THE IMPACT OF HIGH STAKES ASSESSMENTS ON SELF-COMPETENCE, AUTONOMY, AND PERSEVERANCE FOR EDUCATORS IN RURAL MIDDLE TENNESSEE: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment Of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand, as a lived experience, the impact of high-stakes assessments on self-competence, autonomy, and perseverance for teachers in rural middle Tennessee. High-stakes assessments were generally defined as a summative assessment that provides data which could be used for employment, promotion, or pay-related decisions. The theory guiding this study was Deci and Ryan’s (2008) self-determination theory (SDT), which framed understanding a teacher’s determination to perform or avoid certain acts in relation to their innate psychological needs. The central research question for this study was designed to understand the lived experiences of teachers in rural middle Tennessee whose self-competence, autonomy, and perseverance are impacted by high-stakes assessments. The research subquestions were designed for deeper understanding of the impact of high-stakes assessments on rural educators. A transcendental phenomenological approach was used for this study and data collection included a word-association writing prompt, semistructured individual interviews, and a single focus group interview. Data analysis utilized NVivo software and included bracketing, open coding, and thematic analysis. Analysis yielded five major themes. In addition, the findings indicated high-stakes factors impacted participants’ self-competence. Findings also revealed high-stakes assessments had limited participants’ autonomy in their classrooms in numerous capacities. Finally, most participants expressed a desire to remain in the profession but mentioned factors outside of high-stakes assessments as the reason for professional perseverance.

Keywords: high-stakes assessment, teacher autonomy, teacher competence, teacher perseverance
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, without whom none of this would be possible. I owe a special debt of gratitude to my wife, who many times carried the load in our home for both of us as I pursued this endeavor; and to my sons who have sacrificed many talks, games, and moments as I poured myself into this work. I promise to make their sacrificial investment into me worth something and will attempt to pay back all they have given up and more. I love you all to the moon and back.
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List of Abbreviations

Educational Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS)
End of Course Exam (EOC)
English Language Learners (ELLs)
Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)
Higher-order thinking (HOT)
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
Level of Effectiveness (LOE)
National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)
No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)
Race to the Top (RttT)
Self Determination Theory (SDT)
Tennessee Department of Education (TNDOE)
Tennessee Educator Acceleration Model (TEAM)
Tennessee Value Added Assessment System (TVAAS)
Value-Added Modeling (VAM)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Chapter One includes introductory information relating to high-stakes assessments, the primary component of school accountability and the focus of this study. In addition, background information on the historical, social, and theoretical contexts is provided. Contextual information will be followed with situating myself, as the human instrument, within the context of this study by providing information relating to motivation for the study, philosophical assumptions that were employed during the study, as well as the information about the paradigms which guided the study. Chapter One also includes the problem statement, purpose statement, and significance of the study as well as research questions and definitions that will help clarify important terms used for the study.

Background

Understanding the shared experience of those who are impacted by high-stakes assessment is not only important for teachers, but also for parents, district, and school-level administration, and even state and federal policymakers. According to Ingersoll, Merrill, and May (2016), “School accountability may be the most controversial and significant of all contemporary U.S. education reforms” (p. 45). Interestingly, many teachers do not operate from a binary, for-or-against viewpoint about high-stakes assessments (Carusi, 2017; Gonzalez, Peters, Orange, & Grigsby, 2016). Many teachers, for example, value the capability of a standardized assessment to provide data about their students’ learning but disagree with other aspects of using assessments in evaluation or performance decisions (Wahl, 2016). High-stakes assessments have become a common element of school-related discussions among various parties and in many contexts (McCarthy & Blake, 2017). The following sections include
background information regarding historical, cultural, and social contexts of high-stakes assessments.

**Historical Context**

In April 1983, Terrel Bell, then the Secretary of Education for the United States, published a report titled *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. Bell (1993) later noted, “The intent of *A Nation at Risk* was to call the attention of the American people to the need to rally around their schools. No one intended for teachers to receive the blame that was heaped upon them” (p. 593). Even though blame was not his intention, Bell’s report began a process that sought to make teachers more accountable for what was happening in their classrooms. The implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) increased the federal role of providing oversight regarding student achievement. Implementation of the NCLB was the primary driver for state-controlled end-of-course (EOC) exams. The Race to the Top (RttT, 2009) initiative provided financial incentives to states that were implementing sweeping educational reforms. The program included measures to evaluate teacher effectiveness and raised the stakes of EOC exams by awarding states extra funding for above-average academic achievement. Tennessee, for example, was awarded $501.8 million as a result of the RttT initiative (Riley, 2010).

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), which is the current federal act in effect for education, superseded the NCLB and did away with the requirement of mandated standardized assessments. Despite the expired federal mandate for assessments, the practice has become embedded in the American educational system. One should not be surprised, then, to learn that in the current educational landscape, many states are still using EOC exams as a means of accountability (Lewis & Holloway, 2018).
Social Context

To study the many facets of the public context for high-stakes assessments is beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, this study was focused on the impact of high-stakes assessments self-competence, autonomy, and perseverance for rural middle Tennessee teachers. Teachers have been placed in the position of being on the implementation end of policies that raise the stakes of their performance to a critical level. “Regarded as a symbol of quality, testing permeates all aspects of education, shaping the experiences of the actors involved” (W. C. Smith & Kubacka, 2017, p. 3). Research has revealed that teachers have a heightened sense of pressure and competition and a lower sense of collaboration and morale (Collins, 2014). Furthermore, research has also demonstrated that the viewing of assessment data as the most effective measure of a teacher’s competence has permeated virtually every other stakeholder’s mindset as well (Buchanan, 2015; Lewis & Holloway, 2018). Therefore, scholars have noted that students, parents, administrators, and policy makers are judging teachers based primarily on test results (W. C. Smith & Kubacka, 2017).

Another primary social concern has risen dramatically because the rate of public school teachers transitioning or leaving the profession has doubled compared to rates in the early 1990s (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018). The shortage of quality teachers is felt more harshly by disadvantaged students and school districts in rural areas (Hanushek, Rivkin, & Schiman, 2016). Rural schools have a more difficult time absorbing the cost of turnover and experience higher rates of turnover, which can be devastating to the local community (Vagi & Pivovarova, 2016). Finally, most teachers and students value educational methods that celebrate cultural diversity and are responsive to the range of backgrounds present in their classrooms (Zoch, 2017). Despite the value teachers place on culturally responsive education, tremendous pressure is felt
to utilize measures that maximize test scores, even if culturally diverse education becomes limited as a result (Zoch, 2017). Ultimately, high-stakes assessments could be impacting the way teachers and stakeholders view their competence levels and make decisions in the classroom, as well as exacerbating the teacher shortage.

Theoretical Context

Deci and Ryan’s (2008) self-determination theory (SDT) outlines a framework for the study of human motivation that addresses three universal, innate, and psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. The theory presents these needs in relation to an individual’s determination to carry out acts that attempt meet those needs (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). In short, individuals have a self-determination that will cause them to act in ways that help ensure their innate needs are met. High-stakes assessments, and their inclusion in many employment-related decisions, may result in disruption to these innate psychological needs. The response to these deficiencies could be that teachers are deciding to take drastic actions in order to ensure their needs are met (Carusi, 2017).

SDT can help inform how high-stakes assessments impact teachers’ needs and how the phenomenon could be satisfying or thwarting their self-determined aspirations and actions over time (Deci et al., 1991). This study was an examination of the competence and autonomy pillars of SDT as they impact teachers who are experiencing the phenomenon. The research questions were designed to seek understanding of how high-stakes assessments impact the various aspects of a teacher’s identity, and how the impact on that identity shapes their determination to perform or avoid actions related to that identity. Saeki, Segool, Pendergast, and von der Embse (2018) emphasized the need to examine how the implementation of high-stakes accountability policies
impact teachers and T. Lawrence (2018) used the phenomenological method to investigate educator’s views on a phenomenon.

**Situation to Self**

The motivation for this study came from my own experience as an educator in a high-stakes area for almost five years, and numerous discussions about the profession with colleagues. I have witnessed and experienced the impact of high-stakes assessments in my life and in the lives of my colleagues. All my years as a teacher have been in areas in which students that have spent the academic year in my classroom take an EOC exam that serves as the culminating summative assessment of the course and is administered late in the school year.

Noneducators are basing their evaluations of the educational system almost entirely on evidence provided through growth scores that are calculated primarily from high-stakes assessments (Abraham, Wassell, Luet, & Vitalone-Racarro, 2018). I have witnessed teachers express frustration about required practices they do not perceive to be effective and, in some cases, I agree with my colleagues. However, similar to many teachers, my colleagues and I are not wholly opposed to assessments that are meant as diagnostic tools for teachers to use that will drive more effective instruction (Carusi, 2017). Therefore, in this research, I attempted to set aside any preconceived notions I have about the high-stakes testing phenomenon, in order to allow participants to tell their stories in their own words. The unique individual perceptions of the teachers that participated is important because, as I have experienced, the current usage of high-stakes assessments is deeply impacting teachers (Holloway & Brass, 2017; Lewis & Holloway, 2018; Putwain & von der Embse, 2018).

The study was guided by specific philosophical assumptions. The first guiding assumption was the ontological assumption that humans live in a world where things that are
known to an individual are rich with personal thoughts, meanings, and interpretations. The phenomenological research method allowed each individual’s experience to be explored (Moustakas, 1994). Furthermore, the axiological assumption of this study highlighted that the terms and descriptions used in this study were value-laden. Values such as autonomy, relatedness, motivation, and competency provided the major shape of this study. For this reason, it was important that each participant, as well as the researcher, was as clear as possible about the values placed on the aforementioned topics. The definition of these values as they were discussed in this study will be provided later in this chapter. However, participants were allowed to provide their personal definitions of the values. Where necessary, I tried to clarify and explain when the values that were held by participants differed from the stated definitions of the study.

A constructivist paradigm also helped guide the design of the research. The constructivist paradigm assumes that the interaction that takes place between ideas and experiences will impact how individuals establish knowledge and meaning. Employing these philosophical assumptions resulted in a need for a closeness with the research ideas and participants that only a qualitative method would allow (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

**Problem Statement**

The problem examined in this transcendental phenomenological study was the impact of high-stakes assessments on self-competence, autonomy, and perseverance for teachers in rural middle Tennessee. For example, teachers have begun to view their level of competency in correlation to what the assessment results show (Holloway & Brass, 2017; Lewis & Holloway, 2018), instead of including other aspects that are qualitative in nature. In other words, teachers are abandoning a holistic view of themselves in favor of what the test results portray them to be (Holloway & Brass, 2017). High-stakes assessments are not only changing who teachers believe
they are but also what they are doing in their classrooms (Putwain & von der Embse, 2018). Finally, not only are high-stakes assessments causing teachers to alter their self-perceptions and classroom practices, but they are also causing many teachers to leave the profession altogether (Carusi, 2017).

The impact of high-stakes assessments on teachers is a national problem (Saeki et al., 2018). However, the shortage of quality teachers is felt more harshly by disadvantaged students and school districts in rural areas (Hanushek et al., 2016). These areas often have unique problems such as short-staffing, funding issues related to lower enrollment numbers, and increased difficulty in teacher retention and recruitment (Dulgerian, 2016). For this reason, the focus of this research was on teachers from a rural area in middle Tennessee. This study included a purposive sample of teachers from multiple grade levels who experienced the phenomenon of high-stakes assessments.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand, as a lived experience, the impact of high-stakes assessments on self-competence, autonomy, and perseverance, for teachers in rural middle Tennessee. In this research, high-stakes assessments were generally defined as summative assessments that provide data which could be used for employment, promotion, or pay-related decisions (Ro, 2018). The theory guiding this study was Deci and Ryan’s (2008) self determination theory (SDT). The SDT theory served to facilitate understanding of how high-stakes assessments are impacting the various aspects of teacher identity and shaping their determination to perform or avoid actions related to that identity.
Significance of the Study

This research study contributes to the existing body of literature surrounding the SDT and the reasons why people make the choices that they make. In the original publications regarding SDT, the theoretical framework was applied to education and teachers (Deci et al., 1991; Deci & Ryan, 2008). Therefore, the use of SDT as a theoretical framework for this study has support not only in subsequent applications of the theory in published research studies, but also in original publications by the developers of the theory themselves. The SDT could be more accurately applied in specific contexts, such as rural school settings, since this research contributes to the existing body of knowledge about the SDT.

This study also contributes to the existing body of practical knowledge surrounding high-stakes assessments. Saeki et al. (2018) maintained that there is a need to examine how high-stakes assessment policies and their implementation are affecting teachers across multiple contexts. There are multiple other recent studies in which scholars noted a need for further investigation into the impact of high-stakes assessments (Au, 2015; Barnatt et al., 2016; McCarthy & Blake, 2017). The data this research provided can give insight to other scholars as they attempt to study high-stakes assessments among multiple contexts and practical applications.

Finally, this research provides stakeholders connected to high-stakes assessment policies with valuable information. Practice and policy that does not consider the basic conditions for optimal motivation will fail to achieve the desired changes in teaching and learning, waste resources, and ultimately lead to stakeholder resentment and frustration (Ford, 2018). More clearly, Ford (2018) warned that a failure to consider how implemented policies impact teachers will not only be unsuccessful but also be divisive. Furthermore, scholars have noted a need for
further investigation into specific areas of professional experience that high-stakes assessments may impact such as a teacher’s sense of self-competence (Coronado, 2016; Lewis & Holloway, 2018), autonomy (Ro, 2018; Zoch, 2017), and perseverance (Holloway & Brass, 2017; Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018). This research not only may inform stakeholders in the rural context on the impact of high-stakes assessments on their teachers, but it could also help prevent stakeholders from making decisions about high-stakes assessments without knowing how those decisions could possibly impact their teachers, which also impacts their schools. Regardless of whether the stakeholder is a teacher, administrator, legislator, student, or parent, this research can help inform them about high-stakes assessments and their impact on teachers’ sense of autonomy, competence, and perseverance.

**Research Questions**

This transcendental phenomenological research study was guided by one central research question and three additional research subquestions (SQs).

**Central Research Question**

What are the lived experiences of teachers in rural middle Tennessee whose self competence, autonomy, and perseverance are impacted by high-stakes assessments?

The phenomenon of high-stakes assessment, and the myriad ways teachers can be impacted by these assessments, is of utmost importance in the current educational climate (Barnatt et al., 2016). Many teachers enter the profession for altruistic reasons, with a primary goal of employing their skills as a teacher to facilitate student growth (Horvath, Goodell, & Kosteas, 2018). However, there is disagreement between what a teacher believes growth for a student means and what high-stakes assessments evaluate as growth (Ford, 2018). This difference could be the result of the impact high-stakes assessments are having on a teacher’s
perception of their personal competence (Holloway & Brass, 2017) and professional autonomy (Putwain & von der Embse, 2018). The impact of the high-stakes assessments on numerous facets of a teacher’s professional experience could also be causing teachers to leave the profession (Carusi, 2017). Therefore, the central question for this study was used to better understand the impact high-stakes assessments are having on teachers who are employed in a rural context.

**Research Subquestions**

**SQ1:** What are rural middle Tennessee teachers’ perceptions of the ways in which high-stakes assessments impact their self-competence?

High-stakes assessments could be negatively impacting a teacher’s sense of self-competence (Buchanan, 2015; Holloway & Brass, 2017; Lewis & Holloway, 2018). Research has demonstrated that teachers are elevating the quantitative data high-stakes assessments are providing above other possible metrics of their performance as an educator. Data have also shown that the viewing of assessment data as the most effective measure of a teacher’s competence has permeated virtually every other stakeholder’s mindset as well (Buchanan, 2015; Lewis & Holloway, 2018). SQ1 was asked to help understand the way a teacher’s professional competence is impacted by high-stakes assessments.

**SQ2:** What are rural middle Tennessee teachers’ perceptions of the ways in which high-stakes assessments impact their autonomy?

Recent research has demonstrated teaching a course that includes high-stakes assessment increases pressure for teachers and causes them to manipulate what goes on in their classrooms in an attempt to maximize test scores, even if it limits what they perceive as most beneficial to their students (Mulhall, 2018). While teachers in various grades change their approaches
differently, there are commonalities for all teachers, such as regular test practice and feedback, narrowing of the curriculum to tested material, practice of test-taking skills, and employment of instructional methods that would normally not be used (Putwain et al., 2016).

Data have shown that when the stakes are high for teachers, they attempt to raise the stakes for the students as well by utilizing techniques such as fear appeals or timing reminders (Putwain & von der Embse, 2018). The use of these techniques could, in fact, be harming students (Putwain et al., 2016). SQ2 was asked to understand the impact of high-stakes assessments on a teacher’s ability to employ effective strategies and methods in their classrooms.

**SQ3:** What are rural middle Tennessee teachers’ perceptions of the ways in which high-stakes assessments impact their perseverance in the teaching profession?

Recently, concern has risen dramatically because the rate of public school teachers transitioning or leaving the profession has doubled compared to rates in the early 1990s (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018). High-stakes assessments are at least partially to blame for the increase in teacher turnover (Richards, Levesque-Bristol, Templin, & Graber, 2016). Job-related pressure in teachers has been shown to cause disengagement, lack of focus on activities related to their profession, and an overall negativity about their job (Okeke & Mtyuda, 2017). Problems arise with tested subjects because if educators teach a subject that involves a high-stakes assessment, they will have more job-related stress (Gonzalez et al., 2016), and a teacher’s ability to remain in the profession is in some way connected with their ability to reconfigure their professional identity to cope with their dissatisfaction with the current world of teaching (Barnatt et al., 2016; Clarà, 2017). Inversely, teachers who are satisfied with their jobs are more likely to remain in the profession (Omar, Self, Cole, Rashid, & Puad, 2018). High rates of teacher turnover can result in staffing issues, and these staffing shortages could jeopardize the quality of teaching that
students are receiving (Donitsa-Schmidt & Zuzovsky, 2016). The shortage of quality teachers is felt more harshly by disadvantaged students and school districts in rural areas (Hanushek et al., 2016). SQ3 was asked to understand the impact of high-stakes assessments on rural teachers’ ability to persevere in the teaching profession.

**Definitions**

1. **Autonomy** - The ability to control the course of one’s life (Deci & Ryan, 2008).
2. **Competence** - An individual’s level of efficacy when dealing with their environment (Deci & Ryan, 2008).
3. **High-stakes assessment** - Assessments from which data can be used in decisions relating to pay, retention, termination, or remediation (Ro, 2018).
4. **Motivation** - The amount of desire people have for certain activities (Deci & Ryan, 2008).
5. **Level of Effectiveness** - A score provided by a statistical model that measures a teacher’s impact on student achievement (Tennessee Department of Education [TNDOE], 2016).
6. **Value-Added Modeling** - A statistical model that incorporates many facets of a teacher’s performance to produce a numerical score rating the teacher’s efficacy (TNDOE, 2016).

**Summary**

Chapter One included introductory information about this transcendental phenomenological study. Background information relating to the different contexts of high-stakes assessments was provided as well as philosophical assumptions that were employed in the study and used to guide its structure. The problem of high-stakes assessments impacting various
aspects of teachers’ experiences was explained. Research reveals that there is a need to examine how high-stakes assessment policies and their implementation are affecting teachers across multiple contexts (Saeki et al., 2018). There are multiple other recent studies in which scholars noted a need for further investigation into the impact of high-stakes assessments (Au, 2015; Barnatt et al., 2016; McCarthy & Blake, 2017). This current research provided further insight into the lived experiences of rural teachers as they experience high-stakes assessments.

In addition, Chapter One included the problem and purpose statements that clearly demonstrated the problem of the impact of high-stakes assessments and the study’s intended purpose to give further insight to a specific context: rural teachers. The chapter concluded with the research questions that allow stakeholders to more fully understand the lived experiences of teachers in rural middle Tennessee whose self-competence, autonomy, and perseverance are impacted by high-stakes assessments.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Chapter Two contains a discussion of the body of literature informing this research that was conducted to investigate the high-stakes assessment phenomenon. This chapter will begin with a review of the body of literature surrounding the theoretical framework of Deci and Ryan’s (2008) self determination theory. Following the theoretical framework is an explanation of the literature relating to high-stakes assessments. Finally, the literature that informs the impact high-stakes assessments could have on teachers will be discussed. The purpose of providing this information in Chapter Two is to synthesize the literature regarding the impact of high-stakes assessments and provide a coherent argument that established a rationale for the study of the impact of high-stakes assessments on rural teachers’ sense of autonomy, competence, and perseverance.

Theoretical Framework

The SDT frames understanding of the actions people may take based on their innate psychological needs. For the purpose of this study, the SDT helped inform how teachers’ needs are being met while experiencing the phenomenon of high-stakes assessment and whether the phenomenon is satisfying or thwarting their aspirations over time. SDT was initially published by Deci and Ryan in 1985. It was subsequently published in research by Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan in 1991. Finally, Deci and Ryan (2008) brought the theory into mainstream use. The intent behind the theory was to provide a more in-depth theory of human motivation (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). The SDT was not the first theoretical framework created to address human motivation. However, the authors intended to add a new dimension to the current frameworks that addressed the motivations behind behavioral regulation (Deci et al.,
Other theories have consistently defined motivation as the level of desire people have for certain activities (Deci & Ryan, 2008). The SDT, however, includes a more nuanced, but complete, description of motivation.

The SDT has been used in a variety of contexts, including education. In addition, Deci and Ryan (Deci et al., 1991; Deci & Ryan, 2008) specifically apply the theory to educational settings and teacher motivation. Therefore, the application of the SDT to this current study was not only appropriate, but also supported by numerous publications, including those of Deci and Ryan (Deci et al., 1991; Deci & Ryan, 2008) the creators of the theory.

**Human Motivation**

Autonomous motivation contains both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. In autonomous motivation, people have integrated the value of an activity with their sense of self (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Intrinsic motivation is the strongest motivation for an individual, and actions driven by intrinsic motivation are internally regulated (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Controlled motivation is the opposite of autonomous motivation and consists of external regulation which causes a behavior to be driven by reward or punishment (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Individuals can undergo a proactive process by which they transform external regulation to internal regulation and the SDT labels this process internalization (Deci et al., 1991). However, internalizing factors is not always a positive development for an individual. The SDT describes a process called introjected regulation, which causes a behavior to be the motivated by partially internalized factors such as ego, avoidance of shame, or desire for approval (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Conversely, through a process called identified regulation, an individual will come to value a behavior, and even accept the behavior’s regulatory process; however, the individual is not willing to internalize the
behavior (Deci et al., 1991). When individuals are externally controlled, they experience pressure to think or behave in certain ways (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

An important point to be understood about the SDT is that both concepts of autonomous and controlled motivation are classified as motivations, meaning an individual is compelled to carry out certain activities. This stands in contrast to amotivation which is the lack of a desire to carry out certain activities (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Flitcroft and Woods (2018) compared the autonomously motivated to the controlled and find the former to have more interest, excitement, and confidence which leads to enhanced performance, persistence, creativity, and self-esteem.

The concept of motivation as a primary force of behavioral regulation is key to understanding how teachers behave. For example, in this study, the SDT was used to frame the exploration of what motivates a teacher to employ certain teaching methods or remain in the teaching profession altogether. A participant’s answer could indicate whether he/she personally believes in an assessments capability to evaluate their competency as a teacher (autonomous motivation) or whether they simply want to comply with a directive to avoid negative consequences (controlled motivation) Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan (1991) stated, “When behavior is self-determined, the regulatory process is choice, but when it is controlled, the regulatory process is compliance” (p. 327). Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan’s (1991) framework to understand why an individual is motivated to do what they do resulted from their exploration of the impact of choice (internal motivation) or compliance (external motivation) on an individual’s actions and submitted locus of causality as an explanation.

When self-determined behavior is present, the locus of causality is internal to the individual. Behaviors that are intrinsically motivated are performed for the pleasure or satisfaction that is derived from performing the behavior (Deci et al., 1991). Conversely, when
the locus of causality is external to the individual, the behavior is controlled (Deci et al., 1991). Extrinsically motivated behaviors are performed because the individual believes them to be instrumental to a consequence (Deci et al., 1991). These behaviors cause individuals to perceive an external locus of causality and will ultimately decrease intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 1991). Furthermore, the SDT revealed that behaviors that are consistently controlled by an external contingency will tend to diminish and individual’s sense of autonomy (Deci et al., 1991).

**Autonomy**

Autonomy refers to an individual’s ability to choose and regulate their own course of action (Deci et al., 1991). If an individual is allowed the autonomy to perform a behavior by choice, the locus of causality is internal, and the motivation for the action will remain high. Conversely, if an individual is forced to perform the behavior for some purpose, he/she will still possess a motivation to perform the behavior. However, the locus of causality will be perceived as external and the individual’s sense of autonomy will be diminished (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan (1991) predicted an impact on teachers’ autonomy:

> The rhetoric from Washington continues to advocate greater accountability, greater discipline, and increased use of standardized testing, all of which are means of exerting greater pressure and control on the educational process and therefore are likely to have at least some negative consequence. (p. 342)

Interestingly, Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan (1991) not only applied their theory to educational policy and practice but also predicted what could be the result of increasing accountability pressures. According to Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan (1991),
When teachers are pressured or controlled by the system in general, they are likely to respond by being more controlling with their students. In these studies, there was evidence that when the teachers became more controlling the students performed less well in activities. (p.340)

There should be no surprise, then, that teachers have begun to view their level of competency in correlation to what the data shows (Holloway & Brass, 2017), instead of including other aspects that are qualitative in nature. In fact, the SDT seems to predict this decrease in a teacher’s sense of competence.

**Competence**

Competence is “skill in acquiring various external and internal outcomes and being efficacious in performing the actions required to attain them” (Deci et al., 1991, p. 327). The desired outcomes an individual seeks to attain are classified as aspirations (Deci et al., 1991). In essence, competence is an individual’s capacity to achieve their aspirations by being able to effectively plan and perform tasks the aspirations require. For a teacher, these tasks could include lesson plans, differing types of assignments, and even formative or summative assessments.

Aspirations are not static to an individual; they can change as an individual’s needs are met or not. Individuals will change their aspirations as they sense how their behaviors are meeting their innate needs. If a behavior seems to meet the need of an individual, the aspiration is said to have been satisfied. Inversely, if a behavior seems not to meet the individual’s need, the aspiration is said to have been thwarted (Deci et al., 1991). Positive feedback regarding the aspiration will tend to increase an individual’s intrinsic motivation. However, issues begin to arise when the outcome is not as an individual originally desired. Negative feedback, whether
self-administered through failure or administered interpersonally will also typically decrease intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 1991). The changing aspirations of an individual based on the satisfying or thwarting of aspirations could explain the changing classroom practices of teachers. Research has shown that high-stakes assessments are altering classroom practices of teachers (Putwain & von der Embse, 2018). Whether these evolving practices are rooted in a teacher’s sense of competence is something this research attempted to learn. Motivation is not just affected by autonomy and competence, however.

**Relatedness**

The SDT defines relatedness as “developing secure and satisfying connections with others in one’s social milieu” (Deci et al., 1991, p. 327). According to the SDT, activities that support strong connections with others will increase intrinsic motivation and activities that thwart strong connections with others will tend to decrease intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 1991). Recent research has demonstrated high-stakes policies make teachers feel it is necessary to focus solely on their classrooms, to the exclusion of professional collaboration (Stone-Johnson, 2015). The exclusion of peers and decreasing sense of relatedness could be attributed to high-stakes assessments. For the purpose of this present study, however, the exploration of the impact of high-stakes assessments on a teacher’s sense of relatedness was delimited as those data could overlap with other areas that are included in the study, such as perseverance or competency.

**Related Literature**

The following review of related literature provided information about the body of literature that currently exists surrounding high-stakes assessments. The section also provides evidence of the need for a study that examined the lived experiences of high-stakes assessments
among rural teachers. Topics of the literature include high-stakes evaluation, high-stakes assessments, teacher autonomy, teacher competency, teacher relatedness, and teacher burnout.

There is a large body of literature that relates to high-stakes assessments. Compiling an exhaustive discussion of the literature was well beyond the scope of this study and chapter. However, much of the literature about high-stakes assessment informed the focus of this phenomenological study. Literature related to high-stakes assessments, but unrelated to this study, was excluded. For example, some information is provided about specific high-stakes evaluation models, but only the models that were necessary for understanding this study. Literature was identified using library resources that were available as well as other publicly available resources such as Internet search engines. Initial searches included phrases such as high-stakes assessment, teacher perceptions of high-stakes assessment, teacher autonomy, teacher competency, and teacher turnover. Discussions with library personnel and research assistants helped develop more complex Boolean phrases that were used to expand the amount of resources identified. Secondary sources were used for knowledge formation and identification of primary sources related to high-stakes assessment. Many articles were reviewed that are not included in the related literature. Articles that were chosen for inclusion in the review of related literature directly related to the body of knowledge necessary for understanding the research topic and supporting the significance of the research study.

High-Stakes Evaluation

Bell (1993) noted his intention for the momentous report *A Nation at Risk* was not to point blame at American schools or educators, but to call to the public’s attention the need to rally around their schools and support their efforts. Even though it was not his intention, Bell’s (1983) report became a work that forever changed the nature of educational accountability. The
report began a process intended to make teachers more accountable for what was happening in their classrooms. In 2001, President Bush signed into law No Child Left Behind (NCLB). This policy increased the federal role of providing oversight regarding student achievement. Implementation of the NCLB was the primary driver for state-controlled EOC exams. The Obama-era program Race to the Top (RttT, 2009) raised the stakes in accountability by providing financial incentives to states that were implementing sweeping educational reforms which included measures for evaluating teacher effectiveness. The program not only led to increased accountability policies but also raised the stakes of EOC exams by awarding states extra funding for above-average academic achievement. Tennessee, where this current study took place, was awarded $501.8 million as a result of RttT (Riley, 2010).

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), which is the current federal act in effect for education, superseded the NCLB and did away with the requirement of mandated standardized assessments. However, despite the expired mandate for high-stakes assessments, the practice was already entrenched across many educational settings. One should not be surprised to learn that in the current educational landscape, many states are still using EOC exams and including their data in teacher evaluations.

There are two elements traditionally involved in teacher evaluation: supervision (observations) and evaluation (Cuevas, Ntoumanis, Fernandez-Bustos, & Bartholomew, 2018). Summative evaluations are aimed at teacher accountability and formative evaluations are used for professional development purposes (Ford, 2018). Exploring both observation and evaluation was beyond the scope of this current study; therefore, this study was focused on the evaluation component that is primarily driven by high-stakes assessments. Issues with evaluation systems have arisen because there is little known about how effective these evaluation methods are at
actually improving instruction (Ford, 2018). Furthermore, accountability systems tend toward
treating performance information as summative. The lack of clear data about instructional
improvement as well as the misuse of some assessment data increases the likelihood of these
systems being perceived as controlling or unmotivating (Ford, 2018). One of the most widely
used models, the value-added model, is intended to capture student performance over time.
Research is beginning to suggest this form of evaluation can have a negative impact on a
teacher’s psychological health (Cuevas et al., 2018). Furthermore, evidence has suggested that
this type of evaluation model can result in decreased collaboration between teachers,
compression of the curriculum, and could even discourage a teacher from working with students
who have above-average needs (Cuevas et al., 2018). Finally, the impact of these models seems
to increase pressure universally, even if the school typically performs well on high-stakes
assessments (Paufler, 2018).

Educational accountability is not limited in scope. In a recent study, Holloway,
Sorensen, and Verger (2017) sought to understand the global perspectives of educational
accountability. Holloway et al. found the following areas of focus to be universal regarding
educational accountability: a disconnect between policy maker and teacher perceptions of the
specific accountability method; a universal use of student assessment data in the accountability
method; large numbers of teachers lacking feedback on the accountability measure; and low
perceived utility by educators when measures focused heavily on student test scores. Discussion
of global impact of high-stakes assessments far exceeded the limit of this present study.
However, that the issue is reaching a global scale is informative in regard to the necessity of this
research.
The current evaluation model for teachers in Tennessee is called the Tennessee Educator Acceleration Model (TEAM). This model has been adapted from the Educational Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS) and falls under the guidance of the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS). Under this model, an educator’s overall level of effectiveness score is calculated using 35% of their students’ assessment results, 50% of their administrator evaluation scores, and 15% of their chosen school achievement score (typically graduation rate; TNDOE, 2018). Teachers of non-tested courses will have the composite assessment score of the school applied as their growth measure. According to the TNDOE (2018), there are no factors impacting a teacher’s level of effectiveness that cannot be measured or calculated in some way. Even the 50% that TEAM considers qualitative data are forced through a rubric, heavily scrutinized at the state level, and wildly erratic from district to district (Paufler, 2018).

A recent study related to TVAAS that took place in west Tennessee revealed that many participants did not understand how their overall scores were calculated, did not believe their scores were an accurate depiction of their teaching, and agreed their motivation had been impacted by TVAAS (Clement, 2018). Other studies have supported Clement’s (2018) findings that current teacher evaluation systems were inadequate in determining the differences between individual teachers and were often only performed for perfunctory reasons (Lenhoff, Pogodzinski, Mayrowetz, & Umpstead, 2018).

The focus on high-stakes assessment results is causing administrators to describe a system that does not value teaching and learning and is all about measurable results instead (Paufler, 2018). The data surrounding administrators and their lack of consistency regarding high-stakes evaluation models are a primary reason why advocates for high-stakes assessments view them as a necessity (Paufler, 2018). Multiple studies have cited large variation in teacher
observation scores despite the use of rubrics to guide observation (Derrington & Campbell, 2018). Some administrators rate teachers well even though test results suggest otherwise; conversely, some teachers are rated ineffective despite positive test results (Grissom & Loeb, 2017). Thus, some researchers argue that an objective method for evaluating the impact a teacher has on their classroom is needed (Grissom & Loeb, 2017; Paufler, 2018). Advocates of high-stakes evaluations point to research that has demonstrated students whose teachers are informed of their students’ academic performance, or lack thereof, achieve higher levels of academic growth than do students whose teachers are not responsible for high-stakes assessment results (Pope, 2019).

However, others have urged caution when implementing rigorous evaluation policies since the long-term effects are relatively unknown (Derrington & Campbell, 2018). Scholars have noted a generally resigned attitude among administrators about the system, acknowledging that the evaluation system is flawed, but is unlikely to change as well (Munter & Haines, 2019). A key component in a majority of teacher evaluation systems is a statistical model that generates a “student growth score” from high-stakes assessment results based on a method called value-added modeling.

**Value-Added Models**

The state of Tennessee uses an evaluation model based on the value-added system. In general, the EVAAS utilizes value-added modeling (VAM) to assign a student growth score and incorporate that score into a teacher’s level of effectiveness (LOE). Currently, guidance issued to educators in the state of Tennessee indicates that 35% of their final evaluation score will come from assessment results that employ VAM to calculate a growth score (TNDOE, 2016). “The goal of value-added modeling is to compare a teacher’s or school’s student actual test score gains
to the expected gains of the same student if he or she had not been assigned the particular teacher or school” (Everson, 2017, p. 36). Researchers have recently noted that there is a set of assumptions that come along with value-added models that are not as supported by research as stakeholders assume (Amrein-Beardsley & Holloway, 2017). As a result, value-added models have been the source of great debate.

Advocates applaud the model’s capability to give a clear measure of a teacher’s worth and efficacy, and detractors argue that a teacher’s value is far too complex to be measured by a statistical model (Paige, Amrein-Beardsley, & Close, 2019). Scholars have also recently noted many issues with VAM. First, detractors of VAM point to research that has demonstrated the once-a-year feedback that a high-stakes assessment can provide is not as likely to shape teachers’ practices as deeply as continuous feedback (W. C. Smith & Kubacka, 2017). These data have proven true, at least in part, as teachers now view the assessments as administrative tasks to be completed instead of valuable means of soliciting information (Pressley, Roehrig, & Turner, 2018; W. C. Smith & Kubacka, 2017). For example, a teacher’s score could vary by up to 30% depending on their students’ previous achievement levels (Stacy, Guarino, & Wooldridge, 2018). Some of this variation is completely unrelated to a teacher’s instructional methods such as learning disabilities, or neighborhood and family disruptions (Stacy et al., 2018). Furthermore, teachers who serve a large number of low achieving or disadvantaged students will have less precise value-added estimates (Stacy et al., 2018).

Conversely, recent research has demonstrated that similar teachers can have varying value-added scores based on the districts in which their schools are located (Blazar, Litke, & Barmore, 2016). The differences in scores between districts and schools has been attributed to an organization’s varying levels of ability to provide high-quality materials or professional
development to the teachers in their employment (Blazar et al., 2017). As a result, teachers who are subjected to VAM can end up feeling hopeless because the scores hold little personal value and there is no sense of control over assessment scores (Pressley et al., 2018). The hopeless feelings teachers experience are exponentially smaller related to observation scores, which educators feel are more accurate representations of what takes place in their classrooms and are subject to factors that can be controlled by the teacher (Pressley et al., 2018). Finally, many teachers cannot accurately describe how VAM works or how it factors in to their overall evaluations at years end (Pressley et al, 2018). In the end, then, greater caution is needed in high-stakes areas about the performance of teachers whose students are traditionally lower achieving.

Recently, many of the states that employ VAM in their evaluation models have found aspects of their models in court, including Tennessee (Hazi, 2017). In these cases, teachers are reporting that the models are unfairly damaging their reputations, costing them opportunities for advancement, or even resulting in dismissal from their roles (Hazi, 2017). Additionally, Morgan (2016) argued that VAM cause teachers to discriminate against students who do not traditionally show growth by seeking to have middle-class students on the lower end of proficiency and tending to avoid English language learners (ELLs), special needs students, and even gifted students. Not only do teachers tend to avoid these types of students in their classroom, but also teachers have begun to accept low-level expectations of those students in general as a result of their inability to provide value on high-stakes assessments (Davis & Martin, 2018). Teachers believe homogenous classrooms are the most capable of showing improvement (Davis & Martin, 2018; Morgan, 2016). Teachers do not discount the entire accountability system due to its numerous flaws, however.
A majority of teachers agree with the principles of the policies intended to ensure students are receiving quality education. “They agree that effectiveness should be measured to ensure students have the best teachers. Some even endorsed linking tenure to effectiveness” (Pizmony-Levy & Woolsey, 2017, p. 21). However, 75% of the teachers in the aforementioned study did not believe the new high-stakes assessment policies would improve their students learning, or their teaching and only 10% said they supported the teacher evaluation system as they had been implemented. Data have shown that teachers are not directly opposed to measures that are intended to improve student achievement, but they do not believe value-added evaluation models (e.g., EVAAS), which incorporate test scores into a teacher’s yearly evaluation score, actually improve students’ academic growth (Carusi, 2017; Moran, 2017). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that teachers have been found in favor of evaluations and helpful critiques aimed at improving instruction (Moran, 2017). Teachers also want to ensure that students are getting a quality education and that certain problematic issues in education are addressed (Moran, 2017).

Teachers could perceive the system as invalid because they do not believe it actually represents what is happening in their classrooms (Ford, 2018). The driving force behind a teacher’s satisfaction, or dissatisfaction with an evaluation method, is found in whether they perceive it as a means to demonstrate what actually takes place in their classrooms where they take great pride in demonstrating their expertise (Moran, 2017). Deci and Ryan (2008) used the SDT to specify that a teacher will be more motivated to comply with an evaluation method if the teacher believes it provides an accurate depiction of their abilities as a teacher.

Advocates for high-stakes assessments and their usage in evaluation measures argue that high-stakes are a requirement for reliable data, otherwise motivation becomes a confounding
variable in low-stakes conditions (Wiethe-Körprich & Bley, 2017). Teachers may believe they are in a system in which they are not the most effective (Holloway & Brass, 2017) and are forced to use methods they disagree with (Putwain & von der Embse, 2018) because of state-level mandates for high-stakes assessments and evaluation. Even though Tennessee does not require districts to use growth scores in pay and employment-related decisions, the state allows districts the opportunity to do so. In a recent survey by the TNDOE, 73% of teachers believed they were not evaluated consistently and objectively using the state’s system (Pratt & Booker, 2014). Furthermore, the same 73% reported they did not find the information provided by their evaluation to be useful in providing feedback that would improve their instruction (Pratt & Booker, 2014). The SDT and the concept of locus of causality could be causing teachers to undergo identified regulation, which is causing them to be motivated to comply with the system, but not internalize the behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

**High-Stakes Assessment**

A recent study revealed that 33 countries utilize high-stakes assessments in some way (W. C. Smith & Kubacka, 2017). As previously noted, high-stakes assessments are generally defined as summative assessments that provide data which could be used for employment-, promotion-, or pay-related decisions (Ro, 2018). McCarthy and Blake (2017) warned, “a learning environment that focuses on passing tests, whether in the public-school setting or college setting, is unlikely to develop creative thinking skills” (p. 29). Even though there is no longer a federal mandate on the high-stakes usage of assessments results, many states, such as Tennessee, define which content areas are required to administer state sponsored EOC examinations and how the various test scores fit into a teacher’s evaluation score (TNDOE, 2018). In Tennessee, teachers are given a score ranging from 1 to 5, with the latter being the
highest. Schools’ and teachers’ effectiveness for the year hinge on the score. While not a legal requirement, many counties choose to include the test data for employment-related decisions such as retention and merit-based pay. County School District, the district in which this study was situated, does not have a merit-based pay policy, but administrators are allowed to use high-stakes assessment data in other employment-related decisions for teachers. For example, consistently scoring in the lower third of their peers on high-stakes assessments can be grounds for a teacher’s termination.

Many advocates have argued that high-stakes assessments are a necessary component of measuring school efficacy (Lewis & Holloway, 2018). Advocates also claim that high-stakes assessments are accurate and sensitive to differences in teaching and teachers. However, recent research has indicated modest overall levels of sensitivity in some cases, to complete insensitivity in other cases (Polikoff, 2016). These findings are problematic to teachers because VAM is heavily reliant on specifically correlating student scores to teacher performance (Everson, 2017). Advocates for the use of high-stakes assessments have also pointed out the benefit of receiving diagnostic information that can be used to guide teaching plans as well as high-stakes assessments providing students an opportunity to demonstrate what has been learned (Munter & Haines, 2019).

High-stakes assessments, in some way, were implemented to intentionally motivate teacher behavior (W. C. Smith & Kubacka, 2017). Motivation does not seem to be the key outcome of their implementation; however, research has demonstrated that the presence of high-stakes assessment in an accountability system significantly increases teacher stress (von der Embse, Pendergast, et al., 2016; Richards et al., 2016). For example, a recent study revealed that approximately 30% of teachers had experienced “clinically significant anxiety” related to test-
based accountability (Saeki et al., 2018, p. 395). The same study revealed that test-based accountability can even increase the stress for school environments in such a way that it will impact individuals not directly involved in testing (Saeki et al., 2018). Saeki et al. (2018) concluded that even the well-being of teachers in untested courses or grades are being impacted by high-stakes assessments. Mediating factors such as school climate and a teacher’s relationship with colleagues or students can have a moderate mediating effect on test-based stress (von der Embse, Pendergast, et al., 2016).

One challenge for teachers is the inherent inequality in the current systems of high-stakes assessment. The current educational system forces educators to focus solely on a student’s academic capacity, typically causing students from racial and ethnic minority populations to be further marginalized (Zoch, 2017). In fact, the achievement gap that exists between students of different socioeconomic or racial classes has actually widened since the widespread implementation of high-stakes assessments (Au, 2015). Scholars have also noted that high-stakes assessment performance are not predictive of college success (Giersch, 2018). In addition, studies have indicated that choosing more advanced classes is a far more accurate predictor of college success due to the differences in instructional methods between advanced, remedial, or standard high school courses (Giersch, 2018).

Furthermore, even though studies have shown high-stakes assessments results to be inaccurate predictors of college success, scholars have recently noted that accountability policies cause schools and teachers to manipulate their classroom demographics in an attempt to maximize student growth (Heilig, Brewer, & Pedraza, 2018). The manipulation or homogenous grouping of students does not seem to be an effective means of raising test scores or closing achievement gaps either (White et al., 2016). The result of this manipulation harms students who
typically underperform on tests, such as those of low socioeconomic status (Au, 2018; Heilig et al., 2018), and low-income schools have typically underperformed their higher income counterparts on high-stakes assessments (Morgan, 2016). In some cases, underperformance on one high-stakes assessment can lead racial and ethnic minority students to internalize negative stereotypes about themselves which eventually becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and leads to lower performance on subsequent high-stakes assessments (Rodriguez & Arellano, 2016). Furthermore, researchers have noted that high-stakes assessments also further marginalize students by removing them from their educational decision-making since high-stakes assessments are typically mandated at the state or local levels without student input (Woods, McCaldin, Hipkiss, Tyrrell, & Dawes, 2018). Classroom manipulation and the marginalization of students is not the only way they are being impacted by high-stakes assessments either.

Not only are classroom demographics being manipulated, but also teacher placements are. For example, recent research has demonstrated that more effective teachers are more likely to be put into tested classrooms (Grissom, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2017). This strategic placement of teachers is practiced with even greater frequency in elementary schools. Data show that students in K-2 classrooms are put at a disadvantage by this practice (Grissom et al., 2017). The long-term effects of this manipulation result in lower reading and mathematics performance which, in turn, leads to lower performance on high-stakes assessments in subsequent grades (Grissom et al., 2017).

Studies have also shown that students have varying levels of motivation for test performance based on their perceptions of a test as high-stakes or low-stakes (Knekta, 2016). Another interesting facet is the school-wide impact that high-stakes assessments can have. For example, when high-stakes assessments are being administered, the whole school is typically
affected: daily routines are altered throughout the building and anyone not involved in testing is urged to keep noise levels low to prevent distraction (Gonzalez et al., 2016).

Stakeholders have also witnessed the impact of high-stakes assessments. Many principals believe that testing policies are the primary force that drives instructional design in a classroom (Zohar & Agmon, 2017). Researchers have also noted most administrators describe the current system as one that values testing over teaching and learning (Paufler, 2018). Finally, researchers have noted a generally resigned attitude among administrators about the system, acknowledging that the evaluation system is flawed, but is unlikely to change (Munter & Haines, 2019).

Parents are also getting involved in the matter by exercising an ability to opt their children out of high-stakes assessments for a variety of reasons (Abraham et al., 2018). Abraham et al. (2018) revealed the beginning of a counter-narrative surrounding high-stakes assessments to combat the narrative educational policy makers are presenting. Many opponents of high-stakes assessments have even used social media to mobilize support against the use of the high-stakes assessments (McKeon & Gitomer, 2019). The most common issue that parents reported having with high-stakes assessments was test validity (Abraham et al., 2018). In other words, parents did not refuse the idea of educational accountability using assessment, they refused the current model that is being employed. However one views these data, the fact that parents have begun taking such measures provides valuable insight into the range of emotions stakeholders have toward high-stakes assessments. Counsell and Wright (2018) found the most common emotion associated with high-stakes assessments from all stakeholders was fear.

Eliminating standardized tests altogether does not seem to be the answer either. Many traditionally high-performing countries such as Singapore and Japan utilize standardized tests in
some way (Derrington & Campbell, 2018; Morgan, 2016). A distinguishing difference between these nations and the United States is that traditionally high-performing countries such as Singapore and Japan do not utilize the tests as a primary method of evaluating their educators. Instead, these countries take a more holistic approach that includes tests results among multiple other data points (Morgan, 2016). Impartial evaluations of current high-stakes models have also urged caution, warning that “rigorous evaluation policies” will not solve the current educational issues facing the US educational system (Derrington & Campbell, 2018, p. 260). Recently, collaborative high-stakes tests have been employed in specific settings. Students have described learning more about the subject matter, interpersonal dynamics, other students, and themselves during the testing process (Levine et al., 2018). These results seem more in line with skills students will need for posteducational success. However, one issue with reforming the current high-stakes assessment system is that policymakers are heavily insistent on the measure; using declining test scores as the impetus for higher accountability (Derrington & Campbell, 2018; Morgan, 2016).

Furthermore, in a recent article, Cuevas et al. (2018) pointed out a sizable gap in the literature regarding the impact of teacher evaluations on teacher motivation and warned that “evaluations based on external and largely non-controllable criteria such as student performance, are likely to be perceived as controlling and hence have the potential to undermine self-determined motivation” (p. 156). High-stakes assessments are not just influencing teacher’s motivation.

**Teacher Competence**

Reports have shown that a majority of a student’s growth score can be traced to a teacher’s self-perceived competence; with far less being related to specific classroom tasks and
teacher plans (Coronado, 2016). Scholars have noted that a teacher’s sense of self-competence can help alleviate anxiety and depression and is also positively related to their enthusiasm and contentment (Huang, Yin, & Lv, 2019). The knowledge that high-stakes assessments are having an impact on the way teachers perceive themselves as professionals is problematic (Buchanan, 2015). Furthermore, high-stakes assessments could be negatively impacting a teacher’s sense of self-competence (Buchanan, 2015; Holloway & Brass, 2017; Lewis & Holloway, 2018). Research has demonstrated that teachers are elevating the quantitative data high-stakes assessments are providing above other possible metrics of their performance as an educator. Data have also indicated that the viewing of assessment data as the most effective measure of a teacher’s competence has also permeated virtually every other stakeholder’s mindset as well (Buchanan, 2015; Lewis & Holloway, 2018). Applying the SDT definition of competence to the purpose of this study results in defining teacher competence as a teacher’s “skill in acquiring various external and internal outcomes and being efficacious in performing the actions required to attain them” (Deci et al., 1991, p. 327). This definition hearkens to mind the term self-efficacy which was described by Bandura (1977) as “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (p. 3). Pfitzner-Eden (2016) described the concept as a teacher’s beliefs in their capability to construct and execute a course of action required to produce a specific outcome. Putwain and von der Embse (2016) defined “teacher self-efficacy as beliefs that one is capable of planning, organizing, and conducting those activities required to achieve educational goals” (p. 1005). One can clearly see that the definitions include different terms to say the same thing. Therefore, teacher competence, for the purpose of this current research, was defined using Putwain and von der Embse’s (2016)
terminology. This definition was selected because it seems to match with the SDT definition, as well as clearly articulating the practical nature of the term.

The connection between the concepts of self-efficacy and self-competence are important because the former is used extensively in the literature about teachers to the exclusion of the latter. To illustrate this point, an EBSCO search for recent articles (2015–present) using the Boolean phrase teacher self-competence returned five results. The same search using the Boolean phrase teacher self-efficacy returned 2,171 results. Therefore, were one to base a review of the literature surrounding teacher self-competence only on the previous term, far fewer results would be found. This lack of results, then, leads to an incomplete understanding of teacher competence. In order to provide a more complete explanation in the existing body of literature exploring teacher competence, the term self-efficacy was searched through various libraries as well. Regardless of what definition one applies, the foundational idea behind the terms lay in a teacher’s belief in oneself to effectively plan and accomplish their goals (Bandura, 1997; Pfitzer-Eden, 2016; Putwain & von der Embse, 2016; Deci et al., 1991). Both high-stakes evaluation models and high-stakes assessments have been shown to impact a teacher’s sense of self-competence (Holloway & Brass, 2017; Lewis & Holloway, 2018). A teacher’s self-competence beliefs have also been shown to mediate stress, burnout, and even their intention to leave the profession (Gonzalez et al., 2016; Omar et al., 2018). Conversely, research has linked a teacher’s self-competence to their decision to remain in, or leave, a school (Vagi & Pivovarova, 2016).

There are mixed results regarding high-stakes assessments and teacher self-competence. A clear example is a mixed methods study in which quantitative data indicated equal competence belief levels between teachers of high-stakes and non-tested classes (Gonzalez et al., 2016).
However, the qualitative data supported the notion that tested teachers experienced lower levels of self-competence than non-tested ones (Gonzalez et al., 2016). Despite mixed conclusions, Gonzalez et al. (2016) illustrated this point effectively: “In the United States, teachers’ job-related stress and self-efficacy levels across all grades are influenced, in some manner, by the demands of high-stakes testing” (p. 514). As teachers lose confidence in their abilities, they begin altering the techniques they employ in their classrooms. Even worse, “accountability pressures pass through teachers to students” (Putwain & von der Embse, 2018, p. 1016). In fact, a recent meta-analysis by von der Embse, Jester, Roy, and Post (2018) revealed a moderate ($r = -0.40$) effect size related to higher level of student test anxiety for high-stakes assessments versus other types of examinations employed in schools.

Summarily, as teachers feel increased pressure to meet educational goals effectively, as well as experiencing the impact of high-stakes assessments on their sense of self-competence, they are forced to adopt classroom practices they would not normally choose voluntarily (Buchanan, 2015; Putwain & von der Embse, 2018). Giving up control to do what they believe is best for their students for what could be perceived as more effective in achieving student growth even if a teacher is philosophically opposed to the method (Buchanan, 2015). The impact of high-stakes assessments on teachers’ self-competence is important because research has revealed that teachers will work in schools where they feel they are able to do their jobs well (Vagi & Pivovarova, 2016). Therefore, it is important to understand how high-stakes assessments could be influencing teachers’ sense of self-competence.

**Teacher Autonomy**

In the past, teacher autonomy has been defined as a teacher’s ability to enact self-directed teaching in their instruction (Little, 1995). The term has also been defined as freedom from
control or the ability to exercise one’s right against control (Benson, 2001). Finally, Pearson and Moomaw (2005) defined teacher autonomy as the degree to which a teacher has the freedom to take control over their own personal activity. Using the SDT definition of autonomy, teacher autonomy could be defined as a teacher “being self-initiating and self-regulating of one’s own actions” (Deci et al., 1991, p. 327). As with teacher competence, despite differences in vocabulary, the spirit of the definition remains relatively unchanged: that a teacher can self-select and self-regulate their actions.

The impact of high-stakes assessments on teachers could be motivating them to change their classroom practice. According to Ro (2018), “test-based accountability puts tremendous pressure on teachers and constrains their professional autonomy” (p. 88). Some studies have even explicitly stated changes in teacher autonomy driving a limit to classroom practices (Olivant, 2014). Recently, research has demonstrated teaching a course that includes high-stakes assessment increases pressure for teachers and causes them to manipulate what goes on in their classrooms in an attempt to maximize test scores even if it limits what they perceive as most beneficial to their students (Mulhall, 2018). For example, many students value educational methods that celebrate cultural diversity and are responsive to the range of backgrounds present in their classrooms (Zoch, 2017). Despite teachers’ valuing this type of education, tremendous pressure is felt to utilize measures that maximize test scores, even if culturally diverse education becomes limited as a result (Zoch, 2017). This pressure is even greater for novice teachers (Ro, 2018).

While teachers in different grades change their approaches differently there are commonalities for all teachers such as regular test practice and feedback, narrowing of the curriculum to tested material, practice of test-taking skills, and employment of instructional
methods that would normally not be used (Putwain et al., 2016). For example, while many
teachers would normally not use fear appeals (e.g., “If you do not do well, this will have a
negative impact on your grades”) they are feeling the pressures that cause them to utilize these
tactics in their classrooms (Putwain & von der Embse, 2018). These data have indicated that
when the stakes are high for the teacher, they attempt to raise the stakes for the students as well.
The use of these techniques could, in fact, be harming students (Putwain et al., 2016).
Furthermore, the use of fear appeals and other negative motivational strategies, have been shown
to actually decrease test performance (von der Embse, Schultz, & Draughn, 2015). Interestingly,
research has demonstrated that the most effective way to increase students’ test performance is to
employ positive motivational strategies in their classrooms and ensure students understand the
way the assessment data will be utilized (von der Embse et al., 2018).

Motivational tactics aimed at students are not the only practices finding their usage
driven by high-stakes assessments. Test-related instructional practices such as strategies for
taking tests, test stress-management strategies, completing items from a practice test, or items
specific to a high stakes assessment’s format are being employed (von der Embse, Schoemann,
Kilgus, Wicoff, & Bowler, 2016). At minimum, these strategies are confounding student growth
data. Furthermore, these strategies do not bring value to the student in the content they are
studying and are waste of time and resources for student and teacher alike (von der Embse,
Pendergast, et al., 2016). Even more problematic are test-taking strategies and practice for the
high-stakes tests that do not seem to make a considerable difference on assessment performance.
Ultimately, students who persistently underperform on high-stakes assessments are subjected to
even greater levels of test preparation with little improvement to show for their work (Li &
Xiong, 2018). Minority students seem to be the largest recipients of these strategies when
compared to the majority demographic (Li & Xiong, 2018). Deci and Ryan (2008) may have predicted these effects on teachers and students when discussing autonomy in relation to the SDT: “Intrusions on teachers’ sense of self-determination are likely to lead them to be more controlling with their students. That, in turn, will have negative effects on the students’ self-determination, conceptual learning, and personal adjustment” (p. 340).

These altered practices have been shown to harm students’ acquisition of higher order thinking (HOT) by limiting activities that promote it to allow more time for lower-order activities that are aimed to improve test scores (Meuwissen, 2016; Morgan, 2016). “Higher-order thinking is non-algorithmic, it tends to be complex, it often yields multiple criteria and solutions and it often involves uncertainty” (Zohar & Agmon, 2017, p. 244). By nature, then, HOT is not something suited to standardized testing. Thus, activities that help encourage HOT are not as common because they are not seen as the most effective method to raising test scores (Meuwissen, 2016; Zohar & Agmon, 2017). Furthermore, high-stakes assessments have been shown to limit educators’ desire to assess skills such as debating, research, and public-speaking (Morgan, 2016). Even teachers of early grades have limited employing classroom practices that increase creativity because it cannot be quantitatively measured on high-stakes assessment and thus, while important to student development is not viewed as an absolute necessity in the classroom (Olivant, 2014). Long-term impacts of diminished creativity could actually result in a less capable teaching force in the future (McCarthy & Blake, 2017). In a recent study, A. Smith and Anderson (2014) expressed concern about teacher preparation program graduates not possessing the necessary creative skills to address the unique issues that arise in a classroom. Any teacher will say that each day, even each class session, is different. Teachers must be
creative in their approach to each new challenge that is brought before them. Therefore, it is paramount that factors that could be negatively affecting teacher preparation be investigated.

Not all changes to instruction as they relate to high-stakes assessments must be portrayed negatively. For instance, Blazar and Pollard (2017) found that if a high-stakes assessment was rigorous in the way it assessed more complex and higher-order skills, then instructional changes to improve test-performance would also be a benefit to students. The help or harm of these changes to students who are on the receiving end of these practices is beyond the scope of this present study.

What this review of the current body of literature has made clear, however, is that teachers are more likely to stay at a school where they feel they have the ability to control what happens in their classrooms (Vagi & Pivovarova, 2016). Even if a teacher is feeling the pressure of low student performance on high-stakes assessment, classroom autonomy has been found to mediate the negative outcomes of such pressure (Ingersoll et al., 2016). Furthermore, when teachers have a say in policies and practices such as curriculum development, they are more likely to remain in their current position (Ingersoll & Collins, 2017). Test based accountability, and its impact on teacher autonomy is causing teachers to submit themselves to “teaching to the test,” become resistant to accountability policies, or leave the profession altogether (Ro, 2018). In other words, the more positively a teacher feels regarding their professional autonomy, the more likely it is he/she will continue to teach.

Teacher Relatedness

Testing has become a primary factor in the way teachers relate to one another (Bausell & Glazier, 2018). Applying the SDT conceptual definition, teacher relatedness is a teacher’s ability to “develop secure and satisfying connections with others in one’s social milieu” (Deci et al.,
High-stakes assessments can also cause teachers to collaborate less with their colleagues because the tests have fostered an attitude of competition among the teachers (Morgan, 2016). Lack of collaboration is not the only way teachers are feeling less connected to one another; some teachers reported feeling a sense of alienation as a result of high-stakes policies (Stone-Johnson, 2015). “Implementing a policy that hampers chances for cooperation among teachers therefore is antithetical to the practices used around the world that promote successful school systems” (Morgan, 2016, p. 69). High-stakes policies make teachers feel it is necessary to focus solely on their classrooms, to the exclusion of professional collaboration (Stone-Johnson, 2015). Teacher interaction not only enhances the student’s learning environment is helps mediate teacher burnout (Okeke & Mtuyuda, 2017). Conversely, if a teacher is unable to adapt to the current educational environment, the teacher may leave the profession entirely. Teachers experience a broad range of emotions related to high-stakes assessments such as a low sense of morale and collaboration, as well as a high sense of competition and pressure (Collins, 2014). Teachers feel a strong pressure to adapt to the testing culture in many ways. The teachers who
successfully adapt may eventually find themselves using high-stakes testing as their primary means of seeing, interpreting, and experiencing their work (Bausell & Glazier, 2018). If a teacher is unable or unwilling to make this change, the teacher may end up leaving the profession altogether (Richards et al., 2016).

**Teacher Perseverance**

Teacher turnover has been a concern since before high-stakes assessments and evaluations were implemented (Barnatt et al., 2016). Concern continues to rise dramatically because public school teachers are transitioning or leaving the profession at nearly double the rate when compared to rates in the early 1990s (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018). More specifically, studies indicate that 30% to 50% of teachers leave the profession before retirement and up to one third leave within the first three to five years (Omar et al., 2018). “In the United States and elsewhere, the recruitment, preparation, and retention of teachers has become a central concern of top-level leaders in the business, philanthropic, and policy-making worlds as well as in the professional arena” (Barnatt et al., 2016, p. 993).

High-stakes assessments shoulder at least some of the blame for the increase in teacher turnover (Richards et al., 2016). For example, in 2015, Georgia had an astonishing 44% of teachers leaving the profession within the first five years of teaching (Carusi, 2017). In a survey that followed this discovery, when asked to rank the reasons for leaving, “the top two reasons were ‘number and emphasis of mandated tests’ and ‘teacher evaluation method’” (Carusi, 2017, p. 634). Georgia is not an isolated case either; a TNDOE (2014) report indicated that there was substantial variance in turnover rates across the state. However, there were commonalities such as an increased rate of turnover among early career and racial and ethnic minority teachers as
well as teachers with lower overall rates of effectiveness according to the TEAM model (Pratt & Booker, 2014).

While high-stakes assessment and evaluation are only two factors that may contribute to teacher turnover, they appear to be very significant factors. Conversely, a recent study revealed that 40% of teachers have low levels of personal accomplishment, 38% have high levels of depersonalization, and 28% suffer from severe emotional exhaustion (García-Carmona, Marín, & Aguayo, 2018). Recent research has even suggested that in the current educational landscape, all teachers are experiencing job-related stress and burnout (Richards et al., 2016). Job-related pressure in teachers has been shown to cause disengagement, lack of focus on activities related to their profession, and an overall negativity about their job (Okeke & Mtyuda, 2017; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). Burnout is a major factor of turnover in early-career teachers and can also lead to the early retirement of more experienced teachers (D. F. Lawrence, Loi, & Gudex, 2018).

Research has indicated it is very important that teachers are satisfied with the status of their job because better performance of teachers can only be expected if job satisfaction is present (Gonzalez et al., 2016). Problems arise in tested subjects because, if educators teach a subject that involves a high-stakes assessment, they will have more job-related stress (Gonzalez et al., 2016), and a teacher’s ability to remain in the profession is in some way connected with one’s ability to reconfigure their professional identity to cope with their dissatisfaction with the current world of teaching (Barnatt et al., 2016; Clarà, 2017). Inversely, teachers who are satisfied with their jobs are more likely to remain in the profession (Omar et al., 2018; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018).

These findings are problematic because studies have indicated a correlation between stress related to high-stakes assessment and a teacher’s intent to leave the profession (Ryan et al.,
Recently, the attrition rate of teachers has been shown to be higher than nurses, similar to law enforcement officers, and far higher than academics, engineers, lawyers, or pharmacists (Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey 2014). Teacher turnover is costly to school systems and includes costs to process the leaving teacher, replacement of the leaving teacher, training costs of new teachers, and recruiting and incentive costs for new teachers (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018). The cost associated with teacher turnover has been estimated between $4,000 and $18,000 dollars (Vagi & Pivovarova, 2016). In addition, “the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future estimates the cost of a teacher leaving to be as high as $17,862 per teacher” (Saeki et al., 2018, p. 3). The impact of turnover is felt even more deeply by high-poverty schools because they have a harder time absorbing the cost of turnover and experience higher rates of turnover, which can be devastating to a local community (Vagi & Pivovarova, 2016). With less experienced teachers moving at higher rate than more experienced teachers, the cycle can become vicious and devastating for high-poverty schools.

Even though financial considerations are an important facet of the discussion surrounding teacher turnover, the most important concern should be the students that are being impacted. High rates of teacher turnover can result in staffing issues, and these staffing shortages could jeopardize the quality of teaching that students are receiving (Donitsa-Schmidt & Zuzovsky, 2016). The shortage of quality teachers is felt more harshly by disadvantaged students and school districts in rural areas (Hanushek et al., 2016). Data have shown that accountability policies make teacher retention more difficult in schools that are traditionally low-performing, schools with students from traditionally lower-performing demographics, or schools that have previously been sanctioned because of assessment results (Ingersoll et al., 2016). Sometimes, these schools are located in areas which already have unique problems such as difficulty staffing
open positions, a challenge to maintain adequate funding because of lower enrollment numbers, and increased difficulty in teacher retention and recruitment (Dulgerian, 2016). Recently, teachers leaving the profession during the academic year has become problematic with 6% of teachers leaving during the academic year annually (Redding & Henry, 2018).

Furthermore, teachers who remain in the profession despite high levels of stress and burnout are less committed to their organizations, less satisfied with their work, and do not teach with previous levels of quality and concern (Richards et al., 2016; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). Wright, Shields, Black, Banerjee, and Waxman (2018) found that utilizing a growth model in teacher evaluation had a statistically significant negative effect on teachers’ autonomy and job satisfaction.

Just because a school has had difficulty with assessment results does not guarantee the teachers will leave at a higher-than-average rate. Studies have shown that schools where teachers describe a positive environment or high levels of autonomy will be able to mediate the effects of high-stakes assessment on turnover (Ingersoll et al., 2016; Corkin, Ekmekci, & Parr, 2018). Furthermore, scholars have also noted that effective school leaders can mediate some of the impact teachers feel as a result of high-stakes assessments (Grissom & Bartanen, 2018). New evidence has suggested that preservice teacher preparation should begin including activities that help teachers prepare for the more stressful aspects of the profession such as assessment, paperwork, committees, and extracurricular activity participation (Richards et al., 2016). These factors magnify the importance of understanding teacher burnout and turnover for rural districts and schools and the various aspects associated with it. When the prevailing findings from literature are taken into consideration, it becomes clear that teacher stressors in the school
environment is an important area in need of greater study (von der Embse, Shoemann, et al., 2016; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

**Summary**

Chapter Two of this study contained an exploration of the current body of literature that exists related to high-stakes assessments and their impact on teachers. The body of literature outlined in this chapter provided the theoretical framework used in this study as well as demonstrated a current gap in existing research about how high-stakes assessments are impacting rural teachers’ sense of autonomy, competence, and perseverance. Many scholars have noted the phenomenon of high-stakes assessments and their impact on teachers is of utmost importance in the current educational climate (Barnatt et al., 2016). Scholars have also noted that once teachers leave preservice education and enter the workforce, they constantly evaluate the work environment to decide whether the current work situation is the most desirable option that exists (Vagi & Pivovarova, 2016). Since many teachers enter the profession for altruistic reasons with a primary goal of employing their skills as a teacher to facilitate student growth (Horvath et al., 2018), the way high-stakes assessments are impacting a teacher’s sense of competence should be considered. However, there is disagreement between what a teacher believes growth for a student means, and what high-stakes assessments evaluate as growth (Ford, 2018). Since many high-stakes assessments provide a growth score to teachers, high-stakes assessments could be impacting a teacher’s perception of their professional competence (Holloway & Brass, 2017) and professional autonomy (Putwain & von der Embse, 2018). The impact of the aforementioned factors could be causing teachers to leave the profession (Carusi, 2017).

Researchers also demonstrated support for the notion that tested teachers were experiencing lower levels of self-competence than non-tested ones, despite quantitative data
indicating otherwise (Gonzalez et al., 2016). The disagreement of different types of data not only highlights the need for further investigation of how high-stakes assessments are influencing teachers, but also highlights the need for qualitative data to help provide depth to quantitative findings. Furthermore, there are conflicting results about how the phenomenon could be affecting schools in urban or rural settings (Horvath et al., 2018). Ingersoll et al. (2016) identified school accountability as the most significant and controversial of contemporary education reforms. What became clear, then, is that there was a need for conducting this current study to understand the lived experiences of teachers in rural middle Tennessee whose self-competence, autonomy, and perseverance are impacted by high-stakes assessments.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand, as a lived experience, the impact of high-stakes assessments on self-competence, autonomy, and perseverance for teachers in rural middle Tennessee. This research study contributes to the existing body of literature surrounding the SDT and the reasons why people make the choices that they make. The study also contributes to the existing body of practical knowledge surrounding high-stakes assessments. Finally, this research may provide stakeholders connected to high-stakes assessment policies with valuable information.

Chapter Three includes information about the procedures, research design, sampling methods, data collection, and data analysis. The chapter also contains explanation of my role as the researcher in the study and how I maintained the trustworthiness of the findings. Finally, this chapter addresses the ethical considerations of the study followed by a summary.

Design

This study employed a qualitative design. Qualitative research is aimed to understand the meanings behind human actions (Schwandt, 2015). The phenomenological method was chosen based on the need for qualitative data relating to the impact of high-stakes assessments on teachers (Carusi, 2017; Gonzalez et al., 2016; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017.). This study provided depth and clarification to data about how high-stakes assessments are impacting rural teachers.

A transcendental phenomenological method was used to conduct this research. A phenomenological study “describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). According to Moustakas (1994), each personal experience is given equal consideration. For this reason, each
teacher was given the opportunity to contribute their individual experience to the study and each experience with high-stakes assessments was considered as equally valuable. Vagi and Pivovarova (2016) stated, “The perceptions of individual employees can significantly affect their sense of commitment to their schools” (p. 785). The quote from Vagi and Pivovarova (2016) further supported the need for the employment of a phenomenological method to explore the impact of high-stakes assessments on rural middle Tennessee teachers. Rural teachers’ professional experience is different than that of their colleagues in other settings (Hanushek et al., 2016). For example, rural teachers in many areas must deal with limited resources as well as challenging demographics such as students with socioeconomic challenges or parents who are not educated enough to assist them with their studies (Hanushek et al., 2016). Because of the unique experience rural educators have, the transcendental phenomenological method was chosen to provide rural middle Tennessee teachers an opportunity to highlight their unique experiences with high-stakes assessments.

This study was conducted not only to understand the individual experiences of teachers, but also to place that experience in context among the participants’ larger group of colleagues. The participants collectively lived the experience of the high-stakes assessment phenomenon. The impact of the phenomenon on the individual participants provided valuable insight about the way a larger group could be impacted by high-stakes assessments.

**Research Questions**

**Central Research Question**

What are the lived experiences of teachers in rural middle Tennessee whose self-competence, autonomy, and perseverance are impacted by high-stakes assessments?
Research Subquestions

**SQ1:** What are rural middle Tennessee teachers’ perceptions of the ways in which high-stakes assessments impact their self-competence?

**SQ2:** What are rural middle Tennessee teachers’ perceptions of the ways in which high-stakes assessments impact their autonomy?

**SQ3:** What are rural middle Tennessee teachers’ perceptions of the ways in which high-stakes assessments impact their perseverance in the teaching profession?

Setting

The setting for this study was a rural area of middle Tennessee (see Figure 1) that contains three schools. The schools and the district were identified by the pseudonyms Rural Elementary School, Rural Middle School, Rural High School, and Rural School District. The elementary and middle schools are considered feeder schools for the high school. The proximity and naming of the schools mean there is an expectation that as students move to a new grade level they will matriculate to the next with Rural School. For example, students would not complete elementary school at Rural Elementary and then become students at City Middle; they would instead become students at Rural Middle School.

![Tennessee regional map](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tennessee_WV_region_map_EN.png)

*Figure 1.* Tennessee regional map. Unknown Author, Retrieved from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tennessee_WV_region_map_EN.png
Furthermore, many of the teachers and support staff have strong historical connections to the area and its schools. The Rural School District is composed almost exclusively of Title I schools. The student population of the three schools that were the setting for this study have student populations of approximately 86% Caucasian, 8% Hispanic, 2% African American, 2% two or more races, and 1% Asian. The student bodies average 52% male and 48% female. The schools receive federal funding as a Title 1 school that provides all students with free or reduced lunch (Smith, J. 2019. http://ruralhigh.tn.bch.schoolinsites.com/). The area surrounding the schools is predominantly Caucasian and rural. A comparison of school and community data showed the school and community closely reflect one another with similar demographics.

Email databases from all three schools were used to contact teachers at their respective sites. A purposive sampling of teachers who teach classes that require a high-stakes assessment was used for this study. Recruitment information clearly stated the requirements for eligibility of study participation. The study consisted of teachers from the Rural Elementary, Rural Middle, and Rural High Schools. Since this study was aimed to understand the impact of high-stakes assessments on rural teachers, a broader sample of teachers provided a more accurate representation of the phenomenon for this study.

**Participants**

The primary criterion for recruitment of participants was that the participant must have personally experienced the phenomenon of high-stakes assessments. There was a total of 90 certified personnel employed across the three rural schools that provided the population from which the study sample was solicited. Of the certified personnel, 25 were not eligible for participation in the study due to the non-tested nature of their courses; teaching in a non-tested grade level or content area excluded them from having the lived experience that was studied.
The remaining 65 possible participants were identified using information publicly available on district and school websites. Contact information provided from those sites was used to construct an initial list that was used to initiate contact with individuals via email. Once contacted, respondents were selected using purposive sampling in order to ensure the most robust understanding of the phenomenon. As noted, the sampling was limited to individuals who have the lived experience of high-stakes assessments. Ultimately, 10 participants who experienced the phenomenon volunteered to be part of this study.

**Procedures**

Following a successful proposal defense, application for approval from Liberty University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) was received (see Appendix A). The Rural School District was contacted for consent to complete the study in their district. Once permission was granted, individual principals at each school were contacted for consent to contact their staff and solicit participation in the study. After IRB approval was granted, participants were contacted using Rural School District-maintained email databases. Participants were provided information about the purpose of the study as well as information related to eligibility for participation in the study (see Appendix B). Once participants were selected, they were contacted to schedule an interview time that was acceptable as well as to discuss the general outline of their role in the study and to provide them a participant consent form (see Appendix C). Explanation was given to ensure they knew what they were committing to, and an initial schedule for their participation in the study was agreed upon. Before the interviews, participants were sent a document containing a word-association exercise relating to the phenomenon of high-stakes assessment. The purpose of the word-association document was to allow the participant to begin thinking through how they express their lived experience of the
phenomenon. However, semistructured interviews were the primary means of data collection (see Appendix D).

Interviews were audio recorded using a microphone and laptop computer. Once all interviews had been completed and transcribed, approximately half the participants were selected for participation in a focus group interview. Focus group interview questions were drawn from a semistructured set of questions (see Appendix E) as well as questions that were the result of preliminary data analysis of participant interviews. The primary purpose of the focus group interview was to further expand on information that may have been gleaned from individual interviews. Another purpose of the focus group interview was to investigate whether responses varied from individual interviews in correlation to focus group responses. The focus group interview was video-recorded to assist proper transcription and to ensure that participants were properly credited for their individual input.

The final portion of data collection entailed sending participants the transcript of their interview with preliminary information regarding data analysis and allowing them to verify or clarify any information contained in the transcript and data analysis. Data analysis was aided by the use of NVivo software. Analysis software aided in transcription of data as well as identifying important elements such as word frequencies. Using tools in the software enhanced the ability to identify themes, as well as helped develop textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon.

**The Researcher's Role**

The motivation for this study came from my own experience as an educator in a high-stakes area for almost four years. I have seen and lived the changes that high-stakes assessments can have on a teacher in my life and in the lives of my colleagues. This research took place in
the district where I am currently employed. I enjoy close relationships with many of the participants. My proximity to the situation may have helped in relation to soliciting participation in the study, but it could also have clouded my ability to objectively relate to the participants. As the researcher, I was extremely careful to not allow my personal experiences or dispositions toward high-stakes assessments impact the way that I conducted the research or analysis of data.

Fortunately, despite any relationships that may exist, I have never held a supervisory or authoritative role over any potential participants. Furthermore, great care was given to ensure that potential participants understood they were not compelled to participate and my relationship with them would not change, should they have declined to take part in this research.

Data Collection

For this study, data were collected through three primary means: a word-association document, individual interviews, and a single focus group interview. Utilizing multiple sources of data strengthened validity while providing a deeper explanation of the essence of the impact of high-stakes assessments on rural teachers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data collection began individually and culminated with a focus group interview during which data were collected from multiple individuals simultaneously. After agreeing to participate in the study, individuals were sent a word-association document. Participants then took part in an individual interview, following which, a group of approximately half of the total participants was be selected to participate in a single focus group interview.

Pre-Interview Word-Association Document

Participants were sent a word-association document as part of their participation in this research (see Appendix F). Word-association documents are simple projective exercises in which participants are asked to quickly associate words without censoring or thinking deeply
about their responses (House, 2018). The Association for Qualitative Research noted a possible resurgence in the use of word-association documents for qualitative research as more is learned about the way the brain stores and processes information. The document was sent 1 week before their individual interview. The document was in email format so the participant could respond by simply replying to the email without having to worry about printing, downloading, or saving anything related to the research. The purpose of the document was to allow them to begin the process of thinking through their experience of the phenomenon and to also serve as a means of deepening the data that each participant provided during their interview about the phenomenon. These words provided participants an opportunity to begin to articulate their thoughts, feelings, or experiences with high-stakes assessment and how they are impacting each teacher. Data collected from these documents were included in data analysis and helped provide greater depth to the findings as well as dependability and confirmability. For example, there could be multiple words expressing negative orientation that are given in response to the term high-stakes assessment. The presence of related words from multiple participants, for the following word-association exercise, provided greater insight into the impact high-stakes assessments are having on the participants. Some of the words related to the central research question (CQ), while others related to the research subquestions (SQs).

1. Teacher
2. Student
3. Success (SQ1)
4. Autonomy (SQ2)
5. Satisfaction (SQ3)
6. Assessment (CQ)
7. High-stakes assessment (CQ)

Words 1 and 2 were present in order to get the participants accustomed to the exercise and comfortable responding. Word 3 served to explore what the teachers believed success is in their own words. This provided information about how an individual teacher associates success in relation to how it is defined by many assessment advocates (Ford, 2018). Word 3 ultimately helped inform how high-stakes assessments are influencing a teacher’s sense of success in achieving their professional goals.

Word 5 helped define how each individual teacher defines autonomy. The word not only helped establish a baseline for understanding how each teacher expresses autonomy, but also informed whether a teacher’s autonomy has been impacted by high-stakes assessments (Putwain & von der Embse, 2018).

Word 5 helped inform whether high-stakes assessments are impacting teachers’ sense of satisfaction (Carusi, 2017). Words 6 and 7 helped address what teachers are experiencing about the phenomenon and assist others in understanding the “what” and “how” (Moustakas, 1994) of their lived experiences surrounding high-stakes assessments.

**Individual Interviews**

The primary means of data collection in phenomenology is the individual interview. “The phenomenological interview involves an informal, interactive process and utilizes open-ended comments and questions” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114). For the present study, semistructured interviews were used to collect an initial set of data. Participants were familiar with the purpose of the study, but were not given specific questions to consider before the in-person interview. The semistructured nature of the interview allowed me to ask clarifying questions in situations when such questions would be appropriate. Interviews were audio-
recorded and transcribed after the interview had taken place. I also used an interview notes sheet to record pertinent details such as date and times, to ensure all questions are asked uniformly, and to give space for general interview notes to be taken. Participants were supplied with the transcription of their responses to the following interview questions for their personal records and review.

1. Tell me something about yourself that you believe makes you unique.
2. Why do you believe you chose to become a teacher?
3. What is your favorite part of being a teacher?
4. What are your perceptions of the ways high-stakes assessments have impacted instructional methods you use in your classroom? (SQ2)
5. What are your perceptions of the ways high-stakes assessments have impacted your self-confidence? (SQ1)
6. What are your perceptions of the ways high-stakes assessments have impacted your desire to teach? (SQ3)
7. What are your perceptions of the ways high-stakes assessments have impacted how you plan your lessons? (SQ2)
8. What are your perceptions of the ways high-stakes assessments have impacted your satisfaction with teaching? (SQ3)
9. What are your perceptions of the ways high-stakes assessments have impacted your belief in your abilities as a teacher? (SQ1)
10. If you were asked to record a video for a local news channel about teaching and testing, what would you want people to know about teaching in a tested course? (CRQ)
11. What else would you like to share about your experience with high-stakes assessments that we have not covered in the other interview questions?

Interview Questions 1, 2, and 3, while not directly related to the central research question or research subquestions, were an integral part of the interview process. According to Moustakas (1994), “Often the phenomenological interview begins with a social conversation or a brief activity aimed at creating a relaxed and trusting atmosphere” (p. 114). The first three questions were used to create an open and trusting atmosphere that allowed the participant to share freely about their experience of the phenomenon.

Interview Question 4 served to explore the impact of how high-stakes assessments could be motivating teachers to change their classroom practice. In fact, research has indicated “that test-based accountability puts tremendous pressure on teachers and constrains their professional autonomy” (Ro, 2018, p. 88). Further, this question helped reinforce data revealed by some studies explicitly stating changes in teacher autonomy driving a limit to classroom practices (Olivant, 2014).

Interview Question 5 addressed the impact high-stakes assessments are having on the way teachers perceive themselves as professionals (Buchanan, 2015). Furthermore, this question was used to investigate whether high-stakes assessments could be specifically influencing a teacher’s sense of self-competence (Buchanan, 2015; Holloway & Brass, 2017; Lewis & Holloway, 2018).

Interview Question 6 addressed concerns about the rate of public school teachers transitioning or leaving the profession, which has doubled compared to rates in the early 1990s (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018). Previous research has shown high-stakes assessments are partly to blame for the increase in teacher turnover (Richards et al., 2016).
Interview Question 7 served to explore how teaching a course that includes high-stakes assessment increases pressure for teachers and causes them to manipulate what goes on in their classrooms in an attempt to maximize test scores; even if it limits what they perceive as most beneficial to their students (Mulhall, 2018). For example, while many teachers would normally not use fear appeals (e.g., “If you do not do well, this will have a negative impact on your grades”) they are feeling the pressures that cause them to utilize these tactics in their classrooms (Putwain & von der Embse, 2018).

Interview Question 8 helped inform results of a recent study which revealed that 40% of teachers have low levels of personal accomplishment, 38% have high levels of depersonalization, and 28% suffer from severe emotional exhaustion (García-Carmona et al., 2018). Research has even suggested that in the current educational landscape, all teachers are experiencing job-related stress and burnout (Richards et al., 2016).

Interview Question 9 informed the mixed results regarding high-stakes assessments and teacher self-competence (Gonzalez et al., 2016). Interview Question 10 resulted from research highlighting the need for further investigation of how high-stakes assessments are influencing teachers as well as the need for qualitative data to help provide depth to quantitative findings (Gonzalez et al., 2016). Furthermore, there are conflicting results about how the phenomenon could be affecting schools in urban or rural settings (Horvath et al., 2018).

**Focus Group Interview**

Focus group interview data helped provide triangulation for the data gathered during the individual interviews. Focus group interviews have increasingly become accepted as a form of data collection in social science research (Barbour, 2018). Semistructured focus groups were employed as another means of data collection for this study. The semistructured nature of the
following focus group interview questions allowed me to ask clarifying questions in situations when such questions were appropriate.

1. Describe your feelings when you receive your students’ test results. (SQ1)

2. How have high-stakes assessments affected your future plans for the teaching profession? (SQ3)

3. What techniques or tools have you used in your class that you normally would not use in an attempt to prepare your students for a state test? (SQ2)

4. What are your perceptions of the ways high-stakes assessments have impacted your level of satisfaction with you career choice? (SQ3)

5. Explain how you feel as a teacher if your students get high test results. What if they get low results? (SQ1)

6. Imagine you are presenting during a legislative session on teaching and testing. What would you want policy makers and stakeholders to know about teaching in a tested course? (CRQ)

7. What else would you like to share about your experience with high-stakes assessments that we have not covered in the other interview questions?

The preceding list of questions was used to interview the focus group that was selected. As themes and descriptions began to emerge from individual interview data, clarifying questions were developed to assist in providing a robust description of the phenomenon.

Focus Group (FG) Question 1 informed research that revealed the mixed emotions teachers experience about high-stakes assessments (Lewis & Holloway, 2018). Many teachers, in fact, value the capability of standardized assessments to provide data about their students’
learning but disagree with other aspects of assessments usage in evaluation or performance decisions (Wahl, 2016).

FG Question 2 helped understand research indicating the importance of teachers being satisfied with the status of their job, because better performance of teachers can only be expected if they are satisfied with their jobs (Gonzalez et al., 2016). This question also served to explore information from studies that indicate a correlation between stress related to high-stakes assessment and a teacher’s intent to leave the profession (Ryan et al., 2017).

FG Question 3 explored how teachers describe if the practices used in their classroom are the result of high-stakes assessments. This question also served to explore whether test-related instructional practices such as strategies for taking tests, test stress-management strategies, completing items from a practice test, or items specific to a high-stakes assessment’s format are being employed (von der Embse, Schoemann, et al., 2016).

FG Question 4 addressed how teachers located in areas which already have unique problems such as short-staffing at schools and funding issues related to lower enrollment numbers, describe job satisfaction, which can impact their desire to remain in the profession (Dulgerian, 2016). Furthermore, even teachers who remain in the profession despite high levels of stress and burnout are less committed to their organizations, less satisfied with their work, and do not teach with previous levels of quality and concern (Richards et al., 2016).

FG Question 5 addressed reports showing that a majority of a student’s growth score can be traced to a teacher’s self-perceived competence, with far less being related to specific classroom tasks a teacher plans (Coronado, 2016). This question also informed the knowledge that high-stakes assessments are having an impact on the way teachers perceive themselves as professionals (Buchanan, 2015). Research has demonstrated that teachers are elevating the
quantitative data high-stakes assessments are providing above other possible metrics of their performance as educators.

FG Questions 6 and 7 addressed the central research question related to high-stakes assessments. Responses to these questions produced information related to various aspects of the research such as the impact high-stakes assessments and whether the impact is felt more harshly by disadvantaged students and school districts in rural areas (Hanushek et al., 2016).

**Data Analysis**

Moustakas (1994) noted phenomenological data analysis should include bracketing, horizontalization, identification of themes, formulation of individual textual and structural descriptions, formulation of major textural and structural descriptions, and synthesizing textural and structural meanings into essences. Because the present research utilized Moustakas’ model for transcendental phenomenology, it likewise employed his model for data analysis. Interviews and focus group data were transcribed into Word documents, and the word-association document was already in electronic format. Once the data were in electronic format, NVivo software was used to assist in coding, thematic analysis, and the development of textural and structural descriptions.

Moustakas (1994) described epoché as setting aside what is present in an experienced mindset in an attempt to perceive the phenomenon for the first time. Bracketing is the practical way a researcher completes epoché, by writing out what is present in their own consciousness about the phenomenon. Through the process of bracketing for this study, I attempted to separate what was already present in my consciousness about high-stakes assessment from what was present in the data. By bracketing my assumptions from personal experience about the
phenomenon first, the participants could present their lived experiences untainted by my personal experiences as the researcher.

After bracketing, I horizontalized the data of participants’ individual experiences. Horizontalization was performed by giving every piece of data related to high-stakes assessments equal value. For example, each word was considered a building block. As words appeared frequently, their blocks began to stack into larger towers. These towers became easily recognized as distinct from the landscape. Horizontalization is akin to someone seeing the lights of a city skyline on the horizon, then as the city draws closer, being able to more easily distinguish what makes the city unique. For this study, horizontalization was the first step in data analysis and provided preliminary information regarding the impact high-stakes assessments are having on rural teachers. Individual interviews were analyzed during the horizontalizing process, and the frequency of word appearances provided avenues for further exploration as data analysis continued. Coding was a helpful tool to assist in horizontalizing the data because it allowed each word to be assigned a predetermined code. As codes appeared more frequently, the horizon of the impact of high-stakes assessments on teachers began to take shape.

Coding is a way of categorizing the data so that a framework of thematic ideas can be established (Gibbs, 2018). Coding also enables a researcher to perform multiple methods of analysis on a text. I utilized NVivo software to not only apply codes to data, but also to analyze codes by reviewing results from multiple passages using the same codes and by performing case-by-case code comparisons (Gibbs, 2018). In the coding process, the data were reviewed in their entirety and information was coded for further organization and analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018).
The next step of data analysis was thematic analysis. Thematic analysis helped give meaning to the findings and guides further analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For example, if coding and horizontalization revealed that many teachers feel stress related to the assessments, stress would be a theme that warrants further analysis. Codes were compared using NVivo software to identify groups of similar codes that represented themes present in the data. Ideally, data about the impact high-stakes assessments are having will thematically relate to a teacher’s sense of self-competence, autonomy, or perseverance.

Moving from thematic analysis, I began to formulate individual textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon. Textural descriptions helped provide data that explain what the participant could be experiencing related to the phenomenon. Structural descriptions provided information that helped describe how a person is experiencing the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Textural and structural descriptions were first formulated for individual participants, then those descriptions were evaluated and compiled to provide textural and structural descriptions for all participants collectively (Moustakas, 1994). Focus group data were analyzed to help provide major textural and structural descriptions of the impact of high-stakes assessments.

After formulating individual and major textural and structural descriptions, I attempted to arrive at the essence of the impact of high-stakes assessments on rural teachers. The essence of a phenomenon is that which is universal about the phenomenon to the extent that removing it from the experience would change the experience of the phenomenon altogether (Moustakas, 1994). The data analysis concluded with a unified statement of the essence(s) of the impact of high-stakes assessments on rural teachers. Findings as a result of data analysis are discussed at length in Chapter Four. Ultimately, what this research and data analysis were intended to provide was
the common explanation of the impact each teacher experiences relating to high-stakes assessments.

**Trustworthiness**

A primary means of ensuring trustworthiness of data is triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Triangulation can involve the use of multiple formats of data, and multiple collection methods to help maintain trustworthiness of data (Schwandt, 2019). I ensured trustworthiness of the data by triangulating using multiple collection methods. For example, participants had the option of providing information verbally during the initial interview, and in print using the word-association document. Using multiple formats increased the reliability of the study by allowing participants to relay information about their perceptions in the way they deemed most accurate and comfortable (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participant verification was also used to help attest to the trustworthiness of the data. In this process, participants verified the content of their interviews, and were the first to see the results of data analysis. After being provided this information, participants were asked to provide input on the accuracy of the data from their points of view. This process increased the reliability of the study by allowing participants to agree or disagree with the interpretation of their interview material.

**Credibility**

Credibility of data addresses the issue of whether the researcher is accurately representing the views of the participants (Schwandt, 2015). The use of member checks was employed in the study to establish credibility of the data. Member checking is recommended by sources such as Moustakas (1994) and Schwandt (2015). Another means of strengthening credibility was the way focus groups were employed in this present study. The focus group interview took place
after the individual interviews had taken place and preliminary data analysis had begun. Once
the individual textural and structural descriptions began to take shape, the focus group questions
were implicitly chosen to explore whether the individual descriptions were also accurate for the
major theme descriptions.

**Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability and confirmability are similar to reliability in quantitative studies and
address the consistency of the research process (dependability) and the ability of the researcher
to demonstrate that the representation of the findings is accurate and can be linked to the data in
specific ways (Schwandt, 2015). The dependability of this study was maintained by using
research methods that are accepted as scholarly and effective while the study was being
performed as well as employing rigorous data analysis techniques that followed the
transcendental phenomenological method (Moustakas, 1994).

Confirmability ensures that the representation of findings is free from researcher bias
(Miles & Huberman, 1994). Dependability ensures that a study has been carried out with enough
care and quality that it could be replicated by another researcher (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In
this study, I maintained a rigorous level of dependability and confirmability by auditing data,
providing an audit trail, and allowing participants to perform member checking on their
transcripts. Auditing data and utilization of an audit trail are recommended methods of
providing dependability and confirmability to the data (Schwandt, 2015).

**Transferability**

Transferability is another aspect of qualitative research that should be considered; it
refers to the possibility that what was found in one context is applicable to another context. In
other words, the data resulting from this study should be transferrable to other individuals who
have experienced the same phenomenon (Schwandt, 2015). This research study addressed transferability to other contexts by providing adequate information about the setting, procedures, participants, and impact of the phenomenon of the high-stakes assessments phenomenon. Large-scale transferability was beyond the scope of this study, but that does not mean findings are limited only to this study.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations for the study are rooted in my faith. The Bible reveals that all humankind bears the image of God. If every person bears a divine image, then it must be understood that individual cultures and ethnicities are not what make an individual more or less like God. Therefore, nothing about an individual can raise or lower the level of ethical treatment they should receive. James 1:22 (Christian Standard Bible) tells the Bible reader to “be doers of the word and not hearers only.” To apply this verse to educational research means that research must be conducted in accordance with Christian practice; this practice includes the ethical treatment of all individuals.

One ethical consideration for participants was informed consent. According to Gibbs (2018), “Participants should know exactly what they are letting themselves in for, what will happen to them during the research, and what will happen to the data they provide after the research is complete” (p. 8). For this reason, I was abundantly clear about the expectations of the research and what each participant was committing to from the outset. Participants also needed to fully understand that they could withdraw from participation in the research at any time should they so choose, without repercussion.

Personal information for participants was protected from discovery and interview data were kept free of personally identifiable information. Pseudonyms were used and any personal
information of participants was encrypted and stored on a password-protected flash drive that was locked in a safe. Interview results were kept confidential, and transcription of the interviews contained the participants’ pseudonyms instead of real names. Digital or print copies of interviews have been published and compiled using pseudonyms and not the true identities of participants. Another consideration for participants could be reprisal by school or district personnel. This is another reason why participant confidentiality was of utmost importance. Finally, there was no anticipation of physical, emotional, or psychological distress to the participants and no participant reported such distress to me, the researcher.

**Summary**

Chapter Three included detailed methodological information related to this study about how high-stakes assessments are impacting rural teachers. The central research question and research subquestions were used to investigate how rural teachers’ sense of competence, autonomy, and perseverance are impacted by high-stakes assessments. Information outlining the suitability of the transcendental phenomenological methodology was discussed. Textual support for the research design was provided as well as information about the setting and recruitment of participants.

This study took place in the Rural School District and participants were recruited from Rural Elementary, Rural Middle, and Rural High Schools. Procedures used to conduct the study were discussed in detail as well as an overview of the role the researcher played in the study. Information and textual evidence for word association, semistructured interviews, and focus groups were provided as well as the questions employed in those methods of data collection. Detailed information for data analysis was provided in correlation with textual support for the analysis methods. Trustworthiness of data was outlined as well as the methods used to ensure
trustworthiness of the data, such as triangulation and member checking. Finally, the chapter concluded with discussion related to the ethical considerations that guided the design and administration of the study. This study helped fill the existing gap in research relating to the impact high-stakes assessments are having on rural teachers; specifically, how the assessments are impacting rural teachers’ sense of competence, autonomy, and perseverance.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of Chapter Four is to present the results of data that were collected and analyzed as part of this research study conducted to understand, as a lived experience, the impact of high-stakes assessments on self-competence, autonomy, and perseverance for teachers in rural middle Tennessee. A brief introduction of participants is provided, followed by the results of the data analysis. The chapter outlines the results of data analysis procedures such as coding, thematic analysis, and synthesis of the essence of the phenomenon as they were applied to data collected for the research. Analysis and results will be presented in narrative form following the numerical order of research questions with visual aids being presented when necessary for greater depth of understanding.

Participants

This study was an exploration of the lived experiences of 10 teachers from the Rural School District, including five teachers from Rural High School, two teachers from Rural Middle School, and three teachers from Rural Elementary School, who volunteered to participate in the study. Each of the participants is the primary educator for students who are in their courses or content. This means student performance in the teacher’s content area will be attributed to the participant. To clarify, if the teacher is responsible for teaching third-grade mathematics or ninth-grade English language arts, the teacher is responsible for each students’ respective growth scores in those areas.

Descriptions of each participant are provided as accurately as possible to recount what each individual experienced in regard to the impact of high-stakes assessments on the individual’s sense of self-competence, autonomy, and perseverance. Rich descriptions that
provide detail for understanding the individual’s experience of the phenomenon as well as quotes from individual interviews are used as necessary. Details of the interviews and accounts should be considered accurate and original to the participant, but pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality of participant’s identities.

Individual demographic data were collected during the initial discussion with participants. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 58, and all participants identified as Caucasian. A broad range of experience was also found as participants’ teaching experience ranged from 2 years to 24 years. Five participants identified as male and five as female (see Table 1).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Focus group participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blaine</td>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Fourth grade English language arts teacher</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christopher</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Ninth grade English language arts teacher</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dusty</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Fifth grade social studies teacher</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geraldine</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Algebra 2 teacher</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Fourth grade mathematics teacher</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judy</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Sixth grade English language arts teacher</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Eighth grade English language arts teacher</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lela</td>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Geometry teacher</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
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<td>Peggy</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Algebra 1 teacher</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trey</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>10th grade English language arts teacher</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Blaine

At the time of the study, Blaine was a teacher at Rural Elementary School. He believes it is unique that he not only grew up in the area, but he also attended the school where he now teaches. He said he became a teacher because it provided a chance to make a difference and have an impact on the lives of his students. Blaine noted his favorite part of teaching is when he sees a student begin to grasp the concepts that have been taught. Blaine says the biggest impact of high-stakes assessments on his autonomy as a teacher is that every day his lesson is decided for him:

We’re expected each day to be on that exact lesson that our pacing guide says.

Especially starting this year, the autonomy I mean, I have to make sure I’m on that pacing guide, and I have to make sure what I’m supposed to do.

This limited autonomy even affects his ability to provide remediation for his students because his pacing guide does not account for remediation days.

When asked what he felt was most important for others to know about his experience teaching in a high-stakes tested course, he responded,

It’s very stressful. I mean, there’s no other words really to describe what it’s like except that it’s stressful and you can do so much; you can put your heart and so into it, but then it comes down to what they’re going to do [on the test] at the end of the day.

Christopher

At the time of the study, Christopher was an English language arts teacher at Rural High School. He had been in education for 8 years, most of which were at Rural High School. According to Christopher, one of his unique qualities is his ability to connect with difficult students, and the primary reason he was drawn to teaching as a profession is because he felt it
allowed him to make a difference every day even if it was just for one student. When describing how high-stakes assessments had impacted his sense of self-competence, he recounted the time he got a low growth score:

I got the lowest one I ever had. I had a moment where I was like, “What have I done? Have I lost all focus? What did I do differently?” So for me, it can shake your confidence when you get that low number and make you lose sight on teaching kids.

According to Christopher, the upheaval he has experienced in his short tenure as a teacher made him wonder whether teaching long-term is viable. “I’m on Year 8 and you’re thinking big picture of your life . . . 30 years of this, 30 years of this? I know just from when I came in, this is night and day. I could see how it can highly impact somebody.

**Dusty**

At the time of the study, Dusty taught fifth grade social studies and English language arts at Rural Elementary School. An interesting thing that Dusty revealed in his interview is that he came to teaching as a second career after leaving a midlevel management position at a local factory. Dusty believed his status as a second-career teacher gave him a different view on teaching than that of someone who had worked as a teacher right after college. However, being a second-career teacher did not insulate Dusty’s sense of perseverance in the profession from the impact of high-stakes assessments:

I absolutely love my job, but honestly, there have been times when I’m like “Man, maybe I do need to get out” because I don’t want people to think bad about me, but at the same time, I go back to I know I’m doing what they want me to do.
Dusty was not totally opposed to being involved in some sort of testing because he believed it helped keep teachers accountable for their jobs. However, he did explain that he felt a more corporate type model would not have as much negative impact on teachers:

I wish they would change it more like a business model. My previous position every year, they would sit down with me and look at previous year’s performance. Based on that performance they [set my goals]. To me, that is a better model because we have something more concrete to shoot for.

Geraldine

At the time of the study, Geraldine taught Algebra 2 to sophomores and juniors at Rural High School. When asked what made her unique, she responded that she felt the fact she looked more like a student than a teacher could sometimes be an advantage because students may be more likely to relate to her even though she is not as close to their age as they thought. Geraldine believed part of the issue teachers had with high-stakes assessments was the way the test dictated instruction in ways that was not relevant to students:

Some of the skills that I teach, I teach because I know that it’s on the test. I wouldn’t teach it if it weren’t on the test. Some of the things the high-stakes assessment requires students to do is completely irrelevant to real life.

This led to deeper discussion about the way the assessments impacted her autonomy and she explained that the test constricted the language she used in class because she intentionally chose to word things in such a way that it would sound or look familiar on the high-stakes assessment.

When discussing the way high-stakes assessments impacted her sense of self-competence, she said,
When I do badly, like I get a growth score of a 1, it just carries around with me the entire year. Some days I tell the kids “Well, if you actually had a good teacher then you would probably [understand] this better, but you don’t.”

Fortunately, Geraldine was willing to remain in the profession because she felt her coworkers believed in her and her abilities to teach well.

**James**

At the time of the study, James taught fourth grade mathematics at Rural Elementary School. The current academic year marked his 14th year as a teacher and his 10th year teaching fourth graders. During most of his life, he has spent time helping teach younger children. He even recounted how he would volunteer at a local day care not far from his house because he enjoyed being a positive role model. One would think someone who has spent a majority of his/her life helping educate young children would not allow their perseverance as a teacher to be affected by high-stakes assessments. However, James shared,

I’d be lying if I didn’t say this paperwork that they give me; filling out all this data along the way and all this stuff we have to do as educators aside from teaching in the classroom is a turnoff . . . if I’d have gone [to another profession] straight out of school I’d be 8 years away from retiring and here I sit right now doing all I can do and struggling.

As James described the impact of high-stakes assessment on his sense of autonomy in the classroom, he described a forced shift after a certain point in the academic year:

Early in the school year it’s more about “skill and drill.” We’ve got to learn and get a foundation. As that foundation gets better and stronger, my focus shifts to a lot of my questioning. Everything shifts to “this is how things are going to look on the [high-
stakes] test.” Closer to the test, my planning is mostly based on just how do we become a better test taker.

**Judy**

At the time of the study, Judy taught English language arts at Rural Middle School. She described herself as someone in the middle of their career since she had been teaching for 19 years but still felt she is young enough to extend her career far beyond 20 years of service if she chooses. Judy felt a strong sense of calling to the teaching profession and believes the best way to be an effective teacher is to build relationships with students first. She explained the impact of high-stakes assessments on her sense of autonomy:

I feel like it’s kind of taken a little bit of fun out of some things that I used to do and my approach to teaching the [English] skills. Now our curriculum is kind of down to the 9 weeks and we have to get it in. It just kind of gets a little overwhelming and the kids can sense that we are all stressed out about it.

She went on to comment that she could not even choose to spend time remediating a topic or skill that her students had not adequately grasped due to the curriculum map not allowing it.

When describing how high-stakes assessments impacted her sense of self-competence, she commented, “I feel like it is hard, but sometimes I feel inside myself that I’m doing the best I can do. I’m okay with that, but then I get scores that show I’m not doing [enough]. It’s kind of depressing.” Despite the disappointment when she gets a low growth score, Judy said she has come to accept high-stakes testing as the new norm in education. While she believes there are negative impacts that stem from high-stakes assessments, she does not allow them to distract her from her job and that fact that she believes she was purposefully placed in the teaching profession.
Mary

At the time of the study, Mary taught eighth grade English language arts at Rural Middle School. Mary’s interview was possibly the most eye-opening as she described the impact high-stakes assessments had on her personally and professionally. Mary discussed the joy she felt when her students would begin grasping concepts and realizing they were capable of learning. However, the most shocking portion of the interview came as Mary discussed the impact that high-stakes assessments were having on her perseverance in the teaching profession. She first shared that the assessments not only took away time outside of the normal school day due to extra planning, but they also took away her passion and energy for teaching:

I think it has pretty much destroyed my satisfaction. It’s just that constant feeling of “I’m under the gun, I’ve always got to be doing this” instead of enjoying teaching the kids. I hate to say this, but I would quit if I could. Because every time I get those scores, I feel like I’ve been defeated again.

Discussion of the impact the assessments were having on Mary’s sense of self-competence revealed that low scores were felt more deeply than high scores:

I feel no ownership of that good score because I’ve already been told I was below par.

[Low scores] already made me feel like I was incompetent and didn’t know what I was supposed to do and that no matter what I did in the classroom or what gains I saw with my students, if they didn’t perform on that test, the year had been a waste.

Lela

Lela is a self-proclaimed homemaker and piano player. She actually turned to teaching as a second career when she was in her mid-50s. At the time of the study, Lela taught Algebra 1
and Geometry at Rural High School. According to Lela, the largest impact high-stakes assessments were having on her as a teacher was on her autonomy:

There might be an activity that would help them get the concept as well or better, but it doesn’t necessarily lend toward the EOC, the way they test. So, if I have two activities, [even if] one might be more fun, I would lean toward the one that will help them on the EOC.

Later in the interview, she again stated that she was going to choose things that she believed would be most reflective of the high-stakes assessment, even if she thought something else would be better for the students in the long term.

Lela also struggled to see the reasoning behind the way the questions were written on her EOC exam:

They might ask a question related to a specific question, but it might be asked in a way nobody in their right mind would have ever thought to present it. Now, do the students know the content? Most likely. But do they know it presented the way the high-stakes assessments will present it? Maybe not.

She explained that was a primary reason she would choose to present things and question students in ways she believed the EOC would present them because, even if she did not understand why the questions were asked in a specific way, it gave the students the best chance for success.

Peggy

At the time of the study, Peggy was relatively new to the teaching profession. She originally began an accounting career, but decided she would much rather be interacting with people than in her own office with a computer. Peggy taught Algebra 1 to freshman at Rural
High and, despite being new to the profession, she had already felt the impact of high-stakes assessments. While she enjoyed being able to take complicated mathematical concepts and help students understand them, she did not believe the way students were being forced to learn them was actually preparing them for the way those concepts would be employed when they moved on from secondary education.

We’re never going to sit down and do that on a TI-84 calculator. We’re going to do that in Excel or some other software. I think it would be really awesome to be able to incorporate that and have some type of project-based thing. Then they can actually see the application of the concept.

Peggy explained she did not feel she could incorporate those types of projects in her classroom because they were not part of her curriculum map and would not prepare students for the way they would have to demonstrate concept mastery on the high-stakes assessments.

Even as a relatively new teacher, Peggy already believed high-stakes assessments were negatively impacting her perseverance in the teaching profession. At a minimum, she would like to transition out of teaching a tested course: “I would say that transitioning to a business education role is favorable due to it not being a tested subject. Because of all the stress, all the increased observation, increased focus on tested subjects.” When Peggy discussed the way high-stakes assessments impacted her self-competence, she explained that, even if a teacher did not believe the scores were an accurate representation of the job that had been done in their classrooms, good or bad scores would affect the teacher because that is what everyone outside of that classroom was going to believe about the teacher.
Trey

At the time of the study, Trey had taught English Language Arts for 6 years. His favorite part of teaching is being exposed to the many different cultures that students come from because one of his greatest enjoyments is to experience cultures that are different from his own. Trey felt a strong impact on his autonomy from the high-stakes assessments. Everything in his class, in some way, needed to be focused on preparing students for the test; from the way he presents material to the way he picks out writing prompts and questions for his students:

I’ve had countless numbers of trainings on standards-based instruction which is nothing but guiding my instruction to teach a standard because of a state test. So, whenever you talk about do [high-stakes assessments] impact instructional methods, it guides everybody’s instructional methods. My job as a teacher is to improve reading, writing, and reasoning and that needs to be done through rich discussion, analyzation, evaluation of texts, writing, and arguing, but there’s no room for that anymore.

When explaining the way high-stakes assessments impacted his self-competence, he described the difference between getting a good score and a bad score. When getting a bad score,

I feel like I didn’t do my job. I feel like I let my administration down. I feel like I let my county down. It makes me question my pedagogy. It makes me question my classroom management and discipline. It makes me question should I even be teaching?

A high score, however, did not have such a strong impact. Trey said the scores provided a week or two of relief, but then he began stressing about the new test that was upcoming.

Results

The following are the results of this transcendental phenomenological study of the impact of high-stakes assessments on the self-competence, autonomy, and perseverance of teachers in
rural middle Tennessee. Data used in the analysis were collected from a projective exercise in the form of a word-association document, individual interviews of participants, and a focus group interview. Open coding was performed on data as the initial step in developing themes for the findings. Following Moustakas’ (1994) recommendation, individual themes were developed before the development of major themes. Individual themes were given as part of participant description. Finally, through the analysis of individual themes, major themes were developed as a final step in data analysis. Discussion of major themes will follow using narrative form.

**Major Theme 1: Assessment**

The first major theme that emerged from the data was the theme of assessment. The theme was focused primarily on high-stakes assessments. However, discussion of low-stakes assessment was also present in most interviews as well. For example, James called low-stakes assessments a “gauge” that he could use in his classes, and Dusty explained he used them as “benchmarks” in his classroom. High and low-stakes assessments served as subthemes to the major theme (see Table 2). The high-stakes assessment subtheme included general thoughts or statements about high-stakes assessments, the perceived accuracy of high-stakes assessments, the confusing nature of high-stakes assessments, desired change for high-stakes assessments, emotions related to high-stakes assessments, high-stakes evaluation, and the perceived irrelevance of portions of high-stakes assessments. The low-stakes assessment subtheme included data in which participants specifically mentioned a low-stakes type of assessment as well as data that were not explicitly related to high-stakes assessments but were related to assessment in general.
Table 2

**Major Theme 1: Assessment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High-stakes assessments</td>
<td>Emotions (35), accuracy (26), high-stakes (18), desired change (14), high-stakes evaluation (8), confusing (7), irrelevant (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-stakes assessments</td>
<td>Assessment (12), low-stakes (11), test (10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses indicate code frequency.

**High-stakes assessments.** The first subtheme of the major theme of assessment was high-stakes assessments. All participants mentioned multiple aspects of high-stakes assessments in their interviews. The accuracy of the assessments was mentioned by nine of the 10 participants as well as the focus group. A quote from Christopher illustrates the way many participants felt: “I think what I’m trying to say is I’m confident that I can teach well. I’m not very confident that I can teach well enough to be highly successful with the high-stakes assessment at the end of the year.” James echoed a similar sentiment:

I’ve seen situations that make that one day determine that kid’s school year and it kind of changes the way you feel about it when you’ve seen what they’ve done for 180 days and how good they’ve been for 180 days. Then that one day could not prove how good you know they are.

In the focus group, Lela commented, “[The high-stakes assessment] is not any reflection at all of what I’ve done or how far the kids have come”; all other focus group participants commented in agreement.

Five participants revealed there were elements of the high-stakes assessments they found confusing. Lela stated,
They might ask a question on the standard, but it might be in a way that nobody in their right mind would ever have thought to present it. Sometimes I’ve looked at the EOC practice and I’ll go, “What in the world is that?”

Mary not only shared her confusion with the way things were presented on the assessment, but also with her ability to gauge how she her students had performed: “The year I had cancer, I know I did a horrible job because I was sick all the time, but my scores were about the highest they’ve ever been and I thought, ‘How did that work out?’” The lack of perceived accuracy and confusion surrounding the test led to a multitude of emotions.

All participants, as well as those in the focus group, described the emotions surrounding high-stakes assessments. During the focus group, Christopher commented, “I’ll be honest, mine’s high anxiety. Like straight high anxiety.” Trey followed up with, “I would stretch and say a borderline dread.” At the end of his personal interview Blaine explained,

I mean, there’s no other words really to describe what it’s like except that it’s stressful and you can do so much, and you can put your heart and soul into it; but then it comes down to what they’re going to do at the end of the day. So stressful.

These emotions were shared by all participants in some way. Dusty shared, “Because of the high-stakes testing, there’s way too much anxiety on the teacher’s part, the students’ part, the parents’ part; the anxiety is real.”

Six participants as well as the focus group mentioned changes that they felt would make the high-stakes assessment better. Dusty suggested,

They should change it more on more like a business model. My previous position every year they would sit down with me and say, “Okay, so this is how you performed last year.
That way we have something to shoot for. What is your target?” To me, I think that is a better model. Because now you have something to shoot for.

A common refrain in the subtheme regarding desired changes was about feedback. Christopher said,

I want feedback on my end because we’re required to give feedback to the kids we assess, but when we are assessed as professionals on a test like that we rarely get feedback: “That’s why your kids did very well on questions like this. They did not do very well in questions like this.” Oftentimes, that data comes back so late, we really can’t use it in a formative manner like it’s supposed to be used.

**Low-stakes assessments.** The second subtheme related to the major theme of assessments was low-stakes assessments. Three participants as well as the focus group mentioned low-stakes assessments during the interviews. For example, Blaine explained, “I’m just against maybe so much standardized testing and I feel like maybe there are better outlets like performance assessments that we could utilize more of.” The following quote from Christopher was a common sentiment among participants: “So, you’re just anti assessment?” No, of course not, you have to have assessment. But I don’t think that assessment should be the end-all, be-all because there are other factors to it.” Participants understood the necessity of assessments, as any good teacher should. The disconnect between the current system of assessment and participants centered around the stakes the system placed on the assessments.

**Major Theme 2: Professional Autonomy**

The second major theme, professional autonomy, addressed areas in which a teacher would expect to exert a level of authority to make decisions about their teaching. Three subthemes were associated with professional autonomy. The first subtheme, classroom
activities, included activities that were desired, required, or limited due to high-stakes assessments. The second subtheme, planning, included activities that had to be included in a classroom plan, pacing guides that provided guidance for classroom plans, specific methods of presenting material, and specific questions that would be presented to students. The final subtheme related to general comments about the current curriculum and data related to a teacher’s ideal employment of the curriculum if given complete autonomy (see Table 3).

Table 3

Major Theme 2: Professional Autonomy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom activities</td>
<td>Limited activities (25), required classroom activities (16),</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>desired classroom activities (2),</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Planning</td>
<td>Question choice (12), presentation of material (9), activities (4),</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pacing guide (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>Ideal curriculum (10), general curriculum (8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Numbers in parentheses indicate code frequency.

**Classroom activities.** The first subtheme related to the major theme of professional autonomy was the classroom activities participants utilized. Eight participants, as well as the focus group, described their limited autonomy regarding the activities they can choose for instruction in their classrooms. Geraldine mentioned, “I’m not going to spend a whole day, a whole week, talking about how scientists actually use it. That’s for the college to do, not me, because I don’t have the time.” Peggy shared a concern that students were not actually being shown concepts in a format that was true to how they would use them outside of the classroom:

Yeah, I think that would be really awesome to be able to incorporate that and have like, some type of project-based thing. Because at the end of the day, we aren’t going to do these things on a TI-84 calculator. We’re going to have a program that does that for us.
Teachers cannot even choose to take time to remediate for their students. When asked directly if he could choose to spend time remediating his students if he felt it was necessary, Blaine said, “No. Absolutely not.”

Four participants and the focus group described a limit to their professional autonomy by being required to perform certain activities in their classroom. Christopher shared a little more explicitly how their autonomy with classroom activities has been restricted by being told what to do in their classrooms: “We’ve been explicitly told by people above us, not at a building level, ‘Do not teach grammar in isolation,’ but the ACT [a standardized test for college admission and financial aid] tests it in isolation.” Trey shared, “Our curriculum, we just pretty much have a hand guide right now. Like, ‘This is what you need to do, this is how you need to do it.’”

Two participants mentioned activities they wanted to use for their classes, but they felt as if they could not because of high-stakes assessments. According to Lela,

There might be an activity that would help them get the concept as well or better, but it doesn’t necessarily lend toward the EOC, the way that they test. So, if I have two activities, one might be more fun, but I’m going to use the one for the EOC.

Blaine also commented about a lack of freedom and narrowing of his approaches: “I feel like that high-stakes testing has made me . . . this sounds bad . . . I hate to admit it, but a less fun teacher, because I’m so worried about teaching to that test.”

**Instructional Planning.** The second subtheme related to professional autonomy was instructional planning. This subtheme describes ways in which participants’ autonomy to plan for instruction in their classroom was impacted. Eight participants as well as the focus group described an impact on the types of questions they used in their classroom by high-stakes assessments. Lela described,
When I’m writing my assessments in particular, or quiz or a test, then I’m looking at more “What would this look like?” I’m always saying, “Can I pull something in from the practice test or something? That this is what we’re studying would look like on the EOC.”

Trey explained the way he chooses questions:

So what I started doing to prepare my kids was I would take those questions stems and that’s how I would word my questions on my cumulative assessments. Like, if we just got done reading a short story, I would take a question stem from the EOC and make it work with whatever I was teaching at the time.

Seven participants, as well as the focus group, described the way the presented material had been impacted by high-stakes assessments. James described how he tries to present things so students will be familiar with them when the assessment comes around: “That’s when everything kind of shifts towards everything we do at this point has to be geared towards this is what it’s going to look like on the test.” Lela shared, “Within my content, I’m going to try to present it in ways that will reflect how they’re going to see things on the EOC. Most of the time, not all the time.” Peggy described that she “tries to incorporate phrasing and things that I think would be used on the test.”

Four participants described an impact on the way they identified and chose activities for instruction in their classroom. Judy explained she sometimes focused on specific skills “especially the writing skills because that’s something that they struggle with. So, I try to do as much writing as possible because that’s something that’s heavily graded in TCAP [Tennessee’s high-stakes assessment for pre-secondary grades].”
Three participants referenced an impact on their autonomy to plan lessons because of a pacing guide provided to them. Blaine shared,

We’re expected each day to be on that exact lesson what our pacing guide says. I think it has impacted [autonomy] most definitely. Especially starting this year, the autonomy . . . I mean I have to make sure I’m on that pacing guide, and I have to make sure what I’m supposed to do.

**Curriculum.** The third subtheme connected to the major theme of professional autonomy was the curriculum. As part of the projective exercise, all participants revealed thoughts about curriculum in general. The focus group as well as three participants described how they would change the curriculum within their course if they believed they had the autonomy to do so. According to Lela,

I’d rather spend that time [used for test prep] going deeper into the content. So, if I had 4 weeks, I could spread out through the year and have an extra day or two to study reflections and translations that we could do some kind of activity that would get that in their heads better.

The commonality among participants centered around a limiting of the curriculum. Participants explained various ways they had limited the topics to concepts that they believed would only be present on the high-stakes assessment. Trey stated: “If I didn’t have guidelines and curriculums and methods constantly pushed down my throat and forcing me to do something a certain way, I feel like everybody’s teaching would be completely different.”

**Major Theme 3: Professional Perseverance**

The third major theme of this study that emerged from the data was professional perseverance, which comprised two subthemes. The first subtheme, mediating burnout, included
codes related to administration and culture: things which seemed to encourage the participants to remain in the profession despite negative impacts of high-stakes assessments. The second subtheme, job satisfaction, related to the satisfaction a participant felt in correlation to their job (see Table 4).

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mediating burnout</td>
<td>Culture (21), administration (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job satisfaction</td>
<td>Job satisfaction (27)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses indicate code frequency.

**Mediating burnout.** The first subtheme of the major theme of professional perseverance was mediating burnout. Four participants directly mentioned their administration as a factor that kept them from leaving the profession. James stated, “I think if you’re lucky enough to get at a school like I’m at and you have administration that understands that helps a lot. I know that there’s people out there that are not that lucky.” Lela made a similar statement about her administration:

> Our administration has never tried to make me feel bad, never discouraged me in any way. I mean, I’ve been high, I’ve been low. I’ve been through several different new tests. Our administration has never made me feel bad, always encouraged me, always made me feel like I’m a good teacher.

Geraldine revealed that even though she knew her principal wanted to do well on the assessments, he was not “in here all the time, maybe complaining about this or that, which he would never do, but again, if he would do that, then I probably wouldn’t be teaching right now, because that would make me feel completely worthless.”
Eight participants referenced the general culture of their school as a factor that prevented them from leaving the teaching profession. When asked how low scores made her feel about staying in the profession, Geraldine explained how culture helped her:

Particularly when I score badly, it’s not making me run from the profession, like you think it would. I think that has to do with my confidence level of working here amongst my coworkers. They have my back. If I score badly, I get my coworkers telling me that it’s okay. That I really did my job, they know I did, they know I worked hard and that that test doesn’t matter in the end game.

Blaine, when discussing the culture at his school stated plainly, “I can’t imagine teaching at a different school.”

**Job satisfaction.** The second subtheme that emerged in correlation with professional perseverance was job satisfaction. Eight participants and the focus group described a level of satisfaction with their jobs that provided a desire to persevere in the profession, despite the impact of high-stakes assessments. Dusty said, “I don’t even consider high-stakes testing for my satisfaction. I mean, I just enjoy teaching. I don’t let that be . . . I don’t let that cause me to be dissatisfied.” Judy explained that she found her satisfaction in her job apart from high-stakes testing: “The overall satisfaction day-to-day is just between me and my students and our connection. Whether we’re connected or not.” Lela expressed satisfaction with seeing her students succeed:

I love getting to know them well enough on a personal level that when they walk across that stage at graduation that I feel a warmthness in my heart and I’m excited that they’ve accomplished their goals. Whatever it is that they’ve accomplished, whether they excel in sports or whatever. Like I just feel good, I just enjoy seeing them grow and mature.
Major Theme 4: Self-Competence

The fourth major theme of self-competence addressed various aspects of the teachers’ beliefs in themselves to meet the goals that are being set for them in their classrooms. The subthemes of test-related and non-test-related influences to self-competence are included in this major theme (see Table 5). The test-related influences included growth score, high scores, low scores, positive impact, negative impact, and mentions of next year’s test.

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtheme Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Test-related influences Low score (18), next year (13) negative (12), growth score (11), high score (5), positive (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-test-related influences No mention of non-test-related factors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Numbers in parentheses indicate code frequency.

Test-related influences. The first subtheme related to the major theme of self-competence was test-related influences on a teacher’s sense of self-competence. All participants mentioned the impact a high score or a low score would have on their sense of self-competence. Nine participants described a negative impact on their sense of self-competence related to high-stakes assessments. Geraldine described how her self-competence had been negatively impacted by high-stakes assessments:

If the kids don’t grow, if the test says, “Well, they didn’t learn anything they were supposed to learn” and they don’t meet the projection, then I really think I dropped the ball. Some days it’s like, I tell the kids, “Well, if you actually had a good teacher, then, you’d probably get it but you don’t.”

In the focus group Trey shared, “I think it kills all sense of confidence in our ability to do our job. Because we’re hypercritical of ourselves.”
Four participants mentioned a positive impact on their sense of self-competence related to high-stakes assessments. Lela described the positive impact on her self-competence that high-stakes testing can have. “Every time we get our test scores back, if they’re good, it makes me feel like, ‘Oh! I did a good job.’” Geraldine mentioned she was more confident in her teaching this academic year than in years past. When asked why she felt that way she replied, “because I was a 5 [highest growth score] last year.”

Nine participants as well as the focus group mentioned a perpetual focus on the upcoming test score. Trey described the cycle of always focusing on the upcoming test: “To be honest, [a good score] relieves me for about a week and then the stress just resets over because I’m in a new school year.” In the focus group, Christopher echoed something similar: “Even if it’s a positive score it’s like a temporary win. You’re like ‘Ok, next year this means nothing and I start all over again.’” In the focus group Lela commented,

A bad score kind of follows you all year, but then the good score, like a 4 or a 5, it’s only a real temporary feeling of like “I’m good to go” because at that point, you immediately start worrying about the next test.

Other members of the group agreed with the statement as well.

Non-test-related influences. There were many test-related influences to self-competence mentioned by the participants. There were no mentions of non-test-related influences of self-competence, however. Perceived success is discussed as part of the next major theme. For the purpose of this research, impact on self-competence and perceived success were different factors. When participants discussed how their sense of self-competence was impacted by high-stakes assessments, they answered solely in terms of high-stakes assessments results, even if they previously stated they had a belief in their abilities to teach well.
Major Theme 5: Professional Identity

The final major theme that emerged from the data was professional identity. This theme, while not directly related to the research questions, was found as data analysis took place. Three related subthemes made up the major theme. The subtheme of public perception includes what participants believed the public knows about high-stakes assessments, what the public did not know about high-stakes assessments, and what participants believed the public needed to know about high-stakes assessments. The second subtheme, personal identity, includes descriptions of good teachers, older (more experienced) teachers, younger teachers, and various aspects of teacher and students’ interactions outside of a high-stakes setting. The third subtheme, perceived success, included participants’ feelings of success that related to their profession (see Table 6).

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public perception</td>
<td>Public needs to know (5), public knows (3), public does not know (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal identity (teacher)</td>
<td>Good teacher (14), teacher student interaction (11), older teacher (5), young(her) teacher (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived success</td>
<td>Job success (18)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Numbers in parentheses indicate code frequency.

Public perception. The first subtheme that emerged in connection to the major theme of professional identity was public perception. Five participants described what they believed was important for the general public to know about the impact of high-stakes assessments. Christopher wanted the public to know “that that number on the school does not always define what is happening inside of the school.” Lela wanted the public to know the impact high-stakes assessments were having on the curriculum: “They need to know how much time that we’re taking away from instructing their students for these high-stakes tests.” According to Trey,
Probably one of the biggest things I would want people to know is the apathy that comes with maybe not just my content area, but with most core content areas. It’s hard to teach when somebody doesn’t care what you’re talking about because they have to be there.

Three participants referenced what they believed the public actually knew about high-stakes assessments. Dusty commented,

[Results] are so open to the public and to the world to look at you are being judged now. Because if they look at a small school especially, and they see the fifth-grade scores are horrible. It’s only one of two or three teachers that brought them down, if not all of them. So, you can easily point the finger very quickly.

One participant described what she believed the public did not know about high-stakes assessments. Lela believed the public was unaware of “how much time and money is being spent on high-stakes testing.”

**Personal identity.** The second subtheme related to the major theme of professional identity was a participant’s personal identity as a teacher. Eight participants referenced interactions they had with students as part of what who they believed they were as a teacher. Dusty shared, “My favorite part is being with young people and guiding them and helping them because it’s just fun. I mean, it is just fun. To me, this is a fun job.” James shared part of what he believed was his identity as a teacher:

There’s not a lot of people that can say, “Little Johnny, I’ve been with you since you were in kindergarten and now you’re going off into the world to be a man.” To me, that’s one of the neatest things about teaching.

Christopher described his identity as a teacher as “I'm a bit unique in that more times than not, I can find some way to click with a kid that is very, very difficult to click with.”
Four participants referred to what they believed a good teacher was. Blaine described a good teacher as someone who “makes a difference and hopefully makes an impact on [students’] lives and teaches them that there’s a different way and helps them on that path.” The word-association document that participants filled out generated responses for the word teacher such as “catalyst, mentor, impact.”

Four participants described a difference in the way high-stakes assessments would impact an older, or more experienced, teacher. Geraldine described the difference in how she experienced high-stakes assessments as a more experienced teacher: “Because I have a little bit of experience, most days are like that. So, I’m not just constantly thinking about the test every single time, I’m only thinking about the test in, like, the problems I choose.” James, another experienced teacher, also revealed,

I think it probably is different for a newer teacher who knows, “Man, if I don’t get these scores, they are not going to hire me back.” Like I said, I don’t like to, I won’t ever use [experience] as a crutch, but I think somewhere in the back of my mind, I don’t have to be as focused on the scores.

Three participants described a difference in the way high-stakes assessments would impact a younger, or less experienced, teacher. Christopher shared,

that pressure the new teachers feel to get those scores or they’re not going to get rehired and in probably some areas. If you go nationwide or statewide or even countywide, you probably see that a lot. I think for newer teachers, they probably feel that pressure of high-stakes assessments more than anything else.

Peggy, a newer teacher, explained how she experienced the assessments:
I guess that’s something I’m still learning. Last year was my first experience being evaluated. It wasn’t a reflection of me. The scores that the students were given were the reflection on my personal evaluation. I mean, I’ll definitely . . . be looking at it and trying to figure out what I can do better; I don’t know how it will impact me really.

**Perceived success.** The third subtheme related to professional perseverance that emerged was perceived success. Perceived success was a subtheme that provided a broad range of responses and experiences. Four participants described how they perceive success with themselves or their jobs. Trey explained he did not believe a growth score was a measure of success: “A kid’s success is our success and I do not feel like success is defined by a growth score.” On the other hand, Blaine believed growth scores were a measure of success: “It’s almost like, if you tell me that that’s what makes me successful, then that’s what I believe.” James described a mixed approach to how success was perceived:

> It’s easy to get caught up in and when you start to really analyze both sides of it. . . . I want to be that teacher that doesn’t care about them, but I don’t also want to be perceived on paper as somebody that’s incapable of doing the job that they love to do.

**Research Question Responses**

Data collected from a word-association document, personal interviews, and a focus group interview were used to answer the central research question and three research subquestions.

**Central Research Question**

The central research question of this study was as follows: What are the lived experiences of teachers in rural middle Tennessee whose self-competence, autonomy, and perseverance are impacted by high-stakes assessments? Projective exercises, personal interviews, and a focus group interview were used to gain insight into how teacher’s self-competence, autonomy, and
perseverance were impacted by the phenomenon of high-stakes assessments in rural middle Tennessee.

Based on the data provided by the participants, the impact of high-stakes assessment was described as different than the impact of low-stakes assessments on their lived experience (Major Theme 1). For example, when describing high-stakes assessments, Blaine shared, “I think I’ve seen it done better ways. It makes me have more of a negative outlook on standardized assessments.” Furthermore, on the word-association document, all participants provided words that would be considered to have a negative connotation such as “invalid,” “disheartening,” even “yuk.” Low-stakes assessments, on the other hand, generated words such as “benchmark,” “tool,” and “gauge.” Christopher shared, “there is definitely a place for assessments, in my opinion, but it’s the right kind of assessments.”

Participants also discussed how high-stakes assessments have become the primary way they view their professional competence, with the negative impact lasting much longer than the positive impact does (Major Theme 4). When discussing how he felt when receiving a low score James said it made him feel “like I’m not good at my job.” However, when asked what he thought when he got a high score, he stated: “I’ve had to just swallow my pride a little bit and say, ‘They gave me the best group in the grade level.’”

Participants indicated the classroom activities they feel they can choose as well as the way they plan and structure their content curriculum have been limited due to the impact of high-stakes assessments (Major Theme 2). Trey expressed,

At this point, a trained monkey can do my job. What do you need a professional for? If you’re setting up, this is what you need to do. Here’s what you’re doing. What am I
doing, like, as a teacher and, like, at that point a sub can come in and look at all that and pretty much do my job.

Finally, participants also indicated that their desire to remain in the teaching profession had not been impacted by high-stakes assessments because of certain mediating factors (Major Theme 3). Blaine stated, “I wouldn’t say that it’s discouraged me not to be a teacher.” James shared, “At the end of the day, if this is your calling and what you love to do, you won’t let a high stakes assessment bother you.”

**Research SQ1**

The first research subquestion was as follows: What are rural middle Tennessee teachers’ perceptions of the ways in which high-stakes assessments impact their self-competence?

Although each participant’s experience was unique and each provided individual responses to the questions, there was little variation in the way they responded to interview questions as they described the impact of high-stakes assessments on their sense of self-competence. During the interviews, participants frequently indicated that lower test results lowered their self-competence while higher test results had a positive impact. These data directly led toward the development of Major Theme 4: Self-Competence. Lela indicated the common theme among participants about the impact of high-stakes assessment scores on a teacher’s sense of self-competence:

> When my scores come back and they’re good, it makes me feel like, “Oh! I did a good job; but the years that it’s down, I’m like, “What did I do wrong? What did I do different that made it drop?”

Geraldine’s explanation was also informative for the first subquestion: “The test itself, it hurts my self-confidence, particularly when I score badly.” Geraldine would go on to state that she
felt more confident in her abilities as a teacher this academic year specifically because her students had scored highly on the high-stakes assessment the previous year.

Another development in the data related to the first subquestion was the absence of any mention of non-test-related factors that impacted the participants’ sense of self-competence. When questioned about their confidence, or lack thereof, in their individual teaching abilities, participants always shared anecdotally about high-stakes assessment results.

**Research SQ2**

The second research subquestion was as follows: What are rural middle Tennessee teachers’ perceptions of the ways in which high-stakes assessments impact their autonomy? This question resulted in the development of Major Theme 2: Professional Autonomy, and three subthemes connected to the major theme. Data connected to this research question indicated that participants’ ability to make choices related to classroom activities (Subtheme 1), planning (Subtheme 2), and curriculum (Subtheme 3) had been limited as a result of high-stakes assessments. Specifically, participants have experienced a limiting of their autonomy in the activities they choose, the things they plan, the way they present material, and the way they design and implement the curriculum in their content areas. Peggy stated, “I guess that . . . can I use the word autonomy here? . . . that we don’t have a lot of autonomy.” Christopher shared, “I can’t think of any profession of somebody that’s considered an educated professional that has more oversight than education.” The majority of participants shared experiences that they felt were representative of a limited autonomy to choose classroom activities (Subtheme 1). Christopher explained how he was forced to use practice EOC passages, which aren’t related to anything in the curriculum or anything relevant to what’s taking place in class, but we have to pause, per district request, to
cover at least one a week and it’s out of nowhere; it’s not relevant and that was supposed
to start in August and go all the way through the testing window.

Trey also discussed activities that they were told they must use: “15% of our classroom time
everyday must be dedicated to EOC and ACT prep in an English classroom this year.” Mary
also shared how her classroom activities had been limited: “I feel like if we had a little bit more
leeway as teachers in what we could do. Because they give us specific books we have to read,
specific articles we have to read”.

Pacing guides and curriculum maps also greatly limit a teacher’s autonomy to plan for
instruction in their classrooms (Subtheme 2). Blaine stated, “We’re expected each day to be on
that exact lesson that our pacing guide says. I think it has impacted autonomy most definitely. I
mean I have to make sure I’m on that pacing guide.” Judy also shared about limited autonomy to
plan for instruction:

[The curriculum map] doesn’t allow for remediation, but somewhere in there we are
supposed to make sure it happens; but it’s like, I feel like we are just kind of hitting it and
going on. But me as teacher and I don’t know if this is the right thing [to not allow time
for remediation].

Some participants also discussed experiences when they believed their autonomy in overall
curriculum choices had been impacted by high-stakes assessments (Subtheme 3). Trey shared,
“My job as a teacher is to be an educator, which is to improve reading, writing, reasoning, and
we do that through rich discussion, analyzation, evaluation of texts, writing, arguing. There’s no
room for that anymore.”

As Trey stated, “Our curriculum, we just pretty much have a hand guide right now. It’s
‘This is what you need to do, this is how you need to do it.’” Lela shared that with full
autonomy of her classroom, “I’d be more aware of what my kids need and teach to that. You know, I know I have kids that are going to college and they need that higher-level instruction.”

**Research SQ3**

The third research subquestion was as follows: What are rural middle Tennessee teachers’ perceptions of the ways in which high-stakes assessments impact their perseverance in the teaching profession? This question resulted in the development of Major Theme 3: Professional Perseverance and the associated subthemes. Participants indicated that for the most part, their professional perseverance had not been impacted by high-stakes assessments (Subtheme 1, although this seemed to be as much about the impact of mediating factors present in their personal context as the impact of high-stakes assessments. Christopher highlighted this sentiment:

> I don’t regret going into teaching, but I’m saying the whole system should be thankful that teaching is a calling. If these people in these school building weren’t absolutely living and breathing to teach kids, the building would be empty. Because it’s surely not worth the pay and it’s not worth the criticism either. But, personally, I don’t regret it.

Likewise, Geraldine stated, “The test itself, as much as we were talking about [how] it hurts my self-confidence, particularly when I score badly, it’s not making me run from the profession, like you think it would.” Some participants highlighted their administration as a reason they were not planning on leaving the profession. As Geraldine explained,

> If our principal were in here all the time, maybe complaining about this or that, which he would never do, but again, if he would do that, then I probably wouldn’t be teaching right now, because that would make me feel completely worthless.
James described his experience with his administration: “I think if you’re lucky enough to get at a school like I’m at and you have administration that understands that too . . . that helps a lot.”

Other participants cited a general culture among their colleagues as helping to mediate the negative impact of high-stakes assessments. When discussing whether bad scores caused her to want to leave the profession Geraldine shared,

I think that has to do with my confidence level of working here amongst my coworkers. They have my back. If I score badly, I get my coworkers telling me that that’s okay. That I really did my job, they know I did, they know I worked hard and that that test doesn’t matter in the end game.

When discussing culture mediating teachers leaving the profession, Trey stated, “If you’re happy where you are, I think that leads to less turnover . . . which, I think, is a big testament to why I’m still here at this school. I honestly do believe that.”

Other participants cited test-related pressures as a reason to seek other jobs within the teaching profession. Blaine stated, “I wouldn’t say that it’s discouraged me not to be a teacher. I think it’s encouraged me to do other things in education, maybe one day to make some change.” Trey stated,

If I had an English classroom, but I didn’t have to worry about [high-stakes assessments] and I just had to worry about them being successful every 9 weeks, I probably would stay in English because I love teaching English, I really do.

Unfortunately, some teachers shared a desire to leave the profession, but an inability to do so. Mary stated, “I know I can teach well, but teaching well under the current environment, the atmosphere, I can’t do that for very much longer. I hate to say this, but I would quit if I could.”
Summary

Chapter Four included detailed descriptions of the 10 participants in this transcendental phenomenological study. The participants included teachers at elementary, middle, and high-school levels of education. The focus of the study was to understand the lived experiences of the impact of high-stakes assessment on teachers’ sense of self-competence, autonomy, and perseverance in rural middle Tennessee. Data analysis was performed following Moustakas’s (1994) recommendations for phenomenological data analysis. Open coding was performed as the initial step in developing themes. After open coding, individual themes were developed. Through the analysis of individual themes, major themes were developed as a final step in data analysis. Individual themes were given as part of participant descriptions and major themes were discussed in the results section as well as discussion related specifically to the central research question and three research subquestions.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand, as a lived experience, the impact of high-stakes assessments on the self-competence, autonomy, and perseverance of teachers in rural middle Tennessee. The following section provides a summary of the study’s findings. Following the summary is a review of how the central research question and research subquestions were answered. Theoretical and empirical implications of the findings are presented, followed by discussion of the practical implications. Finally, delimitations and limitations of the study as well as recommendations for future research are discussed. Chapter Five concludes with a final summary of conclusions that have been drawn from the study.

Summary of Findings

In this study, data were collected in three different formats: a projective word-association document, individual interviews, and a focus group interview. Each format allowed individuals to describe their lived experience of the impact of high-stakes assessment on their self-competence, autonomy, and perseverance. The primary source of data was individual interviews. Each individual interview was audio-recorded and then transcribed, coded, and analyzed for individual themes. The focus group interview consisted of five participants and provided additional insight about the impact of high-stakes assessments. As data were analyzed, individual themes that had emerged and began to overlap were combined into major themes. Major themes were explored more fully during the focus group interview, which was also audio-recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed. The five major themes that emerged from data analysis included (a) assessment, (b) professional autonomy, (c) professional perseverance, (d) self-competence, and (e) professional identity.
The central research question was used to explore the lived experiences of teachers in rural middle Tennessee whose self-competence, autonomy, and perseverance were impacted by high-stakes assessments. Data provided by research participants demonstrated high-stakes assessment was the nearly exclusive measure that impacted their self-competence (Major Theme 4). Data also showed the negative impact of poor high-stakes assessment results was far greater than the positive impact of good high-stakes assessment results. In addition, the data indicated that participants’ professional autonomy in the classroom had been limited as a result of high-stakes assessments (Major Theme 2). The participants’ ability to instruct, plan, and structure their curriculums had all been limited by high-stakes assessments. Finally, data indicated that the participants’ desire to remain in the profession had not been negatively impacted by high-stakes assessments (Major Theme 3). While discussing the desire to remain in the profession, participants provided mediating factors they believed made them more likely to stay in the profession despite the impact of high-stakes assessments.

The first research subquestion addressed the impact of high-stakes assessments on teachers’ sense of self-competence (Major Theme 2). Interview participants mentioned positive test results did have a positive impact on their self-competence. However, many participants provided reason to believe the positive results were not a direct result of their instruction or glossed over the results and immediately focused on the upcoming high-stakes assessment. Negative results, however, had a much more lasting impact on a participant’s sense of self-competence. Another finding from the data was the exclusive mention of high-stakes factors that impacted a participant’s self-competence. When participants were asked what reinforced their personal beliefs about their teaching ability, the response always pointed to high-stakes assessment results.
The second research subquestion addressed the impact of high-stakes assessments on teachers’ sense of autonomy (Major Theme 2). Data showed that high-stakes assessments had limited the participants’ ability to plan instruction, employ instructional methods, present materials in desired ways, and implement what they felt was important in the curriculum. Participants also believed their ability to use certain instructional methods in their classrooms had been limited to methods that would directly benefit students’ performance on high-stakes assessments. Participants stated they were not even able to provide remediation for their students at their discretion unless it was part of assessment review. Participants’ planning for instruction had also been limited either by being directly instructed from district-level personnel not to plan certain lessons and activities or through the implementation of a curriculum map or pacing guide. Many participants also expressed an impact on their ability to structure the curriculum for their contents or classrooms, with many expressing they would either shorten the curriculum to allow time for more depth of instruction or include topics that related to their content, but were not currently present in curriculum maps or pacing guides.

The third research subquestion addressed the impact of high-stakes assessments on teachers’ perseverance in the teaching profession (Major Theme 3). This subquestion provided the largest variance in response. Despite variances, only one participant clearly stated a desire to leave the profession as a result of the impact of high-stakes assessments. Other participants expressed a desire to remain in the profession but mentioned factors outside of high-stakes assessments as the reason for professional perseverance. Some participants referenced school administration as the reason they were not currently planning to leave the profession; others mentioned colleagues or general culture of the school as mediating factors for the negative impact of high-stakes assessments.
Discussion

The findings of the study provide support for the theoretical and empirical literature that was presented in Chapter Two. A review of the empirical literature suggested high-stakes assessments were impacting teachers’ sense of self-competence, autonomy, and perseverance in various ways. The theoretical framework for this study was Deci and Ryan’s (2008) SDT, which outlines humans’ psychological needs in relation to their determination to carry out actions that meet those psychological needs. The SDT-related literature demonstrated that high-stakes assessments could be disrupting participants’ innate psychological needs. The following sections serve to explain how this study related to the empirical and theoretical literature and presents extensions of theoretical or empirical research when necessary.

Theoretical Literature

The theoretical framework for this study was Deci and Ryan’s (2008) self determination theory (SDT). The SDT has consistently been applied to educational research with the Deci and Ryan originally applying the SDT to education themselves. This study was a specific examination of teachers’ autonomy, competence, and motivation as they are impacted by high-stakes assessments. The SDT differentiates between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation comes from within the individual and is the strongest type of motivation. Actions performed as a result of intrinsic motivation arise from an internal desire to perform them. Research surrounding the SDT has demonstrated that individuals who are motivated internally have more excitement, interest, and confidence, which typically leads to enhanced persistence, creativity, and performance (Flitcroft & Woods, 2018). Extrinsic motivation is the opposite of intrinsic motivation. This motivation is the result of external regulation and is typically driven by an individual’s desire to earn a reward or avoid punishment. Data indicated that participants’
motivation relative to high-stakes assessments should be classified as extrinsic. This means actions taken by participants regarding high-stakes assessments arise from a desire to earn rewards for good student performance, or to avoid punishments for poor student performance instead of a desire to act based on internal belief in the value of the action.

The SDT describes a process called internalization in which an individual undergoes a process that transforms extrinsic motivation to intrinsic motivation. Sometimes, individuals who are not willing to internalize motivation, but face external pressures for certain actions, will undergo a process called identified regulation. This process causes an individual to intrinsically motivate an action or accept a regulatory process without internalizing their motivation. Identified regulation is not a positive development; the concept represents an individual’s response to external pressures that cause a motivation to feed an ego, avoid shame, or seek approval. Some participants seemed to be undergoing identified regulation regarding high-stakes assessments. For example, Judy explained, “I’ve come to accept [high-stakes testing] as part of the job. I’m not going to leave the profession because of it, but I’ve come to accept it as something I’m going to have to deal with.” Peggy also shared, “I’m kind of apathetic about [high-stakes assessments]. I know I’m not going to be able to change anything, so I’ve just accepted it.”

A final aspect of the SDT that was foundational to this study was the concept of locus of causality. When behavior is self-determined, the locus of causality is said to be internal to the individual (Deci et al., 1991). Behaviors that are internal to the individual are not only intrinsically motivated, but they are also performed for the pleasure or satisfaction that is derived from performing the behavior. When the locus of causality is external to the individual, the behavior is said to be controlled (Deci et al., 1991). Controlled behaviors are not only
extrinsically motivated but will also diminish an individual’s sense of autonomy and decrease intrinsic motivation for other activities. This study also included exploration of what motivated participants to employ specific teaching methods, plan certain activities, and even remain in the teaching profession altogether. Data showed that teachers did not necessarily believe in the assessments capability to evaluate their performance as a teacher, but they wanted to comply with directives to avoid negative consequences. These findings imply that teachers are extrinsically motivated by high-stakes assessments and have reached a stage of identified regulation as a means of controlling behaviors. Furthermore, the findings also revealed that because of the perceived external locus of control and controlled nature of many behaviors associated with high-stakes assessments, the participants’ sense of autonomy was negatively impacted.

Empirical Literature

Findings of this research supported much of the data reported in the empirical literature of Chapter Two. Detractors of value-added models and high-stakes assessments have argued that the value a teacher brings to the classroom is far too complex to be measured by statistical modeling (Ford, 2018; Paige et al., 2019). Data from this study have shown that participants agreed the growth model that is used does not accurately reflect all they do in their classrooms. Trey stated, “I wear a lot of different hats for my students—disciplinarian, coach, counselor, mentor—the assessment is only measuring one hat that I wear.” Conversely, recent research has demonstrated that some variation of a teacher’s growth score is unrelated to their instruction (Stacy et al., 2018). Data from this study indicated that teachers agree there are many factors they cannot control that are factored into their growth scores. James recounted a story in which one of his students’ pets was killed the morning they had to take a high-stakes assessment. “She
had done better in that content than anyone else all year long, but she didn’t do good on her test that day and who could blame a kid for that? But the test says that girl didn’t grow that year and she did. I think she ended up graduating top 10 in her class.” Furthermore, research has demonstrated that once-a-year feedback does not have a large effect on teachers’ practices (Pratt & Booker, 2014). Data from this research supported those findings, as many participants expressed a desire for more immediate and in-depth feedback from high-stakes assessments. According to Christopher,

I want feedback on my end because we’re required to give feedback to the kids we assess, but when we are assessed as professionals on a test like that we rarely get feedback. Oftentimes that data comes back so late we really can’t use it in a formative manner like it’s supposed to be used.

Recent findings have shown teachers are not opposed to policies that intend to ensure students are receiving a quality education (Pizmony-Levy & Woolsey, 2017). Data from the present study supports those findings. Most participants expressed agreement that policies aimed at ensuring students are receiving a quality education are needed, even if they disagreed with how said policies were currently being implemented. Blaine commented, “I’m just against maybe so much standardized testing and I feel like maybe there are better outlets like performance assessments that we could utilize more of.”

Recent research has also demonstrated that since the 1990s, the number of public school teachers leaving the profession has doubled (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018). Most participants in this study did not plan to leave the profession but agreed that high-stakes assessments are a driving force behind teachers who are leaving the profession. Many participants expressed that without certain mediating factors they too would leave the profession. Recent research has also
shown most teachers value culturally diverse methods of instruction but feel tremendous pressure to utilize measures that maximize test scores (Zoch, 2017). Findings from this study supported research revealing the limiting of teacher’s ability to choose methods of instruction they felt most effective due to utilizing measures that maximized student performance on high-stakes assessments.

Studies have suggested high-stakes assessments could be negatively impacting teachers’ sense of self-competence (Buchanan, 2015; Holloway & Brass, 2017; Lewis & Holloway, 2018). Data from this study showed that the assessments were negatively impacting self-competence. This negative impact has been attributed to the elevation of qualitative data sources above more wholistic considerations of competence. This study affirmed this concept as teachers replied about factors that impacted self-competence in exclusively high-stakes results. James commented, “It doesn’t matter what I know those kids have accomplished this year or whether I believe that score is accurate because that is what the public is going to see: that test score.”

Recent studies have also shown that accountability pressures have begun to pass from teachers to students (Putwain & von der Embse, 2018). While findings of this study did not confirm whether all stakeholders have elevated the high-stakes results to the level teachers have (Buchanan, 2015; Lewis & Holloway, 2018), findings did confirm that teachers believe the previous statement to be true. Some participants shared that students in their classes were exhibiting signs of feeling stressed or anxious as a result of high-stakes assessments. Judy commented, “I’ve seen students cry because of these tests. That’s just not right.”

Data for this study also supported empirical literature relating to teacher autonomy. Recent literature demonstrated that high-stakes assessments place tremendous constraints on teachers’ autonomy (Ro, 2018). Data from this study supported the literature as each participant
and the focus group described ways their autonomy had been limited. Recent research suggests the limited autonomy as a perceived means of maximizing test performance (W. C. Smith & Kubacka, 2017). Data from this study supported those findings as well. Every participant alluded to the reason behind the choices he/she was making in their classes as an attempt to help students perform better on the high-stakes assessment. Research also suggested novice teachers felt greater pressure to limit their autonomy in exchange for test results. While this study was not able to confirm those findings through participant experiences, more experienced teachers commented they believed novice teachers would respond differently to the pressure than they had.

Literature also suggested the common changes teachers felt compelled to make in their classrooms as a result of high-stakes assessments were regular practice tests and feedback, narrowing the curriculum to only tested concepts, and practice of test-taking skills (Putwain et al., 2016). Data from this study supported the literature. Each participant mentioned one of the previous methods, if not all of them, as activities utilized in their classrooms due to the impact of high-stakes assessments. Recent research also suggested that practices used in classrooms solely for high-stakes assessments do not achieve their intended goals and are by-and-large a waste of resources for teachers and students (von der Embse, Shoemann, et al., 2016; Li & Xiong, 2018). Data from this study supported those findings. As Lela stated: “[The public] needs to know how much time that we’re taking away from instructing their students for these high-stakes tests . . . [and] how much time and money is being wasted on high-stakes testing.”

Recent empirical literature also warned that the increased focus on high-stakes assessments could be limiting higher-order thinking skills (Meuwissen, 2016; Morgan, 2016). Higher-order skills are hard to assess and difficult to gauge using standardized testing.
Therefore, they are not seen as necessary skills for students since they do not translate to better test performance (Meuwissen, 2016; Zohar & Agmon, 2017). Some data from this study supported that literature. Trey shared a concern that his true job as an educator was being reduced to making kids test takers instead of free thinkers. According to Trey, “[My] job, as a teacher is to be an educator, which is to improve reading, writing, reasoning; and we do that through rich discussion, analyzation, evaluation of texts, writing, arguing. There’s no room for that anymore.”

Recent literature about teacher perseverance suggested that a primary force behind teacher turnover was high-stakes assessments (Carusi, 2017). This study supported those findings to an extent. Only one of the 10 participants expressed a desire to leave the profession due to high-stakes assessments. However, most participants agreed that high-stakes assessments were a primary reason behind teachers leaving the profession. Some participants even shared anecdotally about people they knew or schools where a high percentage of teachers were leaving due to high-stakes assessments. In a report commissioned by the TNDOE, a commonality found across the state was an increased rate of turnover among early career teachers (Pratt & Booker, 2014). Data from this current study also supported those findings to an extent. Two subthemes of Major Theme 5 (Professional Identity) were (a) more- and (b) less-experienced teachers. More-experienced teachers, which composed the majority of participants, believed that novice teachers would be more likely to leave the profession than experienced teachers. Recent literature also suggested that all teachers, regardless of desire to remain in or leave the profession, had experienced job-related stress and burnout (Richards et al., 2016). Findings from this present study support that literature. As Blaine explained,
There’s no other words really to describe what it’s like except that it’s stressful and you can do so much, and you can put your heart and soul into it; but then it comes down to what they’re going to do at the end of the day. So stressful.

Christopher described his feelings as anxiety, while Trey described his as dread.

Although participants universally experienced negative emotions connected with high-stakes assessments, only one shared a desire to leave the profession if possible. This supports recent empirical literature that has suggested teachers who are satisfied with their jobs are more likely to remain in the profession due to having been able to reconfigure their professional identity to cope with their dissatisfaction with the current educational system (Barnatt et al., 2016; Clarà, 2017; Omar et al., 2018; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). Furthermore, studies have shown that schools where teachers believe the environment is positive and where they believe they are still offered some level of autonomy in their classrooms are able to mediate the turnover caused by the impact of high-stakes assessments (Ingersoll et al., 2016; Corkin et al., 2018). Findings from this current study support that literature. Geraldine revealed one reason she had not quit teaching was because her principal allowed her some level of autonomy by not being “in here all the time, maybe complaining about this or that, which he would never do, but again, if he would do that, then I probably wouldn’t be teaching right now.”

Implications

Tennessee, where this study took place, was awarded $501.8 million as a result of RttT (Riley, 2010). The state earned the financial award through the development and implementation of a plan that was on the forefront of high-stakes accountability. In the years since, Tennessee has continued to focus on high-stakes assessment results to help evaluate teacher efficacy (Pratt & Booker, 2014). It stands to reason that the current system in place will
not totally dissolve and, thus, must account for the impact high-stakes assessments are having on teachers.

Previous research provided sufficient data to determine whether high-stakes assessments were actually impacting teacher’s sense of self-competence, autonomy, and perseverance. Such research has been foundational in understanding whether high-stakes assessments are impacting teachers or not. This study represents an attempt to address a gap in the literature surrounding the impact of high-stakes assessments on teachers’ self-competence, autonomy, and perseverance by explaining how these impacts are felt by teachers in rural middle Tennessee. The theoretical, empirical, and practical implications for this study are addressed in the following sections.

**Theoretical Implications**

The SDT has been used to explain teachers’ actions and motivation since it was originally published in 1991 (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan (1991) predicted impacts on teachers as a result of high-stakes assessments in their earlier publication, but they could not have known that high-stakes assessments would be used in the way the current educational system uses them. This current research adds to the existing body of literature surrounding the application of the SDT to teachers and education. In this study, the SDT was used to frame the exploration of teachers’ choice to employ certain teaching methods in their classrooms. Participants’ responses demonstrated they were not choosing to employ certain activates because they believed they were valuable for students, which would have been evidence of intrinsic motivation. Instead, participants indicated they were choosing activities either to comply with directives, or to avoid the negative consequences of poor test scores. These responses indicate controlled motivation. However, participants also expressed a desire to move away from activities that did not relate to their content and only applied to high-stakes
assessments. Peggy said, “I think it would be really awesome to be able to incorporate some type of project-based thing. Because at the end of the day, we aren’t going to do these things on a TI-84 calculator.” Rather than working concepts on a calculator, which would be required for the high-stakes assessment, Peggy wanted to use project-based learning that would represent a more true-to-life application of mathematical concepts. The theoretical implication of statements like Peggy’s is that teachers could be beginning to move from controlled motivation to amotivation regarding having to choose specific classroom activities impacted by high-stakes assessments.

The SDT has also been applied to the impact of competence on an individual’s motivation. In the SDT, competence is impacted by aspirations, or planned actions intended to reinforce an individual’s belief in their ability to achieve a desired outcome. If an individual’s actions seem to have achieved the desired effect the aspiration is said to have been satisfied and the individual will be more motivated to perform similar actions in the future. If the individual’s actions seem not to have achieved the desired effect, the aspiration is said to have been thwarted. Thwarted aspirations will cause an individual to change planned actions in an attempt to achieve the desired effect (Deci et al., 1991). Issues arise when multiple revisions to the planned actions consistently fail to achieve the desired effect; when consistently failing to achieve the desired effect despite revising aspirations, one’s self-competence is negatively impacted.

Teachers have high aspirations for student success and try to take action to ensure students achieve success. Regardless of the level of success a teacher’s students achieve, they do not possess the autonomy to truly revise their aspirations to maximize student success. Curriculum maps or pacing guides prevent desired levels of change or remediation. Mary believed she could be more effective if her autonomy were not limited: “I feel like if we had a
little bit more leeway in what we were allowed to do students could connect to the material better
because they give us specific books or articles we have to read.” Judy commented, “I feel like
we’re just hitting [concepts] and moving on; but me, as a teacher, I don’t believe this is the right
thing.” The theoretical implication behind these findings is that teacher’s competence is being
negatively impacted by failing to meet achieve the desired effect of student success. This
negative impact is being exacerbated by not being provided enough autonomy to effectively
revise their actions in such a way that enables continued student success. Both of the previously
mentioned theoretical implications could be improved if teachers were provided a greater level
of professional autonomy.

**Empirical Implications**

There is an extensive body of literature surrounding the many facets of high-stakes
assessments. Many research studies have suggested high-stakes assessments are impacting
teachers in various ways. However, the majority of empirical literature surrounding the impact
of high-stakes assessments is quantitative in nature. Lacking from the available literature was a
rich description of the lived experiences of teachers in tested areas; specifically, teachers in rural
areas.

Findings of this study could have significant implications for stakeholders of public
education. For example, empirical literature has demonstrated that the once-a-year feedback
teachers receive from high-stakes assessments is not likely to deeply affect teachers’ classroom
practices (W. C. Smith & Kubacka, 2017). Furthermore, recent empirical literature has also
suggested there can be large variations in teachers’ assessment results with teachers who serve
large numbers of low-achieving or disadvantaged students receiving less precise value-added
estimates than do their peers (Stacy et al., 2018). The result of the current system in place has
resulted in a framework that teachers believe is not able to provide an accurate picture of all they are doing for their students. Lela shared that high-stakes assessments results were “not any reflection at all of what I’ve done or how far the kids have come.” James expressed the sentiment this way:

On paper, you can pick test scores, but there is no data that show how much better a kid is as a person because of their teacher. There’s only data that shows how much they’ve learned from Year 1 to Year 2 or Year 3 to Year 4.

The implication of these findings is participants believe the system is not reflective of the full amount of impact a teacher is having on their students. Stakeholders need to explore systems that more accurately reflect teacher impact and student growth.

Stakeholders could use the lived experiences expressed in this study to provide a basis for discussions on how to improve the current system of high-stakes assessment, discussions on how to improve the policies that govern high-stakes assessments, or changes in the way school districts approach implementing plans for student improvement on high-stakes assessments. For example, Blazar and Pollard (2017) found that if high-stakes assessments were revised in ways that enabled them to assess higher-order thinking skills, the resulting instructional changes would provide greater benefit to students. Furthermore, the current strategies that are being used to improve test scores typically do not benefit students in significant ways (Li & Xiong, 2018).

Participants in this study expressed a desire to work toward a deeper understanding of their respective contents. As Lela shared, “I’d rather spend [the time used for test prep] going deeper into the content.” In the focus group, Christopher and Trey both expressed a desire to teach grammatical concepts in ways they are currently not allowed to do. Their reasoning behind the desire was a belief that it would make students better writers because they would understand the
concepts of proper writing. With these findings in mind, if the goal of high-stakes assessments is to ensure students are receiving high-quality instruction, the current empirical literature combined with the findings of this study suggest the system could be improved in a way that benefits all parties in education.

Some empirical literature has suggested a teacher’s perceived self-competence is a primary factor in a student’s growth (Coronado, 2016). Other studies have shown that a teacher’s sense of self-competence helps alleviate job-related anxiety and depression and also positively relates to their enthusiasm for their job (Huang et al., 2019). Furthermore, recent research has shown that high-stakes assessments have become elevated to the primary metric a teacher uses as they continually evaluate their perceived self-competence (Buchanan, 2015; Lewis & Holloway, 2018). The findings are problematic, then, when combined with the findings of this present study. This study has clearly demonstrated that participants’ sense of self-competence is being damaged by high-stakes assessments. Regarding results not meeting expectations, James shared, “When my scores aren’t good, then I feel like what I know in my heart [about being a good teacher] is not true.”

The damage to participants’ self-competence has even affected the ability to process positive results from high-stakes assessments. Many participants shared they were skeptical of high-assessment performance by their students. James stated, “I’ve gotten high scores in the past and I’ve had to just swallow my pride a little bit and say, ‘They gave me the best group in the grade level.’” Mary shared, “I feel no ownership on that good score because I’ve already been told I was below par.”
Practical Implications

Test-based accountability places tremendous pressure on teachers; there is not only internal pressure but also external pressure from stakeholders to achieve (Ro, 2018). Holloway et al. (2017) found that a universal component of educational accountability was a disconnect between teachers and policy makers. Teachers in Tennessee are subject to the evaluation model imposed upon them by legislators at the state level. These legislators have determined that 35% of a teacher’s growth score is directly connected to their students’ performance on high-stakes assessments (TNDOE, 2018). Not only have recent studies demonstrated these evaluation systems were inadequate in their capability to determine differences between teachers (Lenhoff et al., 2018), but these systems have also been described by administrators as only valuing measurable results (Paufler, 2018). Recent studies have shown that high-stakes assessments and their usage have a limiting effect on teacher autonomy (Mulhall, 2018). Findings from this study support those of other research. Trey shared, “It’s one of those things where if we had more autonomy of our classes, I feel like that more of my kids would be more prepared.” According to Mary, “We have no time . . . it’s like, everything’s changing, but they’re not giving us time to get competent in what we’re handling.”

The current system holds teachers accountable but forces them to plan and instruct in very specific ways, even if they would naturally do things differently. For example, when discussing required articles in her classroom, Mary said, “I felt like they just pulled them out of a hat because they don’t have anything to do with teenagers, neither one of them. I would have pulled in Freedom Writers and showed them stereotype in there, but that’s not an approved task.” Trey commented, “Teachers can’t be fully who they are in the classroom.”
The practical implication of accountability is the necessity of not limiting teachers’ autonomy to make choices in their own classrooms. With greater professional autonomy, assessment results can truly reflect the personalized teaching choices and methods of individual teachers and provide greater opportunity for improving the instruction students are being given. To put this implication more simply, if teachers are going to be held accountable for the results their students achieve, they should be provided autonomy in their classroom to plan and direct instruction how they see fit. This limited autonomy is a driving force behind teachers leaving the profession at never-before-seen rates.

All is not lost if stakeholders wish to ensure teachers are remaining committed to persevering in the profession. Mediating factors such as administration and culture are very important in keeping teachers in the profession. Lela shared, “Our administration has never made me feel bad, always encouraged me, always made me feel like I’m a good teacher.” This was a reason why she expressed a desire to remain in the profession despite the impact of testing. When discussing why he believed turnover rates at his school seemed to be significantly lower than other schools, Blaine pointed to the culture: “I can’t imagine teaching at a different school.” Trey made a similar remark, explaining that another school had lost nearly 70% of their English faculty in 1 year. Trey explained why it had not happened at his school: “I think the community we’re a part of, it’s probably why we don’t have [high turnover].” The implication of these findings is that if stakeholders are going to insist on subjecting teachers to the negative impact of high-stakes assessments, they must be aware of factors that mediate the impact and invest in mediating factors so educational systems can combat high rates of turnover.
Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations of this research study included the setting as well as the selection of participants. The setting was intentionally limited to a rural section of middle Tennessee in order to provide a unique exploration of the lived experience of high-stakes assessments for rural teachers. Selection of participants was also limited to teachers who were the instructors of record in a grade or content area that included a high-stakes assessment. While the lived experiences surrounding the impact of high-stakes assessments for others in the educational system are important, this study only served to explore the lived experience of teachers who taught in tested areas.

Limitations of this study included the possibility that only teachers who felt very positive or very negative about the phenomenon would be willing to participate in the study. This could have led to findings that are not representative of the impact high-stakes assessments are having on some teachers in rural middle Tennessee. Another limitation of the study was in the generalizability of the findings. Due to the specific nature of the setting and the participants, findings may not be generalizable on a large scale without more data to assist in reliability of the data across multiple settings. For example, the lived experience of high-stakes assessments impact on teachers could be vastly different in suburban or urban areas. Limitations also exist in that all participants identified as Caucasian. This makes it possible that racial or ethnic minority teachers in similar settings could have a different lived experience than that of their colleagues from different ethnicities.

Recommendations for Future Research

In consideration of the study findings, there are areas that warrant further research based on the data that were collected. The following recommendations would be helpful in fully
understanding the impact of high-stakes assessments. First, Major Theme 4: Professional Identity emerged as a result of data analysis. Professional identity was beyond the scope of this research study. However, there is sufficient data to suggest a need for further research into the impact of high-stakes assessments on a teacher’s professional identity. Specifically, a phenomenological study could be conducted to examine the way more experienced and less experienced teachers’ professional identities are impacted by high-stakes assessments.

Second, many participants mentioned improvements that could be made to the current system of high-stakes assessments. Some participants suggested different types of assessments such as a pretest–posttest design or portfolio assessment. Others suggested improvement in the speed and types of feedback teachers receive from their high-stakes assessments. These findings suggest a need for further research into improvements in the current high-stakes system that would make the findings more accurate or more beneficial for teachers to use in future instruction of their content. A mixed-methods or applied research study could be helpful in providing data about alternative methods of assessment or changes to the current method.

Additionally, many participants mentioned mediating factors to the negative impact of high-stakes assessments on their sense of perseverance in the teaching profession. Some participants mentioned administrative factors, others mentioned colleagues, and others mentioned a general culture that helped keep them from leaving the profession. Further research could be conducted to explore types of mediating factors that prevent teachers from leaving the profession in a rural setting as well as the strength of the mediating factors relative to other educational settings such as urban or suburban areas.

Finally, as this study was being conducted, many people associated with education and high-stakes assessments expressed a desire to share their lived experience about the impact the
assessments were having. Unfortunately, in this study, those potential participants were intentionally excluded because they were not teaching in a tested area or course. Additional research is needed to explore the lived experiences surrounding the impact of high-stakes assessments on those who are in the educational system, but who do not teach a tested course or content. A phenomenological study of the impact of high-stakes assessments on non-tested teachers would be helpful.

**Summary**

This research represents an attempt to provide stakeholders connected to high-stakes assessments with valuable information. Ford (2018) warned that a failure to consider how implemented policies would impact teacher motivation would not only fail to achieve the desired changes in teaching and learning but would also waste resources and ultimately become divisive. Ingersoll et al. (2016) called school accountability the most significant and controversial of all U.S education reforms. In addition, high-stakes assessments have become a key component of school-related discussions, regardless of context (McCarthy & Blake, 2017). The purpose of this study was to understand, as a lived experience, the impact of high-stakes assessments on self-competence, autonomy, and perseverance for teachers in rural middle Tennessee. The central question used to guide the research was, What are the lived experiences of teachers in rural middle Tennessee whose self-competence, autonomy, and perseverance are impacted by high-stakes assessments? The intent of this question was to provide stakeholders a rich description of the lived experiences of teachers in tested contents or classes as well as to create an opportunity for participants to provide insight and feedback in the current high-stakes system.

The participants included 10 teachers from rural middle Tennessee who taught a course that included high-stakes assessments results in teacher evaluations in the 2019–2020 academic
year. Data were collected using a word association document, individual interviews, and a focus group interview. Interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy, which prepared data for analysis. The process of data analysis followed Moustakas’s (1994) recommendations and was performed using NVivo software. Data analysis yielded five major themes: (a) assessment, (b) professional autonomy, (c) professional perseverance, (d) self-competence, and (e) professional identity. The findings of this study support previous findings from research related to high-stakes assessments and the study results confirm that the primary impact of high-stakes assessments on teachers is negative.

Theoretical implications of the findings were that teachers had begun moving from controlled motivation to amotivation and that teacher competence was being negatively impacted because teachers were not achieving the levels of success they desired for their students. Empirical implications were that participants believed the system had proved to not be reflective of the full impact they were having in their classrooms. In addition, participant suggestions were made that could possibly improve the assessment system in a way which was not only more reflective, but also more beneficial to both teachers and students. Further empirical implications were participants’ self-competence was being harmed to such an extent that even the ability to accept positive results was being damaged. Practical implications included the limiting of teacher autonomy and the mediating nature of certain parts of a teacher’s environment. All implications but the last one could be improved if teachers were provided a greater level of autonomy in their classrooms and the final implication of mediating turnover may not be necessary were teachers afforded a greater level of autonomy.
REFERENCES


Mulhall, J. (2018). *Perspectives of Florida middle school social studies teachers regarding the impact of high-stakes testing on their instructional choices and resulting student learning*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL.


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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL

September 16, 2019

Lucas Bowling

IRB Exemption 3958.091619: The Impact of High Stakes Assessments on Self-Competence, Autonomy, and Perseverance for Educators in Rural Tennessee: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study

Dear Lucas Bowling,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board 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 exemption category 46.101(b)(2), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

(2) 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:

(iii) 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).
Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible changes 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
Liberty University  |  Training Champions for Christ since 1971
APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT LETTER

Invitation to Participate

Dear Potential Participant:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to study the lived experiences of teachers in rural middle Tennessee whose self-competence, autonomy, and perseverance are impacted by high-stakes assessments and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are willing to participate, you will be asked to fill out a word-association document, participate in a face-to-face semi-structured interview, and possibly participate in a focus group. It should take approximately 40-60 minutes for to complete the procedures listed. Your name and/or other identifying information will be requested as part of your participation, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate please contact the researcher, Lucas Bowling, via phone or email within seven days to indicate your willingness.

A consent document is attached to this email and will be given to you at the time of the interview. The consent document contains additional information about my research, but you do not need to sign and return it.
Sincerely,

Lucas Bowling

Doctoral Candidate
APPENDIX C: LIBERTY UNIVERSITY IRB INFORMED CONSENT FORM

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 9/16/2019 to --
Protocol # 3958.091619

CONSENT FORM

THE IMPACT OF HIGH STAKES ASSESSMENTS ON SELF-COMPETENCE, AUTONOMY, AND PERSEVERANCE FOR EDUCATORS IN RURAL TENNESSEE: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Lucas Bowling
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of the impact of high-stakes assessments on self competence, autonomy, and perseverance on rural Tennessee educators. You were selected as a possible participant because you teach in a subject/grade area that administers a high-stakes assessment. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Lucas Bowling, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to study the lived experiences of teachers in rural middle Tennessee whose self-competence, autonomy, and perseverance are impacted by high-stakes assessments.

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

1. Complete a word association document approximately 5-7 days before your interview. This will take 5-10 minutes.
2. Participate in an interview, at your convenience, within 30 days. This interview will be audio recorded. This will take 45-60 minutes.
3. If necessary, some participants will be asked to take part in a focus group, at a time of greatest convenience to the group, within 60 days. This will be video and audio recorded and will take 45-60 minutes.

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

**Benefits:** Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society may include an increased understanding of high-stakes assessment’s impact on rural teachers’ self-competence, autonomy, and perseverance.

**Compensation:** Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I 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.

- Participants will choose or be assigned a pseudonym. I will conduct the interviews 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. Backup data will be stored on a password protected hard drive and locked in a safe. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Focus group proceedings will be audio and video recorded. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you
decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:** If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. 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.

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Lucas Bowling. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at [931-607-5015](tel:931-607-5015) or [lcbowling@liberty.edu](mailto:lcbowling@liberty.edu). You may also contact the researcher’s faculty chair, [Dr. Kenneth Tierce](mailto:krtierce@liberty.edu), at [krtierce@liberty.edu](mailto:krtierce@liberty.edu).

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](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

**Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.**

**Statement of Consent:** 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 and video record me as part of my participation in this study.
APPENDIX D: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me something about yourself that you believe makes you unique?

2. Why do you believe you choose to become a teacher?

3. What is your favorite part of being a teacher?

4. What are your perceptions of the ways high-stakes assessments have impacted instructional methods you use in your classroom?

5. What are your perceptions of the ways high-stakes assessments have impacted your self-confidence?

6. What are your perceptions of the ways high-stakes assessments have impacted your desire to teach?

7. What are your perceptions of the ways high-stakes assessments have impacted how you plan your lessons?

8. What are your perceptions of the ways high-stakes assessments have impacted your satisfaction with teaching?

9. What are your perceptions of the ways high-stakes assessments have impacted your belief in your abilities as a teacher?

10. If you were asked to record a video for a local news channel about teaching and testing, what would you want people to know about teaching in a tested course?

11. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with high-stakes assessments that we have not covered in the other interview questions?
APPENDIX E: FOCUS GROUP PROMPTS

1. Describe your feelings when you receive your students’ test results?

2. Have you ever thought about leaving the teaching profession? If so, why?

3. What techniques or tools have you used in your class that you normally would not use in an attempt to prepare your students for a state test?

4. What are your perceptions of the ways high-stakes assessments have impacted your level of satisfaction with your career choice?

5. Explain how you feel as a teacher if your students get high test results? What if they get low results?

6. Imagine your presenting during a legislative session on teaching and testing. What would you want policy makers and stakeholders know about teaching in a tested course?

7. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with high-stakes assessments that we have not covered in the other interview questions?
APPENDIX F: WORD-ASSOCIATION PROMPTS

1. Teacher

2. Student

3. Success

4. Autonomy

5. Satisfaction

6. Assessment

7. High-stakes assessment