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## What is the Effect of Standardized Testing on Teacher Practice?

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# WHAT IS THE EFFECT OF STANDARDIZED TESTING ON TEACHER PRACTICE?

by

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A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in Education  
in the College of Education and Human Performance  
and in the Burnett Honors College  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term 2015

Thesis Chair: Carolyn W. Hopp, Ph.D.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the potential correlation between standardized testing and teacher practice. Building upon the conceptual framework, are constructs of school climate and assessment to develop themes such as leadership role, teacher role, district role, and coach's role as well as teacher practice, classroom assessment, standardized assessment, and the alignment of curriculum to standardized testing. In discovering the parallel between standardized testing and teacher practice, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected through research and observations, but more importantly through a survey and focus group. Over a two-semester period, it became evident that there was an eminent parallel between each the themes and constructs within the conceptual framework, ultimately answering the research question. Although the data fulfilled the research question of this study, future research would require a more in-depth, longitudinal study in order to suggest possible ideas for solutions.

## **DEDICATION**

For my Mom and Dad,  
It is impossible to adequately thank you  
for everything you have done,  
from loving me unconditionally  
to always pushing me to be the best.  
I love and thank you, always.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to express the utmost gratitude to my mentor and Thesis Chair, Dr. Carolyn W. Hopp, who has enabled me to reach this level of achievement. Without her invaluable support, encouragement, and dedication throughout this journey, I could not have accomplished the development of this thesis. Not only has her guidance as my mentor been inspiring, but her character as a person and an educator has taught me the meaning of excellence.

I would also like to express a special thank you to my parents, Constance Granato and Steven Granato, without whom I would not have become the woman I am today. Your inexhaustible support and confidence in my success has granted me the courage to reach farther, strive harder, and dream greater.

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## **Chapter 1:**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Why don't teachers teach Social Studies?

Social Studies, as a subject, is often neglected in the classroom because its material is not tested on standardized tests. Standardized tests became popular around the standards movement, when the Federal Government and the Department of Education (FDOE) attempted to design equal standards across the nation. The solution to equality was the Common Core State Standards. So far, 46 states have signed the memorandum to adopt the Common Core State Standards, a framework that only includes standards in English/Language Arts and Mathematics. Of the states that adopted the standards, some have chosen to adopt them verbatim while others opted to modify the standards. Florida, specifically, incrementally adopted the Common Core State Standards with modifications. This is partly due to the fact that standardized tests focus on these the same two content areas the most.

Throughout my courses at the University of Central Florida in the Elementary Education major, I have learned how crucial content areas such as Social Studies, Science, Arts, etc. are to student education and development. Why then, are these topics not included on standardized tests such as the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) 2.0? Some educators, such as Diane Ravitch (author of *The*

*Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education*), feel Americans are taking on a business-like approach to education and therefore are only promoting English/Language Arts and Mathematics. Ravitch (2010) believes, “by our current methods, we may be training (not educating) a generation of children who are repelled by learning, thinking that it means only drudgery, worksheets, test preparation, and test-taking” (Ravitch, 2010, p.231).

My internship experiences over the past year have exposed the ramifications of the new standardized assessment on curriculum and teacher practice. The Florida Standards Assessment (FSA), based on the adopted Common Core State Standards, is the new state standardized assessment being used in schools. Now teachers are cramming subject specific material based on the order of the FSA tests. For example, the writing portion of the FSA was administered a month prior to the other subject area assessments. Once students completed the FSA Writing assessment, teachers were exclaiming how excited they were to not have to teach writing anymore. Now they had time to focus on Science and Reading (the upcoming assessments).

Since the adoption of the Common Core State Standards and the Florida Standards Assessment, both students and teachers have also been complaining of the added specials’ time within the daily schedule. At the school in which I am completing my internship, teachers are expressing their thoughts on the trivial increase of time spent learning subject areas such as art, music, and physical education. This past year, schools have increased the amount of time students spend in specials due to the fact

that these topics are now going to be assessed. Again, schools are adapting their curriculum based on the assessment, essentially teaching toward the test.

Not only is the change affecting teachers, but even the students are criticizing the modification. Students express that specials are no longer “fun” but instead are too demanding. Instead of feeling inspired, students are being drilled with information in order to prepare them for the assessment.

Another major concern that was discussed during Professional Learning Communities (PLC) meetings was the content being withheld from students. Many teachers expressed the need to focus solely on the benchmarks that were to be assessed on the FSA. Rather than teaching students all of the material that met the standards for their particular grade, teachers decided they only had time to concentrate on the standards being assessed. This type of teaching results from teaching to the test and is corrupting our educational system while damaging the development of our students.

Standardization has influenced many teachers to eliminate or significantly reduce teaching content outside of the material on the standardized tests, resulting in a narrowing of curriculum. Test scores have become an obsession and have caused test-taking skills and strategies to take precedence over knowledge (Ravitch, 2010, p.107). The pressures of these tests are preventing students from receiving the education they deserve and suppressing fundamental content essential for higher thinking.

## **Purpose of Study**

The intent of this thesis is to examine teachers' perceptions of the effect of standardized tests on teacher practice. The study will specifically examine if standardized tests lead to a narrowing of curriculum and how the pressures of the test impact instructional practice. The study originated from the idea that content was being withheld from the classroom curriculum simply because it was not included on standardized tests. Recently however, standardized tests have been modified to test every subject and the curriculum has been adapted accordingly. The pressure to raise test scores weighs on teachers and students, prompting schools to start gearing their curriculum toward these standardized tests. The objective of this research is to determine if standardized tests have an effect on the intersection of curriculum and teacher practice and suggest the necessity for possible alternatives.

## **Rationale**

I became interested in this topic when I heard certain content was being withheld from the classroom curriculum simply because it was not included on standardized tests. Then, with the adoption of the new standardized assessments, curriculum was narrowing to the point that students were only learning the material on the tests. The pressure to raise test scores weighs on both teachers and students, prompting schools to start gearing their curriculum toward these standardized tests. Schools are constantly searching for resources that provide any and all information about the new



Florida Standards Assessment. Because the test is new this year, schools are worried about preparing their students for the standardized tests. As soon as teachers are provided updated information about the test, they automatically adapt their teaching methods to align with the assessment. By teaching to the tests, schools are not only generating inaccurate results, but keeping students from attaining the education they deserve. According to Ravitch (2010), “our schools will not improve if we value only what tests measure. The tests we have now provide useful information about students’ progress in reading and mathematics, but they cannot measure what matters most in education” (p.226).

It is concerning to me that teachers feel they are unable to teach a curriculum aligned with standards because it will not result in high enough test scores. It is also unsettling that teachers feel the need to solely focus on the standards that will be assessed rather than all the standards necessary for their specific grade. Standards are designed as a way of setting objectives or learning goals; if the material is mastered, then the objective is met and the standard is achieved. However, even the Common Core State Standards focus more directly on Reading/Language Arts and Mathematics, which could possibly encourage teaching toward the test rather than teaching content itself.

As a future teacher, I will be held accountable for teaching my students. Accountability currently is being determined based on standardized test scores. This has resulted in teachers prepping students for these tests rather than teaching them skills such as critical thinking and problem solving, which are also necessary for student

achievement. When put into a classroom, I feel as though the teacher should teach critical thinking and problem solving skills as well as content across multiple subject areas, for an advantageous education. When teachers use effective teaching strategies, students will be better prepared for the materials presented on standardized tests. By only teaching information on the standardized tests and how to take the standardized tests, teachers are narrowing the curriculum. This is also detrimental to student learning, especially if the state continues to modify the standardized tests being utilized as assessment. My biggest concern arises when students fail to pass a different test based on the same information, an indication that student learning focuses on how to take one specific test, which in Florida, is now the Florida Standards Assessment (FSA). This type of “education” will not ensure the future of our students, our schools, or our country.

## **Testing in Florida**

### *Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test 2.0*

The Florida Comprehensive Assessment (FCAT) originated in 1998 as part of a comprehensive plan to implement a more rigorous curriculum (Sunshine State Standards) in the hopes of increasing student achievement. With FCAT, grade levels three through eleven, participated in a criterion-referenced assessment regarding subjects: Math, Reading, Science, and Writing. The FCAT was a means of measuring the progress of the Sunshine State Standards.

During the 2010-2011 academic year, Florida progressed from FCAT to FCAT 2.0 and End of Course (EOC) assessments. The transition occurred to accommodate the development of the Next Generation Sunshine State Standards (NGSSS). The following table indicates the Florida Department of Education's FCAT 2.0 assessment schedule according to grade levels based on the coordinating subject areas.

Table 1 - FCAT 2.0 Assessment Schedule

Grade	Subjects				Tests
	R	M	S	W	
<b>3</b>	✓	✓			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ FCAT 2.0 Reading</li> <li>♦ FCAT 2.0 Mathematics</li> </ul>
<b>4</b>	✓	✓		✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ FCAT 2.0 Reading</li> <li>♦ FCAT 2.0 Mathematics</li> <li>♦ FCAT 2.0 Writing</li> </ul>
<b>5</b>	✓	✓	✓		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ FCAT 2.0 Reading</li> <li>♦ FCAT 2.0 Mathematics</li> <li>♦ FCAT 2.0 Science</li> </ul>
<b>6</b>	✓	✓			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ FCAT 2.0 Reading</li> <li>♦ FCAT 2.0 Mathematics</li> </ul>
<b>7</b>	✓	✓			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ FCAT 2.0 Reading</li> <li>♦ FCAT 2.0 Mathematics</li> </ul>
<b>8</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ FCAT 2.0 Reading</li> <li>♦ FCAT 2.0 Mathematics</li> <li>♦ FCAT 2.0 Science</li> <li>♦ FCAT 2.0 Writing</li> </ul>
<b>9</b>	✓				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ FCAT 2.0 Reading</li> </ul>
<b>10</b>	✓			✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ FCAT 2.0 Reading</li> <li>♦ FCAT 2.0 Writing</li> </ul>
<b>11–Adult</b>	✓	✓			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ FCAT 2.0 Reading Retake*</li> <li>♦ FCAT Mathematics Retake**</li> </ul>
<p>* The FCAT 2.0 Reading Retake is based on the 2007 NGSSS.</p> <p>** The FCAT Mathematics Retake is based on the 1996 SSS.</p>					

### *Florida Standards Assessment*

As of this year, the FCAT 2.0 Reading and FCAT 2.0 Math are being replaced by the Florida Standards Assessment (FSA), which align with the newly adopted Common Core State Standards. The FCAT Math Retake will be last administered in Spring/Fall 2014 and Spring 2015. The FCAT 2.0 Science and Reading Retake will continue to be administered. The FSA assesses grade levels three through eleven in English Language Arts, grades four through eleven in Writing, and grades three through eight in Mathematics. Meanwhile, Florida is still assessing grades five through eight in Science using the FCAT 2.0. The End of Course (EOC) assessments being administered along with the FSA are Algebra 1, Algebra 2, and Geometry.

Because the assessment is still new, the test is unfamiliar to many schools and faculty members. For this reason, teachers are educating their students based on the most recent information regarding the tests. As teachers are learning new information about the FSA, they are adapting their instruction to best accommodate the test. This has impacted the education of students greatly as it seems as though teachers are providing unstable instruction. For instance, one week teachers will teach their students based on what they perceive the test to be. Another week they will explain to their students that the test changed, therefore they have to learn in a completely different way, in a way that aligns with the new testing information. Rather than just teaching the information that is necessary to achieve mastery of the standards required for that grade, teachers are attempting to teach students how to take a test that is still unknown. Common Core State Standards were adopted to encourage critical thinking of students,

not to promote teaching toward the test. The teaching strategies teachers are using to prepare students for these assessments conflicts with the purpose of education.

## **Summary**

Through my observations as an intern in an elementary school, I noticed teachers would often stress about the standardized test at the end of the school year. It seemed as though their entire instruction was geared toward helping students pass this test. Teachers would often ignore certain subjects that were not being test or drill and kill students on material that was on the upcoming test. For this reason, I chose to research the effect standardized testing has on teacher practice.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The purpose of this study was to determine if standardized testing had any effect on teacher practice. The focus of the review of literature includes the standards movement, international and national perspectives, assessment practices, and the impact of standardization on curriculum, leadership, teaching practice, and student achievement.

#### **Standards Movement**

Although the mention of standards in education was brought about in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the standards movement became a major issue in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It began in 1965 when President Lyndon Johnson passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which guaranteed equal access to education for all students as well as instituted a means of accountability through standards (Girod, 1996, p.5). A few years later, in 1972, Public Law 94-142, also known as the Education for all Handicapped Children Act, was passed in legislation. This act mandated that education was to occur in the least restrictive environment to ensure that students with physical, emotional, and/or learning disabilities were not secluded from mainstream classrooms (p.5).

The standards movement really came into play around the 1980s when attacks from communist countries such as Russia, China, and Cuba prompted the government

to stress academic standards in mathematics and science (Girod, 1996, p.6). For many Americans, this confirmed the need for education to have a more business-like structure, focusing on scientific and mathematical literacy. In order to meet these demands, schools needed to be held accountable for student preparation, and did so through standards. Legislation was enacted in an attempt to make education an unparalleled endeavor (p.6). Following a business type model, student learning became the output and the point of which students, teachers, schools, districts, and states were held accountable (p.6). In order to obtain accountability, agencies and organizations began writing standards defining what schools should be teaching, how to test their teachings, and how to use the test data for assessment (p.6).

Finally, the standards movement received a majority of its initiation from the publication of the National Commission on Excellence in Education's (1983) *A Nation at Risk* (Tillman & Scheurich, 2013, p.413). Concerns stating, "unless public education received a major overhaul and unless expectations for student achievement were raised, America's economic security would be severely compromised," triggered dissatisfaction amongst Americans (p.413). People started to believe the nation was losing its leadership position due to the decline in American education. States now had new requirements to meet, due to the need for accountability; they were not just expected to report whether they met specific standards, but to what extent.

The movement toward national academic standards was mainly caused by global economic competition, poor student performance, achievement gaps, and increasing diversity between state standards and curricula. The permission of states to set their



own levels of student achievement allowed for the variation between different states' standards. Watt (2009) believes that No Child Left Behind "created incentives for states to manipulate the law by lowering standards" (Watt, 2009, p.12). Barton (2009) compared student performances on state assessments and performances on NAEP to argue that variance in rigor and value of state standards is due to different beliefs about the intent of state standards (Barton, 2009, p.20).

To resolve the variance in state standards, the federal government created national standards known as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). In June 2009, NGA and CCSSO released which states signed a memorandum of agreement to participate in Common Core State Standards Initiative (Watt, 2009, p.23). All states except for Alaska, Missouri, South Carolina, and Texas, signed the memorandum. The memorandum described the purpose of the Common Core State Standards and its benefits for the states. The CCSS establish expectations through standards aligned with college and work expectations, in English/Language Arts and Mathematics, for students in grades K-12. Common Core is not a curriculum, rather it is a description of the knowledge and skill sets students are expected to achieve. Since the CCSS are not a curriculum, they do not establish how to teach; that task is left to be determined by individual states' curricula (p.25). The CCSS's purpose is to develop common standards in English/Language Arts and Mathematics for grades K-12 amongst each state in order to reach a common goal. The standards' memorandum affirmed the CCCS benefited states by (1) helping schools communicate to teachers and parents what students should achieve, (2) allowing curricula and textbooks to become aligned

with the standards, (3) developing professional educators based on identified needs and best practice, and by (4) creating an assessment system developed and implemented to measure and evaluate student performance based on the Common Core State Standards (Watt, 2009, p.23). The agreement also explained the process and structure for conducting the Common Core State Standards (p.23).

### **International Perspective**

Countries outside of the United States are outperforming American students, yet they spend less money per student (Tucker, 2011, p.1). Even though the United States contains the most researchers of education, a majority of them focus their studies solely on education within the U.S. because there seems to be the notion that Americans have little to learn from other countries (p.169). Why then are countries such as Shanghai, Finland, Japan, Singapore, and Canada outperforming the United States in education? These successful countries invest the funds allocated for education toward students who need the most help reaching high standards rather than making money available based on the wealth of the local community, as the United States does (p.8). Governments in these countries go to extensive lengths to ensure the best teachers are serving students, especially the disadvantaged ones, whereas in the United States it is the opposite.

Another reason why international countries have such high success rates in education compared to the United States is due to their aggressive research in

educational institutions. Japan, China, and Canada use the research they found to adopt and adapt in order to improve their educational system (Tucker, 2011, p.172). Through research, these countries search for information such as: what the country is trying to achieve, how it has gone about achieving it, what it would have done differently, what mistakes it made, how it addressed the mistakes, and which factors most account for its achievement ( p.173). By basing educational strategies on successful strategies already employed by leading countries, resources are not wasted on failing initiatives.

Almost all high-performing countries gauge key transition points in education through gateways (p.174). Gateway exams give students a strong incentive to engage themselves in more challenging courses as they are often used for admission into the next level of education. Because these exams are scored externally, students understand the only way of excelling is by meeting standards (p.175). Since the exams are of high quality, they cannot be prepared for; the only way to excel on the exam is to master the material. Gateway exams are designed based on national standards and therefore derived from a nationwide curriculum that teachers are instructed to teach toward (p.175). The curriculum is decided based on what topics should be taught at each grade level for every subject. This guarantees that students master the content that serves as a prerequisite for the following year. National curriculum in these succeeding countries goes beyond mathematics and language by covering content areas such as science, social studies, arts and music, and religion. As far as grading gateway exams, these countries prefer not providing computer scored tests, unlike the

United States. It is believed that computer scored tests fail to adequately measure the acquisition and skills of students that educators are most interested in (Tucker, 2011, p.177).

Educational achievements in Japan, Singapore, and Finland are also due to the upbringing of their teachers. Countries such as these hold teachers to much higher standards than the United States. For example, Finland requires primary school teachers to receive a Masters Degree in education as well as minor in two subject areas whose content is in the primary curriculum. Upper-grade teachers are required to major in the subject area they are teaching (p.185). Shanghai, another example, expects its teachers to receive an undergraduate degree in the subject they are going to teach (p.185). Tucker states, "Among all the industrialized countries, only the United States allows its teachers to teach subjects they have not been highly trained in" (p.186). The United States differs from countries like Finland and Shanghai in that the only requirement for a teacher is an education degree, but problems arise when teachers are relocated and asked to teach a subject area they may not be the strongest in (p.186). It is not reasonable for us to expect students to excel in these subject areas if our teachers are not prepared to teach them.

According to Sclafani (2008), Singapore's educational practices (high selectivity, deep support, career management, and strategic use of financial resources) could benefit the United States' education system (pp.8-11). Schools within the United States should have higher selectivity in that they decide who can enter and graduate from teacher preparation programs. If the United States wants their students to be high

performing, then their teachers need to be high performing as well. Although it would require rethinking current practices, implementing a system of support for new and continuing teachers by using an effective induction program could lower attrition rate by 50% (Sclafani, 2008, p.9). Another factor of Singapore's education not found in U.S. education is the working together of districts and universities. By working together, the district and university could align student observation and teacher opportunities with the district's goals and needs (p.10). Professional development could be provided to upcoming teachers within universities based on the current changes in curricula, allowing the teachers to be prepared in advance. Finally, the United States needs to require higher standards for teacher preparation programs, to compete with Singapore. Through career management, U.S. teachers can develop career tracks that are clearly documented, enabling them to focus on their career plan and encourage them to aspire and prepare for future competencies. Finally, none of these changes would be possible without focusing on financial resources, a major challenge in teachers' current retirement system. Compared to Singapore, the United States fails to give teachers the opportunity to move without losing state pension and hinders the chance to reap benefits if teaching is not their life long career (p.12). By adjusting the United States' outlook on education to align more similarly to Singapore's, the government could effectively transform the education system, putting the U.S. back at the top.

## **National Perspective**

The United States spends more per student than almost any other country, yet American students are only scoring average in reading and science and below average in mathematics (Tucker, 2011, p.6). Some educators argue that our low scores are due to immigration, but countries such as Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and Hong Kong all have immigration percentages higher than or equal to the United States and each outperform the U.S. in reading (p.8). Even the individual states that excel in the U.S. do not compare to the best performing countries. For example, Wisconsin, one of the best performing American states, performs substantially below Finland (p.8). The United States' low expectations of students are leading to low test results. By expecting less of our students, we allow them to become comfortable with achieving less.

At one point, the United States flourished due to Americans taking ideas from other countries and making them come to life on a scale that they could only imagine. The U.S. not only borrowed industrial ideas, but ideas on education as well (p.169). Since then, the United States has not adapted any of these ideas, one of the reasons we are falling behind in education.

Within the United States, each state has its own Department of Education (DOE), which regulates laws regarding finance, hiring school personnel, student attendance, curriculum, and number of years of mandatory education. Each state also has control over the material taught in schools as well as the requirements each student must meet. Vermont, Massachusetts, Oregon, Washington, and California each have unique

qualities to their educational systems and when compared contain both similarities and differences to one another.

## **Individual States and the Standards Movement**

### *Vermont*

The state of Vermont has standards in the following subject areas: Arts, English Language Arts/Literacy, Family and Consumer Science, Health Education, History and Social Sciences, Information Technology, Mathematics, Non-native (World) Languages, Physical Education, and Science. Even though Vermont has standards in a multitude of content areas, they use assessments that focus solely on Reading, Writing, Mathematics, and Science. To test these standards, Vermont uses assessments such as the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP), Smarter Balanced Assessment System, Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM), Vermont Alternate Assessment Portfolio (VTAAP) for Science, and National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). Vermont is one of the 50 states that has agreed to adopt the Common Core State Standards. As a result, Vermont's Agency of Education (AOE) has developed a *Standards and Assessment Implementation Guide*, designed to build on Vermont's Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities (Vermont Agency of Education, 2014). The gap between state standards and the content on standardized tests is an indication that schools may be focusing specifically on content tested rather than providing instruction to meet all of the state standards.

## *Massachusetts*

The current curriculum framework for Massachusetts contains standards in the following subjects: Arts, English Language Arts, Foreign Languages, Comprehensive Health, Mathematics, History and Social Science, Science and Technology/Engineering, and Vocational Technical Education Frameworks. Massachusetts assess these standards by the use of statewide assessments such as the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), the Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment (MEPA), and Certificate of Occupation Proficiency (COP) and Vocational Technical Competency Tracking System (VTCTS). These assessments only target English/Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science, even though the state provides standards for many other subject areas. Student Assessment Services also uses the following nation wide assessments: Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2013). Even these nation wide assessments lack focus on content areas other than Mathematics, Reading, and Science.



## *Oregon*

Oregon's Department of Education developed standards in Arts, Comprehensive Guidance and Counseling, Educational Technology, English Language Arts, Health, Mathematics, Oregon Skill Sets, Physical Education, Postsecondary CTE, Science, World Languages (Second Language), and Social Sciences. To test standards, the state administers statewide assessments such as Oregon Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (OAKS), Smarter Balanced Assessment, Kindergarten Assessment, OAKS Extended (Alternate) Assessment, English Language Proficiency Assessment (ELPA), Essential Skills Assessment, Local Performance Assessment, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and Preliminary SAT (PSAT) (Oregon Department of Education, 2014). The assessments, both state wide and nation wide, that Oregon uses to test state standards only test content in Reading, Writing, Mathematics, and Science, leaving standards in other content areas untested.

## *Washington*

Washington's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) tests students in grades three through eight in the subject areas of Reading, Writing, Math, and Science. Washington used to assess students in these four subjects using the Measurements of Student Progress (MSP), but now uses MSP to solely test students in Science, until the state adopts the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS). Beginning the 2014-2015 school year, Washington state will use Smarter Balanced

Tests to assess subjects included in the Common Core State Standards: English/Language Arts and Math (State of Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2014). Although Washington has standards in subject areas such as the Arts, Educational Technology, English Language Arts, Environment and Sustainability, Health and Fitness, HIV and Sexual Health Education, International Education, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, and World Languages, the standardized tests used throughout the state only focus on Reading, Writing, Mathematics, and Science.

### *California*

The state of California currently has standards in English/Language Arts, Mathematics, English Language Development, Career Technical Education, Health Education, History-Social Science, Model School Library Standards, Physical Education, Science, Visual and Performing Arts, and World Language. California uses the following assessments to test students: California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP), California English Language Development Test (CELDT), California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE), California High School Proficiency Examination (CHSPE), High School Equivalency Tests (HSET), National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Physical Fitness Testing (PFT), Smarter Balanced Assessment System, and Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR), all of which fail to test content outside of Mathematics, English Language Arts, and Science (California Department of Education, 2014).

Overall, these five states administer assessments focused solely on Reading, Writing, Mathematics, and Science. Even though each individual state provides state standards in other content areas, promoting necessary skills such as critical thinking and problem solving, this content is over looked on the standardized tests implemented. This begs the question of whether or not students are even being taught the content standardized tests do not focus on, even though states provide standards for these subject areas and skills. If the content is being taught, what is the quality of instruction if there is no final evaluation?

### **Standardized Testing**

As the standards movement gained momentum, reform was implemented through standardized tests because of their ability to measure quality education as well as set a foundation for curriculum and instructional practices. Standardized tests began to fulfill a dual purpose: measure student achievement while holding teachers, schools, districts, and states accountable. The results of these standardized tests are utilized as a way of ranking and labeling schools based on student success rates. Test results are published for the public to see often creating an atmosphere of extreme pressure for educators to increase scores.

Although the tests may generate stress within the classroom, proponents of standardized testing feel that educational standards are essential for improvement in education. Advocates of standardized testing believe the tests are a relatively inexpensive way of measuring whether students have met the standards set by the

government (Moon, Brighton, Jarvis & Hall, 2007, p.3). Not only are these tests the cheapest solution, but they are also rapidly implemented and produce visible results (Lin, 2002, p.43). By holding all students to comparable standards on the same high quality content, the government can provide a fair education for all students.

However, critics question whether higher test scores originate from an increased focus on teaching to the test as way of preparation or whether they indeed mirror improvement in student knowledge. Instructional adaptations such as teaching toward the test have critics skeptical of the validity of standardized test results (p.45). Testing used to be thought of as beneficial to education in a multitude of ways, but recent studies debate whether improvements in test scores actually signal improvement (Herman & Golan, 1990, p.2). Due to the pressure of raising scores, teachers have been increasing preparation time and gearing their daily lessons to relate to the objectives on the tests, inevitably causing standardized tests to become an inaccurate measure of learning (Moon, et. all, 2007, p.4). Some studies blame standardized tests for the narrowness of content, their lack of correlation with curricula, their neglect of higher thinking, and the limited relevance and meaningfulness of their format (Shepard, 1990, pp.12-14). Research has shown that students triumph on standardized tests they have prepared for, but fail to transfer their knowledge to another standardized test on the same content (Amrein & Berliner, 2003; Roderick & Engel, 2001). Even Ravitch (2010) states,

“When teachers focus too narrowly on the test students are about to take, whatever they learn is likely to be aligned with that test and is not likely to generalize well to other tests of the same subject or to performance in real life” (p.160).

This forces critics to believe that increases in test scores are artificial and students are not acquiring knowledge about specific content area, but rather knowledge specific to a particular test.

Ideally, assessment should be a guide for teachers and students based on strengths and weaknesses, in turn creating a valuable learning experience. Assessments tend to motivate students and teachers to improve based on their academic needs. With standardized testing though, striving to improve does not always result in receiving a higher test score, just as a higher test score may not reflect academic improvement. In addition to the issue of validity, critics feel as though accountability for standardized tests have pressured schools to narrow their curriculum at the cost of broader student learning (Diamond & Spillane, 2004; Hoffman, Assaf, & Paris, 2001).

“Increasingly, standardized tests are being used to hold teachers, principals, and district superintendents accountable” (Monsaas, 1991, p.4). Popham (1987) uses the term “high stakes” to describe these standardized tests because of the consequences for students and the use of the tests as a ranking system for schools and districts. Assaf believes “these consequences are considered high stakes because schools, teachers, and students can be either punished or rewarded according to their test score” (Assaf, 2006, p.159).

## **Impact of Standardization**

Controversy over whether standardized tests accurately reflect classroom instruction and student learning has become more prominent throughout the years. Standardized “tests are one size fits all. Test items are not always aligned with instruction, and there seems to be a mismatch between what is taught and what is tested” (Popham, as cited in Ballard, 2008, p.563). According to Ballard, standardized tests include math content, verbal or spatial content, and content requiring prior knowledge.

Standardized tests are generally used to provide data helpful toward making decisions to better educate students. Although many teachers use the data from the test results to determine the route of their instruction, most teachers agree that they only use the standardized test results as a small piece of their overall assessment. (Ballard, 2008, p.563)

Some educators feel standardized testing is unfair especially in the way the questions are worded. The tests also pressure students to perform at unrealistic expectations. If students do not meet these expectations, they often become frustrated. The pressure to perform well is due to the amount of time preparing for these tests. The tests are administered in a miniscule time frame when compared to the amount of time spent preparing for them. Due to these factors, standardized tests often do not reflect students’ abilities. If the standardized tests are administered at grade level, they will show an inaccurate representation of students who have a lower instructional level.

Although students may not perform at grade level, does not mean that the instruction they received was not effective, nor does it prove that they did not progress.

“Teaching to the test is as unavoidable as a force of nature, as inevitable as gravity. And the choice between good instructional practice and good test scores is really no choice at all, since those who opt not to bow to the pressure will reap harsh consequences under tough accountability systems” (Jerald, 2006, p.1).

According to W. James Popham (1987), two different ways to teach toward the test are: curriculum teaching and item teaching. Curriculum teaching focuses on an entire skill set or body of knowledge even though the standardized test may only ask questions on a limited sample of the knowledge in order to assess students' understanding of the topic. On the other hand, item teaching narrows the curriculum. This type of teaching teaches toward duplicates of test questions that are most likely on the actual test, thus teaching only specific pieces of information. Item teaching is unethical in that it is a misrepresentation of what students really know; it teaches students how to memorize the answer to a specific type of question rather than knowledge on the topic as a whole. Popham also believes that teaching toward the test cancels the validity of the test specifically due to item teaching. Teaching toward the test goes beyond test validity though.

Jerald (2006) provides the example: one study found that in a district that relied heavily on item drilling, 83% of students could answer a multiple-choice question written as “87-24.” However, only 68% of the students could correctly answer “Subtract 24 from 87.” This is because students are taught to specifically answer one type of question. Being taught to answer specific questions is not helping the students develop problem-solving skills, nor does it help them solve similar questions gauging understanding of

the same content. By teaching toward the test, teachers are not teaching the students the material they need to know, but instead are teaching them how to answer a question. This type of education does not prepare the students for the future because students will not always be dealt the same questions or scenarios throughout life. Teachers need to teach students information as well as how to think and apply that information (Jerald, 2006, p.2).

Frank Levy and Richard Murnane, as cited in Jerald (2006), warn that all jobs, specifically higher paying jobs, are more and more requiring fewer rote and routine skills and ever more complex skills (p.3). Levy, Murnane, and other economists argue that young people denied these advanced skills will be at a tremendous disadvantage in the changing economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (p.3). Educators who settle for drill and kill instruction will be trading long term benefits for short term gains if they do not at least balance instruction with more complex assignments.

Many experts also feel that some forms of test preparation can be beneficial and somewhat necessary for student success. For example, if students are unfamiliar with the test format or are unsure of how to answer a specific test question, the test may not gauge their true understanding. The student could know the information and just not know how to provide the answer correctly. Teaching students the format of the test and how to take it is very different from teaching toward the test.

“A little teaching about test format goes a long way, and engaging in more test preparation than necessary can depress scores, since it takes time away from the kinds of classroom assignments that help students master the content the test will assess” (p.5).



## **Impact on Curriculum**

Many educators worry that item teaching and other test preparation strategies are taking over more weeks and months prior to testing. Students “are losing a week of instruction to testing, which is bad enough, but the test week comes on top of two or more weeks spent teaching kids how to take the test effectively” (Jerald, 2006, p.2). Others worry that test preparation begins during the beginning of the year with “drill and kill” strategies which replace understanding and learning with memorization.

Resnick and Zurrawsky, as cited in Jerald, along with many observers feel that drill focused teaching deters opportunities to teach students more advanced cognitive skills such as problem solving and communication. “Accountability and standardized tests need not be in conflict with good instruction” (p.4). Jerald thinks Resnick is wrong to assume that standardized tests require teachers to ignore the incorporation of higher level skills. “To the contrary, the evidence indicates that assignments calling for more authentic intellectual work actually improve students’ scores on conventional standardized tests” (p.4). In other words, simplifying instruction in order to teach toward the test is a front. It is promising understanding and learning that is not truly there. “The choice between good instruction and good test scores is a false one” (p.4). So why then are so many teachers failing to provide good instruction in fear of not attaining passing test scores?

In order to raise standardized test scores, many teachers are implementing a more “systematic, low-level, drill and skill building instruction” rather than an “integrated, meaning-based approach” (Pennington in Assaf, 2006, p.1).

The significance of standardized test scores is becoming “more prevalent in the structure of the classroom instruction and the operation of schools due to the pressure on educators and students from various levels of authority” (Ballard, 2006, p.560). Research shows that classroom instruction is more frequently being adapted to meet the content found on standardized tests. Not only are classroom instruction and standardized tests becoming more aligned, but instruction is beginning to focus on test-content and test taking skills rather than subject area content. Standardized tests are limiting the scope of the classroom instruction and education of our students in undesirable ways (p.564).

Teaching students methods to solve problems on the tests was found to be ineffective in teaching the actual material or teaching the skill of problem solving. “Standardized tests have changed the pace and content of instruction, where relentless drill practice for students is instilled” (p.564).

Regardless of consequences or rewards of testing, the implementation of standardized testing has changed teaching in ways that many teachers feel negatively affects education and the quality of instruction provided to the students.

### **Impact on Student Achievement**

“Using basic skills to perform complex intellectual tasks actually helps students better internalize such skills and apply them across a wide range of tasks, including standardized tests” (Jerald, 2006, p.4). One particular instructional strategy will not

meet every need of a student. It requires an innovative teacher to include a variety of instructional strategies to guarantee that students develop basic skills that can be applied to complex tasks, which will be present in the real world.

There are factors other than teacher's instruction that affect student performance on standardized tests. According to Ballard (2008), many researchers are questioning how influential external factors are on accountability of schools and teachers as well as student achievement. Thrupp, Mansell, Hawksworth, & Harold (2003) "found that educators were adamant that they could only be held accountable for student achievement to a limited extent because of the impact of family background" (Thrupp, Mansell, Hawksworth in Ballard, 2008, p.562). Many teachers and principals felt that assessment of schools would never be completely fair in that it assumes that the effectiveness of a teacher or principal can be determined from a single test score which fails to include influential external factors. According to Abrams, Pedulla, and Madaus, another factor that influences standardized test scores is the motivation of the individual student. "Pressure on students to perform well on tests can also increase anxiety and stress while taking the test" (Ballard, 2008, p.564).

Factors that affect a student's standardized test result are the student's individual motivation, the socioeconomic status and parental level of education as well as home and family background. These factors are uncontrollable by the teacher, yet they have a major impact on the results of the standardized tests that teachers and administrators are judged on. The test not only fails to mention or include these outside factors, but the factors also "cause increased levels of anxiety, stress, and fatigue," all of which

have detrimental effects on student performance (Abrams, Pedulla, and Madaus, as cited in Ballard, 2008, p.563).

### **Change in Focus of Teaching**

“The way in which accountability measures occur impacts teachers and students. Educational accountability for teachers, schools, and students appears directed toward identifying those not achieving under highly prescriptive standards as failures and prompts an even more strong-handed, top-down decision-making process that tends to further exacerbate the problem” (Bullough et al. 2003, as cited in Ballard, 2008, p.565).

Ballard believes there is still controversy when determining between what makes a valid means of evaluation and what is considered a reliable measurement of student achievement. Majority of the time, teachers are held accountable based on a single standardized test score, leading to another disconnect between instruction and content on standardized test. Often times, content areas not on the test are ignored in order to match instruction to the information on the test.

In order for standardized tests to accurately measure student achievement, the tests need to reflect classroom instruction (Ballard, 2008, p.566). In addition, a variety of assessments need to be administered in order to properly reflect the achievement and progress of the student.

In general, most teachers feel they teach toward the test during their classroom instruction. “Teaching related to the test includes helping students know the content on the tests, how to properly answer certain types of questions, and practice test taking skills during the school year” (p.572). Teachers are pressured to produce acceptable

test scores and therefore feel the need to teach toward the test. Their main reasons for teaching toward the tests were to generate good scores on the state-mandated states and for the fact that the test scores are published, creating competition within and among schools, school districts, and states within the nation (Ballard, 2008, p.572).

Lin (2003) “believes that by attaching high stakes to test results in an accountability system leads to a narrowing of the instructional focus of teachers and principals” (Linn, as cited in Ballard, 2008, p.572). Teachers are more recently placing a heavier emphasis on the material assessed on standardized tests than on content that is considered important, but may not be on the test. Teachers also feel as though there is too much at stake for them to not teach toward the test in order for their students to perform well (Ballard, 2008, p.573).

Cankoy and Tut, as cited in Ballard (2008), believe teaching to the test not only produces unproductive and uncritical students, but also provides misleading information (p.564). Flores and Clark believe increased concerns about standardized tests are causing teachers to become less responsive and adaptive to students’ needs and instead are focusing more on skills management based on test objectives (Assaf, 2006, p.158). “Teachers are losing trust in their professional beliefs and abilities and their instructional creativity when faced with testing pressures” (Bomer, McCracken & McCracken, as cited in Assaf, 2006, p.158).

Assaf (2006) conducted a research study in which she goes into detail about a specific teacher. The school district the teacher taught in established a rigorous benchmark testing program that required each student in the district to take grade-level

and subject specific benchmarks in order to identify their needs before taking the state's standardized test. Students were continually reassessed with benchmark tests based on their needs, multiple times prior to taking the standardized test. In one academic year, students accumulated 12 full days worth of benchmark assessments prior to taking the standardized test. "Several teachers shared that they were overwhelmed with the districts accountability policies and had ultimately changed their instruction in order to meet the demands of preparing their students for the test" (Assaf, 2006, p.162).

The specific teacher Assaf focused on was referred to as Marsha. As Marsha experienced increased testing pressures, she found it difficult to stay true to her beliefs about instruction. Reluctantly, Marsha began focusing on reinforcing test skills necessary to pass the test. Marsha explained that she felt "anxious and frustrated" (p.162). She stated she felt "torn between what these students need to do in order to succeed as real readers and what they need to do to pass the test" (p.162). Assaf explained that Marsha was pressured into teaching toward the test in order to help her students, but she feared limiting how the students perceived school by focusing on testing. Marsha stated that she noticed teachers pressuring students to do well because the teachers were being pressured by the principal and school district. Most of her students felt that once testing ended, the learning process was over. One student stated, "We won't have to work that much anymore because we won't have to take the [standardized test]" (p.163). Marsha believed that her role as a teacher depended on the needs of her students. Marsha would meet with other teachers to discuss student progress, share appropriate materials, and conduct workshops. However, once

Marsha's school ratings dropped, she had to adjust the focus of her instruction. Her job responsibilities changed as she now "spent all of her time reviewing benchmark test scores in order to identify which objectives students needed to relearn in order to pass the test" (Assaf, 2006, p.164). Marsha was required to maintain lists of students needing additional test preparation. Rather than design groups based on instructional levels, Marsha created groups based on test scores.

One teacher decided to leave the profession because she was "too overwhelmed by the testing pressures" (p.162). She explained that she "used to have fun, but this year there [was] too much pressure, too many tests, and that's all we [did]" (p.162).

## **Leadership Role**

Changes to the role of school principal during recent history have expanded the duty of the principal, demanding more from the administrator. Principals have shifted from a managerial leadership role to a more instructional function. Through this shift though, many principals lack the fundamental professional development support necessary (Prytula, Noonan & Hellsten, 2013, p.2). Because of the lack of support, many principals are deeming themselves unfit to manage the high expectations (Noonan & Renihan, 2006, p.9). The pressures of meeting such high expectations with little support has administrators settling for a less than perfect performance, in an attempt to please more colleagues above and below their level (Hallinger, 2003, p.334).

The leadership role within schools has evolved considerably since the role was first established in the early 1900s. Originally, an administrator's role was non-existent; teachers carried out the functions necessary in the schoolhouse. As decades passed, the role of a colleague developed further into a school board representative (Tyack & Hansot, as cited in Prytula, Noonan & Hellsten, 2013, p.3). Today, social and political forces have consumed the instructional leadership within schools compelling principals to no longer consider themselves educators (Prytula, Noonan & Hellsten, 2013, p.2). As accountability reforms appear more frequently in schools, administrators are currently replacing their managerial role with a more instructional based leadership. Prytula, Noonan, and Hellsten (2013) feel the struggle to shift roles is so great of a "challenge that the shift from principal as manager to principal as instructional leader has not yet been effectively made" (p.3).

In addition to the traditional role of the principal, the function of the administrator is constantly being extended further as a result of high expectations. Society is expecting those holding a leadership position to be responsive to multiple demands (p.4). One of the most recent demands is the encouragement of data usage. Principals are expected to provide their staff with resources that support the data representing students' performance. Furthermore, a major component of instructional based leadership is the application of modeling, mentoring, and monitoring (p.5). Basically, a principal needs to be able to model instruction, promote the understanding of adequate instruction, and recognize effective instruction when it is taking place. The importance



of these duties is for the leader to remain informed and aware of student learning, progress, and achievement (Prytula, Noonan & Hellsten, 2013, p.6).

Instructional leadership demands that the principal understands the specific strategies for teaching, learning, and assessing that takes place within his or her school. Assessment leadership, a more specific type of instructional leadership, “is the practice of focusing on learning and the accomplishment of learning rather than on teaching and the supervision of teaching” (p.8). Assessment leadership also aligns with accountability in that it focuses on the development of higher order thinking and utilizes both standardized assessments and teacher-made assessments to determine student achievement (p.8). Prytula, Noonan, and Hellsten explained “that exceptional principals are those who are assessment literate and can move from being focused on teachers and teaching to being focused on the students and their learning” (p.8).

### **Leadership Role in Assessment**

In a study conducted, participants reported that standardized assessment had an effect on their role as an administrator. Those who reported a positive effect explained that the pressures to improve instruction resulted in an increase in the utilization of data. With the increase in data usage, teachers were able to set appropriate learning goals and therefore improve the overall education of students (p.13). Standardized tests encouraged teachers become further absorbed in the curriculum, focusing on the standards that students seemed to need more practice with based on the data results.

For example, “participants reported standardized assessments provided the catalyst to take a deeper look at curriculum indicators and outcomes, and to plan to improve upon those outcomes” (Prytula, Noonan & Hellsten, 2013, p.13).

On the other hand, the remaining participants reported negative effects on their role as leader. Aside from the additional administrative tasks, the added pressures from high expectations became an annoyance. Many administrators began feeling the burden of standardized testing and the lack of time provided for preparation (p.13). Not only are principals held accountable for the students’ assessment scores, but they are also the first source to relay the data to the staff. Most importantly, principals felt that “assessments drove decision making, priority setting, planning, and instruction” (p.15). Administrators also acknowledged that standardized assessments were the lead components in determining discussion topics, professional learning communities (PLCs), and collaboration (p.15). School leaders felt as though the assessments were creating an atmosphere in which teachers were teaching to the test.

## **Role of Teachers**

According to Vandevoort, Amrein-Beardsley, and Berliner, the quality of the teacher has the greatest effect on student achievement. (Ballard, 2008, p.560). Vandevoort found that students taught by National Board Certified Teachers (NBCT) learned more than students of teachers who were not National Board Certified. Increasing the number of teachers who are National Board Certified will directly impact

student achievement. Student achievement levels will rise in schools across the country. According to Ballard, some policy makers feel that having more nationally certified teachers employed in a school district will be more cost effective for student achievement because teachers make the personal decision to become certified (Ballard, 2008, p.561).

“Teachers need to become familiar with current research on student achievement and network with colleagues to learn more about teaching expertise” (p.562). Regardless of the evaluation tools a district implements, it is the responsibility of the teachers to remain informed of current educational practices and be aware of the effect their delivered instruction has on their students.

Teachers are responsible for meeting all of their students’ needs and finding ways to provide each student an opportunity to a fair education. It is also the teacher’s duty to participate in professional development activities in order to satisfy this responsibility. “Practices such as differentiated instruction, data driven instruction and identifying areas of weakness in students are crucial to developing the quality of classroom teachers” (p.562). Differentiated instruction is necessary in order to meet the variety of needs of each student in the classroom. Using test data, schools can determine students’ needs or the areas they struggle with and provide instruction to help the students’ performance. Teachers also need to keep in mind the external factors that may affect their students; factors such as socioeconomic status and the level of education attained by the parents or guardians impacts a student’s achievement. When those external factors are controlled, the teacher has the most

impact on student achievement. A teacher's job is to help the students make the same achievements regardless of student background.

Teachers are starting to feel as though their expertise within education is no longer being used to its full potential due to the fact that they are being pressured into focusing solely on standardized test content. Many of these teachers feel teaching toward the test is contradictory to their belief of a genuine education. “ The implementation of the test may lead to a de-professionalization of teachers “ (Abrams et al., 2003, p.20).

Just as students are assessed using ongoing assessments, teachers must also be continuously evaluated on a variety of skills and expertise as a form of accountability for student achievement. Popham believes that “what teachers really need are assessment instruments that measure worthwhile skills or significant bodies of knowledge. Then teachers have to show the world that they can instruct children so those children make striking pre instructional to post instructional progress” (Popham, 2005, p.315). If educators are in belief that standardized tests should not be used to determine the quality of instruction, then they need to be able to provide other credible pieces of evidence that display the quality of instruction (p.315).

According to Ballard, many teachers believe that a student's effort, drive, daily attitude, and personal decisions are the individual student's responsibility. It is also the student's responsibility to apply the information he/she has learned and to make the decision about his/her performance. The responsibility of the teacher is taking the time to teach students the content necessary to perform well, to provide the tools for

students to show improvement over time, and to thoroughly prepare the students for standardized tests (Ballard, 2008, p.574).

### **Standardized Testing and Teacher Practice**

The greatest impact of standardized testing on teaching is through teachers' instructional plans. Teachers have reported designing instructional plans focused on standardized tests, teaching toward test content and test objectives, as well as sequencing their instructional curriculum based on the standardized tests (Moon et al., 2007; Herman & Golan, 1990). Although the test does allow for teachers to set instructional goals based on the students' results and identify gaps in instructional practices, these benefits are overshadowed by the time spent on preparing for the test (Costigan, 2002; Herman, Abedi, & Golan, 1994; Mehrens, 1998). Time set aside for test preparation is rising due to the pressure of raising test scores. Many teachers feel as though standardized tests have provoked high levels of stress for both teachers and students. Finally, standardized tests have teachers believing their sense of professionalism is negatively affected by the obligation to implement standards necessary to pass the tests (Moon, et. all, 2007, p.xiv).

## **Achievement Gap**

Milner explains that Ladson-Billings challenged educational researchers when explaining disparities that exist between diverse groups within education. Disparities including:

- “• Race/ethnicity: Black/African-American and Brown/Latino/Hispanic students tend to score lower than White/European-American students on standardized exams
- Socioeconomic status: Students from lower socio-economic statuses tend to score lower than those from higher socio-economic statuses on standardized exams
- Language: Students whose first language is not English tend to struggle more than native English speakers in their academic courses” (Milner, n.d, p.3).

Rather than aiming efforts to close the achievement gap, Ladson-Billings (2006) feels educators should focus on repaying the educational debt owed to our students. Instead of merging a gap based on standardized testing scores, educators should concentrate on providing students, at both urban and non urban schools, an equal education in which students deserve (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Irvine (2010) argues that filling gaps other than the achievement gap should be educators' priority. These gaps include:

“the teacher quality gap; the teacher training gap; the challenging curriculum gap; the school funding gap; the digital divide gap; the wealth and income gap; the employment opportunity gap; the affordable house gap; the health care gap; the nutrition gap; the school integration gap; and the quality of childcare gap” (Irvine, 2010, p.xii).

When educators address the gaps present within the education system, student performance can improve. Merging the achievement gap/educational debt between minority and majority children is correlated to high quality teaching (Meece, 2010, p.36). Although the goal is to obtain high quality teaching within the classroom, as of now standardization is the central reform effort “aimed to decrease and eventually eliminate [these] achievement gaps” (Milner, n.d, p.5).

## **Urban Education**

Urban schools pose an increasing number of problems for their students. Students within urban schools are often absent, tend to drop out of school before graduation, and ultimately perform lower than their nonurban peers. Aside from the students, teachers are also ill prepared due to the lack of necessary materials and resources available at urban schools. Teachers in these schools use whole group instruction, through lectures or worksheets, in order to manipulate large class size, hindering students from being active learners. “This highly prevalent type of instruction in urban schools was characterized by Haberman (1991) as a ‘pedagogy of poverty,’ in which there are few opportunities for developing higher-order thinking skills” (Gottfried, 2014, p.774).

As a result of this “pedagogy of poverty,” students fail to gain necessary skills within the classroom, and therefore achieve lower scores on assessments compared to students enrolled in nonurban schools. “Pedagogy of poverty” ultimately faces

nonurban schools with the challenge to overcome more obstacles with fewer resources compared to nonurban schools. As troubling as the pedagogy may seem, “persistent and widespread differences nonetheless continue to exist in the access, retention, and achievement of urban students within and between districts” (Gottfried, 2014, p.774). Take for example the *Abbott v. Burke* cases in New Jersey which focused on the inequities between urban schools and schools across the rest of the state. The cases established students in urban schools were provided an inadequate education (p.775). Historically, courts would mediate with these state issues with hopes to narrow the achievement gap by better equalizing school resources and establishing equity and/or adequacy (p.775).

Gottfried believes that addressing the issue of equity is critical for urban schools, “as they encompass approximately 25% of all school-age students, 25% of all poverty students, 30% of all English language learners, and nearly 50% of all minority children” (p.775). Because urban public schools contain more impoverished, non-English speaking, and minority students than the average public schools, the challenge to merge the achievement gap is that much greater.

When focusing on the assessment of students in these schools, teachers’ tests are no longer the only form of accountability. Although teachers’ tests were thought to be a merger of the materials taught and materials assessed, they were not filling the achievement gap and were considered flawed in certain aspects. The tests were thought to reflect the individual teacher’s beliefs, both benefitting and/or hindering an individual student’s success. Not only would the assessment be biased to the teacher’s



prejudices, but there was no way to ensure that tests on the same material amongst different schools, across various states, were comparable.

In order to overcome the shortcomings of teacher produced tests, a form of standardized testing emerged as a means to make testing “fair.” “As standardized tests have become entwined with social and political issues such as equality and educational standards and control, their use has changed” (Allard, 1990, p.326). While the tests originally measured student’s individual achievement, state governments have more recently used the tests as tools to “improve, control and standardized the process and outcomes of education” (p.326). Essentially, because both educators and the public have accepted test results as the central measure of achievement, standardized tests are now the main means of accountability within education.

The prevalence of standardized testing within the last decade is in part due to the pedagogical and financial troubles within urban schools (Ascher, 1990, p.i). The tests are used as a way to determine what students in urban schools are learning, while also imposing the improvement of learning on teachers and students, sometimes without the necessary resources. Many educators are more recently arguing that these standardized tests are getting out of hand. Gardner (1988) feels the cognitive and intellectual styles assessed by the standardized tests are no better predictors of college performance than grades on varying forms of informal assessments. Other testing experts believe “our society has embraced the formal testing mode to an excessive degree” (Gardner, as cited in Ascher, 1990, p.ii). Darling-Hammond argues that other

forms of accountability could better aid improvement amongst schools (Darling-Hammond, as cited in Ascher, 1990, p.ii).

Despite the decline in the gap of achievement between urban students and their privileged counterparts, standardized tests reveal that students attending urban schools remain substantially below students attending other advantaged schools (p.1). Schools located in cities where the majority of the families are on welfare or are unemployed, experience pressure to improve the low achievement scores of their students.

The hope of standardized tests in urban schools was to encourage teachers, students, and administration to raise their standards. Since tests can be imposed top-down and are an efficient way of standardizing diverse settings, standardized testing became a dominate indicator of whether schools were following procedures and meeting standards (p.3). The pressure to meet these standards in urban schools forces a tighter curriculum. For example, material not found on the tests was less prevalent in the instruction and became replaced by the material and subjects assessed on the tests.

Education, specifically in urban schools, “serving low-income, linguistic and cultural minority students,” has relied heavily on standardized tests, which inevitably narrows the curriculum and intensifies failure rates (p.2). “While both the form and content of these tests have increasingly driven curriculum, students’ scores have also become a major influence” on factors of education (p.2). Even with the flaws surrounding standardized testing, educators hope that “performance-based assessments will support a richer, more open ended curriculum and more accurately

assess the skills of low-income minority students whose gifts and needs are diverse” (Ascher, 1990, p.4).

### **Diversity of Student Achievement**

Due to the fact that America is a melting pot, full of diverse students, the demographic profile of public schools within the United States has changed overtime. Regardless of demographics though, educators have both a legal and ethical commitment to provide equal opportunities to all students, including students of diverse or low-income backgrounds.

Since the 1990s, increases in segregation of schools have become more common. “This increase is due to de facto neighborhood segregation, urban area demographics, and an increasing tendency of courts and the executive branch to cease enforcement of existing integration orders” (Clayton, 2011, p.673). The increase of segregation is a consequence of the changing demographics within the United States.

Take for example the 2000 Census, which illustrates the exponential growth of the Hispanic population within the United States. The rapid growth of Hispanics has caused Hispanic enrollment in public schools to triple within the last 50 years (p.673). Such accelerated growth is the result of high birth rates and increased immigration (p.674). Similarly, “the Black student population has increased by 30% and the White student population decreased by 17%” (p.674).

As educators explore issues regarding the demographics of schools and districts, the implications for students attending these diversified schools becomes an important facet to consider (Clayton, 2011, p.674). Researchers “must examine whether diversity has an impact on academic achievement ... and whether there are other social, economic, and academic benefits” (p.674).

Borman et al. (2004) further examined the issue based on FCAT (Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test) performances.

“For purposes of this study, [he] defined schools based on ethnic composition as Black segregated (Black enrollment exceeds by more than 15% of average for district), integrated (Black enrollment within 15% of average for district), or White segregated (Black enrollment more than 15% below average for district)” (Borman et al., as cited in Clayton, 2011, p.675).

The study found that White segregated schools scored higher than both Black segregated and integrated schools. However, the integrated schools were only slightly lower than the White segregated schools, implying that “for White students there may not be a significant difference in terms of attending a White segregated or integrated school” (Clayton, 2011, p.675) On the other hand though, Black students “clearly benefitted from attending an integrated school” (p.675). The researchers also noted “both [the] instructional quality and academic expectations were lower at the Black segregated schools” (p.675).

Researchers McKowan and Weinstein (2008) “found that teachers demonstrated lower expectations for African Americans and Latino students with similar records of achievement than for children of European American and Asian American descent and that this teacher action negatively affected student achievement” (p.690). Just as

diversity affects students' achievement, educators cannot disregard the effect poverty has on education. Schools in which there is little diversity and are majorly made up of minority students, tend to accumulate high levels of poverty. Statistically speaking, "in 2001-2002, 43% of all U.S. schools contained less than 10% Black and Latino students. Of these highly concentrated White schools, only 15% had more than half of their students eligible for free/reduced price lunch" (Clayton, 2011, p.675). On the contrary, "88% of schools with high concentrations of minority students had more than half of their students eligible for free/reduced price lunch" (p.675). Orfield and Lee (2004) show the inevitability of students coming from an impoverished neighborhood attending a school of high poverty and/or high minority.

When comparing the two issues, segregation and poverty, Rumberger and Palardy (2005) found that poverty has a greater effect on student performance than the demographics of the school. In a different study, Entwisle and Alexander (1992) found that segregation was the most significant factor in African American students' test results. As a result, students of diverse backgrounds "face triple the challenge characterized by individual poverty, school-level poverty, and school-level segregation" (Clayton, 2011, p.676).

More and more schools are adjusting their enrollment of low-income students and mixed-income students in an attempt to raise achievement scores (Potter, 2013, p.39). Through socioeconomic integration, schools can effectively benefit students through "having high-achieving peers, an engaged community of parents, and high-quality teachers" (p.39). Generally, students' academic achievement is largely affected

by their socioeconomic background (Potter, 2013, p.39). Not only do their own backgrounds affect achievement, but so do the backgrounds of their surrounding peers. For example, “poor students in mixed-income schools do better than poor students in high-poverty schools” (p.39).

According to the Coleman Report, the socioeconomic structure of the student body was found to be the most prominent predictor of achievement (p.39). Another study “found that students of all socioeconomic statuses, races, ethnicities, and grade levels were likely to [perform better] if they attended socioeconomically and racially integrated schools” (p.39). Potter argues socioeconomic integration presents an improvement of student achievement due to the fact that mixed-income schools are more likely to provide students with tools in which achievement is fostered (p.40). But, “despite the evidence of their advantages, socioeconomically integrated schools are not the norm in the United States” (p.40). Majority low-income traditional public schools in the United States consist of 65% low-income students (p.40).

The diversity present in schools has become an obstacle that educators are making an effort to manage. Numerous adequate, diverse, low-income students are not reaching the levels of achievement they are capable of. National and state data on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) tests disclose that educators are moving too few students, specifically students from diverse and low-income backgrounds, to advanced levels of achievement (Olszewski-Kubilius & Clarenback, 2014, p.104). Olszewski-Kubilius and Clarenback feel as though educators “on numerous levels of student achievement, ...are doing a poor job of moving capable

students into the highest levels of achievement” (Olszewski-Kubilius & Clarenback, 2014, p.104).

For example, in 2011, 11% of White students who took the NAEP eighth grade mathematics exam, achieved advanced levels, while only 2% of Black students and 3% of Hispanic students achieved such levels (p.104). Another example analyzing scores on the twelfth grade NAEP mathematics exams shows an even greater disparity. In 2009, such a small number of Black, Hispanic, and low-income students reached an advanced level of achievement that the amount rounded to 0% (p.104). There is clearly an issue within our educational system when students fail to perform at the advanced levels they are capable of achieving (p.104).

Diverse students are falling behind their White peers despite their ability to perform at similar levels. Reardon (2008) “found that initially high-achieving Black students fall behind their White peers between kindergarten and fifth grade at a rate twice as fast as do initially low-achieving students” (p.104). The cause of the diverse students falling behind may be due to the lack of appropriate courses and/or resources offered to students within schools. For example,

“while 55% of high schools offer calculus, only 29% of high schools with the highest enrollments of African American and Hispanic students offer this course. The percentages for physics are similar (66% vs. 40%). The percentages for Algebra II are not as disparate (82% vs. 65%), but overall these data present a picture of unequal access to courses needed” (p.104).

Often times Black, Hispanic, and low-income students are excluded from higher education programs. “Black and Hispanic students are disproportionately underrepresented by more than 50% in these educational opportunities” (p.104). Not

only are students in “high-poverty, high-minority, and low-performing schools” (Clayton, 2011, p.676) not provided the proper tools to achieve success, but they also lack a well-qualified teacher (p.676).

The data provided reveals the restrictions diverse students face when seeking to “develop the skills, habits of mind, and content mastery needed to achieve at high levels and move on to challenging post secondary options and careers that meet students’ abilities and interests as well as the nation’s needs” (Olszewski-Kubilius & Clarenback, 2014, p.104).

It is not uncommon for educators to expect that English language learners, impoverished students, and students who are below advanced achievement are not prepared for curriculum requiring creative thinking skills (p.106). Inappropriately, the abilities “that students of color, those living in poverty, and English language learners possess are often seen as substandard or not as essential” (Milner, n.d, p.6). However, Olszewski-Kubilius and Clarenback mention “that providing a high powered, enriched curriculum and scaffolding for advanced thinking and questioning skills – rather than remediation and direct teaching – was successful in raising the academic achievement of learners of varying ability and backgrounds” (Olszewski-Kubilius & Clarenback, 2014, p.106).

Fostering an educational environment, in which deficit thinking about diverse students is rejected, is essential to providing opportunities of high achievement to all students. If educators want to help students develop their learning, they must recognize that some students will attend schools with previously highly developed skills, while



other students have the potential to reach these high levels of development, but have yet to demonstrate it through advanced achievement. Although educators have traditionally been accustomed to the process “identify first, and then provide opportunity,” they must shift their thinking to develop skills for all students, including diverse and impoverished students (Olszewski-Kubilius & Clarenback, 2014, p.105). It is important to cultivate students from diverse or low-income environments by including them in courses alongside peers of high achievement (p.107). Olszewski-Kubilius and Clarenback (2014) believe that “high expectations on the part of teachers, administrators, parents, and students are critical – and these must be reinforced with experiences of success in challenging classes” (p.108). Every student, regardless of his/her background, needs support in order to achieve success.

### **Impact of School Climate**

Teachers, principals, and all other key staff members weigh on the achievement of students, affecting the school’s overall academic climate. Lately, educators have become interested in the relationship between school climate and student achievement (Bear, Yang, Pell & Gaskins, 2014, p.339). According to Urick and Bowers, “academic climate is a malleable factor that has a positive influence on student outcomes and is a common characteristic of high-performing schools” (Urick & Bowers, 2014, p.387). Even more essential to the education of students is the relationship between school climate and the socioeconomic status of the school’s students. Schools with a stronger,

close-knit climate prove to mediate the impact of student background on student achievement (Urick & Bowers, 2014, p.387). With the mediation of socioeconomic status, the promotion of equity among schools and students within the schools arises, allowing for overall development of student performance.

School climate is not only linked to student achievement, but various supporting outcomes for students, teachers, and schools as well. For example, Bear, Yang, Pell, and Gaskins explain “students’ perceptions of school climate have been shown to be related to academic achievement and multiple indicators of the mental health and socio-emotional adjustment of students, including self-esteem” (Bear, Yang, Pell & Gaskins, 2014, p.340). These consequences are not only associated with students’ perception of the school environment, but the teachers’ viewpoint of the climate as well. Bear, Yang, Pell, and Gaskins (2014) express the parallel between school climate and job satisfaction of teachers (p.340). With higher retention rates, teachers are more likely to perform at a higher level, especially when they are immersed in a positive school climate, allowing for an overall advantageous learning environment for students.

## **Summary**

The focus of the review of literature includes the standards movement, international and national perspectives, assessment practices, and impact of standardization on curriculum, leadership, teaching practice, and student achievement. After reviewing multiple sources regarding this topic, I found that standardized testing

does have an effect on teacher practice. Depending on how the situation is viewed, the effect can be negative and/or positive. The education with the United States has changed dramatically since its beginning, and has made evident that the U.S. is preparing students to take a test rather than to embody creativity and knowledge.

## **Chapter 3:**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study was to determine if standardized testing had any effect on teacher practice. The focus of the methodology includes an explanation of the methods used in researching and developing data to support to purpose of this study.

#### **Research**

My methods were designed based on the ethnographic paradigm of well-known qualitative researchers. The term paradigm “is used to imply a model for collecting data and a theory for interpreting results” (Sanday, 1979, p.527). This data, or paradigm, is represented on not only the observation of participants, but also listening, asking questions, taking part in discussions, and leading focus groups, all known as ethnography (O'Reilly, 2009, p.78).

Van Maanen (1979) explains that qualitative methods of research are often personal experiences of the researcher that are to be understood and analyzed as data (p.520). In contrast to quantitative studies, there are few guidelines to follow when analyzing qualitative data other than providing the “problem, theory, method, and the person(s) standing behind it all” (p.523). The contextual knowledge of the study is achieved through firsthand experience with the research setting. For that reason, I

immersed myself into the classroom setting in order to experience what teachers were encountering from day to day.

In order to construct structures or themes within the qualitative data, the researcher needs to collect accurate, organized descriptions “over a lengthy period of time” (Van Maanen, 1979, p.524). Sanday (1979) feels that a qualitative research study be conducted over an extended period of time; “at least a year is devoted to the task” (p.527). Specifically in working with schools, the minimal time period of a qualitative study should be one academic, school year (p.527). Not only should the study be conducted over a minimal one-year span, but the researcher should be committed to the task and become “part of the situation being studied in order to feel what it is like for the people in that situation” (p.527). Based on the research experiences of Van Maanen and Sanday, I conducted this study over four semesters, Spring 2014 through Spring 2015, as well as immersed myself within the classroom setting for one academic year. I became part of the study in that I attended school enough to understand the thoughts and feelings of teachers.

Sanday (1979) also explains that observations should be supplemented with data to enable “the investigator to cross check results obtained from observation and recorded in field notes” (p.528). Data can be collected through interviews and surveys to then be recorded and categorized (p.528). To supplement my observations, I conducted a survey and focus group session for a set of participants. It was important to ensure that the appropriate participants are selected to partake in the research. Creswell (2007) explains that the researcher should find participants that are willing to

openly express their beliefs and that are qualified to provide the necessary information in the study (Creswell, 2007, p.757). He also suggests conducting the research in an environment that is comfortable for the participants in order that they do not feel restricted or tempted to hold back information pertinent to the study (p.757).

According to O'Reilly (2005), the approach of a planned discussion, or in this case a focus group, "can involve any number and any mix of participants that suit the purpose" (p.80). O'Reilly explains the advantages of this type of discussion stating, "that they generate conflicting ideas, cause people to think about things they may not have considered alone...cause participants to question assumptions, and perhaps change their minds" (p.80). Turner (2010) agrees that the open-endedness of a discussion "allows the participants to contribute as much detailed information as they desire and it also allows the researcher to ask probing questions as a means of follow-up" (p.756).

Because standardized open-ended interviews, or focus groups, are the most common form of interviewing, I chose to utilize this type of research to collect my data. Creswell (2007) explains that one of the weaknesses of using this type of data collection is the difficulty of coding the data.

"Since open-ended interviews in composition call for participants to fully express their responses in as much detail as desired, it can be quite difficult for the researcher to sift through the narrative responses in order to fully and accurately reflect an overall perspective of all interview responses through the coding process" (p.756).

Completing the focus group knowing the possible difficulties, I attended the session prepared with McNamara's eight steps of preparation. Before beginning the focus group, the steps of preparation provided by McNamara (2009) were:

“(1) choose a setting with little distraction; (2) explain the purpose of the interview; (3) address terms of confidentiality; (4) explain the format of the interview; (5) indicate how long the interview usually takes; (6) tell them how to get in touch with you later if they want to; (7) ask them if they have any questions before you both get started with the interview; and (8) don't count on your memory to recall their answers” (McNamara as cited in Turner, 2010, p.757).

By following each of these steps, I was able to collect accurate and valuable data.

I chose to conduct research using a standardized open-ended interview because it reduces bias of the researcher, especially when the process involves multiple participants (Turner, 2010, p.756). Having this type of discussion allowed for an ample amount of unbiased data to be collected. After collecting the data, the data that were uncovered were organized into themes based on consistent topics or points of interest that were prevalent in the study.

## **Methods**

The method of study included research with both primary and secondary sources. Using information from previous studies through library catalogs, online databases, and books contributed to my secondary sources. Through secondary sources, I received a better understanding of the background of my topic, allowing me to hone in on the focus on my research.

I collected data and information through a survey and a focus group. I posted a survey on Qualtrics.com, an online software used to aid research by creating surveys and polls as well as generating results and data. A link to the survey was e-mailed out, after consent was confirmed, for participants to take at their convenience. The survey needed to be completed before participants met with the researcher for a face-to-face focus group.

## **Conceptual Framework**

In order to determine the effect of standardized testing on teacher practice, variables such as climate and assessment must be evaluated. The school climate, specifically the leadership role and teacher role, and assessment, both standardized and teacher-made, have a large effect on each other.

The climate of a school can be further identified through leadership role and teacher role. Administration of the school determines the mood among staff and students proving that the principal has a major impact on teacher performance. The guidelines and expectations set by the principal influences the practices of the staff. If teachers respect their administration, they are more willing to perform to their standards. Equally important, the teacher's role within the school environment has a balanced effect on the leadership role. Depending on the enthusiasm to perform and ability to take positive feedback, teachers affect administration's role as well. A perfectly



balanced school climate consists of both leadership role and teacher role collaborating equally to work toward a common goal, the education of the students.

When the school climate functions properly, there is understanding and balance amongst various assessments. Standardized assessment and teacher made assessment focus on student achievement. Standardized assessment, though, has a stronger focus on accountability. The original purpose of standardized assessment was to ensure that teachers were educating students on the material that needed to be taught. Now, many teachers are solely teaching to the test by only teaching what the test assesses, in order to prove that they are an effective teacher. On the other hand, teacher made assessments are used to gauge student understanding. Rather than using the tests to prove their effectiveness, the tests are used to determine how well the students understand the information. Once teachers measure student understanding, they use the results of the assessment to guide their instruction.

School climate and assessment have an equal effect on the other. The administration of a school, along with the teachers, determines the level of authority at the school. Principals are able to delegate the tasks they want the teachers at the school to perform. They have the ability to allow teachers to teach how they feel best, or provide teachers with a strict set of guidelines. It is up to the principal to decide how lenient he/she wants to be with the teachers' instruction. Depending on the principal and his/her leadership standpoint, the teachers will develop a responding relationship and teach based on the positivity or negativity of that rapport. If the teachers have a positive outlook of the school climate, that positivity will show in their instruction. If the

teachers do not agree with their leadership's role, then the negative results will affect the outcome of their instruction.

The teacher's role then impacts the assessment used within the classroom. If teachers feel as though they have a role in the education of students, they will have an optimistic outlook on education, and will provide more involved instruction. By doing this, teachers will create their own assessments to gauge whether students truly grasp the concepts being taught. They will genuinely care about the education of their students. Teachers who have a less positive view of their leadership models, may solely teach students to pass the standardized tests. This often stresses students because they are taught how to take a test. Most students do not enjoy this type of learning because they are not given hands-on, memorable learning experiences. They are provided drill and kill exercises in order to pass a standardized test.

### **Target Population**

The target population of the study consists of educators and administrators who are interested in learning about their teaching practices, learning what affects their practices, and learning how to adapt to their practices accordingly. People associated with education can learn about the effect of standardized tests in order to better understand current education. Educators may also determine possible alternatives to standardized testing after becoming exposed to the research within this study. This study should have the strongest effect on both teachers and administrators as a means

of improving their strategies to provide the most effective and influential education to students of all levels and all learning abilities.

Participants of the study consisted of 26 graduate students enrolled at the University of Central Florida. More specifically, participants enrolled in the Masters of Education in Teacher Leadership Program at the University of Central Florida. The population of participants was a limitation as it not a reflection of the general population, but rather a convenience sample of local graduate students. Participants needed to be current teachers in order to provide the most accurate information on what is happening in current classrooms. Teachers could be of both primary and secondary level, teaching at any type of educational institution (public school, private school, charter school, magnet school). In order to allow for the study to cover a diverse range of teachers, participants not only taught in a multitude of schools, but across a variety of content areas as well. Participants of the study represented the following counties: Lake, Orange, Osceola, Polk, Seminole, and Volusia. I chose to examine teachers of all levels and content areas to better focus in on the prominence of teaching toward the test. For example, the elementary grades focus on Reading/Language Arts and Mathematics, but in secondary grades, students are introduced to content such as Civics, a topic of Social Studies. The specific participant demographics of this study are represented in Table 2.

**Table 2 - Demographics of Participants**

Ethnicity		
	n	%
White, Non-Hispanic	19	73.08%
Hispanic	2	7.69%
Black, Non-Hispanic	2	7.69%
Multi-racial	2	7.69%
Asian/Other Pacific Islander	1	3.85%
Gender		
	n	%
Female	20	76.92%
Male	6	23.08%

## **Site Description**

The research took place both online and face-to-face. The online portion of the research was completed using Qualtrics.com. Qualtrics is an online software used to aid research by creating surveys and polls as well as generating results and data. A link to the survey was e-mailed to participants, after consent was confirmed, for participants to take at their convenience. The survey needed to be completed before participants met with the researcher for a face-to-face focus group. For the face-to-face portion of the study, participants within the Masters of Education in Teacher Leadership Program met at the University of Central Florida during a scheduled class meeting with Dr. Carolyn W. Hopp.

The University of Central Florida (UCF) is located in a metropolitan Orlando area. According to the university's graduate catalog, graduate enrollment during the Spring 2013 term consisted of 8,348 students. Of these students, there were 1,881 doctoral students, 5,316 students seeking their master's degree, and 1,151 non degree-seeking students. The demographics of the graduate student population in the Spring 2013 semester, based on ethnicity, are represented in Table 3.

**Table 3 - Demographics of UCF Graduate Students**

White, Non-Hispanic	57.76%
Hispanic	12.88%
Asian	9.80%
Black, Non-Hispanic	9.54%
Not specified	8.03%
Multi-racial	1.71%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	< 1%
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	< 1%

Out of the students seeking their Masters degree, 41.1% were full-time students (taking at least nine credit hours a semester) while the remaining 58.9% were part-time students (taking fewer than nine credit hours a semester).

Part of my research also incorporated information from observations during my internship experiences. The school at which I fulfilled my clinical experiences is a fairly small elementary school in central Florida. The school serves about 492 students from a suburban area. The demographics of the school are represented in Table 4, followed by the demographics of my specific classroom represented in Table 5.

**Table 4 - Demographics of Internship School**

Ethnicity	
White, Non-Hispanic	61.60%
Hispanic	23.40%
Black, Non-Hispanic	5.90%
Asian/Other Pacific Islander	5.90%
Multi-racial	3.20%
Special Needs	
Receiving ESE Services	29.50%
Free and Reduced Lunch	21.30%
English Language Learner	7.90%



**Table 5 - Demographics of Internship Classroom**

Ethnicity		
	n	%
White, Non-Hispanic	14	70.00%
Hispanic	2	0.10%
Asian/Other Pacific Islander	2	0.10%
Black, Non-Hispanic	1	0.05%
Multi-racial	1	0.05%
Special Needs		
	n	%
Educational Plan (Gifted)	13	65.00%
504	1	0.05%

## Survey Questions

The questions were categorized into different subheadings such as: General Information, School Climate, Aspects of Teaching, Current Practice, and Short Answer.

The survey was provided as follows:

1. What grade level do you currently teach?
2. How many years have you been teaching?
3. What content area do you teach?

**Thinking about your school, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? For each statement, please check the appropriate box.**

<b><i>School Climate</i></b>	Strongly Agree	Agree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree
1. Students and teachers treat each other with respect.				
2. Faculty and staff value what students have to say.				
3. Students in my school care about learning and getting a good education.				
4. Most of the teachers at my school are enthusiastic about teaching and communicate this to students.				
5. Students are involved in decisions about things that affect them in school and students are encouraged to say what they think.				

**How would you describe your preparation in the following areas? For each statement, please check the appropriate box.**

<b><i>Aspects of Teaching</i></b>	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair
6. Being able to teach all the subjects in your curriculum.				
7. Being able to implement curriculum and performance standards.				
8. Maintaining discipline in the classroom.				
9. Believing all children can learn.				
10. Teaching individual students according to their different needs and abilities.				

**Thinking about a typical school day, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? For each statement, please check the appropriate box.**

<b><i>Current Practice</i></b>	Strongly Agree	Agree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree
11. I'm passionate about teaching and feel successful at my job.				
12. I make curriculum choices that are best for my students.				
13. I have high expectations for all students.				
14. The curriculum appropriately challenges students.				
15. I am interested in what is best for all my students.				
16. I am very committed to teaching.				

**Please provide a short answer response to the following questions.**

<b><i>Short Answer</i></b>
17. Briefly explain your views on assessment.
18. Explain how you prepare for testing at your school.
19. What curriculum do you follow?
20. Is student achievement measured for students to best demonstrate their learning?

## **Focus Group**

After participants participated in the survey, they attended a focus group during a pre-determined scheduled class time. A focus group is a form of qualitative research in which a series of questions are asked in order to determine a group's perceptions and opinions of the topic being studied. The focus group was recorded for reference while completing the study and to ensure that the information and data was accurate for analysis and transcription. The recording was made using AudioNote on a personal technological device, separate from the device used to analyze and record the research. The device the tape was kept on was encrypted with a password and locked in a safe place. Once the participants completed the focus group, their participation in the study was complete. After the data was collected and analyzed, the data was destroyed.

The focus group lasted 80 minutes and consisted of seven questions. The questions asked during the focus group were:

1. Describe the overall climate of the school where you are teaching.
2. Is there a leadership model in place? Explain.
3. Have you experienced changes in education since you began teaching? Explain.
4. During your teaching experience, has the role of the teacher changed? How?
5. Briefly explain your views on classroom assessment and standardized assessment.
6. Does the curriculum you follow help prepare for testing at your school? Explain.
7. Describe the measures you have used to assess student learning outside of standardization. What did the results indicate?

## **Procedures**

It was important to have a set timeline and procedures to follow during this study in order to ensure that the study was completed in an accurate and timely manner. Determining whether standardized testing affects teacher practice could be researched for an extensive period, however this study was conducted during the Fall 2014 and Spring 2015 terms.

The research question that guided this study was: *What is the effect of standardized testing on teacher practice?*

Once the study was approved by the University of Central Florida's Institutional Review Board (IRB), I located the participants for the study. Each participant gave

verbal consent to participate in the survey and the focus group based on the Consent form approved by the IRB. After gaining their approval, surveys were sent to the participants to complete. The survey was accessed through Qualtrics.com via the course website. Additionally, the survey was completed before the focus group was administered in order for participants to be well introduced on the topic at hand. The focus group was then administered and the participants' role was complete. Following the survey and focus group, data examination began. Data were categorized into themes in order to formulate the analysis of the questions according to the conceptual framework of this study.

## **Summary**

In developing my research, it was important to follow the methodology in order to ensure accuracy and effectiveness of the study. Common themes were found in the data, which were analyzed according to the conceptual framework. The different aspects of assessment and teacher practice that were focused on were school climate, specifically leadership role and teacher role, as well as standardized and teacher made assessment. In order to accurately compile data for research, current teachers of all grade levels and content areas were honed in on. Having a diverse target population was important to ensure that all areas of education were explored.

The methods used to collect data for this thesis were through a survey and a focus group. Observations throughout my internship experiences also added inspiration

and guidance to the research. As data was collected and analyzed, the necessary information in developing this thesis was compiled.

## **Chapter 4:**

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

The purpose of this study was to determine if standardized testing had any effect on teacher practice. The research question that guided this study was: *What is the effect of standardized testing on teacher practice?* Data analysis of the research question was based upon focus group and survey data, as well as the conceptual framework, which consisted of the following constructs as detailed in Table 6.

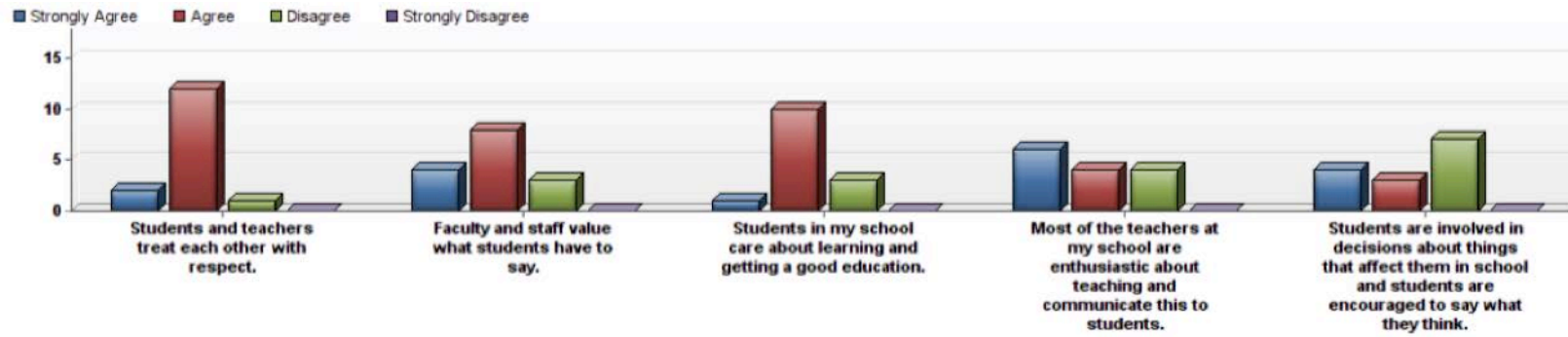


**Table 6 - Conceptual Framework and Themes**

Construct	Themes
School Climate	Leadership Role Teacher Role District Role Coach's Roles
Assessment	Teacher Practice Classroom Assessment Standardized Assessment Alignment of Curriculum to Standardized Testing

Much of the data collected through the survey were based on a scale. Participants were able to decide the extent to which they agreed with the question. For example, for the provided questions, participants could strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3 represent the responses of participants based on these questions.

Figure 1 - School Climate

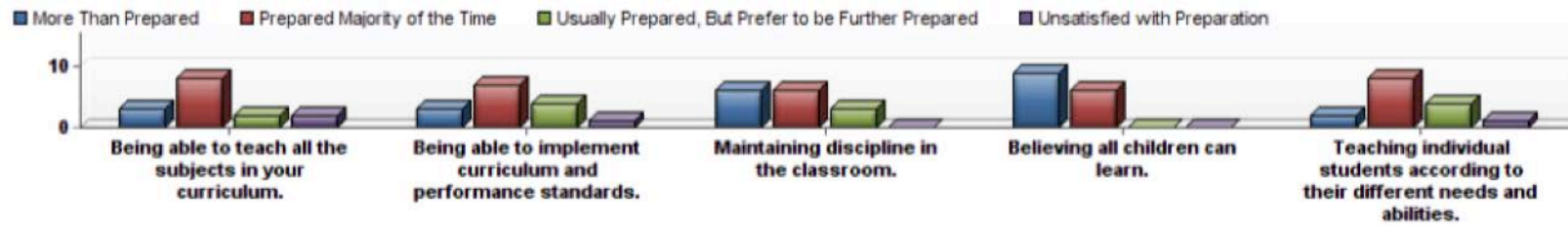


The results of the data regarding school climate illustrate that most teachers agree that there is a sense of respect among teachers and students. Many teachers also agree that the faculty and staff of the school value the students and their education. For this reason, teachers feel as though their students care about learning and receiving a proper education. The participants answered the majority of the survey questions in regards to school climate by agreeing.

The responses began balancing out when responding to the final two questions about school climate. There was a more equivalence of answers in regards to teacher enthusiasm. Many participants agreed that teachers at their school were enthusiastic about teaching, either agreeing or strongly agreeing, but some participants even disagreed. The final question also had more of a diverse response. Again, when combined, most participants agreed that students were involved in decision making and encouraged to express their thoughts. There were the greatest disagreeing responses regarding this question, though.

Many teachers foster an environment in which students feel respected and educated, but it is difficult for teachers to allow students to participate in decision making when the teachers are being monitored so closely by their administration. Teachers have to follow certain guidelines and meet specific expectations, which often times can halt students from having the opportunity to participate in the decision making process.

**Figure 2 - Teacher Preparation**

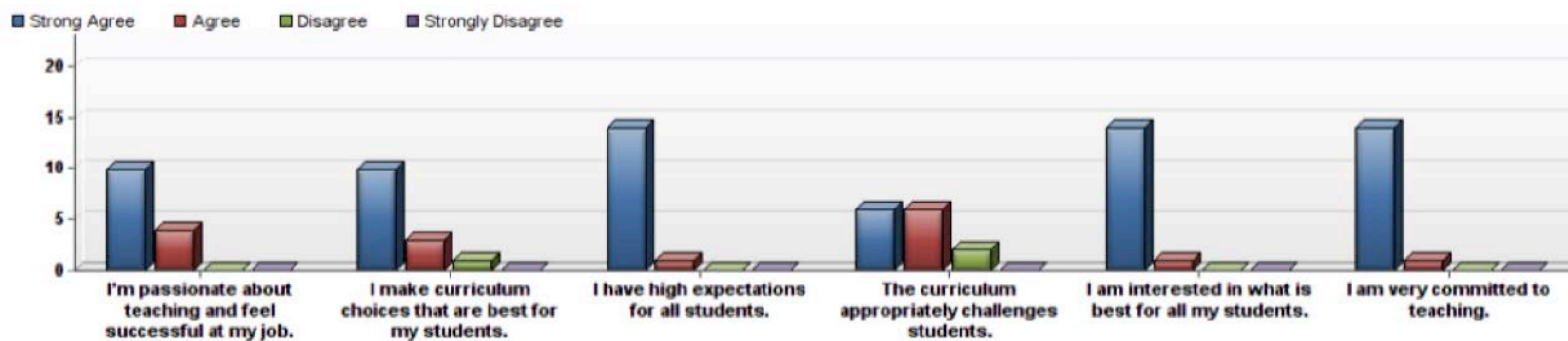


The results of data regarding teacher preparation illustrate that most of the participants agree they are prepared a majority of the time to teach all subjects in their curriculum as well as implement the curriculum. The majority of teachers also feel prepared, if not more than prepared, to maintain classroom management and a high belief in student ability. Most participants responded that they felt prepared a majority of the time in regards to teaching students according to their individual needs.

Although the responses to each question were majorly prepared a majority of the time, two questions had a high response rate of preferring to be better prepared or unprepared. The two questions that participants felt a lack of preparation for were concerning the ability to implement curriculum and performance standards as well as teaching students according to their individual needs.

Teacher preparation has a large effect on teacher practice and student achievement. Although participants felt prepared to teach all subjects in their curriculum, they may only have one specific subject to teach as this survey included participants of all grade levels and content areas. The results of teaching students based on their individual needs as the aspect of preparation that teachers feel they are not overly prepared for, contradict the results regarding teacher practice.

**Figure 3 - Teacher Practice**



The results of data regarding teacher practice indicate that teachers feel more than prepared with their job. Participants overwhelmingly responded that they strongly agree to all the questions concerning teacher practice. Participants feel passionate, successful, and committed to their job, they make curriculum choices that are challenging and best for their students, they hold high expectations for all students, as well as have an interest for the well-being of their students.

Although the majority of participants agreed, if not strongly agreed, the question that had the highest responses of contradiction was in regards to a challenging curriculum. Participants responded they disagree that the curriculum appropriately challenges student, more than they disagreed with any other question. The other question that some participants disagreed with was in regards to making curriculum choices that were best for the students. Again, the majority of participants agreed, but these two questions contained participants who did disagree. One of the reasons participants disagreed with whether curriculum choices were best made for students was in relation to students with special needs or learning disabilities. Many of the students' needs are put aside because teachers are pressured into moving forward with instruction, regardless of the level of student understanding, in order to prepare students for the test material.



## **School Climate**

School climate is the environment in which a school functions. The role of each individual at that school plays a specific part in helping the school operate. The leadership role, teacher role, coach's role, and district role each play a key part in whether a school succeeds or not. The climate of a school more importantly affects student outcomes and the performance of the school. The leadership's view of the school climate affects the teachers' view of the environment which in hand influences the students' perspective of school. Ultimately, the school's setting affects each person's attitude, performance, and success at that school.

Based on research conducted through the survey and focus group, many current teachers felt as though school climate was a major issue that affected their practice. The different themes seemed to determine whether the teachers at the school felt successful. If the teachers felt supported they were more likely to offer stronger support to their students. The specific themes that appeared in the school climate portion of the research were: leadership role, teacher role, coach's role, and district role. Each of these themes played a fundamental role in the operation and function of the school.

### *Leadership Role*

Many teachers feel as though their performance is greatly affected by the leadership at their school. One teacher even stated that the leadership model impacts the academic model. If the administration is willing to work with the staff then the staff is

more willing to perform to expectations. On the other hand, if the principal is reluctant to make necessary changes to the school, teachers do not feel a sense of community and are less likely to put in effort above and beyond. In the focus group, one teacher even stated that the relationship between administration and staff at her school is a civil war. There are no discrepancies between teachers and administration. The school also lacks support from administration, as it seems that the leadership provided is an illusion.

What I noticed during my internship that was mentioned in both the survey and focus group was leadership's use of data. Multiple teachers noted that principals were using students' data from assessments such as Performance Matters, an online tool that assesses students' knowledge in order to provide the teacher with which specific benchmarks the student needs the most intervention with.

One participant expressed a concern about the principal's method of displaying student data, stating,

"Administration has good intentions with sharing students' scores on Performance Matters, but it is basically creating a competition between teachers. Teachers are neck to neck to compete for the highest scores rather than working together to improve the overall scores of all the students" (March 2015).

To make the competition worse, one participant mentioned the principal awarded teachers based on their students' success on assessments.

Another issue that relates to the leadership role at schools is the principal's management. Either the principal micro-manages the teachers or does not provide enough management. For example, some teachers experience principals that tell them exactly what they need to teach, when they need to teach it, and what goals need to be

met by when. Within the focus group, a great sense of frustration came about as participants added to this point. A participant stated,

“When we meet with our principal to discuss the data, it is very heavily implied that the poor scores of the students are the teachers’ fault, yet the teachers are required to follow exactly what the principal has planned. We are not allowed to veer away from the order of instruction even though our students may require a different style of learning than what is planned for us” (March 2015).

Another participant working at a private school explained that the principal of that school “is very competitive and has a say over everything. She makes sure you know she has a Doctoral degree” (March 2015). Other teachers though have been given the freedom to decide what information they want to teach, the sequence to teach, and how they want to teach it. Sometimes the principal will only visit the classroom for a scheduled evaluation of the teacher. Either way, teachers are unhappy because the principal does not allow them the opportunity to teach based on the specific individuals in their classroom or the principal grades the teacher on only a short snippet of their teaching. Many teachers are becoming discouraged as they feel as though this does not provide an accurate assessment of their role as a teacher.

### *Teacher Role*

The role of the teacher is to meet the needs of their students as well as meet the expectations of administration. Teachers are basically the mediator between education and the children attending school. Many people outside of education are unfamiliar with the depth of tasks that teachers are faced with on a daily basis. What once had

flexibility is now completely structured. More and more often, teachers are being required to follow a specific order of instruction with specific benchmarks, standards, and goals. Sometimes even, certain ways of teaching the lesson are made mandatory for teachers. The change in the role of teacher has been noticed among the majority of educators. During the focus group, the participants reached a general consensus that,

“At first teachers had more flexibility. A teacher did what she felt was necessary to teach her students. Now though, we are told what to teach, when to teach it, and how to teach it. There is no freedom to do what you know is right” (March 2015).

Another participant noted that the “...first two years of teaching were awful!” The participant also added:

“My PLC group was led by one teacher. That teacher told the entire team how to teach and exactly what lessons to follow. If the kids would fail, we still couldn’t change our instruction. It was horrible and each day I just tried to make it through” (March 2015).

Not only has the teacher’s role changed, but now it constantly requires teachers to meet greater and greater expectations. As teachers are being required to fulfill more tasks and perform at higher levels, their role is somehow also being minimized. For example, one participant added to the focus group conversation by explaining that often teachers are expected to meet the responsibilities assigned and are assessed on those tasks all while being constantly pulled from the classroom. The participant noted,

“My school chose one fifth grade teacher and one fourth grade teacher to teach teachers about writing. Because those years are big writing years, I am pulled from my classroom for six Thursdays to teach my colleagues how to teach. The administrator explained I was chosen because I can handle it” (March 2015).

Many participants became angered that teachers were missing crucial instructional time to teach teachers.

To explore the role of the teacher further, participants focused on expressing their thoughts about the teacher's role with instruction and the idea of students mastering material before it has even been taught. One participant stated in the focus group that she was told "your class should operate successfully with or without you. If you talk for more than 10 minutes, you are graded as a beginning teacher" (March 2015). Her response to the comment was "It is as if the teaching position is being eliminated. Teachers are now becoming facilitators rather than instructors. It is crazy to think that teachers can only teach for 10 minutes and expect their students to be masters" (March 2015). Many participants began saying that certain subject areas require more background knowledge than what 10 minutes allows. The time spent teaching should differ based on the specific students in the classroom and their needs. Some participants explained that it is as if teachers are to let students explore the standards and benchmarks before the teacher teaches it. Another participant added, "It is our role to make sure students understand the material they do not get. If they do not have the basic skills, how will they be able to understand the material enough to explore the topic at hand?" (March 2015)

Based on the new testing implementations in Florida, teachers have had difficulty in determining their role. The participants noted that the beginning of the year consisted of many hours of preplanning. The teachers stood together as if they were a big family. As the year progressed, teachers became more actively focused on data, scores, and results of testing. One participant stated that,

"At the beginning of the year, teachers were focused on the students and what we needed to do in order to teach based on the students' needs. As we

approach testing, teachers are focusing on the tests. We seem to have to teach students based on what the test is like rather than what they need” (March 2015).

On top of meeting the needs of students, teachers are required to fulfill the demands of their administration. Participants expressed the structure they experience on a weekly basis explaining that they have to post their lesson plans by a certain time on a certain day. Not only are they required to post their plans, but they have a complete schedule full of tutoring, faculty meetings, and conferences. Each day of the week is designated to the different tasks teachers must meet. A participant complained about the issues of planning at her school. She stated,

“We have PLCs twice a month in which we are pulled out of the classroom for half a day to collaborate. I feel like we could meet after school rather than putting a substitute in the classroom and taking away instructional time” (March 2015).

The general consensus amongst the participants was that they were becoming annoyed with all the changes being made. The participants expressed that the changes in education were causing them to become extremely stressed. For example, one participant from the focus group stated,

“We are expected to use a new grade book and new textbooks without being provided with any plan. We are doing whatever is needed to remain successful, but it is annoying that there is no guidance from administration or the district” (March 2015).

### *District Role*

Many administrators and teachers feel the need to do as they are told rather than what is right. Although many educators know what is most beneficial for student

learning, teachers and administrators often do not execute their instruction in such a way. For example, many participants blamed the lack of success of students on the district. They explained that they felt as though they as teachers were required to provide their expectations and instructions to students, but they, as teachers, were not receiving adequate instruction or guidance from the district. One participant of the focus group noted, "Structure doesn't exist. Teachers push kids based on the achievements they want, but what does the district want from teachers? Stress keeps building over formal assessments because nobody knows what the district expects of us" (March 2015).

Teachers also feel stress due to the lack of planning from the district. Many teachers are unaware of what assessments will be required in specific subject areas. Participants expressed their concerns by stating, "The powers in district made changes without managing the change" (March 2015). The most frustrating factor of the district's role is its effect on the leadership role and teacher role. Administration works with the teachers, but is not willing to make changes. A participant mentioned that she brought up issues regarding current education, but her principal basically told her there was nothing they could change because they needed to follow the guidelines the district required. The district is expecting teachers to meet its expectations without laying the expectations out for them. It is demanding teachers to achieve such high levels of success without providing the necessary tools.

### *Coach's Role*

Teachers feel as though they are most heavily blamed for the results of student data, yet the district does not provide the school with the resources or instructional coaches necessary for students to succeed. One participant noted that her school has an instructional coach for language arts only. Her school does not provide a coach for mathematics. Another participant added that his school has an instructional coach for every subject but math. The majority of remaining participants explained that their school had instructional coaches for both language arts and math. Teachers, especially those in content areas other than language arts and math, are becoming frustrated with the narrow focus of subjects being supplemented by instructional coaches. For example, one participant said her principal told her language arts and math are the subjects being tested so the instructional coach needs to focus on those subjects. A participant of the focus group noted "My school has one instructional coach for kindergarten through fifth grade. The coach rarely visits the primary grades (K-2) because they are more worried about third through fifth grade since those are the grades that are assessed" (March 2015).

### **Assessment**

Assessments are used to determine understanding and measure achievement. Within education, assessments are designed based on teacher practice and curriculum aligned with the state standards. The most common types of assessment present



within education are both teacher made assessments and standardized assessments. A survey participant explained the difference between the two assessments as, “Classroom assessment is essential for student and teacher growth. Standardized testing is a political tool used to stress out students and teachers” (February 2015). The common goal of assessment is to measure student knowledge and understanding. Based on what students know, teachers are able to analyze the results using data in order to design their instruction. It is ideal to create lessons that are geared toward what students need. The original purpose for assessment was to gauge student understanding and determine what students did not yet understand in order to ensure they were taught that material. Now though, assessments are “being used the wrong way” according to a survey participant. They are being used as a guideline for teaching. Many teachers are teaching toward the test in order to guarantee that students are achieving the learning goals designed to align with the standards and benchmarks.

Based on research conducted through the survey and focus group, the majority of current teachers feel as though assessment has a major impact on teacher practice. Based on the data from the survey, 81% of teachers believe that standardized testing is not an accurate measure of student achievement. Of those teachers, 85% feel that classroom assessment more accurately measures student learning and achievement. Many teachers have mentioned the pressures of assessment and the effects it has on their instruction. Teachers feel obligated to ensure their students perform well on the assessments, as it is a reflection of their own performance. The specific themes that appeared in the research relating to assessment were: teacher practice, classroom

assessment, standardized assessment, and alignment of curriculum to standardized testing. Each of these themes played a fundamental role in the assessment and achievement of schools.

### *Teacher Practice*

Teacher practice is probably one of the major causes of student success or failure. The way teachers teach students, the materials and tools they use to aid their instruction, and their level of engagement affects student learning. Because certain teachers are being told they need to teach a specific way based on their administration, often times the students are not receiving the intervention necessary for them to succeed. For this reason, schools are beginning to offer students tutoring in order to help them with the subjects they struggle in as a preparation for the Florida Standards Assessment (FSA). Many students are beginning to receive tutoring in order to prepare them for the standardized tests at the end of the year. One participant noted that tutoring is becoming drill and kill, causing students to become frustrated. “Tutoring is having a negative effect on student learning because they are becoming overwhelmed” explained the participant (March 2015).

Another participant explained during the focus group that teachers “just started preparing for the test. It’s already bad. Kids are saying they cannot do it” (March 2015). The help that is offered after school for students that need supplemental support consists of nonstop testing. A participant explained that the tutoring is “not really extra

help. These are students that need help but they are being discouraged by constant test prep” (March 2015). Even a survey participant explained the heavy focus on testing is “to a point where students are experiencing a test fatigue and do not take it seriously anymore” (February 2015).

Testing has also led to a division among teachers at school, causing the quality of teacher practice to decline. Within the focus group, many participants noted that teachers are becoming too competitive for high test results. “It is as if every teacher is against the other. No teacher will help you. At best they will say ‘try this’ but they will not give you any support,” stated a participant (March 2015). Participants expressed that they are becoming exhausted from the lack of support.

Aside from the fact that teachers are competing against one another, teachers feel as though they are unable to teach their students based on their needs. A participant explained the situation as though “we are following a system that has worked for some on all, but education cannot be blueprinted” (March 2015). The general consensus of the group was that teachers are scared to voice their opinions to administration because they know that there will be no change or worse, administration will hold the teachers’ opinions against them. Participants explained that they understand they are contributing to the cycle by going along with the problem, but they are doing their best to provide the best education they can for their students while still abiding by the guidelines of their administration.

### *Classroom Assessment*

Teachers often use classroom assessment to determine their instruction. Classroom assessment consists of informal and formal evaluations of student understanding. Informal assessments are used to monitor student progress while formal assessments are usually graded as a result of student understanding at the end of the unit or lesson. A participant of the focus group explained that she uses “informal assessment as a progress monitoring tool to quickly assess student understanding” (March 2015). Based on the results, she can regroup her instruction and adapt it according to the students’ needs.

Many of the participants expressed the necessity of classroom assessment. “Classroom assessment is necessary. We need to know what students know in order to create our lessons,” noted one participant of the focus group (March 2015). The participants explained that the assessments they created individually for their students are now requiring specific features. For example, teachers have received training regarding test design. Classroom assessments are expected to provide rigor based questioning rather than the common multiple choice questioning. With the transition to the new design of classroom assessment that teachers are being forced to administer, students are becoming stressed with the tests. A participant of the focus group mentioned that she had to explain to her class, “Do not look at the grade, focus on the content you do not understand so that you can figure out what you need to learn. Go back and correct your work in order to learn from your mistakes” (March 2015). With this new design of classroom assessment, students are being tested on strategies and

the application of the learned strategies rather than on content; essentially students are being forced to develop a critical level of thinking.

A variety of classroom assessments were mentioned by the participants of the focus group. Many participants understood the large scope of assessments as every classroom consists of students with different needs. The teacher made assessments should be geared toward the specific students that they are assessing. One participant of the focus group teaches Social Studies, a content area not really addressed on the standardized assessments in Florida. The participant explained that he was more able to develop his own classroom assessments because of the fact that his content area is not addressed on the standardized test. In other words, because he did not teach Reading/Language Arts or Mathematics, he was not pressured by the district or the administration to follow specific guidelines. He stated that he:

“... creates assessments with which I can determine student understanding. Through projects and other teacher made assessments I can get a good understanding of whether or not students truly understood the material. They have to bring the knowledge forth that they learned as well as be creative” (March 2015).

He went on to explain, “outside of traditional assessment, the possibilities of testing for student knowledge are limitless. Often times, students will relay information that you never would have knew they learned on a regular, multiple choice exam” (March 2015).

An issue that arises with teachers who have less freedom with classroom assessment that was noted by a survey participant is the use of classroom assessment. The participant stated,

“I think that classroom assessment is extremely important to know what students understand and how to guide instruction, but I think that it has turned into all summative assessments and there is little focus on formative assessments, and how the students got there” (February 2015).

Rather than using classroom assessment as the traditional teacher made assessments, many teachers are using tools developed by the district to aid in the preparation for the standardized FSA. Instead of focusing on the students’ needs, the classroom assessments focus on teaching the students how to take the standardized test at the end of the year.

### *Standardized Assessment*

Standardized assessment is a criterion-referenced assessment, meaning that students are expected to meet a certain criteria on the test. The standardized assessment was originally meant to ensure that teachers were teaching the standards or benchmarks for the state of Florida. Not only were the tests used to gauge student achievement, but the tests became a tool for accountability as well. A survey participant noted, “There is some value in assessing learning, but standardized testing becomes too confined and is only a snapshot of what students have learned at one point in time. They are utilized too heavily for accountability” (February 2015). Many teachers are held accountable for the learning of their students, which is thought to be displayed in the students’ test scores.

One of the biggest, most recent issues of standardized assessment is the transition between the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) 2.0 and the

Florida Standards Assessment (FSA). Many teachers became familiar with the FCAT 2.0 exam and were able to align their instruction according to the assessment. Teachers often taught toward the test as a result of the student scores affecting the grade they received and possibly their income. The issue arises now that teachers are unfamiliar with the new assessment. Many teachers are finding that they do not know how to teach their students because they are so used to teaching toward a test.

Within the focus group, one participant explained, “assessment is a fancy way to say memorization” (March 2015). Teachers are asking students to learn how to take a test and to simply memorize the material they are going to be tested on. Many participants of the focus group expressed frustration with standardized testing saying,

“it is not an accurate reflection of student understanding. Some students are poor test takers, so they might do horribly on the FCAT but actually have a great understanding of the material taught” (March 2015).

Many participants questioned if students are actually learning or if they are just performing for a test. One participant was angered that:

“Not all kids perform the same, yet everyone is expected to take the same test. All the students are tested on the same thing and the district calls that standardized, but how standardized is it? The results are watered down to make it seem as though students are learning. We only care about the results, not what the kids actually learned” (March 2015).

Another major issue of standardized testing expressed in the focus group is the amount of time spent preparing for the test. A participant responded to the survey about standardized assessment saying,

“I think we are over testing our students. I am frustrated with the amount of instruction time we lose for assessments. I am especially frustrated with progress monitoring assessments. At times our district seems to choose these

assessments based on financial concerns rather than what assessments and data can best inform our instruction” (February 2015).

Many teachers are being forced to complete progress monitoring as a means of test preparation. Participants complained that they have to complete an extensive data analysis on each student’s results of Performance Matters, an assessment of student understanding ultimately providing teachers with the specific benchmarks students need further intervention with. One participant of the focus group noted that she is “pulled from the classroom for a total of six days in order to analyze student data” (March 2015). Not only that, but “the social studies and science teachers have to use the data results from reading to gauge student understanding in those content area because no other data is provided” (March 2015). Teachers are expected to use the data to guide their instruction, but it is causing many teachers to align their lesson plans with the standardized assessments.

### *Alignment of Curriculum to Standardized Assessment*

Rather than designing instruction based on what students are supposed to learn or the standards that were determined for the state of Florida, many teachers are creating their lessons to align with the standardized assessments. Based on the results of the survey, questions regarding the curriculum were the questions with the highest response of disapproval. Many participants disagreed that the curriculum in place appropriately challenged students. They also disagreed that the curriculum was taught in a way that was best for student learning or the individual needs of students,



especially students with special needs or disabilities. One participant of the survey stated, “Standardized testing leads to teachers teaching to the test. It puts too much pressure on the entire staff, and it harms the students because teachers are forced to move through the curriculum even if students are not ready” (February 2015).

Florida decided to veer away from Common Core State Standards, a set of national standards designed to ensure that students from all over the country were learning the same material. Instead, Florida adopted the Common Core State Standards with modifications, ultimately enforcing what is known as Florida Standards. A predominate stress was noticeable this year as teachers were unable to teach to the test as they had in previous years. Because the test was new, teachers did not know what to expect. Many teachers did not know what strategies to teach students, how to assess students, or how in depth to instruct students. Teachers would design their curriculum day by day as they found out more information about the FSA. One week, teachers were told the test would be a certain way; therefore they would design their instruction to teach students in that way. A week later, teachers would find out new information about the assessment, obligating them to alter their instruction to teach the new information learned about the standardized test. In regards to this discussion, one participant of the focus group noted, “We have lost sight of what it means to educate. Truthfully, none of this is teaching” (March 2015).

Rather than focusing on what students do not understand, based on the data results, teachers are focusing on improving results, for the sole purpose of higher scores. A participant of the focus group noted that teachers are “over-analyzing data,

taking away from the process of learning. It should not be about the numbers teachers are capable of producing, but the knowledge we provide our students” (March 2015). Education should be about knowing the students and teaching them according to their learning styles and needs.

In response, another participant of the focus group said,

“Standards should be a guide for what we are teaching. We need to explain the concepts and explain it in a way that students understand. If students understand the concept, they can apply it to any question. It is not necessarily the curriculum, but what you do with the curriculum” (March 2015).

The participants agreed that curriculum is becoming more and more aligned with standardized tests. A survey participant stated, “I have a variety of problems as review and teach [the students] test taking strategies right before a test rather than focusing on the concept mastery” (February 2015). There may be nothing that teachers can do to change the alignment, but teachers are able to change how the curriculum is taught. Depending on what teachers do with the curriculum could have a major effect on student achievement. One participant added, “Curriculum and standards are totally mismatched” as teachers are focusing on matching their curriculum to a standardized test they are unfamiliar with. Through my observations as an intern, fifth grade teachers were unsettled by the fact that the lower grades dropped standardized tests in science and social studies. For once, the teachers were excited to finally have students enter the fifth grade with prior knowledge of those content areas.

For the past years, the fifth grade teachers have been responsible for educating the students on third, fourth, and fifth grade standards, in subject areas such as science and social studies, due to the fact that third and fourth grade had not completed a

standardized test in those content areas. A survey participant explained, “We try to plan backwards with the standards in mind, so the students are automatically prepared for standardized testing instead of having to go back and teach them how to do it at the end” (February 2015). But, a participant of the focus group made a good point. “How much are students really learning if we are only teaching them to take a test?” noted one participant of the focus group (March 2015). Even survey participants felt,

“...that the pressure of standardized testing interferes with our ability to provide meaningful instruction. Standardized testing has gotten out of control. Teachers are almost forced to teach to the test and it gives students anxiety all year all because of one test” (March 2015).

Many participants are wondering if the curriculum is preparing students for the education they need in the future. “The gains are fabulous, but where is the achievement?” questioned a participant (March 2015). Students are not being taught how to think critically because they are learning how to take a test instead. Rather than providing a fair education to students, teachers are aligning their curriculum to a test that is constantly changing, hindering the education of students.

## **Summary**

The research question that guided this study was: *What is the effect of standardized testing on teacher practice?* The different themes that arose during this study were divided between two main constructs: school climate and assessment. While focusing on school climate, themes such as leadership role, teacher role, district role, and coach’s role seemed to have an effect on the education of students. After

analyzing the school climate, assessment appeared to be an issue within education. Assessment was analyzed into themes including teacher practice, classroom assessment, standardized assessment, and the alignment of curriculum to standardized assessments. The data from this study supported the fact that there is an effect on teacher practice due to the pressures of standardized assessment.

## **Chapter 5:**

### **DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The purpose of this study was to determine if standardized testing had any effect on teacher practice. The research question that guided this study was: *What is the effect of standardized testing on teacher practice?* This research was designed to examine if standardized testing had an effect on teachers and students in the classroom. I engaged in this research as an intern, allowing me to see through the lens of a current educator the past two semesters (Fall 2014 and Spring 2015). As a researcher and an intern in an elementary classroom, I was able to not only develop a study through a survey and focus group, but I collected information based on what teachers had to say outside of the school context. After analyzing the qualitative data collected, the common themes that arose were categorized into two main constructs: school climate and assessment. The themes established were: leadership role, teacher role, district role, and coach's role as well as teacher practice, classroom assessment, standardized assessment, and alignment of curriculum to standardized testing.

#### **Discussion**

As an intern at an elementary school, I was exposed to an educational setting. The first semester of internship required two days of attendance at the school, while the second semester of the internship required attendance for the entire week. Within the

first semester, the teacher was much calmer and the students were her main focus. Being at school for only two days out of the week, only a snippet of education was previewed though. During the first internship, I was mostly required to observe how the teacher taught the students, how she designed her lesson plans, and her classroom management strategies. I also designed a handful of lesson plans with which I followed to teach specific lessons to the class. As the second semester began, my attendance increased to five days a week. Not only was I at school more often, but I was also noticing the changes within the classroom as a result of the imminent standardized testing. Teachers started eliminating subject areas that were not being tested from the schedule. Sometimes students were learning one subject for two-thirds of the day, especially if that standardized test was next in line. Teachers were constantly talking about the Florida Standards Assessment (FSA), how unfair the test is, how much parents dislike the test, and the pressures they are feeling as the tests are starting to begin.

The pressures of these standardized tests have caused teachers, from what I have observed during my internship, to gear their entire instruction toward the FSA. The results of standardized tests are utilized in a ranking system for schools based on student achievement. Advocates of standardized testing feel that these tests are an inexpensive way of measuring student achievement of government standards (Moon, Brighton, Jarvis & Hall, 2007, p.3). Not only are standardized tests a cheap form of accountability, but they also produce visible results (Lin, 2002, p.43). Because of the pressures to produce high scores, teachers have adapted their instruction toward the

tests, causing critics to become skeptical of the validity of these test results (Lin, 2002, p.43). For example, the writing standardized test was the first administered. After the test was over, students were promised that they were no longer going to learn writing once the test was finished. Preparation for the standardized test exhausted both students and teachers to the point that they were counting down the days to stop learning.

Another unsettling issue about curriculum and standardized testing arose when the district announced that the lower elementary levels were discontinuing testing of every content area but English/Language Arts and Mathematics. Fifth grade teachers were complaining that their students had no prior knowledge of content areas such as social studies or science. Students were even commenting that their previous teachers never taught the content because they were busy learning the subjects on the standardized tests. To make matters worse, grade levels below fifth grade are not having to address the issue because their standardized tests of content areas such as social studies and science were cancelled for the year. Due to the pressures caused by standardized testing, teachers have increased their preparation of lessons geared toward the test (Moon, et. al, 2007, p.4). Some studies have blamed standardized tests for the narrowing of curriculum, lack of content, and their neglect of critical thinking skills and higher order thinking questions (Shepard, 1990, pp.12-14). Fifth grade teachers expressed their disappointment because they were becoming excited that the students entering fifth grade would have the necessary prior knowledge rather than

having to learn social studies and science benchmarks of third through fifth grade in a one-year period.

Throughout the course of my internship, I was even asked to participate as a tutor in my school's tutoring program. It was the first year the school began a tutoring program as it was required of the district that the school had some sort of intervention for the students who did not receive an adequate score on Performance Matters, an online assessment tool used to assess student understanding. Tutoring sessions would take place twice a week for reading and math for all grade levels. For reading, students would spend an hour each session reading a passage and answering questions based on the text, practicing on an online database, and playing a board game. Essentially, the tutors were providing practice for the students as a way to satisfy the district, rather than actually meeting the needs of each individual student. To add, the tutoring sessions also happened to end at the same time that standardized testing was completed.

While observing teachers during tutoring and the regular classroom hours of my internship, I noticed the amount of work aligned to the standardized tests that was provided to students. Teachers had copied numerous packets, very thick packets, for students to complete, and essentially memorize, before they were to take the standardized tests. Another intern had mentioned that her teacher solely talked about the standardized tests. Rather than worrying about teaching her students the material they needed to learn, she was worried about the fairness of the test, what was considered right and wrong of the test, and how it was impossible for teachers to



prepare their students for the test because the format of the test was unfamiliar. Many teachers are so caught up in teaching toward the test that they are even sending booklets of work home during Spring Break for students to complete as a mandatory assignment. Students “are losing a week of instruction to testing, which is bad enough, but the test week comes on top of two or more weeks spent teaching kids how to take the test effectively” (Jerald, 2006, p.2). Teachers are trying to make up for lost time by beginning the year with drill and kill strategies which replace learning and thinking with memorization. The majority of teachers are becoming desperate to ensure that students are memorizing the material for a test. Resnick and Zurrawsky feel that teaching toward the test prevents opportunities to teach students the necessary, cognitive skills such as problem solving and communication (Resnick and Zurrawsky as cited in Jerlad, 2006, p.4). To add, Jerald thinks, “accountability and standardized tests need not be in conflict with good instruction” (Jerald, 2006, p.4). Despite this, multiple teachers have commented that once testing ends, teachers are done teaching and students are finished learning. There is nothing else to teach them. In a team meeting I sat in on, one teacher even asked where we were going to find the grades for the final grading period since everything would be focused around the standardized test and teachers had nothing to teach once the tests were over.

Since the passing of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, students have been granted access to an equal education. In order to ensure that students were receiving a fair and equal education, the government designed standards, prompting the standards movement. With the implementation of standards, a form of accountability

needed to be established in order to guarantee that teachers were providing students with the proper instruction. Another provision of the act was that students would be placed in the least restrictive environment, meaning students with an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) or with certain learning disabilities were to be integrated into the mainstream classroom if that type of learning environment were least restrictive.

With the act, teachers now had to design their instruction toward a classroom of diverse learners. Integration of students occurred to better guarantee that students would receive an equal education. The influence of equitable education came about because of the United States' competitiveness with other countries. The United States wanted to ensure that they did not fall behind other countries. Their solution was to provide equal education to all. In an effort to remain ahead in the "competition" of education, new requirements were established and new measures of accountability were provided. Not only did teachers and administration report if standards were met, but it was necessary to note to what extent.

Although the United States contains the greatest number of education researchers, they rarely focus on international education, as they perceive the United States to have little to learn from other countries (Tucker, 2011, p.169). Despite the notion, countries outside of the United States are outperforming American students and spend less money per student (p.1).

One reason other countries are excelling with education is their intent to provide the most qualified teachers within the classroom, especially classrooms with disadvantaged students. Whereas other countries notice the need to provide better

teachers to the students needing more intervention, the United States does the opposite. The United States does not always allocate educational funds towards students who need the most help reaching high standards (Tucker, 2011, p.8).

The extensive lengths to which other countries go in order to ensure the utmost education is provided far exceed the techniques of the United States and is another reason they excel academically. Countries such as Japan, China, and Canada conduct aggressive research in educational institutions. They adopt and adapt strategies that have been proven to work within education, based on the goal they are trying to achieve, what should have been done differently, mistakes made, how mistakes were addressed, and which factors most account for their achievement (p.173).

In order to measure the achievements of students, almost all high-performing countries provide gateway exams (p.174). These exams give students a strong incentive to engage themselves in learning as the exams determine their admission into the next level of education. Because the gateway exams are of high quality, students understand that the only means of preparation is to master the material (p.175). Countries design these exams based on a national curriculum and national standards. Having a national curriculum and set of standards, allows the countries to ensure that their students are mastering the material that serves as a prerequisite for the following years (p.175). The national standards also cover content beyond language arts and mathematics, such as science, social studies, the arts, music, and religion.

Rather than assessing students on material from two content areas, with a computerized assessment, these high-performing countries prefer not providing

computer scored tests, unlike the United States (Tucker, 2011, p.177). It is believed that computer scored assessments do not accurately measure skills of students that educators are most interested in (p.177). The United States, on the other hand, uses computer scored assessments because they provide a faster and easier means of evaluation.

Another reason international education is surpassing education within the United States is because teachers are held to a much higher standard outside of the United States. Teachers in countries such as Japan, Singapore, and Finland are required to receive a higher degree as well as an undergraduate degree in the subject they are teaching (p.185). Tucker states, "Among all the industrialized countries, only the United States allows its teachers to teach subjects they have not been highly trained in" (p.186). It is suggested that the United States begin a higher selectivity with which who can join these education programs.

It is unreasonable to expect student achievement if teachers are not prepared to educate. If the United States wants their students to be high performing, then their teachers need to high performing as well. A technique that has proven beneficial in Singapore is the alignment of districts and universities. By collaborating, both district and university could parallel student observation and teacher opportunity with the district's goals and needs (p.10). Professional development could be provided to upcoming teachers within universities based on the current changes in curricula, allowing the teachers to be prepared in advance.

At the end of the day, the teacher has the greatest effect on student learning. The teacher is the one person who spends a majority of the day with the students allowing him/her to have a huge influence on the education of the student. For this reason, “teachers need to become familiar with current research on student achievement and network with colleagues to learn more about teaching expertise” (Ballard, 2008, p.562). Regardless of the evaluation tools a district implements, it is the responsibility of the teachers to remain informed of current educational practices and be aware of the effect their delivered instruction has on students. Teachers are responsible for meeting the needs of their students and providing a fair education to each student. It is also part of the teacher’s role to participate in professional development activities in order to satisfy this responsibility. Ballard (2008) believes “practices such as differentiated instruction, data driven instruction and identifying areas of weakness in students are crucial to developing the quality of classroom teachers” (p.562).

Focusing back on the education within the United States, professional development is crucial for teachers to update their knowledge of the testing strategies, effects, and consequences. Teachers need to continually learn current information in order to better educate their students. Research has shown that students triumph on standardized tests they have prepared for, but fail to transfer their knowledge to another standardized test on the same content (Amrein & Berliner, 2003; Roderick & Engel, 2001). Even Ravitch (2010) states, “When teachers focus too narrowly on the test students are about to take, whatever they learn is likely to be aligned with that test and

is not likely to generalize well to other tests of the same subject or to performance in real life” (Ravitch, 2010, p.160). This forces critics to believe that any increase in test scores is artificial. Most teachers are starting to feel as though their expertise within education is no longer used to its fullest potential as they are being pressured into focusing solely on test content. Many of these teachers feel teaching toward the test is contradictory to their belief of a genuine education. “The implementation of the test may lead to a de-professionalization of teachers” (Abrams et al., 2003, p.20). Students are not achieving or acquiring knowledge, but are learning how to take a specific test. Ideally, assessment should be a guide for teachers and students, ultimately creating a valuable learning experience. Assessment data should motivate students and teachers to improve based on their academic needs. With standardized testing though, the urge to learn does not always result in receiving a higher test score, just as a higher score may not reflect academic achievement.

One major issue within the United States’ education system is the achievement gap. Rather than aiming efforts to close the gap, Ladson-Billings (2006) believes educators should focus on repaying the educational debt owed to our students. Instead of merging a gap based on standardized test scores, which many feel are an inaccurate measure of achievement, educators should concentrate on providing students an equal education in which they deserve (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Milner explains that Ladson-Billings challenged educational researchers when explaining the disparities present within education. As far as race/ethnicity, “Black/African-American and Brown/Latino/Hispanic students tend to score lower than White/European-American

students on standardized exams” (Milner, n.d, p.3). Another disparity among socioeconomic status is that, “students from lower socio-economic statuses tend to score lower than those from higher socio-economic statuses on standardized exams” (p.3). Finally, “students whose first language is not English tend to struggle more than native English speakers in their academic courses” (p.3).

Within education, students attending urban schools are often absent or tend to drop out of school before graduation, causing them to ultimately perform below their peers attending non-urban schools. Aside from the students, many teachers at these schools are unprepared due to a lack of resources. A majority of the teachers use whole group instruction because of class size and resource availability, hindering active learning. Students fail to gain the necessary skills and therefore achieve lower than their peers at non-urban schools. Because of the disparities, the hope of many educators was that standardized testing could encourage teachers, students, and administrators to raise their standards. Since the tests are an efficient way of ensuring the standardization of diverse settings, standardized testing became a dominant indicator of achievement (Ascher, 1990, p.3). The pressure to meet the standards though, especially within urban schools, forces a tighter curriculum. Education, specifically in urban schools, “serving low-income, linguistic and cultural minority students,” has relied heavily on standardized tests, which inevitably narrows the curriculum and intensifies failure rates (p.2). “While both the form and content of these tests have increasingly driven curriculum, students’ scores have also become a major influence” on factors of education (p.2).

Regardless of demographics though, educators have both a legal and ethical commitment to provide a fair education to all students, including students of diverse or low-income backgrounds. More and more schools are adjusting their enrollment of low-income students and mixed-income students in an attempt to raise achievement scores (Potter, 2013, p.39). The diversity present in schools has become an obstacle that educators are making an effort to manage. Numerous adequate, diverse, low-income students are not reaching the levels of achievement they are capable of. National and state data on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) tests disclose that educators are moving too few students, specifically students from diverse and low-income backgrounds, to advanced levels of achievement (Olszewski-Kubilius & Clarenback, 2014, p.104). Olszewski-Kubilius and Clarenback feel as though educators “on numerous levels of student achievement, ...are doing a poor job of moving capable students into the highest levels of achievement” (p.104). Olszewski-Kubilius and Clarenback believe that “high expectations on the part of teachers, administrators, parents, and students are critical – and these must be reinforced with experiences of success in challenging classes” (p.108). Every student, regardless of his/her background, needs support in order to achieve success.

Standardized testing has caused enormous amounts of pressure because teachers are being held accountable for the results of their students. Jerald feels,

“teaching to the test is as unavoidable as a force of nature, as inevitable as gravity. And the choice between good instructional practice and good test scores is really no choice at all, since those who opt not to bow to the pressure will reap harsh consequences under tough accountability systems” (Jerald, 2006, p.1).



As an intern, I attended the PLC meetings of my team. When meeting with the principal, she relayed information she received from the district and other higher-ups. She was introduced to the management techniques of other surrounding schools. She explained to the team that principals were displaying teacher data for the entire school, as well as parents, to see. The principal explained that she was very strongly encouraged to adopt this type of management, and eventually she did. The teachers not only felt uncomfortable, but seemed to disconnect as a team as soon as data was released. The teachers were on completely different schedules, as one teacher was finishing all of math, other teachers were four chapters behind. The display of data created a division within the team and teachers became very competitive. Teachers also became defensive, blaming their students for the data that represented their name. One teacher said that all of her students were way below grade level and incapable of learning the material, hence why she was so far behind. She also said that it was unfair that she had all low achieving students. How could she be expected to produce high test scores with students who couldn't learn? Of course her students are not going to perform and achieve, if she does not believe in them. They are going to meet the expectations she has for them and if she believes they cannot reach success, then they will not. Standardized testing has created a hostile environment for teachers, students, and administration.

This was not only evident in my own experiences, but within the data results of the research, including both the survey and focus group. A general consensus of the participants of the focus group was that standardized tests had a huge impact on

teacher practice, which in turn affected the leadership and students at the school as well. Teachers have reported designing instructional plans focused on standardized tests, teaching toward test content and test objectives, as well as sequencing their instructional curriculum based on the standardized tests (Moon et al., 2007; Herman & Golan, 1990). Standardized tests have teachers believing their sense of professionalism is negatively affected by the obligation to implement standards necessary to pass the tests (Moon, et. all, 2007, p.xiv).

A majority of the participants explained that data is necessary to guide teacher instruction, but teachers are using data as a tool to gauge test results. Because of accountability, many teachers and administration are constantly incorporating any material related to the FSA in order to prepare students to take the standardized tests. Not only are classroom instruction and standardized tests becoming more aligned, but instruction is focusing on test material and test taking skills rather than content. Standardized tests are limiting the scope of instruction and affecting students in undesirable ways (Ballard, 2006, p.564). Teachers have lost track of the real meaning behind education. Frank Levy and Richard Murnane warn that all jobs, specifically higher paying jobs, are more and more requiring fewer rote and routine skills and ever more complex skills. They believe that students denied these advanced skills will be at a tremendous disadvantage (Levy & Murnane as cited in Jerald, 2006, p.3). Educators who settle for teaching toward the test will be trading long term benefits for short terms gains. Many teachers are not thinking about how badly they are harming their students. And, even if they do realize that they are not teaching students in the best way,

teachers are not doing anything to fix the issue. A majority of teachers are afraid to mention changes to their administration because their administration is strictly following the rules and guidelines provided by the district.

Another point made clear in the survey and focus group of this study was that standardized tests are not an accurate measurement of student achievement. First, many students are not strong test takers. Just because a student does not score well on a test, does not mean they have not learned or do not understand the material. Sometimes students become confused on the wording of the question or they are simply stressed because they are drilled to believe that these tests mean and determine every aspect of education. Ballard feels, “pressure on students to perform well on tests can also increase anxiety and stress while taking the test” (Ballard, 2008, p.564). Secondly, standardized tests only assess a portion of student learning. Traditional standardized testing consisted of multiple choice questioning, which required sole memorization. Students were not learning, they were being taught how to recollect information. With that said, the results of the test are often times an inaccurate measurement of true student achievement. As years pass, teachers become more familiar with the testing format and the material the tests assess. Therefore, they spend the majority of their instruction teaching students how to take the standardized test. They heavily review the format, the material, and the types of questions on the test.

By preparing students in this way, teachers are teaching how to take a test. They are not teaching students the standards or benchmarks they are required to learn. Students are not learning to think critically because they are not applying learned

knowledge. This type of preparation is not providing proper education, because most teachers are basically handing students the test before having to take the same test. For this reason, the results are not an accurate measurement of student learning. The standardized assessment is not measuring whether the student learned the information or how well they understand; rather it is measuring how well the student can memorize information. Additionally, the district is constantly recalibrating the results of standardized tests.

The percentages of scores are continually being adjusted to appear as though teachers are educating students. Teachers should be educating their students based on concepts, inspiring them to think critically, and encouraging them to want to solve hands-on problems. The problem is that Florida, along with numerous other states in the nation, is demanding standardization. They are pressing schools to perform strategies that work on some students, and expecting those strategies to benefit all students. But, students do not learn the same way. Every student is different. A crucial role of the teacher is understanding the diversity amongst the students in a classroom and developing instruction to meet the needs of each and every student.

The most compelling piece of this research was teacher practice. To me, that is the one element of education that I have control over. Within every single one of my education courses as an undergraduate, I have learned the necessity of designing instruction in a way that educates each and every student. We are taught to believe that our students can learn, that our students will perform and meet the expectations that we set for them. As an up and coming teacher, I feel as though it would be morally

wrong for me to basically hold my students back from an education they are deserving of. Who am I to decide they are incapable of learning or of deciding that memorizing a test is more important than developing and growing as an individual? So often, people complain about how reliant people are on technology or aspects other than themselves. By not teaching students to critically think and solve problems on their own, the future, our future, cannot improve. Students need to learn and continue learning throughout life. If teachers discourage students by stressing them out about a test every year, they are not going to become inspired to continue learning.

## **Recommendations**

I do believe that there needs to be a guideline for teachers. Standards fulfill that guideline in that they communicate to teachers, administrators, and all other educators what students should be learning. Without some sort of standard, teachers have complete control over their classroom, which is not an issue until there is a teacher who is sub-par. For example, without a set of standards or benchmarks required to be taught every year, one teacher could be instructing a fifth grade class on multiplication of fractions while another teacher could be teaching the alphabet. Yes, that is an extreme, but without a set of standards or guidelines of what needs to be taught, teachers could truly teach whatever they wanted.

With the creation of standards, the issue of accountability arose. Are teachers teaching the standards that are put in place? Well, standardized testing has so far been

the most effective way of determining if students are being properly educated. But, the pressures to ensure students score well on these tests has caused many teachers to lose focus of what is important. They have forgotten that they became a teacher to help others, to educate the future. Some teachers have become selfish and taken away a deserving education from each of their students to guarantee they have a job or an increase in pay.

I am about to become a teacher, and the biggest struggle that I feel I will face is adapting my instruction for the benefit of each of my students. I need to somehow merge what I am required to do with what I know I need to do for my students. At times it can seem like nothing one can do as a teacher will help one's students. As if every time you stand in front of the classroom, becomes wasted time. However, the second students have an "Aha" moment, one can remember why teaching is such an important profession. Knowing you affected the life of even just one student can change your entire outlook on education. Sometimes, teachers are the only people students have to count on. When nobody else will believe in a child, a teacher can make that difference by just believing and encouraging that student. From then on, that student could be inspired to learn; that student could change the world, just as a teacher changed theirs. Teachers have the power to affect the lives of so many children.

By not living up to our standards as a teacher, not practicing what we know is best for our students, we are damaging each and every individual that walks through our classroom doors.

Teachers need to remember why they started teaching. They need to reflect back, especially during stressful times, and recall that passion they had to make a difference in children's lives. Many teachers are doing the best they can to educate students; that is why they continue to return to work day in and day out. But, more and more often, a greater number of teachers are caving in to the pressures and becoming their own enemy. They are teaching kids how to take a test. Test scores have become an obsession and have caused test-taking skills and strategies to take precedence over knowledge (Ravitch, 2010, p.107). Teachers are missing the boat because they are focusing on one single test. Without teaching students how to critically think and solve problems on their own, they will not be able to apply concepts they should be learning. They will be missing out on every opportunity to develop their knowledge and continue learning. Rather than worrying about test results, if teachers would just focus on truly educating students and believing in each student, all aspects of education would fall into place. Students would learn the material they are supposed to learn, they would apply those concepts using the critical thinking skills they have developed, and they would become inspired to never stop learning. It is crucial that teachers remember how powerful they are and start using that power to restore our schools and educate our children.

## **APPENDIX A: APPROVAL OF HUMAN RESEARCH**





University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

### **Approval of Exempt Human Research**

**From:** UCF Institutional Review Board #1  
FWA00000351, IRB00001138

**To:** Carolyn W. Hopp and Co-PI: Courtney Granato

**Date:** December 11, 2014

Dear Researcher:

On 12/11/2014, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Exempt Determination
Project Title:	What is the Effect of Standardized Testing on Teacher Practice?
Investigator:	Carolyn W Hopp
IRB Number:	SBE-14-10703
Funding Agency:	
Grant Title:	
Research ID:	4373264

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the [Investigator Manual](#).

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joanne Muratori".

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 12/11/2014 02:29:26 PM EST

IRB Coordinator

## **APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT**



## **What is the Effect of Standardized Testing on Teacher Practice? Informed Consent**

Principal Investigator(s): Dr. Carolyn Hopp

Co Investigator: Courtney Granato

Faculty Supervisor: Carolyn W. Hopp, Ph.D.

Investigational Site(s): University of Central Florida, Masters of Education in Teacher Leadership.

### **Introduction:**

Researchers at the University of Central Florida (UCF) study many topics. To do this we need the help of people who agree to take part in a research study. You are being invited to take part in a research study which will include about 32 people in the Masters of Education in Teacher Leadership Program at the University of Central Florida, specifically in EDG 6935, Introductory Seminar in Teacher Leadership. You have been asked to take part in this research study because you are a current teacher with insight on your practice in the profession. You must be 18 years of age or older to be included in the research study.

The person doing this research is Dr. Carolyn Hopp of the College of Education and Human Performance at the University of Central Florida. UCF students learning about research are helping to do this study as part an Honors in the Major thesis. Alongside Dr. Hopp, the researcher working with this study is Courtney Granato.

### **What you should know about a research study:**

- Someone will explain this research study to you.
- A research study is something you volunteer for.
- Whether or not you take part is up to you.
- You should take part in this study only because you want to.
- You can choose not to take part in the research study.
- You can agree to take part now and later change your mind.
- Whatever you decide it will not be held against you.
- Feel free to ask all the questions you want before you decide.

**Purpose of the research study:**

The purpose of this study is to examine elementary and middle school teachers' perceptions of the effect of standardized tests on teacher practice. The study will specifically examine if standardized tests lead to a narrowing of curriculum and how the pressures of the test impact instructional practice. The study originated when the idea that content was being withheld from the classroom curriculum simply because it was not included on standardized tests was brought about. Recently though, standardized tests have been modified to test every subject and the curriculum has adapted accordingly. The pressure to raise test scores weighs on both teachers and students, prompting schools to start gearing their curriculum toward these standardized tests. The objective of this research is to determine how great of an affect standardized tests have on the skew of curriculum and teacher practice. Depending on the severity, the research will show the detriment of the tests and hopefully suggest the necessity for possible alternatives.

**What you will be asked to do in the study:**

You will be notified of the research and invited to participate by November 1, 2014. You will be provided a consent form by Dr. Hopp during the EDG 6935 class meeting on November 5, 2014. Once consent is given, you will have until November 12, 2014 to complete an anonymous online survey, before meeting in person for a focus group. After completion of the focus group, which will be held during Dr. Carolyn Hopp's EDG 6935 class on November 12, 2014, your participation in the study is complete. Both the survey and the focus group will occur once and should last no more than a total of three hours combined. Time spent will vary depending on how much time you devote to the independent survey. When completing both the survey and the focus group, you are not required to answer every question or complete every task, although it is recommended. You will not lose any benefits if you skip questions or tasks.

**Location:**

A link to the survey will be e-mailed out by November 1, 2014 through Webcourses for participants to take at their convenience. The survey will need to be completed before participants meet with the researcher for a focus group, which should last no longer than an hour. The focus group will be held on November 12, 2014 at the University of Central Florida campus in Nicholson School of Communication Room 209.

**Time required:**

We expect that you will be in this research study for the Fall 2014 semester. Starting November 1, 2014, an letter will be sent through Webcourses inviting you to participate in the study. If you choose to participate, Dr. Hopp will provide you with a consent form during the EDG 6935 class meeting on November 5, 2014. The consent form will need to be completed in order to participate. If you agree to participate, the anonymous online survey will need to be completed by November 12, 2014 before the focus group takes place during the EDG 6935 on November 12, 2014. The focus group will be

recorded for reference during the remainder of the 2014-2015 academic year. Both the survey and focus group combined should require no more than three hours of time. Time spent will vary depending on how much time you allot for the independent survey.

**Audio taping:**

You will be audio taped during the focus group portion of this study. If you do not want to be audio taped, you will still be able to participate in the study. Discuss this with the researcher or a research team member. If you are audio taped, the recording will be made using AudioNote on the Co Investigator's personal technological device, separate from the device being used to analyze and record the research. The device the tape will be kept on is encrypted with a password. The device will remain in the Principal Investigator's office, a locked, safe place. The recording will be kept until May 2015 when the researcher has completed recording the data.

**Risks:**

There are no reasonably foreseeable risks or discomforts involved in taking part in this study.

**Benefits:**

We cannot promise any benefits to you or others from your taking part in this research. However, possible benefits include learning about your teaching practices, learning what effects your practices, and learning how to adapt your practices accordingly.

**Compensation or payment:**

There is no compensation, payment or extra credit for taking part in this study.

**Anonymous research:**

Your identity will remain anonymous and complete confidential throughout the entire study. That means that no one will know that the information you gave came from you. The survey does not ask for your identity at any point. Although the focus group will take place with the researcher, you will not be identified during the audio taping. Both the focus group and audio tape will remain confidential and will solely be referenced for research purposes only. The information will be kept until May 2015 when the researcher has completed recording the data.

**Study contact for questions about the study or to report a problem:**

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, talk to Courtney Granato, Undergraduate Student, Elementary Education, College of Education and Human Performance, (954) 319-1108 or Dr. Carolyn Hopp, Faculty Supervisor/Thesis Committee Chair, Masters of Education in Teacher Leadership by email at Carolyn.hopp@ucf.edu.

**IRB contact about your rights in the study or to report a complaint:**

Research at the University of Central Florida involving human participants is carried out under the oversight of the Institutional Review Board (UCF IRB). This research has been reviewed and approved by the IRB. For information about the rights of people who take part in research, please contact: Institutional Review Board, University of Central Florida, Office of Research & Commercialization, 12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501, Orlando, FL 32826-3246 or by telephone at (407) 823-2901. You may also talk to them for any of the following:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

## **APPENDIX C: SURVEY**

**Thinking about your school, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? For each statement, please check the appropriate box.**

<b><i>School Climate</i></b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>
1. Students and teachers treat each other with respect.				
2. Faculty and staff value what students have to say.				
3. Students in my school care about learning and getting a good education.				
4. Most of the teachers at my school are enthusiastic about teaching and communicate this to students.				
5. Students are involved in decisions about things that affect them in school and students are encouraged to say what they think.				

**How would you describe your preparation in the following areas? For each statement, please check the appropriate box.**

<b><i>Aspects of Teaching</i></b>	<b>Excellent</b>	<b>Very Good</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Fair</b>
6. Being able to teach all the subjects in your curriculum.				
7. Being able to implement curriculum and performance standards.				
8. Maintaining discipline in the classroom.				
9. Believing all children can learn.				
10. Teaching individual students according to their different needs and abilities.				



Thinking about a typical school day, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? For each statement, please check the appropriate box.

<b><i>Current Practice</i></b>	Strongly Agree	Agree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree
11. I'm passionate about teaching and feel successful at my job.				
12. I make curriculum choices that are best for my students.				
13. I have high expectations for all students.				
14. The curriculum appropriately challenges students.				
15. I am interested in what is best for all my students.				
16. I am very committed to teaching.				

Please provide a short answer response to the following questions.

<b><i>Short Answer</i></b>
17. Briefly explain your views on assessment.
18. Explain how you prepare for testing at your school.
19. What curriculum do you follow?
20. Is student achievement measured for students to best demonstrate their learning?

## **APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP**

**Number of Participants:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Start Time:** \_\_\_\_\_

**End Time:** \_\_\_\_\_

1. Describe the overall climate of the school you are teaching at.
2. Is there a leadership model in place? Explain.
3. Have you experienced changes in education since you began teaching? Explain.
4. During your teaching experience, has the role of the teacher changed? How?
5. Briefly explain your views on classroom assessment and standardized assessment.
6. Does the curriculum you follow help prepare for testing at your school? Explain.
7. Describe the measures you have used to assess student learning outside of standardization. What did the results indicate?

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