

PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES WITH HIGH-STAKES TESTING:
A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

LaMorris Nakita Smith

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to examine how public school elementary teachers perceive high-stakes testing situations as it relates to the impact of test anxiety on young children. Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory guided this study as it sought to explain the role of human self-belief in cognition, motivation, and behavior. Eleven teachers who are elementary teachers within a North Carolina public school system, have been teaching at least three years, and have administered high-stakes testing over the course of their teaching careers shared their lived experiences of high-stakes testing through their answers to the following: How do teachers describe their students' experiences with high-stakes testing?

Purposeful sampling was used in identifying and selecting participants who had experience with high-stakes testing situations as it relates to the impact of test anxiety on young children. Data were collected via individual interviews, a focus group, and open-ended essay questions, and analyzed in keeping with Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological procedures. The findings indicated that though accountability measures are needed to assess student achievement, teachers felt that too much emphasis has been placed on the current models that are being used.

Alternative measures should be implemented to track student achievement over the course of the academic year.

Keywords: accountability, high-stakes testing, teacher perceptions, No Child Left Behind, social cognitive theory, self-efficacy, narrowed curriculum

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my nieces and nephews: Issac, Iyana, Ikeya, Imir, Odin, Titan, JaQuan, and Samson. You all will never know the impact that you have had on my life. From the moment you each arrived on this Earth, I knew that I wanted to be a role model....NO... a **“REAL”** model for you all. Never let anyone tell you what you are not capable of achieving. Wayne Gretzky once said, “You miss 100% of the shots you do not take.”

Believe...Achieve...Succeed

Acknowledgments

From the moment I knew what a career was, I knew that my career would be education. Not only would it be my career, but my DESTINY. Malcolm X once said, “Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today.” As a child, I played school every day. From using my bicycle as the school bus to ensure that my students would have a way to and from school, to taking my students to the family’s dining room so that they would have a hot meal for lunch, to using my mom’s beautiful lamps to create a homemade overhead projector, I made great preparation for my destiny.

God, thank you for giving me the wisdom of knowing who I am and what I was designed to do. I have been truly blessed.

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To myself...YOU GO, BOY!

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List of Abbreviations

Alberta's Commission on Learning (ACOL)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Social Learning Theory (SLT)

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)

North Carolina End-of-Grade (NCEOG)

Race to the Top (RttT)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI)

Academically and Intellectually Gifted (AIG)

Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS)

National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX)

Transcendental Phenomenology (TPh)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Central Public School District (CPSD)

Central Research Question (CRQ)

Sub-Question (SQ)

Institution of Higher Education (IHE)

Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to examine how public elementary school teachers perceive high-stakes testing situations as it relates to the impact of test anxiety on young children. Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory provided the theoretical framework for this transcendental phenomenological study that was conducted in rural public Title I elementary schools. This chapter includes background information of the study that includes the historical, social, and theoretical contexts that sought to address the problem and purpose statements. Furthermore, included in this chapter are the significance of the study and the research questions necessary to direct the study. To supply the readers with a better understanding of the study, there are key terms that are relevant to the literature and research of the topic that guide the data collection.

Background

One of the first initiatives developed by former President Barack Obama began when he presented a speech that included a statement regarding America not being able to compete unless we provide our children and youth with a better education system (Adler-Greene, 2019; Boser, 2012). Quotes, as such, along with those from other past presidents, initiated many education reform initiatives seeking to embrace education priorities that outline and aim to help close the achievement gap and increase college readiness, encourage more rigorous state standards and purposeful assessments, create new data systems that measure student success, improve the recruitment and retention efforts that are associated with teacher effectiveness, and strengthen low-performing schools; all components that are in line with high-stakes testing (Ford, 2018; Race to the top competition changes state education policies, 2015). The historical, social, and

theoretical aspects helped to ground the purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study to better understand teachers' perceptions of high-stakes testing situations as it relates to the impact of test anxiety on young children.

Historical Context

As public school teachers, it is the responsibility of individuals to set a high bar for every child, regardless of the challenges they may face, and provide the teaching and support they need to meet those expectations. Parents, administrators, teachers, students, and all other stakeholders are looking at schools and districts for the answer. For decades, education stakeholders have questioned whether students are learning and to what degree (Serdyukov, 2017). One of the greatest challenges and most recent watchwords that schools and districts are experiencing in the educational field of student learning is high-stakes accountability, also known as high-stakes testing. High-stakes testing is any test used to make important accountability decisions, such as rewards, punishments, or compensation about students, educators, schools, or districts (Polesel et al., 2014). Whether or not learning is taking place is determined through accountability. Accountability is the idea of holding schools, districts, educators, and students responsible for setting those high standards of performance and ensuring that they are being met (Spurrier, 2020).

Developing accountability measures that depict a true reflection of student performance and the successes of schools and teachers has been an ongoing debate and feat for school districts for years. For more than 20 years, the use of testing systems in the public school system, across the nation, has been a widespread complicated debate. Many students experience unnecessary stress impeding the love of learning and ability to express their unique learning styles (Edmonton, 2005). Testing, from the amount of time and the emphasis being placed on it, has

become out of control and today's generation of students are now the most tested generation in history (Ritt & Simpson, 2016). Students in the United States are taking more than one hundred million standardized tests each year (Ables, 2015; Ritt & Simpson). Much attention and great emphasis have been placed on student proficiency in the academic disciplines of mathematics, reading, and science (Duman et al., 2018; Jolly, 2015). Even though holding one accountable for the teaching and learning within an academic setting is not inherently bad, it should not be solely based on one measure of a teacher's overall performance (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Duman et al.). According to Duman et al., because of the heavy emphasis on testing, teachers feel forced to narrow their curriculum to teach the test.

Teachers are stressed about covering tested content and worry about how they will reach all students so that they are proficient at the end of the academic year (Duman et al., 2018). Another study indicated that the United States' 30-year history with high-stakes testing has had a deleterious impact on these students, particularly under the federal legislation of the No Child Left Behind Act (Klein, 2015a). Edmonton (2005) discussed accountability as being synonymous with being responsible; it is defined as an obligation to answer or give a required account for one's assigned responsibilities. Through Edmonton's work, a study was conducted regarding the historical development of Alberta's accountability system in Alberta, Canada. Alberta's Commission on Learning (ACOL) said that accountability measures are a process of taking the known and newly learned information, enhancing it, and making strides toward improvements. Accountability is a collaborative effort of all parties who are willing to share information. "It is about moving and improving, not shaming and blaming" (Edmonton, p. 49).

Standardized test performance and test anxiety was based on the data obtained from a pulse rate study. The evidence showed that test anxiety is related to standardized test

performance and the fact that there is a negative correlation between the two. Fulton's (2016) study measured students' pulse rates during high-stakes testing. As test anxiety increased, student test performance decreased. This study showed the effects of such increases, and how they influence a student's overall performance and scores on a standardized test. Not only was there a negative correspondence correlation between test anxiety and high-stakes testing, but for school-related motivation, academic self-concept, career advancement, personality development, and health as well (Fong & Soni, 2022). Even though high-stakes testing is a major concern, the effects that the testing has on the physical and emotional well-being of the students raises great concern as well.

High-stakes testing contributes to the high level of stress that students often face. According to Bethune (2014), teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17 experience stress levels higher than those of the adults. Eighty-three percent of these teens cited school as a source of their stress. There has been a direct correlation between the apprehension of students being involved in high-stakes testing and test stress. Symptoms tied back to test stress among students include vomiting, headaches, abdominal pain, sleep problems, depression, poor attendance, panic attacks, crying, and behavior concerns (Kelly, 2019). Even though there is much documentation to support these concerns, students are still being required to participate in high-stakes practices.

Social Context

The psychological well-being of a person simply refers to an individual's state of mind as it pertains to the functions of awareness, feeling, or motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Anxiety is a common and disabling condition that most humans experience during childhood, sometimes carrying over into adolescence and early adulthood (Craske & Stein, 2016). For a person to experience anxiety they will first experience fear. The cycle of fear and anxiety spawn from the

function of the brain, especially the amygdala (Steimer, 2002). Research on anxiety indicates that fear is the first experience encountered in anxiety producing situations (Fong & Soni, 2022). This first experience activates an area of the brain called the amygdala. Test anxiety has been ranked among the most common types of anxiety in humans, especially children, and is defined as an emotional dysfunction a person feels under various testing circumstances that can interfere with their performance, affecting over 30% of students in our nation's schools (Fong & Soni).

According to Fong and Soni, test anxiety has been said to be a variable of the academic setting. The research also showed that over half of the people who suffer from test anxiety are also diagnosed with panic disorders. Research on test anxiety has been an issue and has a long and complex history. Over time, there has been a significant progression of the concept of test anxiety, with more theories being developed that explain the concept including the interaction theory, transactional theory, and the theory of basic information processing deficit (Zeidner, 2008). Test anxiety is not limited to one person or group of people. Regardless of a person's gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, or intellectual abilities, test anxiety is known to have an effect (Fong & Soni). Test anxiety has been said to be a variable of the academic setting with which over 30% of scholars deal. It has been proven that test anxiety and academic performance have a negative correlation (Fong & Soni).

Segool et al. (2013) stated that we live in a test-conscious, test-giving culture in which the outcome of people is, in part, determined by their test performance. They outline how the educational accountability movement has greatly increased the importance that testing has on the outcome of children. Several researchers have examined the perceptions that teachers, parents, and school administrators have about the impact of large-scale testing programs on students. In a midwestern state, a study drawn from a population of 335 third through fifth-grade students

examined differences between high-stakes achievement testing from accountability measures such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and classroom testing (Klein, 2015). The study examined how third through fifth-grade students perceived high-stakes testing. This population was selected because NCLB requires that high-stakes testing begins in third grade. The researchers hypothesized that test anxiety among students would be significantly greater for high-stakes testing than for classroom testing. The researchers also hypothesized that teachers would report that both they and their students had more test anxiety about high-stakes testing than classroom testing. This study expanded on the existing literature by directly assessing students, as well as teachers, to justify the correlation between high-stakes accountability measures and test anxiety among elementary school teachers (Segool et al.). The purpose of this study was to critically examine how elementary school educators perceive high-stakes testing situations to enhance the understanding of the impact of test anxiety on young children. In the study, students reported significantly more test anxiety in relation to high-stakes tests than to low-stakes tests, such as classroom tests. There were small but significant differences between students' self-reported test anxiety regarding high-stakes testing and classroom testing, suggesting that state testing programs have increased student anxiety, stress, and focus on test preparation while simultaneously lowering motivation (Segool et al.).

Theoretical Context

The role of providing the theoretical background for qualitative inquiry is significant as it influences the research process (Collins & Stockton, 2018). Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory (SCT) derived from his interest in the ways that people influence the behavior, thoughts, and learning of others. Early in his career, he began developing SCT through observations of others. This work led to the discovery that most learning occurred through conditioning or a

system of reinforcement or punishment (Bandura; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Bandura first developed the social learning theory that outlined five constructs: reciprocal determinism, behavioral capability, observational learning, reinforcements, and expectations (Bandura; Xie et al., 2019). Over time, research yielded the need for social learning theory to be transformed into the social cognitive theory adding self-efficacy to the list of constructs (Bandura). This transformation came about because learning occurs in a social context with a dynamic and reciprocal interaction of the person, environment, and behavior (Bandura, 1997). According to Devi et al. (2017), the goal of social cognitive theory is to explain how people regulate their behavior through control and reinforcement to achieve goal-directed behavior that can be maintained over time. The central principle of Bandura's social cognitive theory is the social context of learning. The theory represents the concept of triadic reciprocal determinism which is explained as a continuous reciprocal interaction between personal, behavioral, and environmental determinants (Devi et al., 2017). Social cognitive theory is related to contributions that move the learners towards learned behaviors from observational learning or modeling where-in they carry a great deal of information and properties or behaviors.

According to Bandura (1997), we find that people's beliefs about their efficacy affect the sorts of choices they make in very significant ways. It affects their levels of motivation and perseverance in the face of obstacles. To succeed, people need a sense of self-efficacy, strung together with resilience, to meet the inevitable obstacles and inequities of life (Bandura; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). For students, this self-efficacy coupled with the willingness to persist in the face of struggle are crucial for academic success. Students who have limited self-efficacy are less likely to continue to try their because they do not believe they can succeed. Social cognitive theory and other external and academic factors can be related to high-stakes testing. Bandura's

theory offered insight into teacher practitioners' thoughts, experiences, and practices. It served to examine and inform the purpose and design to understand the factors that contributed to public school teachers' experience with high-stakes testing.

Problem Statement

The problem was teachers feel that due to the great emphasis being placed on high-stakes testing, they are subjecting young children to high levels of anxiety and stress. In today's realm of teaching and learning, high-stakes testing is being seen as one of the greatest challenges for various schools and districts (Duman et al., 2018). The idea of high-stakes testing is an expectation, but anxiety is a common and disabling condition that most humans experience during their childhood, sometimes carrying over into their adolescent and early adulthood years (Craske & Stein, 2016). Test anxiety has been ranked among the most common types of anxiety in humans (Steimer, 2002). Cherry (2022) defines test anxiety as a type of performance anxiety that can cause people to experience extreme distress and anxiety in testing situations and can interfere with their performance. Studies have shown that over half of the people who suffer from test anxiety can be diagnosed with panic disorders (Craske & Stein; Fong & Soni, 2022; Steimer).

Many teachers and students experience stress impeding the love of learning and ability to express their unique teaching and learning styles (Fong & Soni, 2022). From the amount of time and the emphasis being placed on it, high-stakes testing has become out of control and today's generation of students are being tested more than any previous generation in history (Ritt & Simpson, 2016). As high-stakes testing becomes more generally adopted by the public education system, it is important to understand how such factors have interfered with a student's performance. By understanding the correlation of test anxiety and high-stakes testing, teachers,

and policy makers should make themselves more aware and cognizant in ensuring that they are preparing students to cope with these different types of tests.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to examine how public elementary school teachers perceive high-stakes testing situations as it relates to the impact of test anxiety on young children. At this stage in the research, high-stakes testing was defined as any assessment used to make important decisions for students, educators, schools, or districts (Polesel et al., 2014). In the specific context of educators' experiences with high-stakes testing, the one learning theory that was most prevalent in the classroom practices is Bandura's social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997). The social cognitive theory was evaluated with the high-stakes tests guides and regulates the method of instruction as it relates to a teacher's motivation and self-efficacy. Under this system that rewards and punishes outcomes, the social cognitive theory will likely continue to prevail in importance as teachers conform to the demands of the high-stakes test preparation in the culture of standardization.

Significance of the Study

High-stakes tests are the most heavily weighted measures in accountability systems developed in response to accountability measures such as No Child Left Behind and has influenced the day-to-day functions of public school classrooms (Klein, 2015). Although testing measures are needed, when they are used as a main driver in an accountability system, they can have a negative effect on various stakeholders' motivation and attitude toward teaching and learning. There is a growing body of evidence regarding the connection between high levels of emotional support in a classroom and high-stakes test results (Plank & Condliffe, 2013). Several implications related to identifying children at risk for impairing test anxiety can be taken from

this research. Perhaps the most important finding from Plank and Condliffe (2013) is that students in elementary school report significantly more overall that high-stakes testing is a leading cause of cognitive and physiological symptoms of test anxiety. Understanding high-stakes tests and the effects they have on students offered new perspectives for elementary teachers. Therefore, this study examined the empirical, theoretical, and practical significance.

Empirical Significance

This transcendental phenomenological study explored an understanding of public elementary school teachers' lived experiences of high-stakes testing situations and the effect it has on young children. Researchers have explored several components that pertain to this phenomenon: educational accountability (Duman et al., 2018; Kauchak & Eggen, 2021; Popov et al., 2015; Rosenblatt, 2017), student motivation (Amrein & Berliner, 2020; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Howard et al., 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Vinney, 2019), student-reported pressures regarding high-stakes testing (Kearns, 2011; Kelly, 2019; Segool et al., 2013); narrowing the curriculum: fearful consequences (Amoako, 2019; Heilig et al., 2018; Jennings & Sohn, 2014; Jonsson & Leden, 2019; Kauchak & Eggen, 2021; Li et al., 2018; Santoro, 2018; Veselak, 2018), test anxiety (Cho & Chan, 2020; Fong & Soni, 2022; Hunsley, 1985; Putwain et al., 2016; Sainio et al., 2019; Santoro, 2018; Steimer, 2002;), inequalities associated with high-stakes testing (Au, 2020; Cai, 2020; Civil Rights Data Collection, 2020; Dworkin & Quiroz, 2019; Emler et al., 2019; Hikida & Taylor, 2020; Hogberg & Horn, 2022; Klug & Whitfield, 2003; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), and teacher-reported restrictions high-stakes testing has on curricular decisions (Farvis & Hay, 2020; Hikida & Taylor, 2020; Veselak, 2018). Specific research regarding each topic is further discussed in Chapter Two.

Theoretical Significance

Theoretically, Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory guided the study as it explained the role of human self-belief in cognition, motivation, and behavior. With a growing body of evidence regarding the connection between high levels of emotional support in a classroom and high-stakes results (Plank & Condliffe, 2013), there's still a disconnect with the understanding of the impact of high-stakes testing on young children. Through this transcendental phenomenological study, insight from public school teachers was provided to allow for a better understanding from their perspective, as it relates to high-stakes testing matters. Through the lens of social cognitive theory the experiences as professional elementary teachers provided a greater stance in a deeper understanding of the impact of high-stakes testing on young children.

Practical Significance

Although testing measures are needed, when they are used as a main driver in an accountability system, they can have a negative effect on educator's and students' motivation and attitudes toward teaching and learning. Practically, the significance of this transcendental phenomenological study may help to improve the understanding of public elementary educators' plight with the impact that high-stakes testing has on the students whom they teach daily. In addition, this study showed implications related to identifying children at risk for impaired test anxiety. Perhaps educators conceptualized, based on their current perspective and experiences, and identified the need for future research on the significance of overall test anxiety amongst their students and more cognitive and physiological symptoms of test anxiety from high-stakes testing than classroom testing.

Research Questions

Students are now accountable for passing increasingly difficult assessments. At the same time, schools are not only being judged on how many students pass, but how many student

scores exceed standards or are college and career ready. In addition, a teacher's professional evaluation is now based on how well students do on the assessments (Adler-Greene, 2019; Klein, 2015a). According to Klein, the new Common Core assessments, increasing media coverage on test scores, and the Race to the Top (RTTT) requirement that teacher evaluations be at least partially based on test scores has created a new testing environment for schools and teachers. The purpose of this study was to examine how public elementary school educators perceive high-stakes testing situations as it relates to the impact of test anxiety on young children. One central question and three sub questions guided this study. These research questions were used in the data collection, data analysis, and further discussion within this transcendental phenomenological study.

Central Research Question

How do teachers describe their lived experiences with high-stakes testing situations as it relates to the impact of test anxiety on young children?

Sub-Question One

How do teachers describe self-efficacy and high-stakes testing and the effect both have on their students?

Sub-Question Two

How do teachers describe the strategies that are used in preparing students for high-stakes testing?

Sub-Question Three

How do teachers describe the effect high-stakes testing has on the curricular choices they make?

Definitions

1. *Anxiety* – a common and disabling condition that most humans experience during their childhood and sometimes carries over into their adolescent and early adulthood years (Craske & Stein, 2016).
2. *Extrinsic Motivation* – whenever an activity is done to attain some separable outcome (Ryan & Deci, 2017 p. 60).
3. *High-stakes Testing* – any assessment used to make important decisions about students, educators, schools, or districts, most commonly for accountability purposes and decisions (Heissel et al., 2021).
4. *Intrinsic Motivation* – doing of an activity for its inherent satisfactions rather than for some separable consequence (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 55).
5. *Motivation* – to be moved to do something (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 54).
6. *No Child Left Behind* – a law passed during the Bush administration that put in place measures that exposed achievement gaps among traditionally underserved students and their peers and spurred an important national dialogue on education improvement (Adler-Greene, 2019; Brown, 2015; Duman et al., 2018; Klein, 2015a).
7. *North Carolina ABCs* – an accountability model for elementary and middle schools that was implemented in 1996-97 (Malin et al., 2017).
8. *Psychological* – affecting or arising in the mind, pertains to the mental state of a person (Craske & Stein, 2016).

9. *Self-Efficacy* – people’s belief about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives (Bandura, 1997).
10. *School Performance Grades* – directs the State Board of Education to award North Carolina public schools overall school scores for achievement, growth, and performance, and to designate that a school has met, exceeded, or has not met expected growth (Klein, 2015).
11. *Test Anxiety* – the set of phenomenological, physiological, and behavioral responses that accompany concern about possible negative consequences or failure on an exam or a similar evaluative situation (Fong & Soni, 2022; Steimer, 2002).

Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine how public elementary school teachers perceive high-stakes testing situations as it relates to the impact of test anxiety on young children. One of the greatest challenges that schools and districts are experiencing in the educational field of student learning is high-stakes accountability, also known as high-stakes testing. There are several factors regarding high-stakes testing that have had a significant impact on American students, and many have experienced unnecessary stress that has impeded the love of learning and ability to express their unique learning styles (Edmonton, 2005). Bandura’s social cognitive theory and self-efficacy offered insight into the thoughts, experiences, and practices of teachers and addressed the purpose and design of the study. The chapter opened with a brief overview of the background of the study which included the historical, social, and theoretical context. Additionally, the problem and purpose statements were outlined. The significance of the study highlighted the empirical, theoretical, and practical aspects of the phenomenon. The research questions were addressed and presented along with a brief overview

of their significance. The definitions that were presented multiple times within the study were delineated.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This chapter examines Bandura's (1997) social cognitive and self-efficacy theoretical framework and relevant literature for this research study of how public elementary school teachers perceive high-stakes testing situations as it relates to the impact of test anxiety on young children. SCT and self-efficacy both speak to people's ability to exercise their own beliefs required to contribute to the types of persons they become and their achievements. Heissel et al. (2021) defined high-stakes testing as any assessment used to make important decisions about students, educators, schools, or districts, most commonly for accountability purposes and decisions. With high-stakes testing being a system of rewards and punishments, this connection made SCT and self-efficacy applicable to this study of teachers' perceptions of high-stakes testing as it relates to the impact of test anxiety on young children. To address this phenomenon, the related literature was taken from the basis of student-reported issues, such as anxiety regarding high-stakes testing and teacher-reported restrictions high-stakes testing has on curricular decisions. The chapter ends with a summary of the content and established the gap in the literature that this transcendental phenomenological study fills.

Theoretical Framework

The theory centering this study was Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory. Beginning as the social learning theory (SLT), it outlined five constructs: reciprocal determinism, behavioral capability, observational learning, reinforcements, and expectations (Bandura, 1997). According to Devi et al. (2017), the goal of the social cognitive theory is to explain how people regulate their behavior through control and reinforcement to achieve goal-directed behavior that can be maintained over time. The central principle of Bandura's social cognitive theory is the

social context of learning. The theory represents the concept of triadic reciprocal determinism which is explained as a continuous reciprocal interaction between personal, behavioral, and environmental determinants (Bandura, 1997; Devi et al.).

Fasulo et al. (2018) conducted a study to see the effect of video as an adjunct to preoperative education based on Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory. The study developed a nursing based videotaped instruction in increasing knowledge and self-care practices among patients undergoing shoulder surgery. The study revealed that desired skills and knowledge can be effectively taught through observation of models demonstrating behaviors. Willmott et al. (2016) conducted a meta-analysis study to see the effectiveness of the hand-washing teaching program for families in pediatric intensive care unit. Based on Bandura's social cognitive theory, he developed a teaching program with a video to demonstrate the techniques of hand washing. Kanhadilok and McGrath (2015) discovered that teenage mothers who received breast-feeding promotional programs and watched videos on breast-feeding behavior had higher overall breast-feeding behavior scores than those mothers who received only routine nursing care. Therefore, social cognitive theory is related to contributions that the learners learned more from observational learning. Over time, research yielded the need for the social learning theory to be transformed into the social cognitive theory adding self-efficacy to the list of constructs (Bandura). Bandura stated that this transformation came about because learning occurs in a social context with a dynamic and reciprocal interaction of the person, environment, and behavior.

The social cognitive theory exhibits the interaction of the person, environment, and behavior (Bandura, 1997; Xie et al., 2019). According to Bandura, the unique feature of social cognitive theory is the emphasis on social influence and its emphasis on external and internal

social reinforcement. Social cognitive theory considers the unique way in which individuals acquire and maintain behavior, while also considering the social environment in which individuals perform the behavior (Bandura, 1997; Xie et al., 2019). This transcendental phenomenological study examined how public elementary school teachers perceive high-stakes testing situations as it relates to the impact of test anxiety on young children. Since the SCT considers a person's past experiences and will factor in whether behavioral action will occur or not, the social cognitive theory was best suited for this study. These past experiences influence reinforcements, expectations, and expectancies, all which shape whether a person will engage in a specific behavior and the reasons why a person engages in that behavior (Bandura, 1997; Xie, et al., 2019).

Related Literature

This section of the chapter synthesized the existing literature about high-stakes testing and the effect it has on students. The literature review began with an overview that provided background information about high-stakes testing. To add to the existing literature, other topics were explored. Topics included: (a) student motivation, (b) student reported pressures regarding high-stakes testing, (c) narrowing the curriculum, (d) test anxiety, e) inequalities associated with high-stakes testing, and f) teacher reported restrictions that high-stakes testing has on curricular decisions.

High-stakes testing

For decades, education stakeholders have questioned whether students are learning and to what degree (Duman et al., 2018; Jolly, 2015; Serdyukov, 2017). One of the greatest challenges and most recent watchwords that schools and districts are experiencing in the educational field of student learning is high-stakes accountability, also known as high-stakes testing (Duman et al.,

2018; Edmonton, 2005; Jolly, 2015; Serdyukov, 2017). To see how schools are performing, the use of standardized testing is a useful tool; however, when standardized testing becomes an accountability tool where schools, teachers, or students are rewarded or penalized based on test outcomes, these tests shift from standardized tests and become high-stakes and carry the potential for damage (Mehrotra, 2021).

From the time a student enters a classroom in kindergarten and completes their high school journey as a graduating senior, research has found that they will have taken a minimum of 113 standardized tests (Kamenetz, 2022). Standards, accountability, and high-stakes testing are facts of teaching life, and they will influence all aspects of teaching and learning. All states have created standards in a variety of content areas, schools, and districts that they deem necessary for their learners to master, and the results must be reported based on the achievement of the different groups of student population as it relates to race, ethnicity, gender, and English proficiency (Kauchak & Eggen, 2021). Although testing is promoted as a strategy for improving education for all, research shows that testing has differential effects on students with special needs, minority students, students living in poverty, and those for whom English is a second language (Kauchak & Eggen, 2021).

Educational accountability is the idea of holding schools, districts, educators, and students responsible for setting those high standards of performance and ensuring that they are being met (Duman et al., 2018; Popov et al., 2015; Rosenblatt, 2017). Developing accountability measures that depict a true reflection of student performance and the successes of schools and teachers has been an ongoing debate and feat for school districts for years (Duman et al., 2018; Popov et al., 2015; Rosenblatt, 2017). The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act aimed to make high-stakes testing more prevalent than it had been in the past (Klein, 2015a). NCLB mandated

that students in grades three through eight take annual tests in the areas of reading and math (Klein). The legislators behind this accountability push felt that it would be the right move to ensure the improvement of student motivation and raise the students' academic achievement levels (Amrein & Berliner, 2020). During a study that included taking a deep dive of 18 states that used exams to grant or withhold diplomas, evidence showed that high-stakes testing had the opposite effect of what NCLB set out to do. Student motivation decreased and the percentage of students who exited the education realm earlier than they should increase. In fact, 88% of the states that required students to take high school graduation tests had a higher dropout rate than those states that did not require a graduation test (Amrein & Berliner). High-stakes testing assumes that rewards and consequences attached to the test itself will motivate students to do well. However, evidence manifest contrasting results. "Attaching stakes to tests alienates students from their own learning experiences in school" (Amrein & Berliner, 2020, p. 32).

Schools receive letter grades of A, B, C, D, and F depending on how their students perform. In addition to the stigma that is associated with being a D or F school, sanctions such as the permanent closing of a school or district can be a hovering possibility as well. Several states have passed punitive laws that allow schools to retain students in a particular grade level if they are not proficient on the standards-based tests (Kauchak & Eggen, 2021). Despite these laws, there is research that showed student retention has negative effects later in life (Kauchak & Eggen, 2021). The pressure on all stakeholders involved is enormous. Because of the pressures associated with this accountability measure, high-stakes testing is controversial (Kauchak & Eggen, 2021). The United States' 30-year history with high-stakes testing has had a deleterious impact on these students, particularly under the federal legislation of NCLB (Klein, 2015a). High-stakes testing is any test used to make important accountability decisions, such as rewards,

punishments, or compensation about students, educators, schools, or districts (Brown & Weber, 2016; Duman et al., 2018; Edmonton, 2005; Farvis & Hay, 2020; Jolly; Mehrotra, 2021; Serdyukov, 2017). High-stakes testing is designed to ignore or override factors such as poverty, mental, physical, and emotional welfare, and discriminations, yet research has shown that these factors account for 40 to 50% of student achievement (Brown & Weber; Edmonton). To better understand how high-stakes testing has impacted the teaching and learning of today's classroom, Li et al. (2018) addressed the consequences that high-stakes tests hold for all educational stakeholders. By focusing on these tests and spending large amounts of time on test preparation, there is a narrowing of the curriculum because teachers feel forced to stick to teaching reading and math and allow for the arts, if time permits (Giersch, 2016; Li et al., 2018). Edmonton found:

We ought to be providing environments that enable each youngster in our schools to find a place in the educational sun. But when we narrow the program so that there is only a limited array of areas in which assessment aptitudes and interests lie elsewhere are going to be marginalized in our schools (p. 51).

Li et al. (2018) unveil the assumptions and philosophical foundations on which testing policies are based. Their arguments as well as educational advocates are backed with extensive interviews and research that shows that high-stakes testing promotes students' external behaviors at the expense of internal behaviors.

Student motivation

A major component of social cognitive theory is observational learning that occurs through a sequence of four processes: attentional, retention, production, and motivational (Bandura, 1997; Vinney, 2019). Motivation is a complex part of human psychology and behavior that influences how individuals choose to invest their time, how much energy they exert in any

given task, how they think and feel about the task, and how long they persist at the task (Urduan & Schoenfelder, 2006). Some theories of motivation have focused on factors within the individual, such as their drive, need, and belief.

Deci and Ryan (1985) note that intrinsic motivation represents the prototype of self-regulation and is characterized by undertaking behaviors for the enjoyment, interests, and satisfaction inherent in the activity itself. Intrinsic motivation is observed when one engages in an activity out of genuine interest and is truly self-determined (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Howard et al., 2021). Intrinsic motivation is seen as instantiation of proactive, growth-oriented nature of human beings (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). It is important to foster intrinsic motivation in the classroom by promoting feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Extrinsic motivation is not always controlling but can also be self-endorsed, meaning that it can be personally controlled motivation to attain a desired consequence. Extrinsic motivation is observed when one engages in an activity for a particular benefit or because of pressure from others (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Howard et al., 2021). External regulation represents the least autonomous type of extrinsic motivation and refers to actions that are carried out to gain an external reward or avoid punishment (Howard et al.; Standage et al., 2006). Introjected regulation represents a form of extrinsic motivation characterized by the individual internalizing external regulations (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

High-stakes testing plays a tremendous role in United States classrooms. Like most things, there are pluses and minuses that can be taken from this concept. While there are some advantages to measuring student performance, the negative comes into effect when it becomes a matter of bribery amongst students and other stakeholders. The biggest issue with high-stakes

testing is that instead of homing in on the intrinsic motivating factors, it imposes strong extrinsic motivators for teachers and students (Mehrotra, 2021). Such practices have created a climate within schools causing students to lose interest in learning and no longer find fulfillment in school. Additionally, research has shown that high-stakes testing has distorted students' intrinsic motivation and has harmed their sense of creativity (Amoako, 2019; Cho & Chan, 2020; Heilig et al., 2018; Jonsson & Leden, 2019; Kauchak & Eggen, 2021; Li et al., 2018; Mehrotra; Santoro, 2018). Creativity aids in students having a well-rounded educational experience and begins when students can explore and learn through prior knowledge in multiple facets of the academic disciplines. The emphasis that is being placed on ensuring that the tested material is covered so that students are well prepared for the test, combined with the lack of instruction and exploration in other academic disciplines such as science, social studies, and the arts, have led to a reduction of creative minds amongst public school students (Mehrotra).

Research conducted by Howard et al. (2021) disclosed that student outcomes are influenced by different types of motivation that stem from external incentives, ego involvement, personal value, and intrinsic interest. During a meta-analysis study, researchers examined different types of motivation in 344 samples (223,209 participants) as they related to 26 performance, well-being, goal orientation, and persistence-related student outcomes. Findings highlighted that intrinsic motivation is related to student success and well-being, whereas personal value (identified regulation) is particularly highly related to persistence. Ego-involved motives (introjected regulation) were positively related to persistence and performance goals but also positively related with indicators of ill-being. Motivation driven by a desire to obtain rewards or avoid punishment (external regulation) was not associated with performance or persistence but was associated with decreased well-being. Finally, amotivation was related to

poor outcomes. Relative weights analysis further estimates the degree to which motivation types uniquely predict outcomes, highlighting that identified regulation and intrinsic motivation are likely key factors for school adjustment (Howard et al.).

When thinking about student motivation, there can be a direct link to why students do not perform well on high-stakes testing measures. High-stakes testing structures can be an integral part of the teaching and learning process as high-stakes testing affects students' learning and vice versa (Leenkhecht et al., 2020; Shepard et al., 2018). Student motivation can be a leading element as high-stakes testing is said to influence students' satisfaction of autonomy, competence and relatedness, and their autonomous motivation (Bandura, 1997; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Leenkhecht et al. conducted a study to determine if there was any correlation between student motivation and formative assessments. The two assumptions were: formative assessment contributes to students' autonomous motivation, and students need satisfaction functions as a mediator. Results indicated that when teachers implement formative assessments in their daily instructional practices, students' motivation is increased, generating a positive influence of student learning (Black, 2015; Leenkhecht et al.; Shepard et al., 2018). The results provided support for those assumptions and indicated that more perceived use of formative assessment is associated with more feelings of autonomy, competence, and more autonomous motivation. The researchers demonstrated the benefits of studying formative assessment as practice and provide encouragement for teachers to start applying formative assessment in their classroom.

Student-reported pressures regarding high-stakes testing

Student voice is the idea of supplying students with the tools and ability to advocate for student-driven solutions to educational inequity (Kelly, 2019). For far too long, students have been eliminated from conversations—such as on policy and practices—that impact them directly. Kelly (2019) stated that true positive social transformation will take place when students have a voice. Discourse surrounding high-stakes tests have long been part of the educational experience for students; however, the missing piece about high-stakes tests and how they should be utilized has been student voice. In multiple ways, there is proof that high-stakes testing has a negative and punitive nature at the expense of students. When conversations about high-stakes tests are being held, it is imperative that students are included so that their voice is being heard and acted upon.

Raising awareness about how students perceive high-stakes testing, and the direct impact the testing has on the students and their educational experience, can be a turning point in educational reform. Seven students in grades three, five, and eight were interviewed to reveal the ways in which public school youth view high-stakes testing. Some commonalities that were brought to light were some of the same that are evident in multiple studies. Students suffer in various psychological and physical ways, for example, stress, tension, anxiety, exhaustion, raised blood pressure levels, elevated body temperature, gastrointestinal problems, headaches, sleep deprivation, and muscle spasms (Cho & Chan, 2020; Kelly, 2019). Overwhelmingly, the feelings of nervousness, stress, tension, and anxiety were most prominent. Of the seven students, five of the students expressed that they felt these feelings through the preparation of the tests and even more so on the day of the tests (Kelly).

Students from Western countries revealed the impact of high-stakes testing and the impact on teaching and learning (Cho & Chan, 2020). Cho and Chan conducted a qualitative study to examine the learning experiences of children and other aspects of their wellbeing, including their social relationships, leisure activities, and health, in the high-stakes testing environment of Hong Kong. They found that (a) high-stakes testing has a negative impact on teaching and learning, (b) high-stakes testing jeopardizes children's wellbeing in different aspects, (c) children's relationships with parents, teachers, and peers are negatively affected, (d) children do not have adequate play time and leisure activities, and (e) children are sleep-deprived, endure constant pressure, and sacrifice their happiness. With statistics as such, it is evident that now more than ever, improving children's experiences in learning and wellbeing and reforming the educational system to be less emphasizing academic achievement and making student wellbeing a policy of priority must be a long-term strategy.

There are a variety of students in 21st-century classrooms. The student's ability levels range as well as their behavior needs. The demographic within a classroom lends itself to students who come from low-income homes, English language learners, students with special needs, and students of minority ethnicities. High-stakes tests are not designed to equally meet the needs of all these students. The original intent of high-stakes testing was to close the achievement gap. However, this has not been the case as the achievement gap has continued to widen (Dee & Jacob, 2011; Lloyd & Harwin, 2016). High school exit exams are affecting a growing majority of high school students. Policy makers across the United States enacted high school exit exams with the intent of improving student achievement as well as postsecondary outcomes. However, research has shown that this stance has aided in the development of negative effects as well. To better understand the effects of exit testing policies, Holmes et al.

(2010) reviewed 46 studies that homed in on four domains of expected influences. The evidence indicated that the exit tests produced very little of the expected outcomes and did not even the playing field for the most disadvantaged students.

In the United States, a system of high-stakes standardized assessments for public school children was mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act (Klein, 2015a). The test results were publicized and were used to determine rewards and sanctions for schools, including school funding. Research on high-stakes testing also extended to other educational systems in which the testing was not designed to link directly to educational accountability, such as the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy in Australia, and the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate in Ireland. Most of the studies showed the negative consequences of high-stakes testing on teaching and learning (Gregory & Clarke, 2003).

Kearns (2011) addressed how students felt during test taking. Some students felt ashamed when they did not meet proficient levels or show growth on high-stakes literacy tests. The study showed that high-stakes testing is more problematic than educators or policymakers realize. Students' morale has been damaged due to high-stakes tests. Data concluded many students were affected much more than originally believed. Students reported feeling a level of shame, humiliation, and even embarrassment due to the score they achieved on these high-stakes tests. The students who were interviewed questioned their abilities for the future. A percentage of the students worried about how their scores would impact school choices they would make in the years to come. Students in this study felt that those who created these high-stakes tests did not address their feelings. Finally, the researchers discussed listening to the students and possible changes towards comprehensive multiple literacy portfolios instead of high-stakes literacy assessments (Kearns).

The tremendous national momentum toward high-stakes testing has led to many studies that document the socioemotional and behavioral impact on students. Cornell et al. (2006) conducted a study to see how students react when they are informed of failure on high-stakes tests. Cornell et al. interviewed a group of students who were wrongly informed that they had not passed a high-stakes mathematics assessment. As the students were interviewed, it was determined that 80% reported that they suffered from depression, 50% began to decrease the involvement they had in school activities to focus on their schoolwork, about 50% reported feeling that they were stupid, and 4% of the students had dropped out of school before they were able to learn that what was reported to them was in error.

The National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) is the world's premier licensure exam that is used to test the competency of nursing school graduates in the United States and Canada. This exam tests application and analysis using the nursing knowledge that nursing students learned while in school. It tests how they can use critical thinking skills to make nursing judgments (Glasgow et al., 2019). A study that focused on nursing students who were preparing for their NCLEX exam showed that test anxiety is real. Students reported chronic stress, heavy academic workloads, and rigorous progression standards associated with the anxiety that they experienced because of their upcoming NCLEX exams (Gonzalez et al., 2017).

Though dated, a study of 36 kindergarten students is still relevant to student-related pressures as it relates to high-stakes testing. Fleege et al. (1992) examined the effects of the California Achievement Test (CAT) on a group of kindergarten students. The purpose of the study was to determine if children changed their behavior during a testing period as compared with a normal classroom activity. Therefore, researchers spent seven weeks of strictly observing two kindergarten classrooms before, during, and after the CAT. The CAT is a paper-and-pencil

achievement test. Students were administered the test for five consecutive days for one hour each day. One classroom was observed for four weeks and the other for three weeks. The data suggested that students who were exposed to high-stakes testing at a young age did in fact display increased stress related behaviors. One student even cried during the test and refused to attend school the following day. Students who answered questions incorrectly on the test were asked the same questions orally and were able to provide accurate responses in that forum. When asked about their overall feelings about the testing experience, the students indicated that they did not like it.

A later study that involved 225 students in grades three through six, which are the grades, at the elementary level that the North Carolina End-of-Grade (EOG) tests are administered, was conducted by Barksdale and Triplett (2010). The results of this study that examined the feelings of the third through sixth graders about standardized testing yielded similar sentiments. Students represented five elementary schools and were representative of diverse populations. The students were asked to draw pictures and explain in words to depict their feelings and emotions about standardized testing. The results of the study showed common themes from the reactions of the students: anxiety, anger, panic, and frustration. These themes were derived from the pressures associated with standardized testing.

Segool et al. (2013) also conducted a study in which their results were in line with those of Barksdale and Triplett (2010) and Fleege et al. (1992). Segool et al. observed the anxiousness in elementary children when taking high-stakes testing as opposed to those taking teacher-made tests. The results showed that elementary students exhibited low anxiety in the testing environment when they were involved in the teacher-made test versus when they were taking high-stakes testing such as those outlined in NCLB.

Although there is still much to be learned and understood about the ways that students express themselves regarding their perceptions and experiences with high-stakes testing in school, several implications can be made based on the studies that have been outlined. Through examination of observations and interviews it can be determined that students are manipulated, regulated, and disciplined to view high-stakes testing as a natural part of what it means to be a public school student. Additionally, the data gathered and analyzed provides insight into preparation and practice students endure prior to taking these tests in school. When analyzing the findings from these studies, it is evident that meaningful, deliberate, continued student voice work needs to be a part of the student experience in school, as this research has revealed that children become obedient and controlled through many different mechanisms employed in school (Kelly, 2019).

Narrowing the Curriculum: Fearful consequences

Educators around the world are not as concerned about high-stakes testing as much as they are about the emphasis that is being placed on their students' proficiency ratings on the test. Demands by political leaders and the public for good performance in American schools have led to an explosion of testing requirements that place both teachers and students in a tight corner to ensure that learning is occurring in public schools (Amoako, 2019). Since there has been such a national focus on high-stakes testing, teachers have voiced that one of their major concerns is that they are teaching to the test and not providing their students with an adequate education that will prepare them for success in years to come (Veselak, 2018).

Because teachers feel that they are forced to focus on teaching the content that will show up on the assessments, they have shared that there has been a narrowing of the curriculum (Amoako, 2019; Heilig et al., 2018; Jonsson & Leden, 2019; Kauchak & Eggen, 2021; Li et al.,

2018; Santoro, 2018). As professionals in their fields of study, they know what their students need to be successful in the next phases of their lives; however, educators are not at liberty to provide those teaching opportunities because their time must be devoted to preparing students for the next round of testing. According to Amoako's study that took place in Ghana, assessing students using a test has metamorphosed from a means of checking student progress in academic work into a strategy for holding teachers, school administrators, and learners accountable. He studied how educators voiced their opinions about how their once noble profession has resorted to spending large amounts of time on test preparation. Through his findings he discovered that a high-stakes assessment that drives curriculum implementation in Ghana places the curriculum and teaching practices at stake.

Amoako (2019) and Santoro (2018) looked at several examples of ways that teachers felt their professional judgment had been devalued. In one scenario, six first-year elementary teachers were interviewed; the data revealed that they felt their pedagogical experiences in an educator preparation program were wasted because their entire academic year of instruction was narrowed so that they could teach the material that students needed to know for the end of year assessment. Similarly, a national survey (Jennings & Sohn, 2014) of schools that had not met the required proficiency rating on their state assessment was conducted and 84% of elementary teachers who participated in the survey indicated that they had identified the standards that were going to be largely assessed and focused a substantial amount of their instructional time on ensuring that they fully taught those standards. In another survey, teachers reported having feelings of having to narrow the curriculum to the tested indicators because they were under severe stress to have their students pass the test (Veselak, 2018). Just as Amoako and Santoro

revealed, Hout (2012) identified teachers who indicated their primary goal of their profession was to increase test scores and not the learning capacity for their students.

Another investigation (Amoako, 2019) involved 109 junior high school teachers from Ghana. That study revealed that high-stakes test that drives curriculum implementation in Ghana, places the curriculum at stake. The study found out that the overemphasis on the WAEC examination gradually shapes the content from broad curriculum to narrowed curriculum. Anane (2013) investigated test anxiety among trainee teachers using the Test Anxiety Inventory (TAI) developed by Spielberger and Vagg. Data was collected from 100 female preservice teachers in a college of education in Ghana. One of the key findings in this study was the fact that the participants were fearful of future job security. This fear was directly linked to what was causing the test anxiety. This study affirms what the literature attempts to articulate about students who experience test anxiety; they tend to put pressure on themselves as they mature into adults.

Effective teaching strategies include being able to integrate and implement a broader curriculum within the classroom setting. Authentic teaching and learning take place and it helps students to understand issues related to the concept in a broader perspective. Empirical studies have shown that overemphasis on test scores tends to make teachers narrow the curriculum to reflect test items that appear on the statewide test (Amoako, 2019; Veselak, 2018). However, if the curriculum is narrowed through teaching to the test where only topics that do often appear on the test are taught, then students are more likely to have a distorted idea or understanding about the concept and learning (Amoako). Veselak indicates that high-stakes testing has an impact on curriculum narrowing. This report looked at the findings from Mathematica's Valuing Competencies study. The study analyzed high school students' postsecondary earnings through six academic and non-academic competencies: academic achievement, work habits, sports-

related competencies, leadership skills, prosocial behavior, and attitudes toward determinants of success. It was concluded that while academic achievement was a significant predictor of postsecondary earnings for many of the students, the greatest impact came from improving one of the non-academic competencies. The data generated from this study indicated that when the curriculum is narrowed, students are subject to suffer from long-term negative consequences.

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2021) site outlines content standards for each grade level. This course of study provides a uniform set of learning standards for every public school in North Carolina which are set forth to define what students are expected to know and be able to do by the end of the course or each academic year. There are 12 areas that make up this standard course of study: (a) arts education, (b) career-technical education and career pathways, (c) computer science, (d) English language arts, (e) English language development, (f) guidance, (g) healthful living, (h) information and technology, (i) mathematics, (j) science, (k) social studies, and (l) world languages. Though most of the areas have standards connected to the elementary grade levels, not all areas have a testing component. At the elementary level, arts education includes music, visual arts, and physical education; however, end of grade testing only focuses on reading, math, and science (fifth grade only). Student proficiency and teacher effectiveness ratings are generated based on reading, math, and science results. As a result of the heavy emphasis on these tested areas, teachers feel forced to focus their attention to these tested content areas, leaving all other areas a hit or miss. Barton (2019) states the teaching of the arts and literacy in schools are often at odds with one another. The desire for schools to improve results on high-stakes testing can lead to a narrow view of literacy rather than one that acknowledges the unique and distinct literacies that exist in other curriculum areas including the arts. Arts education support diverse learners in literacy. The arts

have been proven to improve the learning outcomes of students from non-dominant communities. It is argued that without access to quality arts education, these students become more marginalized.

Educators are troubled by the current education situation related to high-stakes testing because they fear that a dangerous trajectory of humanity could be created because of the narrowed curriculum or teaching to the test (Johnson, 2020). Twenty-first-century students will be the next generation of professional leaders and because of the emphasis being placed on high-stakes testing, students may lack the skills to problem solve, to collaborate, and to make hasty and meaningful decisions. With such a great emphasis being placed on ensuring that students are ready for high-stakes assessments, teachers express their concern with how the preparation phase narrows the curriculum and does not promote the development of cognitive abilities amongst their students (Harwick, 2020; Johnson). In fact, they shared that it stifles their ability to make the teaching and learning process impactful for their students. According to Johnson, the time focused on test content has narrowed the curriculum by overemphasizing basic-skill subjects and neglecting higher-order thinking skills. Teachers cannot teach using the breadth and depth approach, as they would like to, in fear of not having enough time to expose their students to the adequate content that students will see on the high-stakes test, which could lead to their students not being deemed proficient. Students subject to a test-focused education and learning experience are discouraged from knowing when and how to use their epistemic virtues in school (Johnson).

Through a study of children's perspectives on testing, the research indicated that testing conversations and fears are impacting students all the way down to third grade. Dutro and Selland (2012) conveyed that even young students are aware of the consequences that high-

stakes testing has on them and their teachers. Chapman (2014) specifically surveyed elementary school students in Texas and found that over 55% of the students believed one reason that they take high-stakes tests is for the purpose of evaluating their schools. The students within the district were asked to share their fears related to high-stakes testing practices and procedures. In doing so, a student shared that her teacher stated,

Your teacher will feel bad because you didn't try. She gets paid for teaching you. She wants her boss to see what a good teacher she is, but if you don't try, her boss won't know what a good teacher she is (p. 5).

The continued discourse between students and teachers regarding high-stakes testing—of reminding the students about the importance of passing the test and feeling the need to teach to the test—creates a sense of anxiety amongst the students. Children are products of their environment and tend to take on the behaviors of those around them. According to Bandura (1997), if a teacher is positive with their students and encourages them, this positive energy and verbal encouragement, in turn, helps build self-efficacy, the belief in one's abilities to succeed in various situations. On the contrary, if a teacher is negative around their students, then the negative energy will begin to penetrate within the minds of their students. This is evident in student comments, highlighted in Strauss (2014), and proves how consequences for schools and educators may cause some students to feel pressure to perform well on high-stakes testing.

Test anxiety

Testing and exams have increasingly become a key part of children and young people's education across the world (Fong & Soni, 2022). There are several factors as to why students do not perform well on tests. If one spends any amount of time in a school environment, it will not take long to discover some of the reasons why students are not successful on assessments. Some

students simply do not test well. Many students are affected by test anxiety or do not show their learning well on a standardized test, resulting in inaccurately lower scores. In the highly competitive 21st century, students face various academic problems including exam stress, anxiety during the test, problems with homework assignments, expectations about academic success or inability to understand the subjects. Test anxiety is defined as a response that comes about from possible negative consequences or failure on an evaluation tool (Fong & Soni, 2022; Romas & Sharma, 2017). Depending on the individual, they may see the evaluation measuring tool as a personal threat, causing them to experience a level of resistance or apprehension. Researchers have developed theories that seek to unfold the underlying work behind test anxiety (Fong & Soni). Through the exploration of anxiety in underrepresented populations such as students with learning disabilities, it has been found that primary-aged children with specific learning difficulties had higher levels of school anxiety and lower self-esteem compared to peers with no learning difficulties (Fong & Soni; Sainio et al., 2019). Sainio et al. found that students with specific learning disabilities in the areas of reading and mathematics are more likely to exhibit higher levels of anxiety in reading and mathematics, respectively.

Sainio et al. (2019) also found that students with learning difficulties may have lower academic achievement compared to their peers with no learning difficulties. Low academic achievement in turn increases negative perceived self-competence and self-efficacy, which then further reduces engagement in learning. When students with learning difficulties encounter challenges in learning and are less engaged, task-irrelevant thinking increases and concentration decreases. This can increase anxiety levels as individuals with learning difficulties struggle to access academic learning and may not feel that they can achieve. Therefore, if lower academic achievement can indirectly impact anxiety levels of students with learning difficulties, it is

equally important to explore whether test and exams also impact. Santoro (2018) conducted a study with the main objective being to investigate the possible relationship between emotional intelligence, test anxiety, and academic stress among university students. The Self Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SEIT), Test Anxiety Inventory (TAI) and Student Academic Stress Test (SAST) were administered to a sample of 200 university students (100 females and 100 males). The results indicated that the total score of emotional intelligence correlated with the test anxiety and academic stress felt, as well as the academic success achieved, by the university students (Santoro). At the same time, there was a significant positive relationship between emotional intelligence, test anxiety, academic stress, and gender. There was no correlation between emotional intelligence and the course of study, but there was a positive relationship between test anxiety, academic stress, and the course of study. The researchers also found a significant positive relationship between emotional intelligence, test anxiety, academic stress, and high academic performance, but a negative one between emotional intelligence, test anxiety, academic stress and low academic performance (Santoro). The study conducted found that emotional intelligence, test anxiety, and academic stress are significant for, and predictive of, the academic achievement the university students' population accomplishes (Santoro).

Test anxiety has been negatively related to a range of educational performance outcomes. Over three decades worth of studies have shown that test anxiety has been significantly and negatively related to the educational performance outcomes (von Embse et al., 2018). Two hundred thirty-eight studies specifically targeted these outcomes on standardized tests, university entrance exams, and grade point averages. The results of these studies have shown that self-esteem was a significant and strong predictor of test anxiety. Perceived difficulty and test consequences were related to higher test anxiety (von Embse et al.).

Hunsley (1985) investigated the impact of test anxiety on test performance and the cognitive appraisals of test-anxious students. To overcome limitations of previous research, state and dispositional measures of test anxiety were used over repeated performance trials. Sixty-two undergraduate students who were enrolled in a statistics course that required multiple examinations were administered the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory. Their expectations, thoughts, and performance were assessed at each of the four examination occasions. Results indicated that test anxiety was related to poor test performance both early and late in the term.

A 2011 study investigated the relationship between test anxiety and academic performance of Iranian university students in a medical university (DordiNejad et al., 2011). For this purpose, the valid and reliable questionnaire of Sarason was administered to 150 female and male students. Results revealed that test anxiety has negative effect on participants' academic performance. Participants' psychological and physiological experience was also descriptively discussed before, during, and after taking the test. Results showed that students studying in lower degrees were more anxious than those who were more familiar with the test taking process in academic environment.

Putwain et al. (2016) conducted a study that explored the relationship between students' self-report levels of cognitive test anxiety, academic buoyancy, coping processes, and their achieved grades in high-stakes national examinations at the end of compulsory schooling. Participants were made up of 325 English students in their final year of secondary school preparing for high-stakes examinations. While controlling for prior attainment and gender, higher worry predicted lower examinations scores. This was partially mediated by less use of effective pre-exam coping strategies. Academic buoyancy moderated the indirect relationship

such that the indirect negative relationship from worry to examination performance was stronger when academic buoyancy was lower.

Inequalities associated with high-stakes testing

Through many forms of research, it can be said that high-stakes testing has caused a great deal of detriment to our educational system and the students within it (Hikida & Taylor, 2020). Originating many years ago as educational policies for accountability measures, to prove to be a reasonable method for improving schools, research has revealed the opposite in that high-stakes tests: (a) are unfair to many students, (b) leads to increased grade retention and dropout rates, (c) drive out good teachers, (d) misinform the public, and (e) punish students—and often teachers—for things they cannot control (Au, 2020; Cai, 2020; Civil Rights Data Collection, 2020; Hikida & Taylor, 2020).

Minority students in the United States face a multitude of educational statistics that consistently tell them they are destined to fail. Hikida and Taylor (2020) affirm that there is much truth that all campuses experience pressure to produce high test scores; however, this pressure is particularly intense in schools where scores fall below local and state averages, which are disproportionately located in urban, working-class communities of color. Representing 54% of the public school student population (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2020), minority students are retained at disproportionately higher rates, more likely to be absent than their white peers, and attend schools with higher concentrations of inexperienced teachers. Black, Hispanic, and Native American students have graduation rates of 80%, 82%, and 74%, respectively, as compared to their White counterparts with 89% (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2020). The dropout rate of minority students also frequently persists in being higher than other racial groups (Cai, 2020; Klug & Whitfield, 2003; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). In 2020, the

national dropout rate rounded out at 5.3%; however, dropout rates for minority students consisted of the following: 11.5% for Native Americans, 6.5% for multiracial, 7.4% for Hispanic, and 4.2% for Blacks (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). In the state of North Carolina, minority students frequently underperform on all high-stakes testing measures in comparison to their White peers (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021). While state proficiency on end-of grade testing in the state of North Carolina stands at 46.8%, proficiency for Native Americans is 20%, Blacks is 13%, Hispanics is 27%, and Whites is 68% (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021).

The increased reliance on high-stakes tests has had a disproportionately negative impact on specific subgroups of students. Dworkin and Quiroz (2019) reported that considerable research has attempted to discern the sources of achievement test-score gaps among racial, ethnic, and social class groups as assessed on standardized tests. According to Hikida and Taylor (2020), students who come from low-income families and neighborhoods have significantly lower test scores on standardized tests. Efforts to improve test scores have not always led to better teaching practices. In some cases, substantive learning goes down and rote memorization increases. Testing is perceived to be an efficient way of assessing school quality, but it can be used as a barrier to graduation or educational advancement, especially for minority and disadvantaged students. Legislators and educational administrators are in constant discourse that is centered around the use of high-stakes testing to make informed decisions. These tests aid in deciding if a student will matriculate to the next grade level, receive high school diplomas, secure acceptance into an institution of higher education (IHE), be a recipient of scholarships and grants, or receive licensure (Heissel et al., 2021).

Consequences tied to high-stakes testing have generated a level of impact that spills over into the classroom content related to the teaching and learning. Au (2020) found that students whose cultural identities differ from the societal norm, are impacted the most. These students must learn to adapt or are simply left out of the curriculum. Content that caters to the diversity of student history, culture, and experiences is not present. Therefore, students associated with these identities do not have a sense of relevance with the curriculum and are not able to connect. The overall result is that high-stakes standardized tests reproduce educational inequalities associated with race and class in the United States (Au, 2020).

Educators voiced their opinions about the problem with the current situation of testing practices and, overwhelmingly, results indicated that it is not necessarily the test, per se, but the instances when tests have unintended and potentially negative consequences for individual students, groups of students, or the educational system more broadly (Emler et al., 2019). In Massachusetts as well as in other parts of the country, there has been major push-back against high-stakes testing. Assessing students to guide instruction is a common practice that educators use. The assessments are not the issue. The astronomical number of hours, excessive money, and the decisions that are tied to the tests are indeed the reason of concern. Educators expressed their concerns with high-stakes testing, including: (a) a reduction in time to teach, (b) a narrowing of the curriculum, (c) a misuse of already limited education dollars, and (d) added stress and a reduction of creativity (Hikida & Taylor, 2020). With this, students in low-income communities of color and students with disabilities are hit the hardest. Instead of having the time to provide an authentic teaching and learning environment, a large amount of time is devoted to preparing for tests; therefore, these various subgroups do not have a chance to secure the skills necessary to receive an adequate education experience (Adler-Greene, 2019; Au, 2020).

O'Dea et al. (2018) determined that the format in which the test was given accounted for 25% of the gender difference in performance in the academic disciplines of reading and math. Girls performed significantly lower on multiple choice tests than their male counterparts but higher on questions with open-ended answers (Berwick, 2019). In addition, a European study by Hogberg and Horn (2022) affirmed some of the same findings from Berwick's (2019) study. It was also noted that students' results on high-stakes tests can have long-term consequences for their future educational trajectories. When reviewing the data from these studies, it is evident that when schools offer tasks that are conducive to the student and learning environment, the results are positive and allow students to experience a sense of accomplishment. When using results from high-stakes tests to make these decisions, schools and school districts must ensure that students are tested on a curriculum they have had a fair opportunity to learn, so that certain subgroups of students, such as racial and ethnic minority students or students with a disability or limited English proficiency, are not systematically excluded or disadvantaged by the test or the test-taking conditions (Hayes & Bulat, 2017).

Research centered around this topic has provided results for how high-stakes testing has had a negative impact on English-language learners (ELLs). ELLs are at a high risk for academic failure, including the failure to pass high-stakes tests such as high school exit exams. Failure on these exams can affect their future career trajectories and have negative impacts on their self-efficacy and emotional well-being. These students' disproportionate failure rates on high-stakes tests are a neglected but important social justice issue in school psychology (Li et al., 2018). It is vital to explore how school psychologists may address this issue in the multitiered support system to help ELLs and their families cope with the unintended negative consequences of high-stakes tests. Based on research, school psychologists proposed evidence-based interventions for

each tier and provided cultural and linguistic considerations for implementing interventions with respect to academic skills, social–emotional coping skills, a strong family–school collaboration, and the advocacy of ELLs’ educational needs (Li et al., 2018).

Equity, or the lack thereof, plays a major role in high-stakes testing. Due to the lack of funding in many schools, many students do not have a fair opportunity to learn the material needed for them to show mastery on high-stakes tests. Having large class sizes, limited number of certified teachers within the academic building, limited access to books, libraries, technology, and other necessary materials are also factors that create an equity issue. Through no fault of their own, high-stakes tests punish students for things they cannot control. If students do not have access to an adequate and equitable education how dare the educational system hold them accountable (Heilig et al., 2018; Santoro, 2018).

Serving in multiple capacities within the educational system allows one to experience various aspects of the teaching and learning process. Deciding whether grade retention will benefit a student is always a topic of discussion, especially at the elementary level. Research has proven that grade retention has repeatedly been counterproductive. In most cases, students who are retained do not improve academically, are emotionally hurt by retention, suffer a loss of interest in school and self-esteem, and are more likely to drop out of school. When grade retention is a consequence for non-proficiency on a high-stakes assessment, students are at risk of experiencing some of those emotional triggers (Heilig et al., 2018; Santoro, 2018; Solorzano, 2019).

As learning largely depends on teacher quality, real improvements in schools can only come through teachers. The deteriorating conditions for teachers have been documented globally and nationally and is known as the global education reform movement (Santoro, 2018). Policy

reforms are intended to provoke change that will improve the quality of teaching and learning and provide a rich and engaging school experience for the students who need it the most. High-stakes accountability or testing has been a policy of reform for several years. However, the irony of it all is that high-stakes accountability is one of the reasons that good teachers are often discouraged and even disgusted. According to Santoro, “Strong teachers offer the strongest defense against this corrosive influence” (p. 105). Many excellent teachers leave, making it an extreme challenge in an environment where it has become more and more difficult to do good work (Amoako et al., 2019; Heilig et al., 2018; Santoro).

Stakeholders have a right to know how well schools are doing. However, tests fail to provide sufficient information. Teaching to the test causes issues; being that score gains are not true reflections of actual improvements in the teaching and learning structure (Amoako, 2019; Hikida & Taylor, 2020; Veselak, 2018). This may mislead the public into thinking schools are improving when they may not be. Tests are a narrow slice of what parents and the public need to know about schools. They do not include non-academic areas and they are weak measures of academics. Test results do not consider non-school factors that affect learning, such as school resources and teacher certification – all of which must be addressed if we are going to practice what we preach, no children are to be left behind (Duman et al., 2018; Heilig et al.; Santoro; Taylor).

Teacher-reported restrictions high-stakes testing has on curricular decisions

Education has gone through myriad changes throughout the United States. According to Collins and Stockton (2018), improving student outcomes and promoting best teaching practices has been a substantial change. Federal educational policies such as NCLB which attempted to hold teachers more accountable to provide their students with the highest standard of education,

erected high-stakes testing models that seems to continue to be at the forefront of these changes (Farvis & Hay, 2020). high-stakes testing was designed to address the disparities and discrepancies that were evident in the United States public education system by improving student achievement while closing achievement gaps of disadvantaged and disproportioned public schools and their students (Farvis & Hay, 2020). Though this was the charge under the Bush administration, data sources pinpoint contrary findings in that concerns regarding poor education outcomes continue to show that despite concerted efforts to raise student achievement levels, high-stakes testing mandates have an adverse effect on public school students (Farvis & Hay).

To aid in the improvement of teacher motivation, following instructional design and practices that allow individuals to set their own goals and make choices regarding their own learning experiences within a particular setting is essential (Evan & Boucher, 2015). Allowing teachers to have a choice provides a sense of autonomy, meaning the teachers feel that the choices are relevant and meaningful. If teachers do not find the work meaningful and tend to make external attributions, then work avoidance may develop (Evan & Boucher). A large majority of the research Ryan and Deci (2017) completed examined environmental factors that hinder or undermine self-motivation, social functioning, and personal well-being.

Teachers are charged with developing an environment in the classroom that balances fun and learning to keep all students actively engaged in their learning (Dworkin & Quiroz, 2019). They must provide instruction that encourages students to use higher order critical thinking skills and to develop sound problem solving strategies, all of which can be very time consuming in a classroom setting when students lack a diverse range of experiences and prior knowledge (Dworkin & Quiroz; Farvis & Hay, 2020). Teachers face tough decisions in the classroom as

they try to balance time to help students develop higher order thinking skills and critical problem-solving skills while preparing them with basic test taking strategies to help them complete the high-stakes assessments. With the demands of ensuring that students are test ready, the strict requirements alter teachers' feelings about the daily curriculum choices that they make (Adler-Greene, 2019; Brown, 2015; Duman et al., 2018).

A study organized by Farvis and Hay (2020) sought to investigate the influence of high-stakes testing from the perspective of education consultants who work with in-service public school teachers and provide job related professional development to build teaching capacity. These consultants bring a unique approach to the field in that they work closely with the teachers and administrators on best practices that aid in the whole school perspective. The study involved consultants undergoing a mixed-method design that included open-ended questioning as well as semi-structured interviews that led to some significant findings. Four questions were used to solidify the consultants' understanding of high-stakes testing and the high-stakes testing environment and any job constraints or limitations that are brought on from high-stakes testing. The responses from the investigation yielded concerns by the consultants in that they discovered teachers and administrators expressed high-stakes testing environment consequences in several areas: (a) rather than maintaining a broad focus on teaching and learning it had become a primary goal for many teachers, (b) test preparation had supplanted more analytical and conceptual learning, (c) the instructional practices associated with the high-stakes testing environment appeared to be associated with reduced student engagement and increases in adverse behavioral incidents, and (d) management practices associated with high-stakes testing also appeared to be associated with less collegial and productive relationships between teachers and school administrators (Farvis & Hay).

Schools, districts, and states have a lot at stake, including rankings and fundings, because of test scores. For many United States classrooms, high-stakes testing has become an ever-present and daunting truth that does not just rear its ugly head on test day, but during the months and years of preparation leading up to that day. This pressure means that many schools have abandoned a varied and enriched curriculum to ensure that students are as prepared as possible for test day. Existing literature (Hikida & Taylor, 2020) outlines painstaking documentation that shows high-stakes testing dampers the teaching and learning process. Ms. Douglas, a fourth-grade teacher, expressed her concern of how the weight of high-stakes testing becomes a physical presence that, as it draws closer to the day of testing, she and her students feel a sense of suffocation (Hikida & Taylor). Douglas, and teachers alike, manifest the many constraints high-stakes testing brings into their classrooms, including narrowing the curriculum toward tested content and focusing on close-ended skills that align with the test day model (Hikida & Taylor). In this 2020 study, researchers sought to determine how teachers in two elementary classrooms responded to administrative mandates regarding high-stakes testing preparation (Hikida & Taylor). Participants included one white female and one white male who were both teachers in self-contained English as a second language classrooms. Douglas, the female teacher, was a third-year teacher, whereas Peterson, the male, had 11 years of classroom teaching experience.

The research found that both teachers sometimes complied with administrative mandates while also articulating tensions of providing access and actively resisting or critiquing the test (Hikida & Taylor, 2020). Consequently, administrators in urban schools sometimes emphasize high-stakes testing results over more immediate concerns of daily teaching and learning. This occurs despite findings that these tests are more likely to negatively impact the learning experiences of students from working-class communities of color. So-called “teaching to the

test” not only narrows the curriculum disciplinarily but serves as a mechanism to further Whiteman curricula, framing White history, morals, and beliefs as the norm while erasing the histories and experiences of people of color and other marginalized groups. Rather than leveraging the voices and experiences of students from these groups, high-stakes testing exacerbates their exclusion from the official curriculum. Understanding the pedagogical centering of Whiteness and monolingualism as pervasive across the U.S. school system, we focus here on its enactment within preparation for high-stakes testing (Hikida & Taylor, 2020).

According to Veselak (2018), a survey that involved 300 school districts representing all 50 states in the U.S. found that for many students, high-stakes testing has led to teachers only teaching content that will be tested, causing a shift of curriculum decisions and limiting a broader spectrum. Of the 300 districts surveyed, 213 of them reported that they had to reduce the instructional time in at least one academic discipline to allow for more instructional time to be devoted to reading and math. Furthermore, nearly 100% of the high poverty schools indicated that they were being held by policy that restricted the curriculum decisions that were offered to their students. Though this type of practice seems that it would offer great support in raising achievement levels among learners in poverty-stricken areas, research proves that when schools demand a higher focus on test preparation, students report the exact opposite. Students from high poverty schools reported that when their schools placed great emphasis on passing the test, the impact was more severe for them. These students explained that they began to feel a complete loss of interest in school, they expressed high levels of anxiety, and their self-confidence levels were at an all-time low. When thinking about the teaching and learning process, teaching to the test causes all students, especially the most at-risk population, to suffer disproportionately (Amoako, 2019; Hikida & Taylor, 2020; Veselak).

Summary

High-stakes testing puts considerable pressure on schools, teachers, and students to achieve at high levels (Au, 2020; Dworkin & Quiroz, 2019; Farvis & Hay, 2020; Hikida & Taylor, 2020; Li et al., 2018). Therefore, how schools and individuals cope with this major source of stress may have important implications for the success of high-stakes testing (Li et al.). According to Blazer (2011):

In recent years, the issue of high-stakes testing has been widely debated in the field of education. Studies have shown that high-stakes tests do little to promote learning in schools, yet they are still widely used. While many studies have examined how testing affects students, schools, and communities, little research has been done to determine how teachers perceive high-stakes tests. It is important for us to study not only how these tests impact our students, but how teachers feel about them as well. (p. 9)

These measures have influenced the day-to-day functions of public school classrooms. Li et al. (2018) state that although testing measures are needed, when they are used as a main driver in an accountability system they have a negative effect on teacher instruction and student achievement and attitudes toward learning. Although some studies show high-stakes testing being related to test score gains, others suggest these policies do not improve achievement and often result in unintended consequences (Li et al., 2018). Some studies consisted of describing results that indicate that the classroom quality is lower when classrooms are under pressure to increase test performance (Heissel et al., 2021). In addition to these findings, there is a growing body of evidence regarding the connection between high levels of emotional support in a classroom and high-stakes results. The goal of this transcendental phenomenological research is to fill this research gap and provide researchers and educators of the public school sector an

understanding of this phenomenon as a way of closing the gap. As high-stakes testing becomes more generally adopted by the public education system, it is more important than ever to understand how high-stakes testing impacts our public school environment (Wood et al., 2016). Brezicha et al. (2022) states high-stakes drive students and teachers away from learning, and at times from school. It narrows, distorts, weakens, and impoverishes the curriculum while fostering forms of instruction that fail to engage students or support high-quality learning. In a high-stakes testing environment, the limit to educational improvement is largely dictated by the tests – but the tests are a poor measure of high-quality curriculum and learning. In particular, the emphasis on testing hurts low-income students and students from minority groups. Testing does not necessarily provide adequate information about school quality or progress. High-stakes testing actively hurts, rather than helps, genuine educational improvement. In view of all of these factor, teachers submit that high-stakes tests are driving instructional decisions rather than what they know their students need to learn.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to examine how public school elementary teachers perceive high-stakes testing situations as it relates to the impact of test anxiety on young children. This chapter showcased the methodology of the study and provided a description of the design developed from the research. Within this chapter, the research questions, the setting for the study, and the guidelines for the participations involved in the study are presented. In addition to these components, the procedures, which include data collection and data analysis as well as the role of the researcher, are also included. In the conclusion of the chapter, the reader finds the descriptions for the aspects of trustworthiness and ethical considerations that were taken into consideration prior to the start of the study.

Research Design

A research design is the plan that lays out the data that is to be collected. The format of qualitative research is surrounded by the researcher taking a specific topic and studying, examining, and revealing how different people and groups interact and react to that topic (Patton, 2015). In view of the research problem, theoretical framework, and relevant literature, the research design best suited for this study is a qualitative method of inquiry which is a transcendental phenomenological (TPh) study. TPh was largely developed by Edmund Husserl and is a philosophical approach to qualitative research methodology seeking to understand human experience (Berghofer, 2017; Husserl, 1970; Moustakas, 1994; Sheehan, 2014). TPh is grounded in the concept and conditioned upon setting aside all epoche to see phenomena for what it is, allowing for true meaning of phenomena to develop. When examining how public elementary school teachers perceive high-stakes testing situations as they relate to the impact of

test anxiety on young children, the Tph qualitative phenomenological research design was valid. TPh focuses on one general topic, concept, or phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). TPh allows for the research to be oriented towards lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through this lens, public school educators shared their experiences of how their students have been impacted due to high-stakes testing. The methodology throughout this research entailed gathering data from interview questions, a focus group, and open-ended essay questions that produced various pieces of qualitative data (Creswell & Poth; Moustakas).

To further explain the research design, Husserl (1970) holds that transcendental phenomenology must clarify the foundations of the natural sciences. Berghofer (2017) shared that the lifeworld is the meaning-foundation for all positive sciences and transcendental phenomenology must investigate and clarify the basic role the life-world plays. To be sure, transcendental phenomenology cannot deliver the basic axioms, principles, or laws that occur in the exact sciences, but it can and must clarify why axioms, principles, or laws of a specific type are appropriate for the corresponding science. Transcendental phenomenology can do this because it is the only science that goes beyond the lifeworld. Moustakas (1994), Creswell and Poth (2018), and Patton (2015) suggested that the transcendental phenomenological research approach is grounded in the concept and conditioned upon setting aside all preconceived ideas to see phenomena through unclouded glasses, thereby allowing the true meaning of phenomena to naturally emerge with and within their own identity. During this study, the voices and perspectives of the participants sought the understanding of individuals who experienced the phenomenon. Through a phenomenological study, research inquiry was used as a guide documenting the dynamic voices of educators currently engaged in the public school setting who teach elementary aged students directly impacted by high-stakes testing. By following the

guidelines for a transcendental phenomenological study, I was able to gain rich, in-depth data to aid in understanding the impact of high-stakes testing on students' anxiety levels from public school educators' perspectives.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

How do teachers describe their lived experiences with high-stakes testing situations as it relates to the impact of test anxiety on young children?

Sub-Question One

How do teachers describe self-efficacy and high-stakes testing and the effect both have on their students?

Sub-Question Two

How do teachers describe strategies that are used in preparing students for high-stakes testing?

Sub-Question Three

How do teachers describe the effect high-stakes testing has on the curricular choices they make?

Setting and Participants

For this research study, the setting was drawn from a population of elementary teachers within the Central Public School District (CPSD) who met certain criteria. The participants in this study had to be an elementary teacher, have at least three years of teaching experience because they have a knowledge base about or experience with high-stakes testing (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015), and have administered a high-stakes test during their teaching career. The participants were based on a voluntary membership of a targeted group of elementary

teachers who were knowledgeable of testing practices and influences such as anxiety amongst students due to the pressures related to testing. The group offered a forum for these teachers to exchange ideas and connect with other elementary teachers within the same school district. To adequately describe the phenomenon of this research study and to answer the research questions, the total sample size included eleven participants.

Setting

The research setting was CPSD. The transcendental phenomenological research design of this study required me, as the researcher, to focus on a specific group or organization that was utilized to explore the phenomenon of the experiences with high-stakes testing from public school teachers. Enrollment data supplied by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) for 2018 indicated a total enrollment in the school district of 22,103 students in grades K-12 (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021). Of those, the district reported 9,658 as elementary school students, 4,334 as middle school students, and 8,111 as high school students.

CPSD reflected one of the highest teacher shortage rates in the state. According to NCDPI, the average number of teachers for both the elementary and middle school levels trailed the state by 1%; whereas the high school rate was above the state by 1%. Thirty-nine schools are in the district with approximately 1,600 teachers. Certification information supplied by the NCDPI for 2018 indicated experience in years for these teachers ranged from less than three (23.6%) to between three and ten (28.6%) to more than ten (47.8%) (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021). The racial and gender make-up of teachers within the district was as follows: 30% African American, 20% Caucasian, 45% Native American, and 5% others; 66% female and 34% male (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021). One rationale for

the setting selection was that CPSD is one of the most racially diverse districts within the North Carolina Public School Districts (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021).

Secondly, according to North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2021) data, the district is one of the lowest performing districts in the state. Thirdly, I am employed as a university lecturer in the School of Education at the local university located in the heart of CPSD. In my current role, I am charged with preparing future teachers, most of which secure employment within the CPSD. It is my hope to help the university in developing coursework that will assist future teachers with managing high-stakes testing environments.

Participants

Purposeful sampling involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals who have a knowledge base about or experience with the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). Purposeful sampling was used in this research study to allow me to select information-rich cases that yielded an in-depth study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton). This knowledge and experience assisted in adding validity to the study. In addition to knowledge and experience it is important to note the importance of availability and willingness to participate, and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner (Benoot et al., 2016; Creswell & Poth; Patton).

The criteria for individuals to be selected as participants in this study followed the details below. Participants were elementary teachers in CPSD and had at least three years of teaching experience in a public elementary school setting, which provided authentic data to support the purpose of the study. Those teachers selected as participants were knowledgeable of testing practices and influences such as anxiety amongst students due to the pressures related to testing. In North Carolina, teachers with at least three years of experience are granted continuing license

which means they have completed their probationary phase and understand all aspects of the job (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021). The final criterion is that teacher participants had experience administering a high-stakes test. Since high-stakes testing is being utilized in kindergarten through twelfth grade, the subject or grade level taught by the participants, was not a factor. Sampling procedures began after I received consent from CPSD and approval from the Institutional Review Board. I used a sample size of 11 participants (Moustakas, 1994) who were selected from the individuals who met the criteria for participants. When I selected the participants, I explained the purpose and rationale of my study as well as the data collecting process.

Researcher Positionality

From my personal experience as a classroom teacher, and, having spent numerous hours administering and proctoring high-stakes tests, I have witnessed the psychological effects and how they have become influential in the student's outcome. I have seen some of the most academically inclined and hardest working students fall short on their assessments because of their fear of not mastering the test as well as the powers to be have mandated. My most recent encounter of high-stakes testing having a negative effect on a student occurred while I served in the capacity of a fifth-grade mathematics teacher. I was administering the North Carolina End of Grade Test (EOG) for fifth grade English/Language Arts when a student asked to go to the restroom but did not return for quite some time. When approached, the student, in tears, explained how the test had become too much to bear and that he already felt defeated. This was a student who was an avid reader, had done exceptionally well on the quarterly benchmark assessments, and was very successful within the classroom, but because of the pressures of having to obtain a level three, four, or five to be deemed proficient, shut down and was no longer

feeling like the competent student that he had already proven to be. The research paradigm that most closely aligns with this study is social constructivism. There are three philosophical assumptions that will guide this study, *ontological, epistemological, and axiological*.

Interpretive Framework

Throughout my career as an educator, it has been and still is my belief that I connect most with educational philosopher, Jean Piaget and his work with constructivism. Constructivism is the philosophical and scientific position that knowledge arises through a process of active construction (Brau, 2018). Constructivism lends itself to allowing for the whole child to be educated and it underlines the current emphasis on reflective teaching. Social constructivist views stress that social group learning and peer collaboration are utilized. In my constructivist classrooms, the curriculum focuses on big concepts. According to Schunk and DiBenedetto (2020), constructivism contrasts with conditioning theories that stress the influence of the environment on the person as well as with information processing theories that place the locus of learning within the mind with less attention to the context in which it occurs. It shares with the social cognitive theory the assumption that persons, behaviors, and environments interact in reciprocal fashion (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). The way in which high-stakes tests are administered goes against everything that outlines with my teaching philosophy. Differentiated instruction strategies that are aligned with constructivism teaching and learning are at the forefront of my teaching philosophy. However, high-stakes testing does not allow for differentiation, nor does it allow students to be actively engaged in the teaching and learning process.

Philosophical Assumptions

By nature, I am a people person and enjoy listening to others share their experiences of

any encounters that they may have had. One of my many strengths is the ability to form lasting relationships. Therefore, I am rightfully justified in conducting a phenomenological study. In addition, I will give attention to the following philosophical assumptions, ontological, epistemological, and axiological. As the researcher, I will attempt to get as close to the participants as possible so that I will develop a rapport with them to gain a great deal of insight about their experiences when it comes to high-stakes testing. By forming a bond with my participants, it is my intent to gain their trust so that I can gather accurate data that may support my study.

Ontological Assumption

Ontology is defined as the science of what is, of the kinds and structures of objects (Ahmed, 2008; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ontology seeks the classification and explanation of entities and concerns claims about the nature of being and existence. By taking an ontological assumption approach, I will strive to focus on the object of inquiry and what I set to examine. According to Lincoln and Guba (1989), ontological assumption is concerned with what kind of world we are investigating, with the nature of existence, with the structure of reality as such. My study will use an ontology which is essentially of a social world of meanings. When doing research, we must assume that the world we investigate is a world populated by human beings who have their own thoughts, interpretations, and meanings (Ahmed; Creswell & Poth; Lincoln & Guba). My career as a general education and gifted education teacher, school level administrator, and now as a university lecturer has forced me to be heavily involved in high-stakes testing. Through these roles, I have witnessed students take the NCEOG, college entrance exams, and other high-stakes testing. In education and real-life encounters, it is my belief that public elementary school educators have varied experiences and perceptions of high-stakes

testing situations as it relates to the impact of test anxiety on young children. In fact, these experiences are the nature of reality. My investigation of high-stakes testing is clearly manifested in the use of phenomenology and techniques of the research design such as interviews and focus groups to interpret the educators' experiences and perceptions.

Epistemological Assumption

The epistemological assumption addresses what counts as knowledge, how knowledge claims are justified, and, more specifically, the relationship between what is being researched and the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Epistemology as a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know. Ahmed (2008) states epistemology is also concerned with providing a philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible and how we can ensure that they are both adequate and legitimate. In my study, constructionism can be closely aligned with the epistemological assumption; being that constructionism is defined by the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context (Ahmed, 2008). In short, meaning is not discovered, but constructed.

Axiological Assumption

The axiological assumption describes the extent to which researcher values are known and brought into a study. By doing a qualitative study, I will convey my personal values and positionality concerning the context and setting of the research. I will have the opportunity to set the tone for my reader by depicting a true picture but also bringing awareness of those values and biases to best seek the truth of the information that is gathered. Having served as an educator, I have personal experiences with high-stakes testing situations as it relates to the impact of test

anxiety on young children. It is my Christian and professional obligation to advocate on behalf of my colleagues and students. The Bible clearly calls Christians to advocate for those in need.

Proverbs 31:8-9 states, “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly, defend the rights of the poor and needy” (*King James Version Bible, 2021*).

Researcher’s Role

In my current role of being a university lecturer, I am teaching both undergraduate and graduate courses. Primarily, I teach in the elementary education program; however, I am also teaching in the specialties department. Additionally, I supervise student interns, advise students, and am the director of teacher recruitment. In this role I do not have power of authority over any of the participants. For five years, I served the Central Public School District as an academically and intellectually gifted (AIG) specialist at several of the elementary schools. As the gifted specialist, I consulted with the general education teachers on the differentiation of instructional strategies and curriculum for gifted students. I also served as a liaison for administrators, counselors, and other stakeholders regarding gifted students needs and services. I reported directly to the school level administration, the AIG district coordinator, and the assistant superintendent of curriculum instruction and accountability. Additionally, I collaborated with other elementary, middle, and high school AIG specialists, curriculum directors, and other area directors to support, implement, and monitor district curriculum initiatives related to gifted education professional learning, new teacher induction, and other initiatives outlined in the district strategic plan. At each school, I was the site-based team chairperson. As a gifted specialist, I had the opportunity to work with students on all levels. We had a nurturing program where, weekly, I worked in the general education classroom as well as my gifted classroom. To

ensure that I provided adequate instruction, I provided techniques and strategies that were beneficial to all learning styles, utilizing multiple intelligences.

Prior to serving as an AIG specialist, I was employed by the district as a general education teacher at the elementary level. I taught fourth grade science, fifth grade mathematics, and while teaching second grade, I taught all academic disciplines. I taught according to the standards and strands aligned with the North Carolina Standard Course of Study and integrated the Common Core and Essential State Standards. I used various techniques and strategies to ensure that I met the needs of all learners in the 21st-century classroom. The techniques and strategies included non-traditional methods such as project-based learning, task-oriented techniques, and flipped instruction, into my daily instruction (Ramirez, 2018). According to Muijs and Reynolds (2011), these strategies are designed to give students an alternative to teaching and learning and are great ways of providing a different approach.

As the researcher, my primary role in this study was to design and implement a study that was relevant to real-world issues of high-stakes testing and to also add to the empirical knowledge that is currently available while respecting the rights of the participants through utilized ethical practices through the study and its entirety. I identify with a Christian worldview which has made an extreme effort to run this study in a manner that reflects such. This worldview and intent allowed me to be honest and forthcoming throughout the course of the research with both myself as well as the participants of the study. I am a current educator but do not have a direct affiliation with high-stakes testing which will aid in reducing any biases from the study. Due to the number of years of experience and the various positions I have had with the district, it is possible that some of the participants may be former co-workers. I utilized a researcher's reflexive journal where I recorded any biases to not compromise the integrity of the

research and using existing research and literature to guide the study design, procedures, and interview questions (Moustakas, 1994).

Procedures

Before I began to recruit participants, I first secured the needed permissions to conduct the study beginning with securing school district permission to conduct research in the CPSD and then IRB approval. Afterwards, I conducted a pilot study and then began the data collection phase that consisted of individual interviews, a focus group, and open-ended essay questions. Each one of these data collection pieces are explained below.

Permissions

First, I sent a letter to the superintendent of CPSD, seeking permission to conduct research from elementary teachers within the district. After receiving this letter, I placed it in Appendix A until I received the approval letter from the IRB. To preserve the confidentiality of the school district, I replaced the district letter of permission with the IRB Permission to Conduct Research in Appendix A. Recruitment of participants did not begin until after I attained IRB approval (see Appendix A).

Recruitment Plan

Following permission from the CPSD district office and IRB approval, I completed a pilot study. The pilot study was a valuable piece of the research study as it afforded me the chance to understand the accessibility and practicality of the research before I completed the research. Authentic data that provides feedback and quality to a research study can be gained from conducting a pilot study (Hassan et al., 2006). As an amateur researcher, the pilot study allowed me to gain some practice with my data collection tools and become familiar with the process. The participants for the pilot study still met the selection criteria of the study, but were

not included as participants in the study. The pilot study consisted of the individual interview questions, focus group questions, and open-ended essay questions that were part of the data collection process. Data collected during the pilot study was not used in the actual research study; it was solely a trial run to ensure that the research questions could be answered effectively (Moustakas, 1994).

I sent emails to elementary teachers within the school district using email addresses provided by the district's communications officer. The communications officer explained that through the district's email listserv I was able to send emails specifically to the teachers from each grade level span; therefore, I was able to select just the elementary teachers within the district. The emails included the recruitment letter (see Appendix B) that provided specific information about the research study including the purpose statement of examining how public elementary school teachers perceive high-stakes testing situations as it relates to the impact of test anxiety on young children. The letter outlined the criteria for potential participants. It also included a link to the screening survey (see Appendix C). The screening survey asked for demographical and background information that was used to ensure that interested participants met the selection criteria of the study. Immediately, I received three replies from elementary teachers. Nearly a week and half passed, and I had heard from seven potential participants. Without losing motivation or hope I sent out the email that included the recruitment letter with the hyperlink to the screening survey. I then received 10 additional screening surveys. Because I was apprehensive that some may back out, I decided to send a third round of emails that included the recruitment letter and screen survey to ensure that I would be able to obtain the desired number of 10 to 15 participants. When doing so, I received an additional three screening surveys, which gave me a total of 16 surveys. Once I secured and reviewed the screening survey, all 16

were eligible. Once the participant selections were solidified, I sent an acceptance email (see Appendix D) to selected participants. The acceptance email contained the Consent Form (see Appendix E), which included instructions for signing and returning the consent form before their scheduled interview. After consulting with the sixteen potential participants, 5 decided that due to work and life related commitments, they would no longer like to participate in the study. I then sent them a thank you message (see Appendix D). With the five deciding not to participate, I was still able to secure 11 eligible participants. Nine of the participants were able to participate in all three parts of the data collection process. The other two participants, due to health-related issues, were able to participate in the individual interviews, but not the focus group and open-ended essay segments

Data Collection Plan

This section focuses on the various data collection approaches that were utilized. To address the proposed research questions, I used three forms of data collecting for this study. For clarity and alignment I asked experts to review the questions. First, individual interviews for each participant were conducted, transcribed, and their findings were sent to them individually for member checking. Second, the participants were contacted to schedule a focus group. Third, participants answered open-ended essay questions. The data analysis of each approach, which were based on Moustakas's (1994) method of analysis for phenomenological research, were executed.

Individual Interviews

At the root of phenomenology, "The intent is to understand the phenomena in their own terms — to provide a description of human experience as it is experienced by the person themselves" (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 96). Comprehensive questions that allowed for thought

provoking responses of the participants' experiences of the phenomenon were essential during the data collecting process (Moustakas, 1994). To align with the structure of phenomenology, one of the multiple sources to collect information that was used were individual interviews. Individual interviews were conducted virtually via the Zoom platform. Participants received a calendar invite that included the Zoom link for their scheduled interview. When the participants joined the Zoom meeting, I secured the meeting to ensure confidentiality. I informed each participant that the interviews were going to be recorded and the recordings would aid in transcribing our discourse about the interview questions. Each of the interviews began with an icebreaker that served as an introduction and allowed for relationship building that helped to create a sense of trustworthiness (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Moustakas, 1994). Following the introduction, I asked a series of planned interview questions (Appendix F). These questions closely related to the central question in which educators were asked to describe their experiences with high-stakes testing.

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please introduce yourself by stating your name, your current role at the school, and the number of years you have taught in the classroom.
2. With specific details, describe your students' experiences with high-stakes testing. SQ1
3. What is your perception of the correlation of self-efficacy and high-stakes testing and the effects it has on students? SQ1
4. Tell me about an unforgettable experience, good or bad, that you can remember while administering a high-stakes test? SQ1
5. Think back when you were in school and had to participate in a test. How did your teacher help you handle the stress of the test? SQ1

6. How do you personalize the learning process in preparing students for high-stakes testing?
SQ2
7. What do you think works best in your classroom to prepare students for high-stakes testing?
Why? SQ2
8. Describe a school wide strategy that could assist with limiting student related anxiety
regarding high-stakes testing. SQ2
9. Describe how time for test prep and time spent testing impact your ability to meet all the
standards that should be taught. SQ3
10. How does preparing for the state assessments change your classroom instruction? SQ3
11. What are your perceptions of the ways high-stakes testing has impacted instructional
methods you use in your classroom? SQ3
12. What factors do you think add to the stress for students on test day? SQ3
13. How does the data from testing inform and impact your lessons? SQ3
14. If high-stakes tests were abolished today, how would the teaching and learning process
change in your classroom? SQ3

Questions one to five addressed components of the central question as well as sub question one. These questions sought to understand how teachers described their students' experiences with high-stakes testing through the lens of the effects that high-stakes testing has on their students. It was paramount for me to understand how teachers described their students' experiences with high-stakes testing and the effects that have been identified. Since Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory considers a person's past experiences and plays a factor in whether behavioral action occurs, these questions were related to the social cognitive theory. These experiences may be influenced through reinforcements and expectations all which shape whether

a person will engage in a specific behavior and the reasons why a person engages in that behavior (Xie, et al., 2019). In understanding the effects that high-stakes testing has on young children, studies by Santoro (2018) and von Embse et al. (2018) were used as part of the literature because they focused on the correlation of test anxiety and student achievement. Results from various studies have shown that test anxiety has been significantly and/or negatively related to the educational performance outcomes (von Embse et al., 2018). Through these questions I was able to determine how participants' experiences aligned with these findings from the literature.

Questions six through eight aided in providing additional insight as to how teachers described strategies that were used in preparing their students for high-stakes testing. As exclaimed by Mills and Kim (2017), teachers face tough decisions in the classroom as they attempt to balance time to help students develop higher order thinking skills and critical problem-solving skills while preparing them with basic test taking strategies to help them complete the high-stakes assessments. Studies have shown that providing students with the opportunities that are centered around problem solving techniques, higher order thinking questioning strategies, test taking, and test preparation encounters are effective ways to ensure that students are more prepared for their high-stakes testing experience (Dworkin & Quiroz, 2019; Farvis & Hay, 2020). Finding answers to these interview questions that are linked to SQ2 is vitally important being that 45% of teachers who thought test prep time was appropriate said their state test was well-aligned to the curriculum, compared to 28% who said the test did not match what they were teaching students. However, even the 28% who said the curriculum was not well-aligned felt it was important to prep students well for end-of-year tests (Harrington, 2016).

Additionally, questions nine through 14 were essential in forming a better understanding of how teachers make curricular choices as it relates to high-stakes testing. A 2016 study surveyed teachers and found their views on the amount of time they spend preparing students for school, district, and state tests depends on several factors, including the autonomy they have and how well the tests align to their curriculum (Harrington). Through a study (Veselak, 2018) that involved 300 school districts, it was documented that high-stakes testing has generated a shift of curriculum decisions causing teachers to limit instructional time in academic disciplines such as the arts (Barton, 2019) to allow for more instructional time in the highly-tested areas, reading and math. Harrington's report recommended that policy makers ensure curriculum and assessments are aligned at state, district, and local levels; districts survey teachers on test prep activities and keep those that are highly rated, while dropping those that are not. A 2012 study examined the perspectives of third grade students and sought to find how the students felt about high-stakes testing situations (Dutro & Selland). The results indicated that even at their young age, they were aware of conversations centered around testing and the stresses that are added to students. It was evident that the students were already accustomed to hearing the negative connotations that are associated with high-stakes testing. Questions nine through 14 allowed me to gather the necessary information to make informed decisions about how teachers make curricular choices as it relates to high-stakes testing.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

As this study attempted to examine and understand public school teachers' lived experiences of the impact high-stakes testing has on their students, Moustakas' (1994) design guided the data collecting structure. After I finished reviewing the recordings and transcribing the interviews, I used member checking (Creswell & Poth, 2018) by sending the transcriptions to

the participants and asking them to check the transcription for accuracy. Upon receiving the member checked transcripts, I identified preliminary codes in each person's interview data. I used horizontalization and phenomenological reduction to derive the preliminary codes.

Focus Group

At the conclusion of the individual interviews, I sent a request to all 11 participants to inquire about the best day and time for them to participate in the focus group. Nine of the participants indicated that they would be able to participate in the focus group. Due to unforeseen circumstances, the other two participants had to decline the offer to participate in the focus group. After receiving this information, I scheduled the focus group for the nine participants. Participants received a calendar invite that included the Zoom link for focus group. The focus group was used so the participants could come together and share their experiences with each other. Questions for the focus group (see Appendix G) were formed using the same criteria as the individual interviews and acted as follow-up questions. A focus group values the collaboration between the researcher and the participants and enable the researcher to discuss specific topics as outlined in phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994). When the participants joined the Zoom meeting, I secured the meeting to ensure confidentiality. I began the focus group with an icebreaker that served as an introduction and time for collaboration amongst the participants. Following the introduction, I asked a series of five questions (see Appendix G). These questions closely related to the central question in which educators were asked to describe their experiences with high-stakes testing.

Focus Group Questions

1. Describe how your students are effected by the high-stakes tests that are administered in your grade level (i.e., End-of-Grade test (EOG), End-of-Course test (EOC), NC Final Exam, MClass Reading 3D Assessment, NC K-2 Mathematics Assessment). SQ1
2. Describe how you feel high-stakes testing effects students with disabilities, low-income populations, and minority students. SQ1
3. Describe for me how high-stakes testing impacts your instructional planning and other teaching responsibilities. SQ3
4. Tell me about a district-wide strategy that you think ensures all your students do well on the assessment while limiting the influence of anxiety on the part of students. SQ2
5. What strategies do you feel the district/state should implement to prepare students for high-stakes testing? SQ2

Questions one and two were critical in answering sub question one and allowed me to gain a better understanding of the participants' lived experiences with high-stakes testing and the effects that high-stakes testing had on their students. When communicating about questions one and two, the focus group delved into discourse of how their students have been effected by high-stakes testing. Studies have shown that because of the pressures of high-stakes testing, students exhibit various psychological and physical sufferings. Some examples include (a) stress, (b) tension, (c) anxiety, (d) exhaustion, (e) gastrointestinal problems, and (f) sleep deprivation (Cho & Chan, 2020; Kelly, 2019). In Kelly's research, over 70% of the students expressed that these feelings began during the preparation of the tests and intensified on the day of the test administration. Question two specifically explored how high-stakes testing effects certain sub-groups that are found within a public school classroom. In today's classrooms, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has taken on a whole new meaning (Ali, 2020). Classrooms are reflected of

populations of students with disabilities, low-income populations, and minority students. Question two explicitly gave the focus group participants the opportunity to voice their experiences of how high-stakes testing has effected these students. Kelly and Sainio et al. (2019) provide insight as to how students with special needs suffer, because of high-stakes testing. Au (2020) found that students whose cultural identities that differ from the societal norm are impacted the most. Students who fall into one of these sub-groups tend to have less access to an equitable educational experience, making it even more challenging to share in the success stories of their peers (Au; Dworkin & Quiroz, 2019; Kelly; Sainio et al.). In addition, studies such as Strauss (2014) demonstrate that high-stakes testing has narrowed the curriculum that may have caused an increase in students' test taking skills; however, content wise, they may not have learned anything more. Research indicates the impact of this phenomenon is more pronounced in low-income schools creating a two-tier educational system where the lower class is taught a narrow curriculum while the upper class, who already passed the test, receive a more well-rounded education.

Questions three, four, and five were used for data collection to describe the influence high-stakes testing had on the classroom environment as it relates to the curriculum-related decisions that teachers make to ensure that their students are test-ready as well as implementing strategies that can be used in preparing their students for high-stakes testing. Knoch et al. (2020) examined shifting test preparation techniques and how it effected student achievement on high-stakes testing items. A study by Mayes and Howell (2017) looked at how when test preparation was intentional and tests were carefully explained to students, students experienced greater success. Dialogue taken from this focus group question was pivotal as teachers began to think about how their lesson planning and curriculum decisions are impacted by high-stakes testing.

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

Like the interviews, the focus group information followed Moustakas's (1994) modification of Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen's analysis method for phenomenological research. Transcription of the information was exercised and sent to participants for member checking. Upon receiving the member checked transcripts, preliminary codes from the focus group data were identified. Horizontalization and phenomenological reduction was used to derive the preliminary codes. The questions, responses, and individual pseudonyms were placed in an Excel spreadsheet. Reduction and elimination of non-essential information was used. The information was color-coded to facilitate clustering and thematizing.

Open-Ended Essay Questions

The task for qualitative researchers is to provide a framework that may allow people to respond in a way that will can give a true depiction of their point-of-view about a particular phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas, utilizing open-ended essay questions is a way for qualitative researchers to understand the perceptions, feelings, experiences, and knowledge of the people. At the conclusion of the focus group, I sent each participant an email that included their four open-ended essay questions and asked that the responses be submitted to me within a week. I was able to secure four responses that day with the remaining seven being returned within a week. The four essay questions (see Appendix H) enabled me to gain insight through direct quotations that served as a basic source of raw data in qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2015). The questions during this time provided closure to the data collection. The questions were open-ended essay questions that allowed the participants to provide any additional comments that the prescribed standard interview questions and focus group questions did not address. Through open expressions, the participants freely expressed their passion about the profession,

their students, and their lived experiences with high-stakes testing.

Open-Ended Essay Questions

1. In what way(s) have you experienced your provided curriculum being altered/narrowed as a result of high-stakes testing? SQ3
2. What effect does high-stakes testing have on elementary students' attitudes, and on the climate of learning? SQ1
3. What fears or concerns do you have for your students as they continue to the next phase of their educational journey, as a result of being educated in a heavily tested environment? Why? SQ1
4. We've covered a lot of ground in our conversation, and I so appreciate the time you've given to this. What last thoughts could you add or share about high-stakes testing?

Questions one and two related to sub question three and one, respectively, and enabled participants to discuss, based on their lived experiences, the effects high-stakes testing had on the curriculum, teachers' and students' attitudes, and the learning environment. Amoako (2019) and Santoro (2018) looked at several examples of ways that teachers felt their professional judgements were being belittled. One study interviewed six novice elementary teachers where the other study explored novice and beginning licensed teachers, basically all teachers with zero to five years of experience, with results revealing that they felt their pedagogical training had been in vain. They expressed that their entire academic year of instruction was narrowed so that they could teach the material that students needed to know for the end of year assessment. In Amoako and Santoro's studies, all the teachers felt they were not being empowered to make competent decisions about what should be happening in their classrooms due to a narrowed

curriculum approach to ensure their students were aware of what would be on the yearly assessments.

Question three sought to get at sub question one and summarized the fearful consequences teachers felt will come about because of students being educated in such a heavily tested environment. According to several data sources, United States students are some of the most tested children in the world, taking more than one hundred million standardized tests each year (Ables, 2015; Ritt & Simpson, 2016). With these alarming numbers, teachers express a great deal of fright as to what these statistics are doing to our next generation of teachers, administrators, medical professions, laborers, armed forces, and other vital careers. Veselak (2018) reported findings through a math study that analyzed high school students' postsecondary earnings through six academic and non-academic competencies: academic achievement, work habits, sports-related competencies, leadership skills, prosocial behavior, and attitudes toward determinants of success. It was concluded the greatest impact came from improving one of the non-academic competencies. The data generated from this study indicates that when the curriculum is narrowed, students are subject to suffer from long-term negative consequences.

Additionally, teachers have voiced that one of their major concerns is they are teaching to the test and not providing their students with an adequate education that will prepare them for success in years to come (Veselak, 2018). During a study (Amrein & Berliner, 2020) eighteen states examined the effects high-stakes testing had on their public school students regarding student motivation. Results showed a decrease in student motivation and an increase in the percentage of students not completing their educational journey. In fact, 88% of the states that required students to take high school graduation tests have a higher dropout rate than those states

that do not require a graduation test. High-stakes testing assumes that rewards and consequences attached to the test itself will motivate students to do well; however, evidence proves differently.

Portions of the study conducted by Strauss (2014) can be aligned with Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory. Strauss looked at things elementary students vocalized about their fears related to high-stakes testing. In their findings, students shared alarming statements that came directly from their teachers. It can be determined that students felt a great deal of pressure to do well on the test in fear being that if they did not, something drastic would happen to their teachers' jobs. Strauss's study relates to Bandura because it can be said that if a teacher is positive with their students and they encourage them, positive energy can be gleaned in various situations; whereas if negative vibes are experienced, then negative energy will be generated

Open-Ended Essay Questions Data Analysis Plan

The open-ended essay question process followed that of the the interviews and the focus group by exercising Moustakas's (1994) modification of Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen's analysis method for phenomenological research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Being that participants typed their responses to the open-ended essay questions, transcription of the information was not needed, nor was member checking. I did generate preliminary codes from the data. Horizontalization and phenomenological reduction was used to derive the preliminary codes. The questions, responses, and individual pseudonyms were placed in an Excel spreadsheet. Reduction and elimination of non-essential information was used. The information was color-coded to facilitate clustering and thematizing.

Data Synthesis

Creswell and Poth (2018) annotate that qualitative data analysis consists of data organization, thorough data analysis coding, and developing themes, data representation and

interpretation. For the data synthesis, I synthesized all the data into one piece of evidence that identified themes and offered answers to the research questions. Moustakas (1994) stated the data analysis process consists of important principles. Moustakas's modification of Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen analysis method for phenomenological research guided this data analysis plan as well. Transcription of the information was exercised and sent to the participants for member checking. The questions, responses, and individual pseudonyms were placed in an Excel spreadsheet. Reduction and elimination of non-essential information was used. The information was color-coded to facilitate clustering and thematizing. Each theme was noted individually on the spreadsheet along with individual textual descriptions, where individual information was listed verbatim. This individual textual description aided in facilitating an individual structural description. A textual structural description followed the same process from the individual interviews and focus group. The textual structure was listed on the spreadsheet as well. The principles that were used to showcase the data are in the following procedures.

Epoché

Epoché is the first step of the phenomenological research process. It is an approach taken by the researcher so that he or she can set aside his or her views of the phenomenon and focus on those views communicated by the participants (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas reported that researchers should perform bracketing, which means to set aside prior thoughts on the research topic. Patton (2015) explained that the researcher must take a reflection of their own thoughts, feelings, judgements, and perceptions about the phenomenon and make a conscious effort to set them aside. Giving way to epoché enabled me to set aside or suspend assumptions and resistance to prejudices (Moustakas, 1994). My prior experience as a teacher administering high-stakes tests presents a bias in this study. Therefore, I used a reflexive

journal (Appendix I) to record any biases or beliefs experienced before beginning this research study. After each interview, I added my reflections to the journal. These reflections included short descriptions outlining the entire interview process for that day. It also provided me some time to reflect on the participants' responses and allowed me to start to document some similarities and differences that later became beneficial in developing themes and sub-themes.

Phenomenological Reduction

In my study, I used phenomenological reduction, not in the sense that what I am doing is wrong, but more so that I take what I am doing to the extent necessary to ensure validity. By shooting from the lens of describing what I see, external and internal, I was able to develop the relationship between phenomenon and self. By doing so, I was able to analysis the data that was used in the study (Moustakas, 1994). After reading the transcriptions of the interviews and focus group numerous times, I was better able to analyze the experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas). I created a document that listed the significant statements that gave a great depiction of the experiences (Moustakas). I omitted statements that appeared more than once. Once the redundant statements were omitted, I was able to formulate a list of themes and sub-themes.

Imaginative Variation

The next step in the research process is that of imaginative variation, as conducive to elucidating the way phenomena appear to consciousness (Moustakas, 1994). By engaging in the phenomenological reduction, and using imaginative variation, I was able to describe the experience of consciousness, having stepped outside of the natural attitude through the epoché. Imaginative variation is a stage aimed at explicating the structures of experience more distinctively and is best described as a mental experiment. Features of the experience are imaginatively altered to view the phenomenon under investigation from varying perspectives. This technique allowed for creating a varying of the frames of reference and the perspectives, employing polarities and reversals. In this stage, intuition is purely imaginative and not empirical. Through imaginative variation and phenomenological reduction, I was able to generate structural themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas).

Textural and Structural Descriptions

I categorized the significant statements into textural descriptions of what was experienced by the research participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These intense descriptions of the lived experiences of the elementary teachers helped narrow the focus of the study. Verbatim quotations captured the experiences of the participants, which will help to provide more understanding of the phenomenon. I attempted to analyze themes and patterns from all participants' transcripts to gain a deeper understanding of the research. Codes helped to identify correspondence to the research questions, and themes outlined and recorded helped to understand the meaning or essence of the participants' lived experiences of teachers' perceptions of high-stakes testing and the effect it has on their students (Creswell & Poth).

Trustworthiness

As the researcher, I aimed to establish validity and reliability in an ethical manner during the length of this study. Trustworthiness is a term that is commonly used about the validity and reliability of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba). Procedures to establish trustworthiness, outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1989), were used to create the foundation of trustworthiness in this study. I ensured that this study addressed trustworthiness in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as outlined by Lincoln and Guba.

Credibility

Credibility involves establishing the truth of the research findings. To ensure that the findings are true, the research used triangulation. Merriam (2009) shared that one of the most well-known strategies to shore up the internal validity of a study is triangulation. Creswell and Poth (2018) described triangulation as collecting and showing data from multiple sources. Triangulation uses multiple sources of data by means of comparing and cross-checking data

through interview data collected from different people with different perspectives. For this study, triangulation occurred through analysis of the individual interviews, the focus group, and open-ended essay questions (Lincoln & Guba, 1989). Member checks ensured the internal validity was not being compromised. Member checks put the preliminary analysis back on the participants and asked whether the researcher's interpretation was perceived to be true. Participants were able to recognize their experiences in the researcher's interpretation. Additional editing to better capture their perspectives was not needed (Merriam, 2009). Another way to ensure credibility was through prolonged engagement. Lincoln and Guba stated that prolonged engagement occurs when a researcher invests a significant amount of time collecting data to fully understand the views of the participants which will be used in this research study. This allowed me to develop a sense of rapport with my participants and aided in building trust with the participants to ensure that the information that was being provided was authentic and rich.

Transferability

Transferability is showing that the findings may have applicability in other contexts, which is largely achieved using thick descriptions when describing research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1989). Merriam (2009) "defined thick descriptions as a term for anthropology and means the complete, literal description of the incident or entity being investigated" (p. 43). The researcher allows the reader to make decisions regarding transferability because the writer describes, in detail, the participants or setting under study (Lincoln & Guba). According to Patton (2015), the researcher is responsible for providing accurate information that ensures thick descriptions that allow the product of the case study to be rich in detail and data. An audit trail (see Appendix J) comprised of dates of the research process (Gall et al., 2006) was used

throughout the data collection process to allow the findings of the study to offer value to other participants and future studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Dependability

Dependability was used to ensure trustworthiness. Peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1989) is a means of ensuring internal validity. This allowed me to discuss the research project findings with a peer not involved in the study to aid in my thinking about the various parts of the research process. Peer review (Lincoln & Guba) is the idea of discourse with professional peers who address emerging themes that can be used to explain a phenomenon. I used peer review to examine the data and findings of the research study. Two peers who have no affiliation with the research study but have a wealth of knowledge and experience with qualitative research were selected. These individuals reviewed that data for accuracy aided in developing reoccurring themes from the collected data.

Confirmability

Confirmability was addressed using a reflexive journal (Appendix I). The reflexive journal recorded any biases or beliefs experienced before beginning the research study. The reflexive journal contains descriptive details of the process. After each interview, I added to the reflexive journal to notate my reflections. These reflections included any mental, physical, environmental, personal, and subjective observations during the data collection process. As a university lecturer preparing the next generation of teachers, I often reflect on my experiences as an elementary teacher preparing students for high-stakes tests and their impact on my students and me. Still, the new insight gained from understanding others' experiences is invaluable.

Ethical Considerations

I gave detailed attention to any ethical considerations for this study. As with any research study involving human participants, I sought approval through the Liberty University Institutional Review Board prior to conducting any research. In addition, I obtained access to the site through approval of the school level administrators, district superintendent, and the assistant superintendent of curriculum instruction and accountability. From the onset, I gained consent from participants and emphasized the voluntary nature of the study, including their right to withdraw at any time (Schwandt, 2007). This ensured that all participants were fully aware and understood the risks associated with the study prior to beginning. I committed to protecting their confidentiality by using pseudonyms, such as the reference to Central Public Schools, and maintained and safeguarded all collected data. Respecting all potential power imbalances was a concern due to my working relationships with the schools and teachers. I previously served in the role of a general education teacher, district co-administrator, committee member, and an AIG specialist. I informed the participants thoroughly about the study's purpose and explained how I will use the data collected from the individual interviews, the focus group, and open-ended essays to co-construct an accurate textural-structural description of their shared experiences with the phenomenon of high-stakes testing.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to provide the methodology of this transcendental phenomenological study. Each step of the process was to attempt to examine and understand public school teachers' experiences with high-stakes testing and the impact it has on their students. This study was necessary as it adds empirical knowledge in qualitative form. To triangulate the data gathered from 11 elementary teachers, interviews, a focus group, and open-ended essay questions were used. In addition to a discussion of these three data collection

methods, this chapter included the research questions, setting, participants, researcher positionality, procedures, and the researcher's role in addressing trustworthiness and ethical considerations that will bring more information to the area of high-stakes testing from perceptions of current elementary school teachers.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to examine how public school elementary teachers perceive high-stakes testing situations as it relates to the impact of test anxiety on young children. To better understand the research participants' experiences, the central research question, "How do teachers describe their lived experiences with high-stakes testing situations as it relates to the impact of test anxiety on young children?" was used to direct the research study. In addition, three sub-questions are discussed to provide a deeper dive into the participants' lived experiences discussed later in this chapter. This chapter provides the data analysis' overall findings, which served as the participants' voices to provide rich and meaningful descriptions. The chapter includes participant descriptions by way of a table as well as a narrative description for each participant; followed by the results section which will provide an in-depth analysis to explain all themes and sub-themes supported by participant quotes. Research question responses are provided as well as a chapter summary.

Participants

To ensure that I could clearly articulate the phenomenon of elementary school teachers' experiences with high-stakes testing, 11 participants who met the selection criteria participated in this study. Eleven participants completed the individual interviews, and nine participated in the focus group and open-ended essay questions data collection portions. The research participants were elementary teachers with at least three years of teaching experience, which allowed for authentic data to support the purpose of the study because these teachers were experienced with administering high-stakes tests and knowledgeable of testing practices and influences such as anxiety amongst students due to the pressures related to testing. Purposeful sampling was used to

identify and select the individual research participants who had a knowledge base about or experience with the high-stakes testing phenomenon (Patton, 2015). The participants' confidentiality is protected using pseudonyms. Table 1 includes the demographic data of the participants.

Table 1

Teacher Participants

Teacher Participant	Years Taught	Grade Level Taught	Content Area
Dawn	26	Fourth	Mathematics
Ben	16	Sixth	English Language Arts
Jordan	26	Third	All content areas
Tasha	27	Third	All content areas
Tom	19	Fourth	Mathematics
Lynn	22	Third	All content areas
Billie	21	Third	All content areas
Jane	10	Third	All content areas
Julie	11	Fifth	Mathematics and Science
Sheev	20	Sixth	Mathematics
Logan	13	Fifth	Mathematics

Dawn

Dawn is in her 26th year as an elementary school teacher and currently teaches in a pre-kindergarten through fifth-grade community school with a heavily English Language Learner student population. Dawn is a fourth-grade mathematics teacher which she quoted as being the greatest job anyone could ever have. She has taught in multiple schools within the district. Dawn enjoys traveling with her family and friends and spending time with her pets.

Ben

Ben is an elementary school teacher who has been in this role for 16 years. She currently teaches in a pre-kindergarten through sixth grade community school with a large minority population of students. Though not native to the state, she came seeking employment 16 years ago, enjoyed the community in which she resides, and has made this her new home. Over the course of her career, Ben has taught fifth and sixth grade English language arts. Her current school is the only school she has taught at, and she would like to remain there until retirement. Singing, dancing, and having a great time is what you can find Ben doing in her spare time.

Jordan

Jordan has 26 years of experience as an elementary school teacher. She currently teaches in a pre-kindergarten through eighth grade community school with a vast majority of Native American students and teachers. This is the second district that Jordan has worked with. The demographics of her first school are almost identical to her current school. All of her career has been spent teaching third or fourth grade. She currently teaches third grade, which requires her to teach the general education curriculum for all academic disciplines. Family time is a crucial part of who she is, especially watching her own four children excel in academics and athletics.

Tasha

Tasha, a 27-year veteran elementary school teacher, teaches in a pre-kindergarten through eighth grade community school with the student and teacher population being predominately Native American. Prior to coming to the district, Tasha taught in her hometown district that is very similar to her current one. There, she taught kindergarten, first, and third grade. Since arriving to this district, she has taught first and third grade. She stated that out of all the grades she has taught, third has been the most rewarding because she enjoys the curriculum and the challenge that comes with teaching a tested grade level. Tasha described herself with using one word, humor. "In my next life, I will be a comedian," stated Tasha.

Tom

As a veteran teacher of 19 years, Tom is employed in a pre-kindergarten through sixth grade community school, in fact, the school he attended as a child. The student and teacher population is predominately Native American. This is the only school that Tom has ever taught at. His entire career has been spent serving as a fourth-grade mathematics teacher; however, this year, he is a fifth-grade mathematics teacher. Tom indicated that he loves teaching fourth grade but when his principal asked, he agreed to give fifth grade a try. In his spare time, Tom enjoys breeding dogs.

Lynn

Lynn has been serving as an elementary school teacher for 22 years. Her school is in the city, has grades pre-kindergarten through fourth, and a diverse population of students and teachers. For 22 years, Lynn has taught in this same school. She has taught multiple grade levels including third grade. She is currently a second-grade teacher and shared that her experience in third grade has truly impacted the decisions that she makes as a third-grade teacher. According to

Lynn, her dream job is to serve as a reading specialist for elementary teachers. Lynn enjoys spending time with her family and friends.

Billie

Billie, a 21-year veteran elementary school teacher, is employed in a pre-kindergarten through sixth grade community school, the same one she attended as an elementary student. The student and teacher population are predominately Native American. As a general education teacher, her current school is the only school in which she has served. At another point in her career Billie worked as a gifted and talented teacher. In that capacity, she taught in both elementary and middle schools across the district. It is her plan to return to that setting before retiring. Billie is active in her community, with her church, and at recreation functions with her family.

Jane

As a 10-year veteran elementary school teacher, Jane teaches in a pre-kindergarten through sixth-grade community school with a predominately Native American student and teacher population. For the first half of her career, Jane taught in a predominately African American school but due to budget cuts, she was relocated to her current school. Jane is a third-grade teacher and absolutely loves all that it means to be a teacher. "Teaching is all that I know," stated Jane. She resides in a different county than where she teaches but enjoys the various aspects she encounters.

Julie

Julie is an elementary school teacher with 11 years of experience. She teaches in a pre-kindergarten through fifth grade city school with a predominately Native American student and teacher population. Julie did not grow up in the area, as her parents moved to a different state

when she was just a few years old. Prior to teaching at her current school, Julie had varied teaching experiences. She began her teaching career in a middle school with a diverse population and then taught in a different district at an elementary school with a diverse population of students and teachers there as well. Julie has always taught mathematics. However, this year, she has added science to her teaching load as well. Julie is a wife and mother and is expecting another baby in the near future.

Sheev

Sheev is now finishing his 20th year of teaching in an elementary school setting. He teaches in a fourth through eighth-grade community school with a predominately Caucasian student and teacher population. Sheev is not a native of the state but has enjoyed being in the area for 20 years. When he first came to the district, he taught in a school with many military families. While there, he met his now wife and when they married, they decided to move schools within the district. Sheev currently teaches sixth grade mathematics, but has also taught fifth, seventh, and eighth grade mathematics.

Logan

Logan is a fifth-grade mathematics teachers who has served in multiple capacities in her 13 years as an educator. Currently, she teaches in a pre-kindergarten through eighth grade city school with a diverse student and teacher population. Previously, she served as a district-level supervisor for elementary mathematics and science. In that capacity, she resided in another state.

Results

This section will focus on the themes and sub-themes that resulted from the research taken from individual interviews, a focus group, and open-ended essay questions. The themes and sub-themes emerged from elementary teachers sharing their perceptions of high-stakes

testing situations as it relates to the impact of test anxiety on young children. The themes and sub-themes were used to create the textural descriptions of the elementary school teachers' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Theme Development

Upon receipt of all data, I analyzed the data to look for emerging themes. Initially, I identified eight themes and a plethora of sub-themes. After doing a further analysis of the data, I consolidated those original eight themes into five themes. Across all data collection touch points, all the participants were able to share experiences for the following themes: (a) environment, (b) test prep strategies, (c) inequities amongst marginalized populations, (d) narrowed curriculum, and (e) motivation. In the next sections, the themes and sub-themes are discussed in more detail. Table 2 includes the key words and phrases from which the themes and sub-themes emerged.

Table 2

Theme Development

Key Words/Phrases	Subthemes
Major Theme 1: Environment	
Educational curiosity, school culture, engagement, constant reminder about the test, blessing of pencils, posters, pep rallies, multiple days of testing throughout the school year	Anxiety
Grade retention, comes down to two or three days of a test	Stress
Major Theme 2: Test Preparation Strategies	
Strategies, materials, professional development, curriculum, resources, goal setting, social and emotional learning, compassion, growth as proficiency	N/A

Major Theme 3: Inequities amongst marginalized populations

Disadvantaged populations, bias, lack of cultural relevance, lack of experiences, lack of student voice, individual student needs, leveled instruction, differentiated instruction

Lack of Cultural Relevance

Major Theme 4: Narrowed Curriculum

Limitations, teach to the test, isolation, standards

Teach to the Test

Arts are lost, specials or resource classes are cancelled for remediation periods, only focus on reading and math

Arts education has become a lost art

Major Theme 5: Motivation

Failure, invested, attitudes, confidence, attendance, behavior, skewed view, buy-in, participation, involvement, engagement, common understandings, empowerment, advocacy

Intrinsic

Environment

Assessing students to guide instruction is a common practice that educators use. During her interview, Julie said, “I feel like assessing my students is just part of my identity. Not only am I assessing my students, but it helps me test myself as a teacher as well.” According to educators, world-wide, high-stakes testing has become a major issue within the education arena since teachers feel they do not have enough time to provide an authentic teaching and learning environment because most of their school hours are spent preparing their students for the upcoming test. The assessments are not the issue. The problem is that there is too much time spent on testing in an already tight academic year. Not only is testing very costly, but decisions

are being made because of performance ratings (Emler et al., 2019). According to Hikida and Taylor (2020) teachers have described testing as a stumbling block for their profession. Instead of progress being made, teachers affirm that testing has stifled their creativity, lessened their instructional planning and teaching time, altered their curriculum, and added an enormous amount of stress for all stakeholders, including their students (Hikida & Taylor). Sheev reported:

My fear or concern for my students during the next phase of their educational journey is that high-stakes testing will diminish their educational curiosity and they will just go through the motions of education instead of learning for learning's sake and will lose their curiosity about the world around them.

In her essay questions, Tasha exposed:

High-stakes testing is an added pressure for both students and teachers. It places a burden on children to perform and teachers to try to achieve a certain percentage of passing and/or growth. It really hampers the climate of learning especially as the time of testing draws nearer.

“Yes, burnout is real,” stated Tom.

Ben also shared, “The educators and students’ attitudes before and during the testing is one of pure exhaustion. By the time testing rolls around, many of us are corks and ready to pop.” Sheev added, “It has gotten to the point that students are not only stressing, but they are also pure exhausted over the fact that they have to do good on the test, which then leads to this sense of anxiousness.”

Anxiety

Research has shown that because of the emphasis being placed on high-stakes testing, elementary aged students suffer from psychological and physical trauma. Studies conducted by

Cho and Chan (2020) and Kelly (2019) showed that many students develop severe feelings of nervousness, stress, tension, and anxiety during the preparation of high-stakes tests and even more so on the day of the tests. During the focus group, all nine participants agreed that high-stakes testing has caused a great deal of stress and anxiety amongst their students. Dawn stated, “I administer the NC EOG for fourth grade, benchmark assessments, and classwork assessments, and the effects on students vary by child. Some are anxious, some are avoiders because of the anxiety, and some act out and misbehave.” During the interview, Dawn also mentioned how she has witnessed a great deal of anxiety amongst the students and the teachers as well. In her essay questions, Billie noted, “Some students develop low self-esteem and anxiety due to not being proficient on the high-stakes tests.” When asked during her interview to provide specific details about her students’ experiences with high-stakes testing, Logan exclaimed:

From when I first began teaching, 13 years ago, until my most recent experiences, I have noticed that my students are a lot more stressed out with testing and have way more anxiety when it comes to performing well on standardized tests in third, fourth, and fifth grade.

Results from a 2010 study by Barksdale and Triplett involving third through sixth grade students who participated in high-stakes tests revealed common themes of anxiety, anger, panic, and frustration. Similarly, during the individual interview with Jane, she shared about an unforgettable experience with one of her students:

I actually can tell you about several experiences. I’ve never had many good experiences with high-stakes testing. The children experience a lot of anxiety. I have had children go to the bathroom on themselves, I have had children get physically ill, I have seen children shut down, and even act out of character. For instance, I had a child last year, who had

never been disrespectful towards me, get really ugly with me. During the test, she continued to lay her head down and attempted to go to sleep. I kept trying to talk to her and motivate her to stay awake and focus. She became very disrespectful and ugly to me and told me to leave her alone.

Jordan, Tasha, Billie, and Jane are all third-grade teachers, and, during the interview and focus group, they each expressed how the day they meet their students and parents at open house, the first phrase that is mentioned from the students and the parents is, “Oh no, this is the year of the EOG.” Jordan shared, “Just this year, a student walked in my classroom during open house and before she even spoke, she said, what if I don’t do good on the EOG.” Tasha voiced:

Of course, 3rd grade is the first time that our students are involved in a testing environment of this magnitude and because they have heard all about the test, there’s a lot of anxiety built up. How do I compete with such a mindset?

Lynn, a former third-grade teacher, shared that because of the apprehension that her students exhibited year after year, she requested to be moved to second grade. “I could not stand to see children be tormented any longer. It was either leave the grade level or leave the profession.” Just as Lynn, Ben shared, “I have a hard time watching my students deal with the anxiety that comes from just that one test.”

Stress

The National Council Licensure Examination is a test that all nursing students must pass to secure their nursing credentials. Glasgow et al. (2019) looked at how the students taking these high-stakes exam felt about the preparation of the exam and the exam itself. Students reported that because of the pressure of having to pass the test to practice nursing, they developed a strong sense of chronic stress and anxiety. According to Jordan’s response from her open-ended essay

questions, “High-stakes testing creates, for most students at the elementary level, a high level of stress. Students often don’t feel confident in their abilities to perform well on these tests.” Sheev stated, “The best way to describe my students’ experience with high-stakes testing is that the end-all-be-all of testing has gotten to the point where it stresses them out.”

During our focus group discussion, participants shared that testing has become the norm, causing our society to be known as test-driven. The lives and futures of people are determined by how they perform on a given test, when in fact, success should not be tied to test performance. Still, our students are negatively impacted because society is making it appear that way. In her interview, Jane shared, “Testing is in every aspect of our students’ lives. Even when they attend church, the pastor is anointing their pencils to make them feel a little more at ease about the upcoming test.” “Not that this is a problem, but has education really resulted to these drastic measures.” Though not a part of the focus group, Lynn professed in her interview, “Several students feel overwhelmed and stressed from the push to succeed on one piece of evidence that does not determine their true ability to read and comprehend or solve math problems.” Just as Lynn, Julie was not able to attend the focus group session, but throughout her interview, she implied that as a fifth grade teacher, her students still exhibit a large amount of stress when it is time to take the end of grade test.

Even though I do not place a lot of emphasis on the EOG and I say to my students that we are going to take this test to see what you have done all year, to wrap up the year, I have still had students to cry during the test. I guess since they have been told since third grade, you must pass the EOG, it is ingrained in them. The test stresses them out even though we try to teach them, you know, take your time, relax, you know this is just another test. They are still stressed out about it.

Julie also disclosed that the students who are overachievers seem to stress even more because they want everything to be perfect.

Test prep strategies

Teachers are tasked with creating an environment that allows their students to be actively involved in the learning process. Dworkin and Quiroz (2019) described this as an act of balancing fun and learning. To meet the demands of the curriculum, teachers generate lessons that include higher order thinking skills to ensure that their lessons are intentional to reach the varied learning styles and ability levels within the classroom setting (Dworkin & Quiroz, 2019; Farvis & Hay, 2020). Teachers have recognized that high-stakes testing has thrown a curve ball into their laps. To ensure that students are prepared for high-stakes testing, teachers are not only meeting the many demands of the profession outside of the teaching process but are finding ways to ensure higher-order thinking skills, critical problem-solving skills, and test-taking strategies are in place so their students are better able to master the high-stakes assessments. “I spend a lot of time teaching my students how to actually take a test,” exclaimed Billie. She continued to say, “I have to model for them how they should look for clue words that will help them make the best answer choices.” For instance:

I teach my students that an alarm alerts them about something. I teach them to read through the questions first, so they have an idea of what they are looking for within the passage. As they are reading the passages, I teach them to highlight and underline important details within the passage. While they are reading through the passage and they come across something that they saw in the questions, I teach them that an alarm should sound off in their heads, signifying that this is important, and it may link them to their answer.

Billie shared that while the strategy seems fun and exciting because she does all the loud sounds like an actual alarm, she just doesn't know how beneficial it is. "I feel that I am just teaching them to look for certain answers and not true reading comprehension skills."

During the focus group, Tasha, Billie, and Jane asked if they could expound on their reply during the individual interview time. They wanted to share some additional information about strategies that they feel forced to implement to ensure that their students are ready for the high-stakes testing. All three participants are third grade teachers, and they voiced that one of the greatest challenges that they face with teaching test taking strategies is that their best hurdle is having to teach their students how to read.

Jane implied:

Okay, you ask me to teach my students how to use a strategy to solve a math equation. I can do that, but my concern is, when am I going to teach my non-readers how to read the math word problem so that he or she knows how to compute and solve the problem?

Tasha added, "Right, I have to teach the students decoding strategies so that they are able to sound out the words, but I am supposed to also teach them a test taking strategy."

Tom signaled and replied,

What about the students who are so anxious and nervous about the test that they forget the strategies that we have taught them? True teaching and learning is not memorizing something for the sake of using it once and tossing it out.

During her interview, Julie shared that her daily instruction is centered around using EOG release test questions that the state provides for teachers. "I wish that I was just free to teach the standards that have been placed before me instead of focusing on test prep materials." "I teach the standards, but I am also forced to intertwine the test prep material." Just as Julie shared in her

interview, during the focus group Sheev shared that he is a math teacher and discussed that one of the strategies that he has implemented has been to use the materials that the state department has issued as test prep items, but to restructure the questions that are in the document. “I have found that by doing this and making the questions more challenging, my students don’t seem to think the actual questions on test day are that difficult.”

When asked to discuss school-wide strategies that are being used in the various schools that were represented during the focus group, Ben, Sheev, Jane shared about EOG pep rallies and EOG boot camps. Ben shared that she enjoyed the pep rallies and felt that they really did take away some of the pressure for the students and teachers.

Not that it took away all the pressures, but students and teachers enjoyed the fact that we were not stuck in the classroom focusing on EOG test prep materials. It offered a fun and relaxing environment for an hour or so.

Jane had a different take on the pep rallies and boots camps.

Why must we continue to torture our students in this manner? It is too much pressure on the children. Students are sitting in the gym, listening to chants yet again about the EOG, they see posters plastered on the wall, yet again about the EOG. As I mentioned in my interview, no matter which way our students turn, they hear about the EOG.

Jordan and Tasha are colleagues and have been their entire career. They both worked in another school district at the same school and shared about a previous experience as it relates to a school wide strategy. Tasha shared:

At our previous school, Jordan and I worked with a principal who believed in everyone functioning as a family. Her leadership philosophy was that all the students were ours, regardless of the grade level that you once taught them in. Families do not function as,

you are my family for one year and never again; therefore, we will have this same mindset with our students. Even though I taught children in kindergarten, four years later, I was still there rooting for them as a student taking the EOG. They knew that I was still someone in their corner. It is my belief that we must build this type of school culture so that our students know that regardless, we believe in them and support them all the way.

Inequities amongst marginalized populations

Students who are being served in today's classrooms vary a great deal from their ability levels to their behavior needs. The demographic within a classroom lends itself to students with disabilities, students from low-income populations, English language learners, and students of minority ethnicities. Research has proven that students who fall within these descriptions seem to suffer the most from high-stakes testing measures and have the most difficulty having their individual needs met. Although high-stakes testing was to aid in closing the achievement gaps of students, this has not been so (Dee & Jacob, 2011; Lloyd & Harwin, 2016). The nine research participants who were present for the focus group were confident in their remarks regarding how high-stakes testing has impacted their students from marginalized populations. Logan shared,

Working in a district with all elementary schools being Title I low socio-economic schools, I believe high-stakes testing tests students above their educational levels in the most inequitable way. Districts that have schools with high sub-populations tend to lack resources needed to get their students where they need to be. High-stakes testing is an unfair measuring tool to show students' knowledge at their academic level.

Both Fong and Soni (2022) and Sainio et al. (2019) studied the effects of high-stakes testing on students from underrepresented populations. They found elementary students with learning disabilities exhibit a higher level of anxiety and lower self-esteem than their non-

learning-disabled peers. Sheev echoed this by stating, “Education is supposed to be the outlet for disadvantaged students; however, the current state of affairs does not offer this outlet. It only makes our students feel like failures and diminishes their self-esteem.” “In my opinion, some students’ self-esteem is harmed with the high-stakes testing. At the third-grade level, students feel as if the entire academic year is determined by a single test score,” added Jordan, during the focus group session. Students have been made to feel that their entire school year was a waste because they were not successful on two or three days of testing,” Tom said.

Low academic achievement has shown to increase negative perceived self-competence and self-efficacy, which then further reduces engagement in learning (Sainio et al., 2019). During the learning process, when students with learning difficulties encounter challenges, they tend to become less engaged. Dawn contributed to the conversation by offering the following, “For these demographics, I have seen high-stakes testing cause anxiety, make them less involved in the teaching and learning process, less confident, and less motivated. It has also affected the attendance for these subgroups as well.” Continuing to discuss this issue within the focus group, Jordan offered, “Tests are often unfair to students with disabilities. We label a child as learning disabled in reading; yet we require them to take the same test as their non-learning-disabled peers.” Billie shared, “We’ve already established that these children have a learning disability that impedes their ability to perform as general education students, but we measure their performance by using the same instrument.” Ben added, “Right, students with disabilities have to have modifications all throughout the year and to be pretty much taking the same exact test as everyone else is clearly not fair.” Logan rendered, “Holding every single kiddo, from all socioeconomic backgrounds, accountable to the same test has become a real challenge.” “It does put them at a disadvantage. As teachers, we differentiate our teaching strategies to meet the

needs of our students from marginalized populations, but yet we are mandated to give them all one standardized test,” said Jane. Similarly, in Jane’s open-ended essay reply, she denoted, “Teachers must use heterogeneous groupings to meet all learner needs; however, students are required to take a homogeneous test at the end of the year. It just does not make sense.”

Lack of cultural relevance

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) defined cultural relevance as pedagogical empowerment that allows students to experience academic success, cultural competence so there’s cultural integrity, and critical consciousness through world engagement and exploration. In other words, when students from marginalized populations, including minority students are being exposed to cultural relevant pedagogy, they should see themselves and their lives reflected within the teaching and learning process so that they are better able to make the connections needed to yield academic success. During the focus group, research participants voiced their personal experiences about the lack of cultural relevance being implemented within high-stakes testing components. Jordan stated:

Tests are often biased for students from low-income and minority students. In order to adequately respond to the test questions, students must have the prior knowledge to make connections with what is being asked of them. I feel experiences given to students places them at a greater advantage than their peers who have not had those experiences. Their vocabulary is often greater, and those experiences have an impact on their ability to make connections with the text on the high-stakes tests. Students who fall into the marginalized populations lack these experiences; therefore, are not able to perform as well as they should.

Ben shared, “When students don’t have the experiences a lot of times, they’re missing a

key component that would help them understand what the questions are asking; therefore, they are not able to make connections.” Billie nodded and said, “The tests that are given to our students are not relevant to their experiences.” Logan delineated:

Students who fall into the category of underrepresented are not provided the same opportunities as other kids from more prosperous areas. No fault of their own, they just are not. They have very limited experiences but they’re being held accountable for the same questions as kids who have various experiences.

In a chuckle, Sheev confessed that the only cultural relevance that he has noticed lately has been a change in the names that are being used within the reading passages and math questions. “Some of the typical white names have gone away, like Sally and Bobby and Judy and they have added names like Carlos, but other than that, I have not seen a change.” Through this data collection process, it was evident that the elementary teachers’ lived experiences with high-stakes testing aligned with the research that Au (2020) conducted in that when students whose cultural identities are not favored by society, their educational outlook is greatly impacted.

Narrowed Curriculum

During the interviews, focus group, and open-ended essay questions, the teacher participants concurred with the empirical literature used to help ground this study by stating that they felt forced to teach only the content that will show up on the assessments (Amoako, 2019; Heilig et al., 2018; Jonsson & Leden, 2019; Kauchak & Eggen, 2021; Li et al., 2018; Santoro, 2018). Sheev exclaimed, “I have to be conscious of the “test details.” If statistics are a small part of the test, I only teach statistics a small amount.” Participants from the work of Amoako and Santoro, and the teacher participants from my study, shared that high-stakes testing has devalued what teachers have been taught to do within their education preparation programs, which is

provide their students with an adequate education. Just as Veselak (2018) stated, all eleven of the research participants from my study voiced that one of their major concerns with high-stakes testing is they are teaching to the test and not preparing their students for success in years to come. Jordan wrote the following in her open-ended essay question:

I want my students to feel confident as learners. I also want to expose them to material that may or may not be necessarily stressed on the high-stakes tests. I'm afraid we are simply attempting to prepare students for the tests and not developing the whole learner who will be ready for the real world. More focus should be placed on developing learners who are confident, and learners who have the freedom to explore some of their interests.

Logan shared:

High-stakes testing, in my 13 years of experience, has altered the curriculum in so many ways. The districts that I have worked in have all seemed to have heavy focus on the standards and skills that are most likely to be on the assessment, rather than building up students' mathematical understanding with a seamless incorporation of the tested materials. With the gaps that this generates within students, they fall behind, are missing parts of the learning trajectory, and progression skews accelerating the gaps they already have.

As professionals in their fields of study, teachers state they know what their students need to be successful in the next phases of their lives, but because of the emphasis being placed on students being proficient on the high-stakes test, time must be devoted to preparing students for the next round of testing. During the interviews, Jane expressed, "High-stakes testing has taken the fun out of teaching." Tom also admitted:

Testing has taken away from the pure joy of teaching. We know what standards we must cover and what percentage of those standards are being tested. A teacher's instruction, that is being provided is contingent upon what percentage of the standards are on the test.

Teach to the test

In studies by Amoako (2019), Santoro (2018), and Hout (2012), teachers indicated that the profession has become about increasing test scores rather than the learning capacity for their students. In Julie's interview, she shared her discomfort of how she has seen a shift in her teaching because it has become more about how she can increase her test scores rather than how can she change the methodology to ensure that her students are learning the curriculum that is supposed to set them up for academic success and life after elementary school. "Teaching has become more about a test and content from subjects that are not being tested on the EOG have been omitted," Billie stressed during her interview, the focus group, and her essays. During the focus group, Sheev added to Billie's statement by communicating, "If it is not on the EOG, I am being told that I am wasting my time by covering it." In fear of not having enough time to expose their students to the content that will appear on the high-stakes tests, teachers are not able to use the breadth and depth approach that they would like. During the focus group, Jordan provided the following statement:

High-stakes testing essentially guides my instructional planning. I have a set of standards that I am required to teach to help prepare students for their testing. However, in recent years it has become solely about only those standards that will be tested and ensuring that students know those standards really well for the test.

In his individual interview, Sheev stated, "If it's not weighted heavily on the test, I'll cover it, but I won't go as in depth as I do for other concepts that are on the test." When asked how high-

stakes testing impacts her ability to teach the standards that are to be taught, Jane shared high-stakes test impacts 85% of her instruction.

Eighty-five percent of my instruction is geared towards subjects that are being tested on the high-stakes tests, which in third grade are reading and math. It leaves very little time for other subjects, such as science and social studies. Even when we teach science and social studies, we are told to gear that towards testing and use testing strategies in those subject areas as well.

Effective teaching strategies includes being able to ensure authentic teaching and learning take place and it helps students to understand issues related to the concept in a broader perspective. Studies have shown that overemphasis on test scores tends to make teachers narrow the curriculum to reflect test items that appear on the statewide test (Amoako, 2019; Veselak, 2018). Ben stated:

As an English/Language Arts teacher, my instructional practice is to mainly focus on very specific things but reading encompasses so many more things that just the five or six standards that are tested in my grade level. Reading encompasses speaking, listening, and writing, in which none of these areas are tested; therefore, I have to put a blind eye to them. So, yes, high-stakes testing really does affect the grand scheme of things.

Arts education has become a lost art

High-stakes testing drives everything we do in education. As a result, the teaching of the arts and literacy in schools is often at odds with one another (Barton, 2019). Arts education support diverse learners in literacy. The arts have been proven to improve the learning outcomes of students from non-dominant communities. Tom exclaimed,

Before testing became as strenuous as it is now, we could incorporate more arts and crafts related activities. Once testing became the end all be all, arts education has been placed on the back burner. School is no longer fun because it has become all about passing a test.

At the elementary level, arts education includes music, visual arts, and physical education, however, end of grade testing only focuses on reading and math for third, fourth, and sixth grades and reading, math, and science for fifth grade (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021). To ensure that students are adequately prepared to take the reading, math, and science EOG tests, schools feel forced to divert their attention away from the areas that fall into the arts education disciplines and focus their attention to the tested content areas. During the focus group, all participants shared that they have witnessed times in which the arts education courses were cancelled so that more time could be devoted to reading, math, and science. “Even the arts education teachers are forced to go into the general education classroom and assist with teaching the content that students will be tested on,” Billie and Logan shared.

Teachers are troubled by the current situation of education, as it relates to high-stakes testing, because they fear that because of the narrowed curriculum or teaching to the test, a dangerous trajectory of humanity could be created (Johnson, 2020). According to Dawn, “My fear for my students is the kind of thinkers we are creating. We are not developing a love for learning. We are creating test takers.” In her interview, Lynn shared, “There is never enough time to meet all the demands of testing. It seems as if we test, test, test. But we never teach! What is this going to do to our society?” During the focus group, both Jordan and Logan expressed, “Finding time to meet the demands of the test is always a problem.” According to Harwick (2020) and Johnson (2020), 21st-century students will be the next generation of leaders

and, because of the way the curriculum has been narrowed, they may lack the skills to problem solve, collaborate, and make hasty and meaningful decision. In her open-ended essay response, Jane shared:

I fear students' lack of social skills from this submersion into the constant test, test, test. I fear that their creativity is being extinguished because the classroom allows little time for creativity exploration. I fear their hatred of reading growing as they are taught only to look for the summary, meaning, and structure of the text rather than the beauty. I am concerned that my students will not progress to the next level. They will not attend college due to their disgust with education and beyond that will be inadequately prepared to succeed in college and/or the workforce.

Motivation

According to Amrein and Berliner (2020), educational accountability is a reform effort within the profession that has been on the market for quite some time. Laws such as the NCLB attempted to measure education accountability by rolling out annual high-stakes tests for all students within grades three through eight to assess their achievement levels in the areas of reading and mathematics (Klein, 2015). Amrein and Berliner further denoted that this aimed to improve student motivation and raise the students' academic achievement levels. However, legislators who are behind the push to ensure that schools are performing at their highest potential have made decisions that seem to have the exact opposite effect as they were intending. There are many factors that play a vital role in motivating students. Researchers who have studied Bandura's self-efficacy theoretical framework have been able to apply its principles to discern that there is in fact some correlation between a person's self-efficacy, their motivation, and self-monitoring (Lekissa & Hsiu-Ling, 2021). All eleven participants shared high-stakes

testing has caused a major decline in their students' self-efficacy and academic motivation. Tom espoused,

Testing makes teachers and students hate school. For teachers, you are made to feel that a successful teacher is one who only has high test scores. If a teacher has low test scores, they are considered a bad teacher. As a student, if you are not deemed proficient on the test, you begin to take on the label of not being smart. Either way you look at it, we are all under extreme pressure to perform well on the high-stakes tests.

Motivation must be present for one to begin to feel that they are able to obtain their goals (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). When students lack self-efficacy, they are not as motivated to try their best because they feel a sense of defeat. During the interview with Lynn, she was eager to share about an unforgettable experience. With tears in her eyes, she shared about a student who was in much distress during the administration of the EOG. When she approached the student to inquire about what was going on, the student burst into tears and told Lynn, "I can't do this." Lynn stated, "Luckily, I was able to get the student back on track, she was able to finish the test, and was successful in her achievement level." "While trying to console her, my heart broke into a million pieces. In silence, part of me died and another part boiled in ANGER." "School is supposed to build student capacity, not tear it down."

Intrinsic

Deci and Ryan (2000) note that intrinsic motivation is an inner drive that moves a person to accomplish something because it is enjoyable, they are challenged, or they are seeking fulfillment. Intrinsic motivation is inherent by nature which means it comes from within a particular being (Deci & Ryan; Howard et al., 2021; Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). This type of motivation is not usually something that a person can be taught; however, it is essential to foster

intrinsic motivation in the classroom by promoting feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan). Dawn shared, “Those who are motivated intrinsically seem more concerned about their scores. Those who are motivated by prizes work for those reasons alone, but from what I see, this doesn’t produce learning retention.” During the focus group, Ben shared,

We can entice students all day long with iPads, extra recess, trophies, parties, etc., but if we are not attempting to build their self-esteem and help them to realize the true benefit of education lies more than within a score on a test, we will never accomplish the real goal.

Tasha added, “I support celebrating and recognizing student success, I do it all the time. However, when we have those students who are never proficient and will never be proficient, what are we saying to them when they are never recognized.”

Bandura’s (1997) social cognitive theory outlines four processes with motivation being one of the processes. He exhibits that motivation influences people’s behaviors, beliefs, and persistence to accomplish set tasks. When the drive is no longer present, then negative effects begin to manifest. The sentiments that Tom, Lynn, Dawn, Ben, and Tasha shared can be found in the work of Bandura and Howard et al. (2021) in that not fostering intrinsic motivation has created a generation of students who have no interest in the learning process and no longer have joy for school.

Research Question Responses

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to examine how public elementary school teachers perceive high-stakes testing situations as it relates to the impact of test anxiety on young children. The data analysis was influenced by the participants’ responses to

the research questions about their lived experiences. The individual interviews, the focus group session, and the open-ended essay questions afforded the participants an opportunity to provide details of their experiences. The responses are discussed below.

Central Research Question

How do teachers describe their lived experiences with high-stakes testing situations as it relates to the impact of test anxiety on young children? The research participants offered a wealth of insight regarding their lived experiences with high-stakes testing and the impact it has on the students they teach. All eleven teachers agreed that there should be some form of educational accountability; however, they felt that too much emphasis is being placed on the current models the state uses. Ben shared her thoughts:

Do not get me wrong, I think we need testing. Testing offers data that informs further instruction. But there are different ways of going about it. In my opinion, the current way does not allow for the data to inform my instruction because the data is not given to us until the end of the academic year when the students are leaving for the summer. The data is then tucked away and sometimes not retrieved. It is my hope that the state will eventually realize that a better accountability model would be to assess students in a way that would provide valuable data that shows student growth throughout the entire academic year. By doing so, I truly feel that teachers will be able to fill some educational gaps.

Tasha proclaimed,

We all know that if high-stakes testing was abolished, we would have teachers not bringing their fullest potential to the classroom, so an accountability model is needed; however, there must be another method to the madness because it is apparent that this is

not working. When we look at the state's proficiency rate, we are not a shining star across the nation.

As a result of the emphasis that is placed on high-stakes testing, the elementary teachers spoke passionately about the effect it has had on their students. Through their experiences, they have witnessed numerous students deal with stress, nervousness, anxiety, sickness that causes headaches and upset stomachs, urinating on themselves, and lack the confidence that they can do well because of their past scores. When asked to share about an unforgettable experience, good or bad, nine out of the 11 participants shared about students becoming extremely sick on the way to school to take the test or during the middle of the test. Billie shared, "Every year, a student throws up the day of the test. They are extremely nervous about the test."

The teacher participants shared that high-stakes testing has challenged everything that they have ever been taught about the teaching profession. All participants shared that they went into the profession so that they could make a difference in the lives of children. They wanted to see students thrive in an environment just as they did. They wanted to be the change agent, just as someone was for them. However, their very reason for becoming a teacher is being stripped away from them. They articulated that high-stakes testing has drastically altered their curriculum. "High-stakes testing has taken away the flexibility and autonomy that I once enjoyed as a teacher. I once felt that I was preparing my students for the next grade level as well as for their future as productive citizens," declared Jordan. During their interviews, focus group, and through their essays, Tom, Ben, Jordan, Sheev, and Tasha voiced that high-stakes testing has set a precedent that regardless of what has taken place throughout the school year, student achievement and teacher effectiveness is based off the two or three days of testing at the end of the academic year. Jordan added, "Students are made to feel that their entire academic year is

determined by a single test score.”

Sub-Question One

How do teachers describe self-efficacy and high-stakes testing and the effect both have on their students? Bandura (1997) defines self-efficacy as one having the belief that he or she can succeed in each situation. The teachers’ experiences with the phenomenon of high-stakes testing indicated that their students’ self-efficacy has been diminished because of how they are made to feel about high-stakes testing. Regardless of the knowledge base that students may have, high-stakes testing has caused such fear and anxiety within elementary age children that their self-efficacy is slim to none. Jane stated:

As a third-grade student, you take a beginning of the year assessment and you do not pass, then you take an end of the year assessment and you do not pass, then you are required take an alternative end of the year assessment; if you do not pass that assessment, you are mandated to attend summer school in which you take the alternative assessment again. If you do not pass the alternative assessment that go round, you are placed in a remedial class when you return in the fall. After a while, the constant reminders that you are not proficient begin to wear down your mental health.

Tom reported, “Students hearing year after year that they were not proficient on the end of year test has an effect on their confidence level and brings down their self-esteem.”

Dawn shared:

I am seeing more students who are developing a lack of confidence. We know there are some students who will never pass the EOG test. After not passing it a few times, students will begin to lack confidence in themselves and not try or even drop out of school because they feel as if they’re not good enough.

Sub-Question Two

How do teachers describe strategies that are used in preparing students for high-stakes testing? The participants had mixed reviews about strategies that are being used to prepare their students for high-stakes testing. They felt that strategies can be beneficial, but for the most part, they were not. Over the course of their careers, they have seen many strategies implemented; however, not much has changed regarding their students' success on the high-stakes tests. Tom and Julie felt strongly that they can incorporate strategies, but feared what students would do when they forgot how to incorporate those strategies on the day of the test.

Julie offered:

I would rather know that I have taught my students an authentic way of computing a math equation so that they are able to transfer that information on the day of the test and in years to come, instead of giving them a get it right for the test strategy that they may or may not remember.

Dawn shared:

Testing strategies are only good if they are remembered and executed correctly. Most of the time, our students are so wrapped up in trying to get through the process, that they do not remember or use the strategies. Therefore, something that we have implemented this year is social emotional learning strategies. I firmly believe that our students will fare better with learning how to de-stress when they feel anxious or nervous during the test.

Sub-Question Three

How do teachers describe the effect high-stakes testing has on the curricular choices they make? Teachers felt very limited in their curricular choices. They shared that they are limited in what they can do within their classrooms. Ben, Jane, and Tasha stated, "We cannot teach like we

would like to teach.” “I remember the days of having arts and crafts to enhance the lessons that I am teaching, now everything has to be centered around the test,” added Tom. Bringing creativity into the classroom is a sure aid in students having a well-rounded educational experience. If students do not have the prior knowledge about a topic or concept, having the chance to bring the classroom setting to real-life is a great way for students to explore and learn through integration of the academic disciplines. With the emphasis that is being placed on ensuring that the tested material is covered so that students are well prepared for the test, teachers are not able to provide these experiences as they would like to (Mehrotra, 2021). “The arts are subject matters that appeal to the majority of our marginalized population of students,” exclaimed Logan and Jordan.

Teachers from a 2018 study by Veselak, which involved 300 high-poverty schools, communicated that policies regarding high-stakes testing restricted their curriculum decisions. With this framework, teachers were forced to teach to the test instead of teaching to the needs of their students. As a result, students who fell into the at-risk category because of learning disabilities, socioeconomic status, or minority populations suffered the most. Dawn added to this data piece with her statement regarding the large Hispanic population that her school serves. “Ninety to 95% of our student population is English language learners. Even still, they are required to take a reading comprehension test and a math test that are 100% in English. How can our students compete?”

Continuing, the teacher participants voiced their concerns about how they are constantly reminded to differentiate their instruction for their students, but at the end of the year, there is one standardized test for all students. “Talk about not practicing what we preach.” shared Logan.

Summary

Chapter Four included detailed descriptions of the research participants, themes and sub-themes, and narratives that the data analysis outlined through individual interviews, a focus group, and open-ended essay questions. A total of 11 elementary teachers participated in this study. The participants' voices were heard through rich and detailed descriptions of the five major themes: environment, test prep strategies, inequities amongst marginalized populations, narrowed curriculum, and motivation. The themes answered the central question and sub-questions and established the foundation for developing a deeper understanding of elementary teachers' experiences with high-stakes testing and how it affects their students. The findings were presented in a narrative format and grouped by emergent themes. Participant responses were presented in vivo quotations to reaffirm the answers to the research questions and the applicable themes.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to examine how public school elementary teachers perceive high-stakes testing situations as it relates to the impact of test anxiety on young children. A group of 11 public school elementary teachers served as participants in the study. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an interpretation of the research findings that were integral in showcasing the teachers' lived experiences with high-stakes testing. This chapter begins with a discussion about my interpretation of findings, then moves into an outline of implications for policy and practice, theoretical and empirical implications, limitations and delimitations, recommendations for future research, and a summary.

Discussion

This research study sought to answer the research question and sub questions that centered around the experiences public elementary school teachers had with high-stakes testing and the impact the phenomenon had on their students. Data collection included individual interviews, a focus group session, and open-ended essay questions. The data analysis yielded themes and sub-themes that provided insight about the teachers' lived experiences about the impact high-stakes testing had on their students.

Interpretation of Findings

There were five themes that emerged from the data analysis process. These themes included environment, test prep strategies, inequities amongst marginalized populations, narrowed curriculum, and motivation. These themes were followed by sub-themes that provided more breadth and depth of the overarching themes. These themes and sub-themes were vital to understanding the teachers' lived experiences with the phenomenon of high-stakes testing. The

participants explained the environment as being toxic causing their students a great deal of anxiety and stress. They further stated that test prep strategies that they feel compelled to teach their students potentially set their students up for the moment in time, but not for longevity. Teachers described high-stakes testing as a bias form of accountability that excludes their students who identify as marginalized populations, causing inequity. According to the participants, high-stakes testing diminishes everything they know about the teaching and learning process and stifles the creativity and fun of teaching. Teachers are not able to teach in a way that they would like to teach because they are constantly teaching to the test so that their students are prepared. Finally, they shared how high-stakes testing has no motivating factor for their students. In fact, teachers are fearful that because of the emphasis being placed on these accountability models, more students will become resentful of school causing more detriment than good. Further interpretations of the themes and sub-themes are provided below.

Summary of Thematic Findings

Eleven public school elementary teachers, whose teaching experience ranged from 10 years to 27 years, were interviewed and asked 14 questions. Nine of the 11 teachers participated in the focus group session and were asked an additional five questions, and the same nine documented responses to four open-ended essay questions. All 23 questions were tied to either the central research question or sub-questions. The central research question that guided this study was: How do teachers describe their lived experiences with high-stakes testing situations as it related to the impact of test anxiety on young children? This question allowed for the essence of the participants' experiences to be captured. The three sub-questions that also guided the work of this study were:

SQ1: How do teachers describe self-efficacy and high-stakes testing and the effect both have on their students?

SQ2: How do teachers describe strategies that are used in preparing students for high-stakes testing?

SQ3: How do teachers describe the effect high-stakes testing has on the curricular choices they make?

An analysis of the data showed the environment, test prep strategies, inequities amongst marginalized populations, narrowed curriculum, and motivation were key findings of the teachers' experiences with high-stakes testing. Sub-themes that were discussed about the environment were anxiety and stress. Teachers also discussed how the lack of cultural relevance plays a part in the inequities amongst their students from marginalized populations. To ensure that their students are equipped to endure the test, teacher participants shared that their curriculum is narrowed; therefore, they must teach to the test, leaving no time to teach other parts of the curriculum such as the arts. Finally, they shared that their students are lacking intrinsic motivation because preparation for testing has become such a major part of their everyday routine.

Educational Curiosity. The theme and sub-themes generated from the data analysis made it evident that teachers believe their students' educational curiosity is at an all-time low. Throughout the interviews, focus group, and their essays, the participants continuously shared how high-stakes testing has narrowed the curriculum causing teachers to only teach material that will be presented on the test, leaving no place for the arts to be incorporated in the education of their students. Additionally, they shared how the lack of cultural relevance on the high-stakes testing has caused an issue for their students because they are not able to make the connections

needed to fully engage in the testing material. Mehrotra (2021) expressed creativity as being essential to the learning process for students and happens when students are engaged in the exploration of various academic disciplines. Additionally, research has shown that high-stakes testing has harmed students' sense of creativity (Amoako, 2019; Cho & Chan, 2020; Heilig et al., 2018; Jonsson & Leden, 2019; Kauchak & Eggen, 2021; Li et al., 2018; Mehrotra; Santoro, 2018). Teachers shared that they are no longer able to incorporate other subject matters because the focus must remain on those areas that are being tested which are reading and mathematics. Lynn shared, "Even when I attempt to teach other subject matters, my focus must still be on those concepts that students will see on the EOG test." "My fear is, if we are only focusing on the assessment rather than the student, what is it doing to their welfare," exclaimed Logan.

I am a firm believer that relevance is essential to student success. In fact, it is essential to all things. When you can connect to something, there is always more meaning behind it. Through the data collection process and listening to the participants disclose their experiences with high-stakes testing, it was even more evident that students are not able to make those connections and find the relevance in the material that they are being tested on because they lack the prior knowledge that is needed. Because of this, teachers feel that the current accountability models do not provide a culturally responsive approach to the students that they are teaching. The questions that are being asked of their students have no relevance to their experiences. Jordan shared:

I can remember one year; a math question asked the students to determine how much wood would be needed to build a boatyard to store a yacht. Though this may seem like a simple problem, our students have no clue what a yacht is, what it looks like, or anything of the like. I wish individuals who write the test bank items would really take into

consideration where our students are from and what they encounter throughout their daily lives.

School Culture. Schools are one of the major institutions where children are supposed to be able to function and feel safe and welcomed. It is a place where they are supposed to be able to develop healthy behavior and learning habits (Fisher et al., 2018). During the focus group, Tasha shared that the district has adopted a new reading curriculum that entails a lot of writing exercises. She shared about how for a large portion of the first half of the school year, the reading curriculum was focusing on the school climate and behaviors at school. Through her conversation with the group, she shared how one student stated that school was not fun. When she asked why, the student shared that all they do is reading and math and those things are not fun. “My heart broke because school was always a safe haven where I could be myself and learn a plethora of things that I could not elsewhere,” expressed Tasha. When I asked why they thought students would express such feelings about school, almost simultaneously, Jane, Dawn, Jordan, and Tom shouted, “testing.” Dawn expounded by adding, “From the moment the school year ends, all of my vital signs are back in the normal range, and I know it is because the pressure of the testing is over for a little while.” With a shaky voice, Ben declared, “If the school environment is this stressful for us and we are adults not even taking the test, can you imagine how our babies feel.” Anxiety and stress have been traced back to the impact of educational performance outcomes (von Embse et al., 2018). Billie offered:

Everything about the school environment has now been impacted by high-stakes testing. I find it painstakingly sad that even our custodial staff are sucked into this testing environment. On the days of testing, our custodians are not even allowed to complete their jobs of cutting the grass in fear of causing a misadministration. Granted, I want my

students to do well and not have distractions, but I think it is so disheartening that testing causes this much stress and anxiousness.

I believe these findings solidified the fact that stakeholders, including students, no longer see school as it once was, a place of freedom, a place of stature, a place where worries and fears can be healed.

Implications and Recommendations for Policy Changes

The literature supports the findings of the teacher participants' perspectives of high-stakes testing and the impact test anxiety has on young children. Teachers find it challenging to support their students through the difficult times of administering high-stakes tests to their students. Thus, federal and state policies, as well as institutional practices, must be addressed and altered to ensure that elementary students' well-being and mental health are no longer compromised. Current policies require students to perform at a certain level of proficiency and if not, there are negative consequences such as possible grade retention, labeling, and/or test retake. The issue is that too much emphasis is being placed on the high-stakes testing which causes the entire school environment to be disturbed. As a result of these pressures, students develop stress and anxiety related issues that teachers feel will have lasting effects on their students. Teachers shared how high-stakes testing has generated inequities amongst certain groups of students, students with disabilities, students from low socioeconomic households, and students who identify with a minority group. Fong and Soni (2022) and Sainio et al. (2019) proved that these students are already at an economic and educational disadvantage and the current accountability models add even more of a strain. Finally, high-stakes testing has narrowed the curriculum that students are being exposed to which adds to their educational disadvantage status.

Teacher participants clearly stated that though they do not have an issue with accountability models, they do not agree with the way in which the current model is being used. Teacher effectiveness and student achievement are two measures that are tied to the high-stakes models that the state requires. The current policy should be amended to include an accountability model that gauges student achievement in other ways than a three-hour snapshot from a reading assessment and a three-hour snapshot from a mathematics assessment. The following are recommendations for change:

First, instead of one culminating assessment that is given at the end of the academic year, implementation of a beginning, middle, and end of the year benchmark that measures student growth throughout the entire school year would be more beneficial. Students will have an opportunity to demonstrate mastery from the beginning of the year which would suffice as a pre-assessment, until the end of the academic year which would serve as the post assessment. Administering a middle of the year assessment would serve as a benchmark to inform students, teachers, and parents how students are performing. It would also provide formative data to further drive teacher instruction.

Second, incorporating leveled assessments that allow students to assess at the level in which they are performing would give all stakeholders a true depiction of a students' ability level. Students who are labeled as exceptional children have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that lays out the program of special education instruction, supports, and services kids need to make progress and thrive in school. This plan is generated based on data that indicates a student does not perform at the same level as their non-disabled peers; however, current practices require students who are functioning using an IEP to take the same high-stakes assessment as those students who do not have an IEP.

Third, having culturally responsive assessments that are printed in students' native language would be a great asset to the high-stakes testing arena. If the reading EOG is designed to measure students' reading comprehension skills and not their ability to read and comprehend English, can this not be measured with material printed in their native language? In addition, culturally responsive assessments that consider a students' homelife and their past experiences would allow for students to make greater connections to what is being asked. It is difficult for students to experience success on high stakes tests if they have no prior knowledge with what the assessment passages or questions are asking.

Fourth, incorporating a portfolio-based model that includes a performance-based assessment would be another approach to help emphasize, measure, and support the skills and knowledge that students will need to be successful. With such a framework, students would be able to demonstrate their readiness to move to the next grade level. Teachers would be able to engage their students in ambitious learning, support their students' strengths and needs, analyze whether their students are learning, and adjust their instruction to become more effective.

Lastly, breaking the assessments into chunks that allow students to test over an extended amount of time may help to ease some of the pressures and anxieties for students. Research participants indicated that their students, especially struggling readers, show signs of anxiety because they know that they are bound to a time limit, and it is difficult for them to focus for hours at a time sitting in the same spot. Common testing accommodations for students with IEPs or 504s are multiple test sessions and extended time. It is my belief that all students would benefit from these accommodations. The state of North Carolina provides a testing window in which districts can test. Most of the time, that window up to two weeks. My recommendation is

that districts utilize that entire window and allow teachers to break the assessments into chunks so that students are allowed to test over multiple days.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The study has both theoretical and empirical implications. Subheadings are provided to offset and provide a deep dive for each subtopic. The theoretical implications align with Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory with attention to describing how self-efficacy and high-stakes effect have on elementary students. I also provide descriptions of how the study supports the literature through the empirical implications.

Theoretical Implications

Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory served as the framework for this study. The lens in which this framework was aligned with this study was based on various constructs of the social cognitive theory to include environment, reinforcements, and motivation. Through continuous exploration of the social cognitive theory, I discovered that self-efficacy also plays a role in student achievement. Bandura defined self-efficacy as "an individual's belief in his or her own ability to organize and implement action to produce the desired achievements and results" (p. 3). Findings from the teacher participants suggested that the constant tear-down that high-stakes testing has caused has diminished students' self-efficacy. According to Domenech-Betoret et al. (2017) there are substantial resources that show a correlation between self-efficacy and student achievement; however, there is little research that explores the motivational factors behind self-efficacy and student achievement. The result of this study attempt to provide supports to the existing literature to better bring about an understanding of the direct alignment.

All 11 participants of my study agreed that the sanctions and consequences that have been tied to high-stakes testing has created a decline in a student's efficacy or belief in their

ability to be successful on the test. The findings of this study showed that teachers believe that their students are more focused on the repercussions that are aligned with not doing well on the high-stakes test, causing them to not be able to fully focus on the test to show their true ability levels. Additionally, teachers felt that the high-stakes testing is not designed in a way to allow their students to be successful. They felt that the tests are not culturally responsive to their students making it nearly impossible for their students to connect with the content that is being asked. In his social cognitive theory, Bandura (1997) stated that learning occurs through social influences, external and internal social reinforcement. Research from this study extends these ideas in the sense that teacher participants felt strongly that the high-stakes testing pressures were derived from the testing environment that their students are subject to. They noted that in every aspect of their life, both academic and social, the topic of high-stakes testing seems to be at the forefront of all conversations. Students are never able to turn away from the thought of test performance, causing them to remain in a state of anxiety and stress. Through this study, there is a gap in how the biological environment of the social cognitive theory impacts high-stakes testing. However, this research does add to the self-efficacy component of Bandura's social cognitive theory through the teacher participants' contributions about how teachers must instill in their students a level of confidence and motivation that they can perform well on the assessments. Although current high-stakes testing measure do not allow for student self-efficacy, it is imperative that teachers build capacity within their students so that they believe that they are able to experience success. With these petitions, I believe that my theoretical framework of social cognitive theory and self-efficacy were appropriate for this study.

Empirical Implications

Due to a gap in the empirical literature of elementary teachers' perspectives, it is

imperative to research the impact of high-stakes testing on elementary school age children. The transcendental phenomenological research approach used in this study captured the lived experiences of public school elementary teachers. The findings of this study revealed that there were similarities between my study and the existing literature. These findings are test anxiety, stress, motivation, narrowed curriculum, and inequities (Amoako, 2019; Heilig et al., 2018; Jonsson & Leden, 2019; Kauchak & Eggen, 2021).

Anxiety and stress were common discussions that evolved in all data collection processes. Collectively, the 11 participants described their students' experiences with high-stakes testing as stressful. Jordan, Jane, Billie, and Lynn all denoted that students enter their classrooms with a sincere fear about the EOG and all that it entails. Billie shared the story of how each year, she has multiple students who are so apprehensive about the test that they become physically ill the night before and morning of the test. Findings from Kelly (2019) aligned with the sentiments of my teacher participants. In Kelly's study, students in grades three, five, and eight shared that through the preparation for the test, and even more so on test day, they experienced extreme feelings of nervousness, stress, tension, and anxiety that resulted in them being physically sick. Cho and Chan (2020) revealed that students with psychological and physical ailments were all linked to the pressures of high-stakes testing. The study conveyed that social disparities, irregularities with blood pressure levels, gastrointestinal problems, and sleep deprivation all stemmed from high-stakes testing. Cornell et al. (2006) proclaimed that a group of students who were wrongly informed of their results on a high-stakes mathematics assessment reported that they began to develop symptoms of depression, a decrease of involvement in school-related activities, and a lack of self-efficacy and self-confidence. Furthermore, some students reported that they were so disheartened by the results that they dropped out of school. Results as these as

well as the findings from my study indicated that there is an increased need for educational accountability reform.

Four of the participants from my study shared that because of test prep, students are not given the opportunity to let their creativity be illuminated, which has distorted their motivation within the classroom setting. Student motivation can be a driving force in student success (Bandura, 1997; Deci & Ryan, 2000). However, students' lack of intrinsic motivation and creativity has been aligned with the increased emphasis that has been placed on accountability measures (Mehrotra, 2021). Findings from a study by Howard et al. (2021) disclosed that intrinsic motivation is directly related to student success. Various researchers completed studies to determine the correlation between student motivation and high-stakes testing measures. The results from all three studies indicated that when teachers implemented formative assessments—which are low stakes tests—student motivation increased, as opposed to when they implemented high-stakes assessments (Black, 2015; Leenkhecht et al., 2020; & Shepard et al., 2018).

Throughout the individual interviews, focus group session, and open-ended essays, the teacher participants revealed that their district has undergone a curriculum change for both ELA and mathematics. With this change, teachers within the kindergarten through eighth-grade settings are mandated to use scripted programs. All the teacher participants expressed that they are no longer allowed to implement supplemental materials that they were once at liberty to use. They felt strongly that this change of curriculum is a result of negative historical test scores for their district. Jordan shared, “I am currently teaching a new curriculum for both tested areas, in my opinion, as a result of test scores not being where the district feels that they should be.” Their opposition to high-stakes testing is that it has altered and narrowed the curriculum and has taken away the flexibility and autonomy they once enjoyed about teaching. Just as Jordan and the

other teacher participants shared, research from the work of Giersch (2016) and Li et al. (2018) indicated that high-stakes testing has created a school culture that does not provide an environment that allows students to be children and find themselves as such. Instead, the emphasis on test preparation has narrowed the teaching and learning process to focusing on ELA and mathematics so that students are prepared for those key elements that will appear on the state assessments. Veselak (2018) conducted a study that analyzed the effect high-stakes testing had on high school students. Results yielded that when students are not exposed to a well-rounded curriculum, long-term effects are produced which can stifle their ability to render significant postsecondary earnings. Similarly, in her essay, Dawn shared that one of her greatest fears about how high-stakes testing is affecting education is the impact it will generate for future generations of leaders and thinkers. Dawn stated, “If we are not giving our students the necessary tools to sustain life after the K-12 setting, then we are doing them a disservice.” Similarly to the empirical literature, my research participants were elementary teachers teaching grades three, four, or five who shared that testing had a negative impact on the scope of the curriculum, narrowing the curriculum to ensure that they had taught the content that would manifest on the high-stakes test.

Favorable research on how social inequalities along racial, social class, gender, and other marginalized populations have sustained through school practices (Fong & Soni, 2022; Sainio et al., 2019; & Steimer, 2002). High-stakes testing was said to be a measurement tool of assessing school quality to aid in closing achievement gaps. However, according to Au (2020) and Hikida and Taylor (2020), we have seen the exact opposite. Students who come from low-income housing and those whose skin color is a darker shade than what society deems as the norm, have suffered from current accountability practices the most. Two hundred twenty five minority

elementary students participated in a 2010 study and were asked to draw pictures and write a narrative to explain their feelings and emotions about high-stakes testing (Barksdale & Triplett, 2010). When the drawings were analyzed, signs of anger, anxiety, panic, and frustration were noted. The results proved that students are negatively impacted by high-stakes testing and this can even be visually evidenced. Anxiety due to high-stakes testing in underrepresented student populations was tested by Sainio et al. (2019). Participants consisted of students with learning disabilities; the study yielded results indicating that the students had higher levels of anxiety and lower self-esteem compared to their non-disabled peers. During the focus group session, the nine teacher participants shared similar stories about how their marginalized student populations have struggled the most with high-stakes testing models. Logan noted that from her experience of working at the district office level, as well as from being a classroom teacher, she has seen how the educational process for students from Title One schools has been conducted in such inequitable ways. Other participants like Dawn and Jordan voiced that their students with disabilities and other underrepresented populations lack the vocabulary, due to the lack of exposure and experiences, that are needed to be successful on high-stakes tests; therefore, putting these populations of students at a disadvantage.

The findings from the teacher participants in my study align with and add to the existing literature regarding high-stakes testing and its effect on younger students, outlined in my literature review. Therefore, my study corroborates with the work of Amoako (2019), Cho and Chan (2020), Cornell et al. (2006), Giersch (2016), Heilig et al. (2018), Jonsson and Leden (2019), Kauchak and Eggen (2021), Kelly (2019), Li et al. (2018), and Veselak (2018) in showcasing how high-stakes test negatively impact the teaching and learning process by causing

test anxiety, stress, motivation, narrowing of the curriculum, and inequalities for certain subgroups of students.

However, the results of my study also demonstrated some unique differences than what was found in the empirical literature as reported in the related literature section of this dissertation. These differences set this study apart in multiple ways, extending the existing research. Several of my participants have had teaching experience in multiple school districts. Two of the participants shared about some of their experience while in another school district as opposed to their experience in the current district. The existing literature highlighted various cases of teachers within the elementary setting, but from their perspectives within the one district they are currently teaching (Hout, 2012; Jennings & Sohn, 2014; and Santoro, 2018). Many of my teacher participants brought experiences of teaching in settings that included minority populations of students and teachers. Furthermore, five out of my 11 participants had teaching experience within schools that had military families. It is my belief that having this population added a dynamic layer of lived experiences. The existing literature did not specify if the teacher participants had experience with this population of students.

Several of my participants have held positions outside of the classroom setting, having served as district leads and curriculum specialists. Many of the participants in the existing literature contributed lived experiences from a classroom teacher's perspective, which may have limited the data for the phenomenon. In a 2019 study, Amoako conducted interviews that focused on capturing the perspectives of six first-year elementary teachers. Participants in that study felt that their educator preparation programs prepared them to teach all content areas; however, because of the demands of high-stakes testing, they are restricted to only teach the content areas that will be tested at the end of the academic school year which left them feeling

that their teacher preparation experiences were devalued. Just as participants in Amoako et al. (2019) and my teacher participants, the teachers in Amoako expressed similar sentiments about high-stakes testing conflicting with their professional judgements about the content to which they exposed their students. Another unique aspect that can be noted in my study was that there were 211 combined years of experience in the field of education between the 11 participants. Based on the studies from the existing literature, most of the teachers who were selected for these studies were novice teachers or the studies did not indicate the number of years that the participants had served in their capacities (Amoako et al., 2019; Santoro, 2018).

In addition, a drastic aspect that I felt allowed my study to corroborate with the existing literature is the setting. CPSD is the second largest county, land-wise, in the state. It is a very rural district that brings unique challenges and barriers. My teacher participants expressed that the living environment of their students hinder them from the exposure of life as opposed to their peers who reside in more affluent neighborhoods. Studies from the existing literature used participants from Chicago, Texas, and Massachusetts, as well as the countries Iran, Ghana, and Europe (Amoako, 2019; Anane, 2013; Chapman, 2014; DordiNejad et al., 2011; Hikida & Taylor, 2020; Hogberg & Horn, 2022). However, the findings from my participants, as well as the findings from the participants in the existing literature, were succinct in that high-stakes testing narrows the curriculum, students exhibit anxieties and stress because of the tests, and students from marginalized populations are the most at-risk of not being proficient on the tests.

Limitations and Delimitations

Having the sample size of 11 participants was one of the study's limitations. It is possible that if more teachers would have served as participants in the study, the findings would have been different. The timing of the study could be a limitation. The school district was undergoing

a change in both their reading and math curricula for kindergarten through eighth grade. Some teachers reached out and indicated that they would be interested; however, they were completely overwhelmed with the demands of the new curriculum. The data collection process took place virtually, which I felt may have limited the findings. I think the focus group may have been a little more impactful had participants been able to interact face-to-face with each other. Another limitation of this study was that I am a former elementary teacher with experience with high-stakes testing. Therefore, I was familiar with some participants' experiences, which could have impacted the findings. Following Moustakas' (1994) process of epoché, I was able to bracket my experiences in this research study and accurately record the detailed descriptions, using the reflexive journal. It is my belief that I was adequately positioned to approach each participant with a bias-free approach, listen to their experiences, and document them for what they were.

I do not believe that the delimitations of the study had a negative effect on the research. In fact, for the nature of the study, I think it allowed for a rich depiction of the experiences of the participants which enhanced the findings. To ensure that participants would have a knowledge base about or experience with the phenomenon, purposeful sampling was used for the study. Criteria to participate in this study were as follows: must be currently serving as an elementary teacher in grades kindergarten through six or have served as an elementary teacher; must have at least three years of teaching experience so that they would be knowledgeable of testing practices and influences, unlike a novice teacher; and must have administered a high-stakes test at some point in their career.

Recommendations for Future Research

High-stakes testing is an accountability model that is utilized in elementary, middle, high, and post high school settings. I would recommend that studies of this nature focus on

incorporating a sample size beyond the elementary level. My study was centered on elementary teachers' perspectives of how high-stakes testing affects their students so I limited the sample to only elementary teachers, but I think perspectives would change with including participants at each level. I also recommend incorporating perspectives from other stakeholders besides teachers. School counselors, school administrators, testing coordinators, district supervisors, parents, and students would offer valuable data to a study as this.

With the growing evidence of social and emotional learning and the effect that it has on student performance, I think it would be beneficial to study the effects of incorporating social and emotional learning techniques into test prep strategies for students who are involved in high-stakes testing situations. According to Melani et al. (2020), research centered on social and emotional learning has found some correlation to positive learning outcomes including student performance on high-stakes testing. It would be intriguing to me to see if incorporating coping skills through social and emotional learning lessens student anxiety and stress during high-stakes testing models.

Conclusion

The transcendental phenomenological study focused on elementary teachers describing their experiences with high-stakes testing as it relates to the impact on young children. The theoretical framework that structured this study was the social cognitive theory, specifically self-efficacy. Findings from the study suggest that elementary teachers feel that there should be an accountability measure in place to ensure that students are achieving academic success; however, the emphasis that is being placed on the current testing models is the issue with high-stakes testing. Coupled with the research and the findings from the 11 teacher participants, it can be determined that there is a correlation between self-efficacy and the phenomenon of high-stakes

testing. Aligning with the literature, the teacher participants reported that these models have created a toxic environment for students, causing massive anxiety and stress. There are inequities amongst disadvantaged populations of students because of the high-stakes testing, due to the lack of cultural relevance in the item banks from the tests. The curriculum has been narrowed to only allow time for teachers to teach those core subjects that students will be tested on, causing teachers to teach to the test and not incorporate other academic disciplines such as the arts. Finally, teachers reported that high-stakes testing has stifled students' motivation to do well academically because they are so focused on passing the test. Teacher participants favor keeping an accountability measure to ensure student success but emphasize that implementing the models should be restructured.

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Appendices

Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

November 2, 2022

Lamorris Smith
Christopher Clark

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-227 PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES WITH HIGH STAKES TESTING: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Dear Lamorris Smith, Christopher Clark,

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

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

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

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

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

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

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

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

Research Ethics Office

Appendix B: Recruitment Letter

Dear Recipient:

As a doctoral 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 examine how public elementary school teachers perceive high-stakes testing situations as it relates to the impact of test anxiety on young children, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be an elementary school teacher, have at least three years of teaching experience, and have experience administering high-stakes testing (e.g. NC EOG tests). Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in a Zoom interview concerning their experiences as an elementary teacher. Interviews will last approximately an hour. Participants will be asked to participate in a virtual focus group with other elementary teachers to discuss their shared experiences. This session will last approximately an hour. Additionally, participants will be asked to answer some open-ended essay questions. This will take approximately 30 - 45 minutes. Upon completing the interview, focus group, and answering the essay questions, participants will have an opportunity to participate in member checking where they will review the transcription to ensure its accuracy. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please click [here](#) and complete the screening survey. It will not take any longer than five minutes to complete and should be completed within seven days from receiving this letter.

A consent document is attached to this email and will be given to you three days before your scheduled interview/focus group. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me at least one day before the time of the interview/focus group.

Sincerely,

A large black rectangular redaction box covering the signature area.

Appendix C: Screening Survey

Willing research participants are needed for this research study to share their lived experiences as elementary teachers. Below is a list of questions that will further indicate your eligibility of meeting the research study's criteria.

Name:

Email address:

Number of years teaching experience:

Current grade level that you are teaching (If you are not currently teaching third, fourth, fifth, or sixth grade, but have in the past, please specify the grade level and when you taught that grade level(s):

At any time, have you administered high-stakes tests to a group of students:

If you are willing to participate, indicate your preferred days and times for scheduling a virtual meeting for your interview and focus group.

Appendix D: Message to Potential Participants

Acceptance Message

Dear Participant:

Congratulations! You have been selected to participate in my research study. Thank you for completing the participant screening survey and indicating your interest. The Consent Form is attached to this message. The consent document contains additional information about my research.

Participation is confidential; therefore, the Consent Form is voluntary. All participants will be assigned a pseudonym to ensure their confidentiality. However, if you elect to complete the consent form, you will type your name and the date on the form and return it to me before the day of your interview.

Thank you for your participation in this research study.

Sincerely,



Thank You Message

Dear Willing Participant:

Thank you for being willing to participate in my research study. However, you did not meet the selection criteria and have not been selected to participate. Thank you again for being willing to participate.

Sincerely,



Appendix E: Consent

Title of the Project: Public School Teachers' Experiences with High Stakes Testing: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study

Principal Investigator: [REDACTED], a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at [REDACTED]

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must have at least 3 years of teaching experience, must be an elementary school teacher, and must have administered high-stakes testing during your teaching career. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

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

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

The purpose of the study is to examine how public elementary school teachers perceive high-stakes testing situations as it relates to the impact of test anxiety on young children.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

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

1. Participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher. The interview will be audio recorded and conducted virtually. This will take approximately an hour.
2. Participate in a focus group with other elementary school teachers and the researcher. The focus group session will be audio recorded and conducted virtually. This will take approximately an hour.
3. Answer open-ended essay questions. You will be asked a series of questions that will guide your responses. This will take approximately 30-45 minutes.
4. Participate in the process called member checking to evaluate the transcripts of your interview and your portion of the focus group session. This will allow you to determine whether the researcher has accurately described the data that you contributed to the study. This will take approximately 15 minutes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. However, you may benefit from participating in a collaborative conversation focus group with other elementary school teachers.

Benefits to society include the following: 1) encouragement for elementary teachers experiencing effects of high-stakes testing with their students 2) expose other elementary teachers to your lived experiences as an elementary teacher of students who are affected by high-stakes testing situations.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

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

How will personal information be protected?

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

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

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary for elementary teachers within the Public Schools of Robeson County School district. Your decision whether 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.

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

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please inform the researcher, at the email address 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.

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

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

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

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the [REDACTED].

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study, after you sign this document, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

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

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

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix F: Interview Questions

1. Please introduce yourself by stating your name, your current role at the school, and the number of years you have taught in the classroom.
2. With specific details, describe your students' experiences with high-stakes testing. SQ1
3. What is your perception of the correlation of self-efficacy and high-stakes testing and the effects it has on students? SQ1
4. Tell me about an unforgettable experience, good or bad, that you can remember while administering a high-stakes test? SQ1
5. Think back when you were in school and had to participate in a test. How did your teacher help you handle the stress of the test? SQ1
6. How do you personalize the learning process in preparing students for high-stakes testing? SQ2
7. What do you think works best in your classroom to prepare students for high-stakes testing? Why? SQ2
8. Describe a school wide strategy that could assist with limiting student related anxiety regarding high-stakes testing? SQ2
9. Describe how time for test prep and time spent testing impact your ability to meet all the standards that should be taught. SQ3
10. How does preparing for the state assessments change your classroom instruction? SQ3
11. What are your perceptions of the ways high-stakes testing has impacted instructional methods you use in your classroom? SQ3
12. What factors do you think add to the stress for students on test day? SQ3
13. How does the data, from testing, inform and impact your lessons? SQ3

14. If high-stakes tests were abolished today, how would the teaching and learning process change in your classroom? SQ3

Appendix G: Focus Group Questions

1. Describe how your students are effected by the high-stakes tests that are administered in your grade level (i.e., End-of-Grade test (EOG), End-of-Course test (EOC), NC Final Exam, MClass Reading 3D Assessment, NC K-2 Mathematics Assessment?) SQ1
2. Describe how you feel high-stakes testing effects students with disabilities, low-income populations, and minority students? SQ1
3. Describe for me, how high-stakes testing impacts your instructional planning and other teaching responsibilities. SQ3
4. Tell me about a district wide strategy that you think ensures all your students do well on the assessment while limiting the influence of anxiety on the part of students. SQ2
5. What strategies do you feel the district/state should implement to prepare students for high-stakes testing? SQ2

Appendix H: Open-Ended Essay Questions

1. In what way(s) have you experienced your provided curriculum being altered/narrowed as a result of high-stakes testing? SQ3
2. What effect does high-stakes testing have on educators' and students' attitudes, and on the climate of learning? SQ1
3. What fears or concerns do you have for your students as they continue to the next phase of their educational journey, as a result of being educated in a heavily tested environment? SQ1
4. We've covered a lot of ground in our conversation, and I appreciate the time you've given to this. What last thoughts could you add or share about high-stakes testing?

Appendix I: Reflexive Journal

Comment	Date
I have a bias from my prior experiences of serving as a general education teacher and Academically Intellectually Gifted teacher and having administered a multitude of high-stakes tests. I have witnessed some of the brightest students underperform on these high-stakes tests because of the anxiety build up. I have also witnessed schools transform their entire teaching and learning structure to prepare for the upcoming tests. I have seen the arts be cancelled so that all teachers could push into classrooms to remediate in the subject areas of reading and math.	July 19, 2022
Today was the day. I was extremely nervous, but just as excited knowing that the rest of the journey would be determined by what was about to take place. I am a living testament of Philippians 4:6, “Do not be anxious about anything. Instead, in every situation with prayer and petition with thanksgiving, tell your requests to God. And the peace that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” Our Lord and Savior provided that peace through Drs. Clark and Collins. As I began to defend my proposal, a calmness came over me that I had never experienced before.	August 12, 2022
I conducted the pilot study, in which all participants showed up on time and participated. There were minor technical difficulties; however, I was able to work those out before beginning the data collection with my actual participants. I was very nervous about this whole deal, but excited at the same time because I knew this was the turning point of my dissertation phase.	November 6, 2022
I conducted my first individual interview. For the most part, everything went as planned. My participant was having a difficult time getting her sound to work on her computer, but we eventually figured that part out. From start to finish, it took 30 minutes to complete the interview. I realized that interviews would not last the entire hour that I had allotted, so the one-hour time slots should be sufficient.	November 9, 2022
Today, I completed the third and fourth interviews. The third interview participant was scheduled for an earlier date, but she became ill and had to reschedule. She was still experiencing some sickness and had been out of work for several days. I offered to reschedule, again, but she refused. Luckily, we were able to complete the interview in about 40 minutes and she was able to rest.	November 14, 2022
I completed the sixth interview, and it took the longest. From start to finish, it lasted an hour and a half. The participant was one of two who had been in various school districts. She presented information from both districts.	November 16, 2022
This was a very long day of interviewing. I wrapped up the remaining three interviews. Just as the sixth interview, the 10 th interview lasted over an hour. This participant, too, had worked in various districts and provided experiences from both districts.	November 18, 2022
I conducted the virtual focus group. Nine of the participants joined. The other two members had informed me that they would not be able to participant in the remaining data collection pieces due to personal illnesses. All nine	December 5, 2022

<p>participants offered an immense amount of information that allowed for rich data. At the conclusion of the focus group, I emailed them their open-ended essay questions and asked that they be submitted by December 12th.</p>	
<p>I developed themes and sub-themes. A total of eight themes emerged but I narrowed it down to five. As I was going through all the data, I grew even more attached to this study. I reflected on the many voices that were present throughout the data collection and could hear the passion that the participants had.</p>	<p>December 26, 2022</p>
<p>The final words were written, and I began to sob. Though there is still much more to do, I know that this journey is ending. It wasn't until now that this entire experience has made sense and I can honestly say that I see how it is unfolding to come together.</p>	<p>December 31, 2022</p>

Appendix J: Audit Trail

Date	Entry
August 9, 2022	I submitted the final edits of Chapters One through Three to my chair, Dr. Clark. He reviewed and sent to my second committee member, Dr. Collins. After Collins's review, we scheduled my proposal defense for August 12 th .
August 11, 2022	Dr. Clark and I conducted a trial run for my proposal defense. I received very valuable feedback from this experience. The major takeaway was to RELAX and own this time. My presentation was entirely too lengthy; therefore, I had to make some adjustments, within a few hours, to ensure that I was ready for the defense the next day. I rehearsed several times before going to bed.
September 1, 2022	After several days of attempting to locate login credentials for the Cayuse IRB portal, I was able to submit my IRB application. It was returned for revisions and resubmitted November 1 st .
November 2, 2022	IRB Approved was the text message that I received. I began to rejoice and thank our Heavenly Father.
November 2, 2022	Sent recruitment letter and link to the screening survey to elementary teachers within the district in which the study was to be conducted.
November 6, 2022	Conducted the pilot study, transcribed the results, made adjustments that were needed.
November 6, 2022	Began sending acceptance notices for the eligible participants from the first screening surveys that I had received.
November 9-23, 2022	Conducted individual interviews, transcribed the data, sent to participants for member checking.
December 5-15, 2022	Conducted focus group, transcribed the data, sent to participants for member checking.
December 26-31, 2022	Completed coding and developed five themes, completed Chapters Four and Five.