

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER EXPERIENCES IN
A STANDARDIZED TESTING ENVIRONMENT

by

Megan Raines Stevens

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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APPROVED BY:

Linda Gable, Ph.D., Committee Chair

James Eller, Ed.D., Committee Member

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of middle school teachers in a standardized testing environment. Using Spiro, Feltovich, and Coulson's theory of cognitive flexibility as a theoretical framework, this study sought to answer the central question: What are the experiences of middle grade teachers in a standardized testing environment? Sub-questions sought to understand how and why middle school teachers adjust instructional practices in a standardized testing environment. A purposeful criterion sampling followed by snowball sampling was used to select participants with the shared lived experience of teaching in a standardized testing environment from four middle schools within a single rural southwest Virginia school district. Data was collected through a writing prompt, interviews, and focus group interviews. Data analysis occurred through epoché phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and describing the essence of the lived experience. The study revealed that teachers perceived this environment limits their ability to adjust instructional practices to meet the needs of the students, fosters feelings of resentment regarding the teacher evaluation process, and introduces concerns on the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the standardized testing environment as the continued focus of instruction in this environment is the end-of-course standardized assessment.

Keywords: standardized tests, instructional practices, teacher evaluation, pacing guides, curriculum framework, state mandates, cognitive flexibility theory

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Dedication

It was through God's calling that I undertook the journey of enrolling in a doctoral program, despite having two young children and a demanding day job. However, God's strength and encouragement kept me focused on the coursework and the end goal. Along with His word and spirit, the strength and determination He gave me were fostered and supported by my loving husband and children, Chad, Katie, and Easton. Therefore, with deep love and appreciation, I dedicate this dissertation to them. Chad, without your unwavering support, I could have never accomplished this goal. Thank you for being my rock on the hard days, my shoulder to cry on when I felt defeated, and my biggest cheerleader when things were going well. Thank you for sacrificing so much to help me accomplish what I felt God was calling me to do. I love you more than you will ever know, "peas and carrots" forever! Katie and Easton, while you are both too young to remember this, I hope that many years from now, this will serve as a reminder to you that you can do anything you set your mind to with patience and trust in God's will and timing. On the days that I wanted to quit, the two of you were my driving force to continue. I love both of you endlessly! In addition to my family, I would like to thank my dissertation chair, Dr. Gable and my committee member Dr. Eller. Throughout this process, you have each served as a beacon of guidance. Thank you for being a consistent help during this journey.

Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Copyright Page	4
Dedication	5
Table of Contents	6
List of Tables.....	11
List of Abbreviations.....	12
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	13
Overview	13
Background	13
Historical Context	14
Social Context	15
Theoretical Context.....	16
Problem Statement	17
Purpose Statement.....	19
Significance of the Study	20
Research Questions	22
Central Research Question.....	23
Sub-Question One	23
Sub-Question Two.....	24
Sub-Question Three.....	24
Definitions	25
Summary	26

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	27
Overview	27
Theoretical Framework	27
Related Literature	30
Summary	54
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS	57
Overview	57
Research Design	57
Research Questions	59
Central Research Question	59
Sub-Question One	59
Sub-Question Two.....	59
Sub-Question Three.....	59
Setting and Participants	59
Setting.....	60
Participants	61
Researcher Positionality	62
Interpretive Framework.....	63
Philosophical Assumptions	63
Researcher's Role.....	65
Procedures	67
Permissions.....	67
Recruitment Plan.....	68

Data Collection Plan.....	69
Writing Prompt Data Collection Approach.....	70
Individual Interviews Data Collection Approach.....	71
Focus Groups Data Collection Approach.....	76
Data Synthesis	79
Trustworthiness	83
Credibility.....	83
Transferability	84
Dependability and Confirmability.....	84
Ethical Considerations.....	85
Summary	86
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS	87
Overview	87
Participants	87
Results	92
Limitations on Instructional Practices.....	94
Resentment in Regard to Teacher Evaluations	104
The Effect of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Standardized Testing Environment	106
Outlier Data and Findings	108
Research Question Responses.....	109
Central Research Question.....	110
Sub-Question One	113

Sub-Question Two.....	118
Sub-Question Three.....	120
Summary	123
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION.....	125
Overview	125
Discussion	125
Interpretation of Findings.....	125
Implications for Policy or Practice.....	138
Theoretical and Empirical Implications	140
Limitations and Delimitations.....	145
Recommendations for Future Research	146
Conclusion.....	148
References	150
Appendix A	168
Appendix B	170
Appendix C	172
Appendix D	174
Appendix E.....	176
Appendix F	179
Appendix G	181
Appendix H.....	182

List of Tables

Table 1. Teacher Participants.....	87
Table 2. Themes.....	92

List of Abbreviations

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Performance Management (PM)

Race to the Top (RTTP)

Value Added Model (VAM)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

State-mandated standardized testing has shifted the way in which educators, administrators, and students perceive the functionality of the school (Blazer & Kraft, 2017). For nearly three decades, schools have operated under mandated testing policies paired with new and ever-changing standards for each subject area (Blazer & Kraft, 2017). With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA), many states placed standardized testing at the forefront of educational policy by federally mandating school accountability linked to assessment reporting in the form of Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) goals (Close et al., 2018; Klein, 2015; Lee 2020). As a result of these federal mandates, increased pressure has been placed on teachers to produce adequate student performance as measured by the standardized assessment (Wronowski & Urick, 2019). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to examine the experiences of middle grade educators within a standardized testing environment. Chapter One introduces and discusses the concepts and information related to the research study. The problem statement, purpose statement, research questions, and research plan of the study are presented in this chapter. In addition, the subsections of background, situation to self, and significance of the study are also developed in this chapter.

Background

Standardized testing has been used as a method of assessment in the United States since the beginning of the twentieth century (Stakes, 1991). By 1917, it is estimated that over 200 standardized assessments were used regularly nationwide in K-12 settings, with some test manufacturers distributing thousands to multiple states (Rodriguez, 2019). In its early

implementation, standardized testing was used to measure intelligence to categorize and promote students (Vinovskis, 2019). President George W. Bush ushered in an era of educational reform with the passage of the NCLB (Klein, 2015). This act, in conjunction with its successor the ESSA (Lee, 2020), placed standardized testing at the forefront of American educational policy (Reese-Penn & Elder, 2018). These educational policies placed states, divisions, schools, and teachers in positions of accountability for meeting annual growth targets as designated by state determining measurements for schools to meet annual yearly progress (U.S. Government, 2017). As a result of these policies, state governments enacted educational policies requiring public school divisions to implement mandated testing and teacher evaluation processes (Marchant et al., 2015).

Historical Context

Although standardized testing has held a place in the American education system for many years, the overall effects of this method of assessment are linked with the implications of legislation such as the NCLB and the ESSA (Vinovskis, 2019). NCLB intended to increase the rigor of state curriculums, better align curriculum and instruction and meet the needs of students in traditionally disadvantaged groups (Ghosh, 2018; Klein, 2015). The passing of the ESSA gave states the flexibility to determine which standardized test is used to measure student performance (Close et al., 2020). Despite this increased flexibility, the usage of standardized testing to measure student performance was still included within the federal government mandate. To support student performance on mandated standardized testing, many states and school divisions implemented policies to improve student test scores. Ruff (2019) revealed that these policies limited teachers to only teaching content related to standardized tests. Implications of these policies, such as pacing guides and curriculum guides, limit educator opportunities to make

curricular and instructional practice decisions related to the learning objectives of their students (Santoro, 2019). In addition, Hayes (2017) explained that many states and school divisions incorporated student test scores into teacher evaluation programs to make teachers directly accountable for student performance on standardized assessments.

As the standardized testing environment becomes a new norm for American educators, the effects of this method of assessment are emerging. Teachers of tested curricula often find themselves under more scrutiny than teachers of non-tested curricula (Jenlink, 2017). In addition, teachers of tested curricula are often given dictated pedagogical practices to implement to ensure student success on course-mandated standardized tests (Santoro, 2019). Furthermore, many districts and states mandated that failing schools implement curriculum scripts that were produced by educational publishing companies in lieu of any curriculum development by teachers (Jenlink, 2017). These factors have directly affected the way in which teachers within a standardized testing environment prepare, implement, and assess their instructional material (Marshall, 2017). As educators work to meet the requirements of state-mandated curriculums and standards-based assessment, they must be flexible in their planning and accommodate standardized testing in the classroom (Marshall, 2017).

Social Context

Mandated standardized testing has resulted in many unintended consequences affecting educators such as unprofessional conduct, cheating scandals, and altered pedagogical practices (Morgan, 2016). Research conducted by Wronowski and Urick (2019) examined teacher perception of how increased accountability measures for teachers led to heightened teacher stress and adjusted instructional practices to address standardized testing. Their findings suggested that increased accountability associated with state-mandated testing led to teachers adapting

instructional practices to reduce the stress associated with teacher evaluation practices (Wronowski & Urick 2019). Additionally, the emphasis of standardized testing has led to a reduction in the non-tested curriculum, particularly curriculum involving higher-order thinking (Aydeniz & Southerland, 2012). Unintended consequences include implications for students often resulting in reduction of morale and effort (Gneezy et al., 2019).

As the testing culture in the United States continues to grow, it is important to understand how standardized testing affects the teacher's ability to adapt instruction to meet the needs of students. Teachers of tested courses are given curriculum and pedagogical mandates for what needs to be done in the classroom to generate proficient student performance on standardized tests (Franklin & Geron, 2007). The inclusion of these pedagogical mandates limits the teacher's ability to make decisions based on student learning objectives (Hull, 2013). In addition, schools and divisions that do not make AYP, as mandated by the state, often implement curriculums developed by educational publishing companies that lack the opinion and experience of the classroom teacher (Close et al., 2018). These factors may have directly affected how the teacher presented curriculum information in the classroom as implementing such policies limits what educators can do in response to standardized testing in the classroom (Close et al., 2018). Limiting the teacher's ability to adapt instruction may lead teachers to feel they are simply "teaching to the test" and not addressing student needs in conjunction with mandated standards (Li & Xiong, 2018).

Theoretical Context

As a result of educational policies such as the NCLB and ESSA, teachers have had to become more flexible in their instructional practices when presenting "a one size fits all" curriculum in the classroom (Bauml, 2016). Research investigating the effects of the

standardized testing environment is grounded in the social theories of Bandura and Vygotsky. Bandura's (1994) theory of self-efficacy refers to one's personal belief about one's level of motivation and effectiveness in achieving results and goals related to performance, behaviors, and outcomes. Bandura (1994) stated, "after people become convinced they have what it takes to succeed, they persevere in the face of adversity and quickly rebound from setbacks" (p. 72). Educators within a standardized testing environment may be able to work through difficult experiences and adjust to the ever-changing curriculum if they feel more secure with themselves as the teacher (Cayirdag, 2017).

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of human learning centers on the idea that the learner is limited to a "zone of proximal development" focusing on the student being presented material at a level just higher than they are cognitively prepared (McLeod, 2018). As teachers prepare instruction to meet the needs of the standardized testing environment, often the instruction is prepared at a level intended to increase rigor for students (Kinay & Ardic, 2017). In this environment, teachers must adjust their instructional practices to ensure engaging lessons are presented at a higher cognitive level, reflecting the teacher's ability to adapt to the standardized testing environment.

Problem Statement

The problem is standardized testing is not adequately achieving its intended purposes in modern education systems (Paulsen & Hewson, 2017). Standardized testing initiated in 1904 when Alfred Binet crafted an assessment tailored to identifying children who were not benefiting from inclusion in regular classrooms and needed special education resources (Himelfarb, 2019). Following the success of psychologists developing tests for Army recruiting during World War I, civilian testing was introduced as a means of college acceptance (Himelfarb, 2019). By the 21st

century, standardized testing became an inseparable part of American culture (Blazer & Kraft, 2017). Federally mandated education policies such as the NCLB and the ESSA placed a large emphasis on the importance of standardized testing as an accountability-based system for school districts, individual schools, students, and teachers (Close et al., 2018). While legislation such as NCLB and ESSA were intended to close the educational gap and create equal education opportunities for all students, the unintended consequences have led to heightened teacher stress, narrowing of the curriculum, altered pedagogical practices, and lower teacher retention rates (Santoro, 2019).

The emphasis placed on standardized testing in the classroom has led many states and school divisions to revise curricula, encourage altered pedagogical styling, and to include student test results into teacher evaluations determining teacher effectiveness and student performance (Morgan, 2016). While all educators may not share the same experiences with standardized testing, in extreme situations and environments, this method of assessment has led to emotional distress, and in rare cases, instances of unprofessional conduct and cheating scandals (Martin et al., 2020). As a result of these implications, many educators are adjusting instructional practices in the classroom to address state standards associated with standardized testing (Bondie et al., 2019). Therefore, understanding the lived experiences of middle school teachers in a standardized testing environment is crucial to understanding how standardized testing is no longer meeting its intended goals.

Research conducted by Coppola (2017) and Brown (2019) analyzed how primary grade teachers adjusted curricula to meet the needs of standardized testing. Research conducted by Shelton and Brooks (2019) focused on how elementary teachers, particularly elementary reading teachers, have shifted pedagogical styling to reflect standardized testing implications.

Shelton and Brooks (2019) suggest that continued research on how educators adapt instruction in high stakes testing environments is beneficial across grade levels as the teacher's voice is often silenced. Coppola (2017) suggested that continued research on how standardized testing affects instructional practices is needed in the upper grades. Research conducted by Buldur and Acar (2019) addressed the views of middle grade educators on standardized testing but did not include how teachers adjust instructional practices to address standards in the classroom or the experiences teachers had with the standardized testing environment. The current study will address this problem by using a phenomenological method to collect qualitative data on the lived experiences of middle grade teacher participants from rural southwest Virginia in dealing with the standardized testing environment in the classroom.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the experiences of middle grade educators within a standardized testing environment. At this stage in the research, the standardized test will be defined as the Virginia Standards of Learning Assessment, which are annual assessments given to determine student performance in core subjects of reading, math, social studies, and science (Virginia Department of Education, 2020). Teacher experiences with standardized testing in the middle grades were defined as how teachers in middle grades adapt instructional practices to address state standards in the classroom. The theory guiding this study was Spiro, Feltovich, and Coulson's theory of cognitive flexibility. The theory refers to the ability to restructure one's knowledge in many ways, specifically in an adaptive response to radically changing situational demands (Spiro et al., 1992). In response to state-mandated standardized testing, many school divisions are requiring educators to adjust their instructional practices to improve student performance on these assessments (Lewis & Holloway,

2018). Therefore, examining the experiences of educators with adjusting instructional practices to address standardized testing in the middle grades revealed how educators restructure their instructional practices to address the standards associated with standardized testing amongst the middle grades in rural southwest Virginia.

Significance of the Study

This phenomenological study had empirical, practical, and theoretical value. The study contributed to an existing body of literature focusing on the effects of standardized testing on today's education system. Additionally, research findings provided opportunities for beneficial professional development implementation for teachers and administrators. This professional development would focus on teaching in the standardized testing environment and provide a rationale to students and parents for the inclusion of standards in today's curriculum. From a theoretical aspect, this research contributed to the understanding of how the cognitive flexibility theory can be used to explain the decisions educators make in a standardized testing environment. Additionally, this research provided a rationale for further research centered on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the standardized testing environment.

Empirical

This research study contributed to the body of literature regarding teacher experiences in a standardized testing environment. This study provided insight into how educators adapt instructional practices to address state mandated standards in the classroom. Much of the existing literature related to how teachers adjust instructional practices as a result of standardized testing was of quantitative design and inquiry. This included the study conducted by Youn (2018) which focused on the impact of standardized testing on teacher empowerment and pedagogical choices and measured teacher responses against pre-set limitations and options. Other studies have

examined how teachers in primary grades have altered instructional practices to address standards-based learning. This included the research conducted by Eizadirad (2019) who examined how standardized testing has affected third grade teachers in preparing instruction to address course-related standards in the classroom. Research conducted by Ro (2019) studied the impact of standardized testing on the instructional practices of teachers in the varied grade levels of first through fourth. Existing research examined the effects of the standardized testing environment on the teacher and students, however, a gap in literature existed in understanding the experiences of teachers with adjusting instructional practices to address standardized testing in the middle grades.

Practical

Studying the experiences of teachers in a standardized testing environment helped reveal how teachers understand the curriculum and the concept of instructional adjustments when needed to benefit the students in regard to state-mandated standards (Meyer & Paxson, 2019). This information was beneficial for both teachers and administrators. At the district and site levels, administrators often provide professional development opportunities that allow teachers to collaboratively focus on curriculum and instruction (Harter, 2014). Information gained from this study could provide an outline for beneficial development opportunities to help teachers better understand their role in the standardized testing environment. Research conducted by Mirta et al. (2016) revealed that parents often do not understand the implications standardized testing has in the classroom. Additionally, research conducted by Whitlock-Williams (2016) suggested that many parents felt unsure of how to support their child in preparation for standardized tests. This research would provide a rationale for the role standardized testing plays

in the classroom environment and provide parents and older students with insight on how to better prepare for courses where standardized testing will be conducted.

Theoretical

This study also contributed to the understanding of the cognitive flexibility theory. Cognitive flexibility theory focuses on the nature of learning in complex or ill-structured domains (Spiro et al., 1992). Additionally, the cognitive flexibility theory intends to foster one's ability to spontaneously reconstruct their knowledge to adopt different situational demands (Spiro et al., 1992). This study will examine the lived experiences of middle school teachers in a standardized testing environment. Using the cognitive flexibility theory as a lens through which to view the teachers' lived experiences, this study sought to understand the spontaneous decision-making teachers utilize to present course material in a means that address both student and standard needs.

Research Questions

Moustakas (1994) revealed that a researcher “constructs a question or problem to guide the study, and derives findings that will provide the basis for further research and reflection” (p. 47). Additionally, Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested that qualitative researcher questions should be open-ended and restate the purpose of the study and allow participants to respond according to their perceptions of their lived experiences. In this phenomenological study, I will ask participants questions that will be clearly worded and will be constructed to include the characteristics Moustakas (1994) identified as key to a phenomenological study. The central question and sub-questions of this study focus on understanding the lived experiences of middle school teachers in a standardized testing environment. Therefore, the research questions will be

focused on how teachers incorporate flexibility in their instructional planning to address the standards in the classroom.

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of middle grade teachers in a standardized testing environment? Standardized testing is a central feature in American education systems today (Stronquist, 2017). In response to educational policies such as the NCLB and the ESSA, many states placed emphasis on standardized testing results to determine the effectiveness of both the school and educator (Loeb & Byun, 2019). This response has led to heightened accountability placed on classroom teachers to ensure the success of their students on end-of-course assessments. Understanding the lived experiences of educators in the middle grades provided insight into how the standardized testing approach affects the instructional and professional actions of the educator (Saeki et al., 2018).

Sub-Question One

What do teachers in the middle grades perceive to be the effects of standardized testing on instructional practices in the classroom? Educational policies such as the NCLB and ESSA placed emphasis on the importance of standardized testing as a means for determining student performance in the classroom (Levitt, 2017). In response to these policies, many states, districts, and schools began implementing pacing guides, curriculum guides, and altered pedagogical styling to improve student test performance (Loeb & Byun, 2019). In examining the phenomenon of how educators adjust instructional practices to address standardized testing, it was important to understand how educators perceive the effects of this method of assessment on their instructional practices. This question focused on the teacher's perception of how standardized testing affects instructional practices in the classroom.

Sub-Question Two

Why do middle grade teachers consider adjusting instructional practices to address standardized testing in the classroom? Gibbons and Cobb (2017) concluded that teacher response to factors including student performance, updated curriculum, and updated testing practices is often present in the presentation of course materials. Additionally, Spiro et al. (1992) stated that cognitive flexibility referred to one's ability to restructure knowledge as an adaptive approach to changing demands. Often there are changing factors within the classroom that lead to educators adjusting instructional practices (Lang, 2019). This question explores the teacher's perception of what factors lead to classroom environment change that may result in teachers adjusting instructional practices.

Sub-Question Three

How do teachers adapt instructional practices to meet the needs of standardized testing in the middle grades? Spiro, Feltovich, and Coulson's theory of cognitive flexibility refers to the ability to restructure one's knowledge in many ways, specifically in an adaptive response to radically changing situational demands (Spiro et al., 1992). In response to state-mandated standardized testing, many school divisions are requiring educators to adjust their instructional practices to improve student performance on these assessments (Lewis & Holloway, 2018). Therefore, educators must be flexible in adaptive responses to changing classroom situations dependent on standardized testing. This question focuses on the teacher's experience with adjusting instructional practices to address standardized testing. The question allows for the discussion of what practices teachers find effective in adjusting instruction to address standardized testing.

Definitions

1. *Accreditation* – The goal of accreditation is to ensure that institutions of higher education meet acceptable levels of quality (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).
2. *Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)* – AYP was the measure through which schools and districts would be evaluated against in terms of meeting their target growth rates for student performance (U.S. Government, 2017).
3. *Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015* – Under ESSA, states get to decide the education plans for their schools within a framework provided by the federal government. The law also offers parents a chance to weigh in on these plans. This is important if your child gets special education services. You can make sure your child’s needs are considered (Lee, 2020).
4. *Instructional Practices* – Specific teaching methods that guide interaction in the classroom (Persaud, 2018).
5. *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* – The act grew out of concern that the American education system was no longer internationally competitive, and significantly increased the federal role in holding schools responsible for the academic progress of all students. It put a special focus on ensuring that states and schools boost the performance of certain groups of students, such as English-language learners, students in special education, and poor and minority children, whose achievement, on average, trails their peers (Klein, 2015).
6. *Standardized Testing* – The assessment instruments that state legislatures mandated schools and districts to use to measure student performance. They are standardized in that all students of a specific grade level or a specific content area take the same test on a

specified date (Cho & Eberhard, 2013). In regard to this study, standardized testing will refer to the current school year assessments.

7. *Teacher Evaluations* – The processes and systems through which states and districts determine the competency and effectiveness of teachers. An increasing number of states are incorporating student test scores into the teacher evaluation process (Hull, 2013).
8. *Tested Curricula* – Course-specific curriculum that is tested as part of the standardized testing measurement of student performance (Cho & Eberhard, 2013).

Summary

Passage of legislature such as the NCLB and its successor the ESSA of 2015 placed standardized testing at the forefront of educational policies as a means of ensuring an equal education opportunity for all students (Close et al., 2018). In response to these policies, many states have included student performance on end-of-course standardized tests as part of teacher and school evaluation processes (Loeb & Byun, 2019). As a result, many states are requiring teachers of tested curricula to alter pedagogical practices, narrowing the curriculum to focus only on tested materials (Wronowski & Urick, 2019). This transcendental phenomenological study investigated the experiences of middle school teachers in a standardized testing environment and contributed to an existing body of literature focusing on the reality of standardized testing in today's education system.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Chapter two examines the theoretical framework and relevant literature review for this research study of middle school teachers' experiences in a standardized testing environment. The chapter begins with a discussion of the theoretical framework followed by a review of related literature focusing on the impact of the standardized testing environment. Specifically, the related literature of this chapter will focus on the rationale of standardized testing, the impacts of standardized testing in the classroom, the impacts of standardized testing on pedagogy, the impacts of standardized testing on teacher evaluation, the impacts of standardized testing on teacher retention, and teacher adaptability concerning standardized testing. The chapter closes with a summary of the chapter contents and a rationale for the gap in literature this study attempted to fill.

Theoretical Framework

The theory centering this study is Spiro, Feltovich, and Coulson's cognitive flexibility theory. Cognitive flexibility theory is a theoretical orientation that addresses advanced learning of ill-structured, complex conceptual material. The cognitive flexibility theory suggests that deep learning occurs when learners are presented with new content from multiple perspectives and in a flexible way of thinking (Spiro et al., 1992). The term flexible is used to describe knowledge representation within one's mind, which provides insight into creating learning resources that may better support learners regarding shifting environments (Spiro et al., 1992). Spiro et al. (1992) stated:

A central claim of the cognitive flexibility theory is that revisiting the same material at different times, in rearranged contexts, for different purposes, and from different

perspectives is essential for attaining the goals of advanced knowledge acquisition (mastery of complexity in understanding and preparation for transfer). (p. 93-94)

The relevance of the cognitive flexibility theory for educators is the adaptation of lesson presentation to present learners with multiple perspectives to ensure deep learning is attainable. Kerns (1995) studied problem-solving and revealed that cognitive flexibility is an “ability to adjust his or her problem solving as task demands are modified” (p. 202). Teachers within a standardized testing environment are often mandated to teach a curriculum aligned with state-prepared frameworks and pacing guides. As a result of this, teachers must adjust their instructional practices to address the needs of both the standards and students, the success of which hinges on the teachers’ ability to target student needs and flexibly adjust their pedagogical style to engage and challenge learners at various cognitive levels (Reese-Penn & Elder, 2018).

The teacher’s ability to be flexible and adapt to an ever-changing curriculum aligns with Spiro, Feltovich, and Coulson’s theory of cognitive flexibility. Cognitive flexibility means “the ability to spontaneously restructure one’s knowledge, in many ways, in an adaptive response to radically changing situational demands” (Spiro et al., 1992, p.165). As state-mandated policies and standards shift, the classroom teacher must flexibly adapt instructional practices to address these changes (Levitt, 2017). Spiro et al. (1992) concluded that emphasis should be placed on the presentation of information from multiple perspectives. In addressing standards in the classroom, teachers must be flexible in the presentation of material from multiple perspectives to ensure the student retains the intended curriculum (Forsythe et al., 2019). Therefore, the theory of cognitive flexibility is well-suited for a study determining the experiences of middle grade teachers with adjusting instructional practices to meet the needs of the ever-changing curriculum and pedagogical mandates. Spiro, Feltovich, and Coulson (1992) describe *ill-structuredness* to mean

that “many concepts (interacting contextually) are pertinent in the typical case of knowledge application, and that their patterns of the combination are inconsistent across case applications of the same nominal type” (p. 641). The situational demands placed upon teachers in tested curricula create an “ill-structured” domain requiring the classroom teacher to inconsistently adapt instruction to meet the needs of standardized testing in the classroom.

The cognitive flexibility theory highlights the need for intermediate learners to assemble schema from a variety of perspectives and mental representations to examine complex concepts through the vehicle of specific cases. This orientation encourages multiple ways of connecting elements from various domains of knowledge across specific cases and values participatory learning and tutorial guidance (Spiro et al., 1992). Teachers in a standardized testing environment must continually adapt instructional practices to meet the needs of state-mandated standards (Close et al., 2018). These instructional and pedagogical adaptations must also align with student needs, and therefore include the usage of a variety of instructional practices aimed at connecting lessons and curricula for students.

Understanding teacher experiences within a standardized testing environment in the middle grades will reveal the inductive reasoning teachers utilized to adapt to quickly changing curriculum requirements. Spiro et al. (1992) revealed that inductive reasoning builds knowledge by characterizing multiple representations, interconnectedness, and contingency to shift habits of the mind from a closed approach to an open, flexible approach. As federal, state, and district policies concerning standardized testing and teacher accountability shift, the teacher’s ability to inductively reason and adapt instruction will be pertinent to the success of the students.

The ability to make instantaneous decisions based on a multiplicity of domain understandings to meet the individual needs of students in a standardized testing environment

requires the teacher to be cognitively flexible (Taylor, 2008). The cognitive flexibility theory offers a unique lens through which I can more fully describe the lived experiences of middle school teachers in a standardized testing environment. The theory is centered on “the ability to spontaneously restructure one’s knowledge, in many ways, in an adaptive response to radically changing situational demands” (Spiro et al., 1992, p.165). Utilizing the cognitive flexibility theory as the framing theory for this study allows me to include interview questions, both for one-on-one interviews and focus group interviews that hone in on the teacher’s need and ability to adapt instructional and pedagogical practices to meet the needs of the ever-changing curriculum mandates. The problem of this study is that standardized testing is not achieving its intended purposes in modern education systems. Using the cognitive flexibility theory as a lens to explore the lived experiences of middle school teachers in a standardized testing environment will allow for the exploration of how teachers must adapt to changing situational demands in the classroom related to state-mandated standards, providing a basis for the inadequacy of standardized testing in modern education systems.

Related Literature

The passage of the No Child Left Behind policy of 2001 (NCLB) and its successor the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) intended to provide quality education for all students regardless of their socioeconomic status, environment, or at-risk status (U.S. Government, 2017). To measure student performance, ensuring the success of these legislative acts, a complex system of testing, progression, and measurement was mandated (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016). In response to these legislative mandates, individual states formulated additional mandates to be carried out by school districts (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016).

The Rationale of Standardized Testing

State legislatures, nationwide, have mandated standardized testing in compliance with NCLB and ESSA. Individual states have mandated the types and purposes of standardized tests used to measure student performance (Nelson, 2013). The identified tests are designed to, “not only make Federal requirements effective and accurate at the state level, but also to support teachers through the provision of test results in a timely manner” (Betts et al., 2017). The basis of measurement for most standardized tests is a standards-reference system in which student performance is measured although students can promote to the next grade level regardless of their performance on the standardized test (Marzano, 2010). To further link district and teacher accountability with state-mandated standardized testing, the NCLB and ESSA legislation held that for schools and divisions to be accredited they must meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) mandates ensuring mandated student success rates (Close et al., 2018). Therefore, the purpose of standardized testing is to promote educational equality for all students through a system that pairs teacher and school accountability with prescribed measurement targets to ensure student performance growth.

Standardized testing initiated with Alfred Binet’s creation of an assessment designed to determine if students needed to receive special education services (Himelfarb, 2019). Large-scale standardized testing emerged in America in the 20th century to relieve the burden of high schools in preparing students for college (Nettles, 2019). George W. Bush ushered in a new era for standardized testing with the passage of the NCLB in 2001. The policy was revised in 2015 into the ESSA. ESSA continued to place standardized testing at the forefront of American educational policy (Himelfarb, 2019). The foundational motivation for the passage and renewal of NCLB in 200 and 2012, and the passage of its successor ESSA in 2015, was to provide a

quality education for all students regardless of their socioeconomic status, environment, or at-risk status (U.S. Government, 2017). As a result of these policies, state legislatures have mandated the types and purposes of standardized tests that are used to measure student performance. The identified tests are “intended to not only make Federal requirements effective and accurate at the state level but also to support teachers through the provision of test results in a timely manner” (Cho & Eberhard, 2013, p. 1).

The purpose of standardized testing as a form of educational accountability was intended to ensure quality education for all students (U.S. Government, 2017). However, there have been several unintended consequences of testing for students. As the division, administrative, and teacher accountability is linked to student performance on standardized tests, the introduction of this method of assessment is being introduced in the early primary grades to prepare students. Jemmott (2018) found that some urban school districts labeled as underperforming have begun introducing standardized testing in the primary grades to ensure gained experience with this method of assessment. Jemmott (2018) revealed that the introduction of standardized testing in the primary grades led to heightened stress levels in the students. Related to the findings of Jemmott (2018) and Mikerova et al. (2018) it was found that the standardized testing environment in the primary grades has an overall negative effect on student morale (Mikerova et al., 2018). In addition, Mikerova et al. (2018) revealed that teachers and parents both noted an increase in student anxiety in relation to standardized testing.

With much focus on the negative aspect of standardized testing, understanding the significance of this method of assessment is difficult. The U.S. Department of Education (2017) suggested that students may gain valuable experience even while taking the assessment and that this method of assessment provides an opportunity for all students to learn core content. In

addition, this method of assessment provides an opportunity for feedback for both educators and students to create a focus on the material that may need to be remediated (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). However, in contrast, Hickey (2015) argued that this method of assessment “has negative formative potential for the learners themselves” and suggest that “the trivial amount of learning that the standardized assessment might support via feedback to the learner or teacher is outweighed by the negative consequences of doing so for teaching, learning, and test security” (p. 218). Similarly, the National Council for Mathematics Teachers (NCMT, 2016) downplayed the student-level benefits of standardized testing suggesting that these assessments and suggested that in place of standardized assessments, school districts should “afford opportunities to identify systematic gaps in student mathematical knowledge and align the curriculum with standards in place” (p.1).

Due to the intent of federal legislation related to standardized testing, there is an expectancy of systematic improvement in student test scores. This expectation is exemplified by Performance Management (PM) and Value Added (VA) accountability and results. PM is “the development and incorporation of performance measurement into an organization’s management and policy systems, and the subsequent use of the information generated for decision making by managers and the politicians to whom they are accountable” (Ohemeng & McCall-Thomas, 2013, p. 457). Thus, the purpose of standardized testing is to promote educational equity for all students through a system that utilizes prescribed measurement targets and subsequent development of additional mandates and policies to ensure student performance growth.

Proponents of standardized testing argue that this method prepares students for the rigor of postsecondary education. A study conducted by Munter and Haines (2018) focused on identifying the rationale for standardized testing in today’s education system. Their findings

yielded results rationalizing standardized testing from the standpoint of both educators and students. One rationale revealed that through standardized assessments, course assignments could be correlated with student achievement. District leader study participants discussed placing students in courses based on their standardized test scores. Munter and Haines (2018) also discussed a positive impact of standardized testing, increased school pride. From interviews conducted during their study, Munter and Haines (2018) determined that school pride motivated students to do well on standardized assessments. Supporting this notion, Campos-Holland et al. (2016) expressed that students did express pride in their school's high scores, indicating that a strong desire to perform well was fostered.

In contrast to the proponents' belief that standardized testing creates a positive learning environment for students, research conducted by Thompson and Allen (2012) suggested that the effects of this method of assessment on students are starkly different. In an urban setting, Thompson and Allen (2012) reported that students felt heightened anxiety with what they felt was the punitive nature of the assessments. A similar study conducted by Esomonu and Eleje (2020) investigated students' perceptions of the effects of standardized testing. Findings from the study reported that students experienced heightened amounts of test anxiety in correlation with standardized assessments (Esomonu & Eleje, 2020). Additionally, Feeney and Freeman (2014) found that the importance placed on standardized testing beginning in kindergarten and primary grades has led to increased stress levels in young children. Related to their findings, Segool et al. (2013) found that not only did elementary students self-report increased levels of anxiety related to standardized testing, but their teachers and parents reported that they observed increased symptoms of student anxiety related to standardized testing.

Impact of Standardized Testing on the Curriculum

The American education system's use of data and student test scores is in direct opposition to the way that other nations use student standardized test scores. As Kamenetz (2015) noted, "the most common type of high stakes standardized test, found throughout Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America, is the high school exit/college entrance exam" (p. 78). Other nations test the college preparedness of students, while testing in the United States labels student learning and compels students whose performance measurements fall below proficient, requiring them to take additional courses that purport to prepare them for the next round of standardized tests (Whitmore, 2017). These actions create the opportunity for states and school divisions to adapt curriculums to ensure student success on high stakes standardized assessments (Whitmore, 2017).

The emphasis on standardized testing has impacted numerous curricular and pedagogical issues and concerns (Cholis et al., 2018). As a result of the prioritization of standardized testing, the curriculums of tested subjects have been narrowed. Research conducted by Cavendish et al. (2017) analyzed the effects of standardized testing on the curriculum by conducting interviews and classroom observations of secondary teachers in the Miami-Dade school system. Findings from their study suggest that with the overemphasis of teaching to mandated standards, the curriculum has been narrowed to only reflect the tested standards (Cavendish et al., 2017). Additionally, research suggested that teachers of tested curricula further narrowed the curriculum by only teaching tested materials and test-taking strategies versus engaging instructional lessons throughout the curricula (Cavendish et al., 2017). The qualitative research study conducted by Darling (2017) identified a common theme of curriculum narrowing from teachers of tested curricula in an urban, grade K-5 sampling. According to Darling (2017), "admission of teaching

to the test is hardly commonplace in the classroom” (p. 72). As more emphasis is placed on state-mandated standards, educators are homing in on only tested standards for focus during instructional time.

In addition to the narrowing of curriculum, the emphasis on standardized testing has led to school divisions purchasing generated curriculum frameworks and pacing guides not created by educators. The implementation of district curriculum and district and division pedagogical guides has led to the limiting of the classroom teachers’ ability to make decisions related to student learning objectives. A quantitative study conducted by Ruan et al. (2015) suggested that the undermining of teachers’ perceptions of their autonomy and self-efficacy may lead to underperformance by both teachers and students as beliefs and behaviors may interact and result in reciprocal determination.

Research conducted by Bogen et al. (2019) suggested that because of state-mandated accreditation requirements, school divisions purchase curriculum frameworks and pacing guides to help ensure student success on the end-of-course assessment. These frameworks and guides continue to narrow the curriculum by limiting teachers of tested curricula to only teaching standards-based lessons with the intention of test prep (Bogen et al., 2019). Research conducted by Mueller and Colley (2015) revealed that teachers resented the numerous curricular changes within their district. One teacher stated that “county changes the curriculum way too often [and] they need to leave it alone for enough time to see a difference, which directly links the curriculum changes with student achievement” (Mueller & Colley, 2015, p. 821). A qualitative case study examining K-12 teachers’ experiences in a standardized testing environment conducted by Hite-Pope (2017) revealed that teachers felt that the standardized testing

environment created heightened stress and promoted a curriculum that did not promote strengthening students' intellectual capacity.

The intended goal of standardized testing is to assess a student's comprehension of course material (Churchill et al., 2015). However, with its implementation, many states included student performance on these assessments as part of district and teacher evaluation programs (Loeb & Byun, 2019). To ensure student success on mandated standardized testing, some school divisions include mandated curriculums to guide teachers to effectively include mandated standards in the classroom (Kempf, 2016). A study conducted by Ziebell and Clark (2018) pointed out that in addition to stress, the mandated curriculum often proved difficult to teach and led to complex issues. In the comparative case study, Ziebell and Clark (2018) conducted interviews with primary science and mathematics instructors to determine the effectiveness of the mandated curriculum. Results concluded that the mandated curriculums were difficult to implement in the classroom, and aside from addressing state standards, the curriculums created gaps in the content. Cho and Eberhard (2013) found that teachers in a Title I school expressed dissatisfaction about changing curriculum solely to meet the demands of high-stake testing rather than to strengthen student learning. Furthermore, in a purposeful sampling of U.S. History teachers, Mueller and Colley (2015) found:

Teacher frustration with high-stakes assessment was often attributed to a perceived disconnect, either between the curricular expectations communicated by the district and the demands of the state test or between state standards and the discrete items on the state test. (p. 97)

The influences of mandated standards and purchased curricula have also led to a decline in instruction in the content area of social studies. The qualitative study conducted by Kuhar

(2016) revealed that following the NCLB policy of 2001, narrowing of the curriculum led to a reduction of social studies instruction. The study involved upper elementary teachers in New York. Interviews were conducted with teachers yielding a present theme that the focus of curriculum shifted following NCLB to include more instruction for language arts and math courses with a reduction in social studies curricula (Kuhar, 2016). In addition to limiting social studies curricula, the influences of NCLB and ESSA have narrowed the core academic curricula as well. Horn (2016) conducted research using a learning design perspective to determine how policies such as NCLB and ESSA have shaped the urban educator's ability to reform curriculum to meet student needs in the content area of mathematics. Results from the study indicated that teachers felt heightened frustrations regarding mandated curriculums which left them "teaching to the test" rather than meeting the instructional needs of the students (Horn, 2016).

As the curriculum is designed to promote standardized test success, it is relevant to study the washback effect that standardized testing can have on the curriculum and teacher's instructional practices (Jiménez et al., 2017). The washback effect is described as:

A natural tendency for both teachers and students to tailor their classroom activities to the demands of the test, especially when the test is very important to the future of the students, and pass rates are used as a measure of teacher success. This influence of the test on the classroom is, of course, very important; this . . . effect can be either beneficial or harmful.

(Buck, 1998, p. 17)

According to Jiménez et al. (2017), washback can also identify the effects that the tests can have on teaching and learning. Utilizing a case study method, Jiménez et al. (2017) determined the washback effect of the Saber Pro standardized assessment in Columbia. Results from the study suggested that with the high emphasis placed on standardized testing in the curriculum, teachers

adapted their instructional strategies to meet the needs of the assessment rather than the needs of the students (Jiménez et al., 2017). Similarly, Beuchert et al. (2017) examined the effects of standardized testing and the curriculum in third grade mathematics. The study revealed that with an influx of emphasis being placed on addressing the standards, the mathematics curriculum was narrowed to only tested material (Beuchert et al., 2017). Studies like that of Jiménez et al. (2017) and Beuchert et al. (2017) focused on the washback effects of standardized testing on the curriculum but do not explore the effects narrowing the curriculum can have on the classroom teacher.

Impact of Standardized Testing on Pedagogy

As pressures mount to ensure student success in a standardized testing environment, the instructional practices of effective teachers have adapted to meet the needs of the test (Blazer, 2011). High-quality teachers are thought and often expected to not only raise test scores, but to also provide emotionally supportive environments that contribute to students' social and emotional development, manage classroom behaviors, deliver accurate content, and support critical thinking (Blazer & Kraft, 2017). In response to standardized testing in the core academic subjects, teachers have adjusted the curriculum to meet the needs of the test, often reducing the focus on providing emotionally supportive environments for students (Smith & Smith, 2020). This overreliance on testing encourages rote memorization whereby students may forget what they have learned after the assessment is over (Sheninger & Murray, 2017). This results in wasted time and resources and can also lead to an engagement issue where students are not interested in the content being presented (Sheninger & Murray, 2017). As postsecondary options encourage students to be mindful critical thinkers, "we need to ensure that our schools are adequately preparing students for the ever-changing global society in which we live" (Brown &

Berger, 2014, p. xix). As new challenges arise “students must be taught how to think critically, they must be taught how to collaborate with others, and ask questions that challenge and inspire growth, rather than memorize information without retention” (Smith & Smith, 2020).

Beyond curricular changes and adaptations in reliance on standardized testing, Mueller and Colley (2015) also found that teachers had to adapt their pedagogical practices to provide instruction that prepared students for standardized testing. The study focused on teachers in a Kentucky school district. While the teacher participants found benefit in standardized testing as a means of accountability, they questioned the accountability of the tests written by American College Testing. Mueller and Colley (2015) also found, “Teachers felt an obligation to help students succeed in this high-stakes environment, not just because of their professional reputation but also because of a broader responsibility to their students, thereby becoming very conscious of the assessments influence on their practice” (p. 102). High-stakes testing is known to have a change in a pedagogical style, but sometimes this change is not understood by educators (Santoro, 2019). Shelton and Brooks (2019) investigated how secondary teachers adjusted their pedagogical practices because of standardized testing. Results indicated that teachers shifted instructional practices and narrowed the curriculum to only tested material to ensure student success on end-of-course assessments. The teachers shared concern that the materials they were omitting to accommodate mandated standards were needed for students to be successful in a postsecondary setting, but with curriculum constraints, they were not afforded the time to cover everything (Shelton & Brooks, 2019). Shelton and Brooks (2019) suggested further research on the adjustment of instructional practices in other grade levels to enhance understanding of how teachers adapt their pedagogical styling to meet the needs of standardized testing.

Brown (2019) conducted research in a third grade setting to determine the effects of standardized testing on the curriculum and pedagogical practices of teachers. Findings from the study suggested that the participating teachers focused more on “teaching to the test” to ensure exposure to all standards prior to the end-of-course assessment. Additionally, the teacher participants discussed reducing their intended curriculum to address only the tested standards to ensure more opportunities for student success (Brown, 2019). A qualitative study conducted by Coppola (2017) sought to determine teacher perception of testing in grades K-2. Interviews were conducted with 16 teachers to determine the perception of standardized testing in the primary grades. Teachers discussed that even in non-tested curricula grades, they adjust instructional practices and curricula to address standards that will be tested in later grades. Brown (2019) and Coppola (2017) suggested continued research on the adjustment of instructional practices to address standardized testing in the upper grades to fully understand how educators flexibly adapt to the ever-changing mandates. Similarly, research conducted by Ro (2019) analyzed how instructional practices were adjusting for teachers in grades first through fourth in regard to standardized testing. Ro (2019) revealed that teachers in primary grades adjusted instruction to “pre-teach” future tested curricula to create a solid foundation for students moving into tested curricula subjects.

Research identifying the effects of the standardized testing environment on instructional practices exists primarily for the primary and secondary grade levels, leaving a gap in middle school teacher perception. Research conducted by Buldar and Acar (2019) addressed the views of middle school teachers on standardized testing. Findings revealed that teachers associated high-stakes standardized testing with heightened stress for both teachers and students. The experiences of educators with adjusting instructional practices were not discussed. Similarly, the

quantitative research study conducted by Youn (2018) focused on teacher empowerment and pedagogical practice decisions against pre-set limitations and options. Findings from this study supported the notion that teachers adjust instructional practices in the classroom but did not discuss the factors leading to the adjustment of instruction, or the teachers' experience with the effectiveness of adjusting instructional practices to meet the needs of standardized testing.

Impact of Standardized Testing on Teacher Evaluation

In addition to curriculum and pedagogical adjustments, standardized testing has also had an impact on the evaluation of teacher effectiveness (Bogen et al., 2019). As more accountability is placed on school divisions to ensure student success on end-of-course assessments, many divisions have placed student performance on standardized testing at the forefront of their teacher evaluation process (Wronowski & Urick, 2019). Research conducted by Wronowski and Urick (2019) examined teacher perception of how increased accountability measures for teachers led to heightened teacher stress and adjusted instructional practices to address standardized testing. Findings from their study suggested that with increasing accountability placed on teachers because of standardized testing, teachers were adapting instructional practices to focus on the standards (Wronowski & Urick, 2019). The addition of student test performance on teacher evaluations has led to many unintended results. Derrington and Martinez (2019) conducted a qualitative study determining teachers' perceptions of the teacher evaluation process. Results from the study indicated that the refined evaluation process is not effective in providing learning opportunities for struggling teachers (Derrington & Martinez, 2019). Teacher participants also reported that the inclusion of student test scores in the evaluation process has led to heightened test anxiety for educators as well as heightened tension with administration (Derrington & Martinez, 2019).

Over the past two decades, legislation has encouraged states nationwide to raise student achievement through rigorous standards-based assessments and assessment-based school accountability programs (Williams & Hebert, 2020). As a result of the 2009 Race to the Top (RTTP) program, accountability systems use teacher evaluation methods to influence teacher-led classroom decisions (Harris et al., 2014). Teacher evaluation systems, once primarily focused on teacher observations, shifted to include student high-stakes test performance scores to encourage teachers to promote the curriculum (Williams & Hebert, 2020). The evaluation systems, to include student test performance, have shifted to include new instruments used to evaluate teacher effectiveness through observations and data that align with the federally funded RTTP program in addition to other resources (Williams & Hebert, 2020). These new standards-based instructional observations have been found to provide more instructional guidance to teachers and encourage the best practices for student success (Williams & Hebert, 2020).

In recent years, many school divisions have implemented high-stakes standardized testing results in the teacher's overall evaluation. With this addition, the classroom teacher is responsible for effectively providing instruction in a means that engages learners with tested content (Jewell, 2017). As a result, evaluation systems have evolved to measure teacher performance in a variety of ways, connecting test performance with teacher effectiveness (Jewell, 2017). Jewell (2017) analyzed the effectiveness of the teacher evaluation system where student test scores are an evaluation determinant. The teachers surveyed reported feeling anxious concerning the usage of student test scores in the teacher evaluation process.

Part of the concern evidenced by teachers regarding the inclusion of test results into the evaluation process is that "there is no way they could isolate the impact of teaching itself from other factors affecting children's learning, particularly such things as the family background of

the students, the impact of poverty, racial segregation, even class size” (Porter, 2015, para. 16). Related to these findings, Croft et al. (2016) cited the high poverty levels in Georgia as a cause of concern by teachers related to the inclusion of test scores in the evaluation process. The role of test scores in teacher accountability and evaluation sets apart those teachers of tested curricula from teachers of non-tested curricula as well as administrators and policymakers.

Teachers of tested curricula are, in many states, held accountable for student test performance (Marchant et al., 2015). As a result of increased accountability, there is evidence to suggest that some teachers participate in unprofessional behaviors in fear of losing their job. Through a mixed-methods research approach, Hibel and Penn (2020) investigated the rising number of cheating scandals that have emerged because of high-stakes standardized testing implications for the classroom teacher. The scandals reported in the research involved both educators and administrators who are also, in some states, held accountable for school-wide student performance on assessments. In Georgia, 11 educators were accused of changing answers on their students’ standardized tests. A multimodal analysis of teacher expectations in relation to the cheating scandal was conducted by Catalano and Gatti (2018), revealing that the teacher’s actions were a result of the systemic problems associated with standardized testing (Catalano & Gatti, 2018). Catalano and Gatti (2018) also discussed that issues arising from a high-stakes testing environment are often “glossed over” in reporting issues in today’s schools.

The likely cause of these behaviors is the incentives and pressures that teachers feel to meet set student achievement goals (Phelps, 2016). Croft et al. (2016) identified the teacher evaluation process as a “mesoscale evaluation system in that the evaluation efforts are meant to serve as mechanisms of accountability for educator preparation” (p. 73). The inclusion of student performance in the teacher evaluation process in many states has led to, in some instances, cases

of unprofessional conduct by teachers as a result of the pressures associated with teaching in a high-stakes standardized testing environment. In addition, in some instances, the mounting pressures of accountability have led to teachers reconsidering the profession.

With the intensified pressure placed on teachers to have students perform at a specific pass/fail rate, many educators feel their professional status has been reduced (Ladson-Billings, 2016). Munter and Hanes (2018) described the effects of a narrowed curriculum as a result of standardized testing as “leading to fewer opportunities for professionals to make instructional decisions in their own classrooms” (p. 3). Additionally, this method of assessment has contributed to a more stressful environment for both teachers and students, with the effects of which often visible in student performance (Munter & Hanes, 2018). As teachers feel they have less control over their taught content, many teachers have reported that a classroom is a place of stress and anxiety, heightened during testing seasons (Munter & Hanes, 2018).

In school divisions where test scores are placed at the forefront of importance in the teacher evaluation process, accountability concerns are heightened amongst teachers, principals, and division leaders (Louis et al., 2005). A qualitative study conducted by Munter and Hanes (2018) focused on the experiences of teachers in an evaluation system based on student performance on high-stakes standardized tests. Interviews conducted within the study revealed that district leaders within the division were concerned with the emphasis placed on student performance and its link to a reduction of teacher morale in tested subjects (Munter & Hanes, 2018). In addition, the study placed focus on the teacher’s perception of their evaluation and revealed that many teachers felt undue pressure to have their students perform well on the test, regardless of how instruction was provided (Munter & Hanes, 2018).

The inclusion of standardized test scores in teacher evaluations has fueled the narrowing of the curriculum in many states (Minnich et al., 2018). Sussman and Wilson (2019) explored the narrowing of the mathematics and science curriculum as a result of standardized achievement tests. The study focused on the attention placed on tested curricula versus the entire curriculum presented. Sussman and Wilson (2019) noted that in response to pressures placed on educators to have adequate pass percentages on end-of-course assessments, the curriculum was narrowed to only focus on the tested content matter. Their study noted that to better broaden the curriculum, teachers would need to focus less on tested items and more on the subject content (Sussman & Wilson, 2019). However, as states continue to include student test performance in teacher evaluation requirements, broadening of the curriculum seems less likely (Sussman & Wilson, 2019).

The passage of the ESSA of 2015 loosened the federal government's hold on teacher accountability systems. ESSA indicated that states would have more freedom to their teacher evaluation policies while re-embracing more local (district) control over teacher evaluation processes (Klein, 2015). However, despite this reprieve, it has been unclear whether states would, in-practice, reduce the usage of value-added models (VAM) in their teacher evaluation systems, or continuing to use VAMs combined with other measures inconsequential ways (Close et al., 2020). A study conducted by the National Council for Teacher Equality (NCTQ) indicated that many states are not making huge changes in the post ESSA world (Walsh et al., 2017). Similar research conducted by Close et al. (2020) indicated that "fifteen states are still explicitly using VAMs as an evaluation tool resulting in the continued emphasis placed on student test performance in regard to teacher evaluation" (p. 3). Some states still choosing to use VAMs are doing so in a less than traditional manner. For example, the state of North Carolina is using the

VAMs to drive professional development opportunities, rather than as a basis for teacher evaluation.

As some divisions begin to place emphasis on altering teacher evaluation programs to focus on lesson student test performance, a new question arises, what are the implications of reduced teacher accountability in regards to testing? (Alzen et al., 2017). In a study conducted by Alzen et al. (2017) the idea of how reduced teacher accountability will affect the current curriculum framework. Their findings suggested that the beneficiaries of reducing the significance of student performance on standardized tests in teacher evaluation systems is actually the students (Alzen et al., 2017). With reduced pressures in place for teachers, the classroom teacher can adapt instruction to meet the needs of the students, rather than feel pressure to only teach to the test (Alzen et al., 2017).

Impact of Standardized Testing on Teacher Retention

As pressures mount with teacher accountability in a standardized testing environment, many teachers are faced with a choice whether to remain in the profession or not. Ingersoll et al. (2016) studied the aspect of accountability and its effect on teacher retention rates. Results from their quantitative study revealed evidence that accountability made teacher retention rates more difficult in low-performing schools (Ingersoll et al., 2016). Further research conducted by Ingersoll et al. (2016) revealed that schools with higher retention rates left instructional practices decisions to the educator. The authors concluded that to not reduce teacher retention rates, teachers need to have control of instructional practices to meet the accountability standard present (Ingersoll et al., 2016). While the mandated requirement of standardized test scores as part of teacher evaluation processes creates undue stress for educators, the implications of the standardized testing environment can also hinder retention rates. Geiger and Pivovarova (2018)

investigated the impact of the work environment on teacher retention rates in three Arizona primary schools. The three-year quantitative study compared teacher retention rates with surveyed teachers' opinions of the work environment. In low-performing schools, the teacher retention rate was higher than in schools where students adequately met state-mandated goals (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018). The research of Geiger and Pivovarova (2018) supported the claim that teachers in a standardized testing environment face struggle that may lead to the decision to walk away from the profession.

While facing the pressures of legislation changes and the impact of standardized testing in the classroom, many educators feel the pressure of perfectionism in their line of work (Jones, 2016). A study conducted by Jones (2016) explores the concept of perfectionism and how it relates to teachers in the education field. The study explored the perceptions of 118 teachers regarding perfectionism and its role in teacher retention rates. Results from the study indicated that in many circumstances teachers felt the pressure to demonstrate perfectionism in all aspects of their career (Jones, 2016). The study's results also imply that in many circumstances, veteran teachers overlook difficult and chaotic circumstances to remain in the profession (Jones, 2016). Von der Embse et al. (2016) found that test-based accountability led to reduced levels of job satisfaction and efficacy while Aldridge and Fraser (2016) found a direct correlation between teachers' job satisfaction and teacher retention linked with student achievement on high-stakes standardized assessments.

Although there are many factors in a teacher's decision to leave the profession, Farber (2015) found that many teachers who leave the profession cite the prioritization of standardized testing and the associated testing culture that has emerged as a factor in leaving. Ryan et al. (2016) revealed that teacher attrition rates are often directly affected by the emphasis placed on

standardized testing, especially in teachers with few years of experience. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) revealed that teachers of tested curriculum often feel demoralized when they cannot do what they feel is needed to be effective in the face of mandated policies and demanded instructional practices. Santoro (2018) points out that teacher burnout in relation to the accountability of teachers in a standardized testing environment is more prominent in beginning teachers. Teachers experiencing burn out because of standardized testing considered abandoning teaching because they feel unable to meet the expectations imposed by state-mandates (Santoro, 2018). Regarding teacher retention rates being affected by mandated policies, Thibodeaux et al. (2015) stated:

Research suggests that at a time when teachers must carefully examine and master the roles and responsibilities of their profession to meet the needs of students as well as the demands of administrators and policymakers, strains experienced by teachers are resulting in teacher turnover ... these strains may be a result of high-stakes testing and stressors that are associated with test preparation, procedures, and accountability. (p. 228)

Furthermore, Thibodeaux et al. (2015) found that “teachers felt that policymakers made decisions that affected educators, and it bothered teachers that so many mandates had been placed on them” (p. 247).

Qualitative research conducted by Dunn (2018) sought to determine the experiences of teachers who left the profession. Through analysis of 23 teacher resignation letters, Dunn (2018) concluded that many teachers left the teaching profession because of not having control over what occurred in the classroom from a pedagogical standpoint. Feelings of the frustration associated with limited decision making created an undesirable work environment, resulting in teacher burn out and eventual vacating of their teaching position (Dunn, 2018). Margolis (2016),

revealed that experienced teachers are leaving the profession because of the “data-driven curriculum.” Participants in the study revealed that the “joy had been sucked out of teaching” and replaced with data notebooks and mandated curriculums focused only on test prep (Margolis, 2016). In similarity with the studies of Dunn (2018) and Margolis (2016), the phenomenological study conducted by D. Thompson (2018) echoed the notion that teachers, both beginning and veteran, are leaving the profession because of the work environment conditions. D. Thompson (2018) conducted interviews with twenty-four teachers of various experience levels to determine factors leading to teachers exiting the profession. Results from the study revealed the number one reason teachers vacate their positions is due to work environment restrictions (D. Thompson, 2018). Some teacher participants indicated that a less than desirable work environment was related to administrative decisions, but a majority indicated that the pressures associated with teacher accountability created a stressful environment (D. Thompson, 2018).

In a qualitative study exploring the retention rates of a southeastern high school, Lane (2018) determined that six themes emerged from interviews amongst staff members. The themes included “feelings of powerlessness, excessive observations, loss of autonomy confidence, ineffective instructional practices, stress and burnout associated with testing, and ineffective professional development” (p. 5). Of the eight teacher participants in the study, six reported the emphasis on standardized testing and the pushed instructional practices as a reason for leaving the profession (Lane, 2018). Additionally, the teacher participants expressed a feeling of “powerlessness” in the ability to make instructional decisions in the classroom. Each participant linked this feeling of powerlessness to have a negative influence on their perceived morale and overall desire to continue teaching (Lane, 2018).

A growing concern in regard to teacher retention rates centers on the experienced educator's decision to leave the profession. According to Allen et al. (2019) the rate at which experienced educators, with more than five years of classroom experience, is leaving the classroom is growing at an alarming percentage. While many factors may attribute to a seasoned teacher leaving the profession, Allen et al. (2019) revealed that a heightened reason for lower retention rates amongst veteran teachers is the impact of legislation rendering teachers limited to making pertinent instructional decisions in the classroom. A study conducted by Paige et al. (2018) focused on 23 mathematics and science educators in an urban setting. The educators represented various levels of teaching experience. Through interviews, veteran teachers report that a lack of administrative support paired with changing and often daunting evaluation standards created heightened anxiety concerning teacher autonomy (Paige et al., 2018). These feelings contributed to a reduction in retention rates amongst educators who had been in the field for more than five years.

Teacher Adaptability

Teaching is characterized by the constant change in an unpredictable and often dynamic environment (Collie & Martin, 2017). The capacity of one's ability to adjust their actions to ever-changing environments is known as accountability (Martin et al., 2020). Research conducted by Granziera et al. (2019) explored the role of flexibility and adaptability in the classroom. Findings from their study revealed the nature of adaptability in the classroom and proposed a range of strategies to be implemented by educators in the classroom to ease decision making in regard to flexibility. Their study linked teacher adaptability as one of the key components of success in today's education field, in addition, their research concluded that teachers with strong adaptability skills would foster longer careers in the field of education

(Granziera et al., 2019). Additional findings within their study revealed that developing adaptability skills in pre-service teachers could lead to a longer career levity for new educators (Granziera et al., 2019).

Similarly, a study conducted by Collie and Martin (2017) explored teachers' sense of adaptability in comparison to their perceptions of autonomy, well-being, and organizational commitment. The study consisted of 115 secondary mathematics teachers. Using single and multi-level structural equation modeling, results indicated that there was a connection between perceived autonomy and teacher adaptability in the classroom. Findings from the study suggested that teachers with higher autonomy had higher accounts of adaptations in the classroom (Collie & Martin, 2017). The study's findings provide a rationale for understanding teachers' responses to inherently changing demands of their work (Collie & Martin, 2017).

In an age of standardized testing, teacher adaptability is more pertinent than ever (Eryilmaz et al., 2020). Research conducted by Loughland and Alonzo (2019) focused on the heightened need for adaptability in preparation for assessments for learning. In a study focusing on the classroom practices of teachers, Loughland and Alonzo (2019) interviewed six educators to determine their instructional practices in student assessment preparation. Findings from the study suggested that teachers with flexible and adaptive practices have more success in preparing students for assessments (Loughland & Alonzo, 2019). In addition, teachers including adaptability within the classroom responded to environmental pressure with a higher success rate than educators with limited flexibility in the classroom (Loughland & Alonzo, 2019).

Teaching in the 21st century requires a plethora of skills for the classroom educator. Of these skills, the ability to adapt to a given environmental or curricular change is one of the most important (Erdem & Keklik, 2020). In circumstances where educators were able to adapt to the

ever-changing curricular demands, the students in the classroom forged higher end-of-course assessment scores than in classrooms where educators were not able to adapt as well (Granziera, 2019). Adaptability amongst active teachers has been linked to many positive outcomes for both the educator and students, outside of test performance. A study conducted by Collie and Martin (2017) revealed when teachers are more adaptable, they have reported higher well-being and organizational rate. An additional study by Collie et al. (2020) revealed that more adaptable teachers tended to be less engaged at work, resulting in more engaging learning environments for students. Loughland and Alonzo (2019) concluded that the more adaptable teachers tended to scaffold instruction at a higher level to best meet the needs of the individual students in the classroom. Adaptability is important for educator, especially those in a standardized testing environment. With ever-changing legislation mandating new education policies, the ability to flexibly adapt to the given situation can be a success or flounder for the classroom teacher (Bogen et al., 2019).

In a study conducted by Collie et al. (2020) the notion of how adaptability helps teachers to navigate curricular changes was investigated. Their findings were geared towards determining whether job demands, in this instance student behavior and curricular pressures, paired with job resources were associated with successful teacher adaptability (Collie et al., 2020). Also examined within the study was the association of school-average teacher adaptability has with teacher efficacy and overall student performance. Results from the study suggested that the higher the teacher-accountability rate, the higher the teacher efficacy rate and in return student performance rate was (Collie et al., 2020). This suggests that in environments where teacher adaptability rates are heightened, the teacher feels stronger in their ability to perform as a

teacher. The result is that students in these environments performed at a higher rate than in classrooms where teacher adaptability was not present (Collie et al., 2020).

Teacher accountability is one of the most pertinent effects of standardized testing in today's education system. With such focus on accountability, it is assumed that teachers use student data to improve learning, however, the data is really used to assist teachers with adapting instruction to meet the needs of the test (Rangel et al., 2017). Research conducted by Rangel et al. (2017) investigated how teachers use student test data in the classroom. Their findings suggested that rather than using data as an accountability tool for the students, classroom teachers used the data to guide instruction adaptations to ensure student success on future assessments (Rangel et al., 2017). To understand how teachers use data to adapt instructional practices, Rangel et al. (2017) utilized the sensemaking theory. Sensemaking contends that "action is based on how people notice or select information from the environment, make meaning of that information, and then act on those interpretations, developing culture, social structures, and routines over time" (Coburn, 2001, p. 147). Teachers actively adapt their instructional approaches based on student test data, but this adaptation is not often for differentiating instruction for student need, but to meet the needs of state addressed standards (Werts & Brewer, 2015).

Summary

The relevant research referenced in Chapter Two provides evidence of the effects of the standardized testing environment on teacher instructional practices. Research has been conducted on the impact of standardized testing on the curriculum and pedagogical styling of teachers. As a result of federally mandated policies such as NCLB and its successor ESSA, many states mandated curriculum and pedagogical practices for teachers to ensure the success of students on

end-of-course assessments (Betts et al., 2017). Research conducted by Santoro (2018) revealed that because of these state-mandated curricula changes, many teachers felt devalued and experienced heightened burn out rates. Additionally, teachers felt pressured to narrow the curriculum to “teach to the test” rather than focus on the needs of the students before them (R. Thompson, 2018). The referenced research also suggests the notion that teachers of tested curricula are held to a different accountability level than those of non-tested curricula, resulting in the constant adaptation of instructional practices to meet the ever-changing state mandates for curriculum and instruction (Marchant et al., 2015).

Although there have been numerous studies conducted concerning the effects of standardized testing on teachers, most of the studies have been quantitative in nature and did not reflect the lived experience of an educator in a standardized testing environment. Beyond the limitations of quantitative research in understanding the lived experiences of educators in a standardized testing environment, a gap in the literature existed. Previously conducted research by Coppola (2017) and Brown (2019) focused on the perceptions of teachers in secondary and primary settings with little focus on the middle grade educator. As standardized testing continues to be a primary method of determining student success in the classroom and a factor in teacher evaluation processes, it is pertinent to understand the lived experiences of educators in a standardized testing environment with an emphasis on how instructional practices are altered to address the standards. Understanding the adaptation of instructional practices will enable productive professional development opportunities within school divisions to assist beginning educators with the stresses often associated with standardized testing. Research conducted by Dunn (2018) revealed that it is often beginning educators that choose to leave the profession because of implications from standardized testing. Developing sound professional development

centered on how to adjust instructional practices regarding these implications will help increase teacher retention rates in divisions with low performing schools.

Adaptability is one of the most important skills a classroom teacher should possess (Collie & Martin, 2017). Studies conducted by Collie and Martin (2017) and Granzeria et al. (2019) sought to determine the importance of teacher adaptability in regard to addressing student needs in the classroom. Their work revealed that teachers spend a considerable amount of time adapting their instructional practices to accommodate student learning (Collie & Martin, 2017; Granzeria et al., 2019). Additional research conducted by Lougland and Alonzo (2019) and Collie et al. (2020) analyzed the difference between teachers with developed adaptability skills and those without. Lougland and Alonzo (2019) reported that teachers with heightened adaptability skills were more likely to have highly engaging lessons resulting in stronger student participation. As standardized testing continues to be a focal feature in American classrooms it is important to understand the effectiveness of teacher adaptability and to understand the value teachers of tested curriculum place on adaptability in the classroom.

The qualitative design of this study provided insight into how teachers perceive and live the experience of being a middle-school educator in a standardized testing environment with an emphasis on how teachers adjust their instructional practices to meet the needs of state-mandated curricula and pedagogical style. This research study provided an understanding of the impact of the standardized testing environment on teachers and their instructional practices as well as contributed to the field of knowledge related to the issue while filling gaps in the current literature.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of middle school teachers in a standardized testing environment. The first section of this chapter will examine the design, setting, and participants of the study. Following this will be an explanation of the procedures, the role of the researcher, data collection, and analysis. The chapter concludes by examining the trustworthiness of the study and the ethical considerations applied.

Research Design

This qualitative study utilized the transcendental phenomenological inquiry and design approach to determine the lived experiences of middle school teachers in a standardized testing environment. Creswell and Poth (2018) revealed that a qualitative research design is appropriate when we want “to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between the researcher and the participants in the study” (p. 104). Therefore, a qualitative research design was appropriate for this study as the study aimed to understand the lived experiences of middle school teachers in a standardized testing environment. According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenological research aims to “determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions, general or universal meanings are derived” (p. 13). In presenting the case findings in a social constructivist framework, the final presentation included the voices of participants, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, the emergence of common experience themes amongst participants, and its contribution

to the literature (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study focused on the phenomenon of middle school teacher experiences in a standardized testing environment.

A phenomenological approach was used for this research to understand the perspectives of those who have lived the experience of this phenomenon. According to Moustakas (1994), the “phenomenological approach involves a return to experience to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience” (p. 13). Creswell and Poth (2018) stated, “a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 153), thus demonstrating the appropriateness of the phenomenological approach for this study. Research participants were asked to reveal their experiences with teaching middle school in a standardized testing environment. Participant experiences were categorized and coded to reveal emerging themes, providing an opportunity for continued reflection and investigation (Moustakas, 1994).

A transcendental phenomenological approach was used in this research study. This allowed me, the researcher, to focus less on personal interpretations and more on a description of the participants’ experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The experiences of teaching in a standardized testing environment may vary among teachers. Therefore, this research study examined the experiences of multiple teachers to determine how the standardized testing environment leads to changes in instructional practice. Epoché was used to allow me, the researcher, to separate from my own experiences with standardized testing to focus on the essence and experiences of the study’s participants with the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas (1994), in utilizing epoché the researcher will be “completely open, receptive, and naive in listening to and hearing research participants describe their experience of

the phenomenon being investigated” (p. 22). While a hermeneutic phenomenological study leads to “analysis and astute interpretation of the underlying conditions” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 10), whereas a transcendental phenomenological approach “emphasizes subjectivity and discovery of the essences of experience” (p. 45). This study’s intended focus is to understand the experiences of middle school teachers in a standardized testing environment. Therefore, a transcendental phenomenological approach is best suited to understand the essence of the experience of the participants.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide this transcendental phenomenological study.

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of middle grade teachers in a standardized testing environment?

Sub-Question One

What do teachers in the middle grades perceive to be the effects of standardized testing on instructional practices in the classroom?

Sub-Question Two

Why do middle grade teachers consider adjusting instructional practices to address standardized testing in the classroom?

Sub-Question Three

How do teachers adapt instructional practices to meet the needs of standardized testing in the middle grades?

Setting and Participants

This study’s setting was the Southern Gap Public School District (a pseudonym), a small rural school district in southwest Virginia. This study consisted of currently licensed public

school teachers teaching in the standardized testing environment in grades six through eight. This section will provide an in-depth description of the research setting and participants.

Setting

The setting of this research study included four middle schools in one school district within a rural, southwest Virginia school division. The schools and district that served as the focus of this study have implemented the state-mandated curriculum and pacing guides for tested curricula. Two of the four schools within the division fell under school improvement policies resulting in the implication of mandated instructional practices to improve student performance on assessments (Virginia Department of Education, 2020).

All four schools are blended elementary/middle schools. Ridgeview Elementary/Middle School (a pseudonym) had a student population of approximately 800 students. Approximately 90% of Ridgeview Elementary/Middle School's students are white with the remaining 10% being minorities, particularly African Americans (Virginia Department of Education, 2020). Davenport Elementary/Middle School (a pseudonym) had a student population of approximately 200 students. Approximately 97% of Davenport Elementary/Middle School's students are white with the remaining 3% being of mixed ethnical backgrounds (Virginia Department of Education, 2020). Rockhouse Elementary/Middle School (a pseudonym) had a student population of approximately 400 students. Approximately 98% of Rockhouse Elementary/Middle School's students are white with the remaining 2% being of mixed ethical backgrounds (Virginia Department of Education, 2020). Twin View Elementary/Middle School (a pseudonym) had a student population of approximately 350 students. Approximately 99% of Twin View Elementary/Middle school's students are white with the remaining 1% being of mixed ethical

background (Virginia Department of Education, 2020). All schools are in rural settings within the Southern Gap School District (a pseudonym).

The socioeconomic profile is similar for each of the four schools. Each school has over 50% of students who receive free or reduced lunches and report economically disadvantaged situations (Virginia Department of Education, 2020). All four schools are Title I funded schools. Ridgeview Elementary/Middle School and Twin View Elementary/Middle School have been accredited for a continued five years. Davenport Elementary/Middle School and Rockhouse Elementary/Middle School have mixed accreditation rates resulting in implemented school improvement plans (Virginia Department of Education, 2020). Twin View Elementary/Middle School, Davenport Elementary/Middle School, and Rockhouse Elementary/Middle School all have a single principal and guidance counselor. Ridgeview Elementary Middle School has a principal, two assistant principals, and three guidance counselors employed (Virginia Department of Education, 2020).

Participants

There are 28 middle school teachers in tested curricula courses within the four middle schools that are the focus of this research study (BCPS, 2020). Each of these teachers received a recruitment packet, including a recruitment letter, consent document, and a stamped, addressed return envelope to return materials to me. From the 28 potential participants, I planned to recruit a sample size of 12-15 participants. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), heterogeneous groups within a phenomenological study may vary in size, allowing the sample size of 12-15 to be appropriate. To participate in this research, the participant needed to be a Virginia licensed educator with middle school endorsements. The participant also needed to be actively teaching a course in a tested curriculum. According to Perucica (2017), understanding teacher perception of

how standardized testing affects instructional practices depends on teacher experience with standards in the classroom and how these standards affect instruction. Therefore, studying the phenomenon among current middle school educators provided relevant information.

A purposeful criterion sampling was used for the selection of the participants. Creswell and Poth (2018) revealed that purposeful criterion sampling “seeks cases that meet some criterion and are useful for quality assurance (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 300). Research participants needed to have experience teaching tested courses to share their experience with the impact of the standardized testing environment. Additionally, participants needed to meet the criterion of being a Virginia licensed educator with middle school endorsements, as this research seeks to explore the experiences of middle grade teachers. The participants represented a purposeful sample as they have all taught in a district that provides pacing and curriculum guides associated with state-mandated standardized testing in in the content areas of English/Language Arts and Mathematics for grades six through eight. Additionally, the participants had experience teaching a tested curriculum aligned with Virginia’s standardized testing. As a result, participants were able to purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposeful criterion sampling yielded a participant total of eight for this study. Snowball sampling was then used to obtain additional participants. Snowball sampling is a recruitment technique in which research participants are asked to assist researchers in identifying other potential participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Snowball sampling yielded two additional study participants.

Researcher Positionality

Throughout my career in public education, I have dealt with the implications standardized testing creates in the classroom. Additionally, I have witnessed colleagues dealing

with the effects of this method of assessment in various entities. I have also watched educators leave the education field as a result of the implications standardized testing can have on the instructor. One of the largest areas affected by standardized testing is the instructional practices of the teacher (Shelton & Brooks, 2019). Deciding how to best present material in the classroom can lead to heightened teacher stress, especially as states and school divisions link student performance on standardized testing to teacher evaluations (Bogen et al., 2019). I have experienced this stress in deciding how to effectively adjust instruction and have witnessed many of my colleagues experience a similar effect. In understanding the experiences of educators in a standardized testing environment, beneficial professional development and collaboration opportunities may occur to relieve some of the undue stress.

Interpretive Framework

The framework for this study was social constructivist. In social constructivism, individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My objective for this research was to understand the lived experiences of middle grade teachers in a standardized testing environment. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), social constructivism is used to interpret the experiences of others. Within this research the experiences of middle grade teachers were interpreted based on how they adapt to the classroom environment guided by standardized testing.

Philosophical Assumptions

My motivation for conducting this study stemmed from three philosophical assumptions: ontological, epistemological, and axiological. As a public-school educator for the past 13 years, I have considerable experience with the effects of standardized testing, particularly with how this method of assessment can impact the teacher. My interest in the research of teacher experiences

with addressing standardized testing comes not only from my own experiences but from the experiences of my colleagues, both past and present. The prioritization of standardized testing led many school divisions to implement policies guiding teacher pedagogical styling and linking teacher effectiveness to the outcome of student performance on the standardized test (Bondie et al., 2019). This study contributes to a body of knowledge needed to inform decisions on the best practices for teachers within a standardized testing environment.

Ontological Assumption

I believe it is important to pursue the knowledge of other's experience, therefore I subscribe to an ontological assumption which seeks to understand the participants' reality of teaching in the middle grades within a standardized testing environment and to describe the lived experiences of these participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is my belief that the best data for determining the experiences of teaching within the standardized testing environment must come from the reality of educators teaching within these parameters. These individuals have firsthand experience to share, which effectively contributed to the goal of this study.

Epistemological Assumption

By integrating an epistemological assumption within a social constructivist framework, I was able to identify patterns and emerging themes from participants' responses while separating my personal bias from their responses through bracketing. Epistemology examines how reality comes to be known, and the relationship between the knower and what is known (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2009). Incorporating an epistemological assumption allowed me, the researcher, to "get as close as possible to the participants being studied; therefore, subjective evidence is assembled based on individual views" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 65). Additionally, underpinned

with a constructivism research paradigm, the study was not designed to seek absolute truths, but rather to understand the unique and subjective experiences of the participants.

Axiological Assumptions

An axiological assumption was present in my own biases due to personal experience in the standardized testing classroom. Axiological assumptions are the values of researchers that are revealed throughout an inquiry (Creswell, 2013). My personal assumptions were bracketed to separate my own beliefs from that of the participants. According to Moustakas (1994), the procedure of seeking the meaning of anything entails time to orient oneself toward seeing before judgment and clearing a space inside oneself so one may truly perceive what is before one and in one. Recognizing and understanding my own views on teaching within the standardized testing environment enables me to set them aside while collecting and analyzing evidence from the study participants.

Researcher's Role

My role in this research is that of the human instrument. Pezalla et al. (2012) identified the human instrument as being able to grasp and evaluate the meaning of differential interaction. Additionally, my role in this project was to serve as the objective researcher conducting research on the topic and the research questions. My role included managing the entire research process through the development of strategic methods to address the research questions and analyze the data collected from each participant encounter. My role included maintaining professionalism and presenting material in an unbiased format to ensure the validity of results.

My experience with the phenomenon being studied is that my entire professional career has been in education. I have served as a secondary, primary, and middle school public school educator for more than a decade. I have primarily served as a middle school educator in the

content areas of English and social studies. In addition, I have served as an at-risk student tutor, after school enrichment program instructor, and a middle school principal designee. Aside from official contracted positions, I have served as a teacher mentor, curriculum team member, consulting teacher for the National Writing Project, National Writing Project teacher leader and professional development presenter, Virtual Virginia training educator, and Virginia Open Educational Resources teacher contributor for middle school English. Within the various roles I have fulfilled throughout my career, I have experienced how educational policies have affected teacher accountability and pedagogical styling in the classroom.

Despite having personal experience with standardized testing, particularly the Virginia Standards of Learning assessment, it is important that within my role as a researcher that I conduct myself with integrity throughout the study to avoid allowing any bias, I may have to affect the interpretation of data. Through my own experiences as a public school educator, I have formulated opinions about how standardized testing and state-mandated policies impact the pedagogical styles, curriculum decisions, and overall well-being of the classroom teacher. Although I have a high level of familiarity concerning the research phenomenon, my experiences may not be the same as other educators in similar circumstances. Additionally, my experiences and comfort with standardized testing will help me with conducting research as I am familiar with practices associated with the phenomenon (Yin, 2018). As the researcher, I will not have any authority of the participants of the study.

The goal of this research was to understand the lived experiences of middle school teachers in a standardized testing environment, “in which everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). Therefore, I needed to utilize “epoché” to set aside my prejudgments concerning the standardized testing environment. According to Moustakas

(1994) “in epoché, we set aside our prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things” (p.85). In this study, epoché was achieved through the use of a reflexive journal (see Appendix H: Reflexive Journal) throughout each stage of the study to record my own experiences with the phenomenon derived from applying phenomenological inquiry to my own experiences with the phenomenon being studied.

Procedures

This study followed Moustakas’s (1994) procedures for conducting a transcendental student which included: identifying a phenomenon of study, setting aside any prejudgments, bias, and experiences about the phenomenon being studied, and collecting data from individuals who are experienced the phenomenon. The participants in this study consisted of public school teachers in a rural school district in Virginia who had experience teaching within the standardized testing environment. The data collection methods for this study were a participant written response, individual interviews, and focus group interviews. The data analysis followed the data analysis model outlined by Moustakas (1994). Moustakas’s (1994) data analysis begins with epoché, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation.

Permissions

After receiving my dissertation committee approval of my proposed research study, I applied for approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). An IRB exemption was given for this study. Before receiving the IRB’s exemption notification (see Appendix A: IRB exemption), I sent a letter requesting permission to conduct research at the four middle schools in the Southern Gap School District (a pseudonym) (see Appendix B: Letter or Request to conduct research). Once I received permission from the school district, I sought written permission from individual school administrators (see Appendix C: Permission form).

Recruitment Plan

Once I obtained full IRB, district, and site approvals, I distributed a recruitment packet to all middle school teachers at the four middle schools in the district. The packet included a recruitment letter (see Appendix D: Recruitment letter), consent form, and a self-addressed, stamped envelope for participants to return information to me (see Appendix E: Consent form). A purposeful criterion sampling was used for the selection of the participants. Creswell and Poth (2018) revealed that purposeful criterion sampling “seeks cases that meet some criterion and are useful for quality assurance (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 300). Research participants needed to have experience teaching tested courses to share their experience with the impact of the standardized testing environment. Additionally, participants needed to meet the criterion of being a Virginia licensed educator with middle school endorsements, as this research seeks to explore the experiences of middle grade teachers. The participants represented a purposeful sample as they have all taught in a district that provides pacing and curriculum guides associated with state-mandated standardized testing in the content areas of English/Language Arts and Mathematics for grades six through eight. Additionally, the participants had experience teaching a tested curriculum aligned with Virginia’s standardized testing. As a result, participants were able to purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The initial purposeful criterion sampling yielded a sample size of eight. Snowball sampling was then utilized. Snowball sampling is a recruitment technique in which research participants are asked to assist researchers in identifying other potential participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Snowball sampling yielded two additional study participants.

Upon receiving consent from participants, I scheduled the one-on-one interviews and focus group interviews and distributed the writing prompt via email. Prior to holding interviews,

I conducted pilot testing of the interview questions. Additionally, a peer review of the questions was conducted. Yin (2018) recommends the usage of pilot testing to refine data collection and develop relevant lines of questions. I also collected individual writing prompt responses prior to conducting the interviews. The writing prompts offered the participants an opportunity to self-reflect on the topic of flexibility in the classroom in a private manner. Each interview was digitally recorded on two separate devices. The interviews were transcribed, verbatim, for coding purposes. All interview participants were invited to participate in focus group interviews. Focus groups were organized into groups of less than eight, and efforts were made to minimize familiar relationships within the groups (Patton, 2014). Focus group interviews took place following the initial one-on-one interview in a digital format. Member checking was utilized following each interview. Following transcription, I sent each participant an electronic copy of their transcription for member checking. According to Birt et al. (2016), member checking is the process of returning data to participants to check for accuracy and relevance to their experience.

Data Collection Plan

Phenomenological research focuses on the lived experiences of research participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moustakas (1994) stated that data collection within a phenomenological study entailed “a systematic way of accomplishing something orderly and disciplined, with care and rigor” (p. 104). According to Creswell and Poth (2018) a primary data collection tool within a phenomenological research design to obtain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon is participant interviews. Other forms of data collection within a phenomenological study include “observations, journals, poetry, music, and other forms of art” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 160). In addition, “taped conversations, written responses, and accounts of vicarious experiences of drama, films, poetry, and novels may be included”

(Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 160). Three data sets were utilized to determine the lived experiences of middle school teachers in a standardized testing environment. One-on-one interviews, a writing prompt, and focus group interviews were utilized to understand the experiences of the participants with the phenomenon. The use of data triangulation through three separate processes shaped the “common categories or themes” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 118). The trustworthiness of this study was strengthened through the data triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants in the study taught within the same school district and were selected for the study through purposeful convenience sampling and snowball sampling.

Writing Prompt Data Collection Approach

Participants were asked to respond to a writing prompt for the purpose of capturing personal reflection focusing on flexibility in the teaching profession. A writing prompt was selected as a data collection instrument due to its ability to allow teachers to practice self-reflection (Gallagher, 2020). According to Husserl (2012), taken away from outside distractors the subject may delve deeper into their teaching practices by writing their thoughts down, rather than worrying about how they sound to others. The writing prompt question focused on flexibility in the classroom and will align with this study’s theoretical framework, Spiro, Felovitch, and Coulson’s, theory of cognitive flexibility.

Writing Prompt Question

1. Please tell me about the relationship between one’s flexibility and their success as an educator.

This question allowed for reflection and resulted in open-ended responses that aided in the terms of qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2014). According to Janesick (1998), the act of writing is

an act of teacher efficacy and reflective practice and can guide participants to new ideas and ways of thinking.

Writing Prompt Analysis Plan

The writing prompt question was centered around Spiro, Felovitch, and Coulson's theory of cognitive flexibility. The term cognitive flexibility means "the ability to spontaneously restructure one's knowledge, in many ways, in an adaptive response to radically changing situational demands" (Spiro et al., 1992, p.165). According to Rosado (2017), the teaching profession requires individuals to be flexible both cognitively and psychologically. The psychological inflexibility of teachers is linked to heightened teacher burnout and desire to leave the profession (Rosado, 2017). Upon receiving completed writing prompt responses from the participants, I read through the responses to discover any additional information pertinent to data I had already collected. Writing prompt responses were used to further identify themes and subthemes.

Individual Interviews Data Collection Approach

The qualitative research interview is defined as, "an attempt to understand the world from the subject's point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experience, and to uncover their un-lived world" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.308). Interviews were essential to this transcendental phenomenological study as the data collected from the interviews reflected the experience of the participants regarding their experiences in the standardized testing environment. Moustakas (1994) identified the importance of interviews in that phenomenological interviews involved "an informal, interactive process and utilizes open-ended comments and questions . . . the co-researcher shares the full story of his or her experience of the bracketed question" (p. 114). Semi-structured, open-ended interview questions were utilized to help me understand the experiences

of the participants with this phenomenon. To strengthen the content validity of the interview questions, I piloted the interview questions. Yin (2018) recommends piloting interview questions to refine data collection.

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted in virtual setting. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was digitally recorded by two recording devices. I sent a Google Meet invitation to each participant for a designated time that was convenient for the participant. Each participant was asked the same pre-written open-ended questions with additional follow-up questions inserted as needed for participant response clarification. Initial, front-end questions were designed to promote interviewee comfort to promote open answering (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Two recording devices were utilized to account for potential technical issues. Interviews were transcribed verbatim within 24 to 48 hours. Following transcription, I sent each participant an electronic copy of their transcription for member checking. According to Birt et al. (2016), member checking is the process of returning data to participants to check for accuracy and relevance to their experience. The usage of member checking helps build trustworthiness of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Individual Interview Questions

1. Introduce yourself to me as if we have just met. CRQ
2. Why did you choose teaching as a career? CRQ
3. What grade and subjects do you teach? CRQ
4. What do you enjoy most about teaching? CRQ
5. Please describe your experiences teaching in a standardized testing environment.
CRQ
6. How does the district pacing guide affect your planning and instruction? SQ2

7. How does the district curriculum guide affect your planning and instruction? SQ2
8. Please explain your lesson planning procedures for instruction in your classroom on a weekly basis. SQ3
9. Please tell me what factors have led you to adjust your instructional practices to address the learning standards associated with the Virginia Standards of Learning assessment? SQ3
10. Please tell me what you have experienced as effects of the Virginia Standards of Learning assessment on your instructional practices? SQ1
11. How have you adjusted your instructional practices to address state-mandated standards associated with the Virginia Standards of Learning assessment? SQ2
12. Please describe how you feel about the inclusion of student test performance in teacher evaluations? SQ1
13. How have you adjusted curriculum and practice in order to help students be more successful on the Virginia Standards of Learning assessment? SQ3
14. Based on your experience as a classroom teacher, what advice would you give a new classroom teacher concerning the implementation of standardized testing in the classroom? CRQ

The inclusion of questions one and 14 presented the interviewee with an opportunity to comment and respond to a question outside of the focused interview questions. Question one allowed the participant an opportunity to introduce themselves to me in a way in which they felt is representative of them. Question number 14 allowed the participant an opportunity to voice personal concerns and issues associated with standardized testing not addressed by the focused questions. Questions numbered two, three, and four were included as ice breaker questions. Their

purpose was to put the participant at ease by sharing their initial desires to be an educator, what subject they teach, and what they enjoy most about their profession and to create a comfortable atmosphere for the remainder of the interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Question five aligned with the central question of the study. The question was intended to create a discussion concerning how teachers feel about instruction in a standardized testing environment. Understanding the lived experiences of educators in the middle grades provided insight into how the standardized testing method affects the instructional and professional actions of the educator (Saeki et al., 2018). Questions six and seven were designed to initiate either a positive or negative reaction to the usage of standard aligned district pacing and curriculum guides to guide instruction in the classroom. States, districts, and schools have implicated the pacing and curriculum guides to assist teachers with adapting instruction to address standardized testing and to help increase student performance on the tests (Bogen et al., 2019). These questions helped to lead into a discussion of how the actual standards associated with standardized testing impact educator decisions on instructional practice. Question eight was included in the intended interview questions to establish a basis for how teachers plan for purposeful instruction in the classroom. Bloom and Briggs (2019) revealed that the emphasis placed on standardized testing has shifted the focus of lesson planning from engaging lessons to more standard aligned repetitive instructional plans.

Questions nine, 10, and 11 addressed the research questions within this study. Each question allowed the participant to reveal their own experience with the research phenomenon of the experiences of how teachers adjust instructional practices to address standardized testing in middle grades. Question 10 gave the participant an opportunity to discuss what they perceive to be the effects to standardized testing on their instructional practices. The question was designed

to allow for either a positive or negative reaction of the effects of standardized testing on instructional practices. Question 10 directly coordinated with the research phenomenon and the instructional theory guiding this research. The theory guiding this study is Spiro, Felovitch, and Coulson's theory of cognitive flexibility. The theory refers to the ability to restructure one's knowledge in many ways, specifically in an adaptive response to radically changing situational demands (Spiro et al., 1992). In response to state-mandated standardized testing, many school divisions are requiring educators to adjust their instructional practices to improve student performance on these assessments (Lewis & Holloway, 2018). Question 10 allowed the participant an opportunity to voice how they have adjusted instructional practices to address standards associated with standardized testing identifying teacher flexibility and ability to restructure in adaptive response. Question 11 provided an opportunity for the interviewee to discuss what factors lead to an instructional change regarding standardized testing. Gibbons and Cobb (2017) concluded that teacher response to factors including student performance, updated curriculum, and updated testing practices is often present in the presentation of course materials. The design of questions nine, 10, and 11 allowed participants to discuss the meaning of their experiences (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Questions 12 and 13 presented an opportunity for the participant to reflect on how standardized testing is linked with teacher evaluative processes and how instruction is altered to meet the needs of students and to address standards in the classroom (Adcox, 2014).

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

Moustakas (1994) wrote, "following the reflective process, with its disclosure of the actualities and the potentialities of which an object is constituted, the individual constructs a full description of his or her conscious experience" (p. 47). The data collected through the individual

interview process revealed the perceptions of middle grade educators on the effects of standardized testing and how it leads to the adjusting of instructional practices to address state-mandated standards in the classroom. After transcribing the interviews, I sent the transcript of the interview to the participants to check them for accuracy. Participants were encouraged to reply to me or contact me if there was further information, they wished to share with me that they thought of after the interview was concluded.

Focus Groups Data Collection Approach

Focus group interviews were conducted and analyzed in this research study. This strategy allowed for participants to interact with each other concerning their experiences with teaching middle school in a standardized testing environment. Additionally, participants had an opportunity to examine their experiences at a stratified complex level (Yin, 2018). All participants were invited to participate in the focus group discussions. Participants were grouped based on common or emerging themes identified from one-on-one interviews. I conducted multiple focus group sessions via Google Meet to accommodate participant schedules and navigate Covid-19 concerns. I asked participants pre-written, open-ended questions in a semi-structured format. Moustakas (1994) wrote that the use of broad questioning “may also facilitate the obtaining of rich, vital, substantive descriptions of the co-researcher’s experience of the phenomenon” (p. 116). I recorded the interviews using two devices to protect against technical issues. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and shared with focus group participants for member checking. Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasized the importance of refining interview questions through piloting. Therefore, focus group questions were piloted, just as individual interview questions, to ensure validity and credibility.

My role in the focus group was the group facilitator. The focus group interview followed a semi-structured format. I used pre-written, open-ended questions to allow participants to respond based on their personal experiences. The focus group questions followed this research study's phenomenon of understanding the experiences of teachers with adapting instructional practices to address standardized testing in middle grades. The following were the focus group questions. These questions were subject to change based on emerging themes that may be revealed in the initial one-on-one interviews and individual writing prompt responses (Patton, 2014).

Focus Group Questions

1. Please introduce yourselves and state what subject you teach. CRQ
2. What is your favorite thing about being a middle school teacher? CRQ
3. How do you know when your students fully understand a concept? CRQ
4. How has standardized testing, in this case, the Virginia Standards of Learning assessment, impacted your decision making in the classroom? SQ1
5. How do you adjust instructional strategies in your classroom to address state standards associated with the Virginia Standards of Learning assessment? SQ3
6. What factors lead to you adjusting instructional practices to address the Virginia Standards of Learning assessment? SQ3
7. How effective do you think you are at flexibly adjusting instruction to address changes associated with standardized testing? SQ2
8. Based on your experience with standardized testing in the classroom, what advice would you offer a new teacher on adapting to standardized testing in the classroom? CRQ

Questions one and two were designed to be ice breaker questions. Their purpose was to put the participants at ease by sharing their initial desires to be an educator, what subject they teach, what they enjoy most about their profession, and to create a comfortable atmosphere for the remainder of the interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Question number eight allowed the participant an opportunity to voice personal concerns and issues associated with standardized testing not addressed by the focused questions. Question number three focused on gauging the visible learning of students in the classroom. Crawford (2018) revealed that visible learning allows the teacher to understand the student's voice inside of the accumulated data to understand when the student has comprehension of a given skill.

Questions four, five, six, and seven were aligned with the questions of this study. Question four gave the participants an opportunity to discuss how the incorporation of state-mandated standards has affected their individual classroom practices. The question was designed to allow for discussion of both positive and negative changes educators make. Grant (2022) revealed that because of state-mandated standards, classroom teachers often align instruction solely to the standard, focusing not on what is best for the students but what is best for the test. Questions five, six, and seven coordinated with the research phenomenon and the instructional theory guiding this research. The theory guiding this study is Spiro, Felovitch, and Coulson's theory of cognitive flexibility. The theory refers to the ability to restructure one's knowledge in many ways, specifically in an adaptive response to radically changing situational demands (Spiro et al., 1992). Question seven directly aligned with the theory of cognitive flexibility as it asks teachers to discuss how effective they are in flexibly adjusting instruction to meet the needs of standardized testing in the classroom. In response to state-mandated standardized testing, many school divisions are requiring educators to adjust their instructional practices to improve student

performance on these assessments (Lewis & Holloway, 2018). Question five allowed participants to discuss how they adjust their instructional practices in the standardized testing environment. Question six allowed the participants to discuss what factors lead to them adjusting instructional practices.

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

Gibbons and Cobb (2017) concluded that teacher response to factors including student performance, updated curriculum, and updated testing practices is often present in the presentation of course materials. After transcription of the participant responses from the focus groups was completed, participants performed member checks of their contributions to the focus group to determine the accuracy of the transcripts. I used the verbatim hard copies of the checked transcripts to carefully read and manually identify statements to discover any emerging themes.

Data Synthesis

Data was analyzed according to the appropriate data analysis procedures. Open coding using the Atlas software program was used for the interview transcripts. I identified themes based on participant responses and comments to interview questions. Moustakas (1994) refers to this step as horizontalization. Following this, I developed textural and structural descriptions of the data. According to Creswell and Poth (2018) textural description refers to the significant statements and themes of what participants experienced. From the structural and textural descriptions, the researcher writes “a composite description that presents the ‘essence’ of the phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 161). The focus of this study was on understanding the lived experiences of middle school teachers in a standardized testing environment. As a human instrument in this study, it was crucial that I accurately interpreted the interviews and documents to gain understanding of the participants’ experience with the phenomenon.

Data was collected and analyzed following a phenomenological model outlined by Moustakas (1994). The data analysis process initiated with what Moustakas (1994) refers to as epoché and moved into phenomenological reduction using horizontalization, clustering of horizons into themes, then clustering horizons and themes into textural descriptions. Following the identification of textural descriptions, imaginative variations were used to identify varying meanings and structural qualities (Moustakas, 1994). The final step in data analysis was synthesizing textural and structural descriptions to form the essence of the lived experiences of middle school teachers in a standardized testing environment (Moustakas, 1994).

To accurately identify themes, commonalities, and patterns from the experiences of the participants in this study, I set aside my own biases and assumptions concerning the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) referenced this step as epoché and identified the process as an essential first step in understanding participants' experiences related to the phenomenon of the study. Moustakas (1994) wrote "in the epoché, we set aside our prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things" (p. 85). The use of epoché allowed me to separate myself from my own experiences and perspectives in relation to the phenomenon to be able to see it from the experience and perspectives of the study participants. I have extensive experience with working in a standardized testing environment, therefore, using epoché allowed me to obtain a full description of my own experience and help me to separate these experiences from the study to rely fully on the experiences of the participants.

Epoché was achieved through the application of the phenomenological inquiry to my own experiences with the phenomenon being studied. Following the steps outlined by Moustakas (1994) from the verbatim transcript of my own experiences I considered each of my statements for significance related to my experiences with the phenomenon and will list the invariant

meaning units. Through the clustering of these units, I identified the themes of my experiences and then synthesized these themes into textural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). A reflexive journal was also used throughout the data collection process for me to record my own experiences with the phenomenon to separate my own pre-suppositions concerning the phenomenon from the study findings. According to Russell and Kelly (2002) the practice of self-journaling allows the research to examine “personal assumptions and goals” and clarify “individual belief systems and subjectivities” (p. 2).

Moustakas (1994) describes phenomenological reduction as “describing in textural language just what one sees, not only in terms of the external object but also the internal act of consciousness, the experience as such, the rhythm and relationship between phenomenon and self” (p. 90). Phenomenological reduction is comprised of horizontalization, the clustering of horizons into themes, and the organization of themes into textural descriptions of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Following IRB approval and the consent of research participants, I followed the same phenomenological inquiry process used for epoché with each participant.

I carefully read through all the interview transcripts multiple times noting key phrases, ideas, and codes that the participants may touch on during their interview. Notes and memos were written directly on the transcription to note initial thoughts and emerging horizons identified from the interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This step integrated Moustakas (1994) principles of horizontalization in that I identified significant statements and I was receptive to all the responses and statements of the study participants equally until each horizon is grouped accordingly. Statements unrelated to the research topic and questions were removed leaving only related statements which were then be formed into themes, or clusters (Moustakas, 1994). Once

the horizons were grouped into themes, they were clustered to form textural descriptions.

Creswell and Poth (2018) defined textural description as the description of the experiences of the participants. The Atlas software program for coding was used to help identify codes. The codes were then combined into meaningful themes (Creswell, 2013). These themes revealed the “what” of the participants experience in the standardized testing environment.

According to Moustakas (1994) Imaginative Variation “enables the researcher to derive structural themes from the textural descriptions that have been obtained through Phenomenological Reduction” (p. 98). The process of Imaginative Variation is comprised of “varying possible meanings, constructing a list of structural qualities, developing structural themes, and forming a composite structural description of the phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 180-181). While each study participant experienced the same phenomenon, their individual experiences with the phenomenon varied. I analyzed participant data closely for possible meanings or horizons as it pertained to their lived experience in the standardized testing environment. From this, I sought to discover the structural qualities, or the “how” the participants experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Following the formation structural themes, I formed a composite structural description of the participants experience. Moustakas (1994) describes a composite structural description as a “synthesis of all structural descriptions into a group or universal structural description of the lived experience” (p. 181).

The final step in the data analysis process for this transcendental phenomenological study was the intuitive integration of the textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement expressing the essence of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole (Moustakas, 1994). Although the essence of any experience can never fully be realized, this study represented the essence of the lived experiences of middle school teachers in a standardized testing environment

through the textural and structural descriptions using phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is important to qualitative study as it works to eliminate threats to the validity and reliability of the work and ensure the overall quality of the study (Polit & Beck, 2014). Amankwaa (2016) suggested that researchers should establish the protocols and procedures necessary to establish trustworthiness and to be considered worthy by readers. The trustworthiness of the research will be essential to its significance and contribution to literature. I will use bracketing, data triangulation, member checking, and an audit trail to ensure trustworthiness in the research study. The subtopics below address the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability within trustworthiness.

Credibility

The credibility of the study is the most important criterion according to Polit and Beck (2014). To determine credibility of a study, it is suggested to use peer debriefing to cross-check the research and the research process (Nowell et al., 2017). It is important for the debrief to look at and analyze components of the research such as coding and analysis with the intention of providing credibility to the researcher (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). To establish credibility, I used bracketing to set aside any personal biases I may have toward standardized testing. I also used the piloting of both individual and focus group interview questions to ensure data reliability (Yin, 2018). Additionally, data triangulation was used. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that the use of gathered information from multiple and different sources will strengthen the reliability and credibility of a study. Data sources for this study included a writing prompt, individual interviews, and focus group interviews.

Transferability

Transferability refers to understanding the extent to which findings are useful to persons in other settings, it is different from other aspects of research in that readers determine how applicable the findings are to their situations (Polit & Beck, 2014). Considering the transferability in this research, a rich description will be generated. Rich or thick descriptions are where the researcher gathers detailed information throughout the project (Amankwaa, 2016). The use of memoing allowed me to record my immediate observations and thoughts as I conducted interviews and analyzed documents. The findings of this study contained complete descriptions of meanings and themes to provide a background for future research.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability refers to the stability of the data over time and over the conditions of the study (Polit & Beck, 2014). Confirmability refers to the neutrality or the degree findings are consistent and could be repeated (Polit & Beck, 2014). Member checking was used in this study to address both dependability and confirmability. Member checking is the process of taking data back to the participant to ensure an accurate account was reported (Candela, 2019). In this study, an accurate account of interviews was assessed. I asked each participant to review the transcription of their interview. Within 48 hours of interview completion, both individual and focus group, participants were asked to review the transcript for accuracy and validity. Transcribing and returning interviews to participants within 48 hours ensured the participants were able to recall the interview questions. Through this process, the researcher was able to validate collected evidence and obtain any other essential evidence that may have been missed (Candela, 2019). Additionally, a reflexive journal was kept by the researcher to separate personal biases from the phenomenon. Lincoln and Guba (1985) revealed reflexive journaling to be a

means of confirmability and dependability as it allows for the regular recording of information related to self and method.

Ethical Considerations

According to Creswell and Poth (2018) researchers need to consider what ethical issues might surface and to plan for how to address these within the study. In this research, the well-being of the participants was considered and placed before my own interests. Prior to conducting research, it was necessary to obtain approval from the university's IRB (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The IRB reviews all proposed research studies involving human participants. I sought IRB approval (see Appendix A); upon approval, I sought site approval from the district superintendent (see Appendix B). Following approval from the superintendent, I sought individual administrator approval at each school site (see Appendix C). I initiated contact with all middle school teachers within the school district by sending recruitment packets containing a recruitment letter and consent document (see Appendix D/E). Participants were also be made aware of the voluntary nature of the study. Additionally, I informed potential participants of the privacy safeguards that were used during the study. Privacy safeguards in the study included the use of pseudonyms to protect participant and site identity, the security of hard documents, as well as the storage of electronic materials. Hard documents were stored in a locked filing cabinet; electronic materials were saved to a password-protected device.

To prevent against retribution from the school or district, pseudonyms were used to protect participants, schools, and the district. Participant interviews were conducted via Google Meet. Focus group interviews were also conducted via Google Meet. To ease feelings of concern about disagreeing with popular notions, individual interviews were conducted prior to focus group interviews, allowing the participants to voice their individual opinion in a more

comfortable setting. To further protect the confidentiality of participants, all hard copies of collected documents and transcribed interviews were stored in a locked filing cabinet and will be destroyed after three years. All recordings of interviews, individual and focus group, are stored on a password protected device.

Summary

Creswell and Poth (2018) wrote that a phenomenological qualitative research design is utilized to understand the lived experiences of a group of people related to a common phenomenon. To have an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences middle school teachers in a standardized testing environment, I used a transcendental phenomenological research approach. Data triangulation was achieved using three data sets including individual interviews, writing prompt, and focus group interviews. To analyze the data, I utilized epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variations, and the essence of the experience. Within this chapter, I identified the research setting, participants, and sampling of the study. Additionally, trustworthiness and ethical considerations were discussed as they applied to the study.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

Chapter Four describes the participants in this study and how their shared lived experiences teaching in the middle grades in a standardized testing environment highlight overall themes from the research questions. Data was collected from ten participants who are Virginia licensed teachers currently working in a standardized testing environment in the middle grade setting. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the lived experiences of middle grade teachers in a standardized testing environment. Chapter Four presents a description of the participants, a discussion of the data results, and emergent themes.

Participants

Overall, 10 teachers participated in the study. Invitations were sent to all middle grade, teachers in the Southern Gap School Division (a pseudonym). Consent was obtained from each participant before conducting the research. All participants had to be Virginia licensed teachers currently teaching a tested course in the middle grade setting. The participants completed a written response and participated in individual interviews. Focus group interviews were also conducted. A brief description of the participants using pseudonyms is listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Teacher Participants

Teacher Participant	Years Taught	Highest Degree Earned	Content Area	Grade Level
Matthew	19	Masters	English Language Arts	8th
Anna	11	Bachelors	Math	6th
Claudia	10	Masters	English Language Arts	8th
Clark	6	Bachelors	Math	8th

Eliza	15	Bachelors	English Language Arts	6th
Sue	15	Masters	English Language Arts	6th
Josephine	15	Bachelors	Math	6th
Jameson	12	Masters	Math	7th/8th
Henry	31	Masters	Math	7th
Claire	20	Bachelors	English Language Arts	7th

The following information describes the individual participants in the study. The information includes the age of the participant, gender, teaching experience, and current grade level and content area. The following information shares why each participant chose to pursue a career in education and what each participants favorite aspect of teaching is.

Matthew

Matthew has taught for 19 years and was 40 years old. Matthew chose education as his profession because he really wanted to make a difference in the lives of his students and build meaningful relationships with his students as many of his mentor teachers had with him. He has taught a plethora of grade levels and subject matter including music, library, primary grades first and second, and middle and secondary English. Currently, Matthew is serving as an eighth grade English instructor at Twin View Elementary/Middle School (pseudonym) in the Southern Gap school district (pseudonym).

Anna

Anna has taught for 11 years and was 37 years old. Anna chose education as her profession because she often saw people struggling when she was in school, and she really wanted to be a teacher that could help those students find success in the classroom. She also

wanted to help her students find joy in what they were learning. Anna has taught in both a general education classroom as well as a special education classroom. While working in a special education setting, Anna worked in grades 6-8 servicing students in English, reading, and mathematics. As a general education teacher, Anna has taught sixth, seventh, and eighth grade mathematics and sixth grade science and social studies. She is currently serving as a sixth grade mathematics and science teacher at Twin View Elementary/Middle School (pseudonym) in the Southern Gap school district (pseudonym).

Claudia

Claudia has taught for 10 years and is 33 years old. Claudia chose education as her profession because she really enjoys her subject area and wanted to help and give back to the community that raised her. Claudia is certified to teach both middle and secondary English as well as English as a Second Language, and middle school social studies. She has taught English in grades 8-12 as well as in a postsecondary setting. Claudia currently teaches eighth grade English at Ridgeview Elementary/Middle School (pseudonym) in the Southern Gap school district (pseudonym). Claudia loves her job and is very passionate about creating memorable learning experiences for her students through the use of novels in the classroom.

Clark

Clark has taught for six years and is 28 years old. Clark chose education as her profession because she felt it was her calling from God. She also wanted to use her calling to help struggling students find success in her subject area. Clark has taught for three years in the state of Virginia and has three years of experience teaching in Tennessee. Clark has taught seventh and eighth grade math as well as seventh grade social studies and science. Currently, she is teaching seventh grade mathematics and science at Twin View Elementary/Middle School (pseudonym)

in the Southern Gap school district (pseudonym). She loves teaching and credits most of her enjoyment to seeing students have the “aha” moment when they finally understand a skill.

Eliza

Eliza has taught for 15 years and is in her late 40s. Eliza chose education as her profession because she wanted to help students succeed and she felt it was a career that fit her lifestyle best. Eliza has taught in two different school districts and a variety of grade levels and subject areas. She is currently employed at Rockhouse Elementary/Middle School (pseudonym) in the Southern Gap school district (pseudonym). She currently teaches sixth grade English, reading, and U.S. History. Eliza enjoys her job and enjoys watching the students understand a particular standard when it has been a struggle for them.

Sue

Sue has taught for 15 years and is 39 years old. Sue chose education as her profession because she wanted to make a difference in the small community that she lives in. She has taught a plethora of grade levels and subject content. She is currently teaching sixth grade English, reading, and U.S. History. Previously, Sue taught second and third grade inclusive, fifth grade English and reading, and seventh grade English and reading. Sue is employed at Twin View Elementary/Middle School (pseudonym) in the Southern Gap school district (pseudonym). She enjoys teaching, especially making a connection with her students.

Josephine

Josephine has taught for 15 years and is 48 years old. Josephine chose education as her profession because she enjoys working with children. She also noted that she wanted to follow in her dad’s footsteps as he was an educator and eventually a school administrator. She is currently teaching sixth grade mathematics and science. Previously she taught kindergarten and fifth grade

mathematics. Sue is employed at Rockhouse Elementary/Middle School (pseudonym) in the Southern Gap school district (pseudonym). She enjoys teaching. Her favorite part of teaching is the time she is able to spend with her students and the relationships she is able to forge through this time spent together.

Jameson

Jameson has taught for 12 years and is 33 years old. Jameson chose education as his profession because he remembered having teachers in school whose classes he did not enjoy, and he wanted to change that. He also wanted to make subjects enjoyable for students. He is currently teaching seventh grade math and serves as a half-day student coordinator. Jameson is employed at Davenport Elementary/Middle School (pseudonym) in the Southern Gap school district (pseudonym). His favorite part of teaching is the time he is able to spend with his students and the relationships he is able to form with the students.

Henry

Henry has taught for more than 30 years and is 60 years old. Henry chose education as his profession because he wanted to work with the youth in his community. He is currently teaching seventh grade math and has previously taught sixth and eighth grade math. Henry is employed at Ridgeview Elementary/Middle School (pseudonym) in the Southern Gap school district (pseudonym). His favorite part of teaching is spending time with the students and the relationships he is able to form with the students in his classroom.

Claire

Claire has taught for 20 years and is 39 years old. Claire chose education because she remembered the impact her teachers had on her, and she wanted to have the same impact on the youth in her community. She is currently teaching seventh grade English and social studies, and

has previously taught sixth grade social studies and kindergarten. Claire is employed at Davenport Elementary/Middle School (pseudonym) in the Southern Gap school district (pseudonym). Her favorite part of teaching is the time she is able to spend with the students and the lasting relationships she has maintained with many of her former students.

Results

After collecting individual writing prompt responses, conducting individual interviews, and conducting the focus group interviews the information was examined for broad themes. The data was organized and classified by using coding. Coding was used to identify similar vocabulary used by the study participants. The information was arranged by the varying codes. Once coding was completed, the themes of the study were determined. Major themes identified from the data were Limitations on Instruction Practices, Resentment in Regard to Teacher Evaluations, and The Effect of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Standardized Testing Environment. Sub-themes identified included, Prioritization of Testing, Narrowing of the District Curriculum, Enforced Teacher Dependency, and Decreased Teacher Flexibility.

Table 2

Themes

Significant Statements	Subthemes
Theme 1: Limitations on Instruction Practices	
Bound to the division curriculum All content teachers should be on the same topic Division curriculum lessons Division curriculum provides a guide for new teachers Administration enforcement of division curriculum	Narrowing of the District Curriculum

Teaching to the test	
Reviewing on tested standards	
Lack of engaging lessons and activities	
Skimming the surface of the content to teach the tested skill	Enforced Teacher Dependency
Have to follow the pacing guide/stay on pace	
How and what I teach	
Administrative observation	
Preparing students for the SOL test	Prioritization of Testing
Teaching to the test	
Test Prep	
Bound by the pacing and curriculum guide	
Must be creative with flexibility	
Adjusting instruction to teach both the test and students	Decreased Teacher Flexibility
Flexible with time	
Ability to be flexible with changing standards	

Theme 2: Resentment in Regard to Teacher Evaluations

Administration enforcement of pacing guide and curriculum guide
 Unfair to include test scores
 Unknown student variables impact scores
 Difference from non-tested curriculum teachers
 Lack of equality in student classroom disbursement
 Limiting teacher efficacy

Theme 3: The Effect of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Standardized Testing Environment

Covid-19 Pandemic changes pace
How do I keep virtual students engaged with
in-person
Building in review for lost content
Remediating to cover lost material due to the
pandemic

Limitations on Instructional Practices

Participants indicated through both interviews and a writing prompt that the standardized testing environment leads to a feeling of being limited in their instructional practices. Participants consistently discussed how the standardized testing environment limited their ability to teach content in a way they would without the limitation of the test in place. Claudia stated in her individual interview, “Teaching in an SOL course adds a specific layer of pressure to me. I feel like I have to rush through the material to have enough time to review it at the end of the semester” (Claudia, Individual Interview, December 13, 2021). She also voiced within the interview that instead of reviewing the material when the students needed it, she felt pressured to stay on pace and move on. Additionally, Matthew contributed in his written response, “The standardized testing environment creates the part of teaching I dislike most. I feel constricted to a timeline and if my kids need me to review, I feel like I have to move on even if they aren’t ready” (Matthew, Written Response, September 13, 2021). Some participants with experience both in the standardized testing environment and outside of the environment offered comparisons regarding instructional practices Eliza stated in her individual interview:

Having taught outside of the standardized testing environment I realize how much fun it takes away. I am so committed to staying on the pace that I do not get to plan the super fun and engaging lessons that I could without the pressure of the test. I can’t turn a novel study

into a cross-curricular unit because I have to stay on pace with my standards and squeeze in the novel as much as I can (Eliza, Individual Interview, January 7, 2022).

A lack of time to make lessons fun and engaging was noted by many participants within both individual and focus group interviews.

Eliza noted the limitations in her instructional practices during her focus group interview by stating, “There is no leeway....no flexibility on letting the students master what they need to master because we have to cover so much so quickly for that test. When I need to take extra time, I simply can’t” (Eliza, Focus Group Interview, February 2, 2022). Sue also expressed a feeling of limitation during the focus group interview saying, “Having taught both in and out of a standardized testing environment the limitation to stay on pace and aligned with a curriculum guide is very frustrating” (Sue, Focus Group Interview, February 2, 2022). She expanded on this by stating, “When I taught second grade, I could plan a fun and engaging lesson. Now, I have to make sure anything I do aligns with the standards and doesn’t take away from the pacing guide and curriculum guide timelines” (Sue, Focus Group Interview, February 2, 2022). Echoing the frustration of limited practices, Josephine stated within the focus group interview, “I would love to plan a fun and engaging lessons, but I don’t feel that I have the ability to do that. I always feel pressure to keep moving forward and to teach the test rather than my students” (Josephine, Focus Group Interview, February 2, 2022). Matthew also supported this by stating in his individual interview, “Outside of the standardized testing environment you are free to make your own decisions on what to teach and how to teach it. In a testing grade, there is no fun, just test prep” (Matthew, Individual Interview, October 11, 2021). He revealed that he often feels that instead of teaching students to think outside the box, he is simply teaching them how to answer multiple-choice questions.

The majority of the participants identified similar limitations to their instructional practices as a result of being in the standardized testing environment. Statements such as Jameson's individual interview statement "I mostly feel like I teach test-taking strategies the closer I actually get to the test, rather than focus on review of the material" (Jameson, Individual Interview, January 11, 2022). Was reinforced by Matthew's statement, "I may want to take extra time with a specific novel or writing assignment, but once I enter the window of test-prep I have to be focused on teaching those test-taking skills versus content" (Matthew, Individual Interview, October 11, 2021). Claudia similarly stated in her individual interview:

I teach both eighth and ninth grade English. Eighth grade is tested and because of that I spend so much time teaching test-taking skills and literally re-wording test questions to mimic standardized testing questions. In my ninth grade English class, I do not have to do this. If I want to spend four extra weeks on a novel study, I can do that. If I want all of my quiz questions to be short response, I can do that because there is no test at the end of that course. No one cares if I am teaching them test-prep things. The administration is only worried about that in the subjects that are tested (Claudia, Individual Interview, December 13, 2021).

In adapting their instructional practices in response to the demands of division pacing guides, state curriculum guides, and the Virginia Standards of Learning, teachers are limiting their instructional practices to focus less on student needs, but rather focusing on teaching the student skills needed to take the end-of-course assessment.

Narrowing of the District Curriculum

The role of the district pacing guide, curriculum guide, and the district mandated curriculum for tested content within the standardized testing environment led to the participant's

perceptions of the narrowing of the district curriculum. This sub-theme was supported by many participants in discussing how the standardized testing environment affects their instructional practices. Narrowing of the curriculum is defined as “the practice of increasing instruction time spent on state-tested subjects like reading, writing, and math at the expense of other core subjects” (Long, 2010). Participants in the study indicated narrowing of the district curriculum as a result of the district mandated curriculum program in place. This discussion came as a result of participants discussing the impact of the district pacing and curriculum guide on their lesson planning procedures. Jameson noted in his individual interview:

I teach both math and science. I have a 90-minute block for math and a 45-minute block for science. Throughout the school year I try to keep on pace in both subjects and check my pacing and curriculum guide when I am preparing lessons. However, all of that changes when we move into SOL prep. At this time, generally mid-March, I am told to stop teaching science and only focus on math. This is great for test prep, but I am concerned at the loss of science instruction happening each year (Jameson, Individual Interview, January 11, 2022).

Similarly, Eliza indicated narrowing of the district curriculum with her focus group discussion of, “I teach history, too. My history class is not tested, so I only teach it for a portion of the year. At the beginning of March, I always stop social studies instruction to focus on reading for test prep” (Eliza, Focus Group Interview, February 2, 2022). Similarly, Sue added during the focus group interview, “I use the pacing guide considerably more in my English class. History is not tested, so I just skim over it or blend it with my reading lesson to keep on pace in English” (Sue, Focus Group Interview, February 2, 2022). Sue continued with, “The CIP program really places a lot of emphasis on tested subjects, additionally, our administrator encourages us to blend social

studies in with reading so we can stay focused on the tested content” (Sue, Focus Group Interview, February 2, 2022). Claudia also offered support of this sub-theme with her individual interview statement concerning writing instruction, “Teaching eighth grade writing is very difficult. I can see where writing instruction has been skimmed in the previous grades. I know why they skimmed it, but it makes my job very hard” (Claudia, Individual Interview, December 13, 2021).

Additionally, this sub-theme was supported by Jameson’s individual interview statement, “I know that often I skim material that I know students will see in future grades to only focus on what I am testing on, I know I do that, and I am sure others do as well” (Jameson, Individual Interview, January 11, 2022). Additional support was found in Eliza’s individual interview comment, “My job is to prepare them for the test, and in order to do that I often reduce my time spent on non-tested material to focus more on what is going to be tested” (Eliza, Individual Interview, January 7, 2022). In response to how the standardized testing environment affects the teacher’s instructional choices, Claudia had a different approach. Initially a proponent of the division enforced curriculum she responded:

I do adjust my instructional practices to meet the needs of the test, however, in using the county CIP curriculum, I really have no other choice but to meet the needs of the test. Are there times when I would like to delve deeper into novels and short stories, yes, but I know that for my students to perform well on the SOL test, I have to stay focused on the standards and the curriculum I have been given (Claudia, Individual Interview, December 13, 2021).

Similar support was seen from most participants, Josephine’s individual interview sentiment, “My job is to teach the test. I feel that I am not there for any other reason, I love my subject area, but I rarely get to discuss content that I enjoy discussing” (Josephine, Individual Interview,

November 15, 2021). Josephine also noted that by adhering only to the district curriculum, she is teaching only tested material.

In adapting their instructional practices to adhere to the division pacing guide, curriculum guide, and the division enforced curriculum, almost all participants in the study expressed feelings that the district curriculum was being narrowed to only include tested content. In addition to limiting the content to be taught, the implications of the standardized testing environment also make it difficult to include individualized and differentiated instruction. Anna commended in her individual interview that, “One of the hardest aspects of teaching in the environment is I knowingly move through content without always ensuring all of my students are okay” (Anna, Individual Interview, October 21, 2021). She also noted that many of her students may need remediation with a topic, but due to time constraints she has to move forward to ensure she is meeting the needs of the test.

Enforced Teacher Dependency

An additional sub-theme that was identified was a sense of enforced teacher dependency on district-provided documents such as district pacing guide for instruction and the district mandated curriculum guides for instruction and lesson alignment. With heightened focus placed on student performance on the end-of-course standardized tests, many participants shared, during individual and focus group interviews, that they felt pressured to stay on pace to cover all tested curricula. Participants discussed the rigidity of the district pacing guide along with the district mandated curriculum guide. Participants also discussed the school district’s purchase of a curriculum designed to prepare students for success on the end-of-course standardized assessment and how they felt dependent on the district pacing guide and the mandated district curriculum guide to ensure student success for the district. Identifying the importance of the

district pacing guide, Anna stated within her individual interview “I feel like I have to stay on pace with the pacing guide to be considered successful. Administration is consistently checking to see if we are on pace; therefore, I feel very bound to the pacing guide” (Anna, Individual Interview, October 21, 2021). Continuing that sentiment, Matthew stated in his individual interview “The pacing guide is okay, but I feel trapped by it. If I need to stay on a topic in a novel longer than the pacing allows, I feel pressured to move forward even when the kids are not ready” (Matthew, Individual Interview, October 11, 2021). Similarly, Eliza stated in the focus group interview “The pacing guide is not amazing, but I feel confined to it because of constant administration pressure” (Eliza, Focus Group Interview, February 2, 2022).

The participants also noted that district pacing guides and district curriculum guides were designed with the intent of preparing students for the end-of-course standardized assessment. Clark stated in her individual interview, “The pacing guide completely dictates what I do but in math. I like that it prepares me and the students for what is coming up on our district benchmark assessments and the SOL test at the end of the year” (Clark, Individual Interview, November 4, 2021). Similarly, Claudia stated, “The pacing guide for English needs to be updated, but if I tweak it and stay on pace with the pacing guide, my students are exposed to all of the standards needed for success on the SOL test” (Claudia, Individual Interview, December 13, 2021). In contrast to her statement, Claudia also added, “However, exposure isn’t enough, and sticking strictly to the pacing and curriculum guides hinders my ability to target instruction based on student need” (Claudia, Individual Interview, December 13, 2021). Claudia went on to say, “I sit on the district pacing guide panel, I have mentioned for many years adjustments that need to be made but no one is ever willing to make the changes” (Claudia, Individual Interview, December 13, 2021).

The participants all noted positives about the pacing and curriculum guides. In particular how the guides aligned with state standards and exposed students to the tested curriculum in a planned manner. However, participants also shared a dislike for the guides and their implementation within the district. Anna stated in the focus group interview, “Following the pacing guide gives me a great timeline, but it also keeps me from reviewing material that I need to review” (Anna, Focus Group Interview, February 2, 2022). In support of this, Eliza stated, “With the administration pushing to always be on pace, I do not get to do any fun activities with my students. Instead, we are always focused on the standards” (Eliza, Focus Group Interview, February 2, 2022).

Decreased Teacher Flexibility

The sub-theme of decreased teacher flexibility was evident through the majority of participant responses. Although some phrasing indicated limited flexibility in regard to teaching in the standardized testing environment, participant responses reflected the need for teacher flexibility to ensure student success within the standardized testing environment. This was demonstrated in Matthew’s written response, “I think flexibility is one of the most important skills you must develop as an instructor. I would dare say, if you cannot be flexible, you cannot be successful” (Matthew, Written Response, September 13, 2021). Matthew also embodied the notion of limited flexibility paired with the need for flexibility in his additional written response:

As far as standardized testing is concerned, it makes flexibility difficult. You feel pushed to present all the information that may appear on the test, whether you have the opportunity to cover it well or not. You sometimes have to ignore “teachable moments” that arise and are so good because you have to stick to the pacing guide. At the same time, the act of testing requires flexibility (Matthew, Written Response, September 13, 2021).

The need for increased flexibility was heightened in the standardized testing environment by the limited practices implied from teaching to the test. Many participants echoed Matthew's sentiment that the standardized testing environment makes flexibility difficult, but participants also voiced that while difficult, flexibility is going to be key for success. This was supported by Anna's written response:

As a classroom teacher, I want my students to master the skill they are learning. Gaining confidence in their skills and ability leads to greater success in the future. If you only have a set amount of time to cover a certain skill due to having to move at a faster pace, those students who may learn at a slower pace may feel more stress and anxiety with new skills. In response to the standardized test, I have to be creatively flexible with how I incorporate review and remedial activities. Adding in this flexibility has forced me as the teacher to be more in tune with what my students need, allowing me to meet both their needs and the test's (Anna, Written Response, September 9, 2021).

Continued support for the need for increased teacher flexibility was offered by Clark in her written response:

Standardized testing also causes me to keep pushing through standards even if students have not fully mastered them. I have a little wiggle room to slow down on things I know are important but oftentimes I have to have a swift speed and feel like the lower students cannot always keep up. Being flexible in this situation is key. I can creatively include remedial times into my day, even when I think I can't, as long as I am willing to be flexible with my own planning (Clark, Written Response, September 20, 2021).

Further support for increased teacher flexibility is found in Jameson's written response,

"Flexibility is key for success. If I wasn't flexible with my planning and instructional goals, I do

not think I would be successful in the standardized testing environment, or as a teacher at all”

(Jameson, Written Response, September 21, 2021).

Prioritization of Testing

Another identified sub-theme from the interviews was the prioritization of testing and the effects of this prioritization on the teachers’ instructional practices. Josephine said, “I am teaching a test, essentially, and my success as a teacher is dependent on how well I teach that test” (Josephine, Individual Interview, November 15, 2021). Initially a proponent for student accountability, Matthew shared:

Teaching in the standardized classroom has really shifted over the years. At the beginning of my career, I never imagined I would be where I am today with testing preparation. While standardized testing was a thing at that point, the emphasis on it was nowhere near what we see today. I still had the freedom to passionately teach my students English and enjoy watching them connect with various classic novels and short stories along the way. Now, I am so fixated on “teaching the test” that I rarely include the things I once did for fear of not covering everything I need to in time (Matthew, Individual Interview, October 11, 2021).

Sue echoed Matthew with her statement:

I have taught in both the standardized testing environment and outside of the environment. When teaching a tested grade, I feel that my whole focus is that test. I carve out time at the end of the year for a four-week test prep because so much of my focus has to be on their success on the one assessment. Outside of the standardized testing environment, I don’t feel that the pressure to only teach certain content exists. I feel free to make curriculum changes without fear of not covering material for the test. At this point, I feel my job is

only to teach them how to take the test, not really be successful beyond that (Sue, Individual Interview, January 28, 2022).

Similarly, Anna commented, “The focus is testing and testing only, and that is a sad result of teaching in the standardized testing environment” (Anna, Individual Interview, October 21, 2021).

Sue’s perspective of the prioritization of testing was centered around the notion that it limited the essential skills and development needed by many students. She said:

I feel that I focus so much on teaching my students the material for the reading SOL test, that I do not include as much writing instruction as I need to. Writing is not tested until eighth grade, and I know I should be laying the foundation, but I simply skim it to make sure I have enough time to teach what I know I am going to be held accountable for (Sue, Focus Group Interview, February 2, 2022).

This was supported by Matthew’s later focus group interview statement, “It becomes a moment where I have to choose. Do I teach what they need to know in future courses, or do I teach what I know on my test” (Matthew, Focus Group Interview, June 7, 2022). Additionally, the current curriculum does not build individual time in for exclusive writing, which leads to frustration for many teachers.

Resentment in Regard to Teacher Evaluations

A widely identified theme was that of resentment concerning the inclusion of student standardized test performance on the teacher evaluation process. Many participants expressed frustration with the fact that student test performance is a factor in the teacher evaluation process. While the Southern Gap school district does not solely focus on student test performance in regard to teacher evaluation, the teachers are required to include student test performance in

individual goal stating forms at the beginning of the semester. These forms outline the teacher's expected student performance on the end-of-course standardized assessment. The forms are then revisited and analyzed during the final teacher evaluation and the end of the academic semester. Teachers failing to meet the stated goal are placed on a plan of improvement for the following semester or school year and are required to attend additional professional development to improve in weak areas.

Within the individual interviews, it was easy to identify a theme of resentment in regard to teacher evaluations. All participants voiced that the inclusion of student test scores in their evaluations were unfair. Matthew stated, "It is unreasonable for their scores to reflect me as a teacher" (Matthew, Individual Interview, October 11, 2021). He rationalized this statement by expressing that "Being a classroom teacher is not like being a business owner. I can't hire my students based on their ability to perform. Instead, you just get what you get, and you have to make it work" (Matthew, Individual Interview, October 11, 2021). Anna also reflected resentment in stating, "As the teacher, I have no control over what happens outside of my classroom, but those outside experiences do affect how a student is going to perform on a test" (Anna, Individual Interview, October 21, 2021). Echoing her sentiments, Jameson stated, "While I do feel like the student's success on the test is in part my responsibility, there are so many factors I am not in control of" (Jameson, Individual Interview, January 11, 2022). He went on to state, "I can't ensure that the child got enough sleep the night before the test. I can't make sure their guardian is providing them with a peaceful environment at home" (Jameson, Individual Interview, January 11, 2022). The participants shared the sentiment that there are so many factors that influence a student's ability to perform well on the test, many factors that cannot be controlled by the classroom teacher.

In addition to voicing the unfairness of the inclusion of student test performance on individual teacher evaluations, the participants expressed resentment that testing dominated their entire teaching and lesson planning process. Eliza stated, “I hate that I can’t have any fun because I have to prepare for the test. When I taught in a non-tested grade level, I didn’t have to only teach a test I could teach the kids” (Eliza, Individual Interview, January 7, 2022).

The Effect of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Standardized Testing Environment

An additional theme that emerged from participant responses was one relevant to current times regarding the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the standardized testing environment. Many participants voiced concerns about the long-lasting effects of the pandemic on instructional practices, and how the pandemic would reflect in a standardized testing environment. As the participants prepare for end-of-course assessments this year, almost three years into the pandemic, a sense of resentment and worry evolved. This was reflected in Eliza’s response:

Teaching in the standardized testing environment is very stressful but pairing that environment with the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic has really increased my stress levels. Some students have been virtual for two years, and now they are back in the classroom preparing to test on content they haven’t had in person in quite some time. Also, you have students who have been in and out all year due to quarantine and positive tests. This has reduced their time in the classroom drastically. The pandemic has been difficult enough to navigate, let alone considering its effects on the standardized testing environment (Eliza, Individual Interview, January 7, 2022).

Continued concerns about the pandemic’s effect on teaching in this environment came from Josephine’s comment:

Test-prep was hard enough before the pandemic hit. Now, it seems almost impossible. The stress levels I felt during a normal school year are magnified as we look to test-prepping with students that, for some, have not been in the regular classroom for almost two years. It just seems that this stress could have been avoided until a more normal school year had returned (Josephine, Individual Interview, November 15, 2021).

Mimicking Josephine's concerns, Eliza added during the focus group interview, "Prepping for the test was hard enough, now we factor in lost instruction with little to no time for remediation." For many of my sixth graders, they are functioning on a true fourth grade level. That is a lot of gaps to overcome in one school year, while also attending the test" (Eliza, Focus Group Interview, February 2, 2022). Similar concerns were voiced by Sue with her comment, "SOL prep is hard, but SOL prep on the back end of the pandemic is brutal. There just is not enough time in the day to teach the test and teach my students" (Sue, Focus Group Interview, February 2, 2022). While it is still uncertain the impact the Covid-19 pandemic will have on education, one thing is evident, the stress and pressure of the standardized testing environment is being felt by teachers.

In addition to concerns associated with the Covid-19 pandemic and the adjustment of instruction in the standardized testing environment, many participants also voiced a level of concern for both the teacher and the student's ability to function in a post-pandemic standardized environment. This notion was supported by Sue's focus group comment:

When we think about the inclusion of student performance in teacher evaluations, the notion was absurd before the pandemic, but now I feel that the increased pressure to catch kids up and have them test well on current standards is even more crazy. My personal stress level was high before the pandemic, but now, seeing the student academic loss and

knowing I have to test them, my stress level has doubled (Sue, Focus Group Interview, February 2, 2022).

Additionally, Clark noted in her individual interview, “My stress level is very high with the inclusion of testing this year that will count towards our school accreditation, and I also see heightened stress in my students” (Clark, Individual Interview, November 4, 2021). She went on to discuss the hinderances of the pandemic within the standardized testing environment by stating, “When they are consistently reminded by admin that their performance on these tests matter, they feel the pressure to do well. The pressure was there before, but now I feel like we can’t escape it” (Clark, Individual Interview, November 4, 2021).

Outlier Data and Findings

This section presents the unexpected findings of this study on the lived experiences of middle grade teachers in a standardized testing environment. The majority of the data collected through individual written responses, individual interviews, and focus group interviews fell within one of the three themes or four subthemes. One outlier finding emerged from the data through participant alteration of the district purchased curriculum when exploring the experiences of middle grade teachers in a standardized testing environment. The findings are presented below.

Outlier Finding #1

One participant, Claire, mentioned she often altered the district purchased pacing guide to better meet the needs of her students. The Southern Gap school district (a pseudonym) utilizes a purchased curriculum within all testing grades and content areas. The curriculum includes set pacing guides, suggested lesson plans, and three benchmark assessments to monitor student growth. Teachers are asked to adhere to the curriculum to ensure student success. Claire stated in

her individual interview that, “I do not strictly follow the CIP pacing guide. I like it, but there are specific areas I feel like I need to move around to benefit my students” (Claire, Individual Interview, May 26, 2022). She went on to state “The pacing guide does not carve out enough time for me to include what I know I need to, so I adapt it and build in time where it is needed” (Claire, Individual Interview, May 26, 2022). She concluded with “I know other teachers do not do this, but ultimately student performance is all the principal is worried about, and my pass rates are consistently good” (Claire, Individual Interview, May 26, 2022).

Research Question Responses

The research questions for the study were designed to investigate the lived experiences of middle grade teachers in a standardized testing environment. The research questions presented in this study were designed to provide information not found in the current literature. Literature has been presented on the effects of standardized testing on teachers, but most were quantitative in nature and did not reflect the lived experiences of an educator in the standardized testing environment. Additionally, literature has been presented reflecting secondary and primary teachers’ responses to standardized testing with little focus on the middle grade educator.

The research questions presented in this study were designed to give insight into the lived experiences of middle grade teachers in the standardized testing environment. The central research question investigated the shared lived experiences of teachers currently teaching in a standardized testing environment within the middle grades. Three sub-questions supported this central research question. The sub-questions were designed to provide information focusing on the impact of the standardized testing environment on the instructional practices of middle grade teachers. Sub-question one addressed what middle grade teachers perceived to be the effects of standardized testing on their instructional practices. The second sub-question examined the

factors that lead middle grade teachers to adapt instructional practices in regard to standardized testing. Sub-question three addressed how middle grade teachers made adaptations to their instructional practices to meet the needs of standardized testing in the classroom. These questions were designed to obtain information and provide detailed descriptions of their perceptions of teaching in the middle grades within a standardized testing environment. Below are the questions and the findings from the participants concerning the questions.

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of middle grade teachers in a standardized testing environment?

The central research question was designed to gain an understanding of the shared lived experiences of teachers presently teaching within a standardized testing environment in the middle grades. The question was designed to provide a broad understanding of these lived experiences. Although a variety of responses were provided, similarities occurred in many answers. The major themes that were identified included limitations on instructional practices, resentment in regard to teacher evaluations, and the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on the standardized testing environment.

Overall, the participants viewed the occurrence of teaching within the standardized testing environment as a negative experience that limited their instructional practices and created feelings of resentment in regard to teacher evaluations. Many participants acknowledged feelings of limitations on instructional practices. Anna noted that the school administrator's support of district pacing and district curriculum guide left her feeling "that she must place emphasis on staying on pace, as opposed to basing instructional decisions on the needs of her students" (Anna, Individual Interview, October 21, 2021). Similarly, Sue expressed feelings of limitation by discussing the emphasis placed on test prep at the end of the course in place of "spending time

on much-needed remediation to meet individual student needs” (Sue, Individual Interview, January 28, 2022). Other participants such as Josephine stated that while teaching in the standardized testing environment, she “plans and implements more test-prep type lessons”, forgoing more engaging lessons to address the standards (Josephine, Individual Interview, November 15, 2021). Additionally, Jameson reflected on limited instructional practices by revealing that while he does “strive to create a learning environment that works for all students”, he feels that the type of lesson he plans must “adhere to the standards and be designed to foster student support on the end-of-course assessment, rather than meet their immediate needs” (Jameson, Individual Interview, January 11, 2022).

In addition to limitations to instructional practices, many participants noted feelings of resentment in regard to the teacher evaluation process. The Southern Gap school district (a pseudonym) does not solely focus on student test performance in regard to teacher evaluation, however, test performance is a factor included in end-of-term evaluations for teachers in tested curricula. One participant, Eliza, shared that while she did “understand that teachers should be held accountable for teaching content”, basing this on student test performance was not a fair practice (Eliza, Individual Interview, January 7, 2022). Another participant, Sue, contributed that she felt very “frustrated that student test performance was seemingly a reflection of her”, specifying, that she was “not in control of what happened to the student at home prior to the test” and could only control an environment that the student was in a portion of their day (Sue, Individual Interview, January 28, 2022). Likewise, Anna stated that “including student test performance in teacher evaluations is unfair for the teacher” (Anna, Individual Interview, October 21, 2021). She noted that while she can work to prepare students for the test, one thing she cannot ensure is that they will pass. She contributed this to the notion that she is unable to

ensure what state the student will come to school in on test day, noting that often student performance is more based on mentality rather than academic ability.

Many of the participants also reflected on the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the standardized testing environment. The participants voiced that as a result of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the already stressful standardized testing environment has new challenges unique to the pandemic. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Southern Gap school district introduced a hybrid learning environment where students can learn either in an in-person or in a virtual setting. Students opting for a virtual setting participate in the regular instructional day, joining from their individual devices to a live-streamed classroom experience. Students opting for an in-person learning experience attend the same live-streamed class as the virtual students, however, they are present in the room with the teacher. The introduction of this new element of learning poised many participants to feel an increase in stress teaching in the standardized testing environment paired with concern with the long-lasting effects of the pandemic on the learning environment. One participant, Eliza, noted that she had always felt stress while teaching in the standardized testing environment, however, as the pandemic has continued this stress has been heightened in response to the continued presence of standardized testing and the emphasis placed on student learning (Eliza, Individual Interview, January 7, 2022). Likewise, Clark noted that preparing students for the end-of-course assessment was “daunting before the pandemic.” Now, she feels that she is “up against more odds that are manageable most days” as she tries to balance instruction between in-person and virtual students while still working to meet the needs of the assessment (Clark, Individual Interview, November 4, 2021).

Concerns for the long-term effects of the pandemic on the standardized testing environment could also be seen in numerous participant responses. Matthew voiced this concern

as he discussed the prevalence of testing in today's classrooms. Matthew contended that with many students showing signs of academic loss as a result of the pandemic, preparing for the end-of-course assessment is more difficult now than ever before. He noted that the standards his students should be finding success with are very difficult, even for his advanced students. He added that "as a result of the state of Virginia proceeding with student test performance as a factor in school accreditation, the pressure to have students reach unattainable goals is insurmountable" (Matthew, Focus Group Interview, June 7, 2022). Another participant, Anna, shared similar concerns discussing her sixth grade math class. Anna stated in her focus group interview that as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, many of her students are "one to two grade levels behind academically" (Anna, Focus Group Interview, February 2, 2022). While she states she knows the focus of her instruction should be on bridging the gap many students have, it is rather centered on ensuring students are exposed to all of the material they will see on the state test, even if the content is above their academic means. Likewise, Claire shared that in a post-Covid-19 environment, the effects of the pandemic are stifling. She noted that many of her advanced students are struggling with concepts that, prior to the pandemic, her middle-of-the-road students would have excelled with (Claire, Focus Group Interview, June 7, 2022).

Sub-Question One

What do teachers in the middle grades perceive to be the effects of standardized testing on instructional practices in the classroom? The purpose of this question was to explore what middle grade teachers perceived to be the effects of standardized testing on instructional practices. Overall, the participants in the study voiced frustration in regard to the limitation of instructional practices imposed by the standardized testing environment. Examples of limitations to instructional practices were identified by the participants noting the prioritization of

standardized testing, narrowing of the district curriculum, enforced teacher dependency, and decreased teacher flexibility. Many study participants voiced frustrations with the limitations of instructional practices within the standardized testing environment in regard to the school division's enforced curriculum and enforced pacing guide. The Southern Gap school district (a pseudonym) enforces the use of a common curriculum program for all standardized tested courses in grades 3-12. The program is purchased by the division and is mandated for use by teachers within the standardized testing environment. The curriculum provides a pacing guide as well as instructional guides for each content area and grade level that are strictly aligned with state standards.

While many participants found some benefit in the enforced pacing guide, many also found frustrating limitations. Offering support to the inclusion of the pacing guide both Anna and Jameson noted that the pacing guide provided assistance in knowing when certain materials should be covered and by providing a time frame to have concepts covered to ensure student success on the end-of-course assessment. Jameson also added that in the early stages of his teaching career the pacing guide was more beneficial, however, as he matures as an educator, he finds frustration with the enforced pacing guide as he feels it limits his ability to make important instructional decisions for the students in his classroom (Jameson, Individual Interview, January 11, 2022). Similarly, Claudia added that she has a "love-hate" relationship with the pacing guide. She felt that while it serves a purpose to help ensure success with tested content, she feels bound by the pacing guide and feels she cannot step out of the rigidity of it to do what is best for her class (Claudia, Individual Interview, December 13, 2021).

Other study participants voiced only frustration in regard to the district-enforced pacing guides' limitation to instructional practices. Matthew noted that "The pacing guide is so heavily

enforced I feel that I can't really part from it. I am dependent on it whether I want to be or not" (Matthew, Individual Interview, October 11, 2021). Continuing, he added that as a seasoned teacher he felt that he was capable of making instructional decisions for his students, however, he did not feel he had the ability to do so in regard to the enforced curriculum. Likewise, Eliza noted that the pacing guide is essential in her weekly lesson plans. She added that school and district administration closely monitor the usage of the pacing guide, therefore, she does not feel she can adjust the pacing to meet individual student needs (Eliza, Individual Interview, January 7, 2022). Similarly, Henry voiced frustration in regards to the district-enforced curriculum and pacing guides in a comparison of how teaching feels today prior to the beginning of his career. Henry stated in his individual interview:

At the beginning of my teaching career, my job was to teach the students. I planned my lessons, I made the decisions for how long I needed to stay on a given topic, and ultimately, I created my assessments to determine if my students were learning the material. It's all different now. This new curriculum we use places a lot of limitations on me as the teacher. I no longer feel like I am in control of what is happening in my classroom, rather, I just feel like a robot doing what I am told. It is clear to me that my job is now to teach a test and prepare students for test success rather than teach a subject and have students leave me efficient in that subject (Henry, Individual Interview, June 3, 2022).

Many study participants also discussed limitations in their instructional practices due to the prioritization of testing within the standardized testing environment. Throughout both the individual and focus group interviews, it became apparent that the participants felt their instructional practices were further limited by the emphasis placed on standardized testing. As a result of this notion, participants voiced a concern that their role as educators was different in a

standardized testing environment versus a non-tested environment. The participants felt their role in the standardized testing environment was more to prepare students for the end-of-course assessment rather than to focus on meeting their students' academic needs. Eliza shared:

I taught non-tested content before moving to sixth grade English. In a non-tested course, I had the freedom to teach the students. I could adapt the curriculum where I needed to in order to meet my students' needs. If I needed to spend extra time on a topic, I could. However, in the testing environment, the test is the priority. I often feel that all I do is teach students how to be successful on a test. I really worry about what happens when the test is over, will they remember what I taught them, or will I just be a faint memory (Eliza, Individual Interview, January 7, 2022)?

Sue contributed, "To be a successful teacher I have to teach a test and not my students. That is a hard concept to deal with" (Sue, Focus Group Interview, February 2, 2022). Matthew also voiced this sentiment in his focus group interview by discussing that the years he taught outside of the standardized testing environment were relaxed and enjoyable in comparison to teaching within the high-pressure standardized testing environment which emphasizes student test success only (Matthew, Focus Group Interview, June 7, 2022). Similarly, Jameson noted that while spending the last several years of his teaching career in the standardized environment he feels he has lost the joy he once had for teaching, as he now feels that rather than teaching the students before him, his job is to teach a test (Jameson, Individual Interview, January 11, 2022). Echoing that notion, Claudia stated, "The standardized testing environment has drastically changed my prioritization in the classroom. Students are now taking a backseat to test prep, and I know some students are being left behind" (Claudia, Focus Group Interview, February 2, 2022).

One participant, Henry, offered a veteran teacher's opinion on the prioritization of testing in his individual interview statement:

I have been a teacher for more than 30 years. I have seen so many changes in education, but the one change that I hate the most is how much emphasis we place on taking a test. When I started teaching, it was rare to see a teacher leave the classroom, now I think it is rarer to see one stay. I think a major reason for this is the fact we are asking teachers to no longer teach the students, but rather, teach the students how to take a test. By adhering to the mandated curriculum and pacing guides I know I am prioritizing testing in my classroom. It is inevitable that I will leave some students behind in order to ensure the success of others on the test itself. It's a sad reality, but the focus of education in the standardized environment is no longer the student, it's the test. For a beginning teacher that hasn't figured out how to prioritize both the students and the test, it has to feel like the only measure of success is a test (Henry, Individual Interview, June 3, 2022).

In addition to the narrowing of the district curriculum, enforced teacher dependency, and prioritization of testing, the study participants also noted decreased teacher flexibility in regard to limitations of instructional practices as a result of the standardized testing environment. The need for flexibility was evident in the participants' written responses as well as in the individual and focus group interviews. One effect of teaching in the standardized testing environment, noted by many participants, was that as the environment limits the teacher's ability to adapt to instruction it also hinders the teachers' ability to flexibly adapt within the environment. Claire discussed this occurrence in her written statement, "To be successful as a teacher one needs to be flexible, and one of the most difficult aspects of the standardized testing environment is how much it limits the teachers' ability to be flexible" (Claire, Written Statement, May 24, 2022). Continuing this

sentiment, she added “I feel like I have to work to be creatively flexible in the standardized environment. I have to work in remediations and reviews in unconventional ways to ensure I am meeting everyone’s needs” (Claire, Written Statement, May 24, 2022). Many participants shared Claire’s sentiments that flexibility is key, but to achieve flexibility in the standardized testing environment, one must be willing to think outside of the norm.

Jameson noted in his individual interview, “Flexibility is key for any teacher’s success, but the teacher in a standardized environment needs it more than anyone. Standardized teachers have to be ready to adapt at a moment’s notice to truly meet the needs of their students and the test at hand” (Jameson, Individual Interview, January 11, 2022). Continued support for the need for increased teacher flexibility came from Matthew. Matthew stated in his written response that “teaching in the standardized setting in comparison to the outside of the setting really opened his eyes to how teachers of standardized courses really have to be flexible and ready to adapt when the opportunity arises” (Matthew, Written Response, September, 2021). Similarly, Sue noted that “in the courses she teaches that is not tested, she is able to adapt instruction easily and while she has to be flexible, her ability to be flexible is not hindered as it is in her tested subjects” (Sue, Focus Group Interview, February 2, 2022).

Sub-Question Two

Why do middle grade teachers consider adjusting instructional practices to address standardized testing in the classroom? The purpose of this question was to gain an understanding of what factors teachers in the middle grades consider when adjusting instructional practices to address standardized testing in the classroom. The majority of the study participants voiced that within the standardized testing environment they felt limitations in their instructional practices, rendering it difficult for them to adjust instructional practices when needed. However, despite

narrowed district curriculum, enforced teacher dependency, and an emphasis on prioritization of testing, the study participants revealed that in response to student needs they would utilize flexibility and adapt instructional practices when feasible to meet the needs of the student and the test.

Many of the study's participants echoed each other in vocalizing the limitations of their instructional practices within the standardized testing environment. Sentiments of teaching to the test, following the district-enforced curriculum, and adhering solely to the curriculum guide for lesson planning were noted by nearly all participants. However, despite obvious limitations, the study participants also discussed utilizing flexibility to adjust their instructional practices when feasible to accommodate both the student and the test in the classroom. Claire stated:

I know I am bound to the pacing guide, but I always look for ways I can adapt my instruction when the students are struggling. This may mean I group students to keep my struggling ones together or it may mean that I push through an easier topic more quickly so I can review what I need to (Claire, Individual Interview, May 26, 2022).

Similarly, Anna revealed that while she adheres to the pacing guide, she does adjust her instructional practices when she sees students struggling or if her assessment scores reflect a learning gap with a given skill (Anna, Individual Interview, October 21, 2021). Sue also noted that while ensuring she remains on pace and is adhering to the pacing guide closely, she also relies on student test performance and student classwork to determine if she needs to make adjustments. Sue stated that “while it is very difficult to adjust instruction, it can be done if she is willing to flexibly adapt her practices to meet the needs of the students and the test” (Sue, Individual Interview, January 28, 2022).

The school division's enforced curriculum also contains built-in assessments targeted to ensure student success with tested standards. Many of the study participants discussed the use of data stemming from these assessments in regard to adjusting instructional practices when needed. Matthew attested to this by stating:

The curriculum we follow has built-in benchmark assessments. We give these three times a year. The teachers are given data following each assessment that breaks down the standards and individual student performance. This data is key for me to know when I need to adjust my instruction. If I can see it in black and white that a student is struggling with a skill, then I know I have to backtrack. It's not easy at all to adjust instruction, being bound to a rigid pacing guide, but if I want my students to be successful, I know I have to find a way (Matthew, Individual Interview, October 11, 2021).

As with Matthew, Claudia notes that data from the benchmark assessments provides her with the basis she needs to adjust her instruction. Henry also spoke on adjusting instructional practices from a seasoned teacher's perspective stating "I know when the kids aren't learning something, and when I see it, I know I need to change what I am doing. It's a moment where, for me, the pacing guide becomes less important and the student success with a skill becomes the priority" (Henry, Individual Interview, June 3, 2022). Overall, almost all of the study participants noted the use of data from the included benchmark assessments paired with in-class assignments and assessments as the basis for adjusting instructional practices despite feeling bound to the enforced division pacing guide.

Sub-Question Three

How do teachers adapt instructional practices to meet the needs of standardized testing in the middle grades? The purpose of this question was to gain insight from the participants

regarding what adaptations to instructional practices they make solely to meet the needs of standardized testing in the classroom. Almost all of the study's participants discussed adjusting their instructional practices to address state-mandated standards in the classroom. Evidence of this was found in both individual and focus group interview responses which highlighted the prioritization of testing within the standardized testing environment, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the environment, and resentment towards teacher evaluations including student test performance.

Throughout the individual interviews and the focus group interview, almost all of the study's participants discussed the effects of prioritization of testing in the standardized testing environment. One of the effects of this was how the participants adjusted their own instructional practices to address both the test and the students in the classroom. Many participants identified the usage of small groups, differentiated instruction, and scaffolding of instruction aligned with the pacing guide as ways they adjust instruction while still adhering to the prioritization of testing in the standardized testing environment. Josephine noted that while adjusting instruction can be daunting due to the rigidity of testing, she does group her students based on ability to build in time to review skills when needed (Josephine, Individual Interview, November 15, 2021). Additionally, Sue contended that adjusting instruction was necessary but very difficult to do. She continued that as a sixth grade English teacher one thing she utilized a lot was small group learning where she would specifically group students based on their instructional needs (Sue, Focus Group Interview, February 2, 2022).

Henry addressed adjusting instruction within the standardized testing environment noting specific emphasis on the difference of adjusting in the environment versus outside of the environment. Henry stated:

When I first started teaching, I never really put a lot of thought into how I would adjust my instruction. I didn't have such strict expectations on me then, and I just focused on teaching the students in front of me. Now, I use a lot of differentiated instruction and scaffolding of the pacing guide to ensure everyone will be okay. I will often present the same lesson material in a variety of ways within a week to ensure that all students have it presented in a means that will help them. To make sure I can do this, I look at my pacing guide and scaffold lessons together to ensure I will have time to make it work. It sure is a lot harder to teach the students now than it was 30 years ago (Henry, Individual Interview, June 3, 2022).

Also noting the difficulties of adjusting instruction, Claire discussed how she consistently works to adjust instruction in her classroom. She discussed using test data to group students based on individual weaknesses and utilizing these small groups two or three days a week to create a more individualized approach to her instruction. Claire stated, "I feel like it is really hard to give each student everything they need. Small groups give me a chance to review and reteach, but I always feel like it still isn't enough" (Claire, Individual Interview, May 26, 2022). Similarly, Jameson noted that adjusting instruction is needed but is met with many challenges. He voiced that as a math teacher, often the skills build upon themselves, therefore if a student has a weakness, it is often felt over and over. He stated that, "When I know there is a weakness, I try to scaffold and chunk the pacing guide to create pockets of time for review. Ultimately, if I don't do this, I will end up having to reteach everything in the end" (Jameson, Individual Interview, January 11, 2022).

Additionally, many study participants discussed that the timing of the academic year made a difference in how they adjusted their instructional practices. Anna brought this out in

discussing how she works hard to allow the entire last month of instruction to be only used for test prep. Anna stated:

I work all year to adjust instruction to meet the needs of my students, however, this becomes very tricky at the end of the year. I always try to allow the last month of instruction to be solely focused on test-prep, therefore, really any adjusting that I am going to do has to be done before this time. Our pacing guide is not really built to allow for this review period at the end, but I know I need it for test success, so I honestly feel that I adjust instruction the entire school year to accommodate for what I know needs to be done (Anna, Focus Group Interview, February 2, 2022).

Similarly, Matthew noted that while he adjusted instruction when needed throughout the year, the largest adjustment for him came at the end of the semester when he was in test-prep mode. Matthew discussed how he utilized small group instruction and looked heavily at test data to differentiated instruction when needed throughout the term, but he specifically adjusted his own instructional practices the last six weeks to ensure his students would be successful on the test. Matthew stated, “I adjust instruction throughout the entire semester, but when we get down to the crunch time, those last six weeks before the test, I really shift my instructional practices to be solely test prep” (Matthew, Focus Group Interview, June 7, 2022). The participants in this study all adjusted their instructional practices in a variety of ways to ensure the students success on the end-of-course standardized assessment.

Summary

Chapter Four gives a detailed description of the ten participants in this transcendental phenomenological study. The participants all experienced the phenomenon of teaching in the middle grades within a standardized testing environment. All participants participated in a

writing prompt response and individual interviews. All participants were invited to participate in a focus group interview.

Data analysis of the written responses, individual interviews, and focus group interviews was conducted, revealing themes and sub-themes. The themes that emerged from the data included Limitations on Instructional Practices, Resentment in Regard to Teacher Evaluations, and The Effect of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Standardized Testing environment. Sub-themes identified included, Narrowing of the District Curriculum, Enforced Teacher Dependency, Decreased Teacher Flexibility, and Prioritization of Testing. The themes and sub-themes represented the participants' perceptions of the lived experiences of teaching in the middle grades within a standardized testing environment, reflecting the central question which focused on these experiences.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

This transcendental phenomenological qualitative study aims to understand the lived experiences of middle-grade teachers in the standardized testing environment. This chapter includes a summary of the findings and answers the central question and the three sub-questions. This chapter also discusses the study's implications, including the empirical, theoretical, and practical implications. Furthermore, delimitations and limitations are discussed within this chapter, and recommendations for future research are also discussed.

Discussion

The findings of this study include the lived experiences of middle grade teachers within the standardized testing environment. Within this section, the study's findings, considering the themes and sub-themes perceived through the lens of the theoretical framework are discussed. The interpretation of findings is discussed, followed by the implications for policy and practice. The theoretical and empirical implications are described, and the study's limitations and delimitations are discussed. The chapter culminates with recommendations for future research. Quotations from participants are included to validate the interpretations of this study's findings.

Interpretation of Findings

Participants for this study included ten middle school teachers from a rural school district in southwest Virginia. The participants were each licensed Virginia educators currently teaching within the standardized testing environment in the middle grades. Data was collected through individual writing prompt responses, individual interviews, and focus group interviews. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic guidelines within the school district, the individual and focus group interviews were conducted via Google Meet. The study participants completed individual written

responses to a given writing prompt as a form of data collection. The writing prompt allowed for participant reflection on how the teaching profession requires flexibility. After collecting the written responses, individual interviews were conducted with the participants. The questions were asked to gather the participants' perceptions of teaching within a standardized testing environment in the middle grades. Lastly, the focus group interviews were conducted. The focus group interviews allowed the participants the opportunity to interact with and build upon each other's responses.

After collecting the data, I examined information in the written responses and interviews for keywords and codes using the Atlas software program. Several themes and sub-themes emerged from the collection of data. The major themes included Limitations on Instruction Practices, Resentment in Regard to Teacher Evaluation, and The Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Standardized Testing Environment. The theme of Limitations on Instruction included the sub-themes of Narrowing of the District Curriculum, Enforced Teacher Dependency, Decreased Teacher Flexibility, and Prioritization of Testing. These themes and sub-themes reveal the realities of teaching within the middle grades in a standardized testing environment through the participants' lived experiences.

Summary of Thematic Findings

The research questions of this study provided information from the participants regarding their perceptions of teaching in a standardized testing environment in the middle grades, giving information on the phenomenon of teaching middle school within a standardized testing environment by providing their lived experiences within the setting. A central question and three sub-questions were used for the study to gather data. The central research question was: What are the experiences of middle grade teachers in a standardized testing environment? This question

was asked to gather information from the participants on their personal experiences of teaching in the middle grades within a standardized testing environment. Sub-question one was: What do teachers in the middle grades perceive to be the effects of standardized testing on instructional practices in the classroom? Sub-question two was: Why do middle-grade teachers consider adjusting instructional practices to address standardized testing in the classroom? Sub-question three was: How do teachers adapt instructional practices to meet the needs of standardized testing in the middle grades?

This summary will discuss the major themes and sub-themes of the study's findings. Altogether the ten participants discussed the limitations on instruction, resentment in regard to teacher evaluations, and the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the standardized testing environment felt while teaching within the middle grades in a standardized testing environment. Additionally, the teachers lamented the narrowing of the district curriculum, feelings of enforced teacher dependency, decreased feelings of flexibility regarding instructional practices, and the prioritization of testing within the environment.

Limitations on Instruction. Most participants referred to the school district's inclusion of an enforced curriculum as one means of limiting their instructional practices. The Southern Gap school district (a pseudonym) enforces a district-wide curriculum for students in grades 3-12 in tested courses. The curriculum includes pacing guides, suggested lesson plans, and student achievement benchmarks for each course within a tested subject area. The Southern Gap school district (a pseudonym) requires all tested subject teachers to adhere to the curriculum's pacing guide. Many participants discussed the administrative enforcement of the pacing guide and how this limits their ability to adjust instruction to meet the needs of their students. Anna, a sixth

grade math teacher, stated that she felt very bound to the pacing guide and did not stray from it often due to weekly observation by the school's administration.

Henry, a veteran math teacher, discussed the division-enforced curriculum and pacing guide. He stated that before the district implemented the new curriculum, he felt he had more flexibility to adjust instruction. He stated that he felt more obligated to adhere only to the curriculum's pacing guide due to weekly observation and lesson plan checking. He stated that this "made adapting instruction difficult" and that he has had to "adapt lessons creatively to meet students' needs" (Henry, Focus Group Interview, June, 7, 2022). An English teacher, Sue, also discussed the limitations to her instructional practices incited by implementing the enforced curriculum. Sue stated that before the division used the enforced curriculum, she did feel she had more "ability to adapt instruction to meet the needs of her students." She now feels that the administration's focus is "not on the student's needs but on the pacing guide" and ensuring teachers adhere to the implemented curriculum (Sue, Individual Interview, January 28, 2022).

Overall, the participants all perceived standardized testing to have a negative effect on their instructional practices, resulting in limited instructional practices with evidence of prioritization of testing. Eliza, a sixth grade teacher, discussed the increased emphasis on standardized testing and its effect on her teaching style. She stated, "When I taught at a non-tested grade level, I felt I had much more control over how I presented the material. Within this environment, I feel I am consistently teaching a test and not always my students" (Eliza, Individual Interview, January 7, 2022).

Similarly, Jameson noted that while he appreciated the structure of the pacing guide and division curriculum in his first years of teaching, he now feels "restricted and bound to only teaching tested material rather than adjusting to meet the needs of his students" (Jameson,

Individual Interview, January 11, 2022). Claudia noted that the non-tested courses she taught were more enjoyable as the pressure to teach the test was nonexistent. She revealed that when teaching in a testing environment, she feels she is watched more closely and must only adhere to the pacing guide, division curriculum, and standards to be successful. Claudia added, “teaching this way is not indicative of my teaching style; rather, it is the style I am conforming to be considered successful” (Claudia, Individual Interview, December 13, 2021).

Most study participants revealed that adjusting their instructional practices to address standardized testing in the classroom was a common practice. The participants discussed testing prioritization and the emphasis placed on the pacing guide and division-implemented curriculum as reasons for their adjustment to instructional practices. Josephine discussed the emphasis standardized testing has on her lesson planning and instructional decisions. She stated that when making weekly lesson plans, she “adheres solely to the division curriculum, the pacing guide, and the standards” (Josephine, Individual Interview, November 15, 2021). She noted that she knew she needed to re-teach certain material and skills for student retention in many circumstances, but she felt pressed by the pacing guide to continue moving forward. She also discussed that when she taught outside the standardized testing environment, she regularly used hands-on learning and highly engaging activities to assess student retention of different skills. However, now that she teaches within the standardized testing environment, she feels she “cannot sacrifice class time to incorporate those lessons as frequently as she would like” (Josephine, Focus Group Interview, February 2, 2022). Instead, she revealed the focus of her instruction is test prep.

Henry echoed Josephine’s sentiments in discussing how his instructional practices have changed as more emphasis has been placed on standardized testing in the classroom. He stated

that he focused on making math enjoyable for his students at the beginning of his career. He added that he would frequently play math games with his class and even take entire class periods to work on detailed math projects. However, as the years progressed and standardized testing increased in emphasis, Henry noted that his instructional practices shifted with it. He said that as more emphasis was placed on student test performance, he no longer worried about the lesson being fun or engaging but focused only on its function regarding the standard being taught. He added that over the years, his teaching style has shifted from fun and engaging to strictly test prep, which is more lecture, assessment, and data review than fun and engaging (Henry, Focus Group Interview, June 7, 2022).

Like Henry, Sue also discussed how teaching in the standardized classroom had impacted her instructional practices. As a teacher within a non-tested course, Sue noted that she tailored her instructional practices to meet the needs of her students. She stated that if she assessed that her class did poorly, it was easy to stop and re-teach the material before moving on. However, within the standardized testing environment, she did not feel she could easily make those types of changes. Sue discussed that she viewed student testing data differently in a testing environment. She discussed grouping her students into tiers identifying those who understood the concept and those who were struggling, then using the tiered information to determine if she needed to re-teach or work in review when necessary. In comparing the two environments, Sue noted that it was easy to adjust her instructional practices for student needs outside of the testing environment. In the environment, she felt she needed data to support coming off pace to re-teach material than just base it on student needs (Sue, Individual Interview, January 28, 2022).

Overall, all study participants noted how they adapted their instructional practices to meet standardized testing needs within the classroom. Many participants expressed these adaptations

with frustration regarding the prioritization of standardized testing and its impact on their flexibility in the classroom. Anna described that while she feels very limited in adjusting her instructional practices, she makes small adaptations each day to ensure student success. Anna discussed the utilization of all potential downtime in her class as an opportunity for small-group instruction. She also noted that she uses test data to determine which students can pair with others as peer tutors to work on remedial skills when needed (Anna, Focus Group Interview, February 2, 2022). Like Anna, Eliza discussed using every minute of instructional time and building in remediation and opportunities to re-teach in moments where one might not expect. Eliza, a sixth grade teacher, stated that she often used her planning period to remediate students struggling with a given skill. She also discussed chunking her curriculum to teach multiple skills to build in time for end-of-year remediation before the test (Eliza, Focus Group Interview, February 2, 2022).

Many study participants discussed the weeks leading up to the end-of-course assessment as being prioritized solely for test prep, regardless of whether students were proficient with the course material. Claire discussed what she described as “testing season” when she most adjusts her instructional practices to adhere strictly to the standardized test. She stated:

I adjust my instructional practices throughout the school year for various reasons. However, I always ensure I set aside ample time at the end of the school year to include test prep for the SOL test. I usually block off the last four to five weeks of instructional time to re-teach and emphasize the standards I know will be included in the assessment. In doing this, I hope the students not ready for the assessment catch just enough in my heavy review to squeeze by (Claire, Focus Group Interview, June 7, 2022).

Other participants, such as Jameson, also noted the usage of a test prep period before the end-of-course assessment. Jameson stated that he always tried to set aside the last four weeks of the course as strictly test prep, where he only focused on material that would be on the standardized test. He noted that in doing this, he often sacrificed un-tested standards to ensure he had ample time to review the tested ones (Jameson, Individual Interview, January 11, 2022). Jameson said, “I hate to cut out the non-tested material, but at the end of the day, I have to do what I know will work for the kids to do their best on the test” (Jameson, Individual Interview, January 11, 2022). Similarly, Josephine noted that she removes a lot of non-tested material from her curriculum to ensure that she explicitly teaches what will be on the test. She supported her decision by noting, “It is evident that to be successful as a teacher, my students need to do well on the test, so I adapt my instruction to achieve this” (Josephine, Individual Interview, November 15, 2021).

In addition to discussing limitations to instructional practices, most participants voiced concerns about narrowing of the district curriculum within the standardized testing environment. According to the literature, teachers shifted instructional practices regarding the increased pressures of standardized testing. They narrowed the curriculum to only tested materials to ensure student success on the end-of-course assessments (Shelton & Brooks, 2019). The influences of the No Child Left Behind and the Every Student Succeeds Act have supported the narrowing of the curriculum as educators focus strictly on tested curricula to ensure student success (Horn, 2016). Furthermore, Kuhar (2016) revealed that following the NCLB policy of 2001, the narrowing of the curriculum led to a reduction of social studies instruction as more emphasis was placed on the tested courses of English and mathematics. Many of the study participants taught both tested and non-tested courses. These participants noted the narrowing of the district curriculum in response to standardized testing. Sue teaches both social studies and

English at the sixth grade level. She revealed that as the end-of-course assessments approach, she is advised by administrators to “stop teaching social studies” and use the extra class period for additional English review (Sue, Individual Interview, January 28, 2022). While Sue noted that she appreciated the additional time for review, she also felt that her social studies classes were not receiving the material they needed to build upon in the coming years (Sue, Individual Interview, January 28, 2022). Anna, who teaches science and math at the sixth grade level, also voiced concerns about the narrowing of the curriculum. She noted that she would often include as much of her math skills as possible in her science class to ensure students retain information. Additionally, Anna discussed limiting her science instruction to ensure she could build additional time for math instruction during the course block (Anna, Individual Interview, October 21, 2021).

The narrowing of the district curriculum is not limited to reducing the curriculum in non-tested subject areas. According to the literature, in response to the implications of high-stakes assessments, many school divisions are implementing purchased curriculums designed to focus on student success on the end-of-course assessments (Bogen et al., 2019). These curriculums continue to narrow the curriculum by limiting teachers of standardized courses to only teaching standards-based lessons with the intention of test prep (Bogen et al., 2019). When asked how they have adjusted instructional practices to meet standardized testing needs in the classroom, many study participants discussed teaching only tested materials as part of the division-purchased curriculum. For example, Matthew noted that before implementing the division-purchased curriculum, he felt he had more freedom to teach the tested and non-tested curricula at a pace that worked for his students. He also voiced frustration with the implemented curriculum adding that he felt it was “only designed for test-prep” and that it reduced the teacher’s ability to

make instructional decisions based on student needs (Matthew, Individual Interview, October 11, 2021). Claire also discussed the narrowing of the curriculum she felt from using the division-implemented curriculum. She stated that while she liked the support of the curriculum and that it was standards-aligned, she felt like all she did was teach to the test. She added that there were many instances where she would have expanded on materials within a novel or even done a mini-lesson on skills that would be expanded upon later. Still, she could not because of the rigidity of the curriculum (Claire, Individual Interview, May 26, 2022). The standardized testing environment often promotes a curriculum that does not strengthen students' intellectual capacity but focuses on test prep alone (Hite-Pope, 2017).

Resentment in Regard to Teacher Evaluations. In addition to feeling limitations regarding instruction, the participants also voiced that teaching within the standardized testing environment has led to resentment regarding teacher evaluations. Many participants expressed frustration and negativity with the notion that student test performance was a factor in their teacher evaluations. The participants who teach both tested and non-tested curricula quickly noted the differences in the evaluation process for teachers in the standardized testing environment and those outside of it. Sue, who teaches both English and U.S. History, stated that she did not like her evaluation as an English teacher, including student testing information. Still, her evaluation as a U.S. History teacher was more linked to student growth. Sue also stated that including student test data within her teacher evaluation made her feel her only value as a teacher was if she taught the test well enough. She noted that as a teacher, there were only certain aspects of a student's life that she has control over, and the mental or even physical state a child may be in on test day is not a reflection of her ability to teach her subject matter (Sue, Individual Interview, January 28, 2022). Josephine, who teaches math only, also discussed the inclusion of

student testing data in teacher evaluations. Josephine noted that this inclusion makes her feel that the only important thing is test performance, and if her students do not perform well on the assessment, then she does not do her job (Josephine, Individual Interview, November 15, 2021). Jameson, a math teacher, also voiced frustration with including student test performance on evaluations. He stated that while he “did feel he should be held accountable for their performance on the test”, there are too many factors involved in a student’s life to have their performance be a factor in his evaluation (Jameson, Individual Interview, January 11, 2022).

According to the literature, in addition to curriculum and pedagogical adjustments, standardized testing has also impacted the evaluation of teacher effectiveness (Bogen et al., 2019). As more accountability is placed on school divisions to ensure student success, many divisions have placed standardized testing at the forefront of their evaluation process (Wronowski & Urick, 2019). When asked to share their feelings on including standardized test performance in their teacher evaluations, most participants expressed resentment and negativity. Claudia, an eighth grade English teacher, compared the inclusion of standardized testing scores on her evaluation to “blaming the dentist when the patient doesn’t brush their teeth” (Claudia, Individual Interview, December 13, 2021). She explained her comparison by stating that while she knew she was responsible for her student’s success with the content, she could not control what that student did outside her classroom. She expressed that while she always strives to do her job, she cannot control a student’s home life (Claudia, Individual Interview, December 13, 2021). Claudia also addressed that having this as an element of her teacher evaluation adds an extra layer of pressure that teachers outside of the standardized testing environment do not have to deal with (Claudia, Focus Group Interview, June 7, 2022). Like Claudia, Josephine also felt the pressure of the added element of student testing performance on her teacher evaluation. She

discussed this during her focus group interview by stating, “there is nothing fair about adding student performance into our evaluations” (Josephine, Focus Group Interview, February 2, 2022). She shared a personal story about a student who could have passed the test, but she was removed from her home and placed in foster care the night before the test. Josephine expressed frustration and resentment that this child’s failure, which was not a result of her teaching, would reflect on her during the evaluation process. Similarly, Sue, who teaches both tested and non-tested subjects, expressed resentment that her evaluation for English included student testing performance. Still, her evaluation for social studies did not (Josephine, Focus Group Interview, February 2, 2022).

With the intensified pressure placed on teachers to have students perform at a certain level, many educators feel their professional status needs to be improved (Ladson-Billings, 2016). For some participants, the resentment stemmed from the feeling that their credibility as a teacher was questioned due to the inclusion of student test performance in their teacher evaluations. Jameson expressed this when discussing his opinion of including student performance in his teacher evaluation with the statement, “teaching is the only profession where a person is judged based on another’s actions with no ability to defend themselves” (Jameson, Individual Interview, January 11, 2022). He also added, “managers hire who they want as employees, teachers have absolutely no authority in who walks in our classrooms, how is it fair to judge us based on them” (Jameson, Individual Interview, January 11, 2022). Eliza voiced resentment in her discussion of including student test performance in her teacher evaluations by sharing, “teachers are professionals. However, we are treated like we have no idea what will work best in our classroom.” She reasoned that “if teaching were like any other profession,

student performance would not have such a high factor in evaluation” (Eliza, Focus Group Interview, February 2, 2022).

The Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Standardized Testing Environment.

Many of the study participants also indicated heightened stress levels while teaching in the standardized testing environment due to the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Southern Gap school district introduced a hybrid learning environment where students can learn either in an in-person or in a virtual setting. Students opting for a virtual setting participate in the regular instructional day, joining from their devices to a live-streamed classroom experience. Students opting for an in-person learning experience attend the same live-streamed class as the virtual students; however, they are in the room with the teacher. The introduction of this new element of learning poised many participants to feel an increase in stress teaching in the standardized testing environment paired with concern with the long-lasting effects of the pandemic on the learning environment.

Sue noted that the pressure she felt within the environment before the pandemic was heightened with students learning in various modalities. She indicated that the added pressure of having students who were never present in front of her for instruction included in her end-of-course score percentage was sometimes overwhelming (Sue, Individual Interview, January 28, 2022). Claudia also shared that one of the most daunting tasks as a teacher in the standardized testing environment is ensuring student engagement. In a blended learning environment, it is impossible to know if you are really engaging the virtual learners, making it harder to determine their proper understanding of the skills (Claudia, Individual Interview, December 13, 2021). Additionally, Claire added that pre-Covid-19 she addressed her students’ needs because she had them before her daily. Now, with the inclusion of a hybrid learning model, she feels

disconnected from her virtual learners, leaving her with concerns that their individual needs are not being appropriately addressed (Claire, Individual Interview, May 26, 2022).

Concerns for the long-term effects of the pandemic on the standardized testing environment could also be seen in numerous participant responses. Many participants noted that academic loss is becoming more prevalent as we move beyond the initial Covid-19 year. Matthew stated that he now has students in his classroom struggling with material that before almost all students mastered before Covid-19. Anna supported this notion by revealing that in her math class, she is now seeing students one to two grade levels below where they should be and that this is not only seen with struggling learners but those who would have been considered high-achievers before Covid-19 as well (Anna, Individual Interview, October 21, 2021). As the state of Virginia continues to utilize end-of-course assessment scores in the accreditation process post-Covid-19, many participants discussed the difficulties of preparing students for an on-grade level assessment when so many are below grade level.

Implications for Policy or Practice

The findings of this transcendental phenomenological study revealed several implications for policy and practice. The results revealed the lived experiences of middle grade teachers within the standardized testing environment. Teachers, administrators, district personnel, and legislators can use these implications to improve middle grade teachers' overall experience and effectiveness within a standardized testing environment.

Implications for Policy

At the state and federal level, content standards must be reviewed with educators from all grade and content levels to determine what content should be included within the respective standards. A sub-theme revealed in this study was the narrowing of the curriculum in response to

a heightened focus on teaching only tested content. Many of the study's participants discussed removing un-tested curricula from their curriculum to ensure students would be successful on the tested standards. McCraney (2020) suggested that while standardized testing provides insight into student retention of content, it has also created content gaps, with the material being omitted due to emphasis on tested standards. Allowing educator influence in the scaffolding of standards could lessen the gaps created by enforced standards.

In addition to re-structuring content standards, state-mandated requirements for universities that train pre-service teachers should include instruction on teaching within the standardized testing environment. As the United States shifts its mission for schools to equip students with "21st-century skills," almost all states have enacted more ambitious standards, including problem-solving and critical thinking (Darling-Hammond & Oakes, 2021). As state standards become more rigorous, the need for more developed preservice training for educators becomes prominent. This study's focus on the lived experiences of middle grade teachers in the standardized testing environment provides insight into the challenges educators face trying to prepare students to be "21st-century learners." Preservice educators must be knowledgeable about including standards in the classroom and how to adjust instruction to balance the needs of the assessment and the students.

Implications for Practice

The information gathered from the lived experiences of middle grade teachers within the standardized testing environment provides several implications regarding the teacher's experience within a standardized testing environment. The participants in the study provided descriptions of their experiences adjusting instructional practices within the standardized testing environment, giving information that can be used to improve the understanding of the teacher's

role within this environment. For example, the participants described instances where they adjusted their instructional practices to meet the needs of the students despite feeling pressure to adhere to the district-mandated curriculum. Many participants also discussed their rationale for adjusting the district-mandated pacing guide to align with the instructional practices needed to ensure student success on the end-of-course assessments. Thus, the information from the study provides the perception of the lived experiences of middle grade teachers within the standardized testing environment, which provides insight into factors that help make teaching within this environment more successful.

Administrators often provide professional development opportunities at the district and site levels to enhance the teacher's ability to provide instruction and meet student needs (Harter, 2014). This study provided insight into the lived experiences of middle grade teachers within a standardized testing environment. As school districts seek to expand the knowledge of educators within this environment, the insights shared within this study could provide beneficial insight in creating effective professional development opportunities focusing on adapting instructional practices within a high-stakes testing environment. As more is understood concerning the educator's lived experiences within this environment, professional development opportunities could be provided to better acclimate new educators to the environment, reducing stress levels and reducing the risk of lowered teacher retention rates.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The findings of this study have both theoretical and empirical implications. The theory used for this study was Spiro, Feltovich, and Coulson's cognitive flexibility theory. The cognitive flexibility theory is a theoretical orientation that addresses advanced learning of ill-structured, complex conceptual material. The theory suggests that deep learning occurs when

learners are presented with new content from multiple perspectives and in a flexible way of thinking (Spiro et al., 1992). A central claim for the cognitive flexibility theory is that “the same material, at different times, in rearranged contexts, for different purposes, and from different perspectives is essential in attaining language acquisition” (Spiro et al., 1992, pp. 93-94). Kerns (1995) revealed cognitive flexibility as an “ability to adjust his or her problem-solving as task demands are modified” (p. 202). Teachers within a standardized testing environment are often mandated to teach curriculums aligned with state standards and intended for test prep. As a result, the teacher must adjust their instructional practices to meet the needs of both the standardized test and the students. The teacher’s success hinges on their ability to target student needs and flexibly adapt their pedagogical style to engage students at various cognitive levels (Reese-Penn & Elder, 2018).

The present study was correlated with Spiro, Feltovich, and Coulson’s cognitive flexibility theory. The theory highlights the need for intermediate learners to assemble schema from various perspectives and mental representations to examine complex concepts. This orientation encourages multiple means of connecting elements from various knowledge domains across specific cases and values participatory learning and guidance (Spiro et al., 1992). All teachers must adapt to changing environments; however, teachers within a standardized testing environment make these adaptations reflecting both students need and the need for the standardized test (Close et al., 2018).

All participants discussed adapting their instructional practices within the standardized testing environment to meet the needs of the test. They described instances in which student needs and environmental factors led them to adapt their instruction to engage both the learner and include the standards needed for success on the end-of-course assessment. Within her

writing prompt response, Anna noted that one of the essential skills a teacher possesses is the ability to quickly re-think a lesson and the flexibility to accommodate both the learner and the standards at a moment's notice (Anna, Written Response, September 9, 2021). Anna's notion of the importance of restructuring and flexibility was echoed by many study participants in the written responses, individual interviews, and focus group interview.

Spiro, Feltovich, and Coulson reason that emphasis should be placed on presenting information from multiple perspectives (Spiro et al., 1992). In addressing standards in the classroom, teachers must be flexible in presenting material from multiple perspectives to ensure students adequately retain information (Forsythe et al., 2019). Most of the study participants discussed adjusting instructional practices to include the presentation of course material in many ways to ensure student success with a given concept. For example, Claudia discussed restructuring several of her lessons to meet the needs of her lower-tiered students in her eighth grade classroom. She stated that "I have a few low students. When I see they are not learning the concept whole-group, I will quickly switch to small groups; that way, I can pull them to me for one-on-one instruction" (Claudia, Focus Group Interview, June 7, 2022). Claudia also shared that in addition to small group restructuring, if she sees students struggling with how she presents the material, she will switch quickly to a different format. For example, she shared, "if the whole-group lecture I am giving doesn't work, sometimes I will switch to a video or offer an EdPuzzle on the topic to engage struggling students" (Claudia, Focus Group Interview, June 7, 2022). Anna also shared examples of adjusting her instructional practices quickly. She stated, "sometimes we have a schedule change that is unexpected; when I am aware of the change, I immediately look at taking out an activity or shortening my lesson, so I am still getting in my tested content" (Anna, Individual Interview, October 21, 2021). Similarly, she added, "we just

had a fire drill yesterday, it was at the worst timing, but I quickly restructured the lesson, shortened the quiz, and switched from whole-group instruction to independent EdPuzzle to ensure we all got what we needed” (Anna, Individual Interview, October 21, 2021).

Taylor (2008) reveals that meeting the needs of students in a standardized testing environment requires the teacher to be cognitively flexible. The theory is centered on “the ability to spontaneously restructure one’s knowledge, in many ways, in an adaptive response to radically changing situational demands” (Spiro et al., 1992, p. 165). The study participants implement a district-mandated curriculum in the classroom to ensure student success on the end-of-course assessment. However, the study participants noted instances when they had to adapt lessons in response to student needs. Henry discussed adjusting the mandated curriculum in response to student needs, stating, “I do use the CIP curriculum. However, I tweak it when I need to help my students” (Henry, Individual Interview, June 3, 2022). He elaborated on this by adding, “sometimes the kids just don’t get it the first time, so I will adjust the curriculum pace in areas I can, to create more time for review” (Henry, Individual Interview, June 3, 2022). Jameson also discussed adjusting the mandated curriculum pacing guide by stating:

I follow the curriculum pacing guide very closely; however, when the kids hit a rough spot, I look for areas in the pacing guide that I know I can adjust to give me more time. For example, I know my students are usually proficient in integers, so I can cut a few days out of the pacing guide with it to build in more time for slope, which I know will be a struggle (Jameson, Individual Interview, January 11, 2022).

By looking for ways to adjust their pacing guides Jameson and Henry applied Spiro, Feltovich, and Coulson’s theory of cognitive flexibility by restructuring their plan to adapt to the needs of the students.

Although there is existing literature examining the effects of standardized testing on teachers and students, a gap exists concerning understanding teachers' experiences with adjusting instructional practices to address standardized testing in the middle grades. Coppola's (2017) research focused on how teachers within the primary grades meet the needs of standardized testing in the classroom. Similarly, Brown's (2019) and Shelton and Brooks's (2019) research focused on primary grade reading teachers and their experiences in the standardized testing environment. Coppola (2017), Brown (2019), and Shelton and Brooks (2019) recommended additional research on how standardized testing affects instructional practices for the upper grades. Additionally, research from Buldur and Acar (2019) addressed the views of middle grade teachers on standardized testing. Still, it did not seek to explore the middle grade teachers' lived experiences in the environment.

This study provided information concerning the lived experiences of middle grade teachers within a standardized testing environment. The participants shared their experiences teaching within the standardized testing environment and described their experiences adapting instructional practices to address student and test requirements. They also provided insight into the role of student testing performance in teacher evaluations and the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on the standardized testing environment. Middle grade teachers within the standardized testing environment are the primary stakeholders. Therefore, this study gave the participants a voice about their experiences teaching within the standardized testing environment.

Although a small amount of literature stated that using standardized testing as a means of student and teacher accountability increased school pride as students strived to perform well on assessments to create a positive learning environment (Munter & Haines, 2018), the majority of

participants revealed a more negative aspect regarding the effects of the standardized testing environment. They described the effects of the standardized testing environment as creating heightened stress for the students and teachers as pressure mounts for students to perform well on the end-of-course assessments. Many of the study participants taught both tested and non-tested courses. These participants provided insight into the differences between a standardized testing environment and a non-tested environment. The participants also noted the standardized testing environment's implications on the teacher's ability to adapt instructional practices. This information was vital as it gave insight into the participants' lived experiences in varying environments.

Limitations and Delimitations

When conducting this study, one of the delimitations made was the study design. Transcendental phenomenological design was purposely chosen for the study. This design was the most appropriate for the study because it provides the appearance of things and themes arising from the information gathered from the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, transcendental phenomenology was most appropriate for the study because it is used to describe and understand the experience of a selected group of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). This design choice allowed the participants to share their lived experiences in a particular setting to understand their personal experiences. Furthermore, the design provided information from the participants to better understand the phenomenon being studied.

Another delimiting factor was the selection of participants. The participants were required to be Virginia-licensed educators with middle school endorsements currently teaching within the standardized testing environment within the intended school district in rural southwest Virginia. The participants were either math or English teachers within grades 6-8, as end-of-

course standardized assessments are only administered within the subject levels in Virginia. Another delimitating factor was that participants were limited to only being teachers in the middle grades. Due to a gap in the literature and a lack of representation of the experiences of middle grade teachers in a standardized testing environment, the decision to limit participation to only middle grade teachers was essential to the study. Providing the shared lived experiences of middle-grade teachers within the standardized testing environment provided insight and gave voice to the stakeholders within the setting.

Several limitations affected the study. Although letters of consent were sent to all 28 middle grade teachers within the Southern Gap school district, only eight initially responded with intent to participate. Snowball sampling was utilized to gain two additional participants, yielding 10 participants for the study. Selecting the middle grades is a limitation because not all grade levels involved in standardized testing were included. Additionally, the study was conducted in rural southwest Virginia. Using this geographical area was a limitation because this study only reflected the lived experiences of teaching within the standardized testing environment in a small school setting due to being in a rural area.

Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of middle grade teachers within a standardized testing environment. Therefore, I sought to collect data on the perceptions of adjusting instructional practices and teaching within the standardized testing environment from teachers currently teaching within the environment. The data collected from this study provides a direction to several areas in which further research could be conducted to gather more insight into teachers' experiences within the standardized

testing environment. The following information consists of recommendations for future research.

A delimitation factor of the study was the teachers participating in the study had to be teaching in grades 6-8. Future research to add information to the lived experiences of educators within the standardized testing environment could consist of using a transcendental phenomenological study including teachers from all grade levels involved in standardized testing. These teachers could share their experiences teaching within a standardized setting with students beginning their experiences with standardized testing. The shared, lived experiences would give opportunities to share their views of how the standardized testing environment impacts their instructional practices and ability to flexibly meet the needs of both the students and the mandated standards. Information collected in this study would enhance the perception of the lived experience of educators within a standardized testing environment. It would continue to include the voice of the educators who are stakeholders in education.

Instead of conducting a qualitative study on the perceptions of middle grade teachers in a standardized testing environment, this study could be conducted using a quantitative approach to collect data and report the results. For example, a quantitative study could be conducted to collect data on the factors impacting middle grade teachers in a standardized testing environment. The participants could complete surveys indicating their experiences teaching within a standardized testing environment. This type of study would present information in a different format; however, it would provide opportunities for teachers within a testing environment to report their perceptions.

The research was limited to a rural area that consisted of smaller schools. A recommendation for future research would be to expand the study to schools that were larger or

in an urban area. The design would still be a transcendental phenomenological design so that information would be gathered to understand the experience of a group of individuals that have experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The lived experiences of middle grade educators in a standardized setting may differ in an urban area compared to a rural setting, providing more insight into teachers' lived experiences within a standardized testing environment.

A theme that emerged from the research was the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on the standardized testing environment. The Covid-19 pandemic has affected many walks of life; however, one of the pandemics' most significant impacts has been felt in education (Ford & Moore, 2022). A recommendation for future research would be to identify the lived experiences of educators within a post-Covid-19 standardized testing environment. A transcendental phenomenological qualitative study is recommended for future research on this theme. A transcendental phenomenological qualitative study would allow the researcher to have an in-depth look at teachers' lived experiences in the standardized testing environment following the Covid-19 pandemic. The lived experiences of educators within a post-Covid 19 standardized testing environment may differ from those in a pre-Covid 19 setting, therefore, building deeper insight into the challenges educators face in a standardized testing environment.

Conclusion

The No Child Left Behind policy and the Every Student Succeeds Act aimed to provide equal quality education to all students throughout the country. While the intent of these policies was for the good of education, the implications of the policies have created issues for both educators and students. As a public school educator for many years, I have witnessed first hand the issues standardized testing has created. I have always been interested in other's perceptions

of the standardized testing environment. This study focused on the experiences of middle grade teachers in the standardized testing environment. Following data collection, themes and subthemes began to emerge as teachers revealed the realities of teaching within the standardized testing environment.

I identified the major themes as Limitations on Instructional Practices, Resentment in Regard to Teacher Evaluations, and The Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Standardized Testing Environment. The theme of Limitations on Instruction included the sub-themes of Narrowing of the District Curriculum, Enforced Teacher Dependency, Decreased Teacher Flexibility, and Prioritization of Testing. As the teachers shared their experiences within the standardized testing environment, it became apparent that the policies and implications of the No Child Left Behind and the Every Student Succeeds Act have created an educational environment that is very limiting for both students and teachers.

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Appendix A**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

June 21, 2021
Megan Stevens
Linda Gable

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-742 A Phenomenological Study of Middle School Teacher Experiences in a Standardized Testing Environment

Dear Megan Stevens, Linda Gable:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B

Request to Conduct Research

Megan Stevens

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

August 2, 2021

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Dear [REDACTED]

As a graduate student in the Education Department of Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctorate degree in Curriculum and Instruction. The title of my research project is “A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER EXPERIENCES IN A STANDARDIZED TESTING ENVIRONMENT ” and the purpose of my research is to examine the lived experiences of middle grade teachers in a standardized testing environment.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research with teachers in the [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. Participants will be asked to complete writing prompt response, give a personal interview, and participate in a focus group discussion, all of which will be used to describe the phenomenon of interest. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please respond by sending a letter of approval to the address above.

Sincerely,

Megan R. Stevens

Doctoral Candidate

Appendix C


Site Request

Date:

Dear (principal):

As a doctoral candidate in the education department at Liberty University, I have recently been granted permission from [REDACTED] to conduct research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree in Curriculum Instruction. The title of my research project is “A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER EXPERIENCES IN A STANDARDIZED TESTING ENVIRONMENT” and the purpose of my research is to understand the lived experiences of middle grade teachers in a standardized testing environment. Participants will be asked to complete a writing prompt written response; the prompt will be emailed to participants. Participants will also be asked to do an audio recorded one-on-one interview (45-60 minutes), and an audio recorded focus group (45-60 minutes) remotely after school or in the evening. Participants will have the opportunity to review their transcripts for accuracy.

Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time. There will be no compensation. The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are comparable to the dangers you could face in regular life.

Thank you for considering my request. If you do choose to grant permission, please respond by letter 

Sincerely,

Megan Stevens

Doctoral Candidate

Appendix D

Recruitment Letter

Dear Southern Gap School Division Teacher:

As a doctoral student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Ed.D in Curriculum and Instruction degree. The purpose of my research is to understand the lived experiences of middle school teachers in a standardized testing environment, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be currently employed as a middle school teacher within a tested curriculum and hold a valid Virginia teaching license. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in one-on-one interviews, focus group interviews, and construct a written response. Participants will also be asked to participate in member checking to ensure validity of the study. It should take approximately 45-60 minutes to complete the interviews and approximately 30 minutes to member check transcribed data. Participation will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be collected.

In order to participate, please complete the attached consent form and return to me in the enclosed envelope. If you have any questions please contact me at [REDACTED] or email me at [REDACTED]

A consent document is included in the received recruitment packet. The consent document contains additional information about my research. After you have read the consent form, please sign, and return the form to me via the enclosed, addressed, return envelope.

Sincerely,

Megan Raines Stevens

Doctoral Student – Liberty University



Appendix E

Consent Form

Title of the Project: TEACHER EXPERIENCES WITH ADJUSTING INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES TO ADDRESS STANDARDIZED TESTING IN THE MIDDLE-GRADES

Principal Investigator: Megan Stevens, Ed.D Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be a licensed middle school teacher in the state of Virginia. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to teacher experiences of how instructional practices are adjusted to address standardized testing in the middle-grades.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in an in-person, recorded, interview. Interview's will be conducted at your school site at a time of your convenience. The interviews will take no longer than 30 minutes.
2. Potentially participate in a focus group interview via Zoom or an in-person site of convenience reflecting on the answers you provided during your in-person interview.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Local and state policy makers may use the information presented in this study to re-evaluate the teacher's role in the development of curriculum, creating an opportunity for educators to contribute to curriculum and suggested instructional design ideals to better align with the standards addressed by standardized testing. Additionally, policy makers may adjust reforms associated with standardized testing, reducing the implications of the test results on gauging teacher effectiveness in the classroom.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study include: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only

the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

[Include the following in this section:

- Participant responses will be kept confidential using pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews/Focus Group conversations will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the group may share what was discussed with persons outside of their group.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or Buchanan County Public Schools. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please return this consent form to the researcher using the enclosed addressed envelope. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Megan Stevens. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, [name], at [email].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records.

The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix F

Individual Interview Questions

1. Introduce yourself to me as if we have just met. CRQ
2. Why did you choose teaching as a career? CRQ
3. What grade and subjects do you teach? CRQ
4. What do you enjoy most about teaching? CRQ
5. Please describe your experiences teaching in a standardized testing environment.
CRQ
6. How does the district pacing guide affect your planning and instruction? SQ2
7. How does the district curriculum guide affect your planning and instruction? SQ2
8. Please explain your lesson planning procedures for instruction in your classroom on a weekly basis. SQ3
9. Please tell me what factors have led you to adjust your instructional practices to address the learning standards associated with the Virginia Standards of Learning assessment? SQ3
10. Please tell me what you have experienced as effects of the Virginia Standards of Learning assessment on your instructional practices? SQ1
11. How have you adjusted your instructional practices to address state-mandated standards associated with the Virginia Standards of Learning assessment? SQ2
12. Please describe how you feel about the inclusion of student test performance in teacher evaluations? SQ1
13. How have you adjusted curriculum and practice in order to help students be more successful on the Virginia Standards of Learning assessment? SQ3

14. Based on your experience as a classroom teacher, what advice would you give a new classroom teacher concerning the implementation of standardized testing in the classroom? CRQ

Appendix G

Focus Group Questions

1. Please introduce yourselves and state what subject you teach. CRQ
2. What is your favorite thing about being a middle school teacher? CRQ
3. How do you know when your students fully understand a concept? CRQ
4. How has standardized testing, in this case, the Virginia Standards of Learning assessment, impacted your decision making in the classroom? SQ1
5. How do you adjust instructional strategies in your classroom to address state standards associated with the Virginia Standards of Learning assessment? SQ3
6. What factors lead to you adjusting instructional practices to address the Virginia Standards of Learning assessment? SQ3
7. How effective do you think you are at flexibly adjusting instruction to address changes associated with standardized testing? SQ2
8. Based on your experience with standardized testing in the classroom, what advice would you offer a new teacher on adapting to standardized testing in the classroom? CRQ

Appendix H
Reflexive Journal

Date	Entries
6/21/21	<p>Today I received IRB exemption. I am excited to begin the journey ahead. I come into this study with biases that need to be noted prior to conducting the research. I have been a public-school teacher for thirteen years. Throughout my time in the classroom, I have taught within the standardized testing environment. It is my belief that this environment does not promote a healthy learning environment for either the teacher or the students.</p>
10/11/21	<p>Today I interviewed “Matthew” an educator with 19 years of experience. He discussed the implementation of the division mandated curriculum. I was nervous about a few of his responses, as I felt they were more targeted at attacking the district than focusing on the students. He also discussed how as an educator he really enjoyed building relationships with his students. Often times within the standardized testing environment, it is hard to form those relationships, taking a lot of meaning and purpose away from the educator.</p>
10/21/21	<p>Today I interviewed “Anna” an educator with 11 years of experience. Anna is a math teacher, who has been teaching nearly as long as me. I connected a lot with what Anna stated. She even brought out points about teaching within the environment that I had not considered. Anna was notably frustrated many times within the interview regarding the usage of testing scores to label students and</p>

	<p>teachers. It was clear to me that Anna had a lot to say about the standardized testing environment and it's impact on her.</p>
11/4/21	<p>Today I interviewed "Clark" the youngest teacher with the least amount of experience. Her interview was refreshing. I anticipated before her interview that with her age and fewer years of experience, her interpretation of the standardized testing environment may be different. I feared she may be experience teacher burnout, as I know from experience that can happen. Clark, on the other hand, still actively enjoys teaching and while she represented her experiences in the environment well, she maintained a positive demeanor throughout the interview. I was relieved to see her remain happy.</p>
12/13/21	<p>Today I interviewed "Claudia" an educator with ten years of experience. It was nice to get back to interviewing today following a break due to sickness. Claudia was very polite and was quick to note the differences between teaching a tested course and a non-tested course. Claudia is unique in that while she teaches 8th grade English, she also teaches upper-level English courses as well. Initially, I was worried that her experiences would potentially be outliers to others, but following this interview I can already see themes forming. All of the participants interviewed have had similar responses to many questions.</p>
1/7/22	<p>Today I interviewed "Eliza" an educator with 15 years of experience. Her responses were more clipped than others, and it was obvious that her opinion of standardized testing was a negative one. While I wanted her to provide more detailed answers, I kept the thought to myself as I wanted her to generate her</p>

	<p>own responses, not tailor her answers to what I wanted her to say. I felt like Eliza was an educator who was ready for a change, and teaching outside of the environment may benefit her.</p>
1/11/22	<p>Today I interviewed “Jameson” an educator with both classroom and administrative experience. I was unsure of how the interview with him would go as I knew he was only teaching half the day and working as a student coordinator the other half. His answers, while more thorough than I expected, they still reflected someone who’s mind frame is shifting from the classroom to an administrative role. Jameson was more understanding of a lot of the district requirements and was more guarded in his responses about how the curriculum made him feel.</p>
1/28/22	<p>Today I interviewed “Sue” an educator with 15 years of experience. Sue was a joy to interview. She had taught both in the standardized testing environment and outside of it. She was great to make the comparisons between the two. Sue also radiated positivity regarding her students, which she frequently referred to as “her kids”, something I also do with my school kids.</p>
2/2/22	<p>Today I conducted the focus group interview. It was a great experience to listen to the educators discuss teaching within the standardized testing environment. It was so nice to listen to them bounce off of each other’s responses and to hear them share their experiences. Today humbled me as an educator and a researcher.</p>
3/22/22	<p>Today I submitted Ch. 4-5 to my Chair for review.</p>

5/1/22	I received my manuscript back from Dr. Gable and Dr. Eller. I need to move my manuscript over to the 2022 Dissertation Template.
5/10/22	I need to add additional participants to my study. Following the advice of Dr. Eller, I will be utilizing snowball sampling to identify two additional participants.
5/26/22	Today interviewed “Clara” a participant recruited through snowball sampling. Clara was very cordial and represented a seasoned teacher’s view of the standardized testing environment. I enjoyed her interview and identified with a lot of the points she made.
6/3/22	Today I interviewed “Henry” the participant with the most years of experience in education. Henry had a lot to say about teaching in the standardized testing environment, and did a wonderful job of comparing and contrasting the changes standardized testing has influenced in education. His interview provided a lot of rich responses. I am thankful for his interview, as it completes my data collection, but I am also thankful for the experience of getting to know him.