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# Teacher perspectives on the impact of high-stakes testing on students with disabilities : a grounded theory study

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TEACHER PERSPECTIVES ON THE IMPACT OF HIGH-STAKES TESTING ON  
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

by

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirement

for the degree of

Doctor of Education

Grand Forks, North Dakota

Spring  
2017

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This dissertation, submitted by Tammy Marie Mayer in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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Date

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## ABSTRACT

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 1997 (IDEA), No Child Left Behind Act 2001 (NCLB), and Every Child Succeeds Act 2015 (ESSA) has changed how public schools adapt to standards and accountability systems for all students, including students with mild-to-significant cognitive disabilities. Federal legislation has changed the focus of teaching and learning since the implementation of NCLB. This movement has altered the way students with disabilities are compared to their same-age peers.

High-stakes testing has generated numerous challenges for educators, administrators, parents, and students across the nation. Increased pressure has been placed on schools to achieve Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), based on participation and proficiency rates in English language arts and math for all students, including students disabilities.

The purpose of this study was to understand how North Dakota general education teachers were adapting to the federal legislative requirements that high-stakes testing placed on curriculum and instructional practices for students with disabilities. NCLB not only mandated access to general education curriculum for students with disabilities during high-stakes testing, but it also held students with disabilities to higher standards.

The study findings indicated that teachers felt pressured into making instructional decisions based on high-stakes testing. As a consequence, teachers were spending more time on test preparation, students with disabilities were exposed to a less rigorous curriculum, teachers felt less in control of making decisions regarding curriculum and instructional practices in their classrooms, and teachers were unable to deploy strategies that supported Universal Design of Learning.

*Keywords:* achievement standards, assessment, high-stakes testing, access, Universal Design for Learning

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Accountability, high-stakes testing, common core state standards, education reform, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) are just a few of the many legislative initiatives being debated among Americans across the country. Whether it is a story told by parents, teachers, administrators, lawmakers, or found in the local newspapers or television news stations, many beliefs exist regarding the impact of how accountability is measured using federal high-stakes testing requirements.

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 2001 was designed to close the achievement gap between low-performing subgroups and their peers (United States Department of Education, 2015). President George W. Bush and Congress were frustrated with teachers, blaming them for rising school costs and underperforming students. Congress wanted to transform American education by creating an accountability system requiring each state to commit to student achievement standards by 2014 or face the withholding of federal funds (Tucker, 2014). This controversial precedent required all subgroups of students, including students with disabilities and students with significant cognitive disabilities, to take a common standardized assessment. All students were expected to show adequate growth to a proficiency rate of 100% in English language arts and mathematics by the year 2014

(NCLB, 2001). When President Bush enacted NCLB, he announced to the public that it no longer was acceptable for the United States to allow its students to be prepared inadequately in reading and mathematics. His remedy was to enforce an accountability reform act that would increase the expectations of all students by leaving behind no child. The purpose was to ensure that all students, including students with disabilities, had a fair and equal opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach a level of proficiency as defined by the federal government's challenging state academic achievement standards – which many people across the country labeled the “common core standards” (Hanzlicek, 2006).

In response to NCLB and other impacting factors, North Dakota adopted common core state standards (CCSS) in 2010. Upon adoption of the common core standards, access to general education curriculum for students with disabilities became mandated in federal law, but it also became critical in providing an opportunity for all students, including students with disabilities, to have a fair and equal opportunity to obtain a high-quality education.

NCLB has been reauthorized and renamed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015). Although the reauthorization of NCLB was long overdue, ESSA was so newly reauthorized that it was difficult to determine how the changes would affect state and local education agencies. ESSA's final regulations shifted control of mandates regarding accountability, teacher evaluations, and school improvement from federal agencies to state and local authorities (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2015). With a show of strong bipartisan support, both the House and the Senate felt that ESSA would be a step toward improving K-12 education, by reducing



the federal role, restoring local control, and empowering parents (Kline, 2015). Additionally, ESSA's regulations had several accountability changes and transferred authority from the federal government to the states to create a plan that included long-term goals and interim targets for accountability indicators. States could include proficiency rates on high-stakes assessment, including student growth and at least one indicator highlighting school quality or student success. Examples of acceptable indicators were: student engagement, educator engagement, student access to or completion of advanced coursework, post-secondary readiness, school climate and safety, and one indicator chosen by the state. The state plan requirements also included measures showing how states would improve learning conditions, by reducing bullying and harassment and addressing behavioral interventions that could impact overall student health (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2015).

As the change in federal requirements began to unfold, the impact this change would have on all students, generally, as well as students with disabilities, particularly, concerned educators. In an effort to help reduce the fear of ESSA's impact, the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction (NDDPI) invited stakeholders from around the state to include local education leaders in the effort to create North Dakota's accountability plan. Stakeholder groups had been working collaboratively on developing ESSA's implementation plan for nearly a year. Although there was excitement about the opportunities ESSA allowed, there was a general sense of anxiety and concern due to past punitive consequences local education agencies encountered as a result of NCLB.

Reauthorization of NCLB changed the way educators in the public sector viewed standards and accountability systems for all students, including students with disabilities. The education system had shown signs of stress, frustration, and fear concerning how to move forward in trying to meet the demands of educational reform. The purpose of this qualitative, grounded theory study was to examine how general education teachers adapted to federal high-stakes testing requirements and, especially, the impact the requirements had on their daily curriculum and instruction practices for students with disabilities.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In response to the mandates in NCLB and ESSA, there was a high degree of interest concerning the use of assessments to measure learning outcomes for students with disabilities. Some researchers explained that placing such high demands on high-stakes testing could lead to risky behaviors, resulting in the widening of the achievement gap and narrowing of curriculum and decision-making processes for students with disabilities (Heubert & Hauser, 1998). Research suggested teachers who were provided with assessment data which could be used to improve instruction tended to increase proficiency rates on high-stakes testing for students with disabilities (Thurlow, 2002). However, national and state high-stake assessment trend data revealed that there continued to be a significant discrepancy in achievement proficiency rates between general education students and special education students (Chudowsky & Chudowsky, 2009; Quenemoen, Quenemoen, Lazarus, Kearns, & Altman, 2010).

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative, grounded theory study was to examine how general education teachers adapted to federal high-stakes testing requirements and the impact this had on curriculum and instruction for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities could learn the same standardized curriculum as their same-age peers, but they required additional, explicit, adapted instruction. However, trend data indicated high-stakes assessment did not provide enough supporting evidence that students with disabilities were achieving at the same proficiency rate as their same-age peers.

This exploration utilized qualitative interviews to identify perspectives of general education teachers in order to assist in the improvement of state policy and provide recommendations for school districts to enhance curriculum and instructional practices for North Dakota students with disabilities on high-stakes tests.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How have federal high-stakes testing requirements impacted 11<sup>th</sup> grade general education teachers' curriculum and instructional practices for students with behavioral, social/emotional, social communication, and mental health needs, as well as the students' performance on high-stakes/accountability testing?
2. How have federal regulations impacted the use of Universal Design of Learning in general education classrooms?

## Conceptual Framework

Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a scientifically-based framework that guided the design of all aspects of the learning environment, included: curriculum, materials, instructional design, and assessment (Dynamic Learning Maps, 2016). UDL was developed in the 1960s as a conceptual model that was designed to reduce physical barriers and create access to structural facilities for individuals with disabilities (Gordon, Gravel, & Schifter, 2009). In the 1990s, UDL transformed into a concept that was more innovative and allowed students with more complex needs to have access to America's schools (Gordon et al., 2009). UDL was federally-funded through the United States Department of Education with the intent to improve education for all students, including students with disabilities. The idea and primary purposes of UDL applied to the instructional design of general education classrooms. It sought to ensure that every student, regardless of learning barriers, would have the opportunity to access the same curriculum and instructional materials as non-disabled peers.

UDL encouraged students to learn in a way that was most efficient and effective for their learning style (Hehir, 2009). UDL emphasized three core principles: multiple ways of representation, multiple ways of action and expression, and multiple ways of engagement (Dynamic Learning Maps, 2016). UDL was considered an educational process that could intertwine within daily instructional practices (Samuels, 2016).

Traditional instructional methods, goals, and assessments have not been successful in serving the needs of such a diverse group of learners (Gordon et al., 2009). With an increased emphasis on student performance on high-stakes testing, researchers and various experts from the field of education consistently reported that school failure

was correlated with curricular methods, goals, and assessments. School failure was not placed solely on schools; responsibility also rested on students and teachers. Research in assessment and instruction revealed a disconnect between how America evaluated education systems and students. This placed educators in a difficult position – having to adapt to increased expectations of federal requirements, while setting aside what they believed to be the best ways for students to demonstrate what they know and can do (Hehir, 2009). UDL was a scientific framework in which educators could design instructional techniques to provide students the opportunity to access grade-level academic content. This framework could be implemented by designing the learning environment to promote activities that would prepare students with the necessary skills to become college- and career-ready individuals (Browder et al., 2007).

UDL had the potential to create a bridge between special education and general education that could promote a higher quality education and improve proficiency rates on high-stakes testing. UDL's framework would open the doors for all students, including students with disabilities, to demonstrate what they knew and could do, thus improving the educational outcomes of students with disabilities (Hehir, 2009).

### **Importance of the Study**

By listening to or reading local or national news, hearing educators speak about their profession, examining state policy, and/or speaking with lawmakers, it is easy to understand that general education teachers struggle with the demands of federal education mandates. There is considerable emphasis on high-stakes testing and its impact on instructional practices for students with disabilities. This study's recommendations focus on how to support educators in improving instructional

practices, and they provide guidance to state education agencies in developing policies that would support local education agencies in adapting to federal education high-stakes testing mandates and closing the achievement gap that existed between students with and without disabilities. The results from this study encourage educators, policy makers, and legislatures not to look at education as a source of failure, but rather to focus on customizing learning for students by providing multiple pathways using the scientific framework of UDL. The outcomes from this study support students with disabilities by enhancing a level of proficiency that will prepare them for the demands of college and career readiness.

### **Delimitations**

This qualitative study investigated two North Dakota high schools: one rural and one urban. There were 27 Grade 11 students in the rural school; in the urban school there were 247 Grade 11 students. This study examined 10 Grade 11 general education teachers. Teachers who participated in this study were required to have a minimum of three years teaching experience and needed to have students (or have had students) with behavioral, social/emotional, social communication, and/or mental health needs.

### **Scope of the Study**

The research goal of this study was to understand how general education teachers were adapting to the federal high-stakes testing requirements, as well as how these requirements impacted curriculum and instructional practices for students with disabilities.

### **Definitions of Terms/Acronyms**

The following definitions of terms and acronyms are used in this study:

*Access:* Access to curriculum that is differentiated and makes personally-relevant connections to the lives of students with significant cognitive disabilities. Personally-relevant curriculum connects students to their current school-based community by considering skills, settings, and relationships that will support students in their school communities (Trela & Jimenez, 2013).

*Accountability:* An individual or a group of individuals taking responsibility for the performance of students on achievement assessments or other types of educational outcomes (National Center for Education Outcome, 2013).

*Achievement gaps:* Differences in academic performance between subgroups of students and their peers (United States Department of Education, 2013).

*Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP):* A goal for annual improvement that school districts and schools must make each year in order to reach No Child Left Behind's requirement to have every student proficient in reading and math by the year 2014.

*Alternate assessment:* Assessments that measure the performance of a relatively small population of students who are unable to participate in the general assessment system, with or without accommodations, as determined by the individualized education program team.

*Benchmarks:* A description of the students' knowledge, skills, and abilities, compared to the standards.

*Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA):* Reauthorization of NCLB that allows state and local education agencies more local control and flexibility in reporting and accountability.

*General education teacher:* A person who instructs students in one or more content areas (i.e. English, math science, history, or career and technical education).

*High-stakes testing:* Any test used to make important decisions about students, educators, schools, or districts, most commonly for the purpose of accountability.

*Individualized Education Plan (IEP):* A written plan for each child with a special education disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in a meeting in accordance with §§300.320-300.324.

*Instruction:* The “how” of teaching.

*No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB):* Federal act that is meant to close the achievement gaps with accountability so that no child will be left behind his or her peers.

*Special education teacher:* A person who instructs students who have been determined to have one or more disabilities in accordance with IDEA, 2004.

*Students with disabilities:* A child who has been evaluated in accordance with Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) requirements, has been determined to have one or more disabilities, and needs specialized instruction.

*Students with significant cognitive disabilities:* Significantly sub-average general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the development period, that adversely affect a child’s educational performance [34CFR§300.8(c)(6)].

*Universal Design for Learning (UDL):* A conceptual model for instructional design that emphasizes the use of evidence-based strategies and technology to meet the needs of a wide range of learners.



## **Organization of Study**

Chapter I includes an introduction to the study and its purpose, including the problem statement, conceptual framework, importance of the study, definitions of terms and acronyms, and delimitations.

Chapter II provides a review of the literature from a variety of sources related to students with disabilities and high-stakes testing.

Chapter III is an overview of the qualitative research design of the study and its research procedures, including data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

Chapter IV is a presentation of the findings.

Chapter V discusses the central phenomenon that is presented.

Chapter VI presents the study's summary, conclusions, and recommendations.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997), No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001), and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) have challenged how public schools considered assessment and instructional practices for all students, including students with mild-to-significant cognitive disabilities. The promise of NCLB was to raise achievement for all students and hold schools more accountable for student performance (Hardman & Dawson, 2008). This movement presented many opportunities and challenges for educators, families, and students. Students with disabilities had increased access within the general education curriculum and were required in statewide high-stakes testing to achieve the same rigorous state standards as their non-disabled peers (Edmonds & Spradlin, 2010; NCLB, 2001). One exception was for the 1% of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, who were allowed to take an alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards (NCLB, 2001).

Inclusion of students with disabilities in an era of high-stakes testing added a new level of difficulty to instruction and assessment. The increased pressure placed on schools to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) as determined by high-stakes testing changed how educators viewed instructional practices for students with disabilities. Schools felt as though students with disabilities were preventing them from reaching

AYP, leaving schools to question whether students with disabilities were benefitting from instruction in the general education classrooms (Allbritten, Mainzer, & Ziegler, 2004). Students with disabilities had Individualized Education Plans (IEP), which allowed for the use of accommodations and various instructional supports to assist students in learning the same rigorous grade-level state standards as their non-disabled peers (Edmonds & Spradlin, 2010).

Likewise, North Dakota trend data from 2011-2016 showed students with disabilities were demonstrating a decrease in proficiency rates in reading and math. This decrease in proficiency rates raised questions about whether current instructional practices for students with disabilities were working. To understand the impact this had on general education classroom teachers, local and state education leaders needed to be conscious of how educators were supporting students with disabilities through the use of specialized instruction to ensure academic achievement on high-stakes testing (Cole, 2006).

Historical and recent legislation regarding high-stakes testing had a significant impact on school systems throughout the United States. When NCLB was enacted on January 3, 2001, it placed a deadline on schools to have all students 100% proficient in reading and math (NCLB, 2001). It was Congress's way of ensuring all students had a fair and equal opportunity to obtain a high-quality education (Ralabate & Foley, 2003). With an assurance of a high-quality education, schools all over the nation were expected to close the achievement gap by increasing student performance on high-stakes tests, based on rigorous content standards also known as the Common Core State Standards (Klehm, 2014). The increased expectations of this law required general and special

educators to reflect on the type of services students with disabilities were receiving, including students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, in order to gain access to the same challenging academic content standards as their non-disabled peers.

During this time of sweeping reform, educators began to experience increased pressure to close the achievement gap between students with and without disabilities in order to make adequate yearly progress (AYP). A National Center on Education Outcome (NCEO) report completed in 2013-14 showed, in 47 of the 50 states that reported, that there was a 37-41 percentage point difference between the reading and math scores of students with and without disabilities. This achievement gap was noted across all grade spans, with more significant gaps in middle and high schools (National Center for Education Outcome, 2013). With increased pressure from high-stakes testing, these achievement gaps presented significant challenges for schools, educators, and students. Educators expressed that they felt like they had to set aside what they knew about how students learn and instead were required to teach in a way that would enable students to perform well on the high-stakes tests (Klehm, 2014).

The 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) was written to guarantee the right to a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment for children with disabilities (Ralabate & Foley, 2003). By the late 1990s, when Congress revisited this shift in education, research supporting students with disabilities demonstrated an increase in academic performance when students were given access to the same content standards as their same-age, non-disabled peers (Ralabate & Foley, 2003). Reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997) required educators to support students with disabilities,

including students with the most significant disabilities, in a general education environment to the maximum extent possible. In doing so, IDEA required that students with disabilities had access to the same content standards as their non-disabled peers (Ralabate & Foley, 2003); otherwise, school districts would not be in compliance for students receiving a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). Numerous research studies made the claim that students who were educated in the general education classroom with the same learning expectations as their peers are capable of increasing their academic achievement performance, based on grade-level content standards (Klehm, 2014; Sledge & Pazey, 2013). Access to general education curriculum was not offered always to students with disabilities, due to a consistent division between what general education and special education teachers believed students with disabilities knew and could do, regardless of the complexity of the students' disabilities (Klehm, 2014).

This chapter addresses a comprehensive review of literature on the current accountability system in public education during a time of standards-based reform, focusing on how this influenced instructional and assessment practices for students with disabilities. It also provides an overview of special education legislation and the policies that drive high-stakes testing, along with a summary of North Dakota State Assessment and the performance expectations high-stakes testing placed on students with disabilities who take federally-mandated tests. Finally, it provides a review of instructional and assessment practices that teachers have implemented in their classrooms for students with disabilities and how these practices demonstrate an increased need for and emphasis on Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

### **The Education for All Handicapped Children Act**

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) was passed in 1975 as a special education law, which guaranteed a “free and appropriate” public education (FAPE) for students to learn in their least restrictive environments (LRE) (Ralabate & Foley, 2003). The purpose of this legislation was to ensure students with disabilities received the same educational benefits from effective and high-level instruction of academic content standards that their peers received (Office of Special Education Programs, 2010). This historical yet significant landmark contained the first federal requirements that allowed students with disabilities to attend and have access to public school education with non-disabled peers (Browder et al., 2004)

### **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act**

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 1965) was reauthorized and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997). When this legislation went into effect, it guaranteed children with disabilities the same access to education as children without disabilities. IDEA was reauthorized in 2004 to include changes that aligned more closely with NCLB, putting a continued emphasis on students with disabilities being ensured access to the same challenging academic standards as their same-age peers (Sec. 300.38 (b) (3)).

The intent of IDEA was to have an integrated educational process in which students with disabilities had more access to regular education while being included in state and district assessments (Skrtic, Harris, & Shriner, 2005). With teaching and learning as an integrated process, students with disabilities were expected by federal

law to have access to the same rigorous content standards and participate in the same high-stakes testing as their same-grade peers (IDEA, 2004; Ralabate & Foley, 2003).

IDEA reauthorization required and supported the inclusion of students with disabilities to the maximum extent possible with non-disabled peers, regardless of the severity of the disability. IDEA also required state systems to accommodate in the state's accountability system, meaning all students were required to be assessed in reading and math – once each year in Grades 3- 8 and once in Grade 10, 11, or 12. Science assessments also were required once in each of the following grade spans: 3-5, 6-9, and 10-12. Individualized Education Plan (IEP) teams had to consider whether students with the most significant cognitive disabilities required instruction on alternate achievement standards, and, if so, whether alternate assessments would be appropriate (United States Department of Education, 2013). Alternate assessments could account for only 1% of the state's total population of students with disabilities (Thurlow, 2002; IDEA, 2004).

In a “Dear Colleague” letter sent to State Education Agencies (SEA) on November 16, 2015, the Department of Education, along with the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, stated that IDEA was the “entitlement” of students with disabilities to receive a free and appropriate education that would allow them to prepare for further education, employment, and independent living (Yudin & Musgrove, 2015). As education systems worked to improve achievement for students with disabilities, schools no longer saw students with disabilities as preventing them from meeting AYP. Educators began to do what **was** needed to create an effective

learning environment to promote high academic achievement and success for all students, including those with mild-to-significant cognitive disabilities.

### **Elementary and Secondary Education Act**

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 1965) represented a commitment by the federal government to “quality and equality” in education of American youth. ESEA’s purpose was to provide additional resources to districts serving low-income students in order to improve the quality of elementary and secondary education. In the 35 years ESEA was in effect, the federal government increased significantly the amount of resources dedicated to education. In 2001, with strong bipartisan support from Congress, ESEA was reauthorized and renamed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

### **No Child Left Behind Act**

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was officially signed into law in January 2002, by President George W. Bush. NCLB was highly controversial. Both Congress and the President no longer could accept how America’s students were underperforming, and they sought to hold teachers accountable for student learning (Tucker, 2014; United States Department of Education, 2013). NCLB was specific in regulation, dictating that all children must receive a fair and equal opportunity to receive high-quality education, with the goal of increasing student achievement on rigorous and challenging state academic standards. NCLB differed from previous reauthorizations in that it required students with disabilities to participate in state testing programs and meet the same rigorous state standards as their non-disabled peers (Edmonds & Spradlin, 2010; NCLB, 2011; Ralabate & Foley, 2003).



NCLB raised many concerns among educators, families, state policymakers, and lawmakers. One core concern among many Americans was the impact that accountability measures in high-stakes testing had on local school districts (Ralabate & Foley, 2003).

NCLB required all students to become 100% proficient in English language arts and math by the year 2014, regardless of whether or not they had a disability – and if students were not meeting this requirement, schools were labeled as failing. Schools labeled as failing were penalized and required to take additional measures to improve student performance. Ultimately, schools could be forced into restructuring – which could result in the replacement of staff or turning control of the school over to the state – which could result in the school being closed or turned into a charter school (United States Department of Education, 2015). This requirement mandated that students with disabilities have access to the same grade-level content standards as their non-disabled peers (IDEA, 2004; NCLB, 2001; United States Department of Education, 2013).

Based on widespread dissatisfaction, reauthorization and restructuring of NCLB was considered widely to be necessary. Many believed that the expectation placed on schools, teachers, and students of all students becoming 100% proficient in reading and math was unrealistic, archaic, and presented impossible challenges for local school districts, students, and educators. The increasing emphasis on standardized test scores placed extreme pressure on school districts, which led some districts to act unethically and illegally. For example, a district in Atlanta, Georgia made choices in 2013 that resulted in serious consequences. The district had an overwhelming fear of not achieving certain test scores, since failing to do so would result in teachers losing their

jobs and schools being labeled as failing (Strauss, 2015). The pressure was so intense that district teachers and administrators felt the need to cheat on their high-stakes tests. The goal of achieving the end result was, in their minds, more important than the students' learning success. The subsequent scandal resulted in eleven teachers being charged with racketeering and other crimes related to cheating (Strauss, 2015).

NCLB recently underwent revisions. A bipartisan vote in Congress removed the previous legislation's requirements in regard to high-stakes assessment, standards, and accountability. The new law, which was signed in December 2015 and will go into effect in the 2017-2018 school year, was titled the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015).

### **Every Student Succeeds Act**

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) reauthorized the 50-year-old ESEA. ESSA allowed states the flexibility to establish long-term goals and submit a plan that would include assurance of compliance with the statute's requirements.

ESSA eliminated the 100 % proficiency rate for adequate yearly progress (AYP) and allowed states to adopt their own challenging academic content standards instead of the former Common Core State Standards. Additionally, ESSA allowed states to use data from multiple indicators, such as: school quality, student engagement, school climate, safety, and access to and completion of advanced coursework (ESSA 2015). In the state's lowest performing 5% of schools, added flexibility was granted to implement student learning improvement strategies for all student subgroups that consistently had underperformed within state accountability systems (National Center for Education Outcome, 2013; Ujjifusa, 2015).

ESSA maintained IDEA's high-stakes testing timeline (described previously in this chapter). The focus remained on the following student subgroups: students with disabilities, racial minorities, and students in poverty – with an increased focus on English language learners (Sawchuk, 2015). ESSA also allowed districts to use nationally recognized tests at the high school level (such as the ACT or the SAT) as their high-stakes testing tool, if requested. (ESSA, 2015). For students who were taught using alternate achievement standards and were assessed using an alternate assessment, states could continue to maintain a 1% cap of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

ESSA also provided additional flexibility to states by eliminating the mandatory CCSS that NCLB enforced. It allowed states to establish and develop their own college- and career-ready standards. It suggested the use of the Universal Design for Learning framework when developing and/or improving state and district assessments for students with disabilities. It required states to provide appropriate accommodations to measure the academic achievement of students with disabilities, such as interoperability with, and the ability to use, assistive technology (ESSA, 2015).

Since ESSA was signed into law, each state was asked by the United States Department of Education to develop a plan that met the required statute. However, with the new presidential administration and the addition of Betsy DeVos as United States Secretary of Education, the regulations were overturned, leaving states to follow what they believed the statutes require. Some supporters of this overturn suggested that the regulations mimicked what they saw as NCLB's heavy federal hand on states. They asserted that eliminating ESSA regulations gave states the flexibility to create a plan

based on what was best for the states. North Dakota began development of the ESSA state plan before initial regulations were finalized. North Dakota intended to continue with the proposed plan and submit it for peer review in April 2017 (United States Department of Education, 2015).

### **North Dakota State Assessment (NDSA) Legislation**

North Dakota law required that all students be assessed annually in English language arts (Grades 3-8, 11), math (Grades 3-8, 11), and science (Grades 4, 8, 11). The North Dakota State Constitution and the Legislative Assembly enacted statutes to secure uniformity in the course of study, including: declaring the state superintendent responsible for supervision of the development of course content standards and the assessment of students (N.D.C.C. § 15.1-02-04.3-4), requiring that all approved schools meet curricular requirements in state law (N.D.C.C. § 15.1-21-02), and requiring the annual administration of state assessments in subjects and grades that are aligned to the state's content standards (N.D.C.C. § 15.1-21-08).

North Dakota had approximately 56,000 students who took the North Dakota State Assessment (NDSA), approximately 13,600 of whom were on IEPs. Individualized Education Plan teams were required by federal law to consider three options for student participation in high-stakes testing: NDSA without accommodations, NDSA with accommodations, or the North Dakota Alternate Assessment (NDAA) based on alternate achievement standards. Recently, North Dakota had approximately 630 students who participated in the NDAA. Students who took the NDAA made up approximately 1% of the state student population, which was based on the student subgroup that had significant cognitive disabilities and could not participate in regular

assessments even with accommodations (IDEA, 2004; North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, n.d.; Towles-Reeves, Kleinert, & Muhomba, 2009).

### **Academic Achievement Standards and Curriculum**

Academic achievement standards help define what students know and are able to do (Thurlow & Ysseldyke, 2002). The idea of academic achievement standards in education is based on the need to define what the students should learn to be college- and/or career-ready, and to provide direction for teachers to help prepare students to become prepared for life after high school (Thurlow, 2002).

Academic achievement standards are “broad descriptions of the knowledge and skills students should acquire in a particular subject area” (Morison, McLaughlin, & McDonnel, 1997). Standards represent the expectations of the grade-level general education curriculum, but they are not the curriculum (Jacobs, 2010). The standards are composed of three components: (a) a description of the standard, (b) the role in assessment, and (c) the contribution to accountability of teachers and schools. Standards ultimately provide a direction for teachers to help prepare all students to become college- and/or career-ready (Courtade, Spooner, Browder, & Jimenez, 2012).

Curriculum provides educators with the skills each grade-level’s standards should contain (Jacobs, 2010; Thurlow & Quenemoen, 2011; United States Department of Education, 2015). The curricular focus for students with disabilities has changed over time, with a continuous focus on student engagement. Curriculum for all students should be focused on multiple means of expression, representation, or engagement – what some experts in education refer to as the principals of a Universal Design for Learning. In particular, students with disabilities have unique, non-standard ways of

learning and require alternative ways to reach the standard expectations. Research indicates that if students with disabilities are not provided these opportunities, a decrease in academic proficiency rates will occur – and, in an era of high-stakes testing, educators struggle to maintain the academic rigor of the standard expectations (Jacobs, 2010; Trela & Jimenez, 2013).

Recent studies suggest that students with disabilities can make notable gains in academic performance when provided with access to the same grade-level content as their peers, by using effective instructional practices (like Universal Design for Learning) (Vaughn, Danielson, Zumeta, & Holdheide, 2015) while focusing on their own learning (Reigeluth & Karnopp, 2013). A continuous process of finding creative ways to address content standards in classrooms is important to help educators recognize ways to improve performance outcomes for students with disabilities. With all the strategies and practices known to educators, and the continuous process enacted to promote performance for students with disabilities, there is a continued need for further research on effective teaching methods for students with disabilities – especially those who have behavioral, social/emotional, social communication, and/or mental health needs (Courtade et al., 2012). Studies indicate that school districts with high-performing students with disabilities also have teachers who do what is best for the student even in an era of high-stakes testing (Edmonds & Spradlin, 2010). However, research on how participating in general education curriculum and high-stakes testing increase academic achievement and support post-school outcomes for students with disabilities still is insufficient (Hunt, McDonnell, & Crocket, 2012).

## **Universal Design for Learning**

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a planning framework that reduces instructional and environmental barriers to create learning opportunities for all learners in their learning environments (Dynamic Learning Maps, 2016), regardless of ability, disability, age, gender, or cultural and linguistic background (Ianiro & Hector-Mason, 2012). The concept of UDL began in the 1960s in the field of architecture as a way to support and secure the rights of individuals with disabilities by eliminating physical barriers (Gordon et al., 2009) and providing access to buildings and products, whether structural or technological (Gordon, Gravel, & Schifter, 2009; King-Sears, 2009).

UDL is a model for curriculum planning, instructional delivery, and assessment in general education classrooms. It contains three key, overarching components: multiple means of recognition, multiple means of expression, and multiple means of engagement (CAST, 2011). The essential elements that support UDL's key components are: curriculum, allowing for goals and benchmarks to be set, multiple methods of instructional media, and materials of learning that were adequate and equal among peers – allowing students with disabilities to express knowledge and understanding of the content being taught (Gordon et al., 2009).

In the late 1990s, there was extensive interest regarding the pedagogical benefits of UDL and what UDL could provide to students with or without disabilities in general education classrooms. Educators realized physical access was important, but, more importantly, students with disabilities often had lower learning expectations than their non-disabled peers, which resulted in limited opportunities to access the same rigorous grade-level content as their same-age peers (Klehm, 2014). The reauthorization of

IDEA introduced universal design as a way of delivering or designing products that were useable by people with or without disabilities and implemented with or without the use of assistive technology (Edyburn, 2010). The Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA, 2008) defined Universal Design for Learning as follows:

**UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING.** The term “universal design for learning” means a scientifically valid framework for guiding education practices that—(A) provides flexibility in the ways information is presented, in ways students respond or demonstrate knowledge and skills, and in the ways students are engaged; and (B) reduces barriers in instruction, provides appropriate accommodations, supports, and challenges, and maintains high achievement expectations for all students, including students with disabilities and students who are limited English proficient.

The UDL movement generated a variety of definitions over time, and it progressed from conceptual or philosophical definitions in the late 1990s to a scientifically-validated framework definition in the early 2000s. Universal Design for Learning provided a scientifically-valid framework for guiding education practices and a flexible way of presenting information so students could respond to what they knew and could do. Universal Design for Learning continued to be funded and referenced in the reauthorization of NCLB and also was referenced in ESSA (Sections 1111(b) (2) (B)) with the intent to improve education for all students, including students with disabilities. This paradigm shift changed from strictly physical access to general education, as well as how students could gain access to the general education curriculum (Edyburn, 2010).



IDEA, NCLB, and ESSA contained a requirement for local school districts across the country to commit to providing equal opportunities for students with disabilities, so they had access to learn the same general education curriculum as their non-disabled peers. Within this requirement, policy makers embraced UDL as a worthy design idea of equitable access (Gordon et al., 2009). The Center of Applied Special Technology (CAST) stated that there had been too little research on UDL to validate whether or not it was scientifically valid (CAST, 2011). With insufficient research and evidence, it was difficult to determine the long-term, post-school outcomes for students with disabilities based on a UDL framework (CAST, 2011). Literature reviews from 1984 - 2014 concluded that UDL as an educational framework had great promise to reduce or eliminate the barriers students often encountered in materials, instruction, and assessment (Crevecoeur, Sorenson, Mayorga, & Gonzalez, 2014).

Timberlake (2014b) identified that teachers believed a UDL model of teaching was a necessary component in daily instruction in order for students to show what they knew and could do. Teaching was intended to be an inclusive process of learning that focused on communication, engagement, and personal relevancy (Timberlake, 2014b). General and special education teachers believed access to the general education curriculum was important to keep students actively engaged in the academic content, but some variances existed in how general and special education teachers defined access. Generally, teachers believed access to general education curriculum was necessary for students to show what they knew and could do, and Individualized Education Plan teams were encouraged to focus on writing goals in order to provide access to the general education curriculum by targeting UDL practices (Timberlake,

2014a; Trela & Jimenez, 2013). The use of technological supports within the UDL framework presented opportunities for students with disabilities to achieve the same academic goals as their non-disabled peers by eliminating physical and academic barriers and attaining the value of unique diversity that all learners brought to the classroom (Shah, 2012). Digital technology was noted to improve access to content standards for students with learning difficulties when instruction was tailored to meet the needs of those students (Dolan and Hall, 2001). When explicit guidance and instruction were provided using a UDL approach, the outcomes for students with disabilities was positive (Dolan & Hall, 2001).

By definition, access to the general education curriculum is not confined to location of learning; it also provides all students with the same grade-level content and standards. Access sometimes is seen as a very limited reference to receiving academic exposure without really addressing the critical elements of instruction.

Timberlake (2014b) found that special education teachers believed curriculum should be designed based on individual student needs and interests, in order to promote meaningful content and relevance to the standards. Others believed the standards should be used as a guide in developing curriculum for students. Additionally, many teachers believed the UDL model of teaching was necessary in order to allow students to show what they knew and could do. To accomplish this, teaching was an inclusive process of learning that focused on UDL's principles of communication, engagement, and personal relevancy (Timberlake, 2014a).

The history of educational law shows that students with disabilities have been held to lower learning expectations and have been denied access to high-quality

instruction and intervention that their non-disabled peers received prior to NCLB (Fuchs et al., 2015). Long-term effects of access to core curriculum, as well as the effects on post-school outcomes based on a UDL model, are not known.

Students with disabilities had limited opportunities to access grade-level general education curriculum until federal mandates made the requirement that students with disabilities must be included in high-stakes testing (Aron & Loprest, 2012). Universal Design for Learning provided assurances for all students to receive equal opportunities in their schools. These assurances raised the learning expectations for students with disabilities. Students had greater opportunities to learn at the same standards as their non-disabled peers, because students had access to numerous sources of information, multiple pathways to achieve goals, and active engagement in their own learning. As a result, teachers were able to spend additional time on instruction, with a prompt response rate to meet the needs of their students (Dynamic Learning Maps, 2016).

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative, grounded theory study was to examine how general education teachers adapted to federal high-stakes testing requirements and the impact this had on the curriculum and instructional practices for students with disabilities. In the field of special education, educators often referred to students with disabilities as general education students first, and they believed the expectation level should be the same for all students. Students had a variety of unique learning styles, but students with disabilities encountered different learning barriers or obstacles which typically did not follow a standard way of learning. Students with disabilities required alternate pathways to reach the learning goals in the classroom. North Dakota Longitudinal Data System (SLDS), a secure data warehouse composed of historical education data, indicated that between 2011-2015, general education students were approximately 66% proficient in reading and 67% proficient in math on high-stakes testing (North Dakota State Government, n.d.). December 2015 child count data (the number of all students with disabilities in all disability categories), indicated that students with disabilities were approximately 31% proficient in reading and 32% proficient in math on the same high-stakes tests.

This exploration utilized qualitative interviews to gain an understanding of general education teachers' perspectives, in order to provide a foundation to assist in the enhancement of state policy and provide recommendations for school districts to improve curriculum and instructional practices with regard to high-stakes testing for North Dakota students with disabilities.

This chapter was structured to contain a description of the research design and research questions, as well as a detailed explanation of participant selection, data collection, and data analysis methods.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How have federal high-stakes testing requirements impacted 11<sup>th</sup> grade general education teachers' curriculum and instructional practices for students with behavioral, social/emotional, social communication, and mental health needs, as well as those students' performance on high-stakes/accountability testing?
2. How have federal regulations impacted the use of Universal Design for Learning in general education classrooms?

### **Qualitative Methods**

This grounded theory study was designed to generate or discover an abstract, conceptual understanding of the studied phenomena (Charmaz, 2006). Strauss and Corbin (1990) stated that grounded theory can be "used to gain novel and fresh slants on things about which quite a bit is already known" (p. 19). This design was chosen for its effectiveness in providing a teacher's view on the impact of federal legislative requirements that were placed on curriculum and instruction for students with

disabilities. This approach was not built as a hypothesis to make conclusions, but rather it was developed to be used to generate, inform, and explore (Slavin, 2007). The grounded theory research method was designed to be a specific kind of methodology that supported the collection and analysis of data. It used raw qualitative data to build and develop its theoretical components (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), which led to an emergent theory. The methods used in grounded theory were selected to develop codes, categories, and themes that clarified meaning (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This allowed data to be collected in the natural setting of the participants' choice and analyzed to identify the categories and themes.

The grounded theory approach of data collection was used to gain an understanding of the participants' realities and experiences with high-stakes testing and the impact that testing had on curriculum and instruction for students with disabilities. It used open-ended interviews pertaining to how general education teachers adapted to the changes in legislation concerning high-stakes testing, and the possible impact of such legislative changes and teacher adaptation on curriculum and instruction.

When conducting this research, one component was to compare knowledge and experience against data, thereby building upon the researcher's prior foundations of knowledge. A critical element was not losing sight of the meaning of data. Corbin and Strauss (2008) suggested that "sensitivity in research is having insight and awareness to notice relevant issues, events, and happenings in data" (p. 32). The more aware the researcher was of the sensitivity involved in the study's data analysis, the more likely it was that influencing interpretations would be recognized.

Throughout this study, the researcher's experiences regarding assessment and instruction, as a special education teacher and as a state education agency special education coordinator, were acknowledged and considered. This foundation allowed for a structure through which focus on the similarities and differences of the descriptive data could be maintained. This experience and knowledge brought increased sensitivity to concepts in the data that formed links between the concepts studied. Without knowledge and experiences, it would have been difficult for any researcher to interpret the data and build a solid foundation to interpret the connections between the concepts that were studied (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

### **Researcher's Role**

The researcher's current professional role is a Special Education Regional Coordinator for the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction (NDDPI)-Office of Special Education. Her primary responsibility is the management of the North Dakota Alternate Assessment (NDAA) system, along with the management of accommodation features of the North Dakota State Assessment (NDSA). In addition, she monitors North Dakota special education units on the compliance indicators required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and provides technical assistance to four of the thirty-two special education units in the state. Her professional career prior to working for the NDDPI includes over twenty years in PK-12 schools as a special education teacher. With this experience, she brings extensive knowledge from the field of special education regarding state and federal law, policy, curriculum, and instruction.

Her background in special education provides additional perspectives that support the benefits of Universal Design for Learning to increase learning outcomes for

students with disabilities. Slavin (2007) questioned whether a researcher should bring their existing knowledge into the study; however, it is more important to consider how existing knowledge can enhance one's study. Finally, the researcher has no affiliation, either professionally or personally, with the study participants.

### **Participant Selection**

Corbin and Strauss (2008) stated that purposeful sampling was not about quantity but more about the quality and the depth of the sampling. Participants in this study were identified through the use of purposeful sampling, which allowed for the intentional selection of participants who had been or were involved in the study's central phenomenon and could add to the data collected until sufficiency (Seidman, 2006) and saturation of the theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Seidman, 2006). The criteria used for inclusion in the study were:

- Teachers who currently taught Grade 11 students.
- Teachers who had completed three full years of teaching.
- Teachers who had students who were identified as having behavioral, social/emotional, social communication, and/or mental health needs.
- Teachers who taught in North Dakota school districts.

Initially, participants for this study were drawn from two urban North Dakota schools: School District 1 and School District 2. The selected districts were based on North Dakota child count data (December 1, 2015), which were obtained from the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction. Child count data were reports of the actual counts of students with disabilities who were served under Part B of IDEA. Child count data included the number of students with disabilities in all disability categories.



For this study, Grade 11 students who had a disability in one or more of the following areas were counted: behavioral, social/emotional, social communication, and mental health needs.

In May 2016, an application to conduct research was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB), along with signed letters of approval by district superintendents and principals in the two urban North Dakota school that were selected to participate in the research study. Approval to conduct research was granted by IRB officials in June 2016.

Maximum variation sampling techniques, a common strategy in participant selection, were used to select teacher participants, since they allowed an analysis of the potential population at each school district to determine the range of sites and people that constitute the target population (Seidman, 2006). Upon IRB approval, the district superintendents (Appendix A) were contacted to review the purpose of the research, and they were informed that the teachers would be contacted to set up face-to-face interviews.

The following school districts were asked to participate in the study, with basic demographics and the assigned pseudonyms. Two districts agreed to participate; two districts declined the request.

Table 1

***School District Demographics and Pseudonyms***

Pseudonym	Total Number of Students	School Type	Participation
School District 1	7,000 +	Urban	No
School District 2	3,000+	Urban	No
School District 3	275	Rural	Yes
School District 4	7,000+	Urban	Yes

**School District 1**

School District 1 was an urban North Dakota School district with an enrollment of more than 7,000 students. School District 1 was one of two public high schools in the city. The principal provided a list of teachers, along with their contact information, as well as permission to contact each teacher directly. With IRB approval granted in June 2016, it was difficult to get commitment from teachers, because they were not on contract during summer break. The principal recommended trying again once teachers were back on contract in August. Following the principal’s recommendation, a follow-up email invitation was sent to teachers once they were back on contract. One teacher responded with interest; however, after several attempts to pinpoint a day and time to conduct the interview, the teacher would not commit to participate in the study.

**School District 2**

School District 2 was an urban school district with an enrollment of more than 3,000 students. The school chosen was one of two public high schools in the city. The principal preferred a different method in setting up interviews. Instead of direct contact initiated by the researcher, the principal spoke to the teachers and provided contact information for those who were interested in participating in the study. There were no

teachers who responded through that approach. Again, with IRB approval granted in June 2016, it was difficult to get commitment from teachers, because they were not on contract during summer break. The principal was contacted one additional time to discuss a different method of contacting teachers; however, the principal preferred to send out another invitation once the teachers reconvened in August. No teachers responded and asked to participate in the research.

Due to the lack of willing participants from School Districts 1 and 2, the same child count data used to recruit School Districts 1 and 2 was analyzed, resulting in the selection of two new school districts. A memo (Appendix A), explaining the purpose of the study and asking for an approval letter signed by the superintendents and principals, was sent to the two school district superintendents.

### **School District 3**

School District 3 was a rural North Dakota School district with an enrollment of approximately 275 students. The principal provided written approval signed by both the superintendent and principal allowing research to be conducted in the school district. Since the school district was not on the initial IRB approval, IRB's required protocol change request was filed asking permission to add School District 3 to the protocol. The stated reason for the change was the unsuccessful attempts to get active participants from the initial participating schools. The IRB approved the addition of School District 3 in September 2016. The principal was contacted to review the purpose of the research and obtain a list of participants, along with their contact information, to complete face-to-face interviews.

The principal recommended that a day and time be chosen to visit School District 3, during which time the principal would schedule face-to-face interviews with the teachers during their fifty-minute prep periods. The visit was scheduled in September 2016, and the interviews occurred over the course of six-and-a-half hours. With the principal scheduling the interviews, there was no need to contact each teacher in advance. Prior to each interview, an “informed consent” form was presented to and reviewed with each teacher. Each interview was recorded once the consent form was signed, and the interviews lasted approximately 30-50 minutes. This schedule allowed time between each interview to prep for the next interview and to review any field notes collected from the previous interview(s).

With the support of the principal and active participation from School District 3 teachers, five teachers who met the participant criteria for this study were selected. These teachers taught in a variety of content areas, including math, chemistry, business education, history, and English. The original proposal stated that 8-12 teachers would be interviewed – or until theoretical saturation from two North Dakota school districts was achieved. With only five teacher interviews and one North Dakota school district participating at that point, a request for additional participation was made to the principal in School District 4.

#### **School District 4**

School District 4 was an urban North Dakota School district with an enrollment of more than 7,000 students. Once again, the principal provided written consent, along with superintendent approval to conduct research within their school district. Since the school district was not on the initial IRB approval, IRB’s required protocol change

request was filed for a second time asking permission to extend the research to School District 4. The IRB approved the addition of School District 4 in December 2016.

The principal of School District 4 followed the same process that occurred with School District 3. Interviews were conducted throughout the day, and five teachers (in the content in the areas of math, chemistry, history, and English) were selected.

The IRB proposal, with the protocol changes, indicated that eight-twelve interviews would occur in School Districts 3 and 4. Five interviews were completed at each school, for a total of 10 interviews. Each principal was told that the researcher might need to return and continue sampling until sufficiency and saturation of themes and categories had occurred. The principals from both school districts were willing to allow interviews with additional teachers, if necessary. In the end, data analysis of the 10 interviews determined there were no new categories or themes emerging. Thus, theoretical saturation was reached, and the participant pool was closed.

### **Data Collection**

The primary source of data was collected from open-ended interview questions used to guide all participants but also allow for variances, if they emerged (Seidman, 2006). The use of this interview format allowed for a much richer and deeper understanding of North Dakota teachers' perspectives on high-stakes testing and how it impacts curriculum and instructional practices for students with disabilities.

The interviews focused on asking specific topic questions (Appendix E), along with clarifying questions, changing the conversations, and following-up based on intuition. Open-ended questions allowed the participants to answer within a scope (Yow, 1994), and they also allowed for unpredicted comments and stories, revealing

words, ideas, feelings, intuitions, and actions (Charmaz, 2006; Slavin, 2007). The participants and school districts for this study remained anonymous and were labeled with pseudonyms. Demographic data were obtained during each interview. Interview sessions were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher, ensuring all of the participants' words and ideas were captured (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

### **Data Analysis**

Prior to the data analysis, all 10 audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The methodological framework of the study was informed by Corbin & Strauss's (1998, 2008) versions of grounded theory. Corbin and Strauss (2008) recognized the interactive nature of the inquirer and participants, and emphasized that the processes of data collection and analysis should be the interaction between the researcher and participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). They believed that "one should include as many different perspectives on the issue or topic as feasible" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 273). Using Corbin and Strauss's (1998, 2008) versions provided useful analytical tools that generated the theory grounded in the participants' narratives. As explained later, each narrative was applied to and explained in light of the development of the theory.

The analytical framework of developing the theoretical perspective grounded in the participants' narratives was guided by four main analytical processes: coding, constant comparative analysis, memo writing, and theoretical saturation. While these analytical tools were intertwined, each of them was applied to the emergence of a theory.

## **Coding**

The process of coding involved the breaking down of data into units (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and allowed for analytical interpretations of the data units and their meaning (Charmaz, 2006). It was the process of moving beyond the concrete statements made by the participants and analytically interpreting the meanings of each statement. Coding was the heart of the grounded theory process, consisting of three steps which provided a link between the data gathered and the subsequent theory construction (Charmaz, 2006): (a) open coding, (b) axial coding, and (c) selective coding (Miller & Salkind, 2002).

### **Open Coding**

Open coding was the first analytical step (Corbin & Strauss, 1998) – sometimes referred to as initial coding (Charmaz, 2006). It was the process of examining each line of data and, in some cases, using the participant’s exact words (called “*in vivo* coding”) (Saldana, 2016). *In vivo* coding was appropriate for all qualitative studies and was recommended often for beginning qualitative researchers learning how to code the data by honoring participants’ actual words (Saldana, 2016).

### **Axial Coding**

Axial coding was employed when the entire interview text was coded. Axial coding was a process “to determine which codes in research are the dominant ones and which are less important ones” (Saldana, 2016, p. 244). With this in mind, a core list of refined code words were created by grouping the codes into subcategories which would specify the relationships that existed between the categories and the central phenomenon. (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Miller & Salkind, 2002).

Each of the categories that emerged during the process represented a different dimension of the central phenomenon. Axial coding provided a frame which allowed the participants' statements to be linked and organized into a scheme that included conditions, actions/interactions, and consequences (Charmaz, 2006).

### **Selective Coding**

The final coding phase was selective coding. Selective coding refined the axial coding paradigm, presented the findings as a model or theory, and generated a narrative which would be described best as inter-relationships among the categories (Miller & Salkind, 2002). Developing a central category was an important step in the process of selective coding. The central category brought all major related categories together and allowed the theory to grow in depth (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Table 2

#### *Sample of the Coding Process and the Emergence of Categories and Themes*

Code	Data Supporting the Code	Interpretive Summary
Experience	But you know as a veteran teacher it's good for me to see how they (the test) are questioning.	Teaching for years there is something always more to learn
Change	Change my skills to this generation, whatever the case maybe you know we sometimes would like to say just let me teach.	Change based on students in the classroom
Feelings	Testing situations are the worst for those students and they perform very poorly.	Students with disabilities fail at testing
Assessment/Feelings	In the perfect world assessment is a tool, not an end all for like administrators and teachers.	What I would like vs. what it is that I feel assessment can give
Student motivation	Our society we have to get kids first interested that is our first hurdle.	Students have to be interested and want to do well



## **Constant Comparative Analysis**

Following Corbin and Strauss (1998, 2008), theory development was a comparative, systematic process that started at the beginning coding stages, during the data collection. This analysis allowed the process to expand and include all potential relevant information that might have been overlooked, because the researcher might not have known that for which he or she was looking (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). During this process, the constant comparative analysis helped the researcher consider how often a concept and the emerging categories were related to known experiences and the literature (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 1998).

## **Memo Writing**

Charmaz (2006) stated that memo writing was the “intermediate step in grounded theory between data collection and writing drafts of the paper” (p. 188). Using memo writing techniques allowed for reflection on the coding processes and choices (Saldana, 2016), giving time and space to think through the research process and explore the various categories and gaps that might have occurred through the data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Corbin and Strauss (1998) stated that memo writing often presented answers to the question, “*What is going on here?*” – thus answering the questions of who, what, when, where, and why (p. 230). Memo writing allowed internal conversations and “brain dumps” that helped consider thoughts and ideas about what the participants were trying express through sharing their experiences. The goal during memo writing activities was not to summarize what the participants were sharing; rather, it was to reflect and expand (Saldana, 2016).

## **Theoretical Saturation**

A point of theoretical saturation was reached when new data emerged within the categories but no new properties (such as conditions, actions/interactions, or consequences) were seen in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). Theoretical saturation was more about reaching the point in the research where collecting additional data seemed counterproductive, and any new data did not add to the final conclusions (Corbin & Strauss, 1998).

The participant samples were analyzed until theoretical saturation was observed (Seidman, 2006)—when the 10 participants had covered all aspects of the central phenomenon, and no additional themes or categories were emerging from the data.

## **Verification**

To verify the findings reflected an accurate account of the central phenomena, two forms of validation were completed. First, the data was validated through a process known as member checking. During member checking, participants received a copy of their interview transcripts to review for accuracy and to verify the conclusions. They were asked to provide feedback as to whether or not they believed the interpretations constituted an accurate account of the face-to-face interviews. Through this process, the participants verified that the researcher's interpretations did, in fact, match what was intended.

Second, after the transcription was completed, an external audit was conducted with a review team. The purpose of this external audit was to discuss the data collection process, the codes, and the categories that were emerging from the data. The review team consisted of the advisor, Dr. Pauline Stonehouse, and two University of North

Dakota graduate students in the Educational Leadership program, Janelle Fererder and Chad Dahlen. The data of the first interview and the tentative interpretations were presented to the team to verify the consistency and credibility of the data collection and analysis process. As a result, useful feedback was given to guide the ongoing data collection and analysis. The review team members did not have any relationship with the research that was completed, but they brought knowledge and experience in the procedures and methods needed for a reliable and valid qualitative study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Since the researcher was an employee of the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, Office of Special Education, there was concern about interviewing special education teachers who might have viewed the researcher as a compliance-monitoring official rather than as a researcher. Previous experience in the field gave understanding of the way special education teachers referred to students as being general education students first. With this perspective in mind, it was decided that the focus should be on general education teachers. General education teachers were the content experts and had the most insight and knowledge of content standards in their area of expertise, which was critical in determining how federal mandates affected their instructional practices. Also, as a researcher and employee of the NDDPI, the researcher had no governing authority over general education teachers and their instructional practices.

During interviews, a conscious attempt was made to maintain a non-threatening environment that would minimize professional position as an influence on the outcome of the data. The participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason, with no repercussions of any kind.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **FINDINGS**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to examine how general education teachers adapted to federal high-stakes testing requirements, as well as the impact this adaptation had on the curriculum and instructional practices for students with disabilities, with an emphasis on students with behavioral, social/emotional, social communication, and/or mental health needs. The grounded theory methodological approach was used to accomplish this purpose. Perceptions of general education teachers from two North Dakota school districts were explored through this grounded theory qualitative study.

Research studies suggested that students with disabilities might be capable of learning the same standardized curriculum as their same-age peers, but access to the same grade-level expectations, along with strong school district leadership, was identified as a critical component in the improvement of academic achievement for students with disabilities (Hoppey & McLesky, 2013; Klehm, 2014). Research also stressed that students with disabilities had unique learning styles (as all students do), but many students with disabilities had experienced additional obstacles which had prevented them from reaching the same academic achievement goals as their non-disabled peers. However, research also suggested that if students with disabilities were

taught using effective instructional practices, they tended to make significant gains in their academic performance (Fuchs et al., 2015; Swanson, Wanzek, Vaughn, Roberts, & Fall, 2015).

Another purpose of this study was to help develop state policy and provide recommendations for school districts regarding how to enhance and develop effective instructional practices for students with behavioral, social/emotional, social communication and/or mental health needs by using a Universal Design for Learning framework.

Using a grounded theory methodological approach provided an opportunity to gain a deeper and more accurate understanding of what high school teachers believed regarding the impact of high-stakes testing on instructional practices. Each participant was given the opportunity to share his or her experiences and beliefs regarding content standards, curriculum, instruction, and high-stakes testing. This study of teacher experiences regarding high-stakes testing provided insight into the challenges teachers faced in their instructional practices that were influenced by federal requirements, as well as the impact on the overall academic performance of students with behavioral, social/emotional, social communication, and mental health needs.

### **Teacher Selection**

Participants in this study consisted of 10 11<sup>th</sup>-grade teachers from two North Dakota school districts. At each school, five 11<sup>th</sup>-grade teachers were interviewed. Each teacher selected had experience working with students with disabilities who had behavioral, social/emotional, social communication, and mental health needs. All teachers interviewed had experience in the administration of the North Dakota State

Assessment. Their basic demographic information was provided in Table 3.

Pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality of the teachers and schools.

Table 3

*Teacher Demographic Information*

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Total Experience in Years	Content Area(S)
Cindy	Female	30	English
Matt	Male	8	English/Intervention English
Jake	Male	23	English/Innovations
Chris	Male	6	Math
Abby	Female	7	Math/Basic Math
Jane	Female	22	Science
Eva	Female	29	Science
Joe	Male	38	History
Sam	Male	28	History/ELL History
Twila	Female	8	Business (elective)

**Thematic Findings**

As a result of a thorough review of the data analysis, three specific themes emerged:

1. Impact high-stakes testing had on instructional practices.
2. Pressure teachers felt as a result of high-stakes testing
3. Barriers in public schools and/or districts.

Figure 1 is a visual example of the codes, categories, and themes that were utilized to formulate the central (category) phenomenon which emerged from the research data analysis and interpretation. It is discussed in further detail in Chapter V.

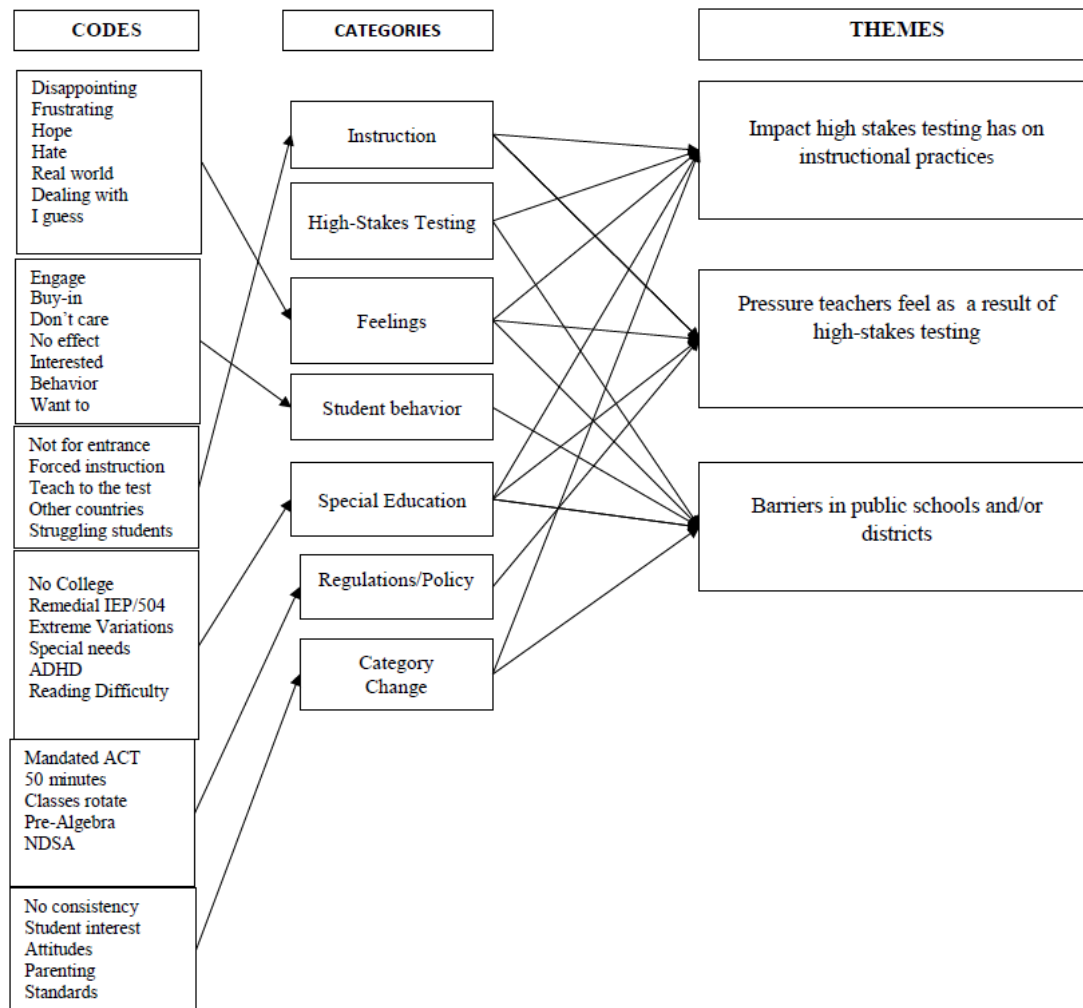


Figure 1. Coding Process for Data Analysis

### Theme 1: Impact High-Stakes Testing has on Instructional Practices

Teachers in this study were asked to describe their instructional practices for students with disabilities and how these practices changed based on high-stakes testing.

**Instruction.** Overall, teachers believed the standards were a guide and did not lay the complete groundwork for what they taught in their classrooms. While teachers felt it was an important process to review their content standards, the standards did not seem to be their priority. Cindy described how her teaching experiences guided her in determining what students need to learn:

We are encouraged to always keep the standards in mind with our lessons. You know, sometimes the books we have will say, “Meet these standards.” I review those state standards maybe once or twice a quarter, and then I kind of guess what students need.

Abby’s reflection on the standards was a bit different. Like others in her school district, she had been spending time working with other English teachers from the school district, reviewing English content standards. The goal was for the teachers to gain a better understanding of the standards and to determine where they fit within their curriculum. She shared that she and her colleagues had become somewhat frustrated during this professional development process. She stated:

I am a little frustrated with how some of the standards are written...They are like one sentence, and it takes like two chapters in the book to cover just one standard.

Teachers felt some of standards were too complex and too difficult to comprehend. They felt the rigor of the standards was unrealistic when teaching students with disabilities, and they based their feelings on how they viewed students learning in their classrooms. Generally, teachers saw themselves as doing a lot of “extra” things for students with disabilities in their general education classrooms. For example, they spent more time preparing materials for the students in order to provide them with the accommodations needed to have access to the material. Teachers paid more attention to where the students were sitting, and they provided small target goals for the students, which typically were not as deep as the full standard.



Within Sam's United States history class, he sometimes gave more time for a test, reduced the number of answer choices on a test, and clearly defined the learning expectations of the lesson for the student. In Matt's English class, he took the reading curriculum and adapted it to the student's actual reading level, and he tried to determine what the student's strengths were and teach to those strengths. Joe's approach was different. He allowed students to leave the classroom for a test and go "over there," which meant students were going to the assigned special education resource room to complete their test. He identified this as a change in his instructional practices.

**Students with disabilities.** The overarching impact that Common Core State Standards (CCSS) had on students with disabilities was an unrealistic expectation that they would learn at the same rate as their non-disabled peers. Due to the intensive amount of critical thinking required by the rigor of the CCSS, teachers felt it simply was not practical for students with disabilities. If the expectation was for students to maintain the same learning rigor as their peers, students were more likely to become at-risk for failure, drop out of school, or have behavioral problems in the classroom – which often impacted the learning of others in the classroom.

However, the empathy teachers felt for students with disabilities was real, and understanding the learning obstacles students with disabilities encountered was difficult. Teachers wanted their students to have good experiences in school with as few struggles as possible. The reality, however, was that the teachers' feeling of empathy was limiting those students' access to the general education curriculum. Students who should have been getting more in their learning were actually getting less, in return potentially affecting all students' academic achievement on high-stakes tests.

## **Theme 2: Pressure Teachers Feel as a Result of High-Stakes Testing**

The second theme that emerged was how teachers felt about high-stakes testing and how this impacted what and how they taught. Cindy stated, “I will not teach to the test.” However, when teachers were asked word-for-word, “Does high-stakes testing change what you teach?” their responses were a quick, “No, but . . .” The “but” was followed by many different qualifications and disclaimers, depending on the content area. Cindy, Matt, and Jake taught English, and all three expressed the similar concern: In preparing students for the state assessment, they had changed their expectations of some students in their classrooms. All three teachers felt it was essential for students to learn to read, locate answers, become quick and fluent writers, and be able to think critically by solving problems. When they were asked to share what they did differently for students with disabilities, their responses were remarkably similar; they provided accommodations for the students in their classrooms.

Eight of the 10 teachers incorporated more time devoted to activities that aligned with what the students would experience during high-stakes testing. Cindy said:

I tell the students to read this article right now – and I am gonna give you five minutes – and then to just – to get them used to it a little.

Other teachers incorporated additional reading and writing activities to help build on students’ literacy skills, and they tried to add critical thinking activities into their daily routines.

Overall, the teachers felt that the data gained from the high-stakes testing was not useful because of the timing of the test and when they received the results. Additionally, not all content area teachers saw the results of the state assessment. For

example, Jane and Eva taught science and, although their content area was assessed, it did not have an impact on school accountability. (The science assessment was based on a previous version of the science standards, but they were teaching mostly from the Next Generation Science Standards that North Dakota had not adopted officially.) The results of the English language arts and math tests were supposed to be given to the content area teachers, but those results often are not shared with them.

### **Theme 3: Barriers in Public Schools and/or Districts**

Teachers were not asked specifically to describe the barriers they encountered as related to high-stakes testing and assessment, but, as they told their stories, the data reflected barriers. Time, teaching methods, regulations/policies, changes, and behavior were just a few that left teachers feeling restricted in what they did.

**Time.** Time limitations presented many challenges. Eight out of the 10 teachers interviewed expressed a sense of urgency and often felt they could not cover all of the required content in a day, a month, or the whole academic school year. Teachers explained that a typical school day consisted of 50-minute class periods, which they believed restricted their teaching time and their students' learning time. Sam, who taught history, felt like he had no time to include additional content to fill recognized gaps in his curriculum. Cindy shared how high-stakes tests took "so much time" out of a day, and how when students were tested they had to do it under difficult time limitations. She preferred "a real lesson" that could take up to four weeks of instruction.

Teachers interviewed brought up the 50-minute class period frequently as a barrier. They believed "seat time" restricted much of what they otherwise could

accomplish with their students and that this time restriction was not realistic for how people in general learned. Eva stated it in the following words:

When people learn new skills, they do not just learn it in 50-minute increments, they keep learning until they understand it. The way our education system in North Dakota is set up does not allow for students to continue their learning. The bell rings and they must stop and move to the next class period.

Part of this time restriction was mandated by North Dakota Century Code (N.D.C.C.) § 15.1-21-02 (North Dakota Century Code, n.d.-a). North Dakota Century Code required each high school unit (class taken) provide 120 hours of instruction per school calendar year, which approximated 50-minute class periods per day.

**How to teach vs. what.** Even though the teachers did not acknowledge they were focusing more on high-stakes testing, it was apparent the teachers were feeling restricted in the content they “wanted” to teach vs. what they felt they “had” to teach. Teachers often made statements such as, “I know the test will ask this, so I need to focus on this,” or, “If I knew what the test questions were, I would be able to better prepare my students.” Two out of the 10 teachers in the study implied that they taught what they wanted to teach, regardless of high-stakes testing expectations. For instance, Jane felt the feedback she received from current and former students was all the justification she needed:

I teach them what I think they need to know when they leave high school . . . my students have thanked me for teaching them what I thought was important.

While others shared how they thrived on teaching innovatively, Jake had an opportunity in his innovations class to teach in a style that utilized some of the principles of a Universal Design for Learning. He explained:

The emphasis in the course is to find problems and then demonstrate (in multiple ways) how to solve problems, while still covering the content standards for that course.

**Regulations/policy.** Generally, when the teachers were asked to discuss local, state, and federal policy and how it did or did not restrict what or how they teach, the consensus was that school district policy did not restrict their instructional practices. Both school districts required additional assessments, such as the NWEA or ACT/Aspire, to be used as tools to inform instruction, which teachers felt provided valid and reliable data to inform their daily instructional practices.

Teachers did not value the federally-mandated high-stakes tests as much as the district-required assessments. One reason was that teachers did not receive the data from high-stakes assessment in a timely manner; another reason was that high-stakes testing did not evaluate what students actually were learning in their classrooms.

Teachers felt there was a mismatch between what they taught and what was tested.

Chris, who taught math, described what he recognized to be a mismatch:

I have had kids that they haven't taken geometry; they haven't taken algebra 2; and then they take the state assessment, and they just have no idea how to do most of the problems on them, because a lot of them are based on algebra 2, and they have not taken the class yet.

When Cindy was asked to describe what she saw as a mismatch, she did not describe content, but she described strategies she used in her classroom that she was unable to use during testing:

In the classroom, I can adjust quickly. When they are in a testing situation, it's not the same. My students cannot highlight on their paper like I teach them, and they cannot make notes on the paper as they go along. They just have to make do on a computer screen, and it is very hard for them, because that is not how we teach.

**North Dakota State Assessment (NDSA) vs. ACT.** In N.D.C.C. § 15.1-21-08, high school juniors were required to take the NDSA in reading, math, and science, and they were required in N.D.C.C. § 15.1-21.19 to take the ACT (North Dakota Century Code, n.d.-b). Teachers believed in the importance of the ACT, because it was a requirement for college entrance and for students to receive various local or federal scholarships which were based on ACT scores. Teachers themselves believed the ACT test to be of more value than the NDSA, and they believed their juniors feel the same. As a result, teachers felt compelled to spend more time on preparing for the ACT exam. As stated by Jake, who took some time to incorporate ACT prep in his classes:

I'll take like a day showing my students sample ACT test questions, because juniors are all freaking about the ACT test.

Eva, who taught science, was not impacted as much by high-stakes testing as her colleagues who teach English and math, but felt the importance of the ACT:

The ACT is the test that everybody takes, so I mean I always think about that.

Abby described her students understanding of the ACT:

Students understand that it is a test that is supposed to prepare them for college, so for the ACT they give it their all.

NDSA was not valued as a useful assessment by the teachers in this study. They believed that NDSA was not a test that could be used for college entrance and that NDSA did not align with college- and career-readiness as did the ACT. NDSA was used solely to evaluate schools, because it was a requirement of North Dakota state law. Teachers observed their students not having the active engagement taking the NDSA as they did with the ACT. Teachers believed that students knew the NDSA would not provide scholarships or be used for college entrance.

Abby stated:

I don't know a single college that looked at my state testing.

Chris said:

The state assessment...I just don't really know how to prepare them sometimes, just because it is so hard. So, I just don't think about the NDSA. We don't use the data. I know my kids are learning, and I know that I can tell that they are learning.

**Parenting expectations.** There seemed to be a growing concern among the teachers about the extent to which student performance was based on factors that were outside of their control, such as parenting style. Teachers reflected how, over the course of their teaching years, they noticed how much home lifestyles impacted their students – and how this transferred into their schools and classrooms. Teachers recognized not all families placed the same value on education. With wide variances within family values,

teachers saw the impact on their students through the students' behaviors in class. Cindy recognized how parenting had changed. She stated:

I know parenting has changed. We are having more problems with discipline . . . Let's take a look at that. Do we have, or does the school have, to change because parenting has changed.

Jane stated:

One student has a lot of behavior issues, but that all goes back to home. Some kids just have a rotten home life, and somebody needs to care.

Jane went on to explain the career choices some students made based on the values of their families, and she shared a conversation she had with a student:

Last year I had a student say he doesn't need to learn chemistry . . . I asked him, "What do you want to do with your life?" He said, "I want to be a farmer, because his dad is a farmer . . . "Well, your dad has to mix chemicals to spray crops, and your dad needs to know chemistry, so don't you think you should know chemistry?"

**Change.** Education was one area in which teachers recognized change was occurring all the time. They experienced change regularly in content standards, assessment, student learning, parenting, college entrance, and student motivation and engagement. This constant feeling of change often was expressed as frustrating and aggravating. Teachers with 25 or more years of experience viewed change as trends that came and went. They felt new teachers to the field brought a subset of skills to work better with the growing changes in education. The teacher prep programs were taking



time to train new teachers to be better skilled in working with technology, student engagement, and students with a wide variety of diverse needs. As stated by Cindy:

I see new teachers that are really good with technology and hooking students (getting them engaged) at the beginning of class, because they've been trained to do that more.

Joe explained that new teachers had "a lot of enthusiasm and lot of good ideas."

**Behavior.** Students with behavioral, social/emotional, social communication, and mental health needs came to school already challenged. Student behavior was a recognized barrier in teaching and learning, and three out of the 10 teachers interviewed related student behavior to student home life. Teachers realized that behavior could be disability-related, but they felt ill-prepared in understanding how to teach effectively students with behavioral, social/emotional, social communication, and mental health needs. All 10 teachers believed in building positive relationships, along with building a safe and positive school environment, as a fundamental strategy to help improve negative student behavior.

The most common instructional strategy teachers used in working with students with behavioral needs was to learn what made the students upset and what triggered their negative behaviors. Teachers expressed different ways of supporting students with behavioral difficulties. Some teachers made small attainable goals with the students, while others exempted the students from certain activities or reduced the amount of work on assignments. Others purposefully scheduled certain activities in their classroom on days the behavioral students were not in school, because they believed

those activities simply were not good for students who struggled with behavior. Jane explained the strategy she used in her classroom:

I do things different with the student. I make sure I use the proximity. You do different things with them just to try and just keep them calm.

Twila stated in business education class:

I recognize that student's triggers and be lenient with their work. As a school, I think we struggle to help some of those students.

Matt gave students space and time:

He just wants to sit in the back of the room with his friend and not do any work for the next two weeks, if that is going to be good for him, I am totally fine with that.

Matt also elaborated that the student's Individual Education Plan dictated what he needed to do in his classroom, but as he described his understanding of the student's IEP his tone was somewhat sarcastic, which made it evident that he was not completely supportive of the plan but did what he was told just because it was in the IEP:

In his paperwork, it said if he swears at you he is not to be held accountable.

You are not to draw attention to it. You are supposed to ignore it, and so if you have that kid in your class, and he can call you an "F-er", you're just supposed to ignore it.

Teachers believed students with behavioral difficulties had been faced with failure too many times in school. They believed developing some of their classroom lessons on days those students were not in school was one way to support them, by eliminating some of their feelings of failure. The overarching strategy described by

teachers was just to do whatever they needed to do in order to keep these students calm. Cindy spoke of activities she incorporated in her English lessons that had time limitations, because high-stakes testing required students to work under time constraints in reading and writing, and so she wanted her students to get used to working under these conditions. However, for students who struggled with behavior, she stated that she “put those lessons on a day that one of them may not be at school because it is so hard for them.”

## **CHAPTER V**

### **EMERGENT THEORY**

#### **Introduction**

This study used a grounded theory methodological approach to understand the perspectives of teachers regarding how high-stakes testing impacted curricular and instructional practices in their classrooms for students with behavioral, social/emotional, social communication, and mental health needs. Students with disabilities had unique learning styles, and the complexities of their disabilities required additional time to learn and practice new skills, as well as alternate ways to complete tasks or assignments using a variety of instructional methods that were different than those used for their non-disabled peers (Vaughn et al., 2015). The perceptions of teachers in two North Dakota high schools were explored through this qualitative research study. This study was intended to help in the development of future state policy, provide recommendations for school districts to enhance curriculum and instructional practices, and recommend professional development activities to promote academic achievement for students with behavioral, social/emotional, social communication, and mental health needs.

Using a qualitative research design allowed the opportunity to gain a deeper, more valid, and more reliable understanding of how high school teachers perceived the impact of high-stakes testing on curriculum and instruction. The teachers interviewed

were given the opportunity to share their experiences and beliefs about achievement standards, curriculum, instruction, and high-stakes testing, as well as their impressions of how these elements impacted students with disabilities, with a greater focus on students with behavioral, social/emotional, social communication, and mental health needs. This study on the pressure teachers experience from high-stakes testing provided valuable insight into the daily challenges teachers faced that were guided by federal regulation requirements and the impact this had on all students with disabilities and their academic achievement on high-stakes tests.

This chapter focuses on the research paradigm that shows the relationship between linkages among the categories and sub-categories. The following section describes the central category (phenomenon) that emerged from the data analysis. Consistent with the study's research paradigm, conditions (causal, intervening, and contextual), actions/interactions, and consequences are presented and described. Figure 2 visually represents the grounded theory conceptual map developed in this study and is organized by the elements described in Corbin and Strauss's (2008) grounded theory paradigm. The following narrative elaborates each theory element in detail and how they are interrelated.

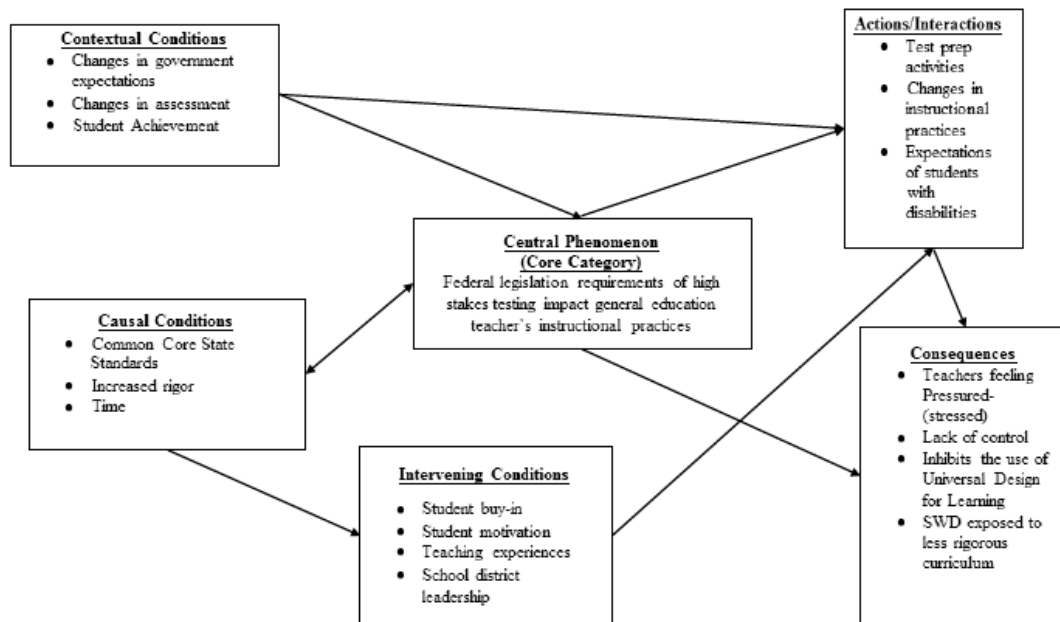


Figure 2. Ground Theory Conceptual Map

### Central Category (Phenomenon)

The central category (phenomenon) explores the question, “*What is going on here?*” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). It is the representation of repeated patterns of happenings, events, and/or actions that people do or say in response to the problems and situations in which they find themselves. The central category (phenomenon) also can be referred to as the core category which appears frequently in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Using Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) framework, the requirements of high-stakes testing and instructional practices appear to constitute a common pattern that is grounded in the perspectives of teachers. The barriers that the teachers face on a regular basis in their classrooms, along with the demands of rigorous content standards, are recurring problems that teachers encounter.

All data collected were subject to selective coding, a recursive process that allowed for comparison of all the interrelationships among categories. A central category (phenomenon) was identified through this process – the impact of federal high-stakes testing requirements on general education teachers’ instructional practices.

During the selective coding and data analysis process, extensive time was spent refining and integrating the categories, which led to the development of the study’s central category. A fundamental issue teachers had was the pressure they felt about instruction, students, and high-stakes testing. Teachers felt they had little choice or control of what went on instructionally in their classrooms. Jake, who taught an innovations class (which allowed flexibility of action in his classroom and the opportunity to explore different methods of teaching), was asked what he would do differently in his classroom if he had no limitations. His response was instructive:

I would have no idea, because I have never had that freedom or that possibility.

Teachers also expressed a desire to incorporate a variety of teaching strategies within their daily instructional practices. This study’s data suggested that federal high-stakes testing requirements have hindered teachers’ ability to have the choice they desire within their classrooms. Cindy stated:

What I am teaching will somehow be tested, and so they (the students) are expected to know it. How can I do what I am doing but still meet what the high-stakes test would be expecting?”

A link emerged between teachers feeling a lack of control in their classrooms and the barriers between actions and interactions among teachers, students, and administrators. Teachers felt they were unable to teach in ways they would like because

of barriers created by federal requirements, time, and student behavior. Teachers perceived these barriers as limiting their ability to be flexible in their teaching style, which would allow them to provide multiple pathways to meet students' needs. The following statement Jake made during his interview illustrated how teachers felt:

. . . high-stakes tests, test content and knowledge. They are not tests of creativity and do not test on any of the soft skills that matter in the business world or outside in college.

When teachers were asked about their experiences with high-stakes testing and its impact on their daily teaching practices, they indicated:

Twila (who taught elective classes that are not required):

I do not do much to support the students on the standards in which they are tested on, but I do try and give them as much practice as I can by using the computers and taking tests on the computer and try to incorporate more reading and writing in my lessons...even though my content area is not specifically assessed in the state assessment.

Abby: I spend time trying to get my students motivated to do well on the test, but, obviously, we want to also prepare them and give them testing tips and make sure that you have taught the content that they would need to know to do well, which we (our district) have designed our curriculum to cover all the standards hopefully the right time.

Eva: There are always things that you know maybe in the back of your mind they need to know, but it isn't in the standards, but I have to teach it anyways,



because in order to learn the standard and be assessed on it, they have to know it.

The study's data suggested that federal regulations had an impact on teachers' activities within their daily instruction. In the following sections, the conditions were explained which formed the basic components of the research paradigm, including the grouping of answers to the questions the teachers were asked explaining the "where, why, and when" and their relationship with the central category (phenomenon) (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

### **Causal Conditions**

Causal conditions represent a set of events or happenings that influence phenomena (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). There was little doubt upon reviewing the data that the root cause of the central category (phenomenon) was the teachers' feeling that federal regulations inhibited what and how they taught. The grounded theory research model required that the researcher break down the data into small details (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). From the data, the three causal conditions that emerged were Common Core State Standards, increase in rigor of the standards, and time.

**Common Core State Standards and increased rigor.** Teachers in both school districts referred to the standards as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). With varying opinions on the CCSS, most teachers felt many of the standards were too rigorous and difficult for the teachers to adequately prepare students for the high-stakes tests, and the standards were even more difficult for students to learn. Abby, who taught mathematics, shared her opinion on the CCSS:

I feel like we are getting more breadth when we are supposed to be getting more depth, so it is frustrating to me.

Sam also shared his impressions of the CCSS. His subject was history, which was not assessed on the high-stakes tests:

I do not even know what standards I cover, because there are so many. To me, if I teach them to read, write, and think critically, then they are going to leave school with skills they need.

The study data suggested that the teachers believed that the adoption of the CCSS did not reduce the number of standards (as they had expected) but rather increased the number of standards they were expected to teach. Abby shared succinctly what she knows of the math standards:

We went from 30 standards to like 120.

The teachers involved in this study revealed the pressure placed by the CCSS demands on their instructional practices and on their students. Teachers believed the CCSS did not align with their teaching practices; however, teachers still felt pressured by state and federal government agencies to increase academic achievement scores on high-stakes testing. Teachers also expressed their desire to experience less rigor in the standards and more time to prepare students for college- or career-readiness. Teachers often made comments that revealed the need to teach more skills that would prepare the students for college and/or careers.

Twila, a business teacher, felt that students needed “skills that our kids can definitely take away, beyond high school.” Matt stated that even though he understood the importance of standards as a guide for his teaching, he believed that schools had

been designed to teach students to be “factory workers not to be thinkers, critical thinkers and intelligent citizens in our world. Students need to learn to find problems and make solutions and carry out those solutions.”

**Time preparing students.** The study data indicated that a lack of time was a barrier for teachers. Teachers in the study raised the issue of time limitations during their interviews. Teachers reported being challenged by the school day schedule. North Dakota high schools typically were scheduled in 50-minute learning blocks (Carnegie Unit), which left the teachers feeling restricted with regard to the amount of content they could cover in each instructional block. Eva shared her feelings on the Carnegie Unit:

The one thing that I don't like is the time limitations on the class periods. You know, I just don't think that is normal – I mean, in terms of how people learn. I mean, if I am learning something new, I will work on it for a while, you know – like learning a new craft or refinishing a piece of furniture. You just don't learn in 50 minute blocks and then totally switch gears and go on to something else. I feel like it (education) is old-fashioned and archaic, but we are forced into that same system.

### **Contextual Conditions**

Contextual conditions pertain to the patterns that shaped the process of actions and interactions. These conditions are more specific to individual teachers, given the context under which they have such experiences. Based on the data, contextual conditions do not determine experiences; rather, they identify sets of problems,

conditions, and situations that arise, to which people respond through action/interaction and emotion (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Three contextual conditions related to federal regulations and assessment emerged – changes in government expectations, changes in assessment, and student achievement.

**Changes in government expectations.** Teachers' perspectives on high-stakes testing often triggered frustration, as observed during their interviews by the tone of their voices becoming louder and more firm and their bodies going from relaxed to a stiff, straight, upright sitting position. Teachers expressed feelings of political overreach, which they described as placing unrealistic expectations on student testing. They also expressed concerns regarding federal mandates and the negative impact they had on teachers and education. Chris and Abby, who both taught math, expressed their thoughts on government expectations.

Chris: This government mandated thing, it is like they are looking over our shoulders, and I don't like it. I am not a big fan, and it makes me feel like not teaching sometimes. So, I just try to block it out and try to move on. I have to be here every day and teach, and my kids and I know that they are learning, and that is what is important to me.

Abby: In other countries that have education systems beyond ours, what don't they do? Well, they don't do standardized tests every year.

In general, teachers felt as though federal and state governmental agencies truly did not understand the impact these requirements placed on students and teachers.

Teachers believed their knowledge and expertise were not heard regarding what they

knew about how students learned, how students should be assessed, and what students needed to learn in order to be college- and career-ready. Regarding changes in NCLB, Jane stated:

I honestly wish legislatures that had say in what we do – they would step into our room for 30 days. They would totally change their mind on their expectations.

Generally, teachers felt there were continuous changes occurring within the education governmental system, because the federal and state governments appeared to be uncertain about what was best for students, and especially for students with disabilities. Even though North Dakota adopted the CCSS, teachers felt the expectations of the standards and how students' progress toward meeting the standards were not realistic, given how students actually learned. With perceived continuous change, teachers believed they were on a continuously swinging pendulum. Abby indicated:

We have to focus on the standards more because of testing, but they are changing, and there seems to be a lot more focus on how we set up classes. I think the idea of Common Core was a good idea, but I don't think the implementation was their vision. Their idea was to reduce the number of topics, but what ended up happening is we didn't lose many topics, we are teaching more.

Joe, who said he had been teaching "longer than you have been alive," explained how he saw change in education:

Every time I have ever seen a trend in the 38 years I have been teaching, they come and they go . . . it is like, we did this and then we're doing this. They are all just trends.

When asked directly what they would do if there were no regulations and if they had to make their own accountability systems to prove their students were achieving at an acceptable rate, there was silence from many of the teachers. They typically had never been asked to think about such conditions. What they shared brought light to how federal regulations impacted the way teachers taught. Their ideas were suggestive of what it would be like if they did not feel a heavy hand of government upon them. Sam stated:

You know, I have not really ever thought about it, but one nice thing is that there would be no mandatory testing.

While Jane did not directly answer the question of what she would like to do without federal regulations, she asserted her feelings regarding federal regulations and what local schools and districts should consider:

I don't think just that type of testing needs to be done; there needs to be some creativity in the test. I do not know what the answer is, but I don't think just a 50-minute test is the answer.

Some teachers felt education's philosophy should be focused more on hands-on activities and less on testing. Others felt that removing the state regulation of seat-time would allow students to learn in ways that were more conducive to acquiring and mastering new skills. Jane stated:

Paper/pencil tests are not the answer always. Rating teachers on a test is not the way to show students are learning.

Generally, the overall logic from the discussions was that teachers felt directed by the federal and state expectations. Interestingly, study data indicated that teachers really did believe their local administration did not put additional pressure on them. Teachers felt that building-level administrators supported what they did. Further, although they spent time planning for the high-stakes testing, as well as time on professional development exploring different teaching methods to improve overall test scores, teachers believed their administrators did not “force” change on them but rather encouraged change.

Diane, an English teacher, simply said, “We are encouraged to always keep the standards in mind.”

**Changes in assessment.** Teachers generally believed instruction and assessment went hand-in-hand. Overall, teachers felt strongly that the state assessment was an unusable tool. They described the many different variables which made the test an inaccurate reflection of what their students knew and could do. Abby said the state assessment was not useful:

I don’t think a single college looks at state testing, and juniors know that, so why should they value it.

A general belief among teachers was that the high-stake tests did not assess what they actually taught their students. With the variability in test questions, it was hard for them to know what they should prepare their students to be able to answer. Cindy wanted to know the types of questions students would be asked most frequently,

because, without that information, it was hard to determine if the assessment would match her instruction. She stated:

Because every student gets a different test, I can't really wrap my whole curriculum around the test.

The 11<sup>th</sup>-grade students were challenged with a variety of federal and state mandated tests every year. In North Dakota, these students were required by state law to be assessed in reading/language arts, math, and science, and by taking the ACT. In addition to federal- and state-mandated tests, school districts had their own additional testing requirements. Two or three times a year, depending on the school district, students also took the NWEA, ASPIRE, or Plan assessment, which were all different variations of formative assessments. According to the study data, teachers felt that the information gained from the school's formative assessments was a better predictor of student performance and better supported what teachers did in their classroom instructionally. Cindy stated:

I found the NWEA to fit my students really well. The Smarter Balances (state assessment) – it is so hard to come back and see individual student scores. I know I have changed my expectations because of the different tests, and as I dig deeper I know I have to focus more on reading comprehension, because the test requires that.

Chris shared his beliefs concerning assessments, how the changes in standards and assessment impacted his teaching style, and how those changes affected his students:



The state assessment hasn't been around very long, especially the way they are doing it now. I think it is too hard. I think it is way too hard. They should make some easier problems, kind of like we do the NWEA Map test. I look at that way more because they have, well, when you take it, it gives you either harder or easier problems depending on how you answer them. To me that is a better measure of where kids are at than the state assessment. I have had kids take the state assessment saying that they didn't know how to do any of those problems. What do they get out of that?

**Student achievement data.** A reoccurring theme throughout this study was the use of student achievement data. In the process of formulating this study and reading current research, it was difficult not to find a report in Education Weekly, the Journal of Learning Disabilities, or any other education journal without reading about data-driven instruction. Literature regarding multi-tiers system of support (MTSS), progress monitoring, and IEP goals and objectives indicated that educators were spending more and more time looking at data and how effective instructional practices could have an impact on student achievement (Klotz & Canter, 2007). Within the data generated by this study, teachers agreed that data analysis was a way to understand how students were doing. During Cindy's interview, she stated that, while she did not always agree that the assessment data she got from the high-stakes testing was useful, she did believe the use of data to determine what her students knew was important in how she taught. She said:

I look at their scores, and I reflect on those that are lower and decide what I need to change.

Abby discussed how she evaluated students in her classroom and what data she found to be the most beneficial:

I use predominately the chapter tests to make sure the topics I am teaching are retaining. Otherwise, I will look at the ACT/ASPIRE scores, because we get those data faster and so we have time to dig into that data.

Throughout the study, it was evident that teachers used data to determine if their students were making progress toward reaching the expected goals set by each teacher. However, teachers often did not use the high-stakes test data, because it was not available before the end of the school year. By the time they received the data, their students had moved on to the next grade level (high school seniors) and were preparing for graduation. In their minds, this made that data irrelevant. Abby summed up the frustrations of all the teachers in the following simple statement:

I can't do it for the juniors, because I don't have the data.

### **Intervening Conditions**

Intervening conditions are those conditions which alter the impact of causal conditions or phenomena (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). They are conditions that explain variations among the reactions – or actions taken in response to the phenomenon.

Grounded in the data, relevant elements external to the other conditions that shaped teachers' perspectives on high-stakes testing and instruction fell into three intervening conditions: student buy-in, engagement, and/or motivation; teacher experience; and school district leadership.

**Student buy-in/engagement/motivation.** Teachers in this study expressed challenges regarding student buy-in, student engagement, and student motivation.

Teachers believed, in order to get students to buy in to what they were teaching, they had to answer the question “Why?” for their students. Students wanted to know why they needed to take a test, why they needed to learn certain content – and, more importantly, students wanted to know, “What’s in it for me?” Of the teachers interviewed, all 10 indicated they spent time motivating and engaging students to want to do well in school, and all of them stated they had to work especially hard to engage and motivate students with disabilities. Study data also pointed out that students with disabilities were perceived to struggle significantly with such intrinsic motivation when compared to their peers. For example, Abby stated:

A student’s drive to want to do well needs to be intrinsic, and students need to have a purpose to want to do well.

Jake learned over the course of his years of teaching that many students with disabilities did not want to go to college, so he felt they had no reason to buy into or do well on high-stakes testing. He said:

Students need to know the purpose. Students need to buy in and know that they will be getting something back from doing well on the testing.

Students liked to be rewarded for their work in school. They got letter grades, earned credit, and took the ACT for college entrance. Jake, who had several students in his classroom with behavioral and emotional difficulties, shared what his students often said to him, as well as his feelings about their response:

“Why do I have to take this test? I hate this test.” Of course, they hate this test. They are not good at the test. They don’t want to take the test.

Teachers perceived that students with disabilities often struggled to learn, not only because they had writing, reading, and/or behavioral difficulties but also because the content was difficult to learn. Teachers felt students with disabilities gave up more easily and did not seem to have the same drive and passion as their peers without disabilities. Abby shared her perception regarding students without disabilities:

Some students don't see the value in it (standardized testing); unfortunately they don't put their all into it. The ones that do, and understand that it is a test that should help them prepare for the ACT, I think value it more . . . just trying to get them motivated to do well, which the ACT is mostly intrinsic because of extrinsic reasons. Most students want a good scholarship to get into the schools (colleges) that they want.

She then expressed her thoughts regarding students with disabilities:

There are students with disabilities who don't want to go to college, and they don't care if they do well. It's just kind of the mentality of what they want to do, and if they don't want to go to college, they do not see how this will affect them. Students need to see value and reasoning behind what they are doing.

All of the teachers talked about student engagement as a key factor in teaching, and they said it was even more critical for students with disabilities, since learning often was so much more challenging for them – that if they were not engaged, learning would be difficult. Teachers had the perception that society expected students to keep moving forward in their learning, even if what they were learning was too hard for them. Jake expressed this clearly in one particular statement:

You don't develop reading and writing skills by doing hard things. You develop them by building on student strengths and students becoming confident in their learning.

Matt explained:

"We sometimes continue to give our students difficult things to do, and (we) say, "You will develop the skills you need," without teaching them skill."

**Teacher experiences.** All of the teachers in this study took slightly different approaches to the instruction in their respective classrooms. Five of the 10 believed they had made significant adjustments in their instructional practices based on the demands of Common Core State Standards and high-stakes testing. Sam shared how he has adjusted his teaching:

I focus more on literacy and do a lot of reading and a lot of writing, because the standards the students are assessed on are driven by literacy. For special needs students, you have to make it user friendly. Don't use big words that are in the standard . . . basically make it understandable for them.

The teachers believed their expertise in working with students was an important part of what they brought to their classrooms. Cindy had taught English most of her career and, with some prior teaching experience in special education, she felt that her expertise supported her teaching:

I guess after teaching so long and understanding what they need for our district assessments and the expectations of college English, I have developed a few things that I know I need to be really strong with, so I will only review the standards once (or) maybe twice a year.

Sam, with 28 years of teaching experience, had taught middle and high school level history and geography. He stated:

In my opinion after this many years, I know what I need to get through.

The teachers felt their years of experience brought an incredible amount of knowledge and expertise regarding student learning into their classrooms. When they were asked to describe students with behavioral, social/emotional, social communication, and mental health needs in their classroom, their responses varied. For example, Matt stated:

A lot of the times those students go into a modified class. The intent is to be the same with similar curriculum but less rigorous, and, because I am flexible in my teaching . . . , I will be assigned to teach modified classes.

Sam discussed a student with autism in his classroom and described his years of experience as an asset in understanding student behaviors. With inclusion of students with disabilities in his classroom, he sometimes understood more of what the student's abilities were than the student's special education teacher. Sam believed the collaboration between special education and general education was important. He described himself as not an expert in special education, and he understood the importance of depending on those (like special education teachers) who had expertise in working with students with disabilities. He explained:

I am not trained in special education, but a lot of it is just communicating with the special education teacher.

Jane taught science for 23 years and had experiences working in a medical lab prior to becoming a teacher. She felt this experience had helped her understand better

what students needed in order to learn science, and her past negative experiences as a student herself had guided some of the practices she employed in her classroom. She stated:

What I do is try to teach the basic knowledge (so) that kids can think on their own. I don't harp on the standards; I just teach what I know. When I was a student, I had a teacher that was a horrible man. He decided that every time there was something I didn't understand, I was supposed to explain it to the class. Everyone knew I didn't know it, so I try not to do that to my students.

When discussing students with behavioral, social/emotional, social communication, and mental health needs, Jane explained how her knowledge and understanding of those students influenced her classroom practices:

I don't want to dumb it down, but I try to explain it so that the kids who aren't science brains (can understand it). Because not everyone has a science brain, they can't always understand . . . but I also give enough challenging materials for the smart kids who want to be engineers. You need to expect different things from different students. It is not a one-size-fits-all in schools, but I know that is the way it is supposed to be, but you can't just do that with every kid. My biggest challenge that I have experienced in education is the behavior of students and the lack of interest in learning.

**School district leadership.** During the interviews, the teachers were not asked directly or specifically about administration support or expectations. However, many teachers shared, unprompted, how their principals encouraged them to use the standards to support their teaching, and that they also were encouraged to use data to

drive their instruction. They recognized that school building leadership supporting teachers and students was a key to improving outcomes of students with disabilities (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013). School districts that had shown success in the outcomes of students with disabilities had principals who personally invested in their teachers, buffered teachers from external pressures (such as those related to high-stakes testing), and promoted teacher growth (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013).

Teachers in both school districts in this study had participated in various professional development activities supported by their principals. Typically, the professional development activities were centered around the development and writing of content standards, understanding and using data from the districts' formative measures, and/or how teaching teams could work together to promote literacy skills across all content areas. All 10 teachers alluded to a perceived pressure from administrators, parents, and governmental officials to improve academic achievement scores on high-stakes tests. When teachers were asked to describe why they had this perception of pressure, they had a difficult time articulating exactly what the perceived pressure was and its root cause, but their statements were insightful. Chris spoke about putting the pressure back on the administrators, because he knew his kids were learning. He stated:

I guess that is why they have administrators in our schools to make sure kids are learning . . . the test scores students get kind of reflects on me a little bit.

Even though the teachers did not speak about teacher evaluations, there was a general belief that the high-stakes tests were an evaluation of their teaching practices, and how their students performed was a direct reflection of their effectiveness



improving student learning. Cindy believed that teacher evaluations based on test scores were not fair. She explained:

I've had classes where you got a student very low-functioning, and they can bring down a class average, and yet the teaching practices were probably the same as the year before.

### **Actions/Interactions**

“Actions” and “interactions” refer to the deliberate acts that are taken to resolve a problem and also shape the phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

From the data, actions reflected specific strategies at the local, district, or state level that were adopted to ensure that teachers were prepared and ready to administer high-stakes tests. This led to the emergence of three actions/interactions: test preparation activities, changes in instructional practices, and expectations of students with disabilities.

**Test preparation activities.** Teachers commented during their interview sessions they did not and would not teach to the test. However, all 10 teachers spent various amounts of time preparing their students for high-stakes testing. Five of them incorporated test preparation activities that were not related to instruction but were considered important activities to do before the opening of the testing window.

Chris said:

I go to the site and go through some of the practice problems. I am sure I will eventually do more, as you know they only have done them on the computers for like two years now. I haven't really figured out the best way to get them ready for it. I will take them to the computer lab and have them do the practice

tests themselves. Then at least they are a bit familiar with the way some of the problems are.

Eva taught science and explained that she did a certain amount of test preparation in her classrooms to support her colleagues, even though schools were not held accountable for student performance on science tests. For example:

I don't think much about it. I don't proctor the state test, so I don't even see it. It would be nice to know the format of what the test is. You kind of hear things, and it's mostly about the ACT that everyone talks about, so I always think about that. One of my goals this year is to practice doing problems that are taken from the ACT site, so the kids get practice in doing that type of test. For the state test, I feel like I am doing a good job having them learn what they should be learning. If they know how to read, and how to evaluate, then I think this should support the state testing.

Teachers who taught classes in the assessed content areas (English language arts and math) had slightly different perspectives on test-prep activities. While teachers felt strongly about not teaching to the test, their responses about preparing the students added important nuances to their responses. Cindy explained her test preparation activities:

I have to take a look at the test requirements a little more and try to do some more adaptations. I won't teach to it, because you really can't, because you don't know what reading selection they are going to get. But, as a veteran teacher, it is good for me to see how students are questioned, so I know how I may change my skills to teach to this generation. I have become more cognizant

of the state assessment, and I am sure subconsciously I am thinking ahead to that test. I don't think that it is a bad thing, but I am not spending weeks on it, where I would, say, preparing for the ACT. District assessments – I will show the kids old versions about a month previous to taking the tests, so they can see how they will be tested and why I am teaching what I teach.

**Change in instructional practices.** Teachers in this study recognized a shift in emphasis to a more in-depth understanding of the CCSS, NCLB, and high-stakes testing. They had to adjust their instructional practices in response to the rigor of the CCSS, the increased focus of English language arts and mathematics in NCLB, and the requirement that all students become 100% proficient as measured on high-stakes tests. Even though NCLB was reauthorized to ESSA, teachers still felt burdened by past expectations – that they could not teach in the ways they preferred, even though there were no expected proficiency rates within ESSA's reauthorization. During teacher interviews, they all expressed a desire to be able to be flexible in their teaching, as well as to find innovative ways to accommodate students with disabilities. The primary barrier for many of them was the additional time required for students with disabilities to learn new content and skills. The time factor and the increased rigor of the standards left teachers feeling pressured, strained, and frustrated.

Under these conditions, the teachers had to develop unique teaching methods to accomplish increased student learning in their classrooms. Chris and Abby each shared how they made adjustments in their teaching because of the increased rigor of the CCSS and the emphasis on high-stakes testing. Chris explained the adjustments within his instructional practices, and how he made alterations for students with behavioral,

social/emotional, social communication and mental health needs. He described how he taught the whole class and then transitioned to teaching students with behavioral, social/emotional, social communication and mental health needs:

. . . making sure I get through a lot of examples and have them work through problems and make sure they understand the vocabulary. I have changed how I have them do homework. In the past, I have collected the homework, and then I graded a few problems, but now I have them keep their homework, because homework is for practice, and I do more quizzes and tests now, and they hand in their homework at the end of a chapter to get a homework grade. For students with disabilities, I will have to tell them that it is ok, because they may not be able to do some of the problems

Abby explained the adjustment she made:

I generally do direct instruction half of the period, and then I allow kids to work at tables in the classroom, so they can work together. If I see everyone is on the right track, I can do something different. For students with disabilities, generally they take adapted math. This gives them a lot more work time, and we only cover half of the content in one school year, whereas the regular math class goes through the whole book in one school year.

Although Chris and Abby did not speak specifically to what they changed in their classrooms in relation to NCLB regulations, the changes in the increased demands of the CCSS rigor and the impact of high-stakes testing forced them to think about instruction differently.

**Expectations of students with disabilities.** The focus of this study was on general education teachers' perceptions of high-stakes testing and the impact of that testing on students with disabilities – and more so for students with behavioral, social/emotional, social communication, and mental health needs. Interestingly, when teachers were asked about students with disabilities in their classrooms, they had a hard time describing their students' disabilities. Every teacher interviewed (10 of 10) could not articulate their students' specific disabilities. They made statements such as, “I think I had an autistic student a few years ago,” “mostly students with a disability usually had ADHD or some medical kind of thing,” “some students have a disability because his/her home life is awful,” or “some get accommodations.”

One general statement the teachers made regarding students with disabilities was that those students struggled with high-stakes testing and did not want to learn. The teachers also believed that many students with disabilities had some behavioral problems specifically because school and academic learning was so hard for them. A general sense among the teachers was that students with disabilities had a more difficult time maintaining their stamina and rigor than their non-disabled peers. As a solution, some school districts offered “basic classes” or “adapted classes” to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities, instead of offering opportunities to learn in multiple ways in the general education classroom. Although teachers generally felt that they were supporting students by offering adapted or basic classes, their conclusion was not supported in the literature on teacher beliefs and student achievement. A study completed by Klehm (2014) suggested that students with disabilities needed to be given the opportunity to show achievement through multiple measures and that, in order for

students to do this, they had to be involved in the general education curriculum with their non-disabled peers. This same study also suggested that teachers' attitudes and their expectations for students with disabilities was a key to student achievement. Ninety-seven percent of the teachers who participated in the Klehm study felt that students with disabilities should be given the opportunity show achievement at grade level standards.

### **Consequences**

In this framework, consequences refer to the outcomes, based on the different responses and strategies applied to high-stakes testing and instruction. They answer the question, "What are the effects from the various actions taken by schools to prepare students for high-stakes testing?"

The data analysis revealed three consequences: teachers feeling increased pressured, teachers feeling lack of control, and inhibition of the use of Universal Design for Learning.

**Teachers feeling increased pressure.** Throughout this study, it was evident that the changes in assessment, instruction, curriculum and standards left teachers feeling more pressure regarding the content they were expected to teach, the amount of time required to test and prepare for tests, and balancing all of the daily activities in a regular school day. Time constraints and frequent changes that occurred were difficulties about which almost every teacher in this study spoke. As causal conditions, teachers felt pressured by the rigor of the Common Core State Standards, time spent in testing prep, and time spent actually taking high-stakes tests. Conditional, contextual pressures involved changes in governmental expectations, changes in assessment measures, and

the expectations surrounding student achievement. Intervening conditions that created pressure on teachers were student behaviors, student buy-in, motivation, and engagement. Teachers also felt they were not able to bring their expertise and knowledge of student learning into the classroom as much as they would have liked. School district leadership was not perceived negatively, but not much discussion occurred concerning their feelings and beliefs about supportive leadership. In general, teachers felt supported by their principals; however, principals usually took a hands-off approach. Jane expressed how past administration supported teachers:

Old administration . . . were just like, “Well, you know, you’re teaching; you’re in the classroom; you’re entertaining the kids; do what you want.” You know, there was no accountability.

Joe did not express exactly what administrators were doing to support teachers but his comments were positive in nature:

They are doing the right things to help our school.

The teachers expressed that students with behavioral, social/emotional, social communication and/or mental health needs added additional pressures during their school day. Teachers discussed how their school staff, including administrators, worked together to try come up with a plan that would alleviate some of the pressures and demands they were feeling. Teachers from both school districts that participated in this study wanted to create a learning environment for students with disabilities that would allow enough time to provide multiple methods of instruction and to engage and accommodate each student’s unique learning needs. A solution for both school districts was to place students with disabilities in a basic or alternate class designed to cover the

same content standards as the general education classroom, but at a much-reduced depth and breadth. Abby shared what a typical day would look like in her adapted math class:

We have a lot more work time, so they don't feel overwhelmed when they don't remember how to do something. It is adapted, so I get to teach at a slow pace over an entire year, and more days are spent on each lesson. I teach for a shorter amount of time, so it gives the students longer work time to ask their questions. I have (a) para in the classroom, and any time the students have questions one of us is usually available.

Matt said his adapted English class was:

... an intervention class that has a scripted curriculum. It should be for somebody who has had a different learning style. The class isn't as visual as it probably should be, but I make some adaptations.

Jake, who also taught an adapted English class, stated his feelings:

The intent was to be similar to the regular standards curriculum but less rigorous, and I can vary my teaching structure. It was supposed to be for kids with LD, but over time it became a dumping ground for ED students who could do the work but just chose not to.

**Lack of control.** Teachers in English, language arts, and mathematics felt the most impacted by limitations on what they believed they were allowed to teach.

Although they were not told by their administration what they had to teach, they placed expectations on themselves regarding what they wanted to teach vs. what they had to teach. Teachers in content areas such as science, history, and elective courses did not appear to have the same pressure as English and math teachers. Even though North



Dakota mandated testing in science, the state did not adopt science standards, and the science assessment was not used for school accountability reporting.

The teachers who were less impacted by high-stakes testing still felt pressure and felt controlled to a degree by the high-stakes tests, because of the additional support they needed to provide to their colleagues, which in turn took away some of the time in their classrooms for the content they wanted to teach. Overall, teachers appeared to work together collaboratively to support the increased demands in English and math content areas.

Twila stated:

I want to make sure that I am doing what I can to support my colleagues that are most impacted by the assessment.

Sam stated how he supports his colleagues in instruction and during actual assessment times:

I support the teachers by incorporating more writing and reading in my classroom, and, when it comes to state testing time, I cover their classes for them.

**Students with disabilities exposed to less rigorous curriculum.** There was a division between curriculum expectations of students with and without disabilities. Depending on the complexity of student behaviors and the significance of their disabilities, students with disabilities were often put in “basic classes” or “intervention classes.”

Study data exposed a variety of justifications for why students with disabilities were placed in basic classes. Students in basic classes were not exposed to the same

expectations as their non-disabled peers. Klehm's (2014) study findings described that more than half of the respondents who were surveyed did not believe students with disabilities could meet proficiency on high-stakes tests.

Abby, who taught an adapted math class, explained that this class was basically the same as her regular math class but with lower expectations:

It is adapted, so I go at slow pace. Half the book takes over an entire year.

Even though Sam's area of teaching was not assessed on high-stakes tests, he taught an adapted class and described his approach:

We go incredibly, incredibly slow...I don't even know what standards we cover, because it goes so slow. We just focus on going through the textbook.

English was a class with standards that were assessed through high-stakes testing, and Matt, who taught adapted English for many years, stated the whole class was:

Interventions . . . the class is a scripted curriculum. (It) should be for somebody who has had a different learning style."

**Inhibits the use of Universal Design for Learning.** The theoretical framework for this study was the Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The study data indicated that within the general education classroom, teachers typically taught using a "traditional style" of teaching. Teachers defined "traditional teaching" as giving a lecture on the content, having students take notes, and giving students a test at the end of the chapter. Joe, who stated that he could have retired five years ago, explained his traditional style of teaching in his classroom:

Pretty old school . . . a lot of lecture, take notes, tests. I don't change anything.

Sam explained that, although he does try to do different projects in his classroom and in his adapted class:

I will be honest: I still lecture. I still make them read. I still make them take notes. It works. If it is not broke, don't fix it.

Others considered themselves somewhat innovative teachers, incorporating different techniques within their lessons, such as: giving a partial lecture with student work time, allowing students to have copies of notes, or changing how they used homework. Abby described how she designed her classroom, which might have looked different than those of her colleagues who considered themselves "traditional teachers:"

I allow the kids to work at tables in the classroom, so they can work together.

They are still doing math but not just sitting there listening to me talk.

Jake, who taught what he described as an innovations class, stated that when someone walked into his classroom they would see:

Students propose projects, carry out projects, and do all sorts of different things.

It is making students think beyond just facts and content knowledge.

Twila, who taught an elective course (a non-required course chosen by the students), explained that because she was able to teach in the computer lab she had more capabilities and flexibility to teach in many different ways. She explained:

There are different presentation options; there are a few different tools they can choose. Technology classes are more project-based with more presentation options. In my technology web design class, students made a live website.

Generally, the teachers who described themselves as innovative still felt a need to maintain a "traditional teaching" style. Their justification for this was based on high-

stakes tests and the traditional format in which they were given, even though the tests were computerized. The study data verified the teachers' desire to be creative and innovative in their learning, but the high-stakes testing demands and their accompanying pressure made teachers believe they needed to teach in the more formal way that students would be assessed.

From the study data, students with disabilities appeared to have had more opportunities to be supported by a Universal Design for Learning within an adapted or basic class. Students were given opportunities to be taught in multiple ways of expression, engagement, and representation. The literature on UDL supported high-quality education by allowing students with disabilities to have the same learning opportunities as their non-disabled peers, and to be educated in the general education classroom (Hehir, 2009). The data from this study suggested teachers were using UDL for students within their adapted or basic classes. Course content in the adapted classes was designed to cover fewer standards at a much less rigorous pace than their non-disabled peers, allowing for more time and flexibility for teachers to implement UDL principles in their instruction.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **DISCUSSIONS, CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **Summary**

This chapter includes a conclusion, a summary of findings, and recommendations for further study.

#### **Discussion**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how general education teachers adapted to federal high-stakes testing requirements and the impact this adaptation had on curriculum and instruction for students with disabilities, with an emphasis on students with behavioral, social/emotional, social communication, and mental health needs. Qualitative interviews were used to gain an understanding of general education teachers' perspectives, in order to provide a foundation to assist in the enhancement of state policy and to provide recommendations for school districts to improve curriculum and instructional practices for North Dakota students with disabilities on high-stakes accountability tests.

Participants in this study included 10 11<sup>th</sup>-grade general education teachers, from one rural and one urban school district. Interview transcripts were coded and analyzed using a constant comparative analysis and open, axial, and selective coding techniques to refine the theory that emerged.

Three theoretical themes emerged after coding and analyzing the transcribed interviews. Collectively, each of the theoretical themes that emerged from this study helped address the following research questions that were developed from the purpose statement found in Chapter I:

1. How have federal high-stakes testing requirements impacted 11<sup>th</sup> grade general education teachers' curriculum and instructional practices for students with behavioral, social/emotional, social communication, and mental health needs, as well as those students' performance on high-stakes testing?
2. How have federal regulations impacted the use of Universal Design of Learning in general education classrooms?

### **Research Question 1**

*How have federal high-stakes testing requirements impacted 11<sup>th</sup> grade general education teachers' curriculum and instructional practices for students with behavioral, social/emotional, social communication, and mental health needs, as well as those students' performance on high-stakes testing?*

It was clear through this research study that teachers felt pressured to prepare their students for high-stakes tests. They felt compelled to provide instruction that would give students the necessary skills to be successful on the required high-stakes tests. The presence of students with learning difficulties was impactful on classroom teachers, and adding a layer of behavioral, social/emotional, social communication, and mental health needs with little or no extra training or resources put additional strains on those teachers. They felt that schools' curricular and instructional practices were

designed to teach students how to be good test takers instead of good critical thinkers, but breaking this chain was overwhelming and difficult for teachers to do based on the demands of No Child Left Behind (2001). However, many students who struggled with behavioral, social/emotional, social communication and mental health needs were not good test takers and struggled with knowing how to be good learners. The reauthorization of NCLB provided educators with some reprieve, because the newly named ESSA indicated that states had the flexibility to develop their own accountability plans by adding additional quality indicators, developing their own content standards, and restoring local control to the states and local school districts.

## **Research Question 2**

*How have federal regulations impacted the use of Universal Design for Learning in general education classrooms?*

The data from this research suggested that teachers integrated small bits of each of the three principles of Universal Design for Learning in their classroom instructional practices. Teachers understood the complexities of differing learning modes and that students benefited when given multiple means of expression, representation, and engagement, especially students with disabilities. However, based on the time constraints to which teachers felt bound, the complexity of the content standards, and the pressure of high-stakes testing, teachers felt limited in what they could do. They felt as though the strategies they used in the classroom to support student learning could not be carried over into the high-stakes testing because of the rules associated with high-stakes tests. Teachers implemented a large number of accommodations within their daily lesson activities to support students with disabilities during instructional time;

however, when discussing accommodations and UDL, teachers had a difficult time understanding the differences between the two. Generally, teachers felt that providing accommodations for students with disabilities was good instructional practice and that accommodations were what was needed for a Universal Design for Learning.

Teachers had a desire to be creative and innovative in their teaching styles and methods, but, under increased pressure from the constraints of high-stakes testing, they often resorted back to archaic ways of teaching – with their justification being their inability to change the way school systems across the nation were designed.

The data also indicated that teachers understood the uniqueness of students' styles of learning and how students with disabilities often do not fit into a typical learning style "mold." They expressed positive implications of UDL's multiple forms of expression, representation, and engagement for students with disabilities. The only solution teachers were able to find was providing the principles of UDL in a classroom design that was less rigorous, lowering and limiting learning expectations concerning what students should know and learn. Their realization that they had the flexibility to take their time and teach content in a manner through which students could learn and understand allowed them to feel freer to instruct more proactively and less confined to working on improving what federal regulations required. However, this focus on more effective learning for students with disabilities led to less exposure to the content standards for those students, which consequentially lowered student academic achievement on high-stakes tests. Additionally, this approach could decrease the college- and career-readiness of students with disabilities after high school.



## Conclusion

This dissertation research was undertaken with a hope that the data analysis would lead to a richer understanding for general education teachers, special education teachers, and school district and state leaders of program changes that could be used to provide a greater degree of success for students with disabilities.

Three thematic findings emerged from analysis of participant interview data:

1. Impact high-stakes testing had on instructional practices.
2. Pressure teachers felt as a result of high-stakes testing
3. Barriers in public schools and/or districts.

A grounded theory model with a central phenomenon based on the impact of federal high-stakes testing requirements on general education teachers' instructional practices also emerged from this study. Consequences identified as a result of this included (a) teachers feeling increased pressure (stress), (b) lack of control, (c) students with disabilities exposed to less rigorous curriculum, and (d) inhibition of the use of Universal Design for Learning.

Looking into the future, with President Donald Trump's choice of United States Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, the future of high-stakes testing is uncertain. DeVos is a firm believer in local control, parent choice, and charter schools. Additionally, because there is widespread uncertainty regarding the impact ESSA will have on schools under the new presidential administration, the future of high-stakes testing remains uncertain. Recommendations made in this study are based on the regulations of NCLB and ESSA, which will take effect in 2017-2018. However, if Congress repeals ESSA and makes radical changes to the way it currently is written, this study will be

limited to instructional implications concerning the principles of a Universal Design for Learning that could promote academic achievement for students with disabilities.

Perhaps without the pressure of high-stakes testing, teachers and school district leaders would feel less burdened by time constraints and state assessment proficiency rates. Consequently, teachers who felt stressed and powerless might not have the same feelings about whatever education reform the presidential administration might propose. In a time of rapid reform, it is important to understand the amount of stress teachers feel due to federal regulations. Considering and listening to those who work deep in the trenches with these federal mandates is a core consideration of this study. The study is enhanced greatly by being undertaken in an era with abundant educational research – a time when continuous improvements are being considered that deal specifically with students with disabilities and their classroom instruction.

### **Recommendations**

This research study focused on how federal legislative requirements impacted instructional practices in the general education classrooms. The duty of educators to provide students with a solid foundation of skills needed to become college- and/or career-ready was assumed, as was the need for education leadership to be in tune with the impact federal legislative requirements have on classroom instruction and address teacher needs to support effective instructional practices for students with disabilities. The following recommendations were the result of this study's findings:

### **Recommendations for State**

1. Give school districts the flexibility to incorporate innovative ways of teaching without being restricted to the number of hours of “seat time” students are required to have in each class; consider supporting reforms initiated by high schools.
2. Promote statewide incentives that support Universal Design for Learning.
3. Increase funding to local education agencies to hire additional general and special education teachers, enhance professional development activities, and ensure access to high quality resources for students with disabilities.

### **Recommendations for School Districts**

1. Provide common collaboration time during which general and special education teacher teams can plan activities that will promote a Universal Design for Learning.
2. Allow general and special education administrators the ability and authority to identify and implement continuous school improvement initiatives that will be helpful in improving the quality of education through a Universal Design of Learning for students with disabilities.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

1. Conduct a study on students’ perceptions of high-stakes testing and the implications such testing has for their learning.
2. Interview general education and special education school district administrators regarding their perceptions of the impact high-stakes testing has on instructional practices.

3. Conduct a comparison study on high-stakes testing and its impact on instruction for elementary students.
4. Expand on this research to add school districts from across the United States.
5. Examine the effects of UDL on post-school outcomes for students with disabilities.

### **Limitations of the Study**

One limitation of this study was sample size, as it was limited to 10 teachers in two North Dakota high schools (one rural and one urban). Although the sample size was relatively small, a point of saturation appeared to have been reached, with no new information being brought forth in later interviews. Furthermore, the consistent message offered by the teachers provided a unique insight into the impact federal regulations had on instructional practices for students who were identified as having behavioral, social/emotional, social communication, and/or mental health needs.

### **Final, Personal Thoughts**

High-stakes testing obviously was a hot topic to research. As a special education teacher, I constantly struggled with how to meet best the needs of my students in the classroom. I had opportunities to work with students in a variety of settings, utilizing a variety of instruction methods. I wanted what was best for my students; I wanted to see my students have academic success. My students struggled with school. They would either tell me or show me by their actions that did not like school, and they struggled with their emotional well-being. It took all the tricks I had in my bag to keep them engaged and build their self-esteem. My students were my children and, when they hurt, I hurt; when they felt like they failed, I felt like I had failed. Even though each and

every one of my students had difficulties in school, my expectation for them was to succeed, learn, and grow emotionally and academically. I wanted them to be happy and proud of who they were.

I needed help as a special education teacher. I was driven to find the time to learn what was best for my students. Deep down I knew what I needed to do to support my students, but I worked within an education system that did not have the resources or the time available to allow me to do what I wanted to do. Administrators believed in me, and my students depended on me, but many of them never reached the level of proficiency that was expected in NCLB. Yet, I knew that they were making gains, that they were becoming confident individuals, and that together we were learning how to overcome their learning barriers.

Finally, in 2007, I was given the opportunity to join a school team that allowed me to think innovatively. With full administrative support, I joined together with a general education teacher, and we planned together, looked at individual student needs together, and taught together. I joined her classroom community, and together we taught with the same goals and passion in mind. We were innovative, and we were creative, and my students were able to have the individualized instruction that they needed and build on their strengths alongside their peers. I saw students become confident in what they were doing, and I saw them become able to do things that they never, ever thought they would be able to do – and, quite honestly, might never have been able to do if I had continued to keep teaching in a pulled-out, segregated setting.

Do not get me wrong, there is a time and a place for intense individual one-on-one learning. Honestly, I believe that we all could benefit from it at some point.

However, it is only sometimes that some students need it more than others. It should not be the instructional default setting for students with disabilities.

With administrative changes, teacher shortages, and an increase in the number of students with disabilities, it became more difficult to fully embrace a teaching style that allowed for a partnership between a special education teacher and a general education teacher. Even when we could not teach together, we continued to try to plan daily lessons together, making a conscientious effort to consider all possibilities we could utilize to engage students – all possibilities that we could utilize to have them show what they know or demonstrate to us what they could do. Ten years ago, we did not know that we were incorporating the principles of a Universal Design for Learning into our co-taught classroom, but it was working.

Finally, through my journey, I struggled with many of the same things with which teachers in this study struggle. High-stakes testing took time from my co-teaching; it took time for me to try to prepare my students to learn to take the test; my students often felt like failures because the test was too hard. When the results came back, they were still underperforming as compared to their same-age peers, but I knew that they were making gains. Their IEPs showed they were making progress; their parents knew that their children were making progress; but the piece of paper we got back indicated that they were either partially proficient or novice. It did not support what we, as teachers, knew to be true.

High-stakes testing definitely puts pressure and stress on both general and special education students, school leaders, and families. The question is, “Why?” Although this study may not provide an exact answer, I think it offers some powerful

insight on today's education system and gives us a framework regarding ways to move forward.

Accountability is important; it is our duty as educators, policy, lawmakers, and citizens to ensure that we are doing our personal best to prepare students for their future. I just do not think high-stakes testing is the answer. What if we had a system that did not have any type of test, but we needed to prove that our students were learning what we were teaching? The answer might be more complex than saying we need to give a test one time a year to prove it. The answer might be in the instruction. We need to put faith and value back into our teachers; we need to have supportive administrators; and we need to have teachers believing in themselves and in what they do.

As a teacher, I needed this. I needed my administrators to allow me to teach to my strengths, and I needed my school committee to believe in me. I needed to feel confident that parents trusted that I would do my very best to meet the needs of their children. As a representative of a state education agency, I have a duty and commitment to support local education agencies in overcoming the barriers that stand in the way and that might prevent them from doing what they need to do to increase academic achievement for all.

## **APPENDICES**



**Appendix A**  
**Letter to Superintendent and Principal Describing the Study**

My name is Tammy Mayer and I am a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Leadership at the University of North Dakota. I am writing to request your permission to conduct research in your school district to learn the impact federal legislative testing requirements have on daily classroom instructional practices for all students and how federal requirements impact students with emotional disabilities, other health impairments and/or autism.

To find answers to this and other related questions, I would like to interview high school Grade 11 general education teachers.

I hope to do this study from August, 2016 through December, 2016. If you grant me permission, I will arrange to hold interviews with teachers on days and times that will not interfere with their normal class activities. Interview sessions will be expected to last approximately 20-30 minutes. I hope to secure your assistance in identifying schools and participants for me to contact.

Throughout the study process, the name of the schools, administrators, and teachers will be changed to preserve the anonymity of the schools and the participants. Responses will not be linked to participants' names or positions or the name of the school in any report of this study.

If you have any questions and concerns about this study, please feel free to contact me at (701-220-7484) or e-mail me at [tammy.henke@my.und.edu](mailto:tammy.henke@my.und.edu). You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Pauline Stonehouse at (701- 777-4163) or [pauline.stonehouse@email.und.edu](mailto:pauline.stonehouse@email.und.edu). If you have questions regarding participants' rights as research subjects, or if you have any concerns about the research, you may contact the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (701) 777-4279.

I would be very grateful to have your permission to conduct my study in your school district, and I would be happy to share a copy of my final dissertation with you.

I would need a letter of support from your office, as required by the IRB, permitting me to undertake the study in your school district.

Thank you.  
Sincerely,  
Tammy Mayer

**Appendix B**  
**Approval Letter for the Institutional Research Board**



**UND.edu**

**Institutional Review Board**  
Twamley Hall, Room 106  
264 Centennial Dr Stop 7134  
Grand Forks, ND 58202-7134  
Phone: 701.777.4279  
Fax: 701.777.6708

June 13, 2016

<b>Principal Investigator:</b>	Tammy Mayer
<b>Project Title:</b>	Teacher Perspectives on the Instructional Impact Federal Legislative Requirements Place on Students with Disabilities
<b>IRB Project Number:</b>	IRB-201606-405
<b>Project Review Level:</b>	Expedited 7
<b>Date of IRB Approval:</b>	06/10/2016
<b>Expiration Date of This Approval:</b>	06/09/2017
<b>Consent Form Approval Date:</b>	06/10/2016

The application form and all included documentation for the above-referenced project have been reviewed and approved via the procedures of the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board.

Attached is your original consent form that has been stamped with the UND IRB approval and expiration dates. Please maintain this original on file. **You must use this original, stamped consent form to make copies for participant enrollment. No other consent form should be used.** It must be signed by each participant prior to initiation of any research procedures. In addition, each participant must be given a copy of the consent form.

Prior to implementation, submit any changes to or departures from the protocol or consent form to the IRB for approval. No changes to approved research may take place without prior IRB approval.

You have approval for this project through the above-listed expiration date. When this research is completed, please submit a termination form to the IRB. If the research will last longer than one year, an annual review and progress report must be submitted to the IRB prior to the submission deadline to ensure adequate time for IRB review.

The forms to assist you in filing your project termination, annual review and progress report, adverse event/unanticipated problem, protocol change, etc. may be accessed on the IRB website:  
<http://und.edu/research/resources/human-subjects/>

Sincerely,  
  
Michelle L. Bowles, M.P.A., CIP  
IRB Coordinator

MLB/sb  
Enclosures

Cc: Pauline Stonehouse, Ph.D.

## Appendix C Consent to Participate

### THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

**TITLE:** *Teacher perspectives on the instructional impact of federal legislative requirement places on students with disabilities.*

**PROJECT DIRECTOR:** *Tammy Mayer, Ph.D. Candidate*

**PHONE #** *701-220-7484*

**DEPARTMENT:** *Department of Educational Leadership*

#### STATEMENT OF RESEARCH

A person who is to participate in the research must give his or her informed consent to such participation. This consent must be based on an understanding of the nature and risks of the research. This document provides information that is important for this understanding. Research projects include only subjects who choose to take part. Please take your time in making your decision as to whether to participate. If you have questions at any time, please ask.

#### WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

You are invited to be in a research study about the instructional impact federal legislative requirements places on students with disabilities because you were identified as an individual who has experience with teaching students with emotional disturbances, other health impairments, and autism.

While research in regards to curriculum and instructional practices for students with disabilities is abundant; there is little research on how federal legislative requirements impact the instructional practices teachers use in their classrooms and how this may impact students with disabilities. The purpose of this research study is to determine the impact of federal legislative requirements places on instructional practices for students with emotional disturbances, other health impairments, and autism.

#### HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL PARTICIPATE?

Approximately 8-12 people will be interviewed at a location selected by the interviewee.

Approval Date:	<u>JUN 10 2016</u>
Expiration Date:	<u>JUN 9 2017</u>
University of North Dakota IRB	

Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Subject Initials: \_\_\_\_\_

**HOW LONG WILL I BE IN THIS STUDY?**

Your participation in the study will last no longer than 30- 60 minutes.

**WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY?**

Participants will be asked a serious of questions related to requirements of federal legislative mandates and the impact this has on curriculum and instruction practices. Participation is voluntary, and participants may elect to opt-out at any time.

All participants will be provided a reasonable assurance of anonymity. Individuals who participate will be referred to in a manner that will not unveil their position or identity.

**WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THE STUDY?**

The research poses no risk to participants. Participants who are uncomfortable with questions, comments, or discussion points may opt out at any time.

**WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY?**

You may not benefit personally from being in this study. However, we hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study because it will assist State Education Agencies help develop policies to support local education agencies and teachers in the education of all students including students with disabilities.

**ALTERNATIVES TO PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY**

The alternative is to not to participate.

**WILL IT COST ME ANYTHING TO BE IN THIS STUDY?**

You will not have any costs for being in this research study.

**WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING?**

You will not be paid for being in this research study.

**WHO IS FUNDING THE STUDY?**

The University of North Dakota and the research team are receiving no payments from other agencies, organizations, or companies to conduct this research study.

Approval Date:	JUN 10 2016
Expiration Date:	JUN 9 2017
University of North Dakota IRB	

Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Subject Initials: \_\_\_\_\_

## CONFIDENTIALITY

The records of this study will be kept private to the extent permitted by law. In any report about this study that might be published, you will not be identified. Your study record may be reviewed by Government agencies, the UND Research Development and Compliance office, and the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board.

Any information that is obtained in this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. [You should know, however, that there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example the law may require us to show your information to a court or to tell authorities if we believe you have abused a child, or you pose a danger to yourself or someone else.] Confidentiality will be maintained by means of providing a secure location for all digital recordings and transcripts. Participation forms will be kept separate from recordings. No names or other forms of identification will be used during the transcription of the focus group sessions or interviews.

If we write a report or article about this study, we will describe the study results in a summarized manner so that you cannot be identified.

Recordings will be maintained for a period of three years following the completion of research.

## IS THIS STUDY VOLUNTARY?

Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of North Dakota.

## CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS?

The researcher conducting this study is Tammy Mayer, Ph.D. candidate, Department of Educational Leadership. You may ask any questions you have now. If you later have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research please contact **Tammy Mayer** at **701-220-7484**. You may also contact student advisor, Dr. Pauline Stonehouse at **701-777-4163**.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you may contact The University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at **(701) 777-4279** or **[UND.irb@research.UND.edu](mailto:UND.irb@research.UND.edu)**.

Approval Date:	<u>JUN 10 2016</u>
Expiration Date:	<u>JUN 9 2017</u>
University of North Dakota IRB	

Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Subject Initials: \_\_\_\_\_

- You may also call this number about any problems, complaints, or concerns you have about this research study.
- You may also call this number if you cannot reach research staff, or you wish to talk with someone who is independent of the research team.
- General information about being a research subject can be found by clicking "Information for Research Participants" on the web site:  
<http://und.edu/research/resources/human-subjects/research-participants.cfm>

**I give consent to be audiotaped during this study.**

Please initial:      \_\_\_ Yes      \_\_\_ No

**I give consent for my quotes to be used in the research; however I will not be identified.**

Please initial:      \_\_\_ Yes      \_\_\_ No

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Subjects Name: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I have discussed the above points with the subject or, where appropriate, with the subject's legally authorized representative.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Who Obtained Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Approval Date: <u>  JUN 10 2016  </u>
Expiration Date: <u>  JUN 9 2017  </u>
University of North Dakota IRB

Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Subject Initials: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix D**

### **Teacher Interview Questions Guide**

#### *Interview Protocol*

Interview Time: 60-75 minutes

Interviewer: Tammy Mayer

Consent: Review the consent form and ask if there are any questions. Inform the participant that they are under no obligation to participate in the project and may stop the interview at any time. Inform the participant that the interview will take 60-75 minutes.

#### Questions

1. Tell me about you as a teacher. How many years of teaching, grade levels, schools you have taught, etc.
2. Tell me about your instructional practices for students with disabilities in your classroom.
3. As you think about the instructional practices that you recently explained for students with disabilities, tell me if you have adjusted or changed how and what you teach based on high-stakes testing and the kind of impact this has on you and your students.
4. Tell me about your experiences with NDSA.
5. What impact did these experiences have on students with disabilities?
6. As you look forward to the future of teaching and learning in the era of high-stakes accountability testing (NDSA), what instructional practices do you believe will be supportive to students with disabilities?
7. If you could create your own assessment system within your own classroom for high-stakes testing, what would this look like for students with disabilities?

Thank you for your time. After 10 working days, you will receive the transcriptions from this interview. In order to ensure that I accurately recorded your thoughts, please review the transcripts and correct any inaccuracies in the report. Please return the interview transcripts with your corrections in the enclosed, stamped envelope.

## Appendix E Codes

Codes	Data Supporting the Codes	Interpretive Summary
Experience	But you know as a veteran teacher its good for me to see how they (the test) are questioning	Teaching for years there is something always more to learn
Change	Change my skills to this generation, whatever the case may be you know we sometimes would like to say just let me teach	Change based on students in the classroom
Feelings	Testing situations are the worst for those students and they perform very poorly	Students with disabilities fail at testing
Assessment/Feelings	In the perfect world assessment is a tool, not an end all for like administrators and teachers	What I would like vs. what it is that I feel assessment can give
Student motivation	Our society we have to get kids first interested that is our first hurdle	Students have to be interested and want to do well
Student Expectations	There is some of them that I tell them that you might not be able to do some of these problems and	Limiting student's expectations
Feelings	So, it kind of reflects on me a little bit when well they haven't even taken the courses so	Perception that bad test scores reflection on the teacher
Government Expectations and Feelings	To me this government mandated all these government mandated things and there it's like they are looking over our shoulders and I don't like it.	Frustration with governmental accountability
Test Prep	I am gonna take the computer lab now and have them do the practice tests themselves because they can all get on there and do that so then they are at least a little bit familiar with the way some of the problems are	Preparing students for state assessment
School District Leadership	We weren't doing justice as a school preparing	Improving as a school
Test Prep	Made sure we do a lot more assessments in my room	Test preparation
Instructional Practices	The more different presentation options especially those juniors and seniors few different tools under their belt they can choose whatever option	Offering a variety of ways to show what students know
School Leadership and Special Education	As a school, I think we struggle to find some of those students	Struggles with working with students with disabilities-Lack of professional development
Feelings	Standardized test are in the back of my mind	Feelings
Test Prep	Preparing them tried to do my assessments on to the computers to help with MAP test	Student test preparations



Student Motivation	Older students a lot of complaints reading we have to do on the screen, it's much easier on paper	Students feelings on assessment
Instructional Practices	I really don't because what I do is try to teach the basic knowledge that kids can think on their own	What I teach to my students
Student Expectations	I don't want to say dumb it down but I try to explain it so that kids who don't...aren't science brains, because not everybody has a science brain	Student expectations for struggling learners
Teaching Expectations and Instructional Practices	You need to expect different things from different students and I know it's all one size fits all in school is what you're supposed to do, but you can't, not every kid is the same	What is believed about what should be done with students vs. what is felt is required
Instructional Practices	Another thing I think makes a teacher more successful is when you get to know your kids and find out what their interested in because you can gear your subject, how your teaching or what your teaching to something that pertains to their life	What teachers need to do in order to have successful learners and to get students engaged
Instructional Practices	Do things different with the student but I make sure I use the proximity you, you do different things with them just to try and just keep them calm because this kids is always out of the desk and loud and making noises	Different ways of teaching for students with disabilities
School District Leadership	Old administrations were just like, well you know, your teaching you're in the classroom your entertaining the kids do what you want you know there was no. I don't want to say accountability	How administration can impact what is taught in the classroom
Government Decision Makers	I honestly wish legislatures that had say in what we do they would step into our room for 30 days, 30 days, they would totally change their mind	Governmental officials need hands on experience
Instructional Practices	That is about the extent of modifications. I don't change the tests, I have had them ask me can you cut down some of the answers mainly	Strategies used for students with disabilities
Instructional Practices	I am pretty old school is what I do. Today, these kids took a test in world history you know and we had some terms to do	Instructional practices in the classroom
Students with Disabilities and Knowledge	I don't think there is anybody in that class that to leaves to take a test I don't know if they even go over there	Understanding of students with disabilities

Students with Disabilities and Knowledge	There is probably like one kid within the three classes that I teach actually	Students with disabilities in the classroom
School District Leadership	My principal is probably going to try and change my ethics	School district leadership beliefs
Changes That Impact Education	They are all trends and every time I have ever seen a trend in the 38 years I have been teaching they come and they go, so I just keep doing what I am doing	Changes in education and how to deal with the changes
Student with Disabilities Expectations	I think a lot of times these kids get to dependent on our help is right next door here and they get to dependent on that and then it's almost like you are doing their work for them	Beliefs on how students with disabilities perform in the classroom based off what is perceived special education teachers to for their teachers
Instructional Practices	Don't do a lot of class projects but I do, their homework has to be pretty inclusive, as far as their answers	Instructional activities in the classroom
Alternate Classes	years ago, 8-9 years they started a modified curriculum	Modified curriculum
Instructional Practice-Less Rigor	The intent was to be a somewhat similar curriculum but less rigorous	Less rigorous curriculum
Beliefs Of Alternate Classes	Over time it became a dumping ground for ED students who could do the work or but just chose not to or they LD	Dumping ground for ED
Instructional Practices	So act things out with them rather than have the students who might be a little afraid to get up front	Options for student presentations
Instructional Practices For Students with Disabilities	Time some of the special need students you just have to make it more just user friendly	Special needs need user friendly
Intervention Classes/Alternate Curriculum	Teaching a core English class for MTSS	
Testing Strategies/Test Prep	Try to teach them the skills to go back and find just the for that support that basis	Testing makes them read and find answers
Special Education Student Expectations	Students reg plus the special needs that they are never going to go to college	Spec ed and gen ed some never go on to college
Instructional Practices-Standard Based Teaching	If you went back and looked at the state standards you're not going to see a direct one to one correlation between what the state standard says and what my learning goals	Actual standard and learning goal look different
Student Expectation and Student Motivation	Start with your learning goals and you then just decide on activities that you think are going to help the kids learn those	Start with learning goals and plan activities

Alternate Classes	Remedial class just about every kid in that class either was on an IEP or 504 plan in that setting	Students with disabilities take remedial class
Instructional Practices	Might read about we might talk about it we might do an activity we might they might listen to me talk about it you know so that they might do a lab	Multiple ways of instruction in the classroom
Test Preparation to Support Instruction	But there is some things that I teach that maybe are not directly in the standards but maybe in order to get to that standard they have to know	Pushed more reading and writing in all content areas
Test Prep	That is one of my goals this year is to practice doing, do practice problems that are taking from the ACT	Test prep goals
Instruction/Feelings	As far as the state test goes I feel like if there, I feel like if I am just doing a good job of having them learn what they should be learning	What my students are learning for the state test
Instructional Practices for Students with Disabilities	My students with disabilities their main thing, is you know they want my notes so what I do is I print off my blank smart slides and I fill them in with how I would do the problem	Accommodations for students with disabilities
Student Buy In	Some students like all standardized tests they don't see the value in it and unfortunately so they don't put it their all into it	Not all students value standardized tests
Student Motivation	Trying to get them motivated to do well which the ACT is mostly intrinsic... well its intrinsic because of extrinsic but um those students want a good score to get a scholarship to get into the schools that they want	Get motivated for ACT
Instructional Practices for Prep of Testing	We've designed our curriculum to cover all the standards at hopefully the right time.	Curriculum designed around state assessment
Government Regulations	If the state mandates the ACT that that should be the test for the junior year	State mandates

Student Buy-In	The mentality of if I wanta going to college I am going to try and the other ones are like. I just don't see how that's gonna affect me	Student buy-in
Alternate Classes	Adapt them um especially for the class that I have that is the whole class um then I need to adapt from there	Adapt the standards for adapted math
Instruction in Alternate Classes	Cover the topics but it's not so much the application the rigor	Instruction in adapted classes
Alternate Classes	Innovation and communication class where we propose projects carry out projects and do all sorts of different things	Innovate styles of instruction for students who struggle in traditional classes
Instruction in Alternate Classes	Interventions class...Ya that class is a scripted curriculum	Intervention class is a scripted curriculum
Student Motivation/Engagement	When they are reading independently they are going to find books that are more suited to their abilities	Meeting students' needs and getting them engaged
Feelings on Student Expectations	It's so stupid that we keep asking these kids	Expectations of students is unrealistic
Motivation/Engagement	Much more high interest	Motivation and engagement
Feels on Test Expectations/Outcomes of State Assessment	Tests are content knowledge/ are not tests of creativity or any of the soft skills that matter in the business world or outside in college	What state assessments actually test
Feelings on Student Instructional Practices	Prepare them to be factory workers not to be thinkers, critical thinkers and um and intelligent citizens in our world	How students are prepared in schools
Time	So many things that are not tested on that are not worth anything.	Time wasted on testing
Instructional Focus on Test Prep	Schools are focused on certain things like preparing students to be good test takers	Focus is preparing students for testing
Motivation	These students aren't good test takers and they don't care to be good test takers many of them	Students with disabilities struggle on tests

Feelings/Governmental Expectations	If I were to be in that situation and somebody were to say and go do this, go teach your English class in this way, I would have no idea what I am doing because I have never have had that freedom or that possibility	Not sure what to teach without today's expectations on teachers
Teaching Experiences	After this many years, I know what I need to get through	Years of teaching experience helps in knowing what students need to learn
Instructional Supporting Activities for Test Prep	Our whole department we do a lot of reading do a lot of writing in with that idea of literacy.	Department supports school in preparing for assessments by doing more writing and literacy
Alternate Classes	Separate a separate class cannot bring like a lot of things I like to do is when I read the chapters find out gaps	Basic classes for struggling students doesn't allow me to teach how I would like
Feelings	To be honest the state assessment is a waste of time	Feelings on state assessment
Feelings	Kids know you know that it means absolutely nothing to them	Students do not believe the test is beneficial
Student Buy-In	A lot of it it's the buy in of the students in this case and ACT	ACT is meaningful because it can help for college
Instructional Practices	I don't even know what standards I cover	Teaching standards and instruction
New Teachers	When we start to do new hires, we need to start finding people that have been trained	New teachers bring new ideas to schools
School District Resources	We just don't have the resources or what but we still need that	Limited resources

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