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Teachers' Perceptions of Formal Testing of Students in Grades K-2

Adriana Battista Coppola

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

Seton Hall University
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SETON HALL UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SERVICES
OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

APPROVAL FOR SUCCESSFUL DEFENSE

Adriana B. Coppola, has successfully defended and made the required modifications to the text of the doctoral dissertation for the Ed.D. during this **Spring Semester 2017**.

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Teachers' Perceptions of Formal Testing of Students in Grades K-2

Abstract

School leaders and teachers are confronted with federal, state, and local mandates that must be followed to ensure all students reach their fullest academic potential. To this end, the challenge has been raised to teachers and administrators to have younger students in the lower elementary grades prepared for standardized student testing. Assessment comes with varied expectations and beliefs among parents, teachers, administrators, school board members, and the community that may cause difficulty acknowledging developmentally appropriate assessment methods.

This qualitative study focuses on the perceptions of 16 elementary teachers towards testing students in kindergarten, first, and second grade in one New Jersey urban public school district. Semi-structured interviews were conducted as participants discussed their agreements and disagreements of whether testing has an effect on students, teachers, and on classroom practice. Findings from this study disclosed negative results from student testing such as distress, anxiety, high-levels of worry, and students' lack of confidence as well as positive outcomes from the collected test data, including richer discussions between student, teacher, and parent, and classroom planning and grouping. In an age where accountability for student achievement impacts schools, districts, and teachers, the pressure rises to have student scores increase. Findings for this study documented the importance of professional development and the involvement of teachers in curriculum design.

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Dedication

I dedicate this doctoral dissertation to my family who have given me the greatest blessing of life . . . Love. “*It’s not what we have in life but who we have in our life that matters*” (Anonymous).

My parents, Italo and Nunziatina Battista, “*Papa e Mamma,*” I honor you both, for teaching me that I can achieve anything through education and determination. *Con tanto amore, Grazie! Ti amo sempre!* My two sisters, Silvia and Laura, and my brother, Gerardo, I thank you for your continuous support and love. My gratitude towards my two brothers-in law, Alfonso and Vincent, and Cara, my sister-in law, and all my beautiful nephews and nieces, Francesco, Marco, Alessia, Luke, Lorelai, Giancarlo, and Giuliana . . . Zia loves you! My parents by marriage, John and Maria Coppola, “Dad and Ma!” who have supported me with encouraging words through this journey . . . I love you! My two brothers-in-law, Jonathan and Justin Coppola, along with my sisters-in-law, Michele and Michele, and my beautiful nieces and nephew, Zoe, Genevieve, Conor, Quinn, and soon to join our family, Kate May . . . Zia loves you!

My wonderful, loving, and most caring, handsome man, my husband Matthew, who has survived the many nights and tireless weekends of watching me pace and type, revise, and type again. Your patience is unbelievable, and I treasure each day that I am married to you. I thank you and I love you! I also dedicate this dissertation to my beautiful, smart, and loving daughter, Ava Maria. She has taught me so much about life and faith. She is my rock, my core of being. Mommy is all yours! I love you! Finally, Guido, our gorgeous shih tzu-toy poodle mix . . . Let’s play!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Standardized tests were first introduced as a tool for assigning grades at the beginning of the twentieth century (Giordano, 2005). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) signed by President Obama on December 10, 2015, is a new law that replaces The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). Preserving the spirit of No Child Left Behind, ESSA mandates that all states must test public school students in Grades 3 through 8 in language arts and mathematics to ensure that they are achieving the desired level of education (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). In addition, the Obama administration's Race to the Top (RTT) of 2009 awarded states considerable sums of funding for education that propose specific rigorous and coherent accountability plans to prepare students for success (Shapiro & Gross, 2013).

School leaders and teachers are confronted with federal, state, and local mandates that must be followed to ensure all students reach their fullest academic potential. To this end, the challenge has been raised to teachers and administrators to have younger students in grades kindergarten through second grade prepared for standardized testing. Using the academic constructs of the reviewed literature, this study explored the perceptions of elementary teachers towards testing students in kindergarten, first, and second grade in one New Jersey urban public school district.

According to Edwards (2015), teachers are the most important factor in student achievement; therefore, teachers' perceptions are vital to the learning environment, as their perceptions of standardized testing may impact the learning culture. Good (2014) states that this impact may occur when teachers hold negative subjectivity connected to

what they are teaching. Specifically, if a teacher's perception about an assessment is negative and he or she is not in favor of assessment, that negativity may carry over towards instruction. As a result of this research, one can conclude that society ought to become aware of the effects that may result from testing young students and the future implications that may result from such testing.

Context of the Problem

When the NCLB provided federal aid to school districts serving low-income families to support the improvement of educational equity in 2001, it required that these districts test students, advantaged and/or disadvantaged, in Grades 3-8 to ensure all students achieve proficiency in academics: English language arts, math, and science. Although the deadline has passed, NCLB required states, school districts, and schools to ensure that all students be proficient in grade-level mathematics and language arts by 2014. Currently, each state still identifies standards aligned to the state test to measure student progress, holding schools accountable for the outcomes. As a result, standardized testing has become high-stakes testing.

This movement has placed ample pressure on teacher performance and on student outcomes (Twyman & Sota, 2008). Hummell and Huitt (1994) state, "What you measure is what you get"; that is, the types of assessment used in all levels of education impact how teachers teach and affect how students learn (p.10). According to Bredekamp (1990), this movement could impact the learning environment by infusing instruction with drills and lectures that are developmentally inappropriate for young students and with information that may be above their capability and understanding. This type of

pressure has been passed down to teachers of grades K-2 to prepare students for high stakes testing.

Pressuring teachers to implement standardized testing puts teachers "in the unenviable position of explicitly denying their own judgment" (Murphy, 1997, para. 30). Moreover, unlike teachers, tests cannot bridge the gaps between controlled knowledge and the students' knowledge. The concern remains that test scores may be used against students and teachers, ignoring the necessary focus on individual needs. There is a high concern about the objectivity of testing and the unnecessary pressure it places on teachers and students (Volante, 2007). As test pressure fills the inner school walls, one can conclude that anxiety may affect the teachers and students, as they may not be ready or capable of understanding the content or skills that state mandates are forcing them to learn. Volante (2007) states that the best type of assessment focuses on validity and reliability of classroom data assessment. Swope and Miner (2000) are in agreement that the assessment goal should not be of a comparison of students and schools but to encourage and provide students with a quality education. Clearly, there is a need for balance between assessment and classroom instruction, especially within the K-2 classrooms; and high-stakes assessments at this level could be disproportionate.

Statement of the Problem

Research indicates that students learn best when they are not lectured or verbally drilled and that young students should be provided with appropriate stimulation, activities, and challenges in order to perform to their optimum capability (Bredekamp, 1990). Information taught to students should be meaningful and comprehensible. In addition, it is fundamental for students' development and understanding of concepts that

they be presented in a significant context, as these concepts may serve to motivate students. Students will gain additional experiences and skills as they get older that ease the learning process, allowing for a more natural pace of learning (Forman & Kushner, 1983). Research indicates that there are concerns that the quality of tests that many states are implementing are negatively impacting curriculum design, which then negatively affects a student's opportunity to learn (Darling-Hammond, 2003).

According to the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL, 1999), teachers and administrators have acknowledged the issues surrounding assessing young students. The most significant challenge results from the kind of curriculum being implemented and what is appropriate for young students. These difficulties result from a mixture of the curriculum to which young students are exposed in the early years of school and their developmental characteristics (Bredenkamp & Shepard, 1989). Assessments that have been conventionally accepted for older students in Grades 3-12 may not be appropriate for students in Grades K-2, as both the content and meaning of assessment material may be neither suitable nor understood.

Administrators and teachers have been challenged with implementing and executing appropriate testing techniques to students because they have acknowledged the difficulties in assessing young students. According to Atherton (2013), Jean Piaget, an influential psychologist who intensely investigated how young children cognitively learn and develop, stated young children cannot assume certain tasks until they are psychologically mature to move from transitional stages of development (at 18 months, 7 years, and then 11-12 years of age). Moreover, these young children who transition into their new stage of learning are not capable of understanding information in a smooth,

clear way. Therefore, students in Grades K-2 may not have reached the stage of development to apply skill or knowledge in formal assessment.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine teachers' perceptions of formal testing of students in Grades K-2 in one urban New Jersey public school district. Specifically, this study sought to explore if these teachers believe that formal student testing in the K-2 grades is appropriate and conducive to learning. Furthermore, exploring teachers' perceptions regarding K-2 formal student testing could provide school districts with the necessary information that can help them reflect on and assess the benefits of testing these young students.

Assessments adopted for elementary students should be based upon expectations for the learning and development of a child (NCREL, 2015). Assessment standards should be joined with programs that begin in preschool and follow through in kindergarten, first, and second grade levels to produce a planned, logical experience for the whole child. This study sought to explore teachers' perceptions associated with formal testing of young students, as there is a lack of qualitative research on this topic. Research is needed to address how teachers' perceptions may influence teacher effort, classroom practices, and student success.

Research Questions

This study explored teachers' perceptions of standardized student testing in Grades K-2 at one urban public school district in New Jersey. The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. How do teachers perceive the use of standardized student testing of students in Grades K-2?
2. How, if at all, does standardized student testing influence classroom practices of K-2 teachers?
3. How do teachers' perceptions vary, if at all, about standardized student testing in different grade levels K, 1, and 2?

Conceptual Framework

What we know about child development, as stated by psychologist Jean Piaget, is that there is a qualitative change as a child gradually progresses through the four stages of cognitive development. These four stages are the sensorimotor stage, the preoperational stage, the concrete operational stage, and the formal operational stage (Brain & Mukherji, 2005). Research indicates that a child's cognitive development in the early years involves processes based upon actions and later progresses into changes in mental operations. Furthermore, children are unable to simply add information and knowledge to their existing knowledge as they grow each year. Children progress through these four stages as they acquire new knowledge and interpret meaning as it applies to them (Salkind, 2004). For example, Salkind (2004) states that psychologists Lev Vygotsky's *zone of proximal development* and Jean Piaget's *four stages of cognitive development* analyze the way children learn and retain knowledge. According to Piaget and Vygotsky, a child's thinking does not develop all at once. They stress that there are particular times at which a child's learning is able to move forward into new areas of skill adaptation and growth and that such learning cannot be forced. In other words, children are not able to understand the necessary skills unless mastered at an earlier stage of development.

Research indicates that the testing of young students during the early years of education may impinge upon a child's developmental nature (Vygotsky, 1978).

Due to the developmental constraints of early childhood, younger students need individualized programs that enhance their learning process. Research shows that although the idea of school improvement emphasizes enhanced achievement for all students, it is younger students that most require individualized special attention for school success (Bredekamp & Shepard, 1989). In addition, Bredekamp and Shepard continue that the assessment process requires understanding that children rapidly grow and change and can be easily sidetracked by the rigor of assessment procedures, especially when they have little interest in being assessed.

In order to gain perspective on students and how the developmental stages benefit the young learner regarding testing, it is beneficial for the researcher to utilize a basis of early childhood theories for this study. If administrators and teachers are to be successful in implementing and executing the mandated standardized testing, they must become more sensitive to the perceptions of elementary teachers. This study sought to investigate K-2 teachers' perceptions of student testing.

Design and Methodology

In order to answer the research questions, the researcher selected a qualitative analytic method and purposeful sampling practices. A qualitative study is most suited to explore the individual perceptions of participants. Research indicates that a qualitative method is best suited for discovering the significances and interpretations people assign to their experiences (Miller & Almon, 2001). Therefore, qualitative research typically

deals with a small purposely chosen group of participants who will be able to provide a deeper depiction of a phenomenon.

A purposeful sample total of 16 elementary K-2 public school teachers selected from one New Jersey urban public school district were selected for this case study. The researcher was interested in examining the participants' perceptions of student testing in Grades K-2 to determine if responses to interview questions vary based on how teachers perceive the use of standardized testing, if perceptions of student testing differ by grade levels, and if standardized testing influences instructional practice.

After being granted approval for this study by the school district to conduct the interviews, the researcher sought permission from the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to execute the study.

The researcher explained her affiliation with Seton Hall University to the elementary teachers. She explained the nature of the study and indicated that the participation of the elementary teachers was voluntary. In addition, the researcher guaranteed the participants' confidentiality.

A structured interview sample of 16 participants in Grades K-2 was utilized to ensure each interview had the same questions in the same order. The researcher developed 10 questions for the interview. The open-ended interview questions were created for this study based on the review of literature and were used to collect qualitative data from early childhood teachers to understand the phenomenon of their perceptions of student testing. Interviews allowed the researcher to recognize participants' perceptions and experiences regarding the topic. Follow-up questions were used to further elaborate on answers given (Creswell, 2009).

A significant component in gaining validity and reliability with the interview questions was to have all questions reviewed by an expert panel consisting of three school administrators. This panel assisted the researcher in determining if there were any limitations, flaws, or other vulnerabilities within the interview design. Their feedback helped the researcher revise interview questions prior to interviewing the participants. This expert panel did not participate in the actual research study.

The data collection methods that were used were face-to-face interviews at a library or a preferred site by the participant. Participants were contacted via email and/or telephone and were invited to participate in interviews. Participants were informed that the interview would be confidential. The participants were asked to talk about their practice as a K-2 school teacher, their familiarity with student testing at their specific grade level, and their feelings about student testing in early elementary grade levels. The researcher took notes as the interviews proceeded to align for accuracy or questioning. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes and remained confidential. This allowed the researcher to determine if responses varied based on grade level, teacher support, or lack of teacher support of student testing. The participants were reassured that all interviews, notes, and printed papers would be kept in confidence under lock and key with the researcher.

In addition, the researcher followed Marshall and Rossman's (2006) seven phases of analytic procedures to finalize the collected data method utilized to conduct a qualitative research. The seven phases are (1) organizing the data, (2) immersion of the data, (3) generating categories and themes, (4) coding the data, (5) offering

interpretations through analytic memos, (6) searching for alternative understandings, and (7) writing the report.

Significance of the Study

In the United States, there is pressure to implement standardized testing to students in younger grades (Shapiro & Gross, 2013). The collected data from this study regarding teachers' perceptions of student testing may allow administrators and those closely invested in education to view classroom practice and instruction through a different lens. The results of this study can assist stakeholders in understanding how K-2 school teachers perceive student testing and whether they perceive that student testing is beneficial.

This study investigated teachers' perceptions of the influence of testing on K-2 students. The outcomes from this study may support professional development in developmentally appropriate classroom instruction and may provide encouragement for optimal learning for teachers, students, and administrators.

Limitations of the Study

This study possesses the following limitations:

1. Teachers from one urban district were interviewed for this study. The results are limited to their perspectives and the findings may not be representative of a larger population.
2. The researcher must make the assumption that teachers responded honestly to the interview questions.
3. The researcher assumes that the interview questions are an accurate measure of K-2 teachers' perceptions on student testing.

4. The researcher brings her own experiences and concepts to the research topic, which may influence analysis of the findings.

Delimitations of the Study

This study possesses the following delimitations:

1. This study was limited to K-2 teachers in one New Jersey public school district and may not be generalizable to other teachers and/or other school districts. This study may also limit its reference to practice and policy in other states and/or other locations.
2. The perceptions of teachers of other grades and of administrators were not included in this study. This study did not differentiate by demographic factors.
3. This study is delimited to the perceptions of K-2 teachers without researching their tangible effect on student learning.

Definition of Terms

A **Teacher** is a person who provides education to students. He/she is responsible for educating the total number of students within the assigned classroom. In this study, the teacher was New Jersey State certified with qualifications to instruct students of a particular age.

Testing refers to an assessment, computer-based or paper, intended to measure the students' abilities or knowledge.

A **Public Elementary School** is a tuition-free institution serving student in grades preschool through six funded by the state and by local taxes.

An **Elementary Teacher** is a trained professional who teaches kindergarten, first, or second grade.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) is a United States Act of Congress that is a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), including Title I to aid disadvantaged children.

The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) is a common set of assessments to measure students' ability to apply their knowledge of concepts.

Early Childhood Education is a period of time from preschool through Grade 3 that is geared towards a child's school-based experiences.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice, often shortened to DAP, is a method of teaching young children from ages birth through 8 years based on the research on how young children learn and develop.

Summary

This research study is organized into five chapters. Chapter I of this study presents the background of standardized testing and the topic of testing young students. It presents an introduction, discusses the context of the problem under study, the purpose of the study, and states the research questions. It provides an overview of the conceptual framework and the design and methodology of the research study, identifies the significance of the study, describes the limitations and delimitations of study, defines basic terms of the study, and provides a summary.

Chapter II presents a review of the literature, while Chapter III presents the study's methodology, including an introduction, purpose of the study, research questions,

research design, population, development of the survey instrument along with data collection, data analysis, and a summary. Chapter IV presents the research findings and the data analysis. Chapter V presents the findings, conclusions, and recommendations for practice, policy, and further research.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter provides a review of the literature relating to the perceptions of elementary school teachers on student testing in kindergarten and first and second grades, beginning with an analysis of the history of testing elementary students and continuing with a discussion of how young students learn along with the appropriateness and the applications of student testing. This is followed by an overview of the theoretical research on testing young students. The literature review then continues with a discussion of teacher perceptions about young students being tested and how they perceive it affects their classroom practices. Finally, the literature review summarizes what educational leaders can do to support elementary teachers regarding the testing of young students and add to the lack of qualitative research in this area. This study may help educational leaders to make conscientious decisions regarding the testing of young students.

Literature Search Procedures

Creswell (1994) indicates that a literature review should meet the following three principles: depict results of like studies, connect the current study to the ongoing discourse in the literature, and state a framework for relating the results of a study with other studies (p. 37). A literature search was carried out in an effort to reveal studies that observe any of the features of teacher perceptions on student testing, the history and appropriateness of student testing, and the applications of testing. The researcher followed the framework for scholarly literature reviews developed by Creswell (2002).

Online academic databases including ProQuest, EBSCOhost, ERIC, Google Scholar, the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) website, and Dissertation Abstracts, as well as textbooks and online print editions of peer-reviewed educational journals were used for accessing the literature reviewed for this research. The researcher also used the Seton Hall University Library to review books related to the research topic.

The following words were entered in several ways into the database to discover literature relating to the topic of focus: teachers' perceptions of student testing, teacher effectiveness, student testing and elementary teachers, early childhood practices, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), concepts of student testing, and how young children learn.

The researcher chose to include some earlier literature in order to develop the history, appropriateness, and applications of the framework on student testing.

Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion of Literature

Creswell (2002) recommends a five-step process for a literature review: “identifying terms to typically use in your literature search; locating literature; reading and checking the relevance of the literature; organizing the literature you have selected; and writing a literature review” (p. 86). Literature was considered for inclusion for review if the following criteria were met:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles
- Qualitative and quantitative scholarly research publications from peer-reviewed professional journals
- Articles from education and educational research journals
- Books and book chapters on qualitative research

- Books and book chapters on early childhood practices
- English language literature and research articles published within the past 15 years, unless the work was historically based
- Doctoral dissertations
- Federal and state legislation as contextual information
- Government reports on education

Literature was considered for exclusion for review if the following terms were met:

- Literature relating to the perceptions of middle school and/or higher education educators
- Literature not written in English
- Research studies performed in non-public schools in the United States

History of Testing Children

Although high-stakes tests seem to be a new educational phenomenon, they actually date back historically in various forms. The Chinese used high-stakes tests in 200 B.C. to support the civil service. Italy, England, France, among other nations, used high-stakes tests to guarantee that students met high standards of performance and secured certain skills. For example, during the 15th century in Italy, high-stakes tests were used to hold teachers accountable for student learning. Since then, especially in recent years, policy makers have used high-stakes tests to hold students and schools accountable and allocate scarce resources (Madaus, Higgins, & Russel, 2009, pp. 13-14).

Madaus, Higgins and Russel (2009) state the following:

The rise of high-stakes testing in the United States is rooted in the idea that the correct system of rewards and punishments will motivate obstinate, dispirited

lazy, or recalcitrant students, as well as their teachers, to try harder (p. 15).

In education, the word *test* describes a tool used to systematically obtain a sample of what a student knows or can do (Madaus, Higgins, & Russel, 2009, p. 37). The practice of high-stakes testing surfaced long before the 1950s first landmark case. There have been a number of events and federal legislative acts that solidified the importance of high-stakes testing in American society over the last five decades. High-stakes testing today is the primary strategy commissioned by federal and state governments to monitor and reform the educational system. There have also been many landmark events that produced and sparked both interest and concern about high-stakes testing and the usefulness for the United States (Madaus, Higgins, & Russel, 2009).

Sputnik, a Russian space satellite, was launched in 1957. This event produced a nationwide concern about the United States' competitiveness with the Russians in mathematics and science education. There was great concern that the Russians had a better education system than America, and the American people were dismayed (Eskro-Clemetsen, 2000). An evaluation was demanded to obtain better-qualified teachers so that American students would be able to compete with students from Russia (Clark, 1993). This began the drive to increase basic skills achievement and also to enhance mathematics and science teaching. The National Defense Education Act of 1958 (NDEA) authorized funds for local testing programs in both private and public school systems.

Consistent with the movement for students' testing standards, the Equal Educational Opportunity Survey of 1960, (EEOS) known as the Coleman Report, contributed greatly to the growth of educational testing by placing accountability on

school performance. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) also increased the importance of educational testing. Last, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) raised the use of tests to monitor public education to the national level. NAEP occasionally tested students across the nation in various grade levels on reading, science, and mathematics, with other subjects sometimes tested. In 1975, P.L. 94-142.23, known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, was created. This act mandated that handicapped children have their specific needs identified, receive individual educational plans (IEP), and receive proper placements (Madaus, Higgins, & Russel, 2009, p. 18).

On December 10, 2015, President Obama signed a new measure of accountability, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). This new law promised to focus on preparing success for all students in college and careers (p. 1). Specifically, ESSA was designed to ensure that states set higher standards for their students, maintain accountability, empower state and local decision-makers to change their own systems for school improvement based upon evidence, preserve annual assessments, provide more children opportunities to attend high-quality preschool programs and establish new resources to test practices and repeat proven strategies (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, pp.1-2).

Research indicates that policy makers in the 1980s relied on test scores to argue that there was a problem in our educational system (Madaus, Higgins, & Russel, 2009). These same policy makers then appealed for increased testing in order to determine whether such reforms were effective. Testing was accepted in the late 1980s and was

seen as a crucial instrument for improving education (Madaus, Higgins, & Russel, 2009, p. 20). In 1997, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was passed. Because of the essential consequences of testing, it is important to note that IDEA required students with disabilities to participate in both the general curriculum and assessments of achievement overseen by districts and states. With the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, the act continued the expectation that students with disabilities take standardized tests and achieve at levels equal to peers without disabilities.

Federal and state sponsored educational initiatives attempt to realize honorable objectives such as decreasing achievement gaps between minority and White students to ensure poor students receive a high-quality education (United States Department of Education, 2001, 2002). Nevertheless, the importance placed on standardized tests inadvertently brings with it negative effects during the early grade levels of school. Schools commonly use their test scores to compare themselves with other schools (Herman & Abedi, 1994; Perrone, 1991; Powell, 1999). Subsequently, many administrators pressure their teachers to increase student achievement on numerous standardized tests (Fry, 1998; James & Tanner, 1993), causing the phenomenon of “teaching to the test” (Herman & Abedi, 1994; Powell, 1999). Performing well on standardized tests may be significant, yet the risk is that these high test scores will replace learning as the critical objective (Perrone, 1991; Powell, 1999). Moreover, states may rely too heavily on standardized tests to compare students with one another. These tests eventually gauge theories rather than investigate the effectiveness of schools in teaching the fundamental knowledge necessary for success (Fry, 1998; Perrone, 1991; Powell, 1999).

Education leaders in America are proposing more testing of all students at every level of education, including kindergarten and first grade (Clark & Clark, 2001; Mason, 1986). Research indicates that many teachers prepare students for the more demanding standardized assessments that are taught to young children in the following grades (Liebschner, 2001; Ohanian, 2002). In addition, Ohanian and Saracho (1986) state that the increased use of testing in the younger grades likely relates to the growing number of academically oriented preschools and kindergartens. Thus, Deboer and Saracho (2002) note a general trend to teach in kindergarten what used to be included in the first grade curriculum and to push down to preschool what formerly had been accomplished in the kindergarten curriculum. This has become a serious problem in early childhood practice.

The founder of kindergarten, Friedrich Froebel (1837), had a different concept of pre-first grade education on which the American kindergarten is supposedly based. Deboer and Hughes (1897) stated that Froebel did not believe the purpose of pre-first grade education to be entirely academic. Froebel intended this time for children to be like a garden from which children grow and become united with God and eventually with one another. Furthermore, Froebel theorized kindergarten and the early years of schooling as a place where children develop discipline, personality and the necessary social skills in play to succeed within school and in society (Graves, 1912; Hyson, 1991). Along with Froebel, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, although they contradict Froebel in how a child proceeds in learning, both believe that children learn through social interaction and through self-investigation of the environment.

There appears to be a universal tendency to assume that the first grade curriculum be taught in kindergarten and to further push down the kindergarten curriculum to the

preschool years (Deboer & Saracho, 2002). As a result, many teachers may feel undue pressure to either increase student achievement in preparation of standardized tests and/or adapt to the practice of “teach to the test” (Herman & Abedi, 1994; Perrone, 1991; Powell, 1999). In addition, when children are part of a community of fellow learners in which all take part in helping one another socially and academically, children learn best because they make the effort to help one another’s strengths and weaknesses, creating a safe learning environment (Bredekamp & Copple, 2009).

With an emphasis on standardized tests, some school districts even feel the pressure to reduce and/or eliminate recess time (Ohanian, 2002). For example, California, Chicago, and Virginia are a few places in which school districts have removed recess entirely to increase the amount of time teachers can devote to improving students’ academic skills, while other states feel just a few minutes of recess is sufficient as the focus weighs in on academics (Ohanian, 2002). This type of movement negates what the majority of educational psychologists believe regarding the necessity of play during a school day for young students. Lascarides and Hinitz (2000), Morgan (1999), and Saracho (1986) believe play functions as an important role in the development of a child and that recess lets students’ minds relax from the long school day of academics. Ohanian (2002) states that recess allows a student’s mind to be refreshed and reinvigorated since children’s attention spans are limited. Research further states that children are more likely to do well academically if they are physically active (Blakemore, 2003; Dwyer, Sallis, Blizzard, Lazarus, & Dean, 2001).

As Fry, Perrone, and Powell (1999) indicate, there are three areas of concern related to standardized testing of young students:

1. High scores on standardized tests will displace learning as the ultimate goal.
2. Students are significantly compared to one another.
3. Tests eventually evaluate concepts rather than the effectiveness of schools in teaching fundamental information.

In addition, an author from *The Washington Post* commented on how the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which mandated high-stakes assessments are derived from, may cause harm to young students as they are forced to read when they are not developmentally ready (Strauss, 2015). Furthermore, these standards have no documented research of long-term gains from learning to read in kindergarten. These concerns will trickle down their effects to the lower grades, thus establishing a school of test scores and not of learning. Historically, Hyson and Hirsch-Pasek (1991) debated that to focus on standardized tests ignores the whole child's development and that a five-year-old child, a kindergartener, is not developmentally equipped for an extreme mental assessment. Additionally, Rescorla (1991) and Elkind (1981) emphasized that standardized tests at an early age push children through their developmental process, representing a "miseducation," as it may work against their natural development. Froebel (1837), inventor of kindergarten, imagined a kindergarten environment to be one of unity, cooperation, and love, and not of stress. Besides having a child's natural creative desire be unconstrained, a young child's school experiences may promote test anxiety as schools compete with one another as to who received the highest test scores (Harmon, 1990; Kamii & Kamii, 1990; Ohanian, 2002).

Years later, Defending the Early Years, (DEY) was created in 2012 to assemble educators to take action on strategies and procedures that affect young children's

education (Almon, Carlsson-Paige, & McLaughlin, 2015). Dedicated to promote developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood classrooms, DEY also supports educators in neutralizing amendments. “Children learn through playful, hands-on experiences with materials, the natural world, and engaging, caring adults” (Almon, Carlsson-Paige, & McLaughlin, 2015, p. 5). There is no evidence that mastering the CCSS in kindergarten brings long-term advantages in academic success. In addition, Darling-Hammond (2014) states that high-stakes assessment and data-driven accountability have increased the inequalities in education.

The role of a teacher is vital in helping children build a strong foundation in early literacy (Schneider, 2014). The teacher creates a warm and accepting learning environment that will foster curiosity, engaging students in various ways of exploration and respecting each student as an individual. Play-based, active experiences in the early years of learning promote strong early language and trust (Christie & Roskos, 2006).

There is strong expectation from CCSS that kindergarten students should be reading on their own with understanding and purpose. This negates the theory that children do not all develop at the same rate and that development progresses naturally (Schneider, 2013). Although most students are willing to meet high-expectations, their enthusiasm and skills as a learner deteriorate as the inappropriate demands increase with high-stakes testing. The current pushdown of teaching reading to five- and six-year-olds in kindergarten to pass a state assessment is disheartening youngest learners in their childhood (Christie & Roskos, 2006).

Appropriateness of Student Testing

Armstrong (2006) argues that our world's current fixation on academic achievement is harmful to students because it leads educators to "ignore the true developmental needs of children and adolescents" (p. 5). Armstrong (2006) continues to question and explain the past practice of the NCLB as the result of an 80-year control of Academic Achievement Discourse (AAD), which he defines as "the totality of speech acts and written communications that view the purpose of education mostly as a student's ability to obtain high grades and standardized test scores" (p. 10).

The primary goal at the elementary level is not achieved through seatwork but through real-life experiences. In addition, Armstrong (2006) believes that we as a society stress the use of worksheets, textbooks, and homework, spending too much time teaching math, reading, and writing to elementary children.

According to Katz (1995), the purpose for which young children are assessed can help determine what types of assessments would be most beneficial. Katz continues to state that an assessment of a child may serve one of the following:

- To determine progress on meaningful developmental achievements
- To make placement and/or promotion decisions
- To diagnose teaching and learning delays
- To serve as a bias for reporting to parents
- To assist a child with assessing his or her own progress

In order to decide what the purpose of an assessment is, a discussion among invested stakeholders, teachers, parents, and community members should be held. In addition, Katz (1995) mentions such invested members should consider the following:

1. Strategies, plans and assessment instruments are not all intended for one sole purpose; there are different assessments suited for specific needs.
2. The four categories of educational goals—knowledge, dispositions, skills, and feelings—should be included in an overall assessment (Katz, 1995).
3. To minimize errors of assessment strategies, assessments should be made during a student’s informal play and work.

There are risks in assessing young children, according to Katz (1995). Young children are not good test-takers because they become confused by the questions on a test, thinking that the person who designed the test must already know the answers Katz (1995). In agreement, Shepard (1991) and Ratcliff (1995) suggest that the younger the student, the more chance of errors with a student evaluation, assessment, or test, resulting in a greater risk of giving young students a label.

Having awareness of the possible mistakes a standardized assessment could make would better help minimize the oversights in interpretation (Katz & Chard, 1996). It may serve young students best if evaluators strive for a balance between a broad or holistic assessment. With any type of measurement applied to any group of any age in their aptitude, experience, culture, language, interests, and development, some will always score lower and some higher on any particular assessed item (Katz, 1995). Procedures of assessment should specify which resource and strategy is available and which has been assessed appropriately to help each student in his or her school career.

Applications of Student Testing

The goal of large-scale assessments is to improve the educational process by monitoring student achievement. In recent years, federal law has mandated large-scale

assessments for the purpose of accountability in hopes of advancing student performance. There is growing concern that the increase in testing over the years has had a negative impact on student learning (Miller & Almon, 2009). Research has demonstrated that some of the adverse effects of high-stakes testing on students include illness, anxiety, and heightened levels of stress (Triplett, Barksdale, & Leftwich, 2003). Many parents and educators believe that standardized tests are responsible for creating anxiety and tension in students (Mulvenon, Stegman, & Ritter, 2005).

This is not an unreasonable speculation since there has been a steady increase in the prevalence of test anxiety among students over the decades. In the early 1980s, researchers studying testing anxiety reported that between 10% and 25% of students in the United States experienced test anxiety (Hill & Wigfield, 1984). This number has increased to more than 33% of U.S. students experiencing some form of test anxiety (Methia, 2004). Research has established that test anxiety has a negative impact on achievement motivation and results in an inadequate assessment of student ability (Hembree, 1988). This is a serious concern, as inadequate assessments of ability ultimately undermine the validity and reliability of test score interpretability.

The recent adoption of the Common Core State Standards by numerous states brings this issue to the forefront. The Common Core State Standards Initiative was established to provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn and yield well-constructed tests that include tasks with real world relevance. The trend for teachers to administer standardized assessment seems to be more of a state-initiated occurrence rather than a federally sponsored movement (Ohanian, 2002; United States Department of Education, 2002). However, state-initiated tests are driving the

federal movement toward greater standardized testing (Ohanian, 2002). In addition to the recent programs calling for higher standards, America 2000, Goals 2000, and NCLB, all demand standardized assessment at the lower grade levels, especially at the kindergarten level. Moreover, both Republicans and Democrats have requested for standardized assessments to begin at the third or fourth grade level (National Commission of Testing and Public Policy, 1994; Patrick, 1994; United States Department of Education, 2001, 2002).

Standardized test results are the crucial means of measuring the effectiveness of schools (Ohanian, 2002; Shepard & Smith, 1988). Since the federal government is progressively highlighting schools to be held accountable and to guarantee that they propose quality education, schools are warned that continuous failure in providing sufficient instruction could limit federal funding to that particular school (United States Department of Education, 2001, 2002). These state and federally sponsored initiatives attempt to realize honorable goals, such as reducing achievement gaps between minority and White students to safeguard that poor students receive a quality education (United States Department of Education, 2001, 2002).

Focusing on standardized tests subverts the comprehensive development of children. Young children, beginning at the age of five, are not prepared for such demanding and exhaustive assessment of their intellect (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Meisels, 1999; Rescorla, Hyson, & Hirschpasek, 1991). Furthermore, these researchers, along with Elkind (1987), claim that emphasizing standardized tests at an early age accelerates children through the developmental process, demonstrating a “miseducation.”

Vygotsky, Piaget, Froebel, and many other researchers have supported the notion

of “play” in the development of children (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Piaget, 1950; Saracho, 1986; Spodek, 1991). Further, Berk and Winsler (1995) claim that play encourages the ethical quality of self-restraint. Play consists of moral functions, including teaching students to accept rules, cooperate with others, and learn from one another (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987; Piaget, 1950). In addition, educational research indicates high levels of stress with the association of standardized tests in some children, in particular young children, with strong academic emphasis that may then lead to test anxiety and reduce creativity (Hyson et al.; Rescorla et al., 1991). In many schools, this type of atmosphere is encouraged because these schools are regularly in competition with one another, eager to boast the highest standardized test scores in the district (Harmon, 1990; Meisels, 1999; Ohanian, 2002; Perrone, 1990; Thompson, 1990).

Teachers frame their perceptions and beliefs about their abilities to alter their teaching practices to create preferred student outcomes, which in turn reflect a teacher’s perceptions about his or her experiences with individual students. Moreover, these perceptions cultivate feedback from their colleagues and administrators. As stated by Bandura (1977, 1986), beliefs and behavior are difficult to understand unless examined within the social structure in which they operate. A human action must be explained within a codependent fundamental structure in which an individual’s own behavior, characteristics, and surrounding environment interact, as an individual’s feelings and thoughts are a determining factor in how one sees and acts within his or her world (Bandura, 1997, 1986, 1989, 1997). Through their own efforts of self-reflection, people can influence change in themselves, as change is viewed as a unit of control of one’s own personal belief to exercise such action (Bandura, 2001).

The practice of administering standardized testing in the early grades of K-2 most likely challenges the goals it proposes to attain and disengages the social and moral foundation necessary for social and personal success (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). The trend for educators to implement standardized assessment seems to be more of a state-initiated phenomenon rather than a federally supported undertaking (Ohanian, 2002; United States Department of Education, 2002), yet the federal undertaking towards more standardized testing is increasing the number of state-initiated tests (Ohanian, 2002). Additionally, the most recent programs requesting higher standards Goals 2000, America 2000, NCLB, and now ESSA, demand standardized assessment at the kindergarten level, yet all the primary educational initiatives by Republicans and Democrats have proposed beginning standardized testing at the third or fourth grade level (National Commission on Testing and Public Policy, 1994; Patrick, 1994; United States Department of Education, 2001, 2002).

Policy makers currently advocate using student achievement to measure teachers' effectiveness; and by doing so, policymakers create a core assumption that teacher effects should be consistent over the following years (Good, 2014). In addition, research has shown that one reason that teachers differ in their effects from year to year on student achievement is because the characteristics of the students they teach change from year-to-year (Brophy & Evertson, 1981). In agreement, Hills (1997) states that determining young students' (3 to 8 years of age) academic demands requires special attention and is a small factor of student achievement. To assess a young student of his or her growth and achievements requires the ability to understand that students at this young age quickly develop and change, especially in their emotional and social development, signifying

they can be distracted and simply unfocused, as they do not have much interest in being assessed (Hills, 1997).

According to Kassem (2007), the NCLB was labeled by Armstrong as an apex of an 80-year control of Academic Achievement Discourse (AAD). AAD, as stated by Armstrong, is a philosophy based on empirical research regarding the focus of academics in schools. He continues to explain some damaging results of the AAD model: a neglect of other important areas of the curriculum (physical education, music, and art); reduced teacher control of curriculum; “teaching to the test”; manipulation of test results; harmful levels of stress for teachers and students; and the increase of inappropriate practices in schools.

In contrast to Armstrong’s (2006) philosophy on AAD, the Human Development Discourse (HDD) is defined as “the totality of speech acts and written communications that view the purpose of education primarily in terms of . . . facilitating a student’s growth as a whole human being” (p. 39). This practice of humanism is discovered in the works of Piaget, Erikson, Montessori, Dewey, Elkind, and Gardner. Included in Armstrong’s (2006) positive results of the HDD model are the following: a reduced need to classify students according to their disabilities, a curriculum that better communicates students to the real world, teacher and student greater control of the learning environment, increased methods in teaching practices, and more developmentally appropriate practices. In addition, Kassem (2007) mentions that play should be an unplanned, unstructured time for young students to create, pretend, and use found objects imaginatively as recommended by Armstrong (2006) as well as Elkind (1987) and Vygotsky (1929). With play as an integral part of a child’s development, the importance

of adding or maintaining play within the curriculum may become obsolete as the pressure for teachers and standardized test scores rise.

Standardized Testing Consequences

Assessment comes with varied expectations and beliefs among parents, teachers, administrators, school board members, and the community that may cause difficulty acknowledging developmentally appropriate assessment methods. Opportunities in professional development need to be enforced in early childhood classrooms, as these teachers may lack the systematic training in the new forms of assessment (Hills, 1997). Parents and school board members need administrative support and guidance if the ultimate goal of effective results of adopted assessments of young students in kindergarten, first, and second grades is to be accomplished. Assessment standards should be jointed with programs that follow the kindergarten years at school, including primary benchmarks, to produce a comprehensive whole experience within an elementary school (Hills, 1997).

The improvement of any assessment program requires time and effort from all participant stakeholders. Parents, teachers, school board members, and administrators should remember that if the improvement plan of an assessment were deserted too early, issues that were already present, along with added concerns, would disrupt any process of change. It is important to note that problems and resistance may occur with any novel method; the key is to involve all stakeholders from the beginning to enjoy the journey as a unit.

Points of View

Formal testing is believed to be a necessary requirement for significant assessment of students. Many people believe that scores on standardized tests will determine how much students have learned and whether a school district and/or program are accountable. These same people who stress the importance of standardized test scores may question a teacher's ability to be objective, placing a higher value on comparing students' achievement with the achievement of other students in other years, schools, and countries (Hills, 1997). As mentioned throughout this chapter, the pressure from administrators and teachers in higher grades to teachers in the lower grades of kindergarten and first and second grades to give young students the experience with standardized tests, will eventually develop into a feeling of obligation, even if these primary teachers have concerns about administering such tests.

Elected officials, school board members, and administrators should tackle the accountability issue: Are school programs achieving their mission? Although they may rely on standardized testing programs, to ensure that the tests are impartial and rigorous can lead to a more truthful conclusion about student achievement (Hills, 1997). Parents have confidence in standardized testing, which is clearly evidenced by elected officials, public school educators, and by the media in the past 20 years. Attending to the challenges that may overwhelm teachers and their perceptions of student testing, school districts across our nation can evaluate the decision of when to administer standardized testing and in doing so, use their greatest resource, teachers, for optimal success for each student.

Understanding how young children learn should determine how teachers of young

children teach. According to Forman and Kushner (1983), teachers of young children are more like facilitators or guides. Teachers must also prepare their learning classroom environment to include challenging materials to stimulate curiosity and risk-taking as well as activities that are meaningful and relevant to a young learner. Here, the teachers are able to observe what material and information children understand and then are able to ask further questions to encourage their critical thinking (Piaget, 1972). Although it may be possible to drill information to young students until they are able to recite correctly, their true understanding of the information will not be revealed.

Information taught or presented to young students must be meaningful in context of their development and experiences in order for them to remember and fully understand what was presented whether it be mathematics, reading, or any other subject matter (Bredekamp, 1990). A quote from Bredekamp (1990) combines the importance of what and how a young student learns:

Learning information in a meaningful context is not only essential for children's understanding and development of concepts, but is also important for stimulating motivation in children. If learning is relevant for young students, they are more likely to persist with a task and to be motivated more. (pp. 51-53)

Summary

This chapter began with a review of literature relating to the perceptions of elementary teachers on student testing in kindergarten, first, and second grades since 200 B.C., specifically how testing developed analysis and accountability through historical events and landmark legislation. Next, the chapter provided an overview of literature on standardized testing, followed by the methodology employed for this review, limitations,

and the terms for inclusion and exclusion of literature. The chapter then provided the history of student testing, including that of other countries, the appropriateness of student testing, and the applications of student testing. Finally, this chapter discussed the consequences related to standardized testing and the points of view from the lens of invested stakeholders. Chapter III provides the methodology used in this qualitative dissertation.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' perceptions of formal testing of students in Grades K-2 in one urban New Jersey public school district. Specifically, this study sought to explore if teachers believe that formal student testing in the K-2 grades is appropriate and conducive to learning. I chose to do a qualitative case study through the analysis of K-2 teachers' perceptions regarding context, beliefs, and influence of standardized testing in the early grades. One-on-one interviews of selected teachers were conducted.

In this chapter, I provide a description of methods used to answer the research questions listed below. The questions are followed by an explanation of the design of the study and selection of the participants along with a brief profile of the participating teachers. Finally, I describe how data were collected, analyzed, and validated.

Research Questions

1. How do teachers perceive the use of standardized student testing of students in Grades K-2?
2. How, if at all, does standardized student testing influence classroom practices of K-2 teachers?
3. How do teachers' perceptions vary, if at all, about standardized student testing in different grade levels K, 1, and 2?

Background

When I began my educational career in 1994, I knew then that my choice in this field would require patience, joy, and perseverance. Having the privilege of teaching students in the primary and elementary grades and at the university level combined with the experience as an administrator, I have witnessed teachers frustrate easily as the curriculum and standards placed upon them consistently transform. As educational expectations reformed, pressure for teachers increased. By understanding and listening to the teachers' perceptions of student testing, school leaders can shape their school culture in a positive way to make better use of their greatest strength, their teachers, to implement appropriate learning in our schools.

Design

A qualitative study is mostly suited to explore the individual perceptions of participants. Focusing on the phenomenological aspects of qualitative research allows the study to expose teachers' perceptions about student testing in the kindergarten, first, and second grade levels. Research indicates that qualitative research typically deals with a small purposely chosen group of participants who will be able to offer a "rich description" of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2002).

The qualitative research method has to be flexible to allow for developing ideas and thoughts through the process of data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation from the interviews. A qualitative method is best suited to explore the true feelings and opinions of the selected teachers (Creswell, 2002).

Setting

The district selected for this research study is one of 31 New Jersey Abbott districts, now referred to as “SDA Districts,” School Development Authority. These 31 public school districts are provided with solutions to guarantee that their students receive public education in agreement with the state constitution and also requiring for the state to cover all costs for renovation projects for the school building (NJDOE, 2015).

With the influx of funding these 31 districts receive from the state, there are increasing demands for students to succeed academically beginning as early as kindergarten. In this particular district of study, students in Grades K-2 are assessed using various instruments such as DRA2, Dynamic Reading Assessments where students are timed to read a passage and then use their comprehension skills to answer questions. A score is used to analyze what reading level the student falls in and is placed in a reading group as prescribed. In addition to DRA2, Model Curriculum Benchmark Assessments (MCBA) is given to Grades K-2 to gauge reading comprehension skills along with writing skills. These MCBA tests are given three to four times a year to analyze growth or decline of a student’s academic scores. Moreover, students in these primary grades are also given curriculum content-based assessments throughout the school year in reading, math, science, social studies and world language.

Participants

All K-2 elementary teachers in the selected public school district were invited to participate in this research by way of email. Teachers had an opt-out possibility if they chose not to participate. The superintendent of schools approved district participation. A purposeful sample of 16 elementary K-2 teachers, a mix of female and male

participants with varied levels of teaching experience, was selected from the participating New Jersey urban public school district. Interviewing teachers from different grade levels provided me with understandings of each teacher's perceptions. Depending upon the grade level assigned to teach, teachers' ideas may vary.

The participants selected were assigned pseudonyms in order to shield the confidentiality of all. The identity of the participants, along with their demographics, was also shielded. Maxwell (1996) explains that this type of strategy sampling of particular persons, settings and/or events are selected intentionally to deliver relevant information and cannot be gained from probability sampling and/or from convenience sampling.

There were 10 open-ended interview questions created for this study based on the review of the literature. The questions were used to collect qualitative data from early childhood teachers to understand the phenomenon of their perceptions of student testing. Interviews allowed the researcher to recognize participants' perceptions and experiences regarding the topic. Follow-up questions were used to further elaborate on answers given (Creswell, 2009).

Profiles of the Participants

In order to shield the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, details including names and schools are not included in the profiles and findings. Table 1 provides a summary of the demographic information for each participating teacher.

Table 1

Summary of Demographic Information for Each Teacher

Teacher	Grade Level	Age Range	Tenure (T) Non-Tenure (NT)	Number of Years Experience	Female (F) Male (M)
Mrs. Pine	K	32-38 yrs.	T	19	F
Mrs. Brach	K	25-31 yrs.	T	10	F
Mrs. Odin	K	32-38 yrs.	T	18	F
Ms. Blaze	K	39-45 yrs.	T	12	F
Mrs. Yelena	K	46-52 yrs.	T	18	F
Mrs. George	K	25-31 yrs.	NT	1	F
Ms. Asher	1	39-45 yrs.	T	10	F
Mrs. Myrick	1	32-38 yrs.	NT	2	F
Ms. Mabel	1	32-38 yrs.	NT	3	F
Mr. Shane	1	53-59 yrs.	T	23	M
Mrs. Ella	1	32-38 yrs.	NT	2	F
Ms. Chloe	2	32-38 yrs.	T	18	F
Ms. Skyler	2	53-59 yrs.	T	34	F
Ms. Padma	2	53-59 yrs.	T	22	F
Mrs. Elijah	2	53-59 yrs.	T	21	F
Mrs. Seth	2	53-59 yrs.	T	34	F

Mrs. Pine

Mrs. Pine's dream was always to work with children. She began volunteering at a local day care to gain the experience of working with young children. She then received a job at that private day care as a preschool-Grade 3 teacher. After four years, she moved into the public school district and became a kindergarten teacher. Mrs. Pine said, "I found my home, here, in the public schools."

Mrs. Brach

Mrs. Brach began her teaching career 10 years ago in the private sector of education, yearning for the public school atmosphere and benefits. Mrs. Brach describes teaching as "colorful as a crayon box."

Mrs. Odin

Being in public education for 18 years, Mrs. Odin has enjoyed teaching preschool, kindergarten, and first grade. Because she has dual certificates in teaching elementary education and special education, her classroom consists of children with Individual Education Plans (IEP), 504 Modification and Accommodation Plans, and regular educational students receiving no extra accommodations for a disability.

Ms. Blaze

Teaching kindergarten for 12 years has been both fun and rewarding for Mrs. Blaze. She began her teaching career in a private day care setting teaching preschoolers ages three and four years. Ten years ago, a friend of Mrs. Blaze who was a public school teacher, asked the elementary school principal to interview Ms. Blaze for the available kindergarten position. She interviewed and was awarded the job. At present, both remain

co-teachers and friends. “What a great experience it has been to teach. I am honored to be a teacher and look forward to meeting many more students.”

Mrs. Yelena

When I interviewed Mrs. Yelena, she used many adjectives to describe the 18 years of teaching kindergarten: precious, exciting, challenging, and rewarding, to name a few. Mrs. Yelena has always taught in the same public school district and in the same school. “It has truly been a privilege to meet so many students and families.” Mrs. Yelena is worried for the school district, as she has seen so many administrators come and go. “This beautiful district has become the revolving door for administrators. I just feel for the students.”

Mrs. George

With only one year invested in the public school system, Mrs. George feels “at home” and looks forward to another successful year. Mrs. George enjoys teaching first grade and learning from her colleagues.

Ms. Asher

Ms. Asher has been teaching for 10 years: four years in third grade, three years in second grade, and three years in first grade. Ms. Asher prefers first grade, as it is the most challenging and rewarding at the same time. She enjoys teaching them to read and write focusing on New Jersey state curriculum standards. “I think it is important that students are readily prepared for the next grade. If the students aren’t ready, then I did not do my job effectively. I cannot live with that.” Ms. Asher believes it is important to have a good team building amongst teachers within the school unit, especially during a common planning period, to share and network ideas with one another. Ms. Asher puts

much effort towards advanced proficiency for her students' achievement and herself by planning rigorous lesson plans, implementing such in her daily schedule, and reflecting on what she can do to better her students learning.

Mrs. Myrick

Mrs. Myrick has been teaching first grade for two years in this particular district. Previously, Mrs. Myrick taught in a suburban district where she did not feel “needed.” Mrs. Myrick enjoys teaching in an urban district and enjoys speaking with the families. Mrs. Myrick looks forward to the next school year and hopes to learn from her peers.

Ms. Mabel

Being a non-tenured teacher, with three years teaching in a public school, motivates Ms. Mable to perform. “I was always a go-getter. Guess my cheerleading background shines through! I want to see my students succeed and I want to push them to do their very best in their realm of development.” Ms. Mabel’s philosophy of teaching is to create a boundary of trust and the students will perform.

Mr. Shane

Mr. Shane, a teacher in the same district for 23 years, has been in multitudes of grade levels. Having taught Grades 5, 7, 8, and 10, and currently Grade 1, Mr. Shane has found his educational home in the elementary school. Mr. Shane has a strong background in math and enjoys teaching the first grade students. “I feel math and English have prevailed over other school subjects. I want to instill the love of math in young students so they do not become fearful of numbers and equations.”

Mrs. Ella

Although Mrs. Ella has two years invested in the public schools as a non-

tenured teacher, she has five years experience in the private schools in the same school district of study. She is familiar with some of her current students, as they or their siblings have attended the private school in which she was previously employed. Mrs. Ella describes teaching first graders as “small puzzle pieces being placed together to mold a larger picture.”

Ms. Chloe

Ms. Chloe’s background includes teaching in first and second grades; and while she prefers first grade, she struggles with second grade to “make it fun even with the continuous pressure to have students succeed although they are not ready to.” Ms. Chloe believes in peer teaching and sharing ideas to help better each student.

Ms. Skyler

With 34 total years in public education, Ms. Skyler’s passion for students remains present. Ms. Skyler began her teaching career as a first grade teacher for six years, then taught third grade for three years, and has been teaching second grade for 25 years. Ms. Skyler enjoys teaching the second grade students, as “their curiosity is a magnet for learning.”

Ms. Padma

Ms. Padma has extensive experience in the classroom. She believes in testing students. Ms. Padma believes that it is a teacher’s responsibility to balance instructional content incorporating test-taking skills.

Mrs. Elijah

Mrs. Elijah’s 21 years teaching in the classroom has gained her considerable experience with students. She believes that using the collected data from student testing

enables her to group students into their academic levels. Mrs. Elijah stressed how some administrators need to understand early childhood development and the appropriate ways young learners adapt to information.

Mrs. Seth

Mrs. Seth's 34 years total in public education has ranged from the elementary, middle, and high school grade levels. Currently, Mrs. Seth has been in second grade for three years. Mrs. Seth brings to her classroom a wealth of curriculum knowledge and experience.

Data Collection

Approval was given by the school district's superintendent to conduct research among its teachers. An expert panel consisting of three school administrators was established to help gain validity and reliability with the interview questions. Once I received approval from Seton Hall's University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the school system, this panel assisted the researcher in determining if there were any limitations, flaws, or other vulnerabilities within the interview design. Their feedback helped the researcher revise interview questions prior to interviewing the participants. This expert panel did not participate in the actual research study.

A comparison table (see Table 1) was completed to visually demonstrate a summary of demographic information for each participant. Table 2 provides the research questions followed by interview questions that were used to collect data. Table 3 provides sample interview questions that established a trusting and open environment for participants to feel comfortable. The interview questions were developed after a careful review of the research and based on my experiences as an early childhood teacher.

The interviews helped me explore the teachers' perceptions of standardized testing and how they believe it has impacted their teaching practices. Abernathy-Dyer, Ortlieb, and Cheek (2013) stated that it is one's (teacher's) own beliefs and values that influence her work, not necessarily what is printed on the pages of a manual.

Table 2

Research and Interview Questions

Research Question 1: How do teachers perceive the use of standardized student testing of students in Grades K-2?

Interview Questions:

To what extent, if any, do you perceive that the use of standardized testing in your classroom to be beneficial?

What are the perceived weaknesses, if any, of the use of standardized testing in your classroom?

To what extent, if any, do you think your students are developmentally ready for formal student testing in your current grade level?

To what extent, if any, is your teaching philosophy of how young children learn consistent with testing of young students?

Research Question 2: How, if at all, does standardized student testing influence classroom practices of K-2 teachers?

Interview Questions:

To what extent, if any, do you perceive the use of standardized testing in your classroom creates an opportunity for discussion about teaching practices?

To what extent, if any, are the current curriculum materials appropriate for the developmental age of your students?

Tell me about your class schedule. To what extent, if any, does it offer opportunities for play-based programs?

What do you see as your most important task(s) and responsibilities in the teaching profession?

Research Question 3: How do teachers' perceptions vary, if at all, about standardized student testing in different grade levels K, 1, and 2?

Interview Questions:

To what extent, if any, do you perceive the use of standardized testing in your classroom improves your classroom practice?

Table 3

Sample Interview Questions Geared to Create Comfort

Can you tell me how many years experience you have as a teacher?

Can you tell me how many years experience you have in your current grade level?

What do you see as your most important task(s) and responsibilities in the teaching profession?

Would you like to add anything else that you feel may be relevant that we have not discussed?

After I began my interviews, participants had much to reveal in response to my questions. I focused on creating a trusting rapport with each subject, and I reminded them that all data would be kept confidential and anonymous as previously promised. Interviews took place in a private conference room at a local coffee shop and a private room in a restaurant. Each interview was no longer than 30 minutes.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is a reflexive and interactive process that begins once data are collected during the interviews instead of after the data collection is completed. Data analysis and data collection are not necessarily viewed as two separate steps in the qualitative study. Qualitative methods of data analysis provide ways of examining,

contrasting, comparing, identifying, and interpreting meaningful patterns of themes (Stake, 1995).

The identification of significant themes, categories, or concepts is a general procedure in the analysis of qualitative data (Creswell, 2003). After the data were transcribed from the interviews, I carefully read the results and took notes. Themes help the researcher “get a sense of the whole” (Creswell, 2003, p. 192). A reading of the documents again ensures the researcher creates a set of codes to further examine collected data.

After reading the documents again, emergences of themes, concepts, ideas, and relationships, also known as emergent codes, arose in the participants’ responses during the interviews and were marked accordingly. I labeled, collected, and systematized the data collected from the interviews for analysis. As explained in Saldana (2008), a code is frequently a short phrase or word that representatively provides a summative, relevant, most important feature and/or characteristic for a piece of visual or language-based data. Gibbs (2009) states that a coding scheme and categories can be compiled from three sources: the data, previous related reports, and theories. Table 4 provides a list of the preliminary codes created during the analytical process.

Table 4

List of Preliminary Codes

Code	Theme	Code	Theme
DAP	Developmentally Appropriate Practice	rout	routine of schedule
anx	anxiety from students and teachers	rig	rigor of instruction
str	stress about testing	st tstg	standardized testing
frus	frustration about testing	dta	collected data
pr	pressure on teachers	bld disc	builds discussion
curr	curriculum changes often	impr	improves class instruction
admin	administrator	sup	lack of support from administrators

Once interview transcripts were coded with preliminary codes, I re-read through the data to ensure that the codes were accurate and to find the emerging themes. Next, I began to combine the codes into themes. I found four major themes of teachers' perceptions of formal testing of students in Grades K-2: pressure from upper grade level teachers; stress and anxiety; frequent change in curriculum; and the lack of administrative support. I arranged the data according to the codes and categorized them into four themes and placed the corresponding data under each theme.

Validity and Reliability

According to Creswell (2003), the researcher must use member checking. I had a panel of experts in the field of education; in this case, three administrators reviewed the interview questions in order to achieve reliability in the methods of data collection. I tried to acknowledge each participant's biases as a method of dealing with them in their research. To eliminate any effect of my own bias that I may have on the data participants give, I used a pre-determined set of questions that were reviewed and

approved by the expert panel to avoid bias and to safeguard that the responses from the interview questions were accurate and reliable. Participants had an opportunity to review the transcribed interviews for accuracy.

Summary

Chapter III provided a description of method of qualitative measures proposed for this dissertation. It described the research method and design used to answer the research questions, an explanation of the design of the study, a description of how the sampling of participants were selected along with a brief description of the site. Then, this chapter described the interview method of data collection used to answer the three overarching research questions. Last, Chapter III provided an explanation of how the data were collected and analyzed and a description of the validity and reliability of the interview questions and research procedures. Chapter IV presents the findings.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter presents the significant findings of the study and an analysis of these findings. The first section presents an overview of the purpose and context of the study. The next section presents the three research questions that guided the study and the themes that emerged relating to the research questions. The final section presents a summary of the findings.

For our youngest learners, education includes the first years of school where the development of social and emotional needs are nurtured, students are engaged, supported, and challenged, and where an increase in student independence and self-confidence is individually met. With the current focus on academic and standards achievement, the aforementioned may not be visible in all schools.

The purpose of the study was to examine teachers' perceptions of formal testing of students in Grades K-2. I sought to explore if the teachers in this study believed that formal student testing in the K-2 grades is appropriate and conducive to learning. Furthermore, exploring teachers' perceptions regarding K-2 formal student testing could provide school districts with information that can help them to reflect on and assess the benefits of testing these young students.

The site selected for this study was an urban district in northern New Jersey. The district introduced standardized testing of primary grade students in K-2 in 2012. Sixteen teachers who participated in the study were asked the same questions in a semi-structured

interview. Questions were designed to explore the phenomenon of teacher perceptions of student testing in primary grades. The research questions were as follows:

1. How do teachers perceive the use of standardized student testing of students in Grades K-2?
2. How, if at all, does standardized student testing influence classroom practices of K-2 teachers?
3. How do teachers' perceptions vary, if at all, about standardized student testing in different grade levels K, 1, and 2?

The following section presents the responses from the teacher interviews regarding standardized testing of children in the primary grades. Included is an analysis of the themes that emerged from each of the research questions.

Research Question 1 and Related Themes

Research Question 1: How do teachers perceive the use of standardized student testing of students in Grades K-2?

Due to the high-stakes testing demands of primary grade teachers, all but one teacher in this study expressed an overwhelming theme of stress and anxiety in their students coupled with high levels of worry and a consensus of low-confidence levels of students. Standardized tests are not exact measures of student success. The results of standardized tests may lead to a perceived insignificant value of teachers and can produce unfavorable results with young students.

Interview questions (see Appendix A) Numbers 1, 2, 5 and 8 were designed to address Research Question 1 through asking 16 participants about the possible benefits of standardized testing, the perceived weaknesses of standardized testing, the developmental

readiness of formal student testing in the current grade level, and if their teaching pedagogy is consistent with testing of young students.

In each grade level K-2 in the district, students must take standardized tests in Math and English Language Arts (ELA), utilizing the assessments STAR Renaissance and Model Curriculum. STAR, an acronym for Standardized Test for the Assessment of Reading, is no longer referred to as an assessment just for reading; mathematics has been added as an additional subject to assess. The STAR Renaissance assessments and Model Curriculum assessments are used in the participating school district three times a year to monitor students' understanding of state standards. The model curriculum includes the Common Core State Standards of grade-level content arranged into five units of study, targeting the sequence of skills for each unit per grade. Students must learn new skills in a six-week format and meet a proficiency score to pass by completing a series of varying levels of text difficulty.

As testing has become an integral part of teaching, teachers in the study continuously expressed feeling the pressure to “teach to the test” rather than use their individual, creative ways to implement the curriculum. The intent to assess every K-2 student with hopes of producing successful academic learners by administering these assessments contradicts what the teachers in Grades K-2 stated they believe is best for their students.

Stress and Anxiety

The first theme that emerged from this study was stress and anxiety. Analysis of interview documents disclosed the teachers' emphasis on the high stress and anxiety levels of their students when taking a standardized test. Here, “stress and anxiety” refers

to the adverse effects of high-stakes testing on students, including illness, anxiety, and heightened levels of stress (Triplett, Barksdale, & Leftwich, 2003). Stress and anxiety were also present amongst teachers preparing and administering these tests to the young students. Teachers in the study felt pressured by the community and stakeholders to have students ready for testing. Each of these concerns weighed heavily with teachers who were interviewed, as they felt that it was their responsibility for their students to be happy and enjoy learning in school. Testing takes from 45 minutes to 90 minutes to complete. This monopolizes at least two to three weeks of class time to test the entire class of students for each unit or 8 to 12 weeks during the school year. Teachers complained that their students become frustrated and worried that their performance was not of passing grade. Furthermore, teachers stated that as soon as one assessment was completed, they needed to quickly play “catch up” with the curriculum standards to prepare for the next standardized assessment.

There were two patterns that emerged from this theme of stress and anxiety.

These two patterns were the following:

1. High levels of worry for students by teachers
2. A concern that students' confidence levels were being compromised

High Levels of Worry

The first pattern that emerged from the theme *stress and anxiety* was the high levels of worry of both students and teachers regarding standardized student testing. When I asked participants how they perceive the use of standardized testing of their students, the kindergarten teachers responded, “Testing at this age causes too much stress and frustration. Kindergarten students would rub their eyes, squeeze their hair, and some

students would just cry while other students would just stare at the computer screen” (Blaze). Equally, Mrs. Brach said, “Testing is not developmentally appropriate. Students of this age level are not capable of understanding how to formulate and process questions that are above their developmental stage. I remember when two female kindergarten students began crying, screaming, ‘I can’t do this!’ while another student just kept asking when he could play on the computer.” Across all participants interviewed, this theme of stress and anxiety prevailed.

Because Mrs. Odin has dual certificates in teaching elementary education and special education, her classroom consists of children with Individual Education Plans (IEPs), 504 Modification and Accommodation Plans, and regular education students receiving no extra accommodations for a disability. Mrs. Odin feels “helpless and sad” for the students when testing is administered because she sees her students struggle with simple directions. Although students with IEPs and 504 Modification Plans are accommodated with additional time and some even with additional teacher support, Mrs. Odin feels that extra time and support is still not enough and that standardized testing remains inappropriate for young children. “I don’t like sitting here, Mrs. Odin,” a first grader told me, “When can I play with the blocks again?” (Odin). Continuous high levels of worry in students are demonstrated through crying, screaming, pulling of their hair, putting their heads down, and even shutting down the computer.

Additionally, when the first grade teachers responded to Research Question 1, most of their answers coincided with those of kindergarten teachers. “Standardized testing is not for primary grades. It only tests the individual student’s performance on that day” (Asher). Ms. Myrick agreed as she stated, “With this test prep, anxiety is felt

by both the students and teachers.” Ms. Mabel added, “Kids need so much support. When kids are not developmentally ready to focus, kids will not perform well.”

With most participants in agreement that standardized testing in Grades K-2 should not be administered, one first grade teacher, Mr. Shane, disagreed with his colleagues and argued, “It is up to the teacher and his or her knowledge of classroom management and curriculum content to boost students to optimal success. It is a teacher’s responsibility to perform for his or her students.” With 23 years teaching experience, Mr. Shane is not reluctant to hold back his opinions regarding the testing of young learners. “I have witnessed in all grade levels of teaching the lax attitude of teachers when the curriculum, along with responsibility, becomes more rigorous. Perhaps teachers would serve their students better when they are held accountable. Teachers should stop complaining and teach!” (Shane).

Mr. Shane’s distinct perceptions provide this study with another perspective angle to consider. His colleagues in Grades K-2 have shared their perceptions of the negative aspects of standardized testing, yet Mr. Shane’s perceptions are more negatively geared towards the teacher and not so much the testing itself.

The second grade teachers took some additional time and reflected when answering the same research questions. After I reminded them that their answers were confidential and names would be replaced with pseudonyms, they smiled and began sharing their perceptions. “Students in the lower grades need more support when completing tasks. If students do not receive the support, students act out and shut down, causing an uproar of problems during testing” (Chloe). Ms. Skyler and Ms. Padma agreed with Ms. Chloe by stating, respectively, “Kids cannot handle the unnecessary use

of testing and all of its components of test prep to administering tests” and “The excessive use of class time utilized for test prep is a major weakness, as it does not teach the necessary skills to enhance life-long learners. Instead, it pushes information for a student to absorb that he or she is not ready for.”

While stress and anxiety was a recurring theme from most participants, teachers’ perceptions regarding standardized student testing differed. Most teachers, like Ms. Blaze, Ms. Brach, Ms. Myrick, Mrs. Odin, and Ms. Chloe, expressed frustration and worry with testing of their students, while Mr. Shane, on the other hand, expressed frustration with teachers. “Teachers need to understand that it is our role in society to teach and not complain” (Shane). He continued, “Teachers criticize when a new initiative comes out and instead of tackling it, most teachers, colleagues, whine. It is annoying.” Mr. Shane shared that his students may display frustration and stress with standardized student testing by scratching their head or constantly asking to go to the bathroom. Mr. Shane then proceeded to inform me that he tells his students that when their assessments are completed to the best of their ability, a special treat will be distributed. When asked what the special treat was, Mr. Shane responded, “A lollipop. My classroom is rigorous, organized, and studious. I expect my students to learn and they expect for me to teach. I do not waste time with feelings and emotions. I focus more on what the product is and how can we get to the correct outcome” (Shane). Mr. Shane spoke with pride and a matter-of-fact sort of way for teaching. Mr. Shane believes in the teaching profession and the importance to instill the correct information into the minds of young learners.

It is not possible to tell from the interviews in this study exactly how much dedication goes into test prep and if test prep distracts teachers from their authentic effort as professionals to teach their students the appropriate grade level skills necessary for student growth. Teachers have expressed the worry that their students' confidence levels are being neglected.

Confidence Levels

The second pattern that emerged from the theme of stress and anxiety was the confidence levels of the students regarding standardized student testing. Teachers shared how their students' confidence levels dropped during testing, causing great distress within the classroom. In each grade level class, teachers stated that at least 85-90% of their students felt anxious about testing. "Students would groan, put their heads down, and some would even kick chairs when the word *testing* is mentioned, saying, "I don't want to do this!" said Mrs. Pine.

This notion is clear amongst participants. Whether teachers agree or disagree that testing is appropriate, they do agree that testing does not support a student's confidence level. Besides the understanding that testing does not support levels of confidence in a student, teachers like Ms. Asher and Ms. Mabel fear that their students may dislike school, resulting in behavior problems. Ms. Asher stated the following:

It is a lot of pressure I put on myself and on the students because I set high expectations for success. It is a great feeling to see students meet Proficient and/or Advanced Proficient. When I see a student's confidence declining, I reflect upon the profession I chose as a teacher and decide what I can do to better their school learning. It pains me to see a child misbehave because they are unable to

perform on what other people think they should perform on. This misbehavior is not a student's fault. I feel that it is ours, as educational leaders, to guide students towards success and not failure.

Thus, Ms. Asher said she makes conscious decisions to prepare better lesson plans, including adding downtime for students to best suit their academic needs. Ms. Mabel added, "Anxiety is observable when preparing for testing and when students are tested. Students display a lack of confidence by screaming, 'I need help with this question,' and 'I can't do this!'"

For Mrs. Elijah and Mrs. Seth, students perform best when "they are in their natural element." Most teachers expressed how students could not focus nor do their best under conditions like standardized testing. "All kids are not made from one mold. We teachers are constantly told how we must differentiate instruction to allow for each student to succeed, yet people (stakeholders and community members) expect that all students should be able to perform just like their peers" (Seth). This belief has been repeated amongst participants during the interviews along with the confusion of what is expected of the teachers during testing.

Participants expressed how difficult it becomes to redirect their students back to academic focus when they are crying, fidgeting, and screaming, all due to the frustration of standardized student testing. Rubbing backs, telling a student that everything will be "OK," is not always effective according to the participants. The high levels of worry and the lack of confidence displayed by a student is indicative of the effect standardized student testing may have upon a young student. Most of the participants believed that the stress and anxiety resulting from standardized student testing weighs too heavily on their

young students and that whether standardized student testing should be implemented in the primary grade levels may need to be re-evaluated

Research Question 2 and Related Themes

Research Question 2: How, if at all, does standardized student testing influence classroom practices of K-2 teachers?

This research suggests mixed feelings related to standardized student testing and its influence on K-2 classroom practices. Teachers understand that although some may not be in agreement of testing in Grades K-2, they agree that testing does have a negative and/or positive influence in their classroom practices. A positive influence on teaching practice emerges from the data produced by a test. When analyzed properly, information is provided that can help a teacher design individual activities to address each student's needs. The primary negative influence on teaching practice emerges from the time needed for testing. Testing time reduces a teacher's ability to offer creative, hands-on experiences for students. Testing interferes with the natural and curious way young students learn. Teaching practice was also affected by frequent district changes of initiatives.

Finally, the multitude of district instructional demands, data reports, changes in reading and math programs, and the need for administrative support, conveyed that teachers have difficulty doing their jobs.

Interview questions (see Appendix A) Numbers 4, 6, 7, and 9 were designed to address Research Question 2, asking the 16 participants if classroom practices are influenced by the implementation of standardized student testing in Grades K-2.

Teachers in Grades K-2 stated that student testing influenced classroom practices in both a negative and positive way. It was the beliefs of each teacher, in each grade level, that despite the challenges of testing, their intent was to effectively apply best practices within their classroom(s). Due to the need of test prep, teachers felt limited in organizing their classroom environment with materials to promote curiosity, hands on learning experiences, and risk-taking opportunities that would challenge their young learners. Although challenging, Grade K-2 teachers were determined to support their students' interests by providing an engaging classroom while adhering to the state-mandated initiatives.

Kindergarten teachers believed that there are some factors regarding testing that could influence classroom practices. "I do think that the data retrieved from testing influences my teaching, as it could help guide my students towards a more productive outcome by understanding what I need to work on for each student" (Brach). In agreement with Mrs. Brach's beliefs and influences regarding standardized student testing, both Mrs. Odin and Ms. Blaze stated that if the data from testing are interpreted properly, the results could produce classroom centers geared towards students' growth and weaknesses. Furthermore, Mrs. Odin and Ms. Blaze continued to state that although testing is currently happening, most teachers in the primary grades are unaware of interpreting the data results, making the entire process of testing meaningless to them. It has been shared among these particular three teachers, Mrs. Brach, Mrs. Odin and Ms. Blaze, that a productive professional development is warranted and necessary for teachers to be effective in analyzing the data.

Contradictory to the previous three kindergarten teachers' opinion on how

standardized student testing influences classroom practice, Mrs. Pine, Mrs. Yelena, and Mrs. George, believed that although testing influences their teaching practices and/or classroom practices, they felt that testing remains inappropriate. “Standardized student testing does not belong in kindergarten. Testing negatively influences my classroom practices. There is no time for student exploration anymore. Recess is cut back entirely from the daily schedule and is incorporated during lunchtime: 20 minutes for eating and 20 minutes for recess” (Pine). Mrs. Odin agreed with Mrs. Pine and added, “Our youngest learners need time to socially engage with their peers. They are being drilled with reading and math skills all day in class. Being socially active is a part of their developmental growth and allows for a child to develop fundamental behaviors such as following the rules, listening to one another, asking for help, and staying calm with others, which are necessary for success. Reducing recess time, the basic element of a child’s learning day, is only diminishing peer interactions and that is not ok.”

In addition, Mrs. Yelena and Mrs. George stated that it was not “worthy” to put these two words of *testing* and *influence* in the same sentence because it is an erroneous statement. “First, can I just say that testing is silly? The whole idea of testing in kindergarten is ridiculous. With that said, of course testing influences my classroom practices. The daily routine has been changed from what was once Free Play, where students actively and socially engage in learning centers, is now memorizing sight words and performing math tasks such as solving word problems when some kindergartners are unable to read!” (Yelena). “Struggling daily with what I want to teach and what I need to teach,” stated George, “is an impossible fight. But I will not give up!”

Although kindergarten teachers do not feel that standardized student testing belongs in that grade level, three of the six kindergarten teachers feel that test data may address learning needs and assist with the implementation of setting appropriate learning goals and plans for their young learners. The consensus among these three kindergarten teachers is for a conducive, strategic professional development plan to strengthen their knowledge of interpreting the data effectively.

Adding to this study, first grade teachers believed that standardized student testing influences classroom practices. “Testing is viewed more as a forced concept to implement into the classroom without any suggestions or thoughts from a teacher” (Myrick). She continued, “Standardized student testing influences my classroom practice but in an unfavorable way. Because testing causes so much stress on my students, many behavioral issues arise that need to be addressed in lieu of a hands-on learning lesson that students in first grade should be experiencing. It is frustrating” (Myrick).

Ms. Mable contributed to this research question by stating, “Standardized student testing does not create an opportunity for growth; rather, it creates more of a hindrance towards real learning.” In addition to her fellow colleagues, Ms. Ella believes that the influence of testing should not interfere with the academic goals she has created for her students; but it does. “It is so absurd how people who are not in education create standardized tests thinking they know what and how a child thinks and then hold students accountable for a test that is basically created from a foundation of a business degree!” After a long pause, Mrs. Ella continued, “I have 22 first grade students. Each of these students comes to school in September barely reading or writing, and with low comprehension. Along with their input, the student and I set bi-monthly goals to improve

specific reading or math skills necessary for academic success. Testing influences my classroom practice by interfering with this goal process by blocking the natural and curious way students learn.”

The remaining first grade teachers felt strongly about their beliefs of using the data results to strengthen classroom practice. “Many teachers cringe when they think of data. This is only because they are unaware of how to read it, interpret it, and how to apply it to benefit the students. Data is not going anywhere. We, as a teaching society, should embrace testing as it surrounds us, especially our children” (Shane). In alignment with Mr. Shane’s views on the influence testing has in classroom practice, Ms. Asher shared the importance of comparing student data amongst peers. “When receiving test data scores, I believe it is indicative to understand your students’ score in comparison to their grade level peers within the school district, state, and nationwide. We, as teachers, need to see where our students are placed on the learning curve to truly understand how we can better prepare students for their future academic careers.” Ms. Asher smiled, tapped her pencil and continued, “The results from standardized student testing allows for a teacher to view a student’s baseline data score to then use it for educational lessons. These data results can then build for rich discussions with the student, parent, and teacher to understand where each student begins and how each student can get to the finish line successfully in their learning growth. Teachers are then able to analyze deficiencies to better create appropriate prescriptions for success.” Testing does influence classroom practice. It helps me understand where my students are academically and what skills I need to work on (Asher).

In response to this research question, more than half of the second grade teachers felt that standardized student testing does not influence their classroom practice. “The materials we, as teachers, are given at the beginning of the school year to teach our students, do not connect with what the tests ask students to do. A disconnect remains between what the teacher implements using the given instructional materials and what the students must pass on a standardized test. It is unreasonable to expect students to achieve proficiency when we set them up for failure from the beginning” (Chloe). In addition, Ms. Skyler and Mrs. Seth believe that it is up to the teacher to manage the testing demands within their classroom practices.

Second grade teachers Mrs. Elijah and Ms. Padma, in contrast, believe that standardized student testing has a direct influence on their classroom practices. “Testing allows for a teacher-student to discuss what they need to work on regarding academics and how they will achieve it within a manageable timeframe. I am also able to use the collected data to group students according to their outcomes to effectively teach them the proper skills necessary for them to improve and achieve success” (Elijah). Ms. Padma consents to having influence in her classroom practice due to standardized student testing. “The testing results help shape classroom design of daily lessons, classroom setup, and daily discussions. If teachers utilize what is expected of them using the CCCS within the daily structure of the classroom, it would enable the student to adapt to a rigorous environment, tolerating the pressures and/or stress that a test may bring” (Padma).

In kindergarten, first, and second grades, teachers had mixed feelings about the influence standardized student testing has on classroom practices and learning. However,

a few teachers in Grades 1 and 2 elaborated on the two perceived benefits of student testing: (1) The collected data results allow for student grouping in the classroom, and (2) the testing results also serve as a tool to differentiate instruction so that every student can learn according to his or her individual ability.

District Reading and Math Program Initiatives

The second theme that emerged from this study was the frequent changes in the reading and math programs in the district. The changes in these programs require changes in approaches. In the past decade, this school district has implemented four reading programs and three math programs. Although each program has its pros and cons, it is time-consuming to fully grasp all of its components to carry out to the students in a successful way. Grades K-2 teachers agreed that although confusion exists due to the constant variations of how teachers are to apply these new programs, it (confusion) is all part of this school district's culture. "This district is a rotating door for administrators and program practices. In the past 10 years, there have been four superintendents and over 10 administrative changes" (Yelena). Asher adds, "Consistency works best for students and for teachers as well. It has been difficult over the years with the many turnovers in administration and in math and reading programs. It has been more difficult to implement the Common Core State Standards and all of its indicators."

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS), for example, were implemented by the school district to ensure all students, regardless of where they live and graduate high school, are prepared for college, career(s) and life. The model curriculum is intended to assist school districts with the implementation of the CCSS by providing examples from the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards into six-week formative assessments

targeting student-learning objectives (SLO's) that explain what students need to know within each unit in Grades K-12. Participants expressed their apprehension towards increasing student rigor in the classroom as a result of the increase of student testing. This is a clear indication that student testing causes changes in teaching, which results in the influence on classroom practices.

Teachers had expressed the need of reliability, consistency, and employing a research-based program utilized and understood by all stakeholders invested within the school district. Teachers believed that it is important and beneficial for students, staff, and community members to ensure that a common language is understood amongst all involved, encouraging the entire district to move forward in unison. "To work in a school district with a disturbance in teaching strategies would not be enjoyable. Testing in the younger grade levels could cause a negative commotion. I love this school district. Many of the teachers do. We want the best for our students; and should that indicate testing, then all we ask is for is guidance and support from administrators" (Asher).

Once another reading or math program was introduced to the teaching staff, teachers would make sure that what is expected of them to instruct to their learners is understood and executed. "We teachers would always take it upon ourselves to study the new practices of the program and its components. Although sometimes we feel confused, we remain calm and continue to learn the new material" (Chloe). According to Ms. Blaze, "The regular changing of district programs not only causes confusion but also causes frustration. It becomes a losing battle to even try."

The lack of teacher involvement in the reading and math programs ultimately affects the influence on classroom practices. Including invested stakeholders as part of

the process may better serve its constituents. Teachers continued to share that it is important to have a fair and equitable decision process to choose the right instructional programs, such as reading and math, for their students in the school district. “After all, teachers spend the most time with students. It may benefit both teachers and students to be involved in the process of researching and discussing which program, reading or math, best suits our learners; therefore producing positive influences on classroom practices and resulting in an accommodating, overall environment” (Blaze).

The Need for Administrative Collaborative Support

The third theme that emerged from this study was the need for administrative and collaborative support. Participants felt that most administrators are deficient in early childhood knowledge. As Ms. Myrick said, “I think having an administrator with an early childhood degree is important so he or she fully understands what should and should not be taught in an early childhood classroom.” Similarly, Ms. Mabel stated the following:

I feel that teachers need to have administration on board with early grade teachers so they, too, understand what is expected from such young learners instead of what the State of New Jersey expects of them.

Even though Ms. Mabel’s passion for teaching and her students was evident during the interview, she still found the need to share that she works hard every night on her lesson plans, as she continuously revises and differentiates the lessons to best serve her young learners. Ms. Mabel also stressed how she believed in this study. With an enthusiastic smile, she stated, “Testing seems to be a fixture in education. Perhaps when administrators and policy makers read this, changes could begin with altering or even

eliminating the testing of young students” (Mabel).

Most teachers agreed that some administrators do not understand the necessary skills and even the materials required for young learners to be successful. Ms. Asher expressed the importance of an administrator “understanding that a young learner needs to discover things through play and that there are reasons for the deconstructing and reconstructing of thoughts and ideas.” Mrs. Elijah added, “Early Childhood is misinterpreted as just *play* when it involves so much more. Play, a time for students to engage with their peers in a non-structured way, motivates a child to socially learn from their peers by actively participating in groups.” According to Grade K-2 teachers, the importance of play and how it affects the lives of children is vital to their development. The opportunity a child has to interact with other children in his or her age group is valuable and should not be compromised.

Teachers believed that if administrators understood the development and needs of Grades K-2 students, then perhaps, as a combined effort, teachers and administrators would be able to devise a new plan for the youngest learners.

Research Question 3 and Related Themes

Research Question 3: How do teachers’ perceptions vary, if at all, about standardized student testing in different grade levels K, 1, and 2?

This research question raised important evidences of how Grade K-2 teachers perceived standardized student testing in each grade. Teachers recognized that even though some may believe in the benefits of standardized student testing in Grades K-2, they concur that testing has a perception of being harmful for young learners.

Kindergarten teachers felt that standardized student testing does not belong in this

grade level as testing pedagogically conflicts with best practice. First grade teachers differ with one another as to whether standardized testing at this level is beneficial or unsuitable. Second grade teachers also vary in belief by stating that standardized student testing interferes with their instructional purposes and/or that there is value in testing.

Furthermore, Grades K-2 teachers were unified in their overall feelings of frustration and angst with the upper grade teachers to have students prepared and ready to perform on the upcoming standardized testing.

Interview question (see Appendix A) Number 3 was designed to address Research Question 3 by asking the 16 study participants if their perceptions differed regarding standardized student testing in each grade level of K-2.

Perceptions of standardized student testing differed by grade level. All kindergarten teachers believed that testing does not belong in this grade level. “Kindergarten students are just not ready for school in the fall let alone ready for taking a standardized test!” (Pine). In agreement with Mrs. Pine, Mrs. Yelena added, “In the early grades, students are not familiar with school and its rules, nor have the appropriate interaction skills to act socially with other children. Can we really expect young students to perform well on standardized student testing when holding a pencil is difficult for some!” Soon after this comment, Mrs. Yelena sat back and reflected about the first day of school of her first year of teaching over 30 years ago. “Education has come a long way, yet at the same time, has gone backwards in time. We need to be the policy makers for students, not those people who work in their offices, getting paid well, without having any teaching experiences. It is ludicrous and so sad. I look forward to the day when the educational system is challenged to make the necessary changes for our students. It is

they, the young students who suffer, and I find this cyclical path sad” (Yelena). With a sigh and grin, Mrs. Yelena sat back in the chair and shared memories of her beginning teaching days. She remembered her students’ names, parents, and the very first teaching lesson she performed. Listening to Mrs. Yelena and observing the joy she had sharing such thoughts was unforgettable. In accord, Mrs. Brach, Mrs. Odin, and Mrs. George affirmed that they do not believe in standardized student testing for young children. With a little over a decade of teaching experience, Ms. Blaze was unsure of how she felt about standardized student testing. “Even with a few years under my belt, I have learned that teaching should be a profession of doers, not robots. I just feel that testing produces robotic thinking rather than creative, more outside-of-the-box way of thinking” (Brach).

Most first and second grade teachers were divided on the ease of standardized student testing. First grade teachers differed in their perceptions about standardized student testing. Three of the five first grade teachers felt that testing is unsuitable for students, while two teachers believed that standardized student testing delivers benefits for both students and teachers. “I absolutely do not agree with standardized student testing for my first grade students. Testing is more appropriate for middle school and upper grade level students, where they could cognitively solve problems that developmentally support their brain growth” (Mabel). Ms. Ella, in agreement with Ms. Mabel, contributed to this research study by stating, “Student readiness varies. I do not believe students are developmentally ready to fully understand how to read, process, and compute on a standardized test.” In addition, Ms. Myrick stated, “It is a shame that this is what education, specifically teaching, has become: test prep and student preparedness for the next grade level. It is up to us, the teachers, to provide the proper tools for

students to gain the mastery skills for success and not just to pass a standardized test.”

Contrary to the perceptions of the three aforementioned first grade teachers, Ms. Asher and Mr. Shane expressed their positive beliefs on the effects standardized student testing has had on their students. “If teachers make standardized student testing into a game and relevant to their existing world, any student could be ready for testing. I believe it is how the teacher executes the assessment and age-appropriate content that produces successful students” (Asher). Adding to this thought, Mr. Shane believed, “If teachers are willing, I mean, more than willing to do the extra work, their students will and can perform on a standardized test.”

Second grade teachers’ perceptions of testing in their grade level are divided as well. Three of the five second grade teachers feel that testing is a hindrance upon academics. “Every school has its own culture. And every culture has different styles of learners. In my classroom, students are developmentally low and very immature. First, I need to deal with behavioral issues, then, I am able to teach skills and concepts” (Chloe). Mrs. Seth and Ms. Skyler, on the contrary, believe that testing puts too much pressure on the children to perform well rather than to apply the necessary skills for individual students to accomplish success.

The remaining two-second grade teachers believed that standardized student testing is an important factor. “I believe there is a value in standardized student testing. However, it is highly dependent upon the teacher’s ability to balance content-based lessons seamlessly, incorporating test taking skills” (Padma). Agreeing with Ms. Padma, Mrs. Elijah specified that a positive learning environment, along with creating a strong working environment for the students, could improve a teacher’s confidence and morale

that could lead towards a successful school year.

The Pressure from Upper Grade Teachers

The fourth and final theme that emerged from this study was the pressure from upper grade teachers to have students prepared and ready for standardized testing. Analysis of interview documents disclosed the teachers' emphasis on the pressures from teachers in Grades 3-6 in their schools to have students reading, writing, and comprehending what they read in preparation for the PARCC exam. Consequently, several K-2 grade level teachers feel excessive pressure to increase student achievement by having to prepare students to read, comprehend, and interpret data in preparation for standardized tests or adapt to the practice of teaching to the test. These high expectations set forth by the upper grade teachers towards the younger grade teachers to have young students ready to perform on a standardized test have created resentment, not only with regard to the upper grade teachers, but also with administration. Adding to the students' anxiety is the pressure of standardized testing.

Most K-2 teachers perceived the same negative factors about standardized student testing and expressed concern of the undue pressure to have their students not only ready to perform for the current testing grade but also be prepared for the next grade level. Participants believed that testing in the early grades of K-2 produces vulnerable learners instead of confident ones.

Grade K-2 level teachers stated the need to change their own philosophies of teaching after witnessing how standardized testing impacts learning in their classrooms and the culture of a school setting. Teachers shared their goals for each student to ensure future confident, independent, risk-takers, creative thinkers, self-assured speakers, and

positive members of society with a desire to be lifelong learners. These academic and social goals have been obstructed by the practice and implementation of standardized student testing. Standardized student testing has also impacted teachers' personal goals, as they have been unable to proceed with teaching the creative, inventive way and have been pushed towards a robotic method of using a "drill and fill" in the blanks of a test. These teachers also expressed the disappointment with administration, as teachers did not feel supported.

When participants were asked what they thought the most important task and responsibilities of teaching are, their responses varied according to grade level. Kindergarten teachers Ms. Yelena, Mrs. George, and Mrs. Brach answered, respectively, "to promote self-esteem and develop the love of learning," "to encourage self-confidence and risk taking," and "to create an environment filled with warmth, rules, and confidence." The first grade teachers Ms. Asher, Mrs. Myrick, and Mr. Shane answered, respectively, "for me to stay relevant, current, and curious within education," "to get the students reading and writing so in second grade, they will perform better on standardized testing," and "to have the students perform proficiently in math, as they historically have performed low in this area."

Even though second grade teachers understood what the K-1 teachers feel regarding preparing their students for testing and for the next grade, Mrs. Ella made the following comment: "Preparing lessons for differentiated instruction, engaging student learning, preparing each student with the necessary skills for proficiency towards standardized tests, and establishing sound parent relations is most important in our aspect of teaching." Ms. Chloe and Ms. Padma added, respectively, that the following tasks

were also important: “to provide understanding and connection to the purpose of instruction through assessment and data analysis” and “to provide and enhance the basic skills necessary for each student to achieve proficiency or high proficiency.”

Participants spent a considerable amount of time expressing self-reflective thoughts of their own philosophy of teaching and many even shared that they want to change their teaching philosophies to update their current beliefs. “I can understand how the next grade level teacher wants the students prepared for them, but to expect the students to fully grasp their curriculum material and be able to apply everything learned is unfair, unrealistic, and inappropriate for a young student” (Odin).

Grade K-2 level teachers feel pressure to have their students perform well with standardized testing, and to have their students ready for the next school year is consistent amongst grade levels. Each grade level teacher expressed feelings of pressure from their higher grade level peers. “Even though I am friends with the next grade level teachers, I feel a sense of pressure to prepare my students for them so I am not judged by nor spoken badly of by them. I know this is silly, but I do feel this way” (Mabel).

During the interviews, teachers felt the need to say, “I’m sorry” or “I know I shouldn’t say this but” and even “I can’t believe I am going to say this aloud!” I was pleased that I was able to create a comfortable and safe atmosphere for the teachers to be honest with me but at the same time felt obliged to keep the interviews going, as the process felt genuine and natural. Teachers expressed what they thought, some with a grin and others with a “Well, you know how it is” and with a matter-of-fact facial expression. Overall, this experience of interviewing educators’ perceptions has been eye-opening and rewarding.

Summary

Fifteen of sixteen participants in this study expressed tremendous amounts of stress and anxiety in their young students in Grades K-2 together with high levels of worry and displays of low confidence levels of students, shown through crying, screaming, and misbehaviors of anger all due to the high-stakes testing demands of primary grade teachers. In addition, Grades K-2 teachers shared a common feeling of pressure and anguish from the upper grade teachers to have students ready and prepared to perform on the forthcoming standardized student testing. Finally, although some teachers may believe in the value of standardized student testing in Grades K-2, most teachers agree that standardized testing is harmful to young learners. These testing demands may result in making the efforts of teachers seem insignificant and unimportant and can also produce unfavorable results with young students.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

In this chapter, I present historical information before summarizing the findings of the study as they relate to the three research questions. Then, I discuss additional connections to the existing literature of student testing. Finally, I end this chapter with recommendations for practice, policy, and research. The participant sample for this study was 16 Grades K-2 teachers in an urban school district. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants. There were 15 females and one male participant.

Discussion

High-stakes tests have historically been used to hold teachers responsible for student learning. As years progressed, policy makers have used high-stakes tests to hold students and schools accountable and then used low test scores as evidence of a failing educational system. Testing was vastly accepted as a vital tool for educational improvement (Madaus, Higgins, & Russel, 2009, pp. 13-20).

Contrary to what we know about human development, there is pushdown to lower grades, including the kindergarten level, to teach the skills of math and reading once linked with older grade levels (Almon, Bywater, McLaughlin, & Carlsson-Paige, 2015). Along with the pushdown of academic skills, many districts, like the district in this study, have instituted standardized testing of students in the primary grades. According to Strauss (2015), many kindergartners are being required by the Common Core State Standards to read and be tested on an inappropriate level, leading to unsuitable developmental practices.

The purpose of this study was to examine teachers' perceptions of formal testing of students in Grades K-2 in one urban New Jersey public school district. Specifically, this study sought to explore if teachers believe that formal student testing in the K-2 grades is appropriate and conducive to learning. Furthermore, exploring teachers' perceptions regarding K-2 formal student testing could provide school districts with information that may help them to reflect on and assess the benefits and disadvantages of testing these young students.

Summary of Findings

This study was guided by three research questions. These three research questions were as follows:

1. How do teachers perceive the use of standardized student testing of students in Grades K-2?
2. How, if at all, does standardized student testing influence classroom practices of K-2 teachers?
3. How do teachers' perceptions vary, if at all, about standardized student testing in different grade levels K, 1, and 2?

Research Question 1: How do teachers perceive the use of standardized student testing of students in Grades K-2?

In this study, kindergarten teachers did not view standardized student testing as beneficial for students. These teachers believed that testing contradicts what theorists state about early childhood development and the necessary emotional, social, and educational needs a young learner requires to achieve success. In Grades 1-2, teachers' perceptions on the value of standardized student testing varied. Six teachers were against

testing, while four favored the use of testing. The teachers against testing believed that the time used for test prep and testing itself does not equate to a favorable style of learning that a young learner requires. The four teachers who believed that testing was beneficial felt that the information gained from the test scores allows for richer conversations and better instructional practices. Emerging during the interviews were four themes: stress and anxiety, the districts reading and math program initiatives, the need for administrative collaborative support, and the pressure from the upper grade level teachers in regard to standardized student testing. Developing from the first theme of stress and anxiety were two patterns. These two patterns were teachers' high levels of worry for students and the concern that students' confidence levels were being compromised. This study reveals that most primary grade teachers believe that standardized student testing does not belong in a student's early years of school.

The first and most dominant theme that emerged from the interviews was the stress and anxiety felt by both teachers and students. Teachers expressed their concerns when their students presented behaviors such as screaming, throwing of objects, and crying all due to testing. Teachers also shared their own feelings of strain and frustration when preparing and administering testing by feeling forced to proceed with testing even if the comfort value or the wish to continue was not present.

The first pattern emerging from the theme of stress and anxiety was the high levels of worry of both students and teachers regarding testing. Teachers noted many students rubbing their eyes and squeezing their hair when preparing and taking a standardized test. The focus on standardized tests undermines the overall development of children. Young children, beginning at the age of five, are not prepared for such

demanding and exhaustive assessment of their intellect (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Meisels, 1999; Rescorla, Hyson, & Hirschpasek, 1991).

A second pattern emerging from the theme of stress and anxiety was the decreasing confidence levels of students before and during testing. Teachers noted many students appear worried and nervous when preparing and taking a standardized test. The notion of trying to redirect young students during a test from crying, screaming, “I can’t do this!” and fidgeting has proven very difficult. Research has documented that some of the adverse effects of high-stakes testing on students include illness, anxiety, and heightened levels of stress (Triplett, Barksdale, & Leftwich, 2003). Studies have also found that many parents and educators believe that standardized tests are responsible for creating anxiety and tension in students (Mulvenon, Stegman, & Ritter, 2005).

As discussed in Chapter II, research indicates that the testing of young students during the early years of education may impinge upon a child’s developmental nature (Vygotsky, 1978). During the interviews, kindergarten teachers expressed how student testing at this young age not only produces scores, testing also produces harm. Teachers stated that students at this level are unable to formulate and process test questions. Teachers believed that kindergarten students become frustrated with information that they are not yet ready to process, causing students to cry, misbehave, and/or shut down by walking away from the test. First and second grade teachers also believe that when children are not developmentally ready, they are incapable of performing well on tests. This finding is consistent with research demonstrating that young children are not prepared for such demanding and exhaustive assessments of their intellect (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Meisel, 1999; Percola, Hyson, & Hirschpasek, 1991).

The current mandated methods of teaching math and reading in the early grades leaves both students and teachers frustrated as evidenced by teacher comments in this study. The notion that all young students in early grades such as kindergarten are expected to read, comprehend, and answer questions negates any psychologist and theorist believing that children mature at their own pace (Almon, Bywater, McLaughlin, & Carlsson-Paige, 2015).

According to Armstrong (2006), we as a society emphasize the overuse of textbooks, worksheets, and homework. What is most significant for young students is not achieved through seatwork but is accomplished through real life experiences (Armstrong, 2006). The interviews also presented the Grades K-2 teachers feeling compelled by administration to utilize workbooks and worksheets instead of allowing their students to explore learning through hands-on experiences.

Research Question 2: How, if at all, does standardized student testing influence classroom practices of K-2 teachers?

All teachers in Grades K-2 believe that standardized student testing influences classroom practices. Half of the 16 participants interviewed believe that young children learn best through daily hands-on activities, social interactions, and learning through exploration rather than teacher-directed worksheets and drills. These eight teachers emphasized the negative impact that testing has on their young students, which counteracts what pedagogical research has demonstrated works best for young students. For example, *play*, an integral component of early childhood best practice, and recess has been reduced from a 40-minute duration to what currently is a 20-minute time block. Research states that recess allows a student's mind to be refreshed and reinvigorated

since their attention spans are limited (Ohanian, 2002). Furthermore, research indicates that children are more likely to do well academically if they are physically active (Blakemore, 2003; Dwyer, Sallis, Blizzard, Lazarus, & Dean, 2001).

Instead of being able to offer hands-on, exploratory learning opportunities, the eight teachers feel that they must follow a district-planned curriculum using extensive worksheets. This practice is contrary to Armstrong (2006), who argues that the primary goal of elementary education is not achieved through seatwork but through real life experiences.

The remaining eight participants believed that testing allows for richer discussions between student and teacher on what skills needed to be improved upon. These teachers also believed that the data retrieved from testing help them create better lesson planning for optimal student growth. The perceptions of these eight participants coincides with what research stated about the reason why testing was generally accepted. School educators and stakeholders accepted the purpose of testing because it was seen as a vital tool for improving education (Madaus, Higgins, & Russel, 2009, p. 20).

Emerging during the interviews from this research question was a discussion of the district's frequently changing math and reading programs. Grades K-2 teachers agreed that teachers are confused when new program initiatives are introduced. Teachers expressed that there is a disconnect between what a teacher communicates to students using the given instructional materials and what the student must know and understand to pass on a standardized test. The participants further believed that the influences of classroom practices are affected by the lack of teacher involvement in the initial process of choosing the assigned reading and math programs. Professional development was

another important factor raised by teachers to not only be involved with the selection of topics but to provide teachers with the appropriate training necessary for success.

Teachers further shared the importance of involving teachers in the district's decision process regarding instructional initiatives. As research indicates, the role of a teacher is vital in helping children build a strong foundation in early literacy (Schneider, 2014).

Another element that emerged in response to this research question was the teachers' needs for administrative and collaborative support. Grades K-2 teachers shared their disappointment that most administrators were deficient in understanding pedagogical practices most appropriate for young student learning. Teachers believe they will be penalized for implementing what they know are appropriate practices such as hands-on learning activities in lieu of worksheets for fear of being ranked inefficient in their observations. Teachers expressed the importance of an administrator understanding that young students need to explore and discover through play, and by doing such, understand that a student is learning.

Research Question 3: How do teachers' perceptions vary, if at all, about standardized student testing in different grade levels K, 1, and 2?

All kindergarten teachers believe that standardized student testing affects early childhood best practices and that testing does not belong in this grade level. The first and second grade teachers vary in belief about testing. Of the 11 first and second grade teachers, six believed that testing is unsuitable and a hindrance to learning in the earliest grades. Four teachers in these grade levels believed that testing has value by producing data that can be used to identify student strengths and areas in need of improvement.

All teachers agreed that there was pressure from the upper grade teachers to have students prepared for the next grade level of testing. At times, this was intolerable for these Grades K-2 teachers, who experienced irritation and anxiety. Teachers were constantly reminded of the next grade level's expectations to have the students ready for the following grade causing, at times, feelings of distress with their colleagues and with the educational system. Research shows that the pressure to have young students ready for the next grade level increases the risks of teachers putting aside their best practices of early childhood, which allow for student exploration instead of the implementation of drills forcing a student to learn what they may be incapable of developmentally understanding (Strauss, 2013). There appears to be a universal tendency to assume that the first grade curriculum be taught in kindergarten and to further push down the kindergarten curriculum to the preschool years (Deboer & Saracho, 2002). As a result, many teachers may feel undue pressure to either increase student achievement in preparation of standardized tests or adapt to the practice of "teach to the test" (Herman & Abedi, 1994; Perrone, 1991; Powell, 1999).

The notion that teachers feel pressure for their young students to perform well on a standardized student test and also be prepared for the next grade level not only causes dissatisfaction with their colleagues but causes a myriad of disappointment with the educational system. Grades K-2 teachers feel that their classroom should be a place of learning through hands-on discovery and socialization, not of continuous preparations for testing.

Recommendations for Practice

The push for standardized student testing continues. Teachers in Grades K-2 need to advocate for modifications and possible eliminations of testing of their young students. The participants in this study expressed the need to provide opportunities for young students to play, fostering their natural curiosity of learning instead of the drilling of skills and practice related to standardized tests. Schools should offer opportunities to experiences the following:

1. Involve teachers when curriculum changes are being considered
2. Provide professional development that facilitates understanding of new curriculum
3. Train teachers in the analysis of data
4. In elementary schools, hire administrators who demonstrate an understanding of how young students learn best or who are willing to develop that knowledge
5. Encourage teaching in early grades to include manipulation of materials instead of worksheets
6. Encourage play-based, engaging, language-rich classroom environments in the early grades
7. Ensure that all primary grade students experience opportunities in the arts and music and engage in social play.

Involving teachers in curriculum initiatives, providing training to analyze data during professional development, and promoting teachers to apply hands-on materials in lieu of worksheets would create an environment of positivity and growth for both

teachers and students. Having an administrator with a pedagogical background would serve students in Grades K-2 in a developmentally and appropriate way.

Recommendations for Policy

1. Policy makers should involve experienced educators when making decisions that impact student learning.
2. Policy makers should reference research-based best practice before determining testing requirements for students.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. This study focused only on perceptions of teachers on testing in the primary grades. Another study of principals' perceptions of the same issue would be worthwhile.
2. A similar study could be conducted with a suburban district.
3. The study was limited to only one district. A broader study of several districts using triangulation of data would provide an expansive view of the use of K-2 testing.
4. A quantitative study on a large scale could provide further insight on teachers' perceptions of formal testing of K-2 students.

Concluding Remarks

“You can teach a student a lesson for a day; but if you can teach him to learn by creating curiosity, he will continue the learning process as long as he lives.” — Clay P. Bedford

A student's academic success depends on teachers who understand the balance of student needs for developmental and appropriate instruction. A primary grade student benefits from concrete hands-on experiences to make connections between concepts and

areas of learning, rather than repetition of skill worksheets. It is in these lower grades that students learn how to read, write, and engage in various manipulatives to grasp a range of academic concepts. Best practices for primary grade learners include the balance of developmentally appropriate practices of instruction with the need to build upon prior knowledge, making the connections necessary for learning.

This study supports prior research in that formal testing is not suitable for kindergarten students. The study also found mixed teacher perceptions about testing in the first and second grades. Six of ten participants interviewed in these two grade levels stated that formal testing is unsuitable and inappropriate, while the remaining four participants believed that formal testing has value. During these young years of learning, students develop more understanding of what their abilities and capabilities are in relation to others. Thus, as a community of invested learners, we must provide students with meaningful lessons and experiences that they, in turn, will be proud of; and let us do this together, as an educational family.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. To what extent, if any, do you perceive the use of standardized testing in your classroom to be beneficial?
2. What are the perceived weaknesses, if any, of the use of standardized testing in your classroom?
3. To what extent, if any, do you perceive the use of standardized testing in your classroom improves your classroom practice?
4. To what extent, if any, do you perceive the use of standardized testing in your classroom creates an opportunity for discussion about teaching practices?
5. To what extent, if any, do you think your students are developmentally ready for formal student testing in your current grade level?
6. To what extent, if any, are the current curriculum materials appropriate for the developmental age of your students?
7. Tell me about your class schedule. To what extent, if any, does it offer opportunities for play based programs?
8. To what extent, if any, is your teaching philosophy of how young children learn consistent with testing of young students?
9. What do you see as your most important task(s) and responsibilities in the teaching profession?
10. Would you like to add anything else that you feel may be relevant to this study?

Appendix B

REQUEST FOR APPROVAL OF RESEARCH, DEMONSTRATION OR RELATED ACTIVITIES INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

All material must be typed.

PROJECT TITLE: Teacher's Perceptions of Formal Testing of Students in Grades K-2.

CERTIFICATION STATEMENT:

In making this application, I(we) certify that I(we) have read and understand the University's policies and procedures governing research, development, and related activities involving human subjects. I (we) shall comply with the letter and spirit of those policies. I(we) further acknowledge my(our) obligation to (1) obtain written approval of significant deviations from the originally-approved protocol BEFORE making those deviations, and (2) report immediately all adverse effects of the study on the subjects to the Director of the Institutional Review Board, Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ 07079.

Adriana Battista Coppola



April 12, 2016

RESEARCHER(S)

DATE

****Please print or type out names of all researchers below signature.
Use separate sheet of paper, if necessary.****

My signature indicates that I have reviewed the attached materials of my student advisee and consider them to meet IRB standards.

Dr. Barbara V. Strobert



April 12, 2016


RESEARCHER'S FACULTY ADVISOR **[for student researchers only]**

DATE

****Please print or type out name below signature****

The request for approval submitted by the above researcher(s) was considered by the IRB for Research Involving Human Subjects Research at the April 27, 2016 meeting.

The application was approved not approved by the Committee. Special conditions were were not set by the IRB. (Any special conditions are described on the reverse side.)


DIRECTOR,
SETON HALL UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL
REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN SUBJECTS RESEARCH

4/1/16
DATE



Researcher's Affiliation

Adriana B. Coppola is a doctoral candidate at Seton Hall University in the Department of Education Leadership Management and Policy.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to examine teachers' perceptions of formal testing of students in Grades K-2 in one urban New Jersey public school district. Specifically, this study seeks to explore if these teachers believe that formal student testing in the K-2 grades is appropriate and conducive to learning. Furthermore, exploring teachers' perceptions regarding K-2 formal student testing could provide school districts with the necessary information that can help them to reflect on and assess the benefits of testing these young students.

Procedure

Participants will be interviewed for about 30 minutes at a place of convenience. You will be asked to talk about your practice as a K-2 school teacher, your familiarity with student testing at your specific grade level, and your feelings about student testing in early elementary grade levels. The researcher will take notes as the questions are asked and then review the notes with you when the interview is completed to check for accuracy.

Instrument

The researcher will conduct an interview consisting of ten questions relating to teachers' perceptions of formal testing of students in Grades K-2 and. A few examples of the interview questions are: 1. To what extent, if any, do you perceive the use of standardized testing in your classroom to be beneficial? 2. To what extent, if any, do you think your students are developmentally ready for formal testing in your current grade level? 3. What do you see as your most important task(s) and responsibilities in the teaching profession?

Voluntary Nature

This research is free of any risks or costs and is strictly voluntary. Refusal to participate or discontinue participation at any time will involve no penalty or loss of benefits.

Anonymity

All responses will be anonymous and all notes taken from the interviews will be destroyed after the data is tabulated. If selected, you will be assigned an alias in order to shield your confidentiality. Identity and years of teaching will be protected and a range for demographics will be published in order to provide safeguard of all individuals participating.

Confidentiality

All efforts will be made to protect your identity. Data will be confidential and will remain under lock and key with the researcher.

Seton Hall University
Institutional Review Board

JUN 01 2016

Approval Date

College of Education and Human Services
Executive Ed.D. Program
Tel: 973.275.2728 • Fax: 973.275.2484
400 South Orange Avenue • South Orange, New Jersey 07079-2685

Expiration Date

JUN 01 2017



Records

All interview notes will be securely stored on a USB memory key with the researcher under lock and key to maintain confidentiality. Only the researcher and her advisor, Dr. Barbara Strobert, will have access to this collected data. Information collected will not be stored on anyone's computer.

Risks

There are no anticipated risks associated to this study.

Direct Benefits

No direct benefits to subjects are expected.

Remuneration

No monetary or any other type of gift will be given.

Compensation

This research does not anticipate any type of minimal risk.

Alternative Procedures

This research does not require any alternative procedures or courses of treatment.

Contact Information

If you decide to participate in the 30-minute interview, please let the researcher know via email. If you have any concerns about your rights as a human subject, please contact IRB at 973-313-6314.

If you require any additional information, please email the researcher at adriana.coppola@student.shu.edu or Dr. Barbara V. Strobert at 973. 275. 2324.

Permission to record

The use of a video and or audio tapes are not involved with this research.

Consent Statement

Consent to participate is indicated by returning this form to the researcher. You will be given a copy of the signed and dated Consent Form before your participation begins.

Subject
Seton Hall University
Institutional Review Board
JUN 01 2016
Approval Date

Date

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