called gold standard is?

Limitations of the Present Study

It must be noted that the inferences that can be drawn from this study are limited by a number of factors, four to be discussed here.

First, this study is obviously limited by its inclusion of just ten perspectives. Although a mixed group in age, experience, and teaching environment, they were all special educators within one state's unique education environment and, further, were mostly from the east and central parts of that state.

Second, although this state was an interesting case in that it was one of the first to offer a modified assessment option within its accountability system, it was also one of the first states to connect student scores on assessment to teacher evaluations and student grades. This may have influenced educator opinions about large-scale assessment, especially for students who are not expected to pass the assessment. In addition, this state had also recently completed an overhaul of state standards, and a dramatic drop in student proficiency across the board was expected (among students without disabilities as well).

A third limitation was the inability to get into the schools and classrooms of all interview participants. It is possible that participants spoke more frankly due to feeling more comfortable with an in-person interviewer rather than with one on the other end of a telephone line. Completing many of the interviews using conference call techniques may have led to a loss of data for those interviewed with this method.

A fourth and final limitation of this research was the timing of the interviews themselves. Many of them occurred at the end of the school day, when without a doubt some educators are exhausted from a day's work and less likely to share their most complex ideas. In addition, the interviews occurred in November and December, spaced far from the mental, emotional, and physical preparation for the accountability testing window in April, and the release of results in the late summer. It is quite possible that participants would have had additional information to share if they spoke with interviewers during the spring or summer.

Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Research

The educators participating in this study stated a desire to effectively teach grade level content to their students, even those who typically do not achieve proficiency on state tests. Assessment has the ability to inform this instruction in the classroom, to support educators in aiding policy makers in providing resources, when needed, where they are needed, and to support public perception and opinion of the quality of American's public schooling system. However, it appears that the current state assessment program falls short in its ability to inform instruction and support educators, at least for the ten participants in this study.

It is clear from talking with study participants that some of the changes made to the TCAP-MAAS were desirable and may actually be examples of best practice in assessment development for all students. In fact, many of the changes lauded by participants had previously been identified as valuable tenets of creating tests from the very beginning to be inclusive to all populations of test takers through Universal Design for Assessment (Thompson, Johnstone, Anderson, & Miller, 2005) and also match what students have told us makes test better for them (Johnstone, Liu, Altman, & Thurlow, 2007).

This is a unique time and place in education. With the implementation of common content standards in core subject areas across most states in the country, as well as the development of new assessments to measure these standards, it is important to the participants in this study that these new assessments support educator efforts to differentiate their instruction to students who need help in accessing grade level content. It is important to other stakeholders that these assessments support school and district accountability measures and state education department decision making. Perhaps it is possible to develop an assessment from the ground up to satisfy all.

It would be of interest for future research to involve some data collection during other times of the school year. In addition, future research might focus on the scaling up of this study to include perspectives of educators from multiple states and diverse educational settings. An initial survey of educators across the nation could be valuable in collecting data on the opinions of a larger and more diverse group of educators, which could then be followed by directed interview methods designed to investigate reasons why educators feel the way they do. It would also be important to track educator perceptions as we

rapidly shift towards more national commonality in education than ever before. It is quite possible that educator perception will change with this massive shift in what is taught, when it is taught, and how what is taught is assessed.

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APPENDIX A – Structured Interview Guided Questions

1. When did you receive the results from spring 2010 testing?
    a. How valuable were the results that you received?
    b. How will you use these results?
    c. Do they reflect fairness in holding schools and districts accountable for the performance of these students?
2. Think briefly about students that you teach who persistently perform poorly on state assessment. What do you think is the root of that poor performance?
    a. Do you think these students are motivated to perform well on the assessment?
    b. What changes in the assessments themselves could benefit these students?
    c. What changes in the system of assessment could benefit these students?
3. What is an accommodation?
    a. What accommodations can you choose from?
    b. Where do you find them?
    c. What is its purpose?
    d. To what extent do you include students in the decision making?
    e. Do you think accommodations are beneficial to students?
    f. Why or why not?
4. Do students have "the same" opportunity to learn the grade level curriculum in core content areas such as math, reading, science and social studies no matter which assessment they are tracked to?
    a. Please explain your answer

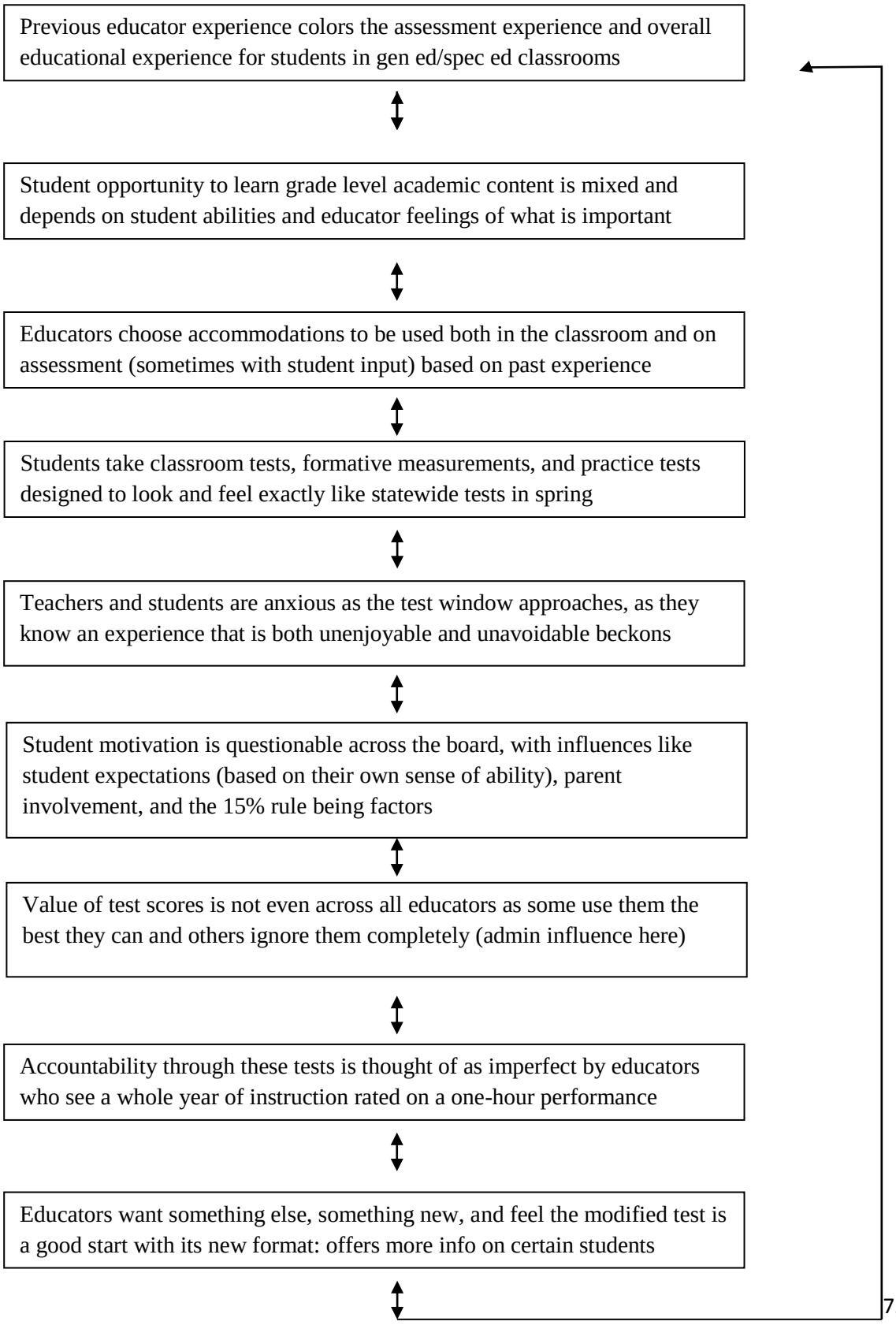
b. To what extent do you think all students are exposed to the same curriculum
c. If answer is the same: Did the students have no change in their access, or did they receive more in some areas, and less in others?
d. If answer is less: Do you feel that the students were tracked into lower expectations and if so why?
e. If answer is more: Were there any particular reasons why they received more grade level curriculum?

5. Wrap up with some demographic questions:
    a. What school level(s) do you teach?
    b. How long have you been teaching at your school and in Tennessee, and how long have you been teaching total?

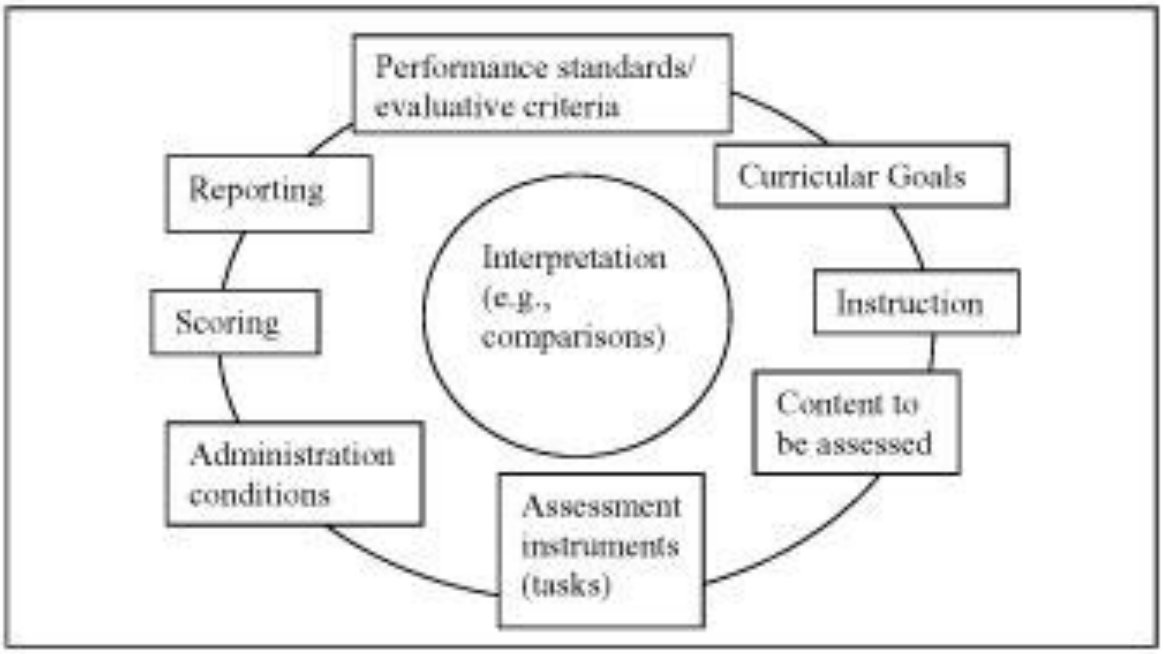
<u>Removed following pilot interview</u>

6. Can you please define, in a few sentences, the term "instructional support"? What does it mean to provide "instructional support to a student"?
    a. Does providing these supports lead to better assessment success for students who don't typically perform as proficient on state assessment

APPENDIX B – Concept Model



APPENDIX C – Gong and Marion's Typical Instruction, Assessment Design, Administration, and Interpretation Sequence



Gong, B., & Marion, S. (2006). *Dealing with flexibility in assessments for students with significant cognitive disabilities* (Synthesis Report 60). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes. Available at: http://education.umn.edu/NCEO/OnlinePubs/Synthesis60.html