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Teacher Perspectives on the Instructional Impact of the Florida Alternate Assessment

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Teacher Perspectives on the Instructional Impact

of the Florida Alternate Assessment

by

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DEDICATION

To my Sunshine, McBoobles, and Wiggle Bear,

Here's to a lifetime of storybook endings!

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ABSTRACT

This study examined special education teachers' perspectives of the instructional impact of the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Through purposeful sampling, six special education teachers who serve students with significant cognitive disabilities and had experience administering the FAA were identified. Interviews posed questions about how they used the FAA to impact their instructional decision-making, how the FAA has influenced how the development of Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals, and how the FAA impacted how they defined access to the general education curriculum. The interviews, along with IEP artifacts, and a research journal formed the research design.

Results revealed 8 major themes and 18 sub-themes. Teachers reported that the FAA ignores the complex needs of their students, and highlighted the curricular tensions between academics and life skills. A third of the teachers indicated they have created and adopted curriculum to mirror the FAA, and five out of the six teachers integrated more daily assessments similar to the FAA. In addition, the study revealed varied results for utilizing FAA results on IEP development and writing goals. Finally, teachers had varied beliefs on the value of curriculum content standards called access points for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Most of the teachers stated that higher standards lead to higher expectations. The results also revealed teachers' perspectives of the instructional impact of the FAA were influenced by their teaching context: center setting versus general education setting. Implications for future research and practice are included.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The standards-based reform iniatives, as operationalized by the No Child Left

Behind Act (2001), was based on the premise that high content standards, the use of

assessments to measure progress towards these standards, and an emphasis on

accountability must be present in order for schools and our educational system to have

meaningful improvement (McGregor, 2003; Nolet & McLaughlin, 2005). What does this

mean for students with significant cognitive disabilities who are unable to partake in

large-scale assessments even with accommodations and modifications?

Federal regulations mandate that students with significant cognitive disabilities

are involved in the standards-based reform movement. The No Child Left Behind Act of

2001 requires that all students must be assessed on grade-level academic content

standards or alternate achievement standards, which are linked to grade-level content

(Towles-Reeves & Kleinert, 2006). The Individuals with Education Act Amendments of

1997 (IDEA) and the Individuals with Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004)

mandate that all students, regardless of disabilities, must be included in state and district

assessments (Browder, Spooner, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Flowers, Algozzine, & Karvonen,

2003). These legislative initiatives immerse students with disabilities in large-scale

assessments aimed at assessing progress towards general education academic content

standards. IDEA (2004) places special education within the general education curriculum

and within the accountability and assessment movements (Nolet & McLaughlin, 2005).

Before the IDEA amendments of 1997, students with significant cognitive disabilities were exempt from large-scale assessments (Rigney, 2009). With the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, along with NCLB (2001), students with the most significant cognitive disabilities qualify to take an alternate assessment. Alternate assessments are designed for students, whom even with appropriate accommodations, traditional assessments would not be appropriate measure of progress toward general education curriculum (Towles-Reeves, Kearns, Kleinert, & Kleinert, 2009).

An interesting issue is that federal regulations do not mandate the content or format of alternate assessments (Hager & Slocum, 2005). Each state is responsible for the creation of their own alternate assessment based on specific state alternate achievement standards. Alternate assessments can take the form, but are not limited to, portfolios, performance based activities, and checklists (Kleinert, Quenemoen, & Thurlow, 2010). This range of options has led to variability in the translation of the policy. There are differences in the alternate assessment approaches across states (i.e., portfolios, performance events, checklists) as well as variability within approaches (e.g., variations in portfolio assessments from one state to the next) (Towles-Reeves, Kleinert, & Muhomba, 2009). A body of research has stemmed from this issue ranging from validating performance indicators with content experts and stakeholders (Karvonen, Wakeman, Flowers, & Browder, 2007; Kohl, McLaughlin, & Nagle, 2006) to using alternate assessment outcomes for program evaluation and ongoing quality enhancement (Karvonen et al, 2007; Browder, et al., 2003).

Florida has developed a performance-based alternate assessment for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Performance-based assessments are a "direct measure of

a skill under controlled assessment conditions (e.g., the student responding to questions about interpretations of bar graphs taken from grade-level math content in a one-to-one assessment task)" (Kleinert, Quenemoen, & Thurlow, 2010, p.13). The Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) is aligned to Florida's Sunshine State Standards Access Points in reading, writing, mathematics, and science. The Sunshine State Standards Access Points are alternate achievement standards based on the core content general education curriculum standards with reduced levels of complexity at three levels: participatory, supported, and independent (Florida Department of Education, 2011). The FAA is designed to provide students, parents, and educators information on the extent at which students are progressing towards learning the knowledge and skills outlined in the Sunshine State Standards Access Points. One of the purposes of the FAA is to "assess the annual learning gains of each student toward achieving the Next Generation Sunshine State Standards Access Points appropriate for each grade level" (Florida Alternate Assessment Technical Report, 2010, p. 5). Teachers can utilize the results of the FAA to inform instruction, improve instructional decision-making, and develop and write IEP goals (Florida Alternate Assessment Technical Report, 2010).

Since students with significant cognitive disabilities have been included in state and district-wide accountability systems, controversies and debates have surfaced. Major debates have focused on access to the general education curriculum, effects of being included in accountability systems, and change in curricular focus (Browder et al., 2003). One of the major controversies that have emerged is the emphasis on accessing the general education curriculum and academic content standards for students with significant cognitive issues (Agran, Alper, & Wehemeyer, 2002). Flowers, Ahlgrim-

Delzell, Browder, and Spooner (2005) reported that 72% of teachers (N=983) who participated in their survey do not agree that alternate assessments promote access to the grade-level content standards. However, other research has indicated that students with significant cognitive disabilities can potentially benefit from being included in accountability systems; these include improved instructional methods and higher expectations for academic learning (Browder, Spooner, Algozzine, Karvonen, Spooner, & Algozzine, 2004; Flowers et al., 2005).

The inclusion of students with significant cognitive disabilities into accountability systems has led to powerful shifts on how this group of students are instructed and perceived (Ayres, Lowrey, Douglas, & Sievers, 2011). The curricular focus has shifted from a functional, life skills approach to a concentration on academic skills (Kleinert et al., 2010). Teachers are being encouraged to have higher academic expectations for student learning (Browder et al., 2004; Flowers et al., 2005). However, this change in focus does come without its own set of controversies. Flowers et al. (2005) report that functional skills curriculum is being overpowered and shadowed by academic content. In this study, teachers felt that individual needs such as grooming, social skills, communication, and choice-making were more important educational objectives when compared to teaching academic content. An emerging challenge for teachers is how to provide appropriate instruction on grade-level general education curriculum, while ensuring that they meet their students' functional and independent functioning needs as outlined in Individualized Education Programs (Collins, Hager, & Galloway, 2011).

Browder et al. (2003) assert that the change in curricular focus from functional to academic skills can have the potential for higher expectations, only if research can

produce examples of how to effectively teach this group of students the academic skills that are included in alternate assessments. Assessments have the potential to enhance instruction and learning (Pellegrino, Chudowsky, & Glaser, 2001) if support for effective instructional strategies is given. Alternate assessments have the power to improve educational outcomes for students with significant cognitive disabilities by motivating and improving "ongoing progress monitoring and instruction" (Hager & Slocum, 2005, p.28).

<div align="center">Statement of Problem</div>

The federal mandates of NCLB (2001) and IDEA (2004) ensure that all students with disabilities have access to the general education curriculum and be included in state and district-wide accountability systems. For students with significant cognitive disabilities, this translates to taking alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards. Alternate achievement standards can reflect reduced complexity of academic standards that are aligned to content standards for all students (Kleinert et al., 2010). Alternate assessments are a relatively new educational practice with regards to assessing learning progress for students with significant cognitive disabilities (Roach, Elliott, & Berndt, 2007).

Research on alternate assessments, specifically on teacher perspectives on instructional impacts, is limited (Roach et al., 2007). Research on teachers' perspectives that has taken place has focused on three main areas:

- perceived benefits of including students with significant cognitive disabilities in statewide accountability systems (Flowers et al., 2005);

- tension between the amount of time required to complete alternate

  assessments when competing with instructional time and individual

  student needs (Kampfer, Horvath, Kleinert, & Kearns, 2001); and

- instructional implications on using performance-based assessments

  (Kleinert, Kennedy, and Farmer Kearns, 1999).

Roach et al. (2007) suggest that alternate assessment provides curricular access

and should motivate teachers to provide an appropriate standards-based curriculum and

instruction to students with significant cognitive disabilities. One issue being raised from

alternate assessments is "what do we do with these alternate assessments once they are

completed?" (Thompson, Quenomoen, Thurlow, & Ysseldyke, 2001, p. 113). There is

limited information on teacher perspectives of how data from alternate assessments can

inform instruction and be a tool for progress monitoring. With this being said, it is

therefore important to understand how teachers perceive how the alternate assessment

process is impacting their instructional decision-making in curriculum planning,

instruction and progress monitoring. This is essential because teachers need to understand

what it means to provide access to the general curriculum and how to provide students

opportunities on how to meet curriculum content standards and expectations. Thereby,

providing the same educational opportunities for all students.

With little being known about how teachers perceive the instructional impact of

alternate assessment on the education of students with significant cognitive disabilities,

more research is needed (Towles-Reeves & Kleinert, 2006). There is a need for research

to explore how teachers are using the FAA to improve instructional decision-making,

influence the development and writing of IEP goals, define access to the general

education curriculum and inform instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities. This study explored teacher perspectives regarding the impact the FAA has on their instructional planning and classroom practices.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of six teachers serving students with significant cognitive disabilities on the instructional impact of the FAA. Teachers' perspectives of their current classroom practices related to the alternate assessment need to be explored (Kim, Angell, O'Brian, Strand, Fulk, & Watts, 2006). It is important to examine how instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities is impacted by alternate assessments (Thompson et al., 2001). Research needs to be conducted to better understand how alternate assessments influence IEP development (Towles-Reeves, & Kleinert, 2006). Finally, it is important to understand the perspectives of teachers about alternate assessments because "teachers' beliefs directly influence their implementation of alternate assessment in their classroom" (Kim, et al, 2006, p. 84).

Research is emerging that indicates a relationship between instruction and alternate assessment outcomes (Browder, et al, 2003; Towles-Reeves & Kleinert, 2006; Turner et al., 2000). This association becomes apparent when teachers recognize the connection between instruction and alternate assessment data when making daily instructional decisions. Teachers' perspective of the relationship of alternate assessments to standards-based IEPs is influenced by their experiences of alternate assessments (Browder, Wakeman, Flowers, Rickelman, Pugalee, & Karvonen, 2007). This study's major contribution is to add to the body of knowledge on teachers' perspectives of the relationship between the FAA and daily instructional decision-making.

The purposes of this study were as follows: (1) examine teacher views relating to the impact of the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) on the curriculum and instruction of students with significant cognitive disabilities, (2) explore what influenced daily instructional decision-making, (3) understand how teachers have utilized the results of the FAA when developing and writing Individualized Education Programs goals, and (4) examine if the FAA had any influences on teachers' understandings of accessing general education curriculum.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study were as follows:

1. How has the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) impacted teachers' perspectives on daily instructional decision making for students with significant cognitive disabilities?

2. How do teachers perceive that the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) has impacted the curriculum and instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities?

3. What is the nature of this specific group of teachers' views about how the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) has influenced how they develop and write IEP goals?

4. What is the nature of teachers' views about the value of the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) on their perspectives of accessing general education curriculum standards for their students with significant cognitive disabilities?

Significance of the Study

The results of this study are potentially beneficial to state department officials, local teacher preparation programs, school and district level administrators, and special education teachers. State department officials who work on revising the FAA may be interested in how teachers are specifically using the results of the FAA for instructional-

decision making. Local teacher preparation programs may be able to use the results of this study to inform pre-service special educators on how standards-based reform initiatives and accessing the general education are implemented within classrooms serving students with significant cognitive disabilities. School and district-level administrators can use the results to inform in-service training opportunities for teachers on how results of the FAA can impact daily instruction and decision-making while influencing how IEP goals are developed and written. Finally, special education teachers working with students with significant cognitive disabilities may be able to relate to or discover new ways in which the FAA has impacted daily instruction and IEP goals.

Roach et al. (2007) report that there is limited research on teachers' experiences with and perspectives of alternate assessments. This study responds to this concern in its contribution to the body of knowledge on understanding and exploring teachers' views on the impact that alternate assessments has had on instruction, decision-making, writing and developing IEP goals, and access to the general education curriculum.

Limitations

This study was not without inherent limitations about federal mandates on alternate assessments. According to Browder and Spooner (2003), having students involved in the standards-based reform and accountability movements has increased accountability for teaching students with significant cognitive disabilities, served as a catalyst for a change in curricular focus, and resulted in more school wide membership and school planning for this group of students.

This study explored teachers' views of the FAA for their students with significant cognitive disabilities. For the purposes of this study, a small sample size of teachers who

teach and administer the FAA was used. The selection criterion limited the number of teachers that could be involved in the study. The purposeful small sample size limited the generalizability of this study into other contexts but gave an in-depth insight into how this small group of teachers responded. The findings reflect views of special education teachers from one large, urban school district and limited the findings in this study. Teacher participation was voluntary. The data collected from this study were from in-depth interviews, IEP analysis, and my research journal. An extended discussion of the research design, including the benefits and disadvantages of utilizing the chosen data collection tools will be explored in Chapter 3.

<center>Definitions of Key Terms</center>

Research on teacher perspectives on alternate assessments includes a variety of terms used interchangeably with the same meaning. Therefore, it is necessary to provide a thorough list of terms and operational definitions to avoid confusion.

Accountability: refers to an individual or a group taking responsibility for the performance of students on achievement assessments (NCEO, 2011).

Access to the general education curriculum: mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 where students with disabilities must have access to the general education curriculum (Alper, 2003).

Alternate achievement standards: alternate achievement standards can reflect reduced complexity of academic standards that are aligned to content standards for all students (Kleinert et al., 2010).

Alternate assessment: designed for students, who even with appropriate accommodations, traditional assessments would not be appropriate measure of progress toward general education curriculum (Towles-Reeves et al., 2009).

Alternate Assessments based on Alternate Achievement Standards (AA-AAS): for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities based on the grade-level content covered by the general assessment, but at a reduced depth, breath, and complexity (NCEO, 2011).

FAA: Florida Alternate Assessment is a performance-based assessment for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. Measures student academic progress towards mathematics, language arts, and science Sunshine State Standards Access points at three levels of complexity: participatory, supported, and independent (Florida Department of Education, 2011).

IDEA 1997: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 was first law that mandated that students with disabilities be included in state and district wide assessments and must receive appropriate accommodations as outlined on students' Individualized Education Programs (Kohl et al., 2006).

IDEIA 2004: Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 reiterates increased accountability for students with disabilities to be included in state and district assessments (CEC, 2011).

Instructional decision-making: a proactive process that focuses on data regarding students' responses to instruction to guide future educational decisions. It should drive how curriculum is delivered through instruction (Iowa Department of Education, 2011).

IEP: Individualized Education Program is the cornerstone for any child receiving special

education services, and is critical to the success of these students' educational

progress (Nolet & McLaughlin, 2005).

Large-scale assessment: often referred to state-assessments where student progress is

gauged towards general grade level performance (Nolet & McLaughlin, 2005).

NCLB: The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 mandates that all students must be

included in accountability systems, including students with significant cognitive

disabilities (Hager & Slocum, 2005).

Performance assessment: "this is a direct measure of a skill under controlled assessment

conditions (e.g., the student responding to questions about interpretations of bar

graphs taken from grade-level math content in a one-to-one assessment task)"

(Kleinert et al., 2010, p.13).

Students with significant cognitive disabilities: term applied to a group of students who

are eligible to participate in alternate assessments; no more than 1% of all

students can be included in school accountability measures (Browder et al., 2003).

Typically include students "with moderate and severe intellectual disabilities, as

well as many students labaled as having autism, multiple disabilities, and

deafblindness" (Kleinert et al., 2010, p.3).

Standards-based reform: the prevailing paradigm of educational reform that is based on

"the following assumptions about student performance: all students can learn, all

children thrive in an atmosphere of high expectations about what they will learn,

if all children are expected to learn and they have had opportunities to reach high

expectations, all children can be successful" (McGregor, 2003, p.33).

Sunshine State Standards Access Points: "are extensions of the general standards and

capture the essence of the Sunshine State Standards with reduced levels of

complexity, participatory, supported, and independent" (Florida Department of

Education, 2011).

Summary and Organization of Remaining Chapters

Chapter 1 has discussed key issues that have emerged relating to the inclusion of

students with significant cognitive disabilities within the accountability and standards

movement through the use of alternate assessments (Roach et al., 2007). Chapter 2

presents the literature review of curriculum models for students with significant cognitive

disabilities, the standards-based reform and accountability movement, how alternate

assessments are embedded and influenced by these movements, and the links between

curriculum and instruction, assessment, and data-driven instructional decision-making for

this group of students. Chapter 3 presents the theoretical framework that influenced the

research methodology, along with the research design utilized in exploring teachers'

views on the alternate assessment. The use of interviews, collection of IEP artifacts, and a

research journal are included. Also in this chapter are the theoretical underpinnings,

participants and setting, ethical, tenants concerning trustworthiness, procedure of data

collection, and overview of analysis technique. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the

study organized by research question and the major themes and subthemes that emerged.

Chapter 5 discusses the emerging themes and subthemes in relation to the research

questions and to current literature on the instructional implications of alternate

assessments. Implications for future research and practice are also discussed.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This review of literature was conducted to synthesize the body of knowledge that exists on students with significant cognitive disabilities and alternate assessments. The literature review is organized into 7 major sections that connect the federal regulations on alternate assessments and standards-based reform movement to classroom practices for students with significant cognitive disabilities. The literature review presents the evidence that exists for including students with significant cognitive disabilities in standards based alternate assessments. The sections include: (1) standards-based reform, (2) alternate assessments, (3) the Florida Alternate Assessment, (4) teachers' perspectives toward alternate assessments, (5) curriculum for students with significant cognitive disabilities, (6) instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities, and (7) the link between assessment, curriculum, and instruction.

Standards-Based Reform

The past three decades of school reform have focused on curriculum, assessment, and accountability in the form of legislative initiatives (Nolet & McLaughlin, 2005). This started with the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for National Reform,* which highlighted the mediocre state of public education and stressed the need for education reform. More recently, the NCLB (2001) aims towards increasing student achievement and accountability. Standards-based reform emerged from the frustration

and disappointment with the state of education in this nation (Nolet & McLaughlin, 2005). Standards-based curriculum and assessment is the prevailing paradigm of educational reform that is based on "the following assumptions about student performance: all students can learn, all children thrive in an atmosphere of high expectations about what they will learn, if all children are expected to learn and they have had opportunities to reach high expectations, all children can be successful" (McGregor, 2003, p.33). This discussion focused upon the implications for students with significant cognitive disabilities in the standards-based reform movement, defining curriculum content standards, assessments, and accountability.

Implications for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

Students with significant cognitive disabilities must be included in state and district-wide accountability systems, and have access to the general education curriculum (Browder & Spooner, 2003). For students with significant cognitive disabilities, this means participation in state alternate assessments. Alternate assessments for students with significant cognitive disabilities are based on alternate achievement standards. Alternate achievement standards must relate to states' general education curriculum content standards (Towles et al., 2009). The standards-based reform movement provides the foundation for analyzing what it means "to access the general education curriculum" for students with significant cognitive disabilities (Nolet & McLaughlin, 2005, p. 2).

A historical overview of federal policies related to standards-based reform offers a context for this analysis. With the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative For National Reform* by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE), the standards movement began (NCEE, 1983). The report deplored the state of education

with a rating of mediocre and started a wave of educational reform at the federal, state, and local levels. The committee recommendations were based on the belief that everyone can learn. One of the main recommendations included that standardized tests of achievement should be administered at major points in a child's schooling (McGregor, 2003).

In 1987, President Bush and state governors held an educational summit aimed at improving the state of education in the country. The goals from the summit became the framework for *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* (P.L. No. 103-227). *Goals 2000*, signed into law in 1994, aimed at measuring student progress on academic content standards. States were able to create their own academic content standards, however, the standards were very vague and were devoid of any concrete descriptions (Ravitch, 2010).

The Amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 1994) defined that standards-based reform needs to include all students, regardless of disability. In addition, the ESEA (1994) mandated that all schools receiving funding underneath Title 1 must use assessments that are aligned to curriculum content standards. The assessments are used to assess student progress towards the standards by "raising academic standards for all students and measuring student performance to hold schools accountable for educational progress are central strategies for promoting educational excellence and equity in our school" (ESEA, 1994, p. 2).

The 1997 amendments of Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and reauthorization in 2004, mandate that all students, regardless of their disability, must be included in accountability systems and state-wide assessment programs (Browder, Karvonen, Davis, Fallin, & Courtade-Little, 2005). For those students with significant

cognitive disabilities who cannot participate in the state or district-wide assessments, alternate assessments must be developed and implemented. Alternate assessments are based on alternate achievement standards that are based on state's academic content standards and that vary in complexity with regards to the general curriculum content standards (Browder & Spooner, 2003).

NCLB (2001) requires that all students demonstrate adequate yearly progress and be assessed in reading, math, and science. Students who are unable to master the grade-level content standards even with accommodations, are eligible to take an alternate assessment (Browder & Spooner, 2003). Federal regulation 34 C.F.R. Part 200., mandate that only 1% of the number of students enrolled in tested grades who received proficient and advanced scores can be included in adequate yearly progress (AYP) (Title 1: Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantage, 2003). Prior to the passage of regulations that approved the development of alternate assessments, NCLB (2001) required states to include all students, regardless of disabilities, within accountability assessments. Therefore, teachers must prepare students with significant cognitive disabilities to take alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards in reading, math, and science, as well as demonstrate adequately yearly progress in the curriculum content areas (Browder et al., 2005).

What Are Curriculum Content Standards?

There are three critical components of the discussion of curriculum content standards including the nature of curriculum content standards, their role in assessment and their contribution to accountability of teachers and schools. The first critical component of the standards-based reform movement is curriculum content standards.

Standards are "general statements of what students should know or be able to do as a result of their public school education" (McGregor, 2003, p. 34). Curriculum content standards represent the expectations of the general education curriculum. Curriculum content standards can be further broken down and described as benchmarks, and performance standards (McGregor, 2003). Curriculum content standards encompass what gets taught, including skills, knowledge, and subject matter. Benchmarks are "clear descriptions of expectations for student knowledge, skills, and abilities relative to content standards" (McGregor, 2003, p. 34). Performance standards illustrate a student's current level of skill, knowledge, or ability relative to benchmarks.

Curriculum content standards set targets and performance levels that students should achieve in the content area (Nolet & McLaughlin, 2005). NCLB (2001) mandates that states need to have one set of curriculum content standards and achievement standards in reading, science, and math (Towles-Reeves & Kleniert, 2006). Standards can be broad statements or very specific to student ability. According to Nolet and McLaughlin (2005) standards are important for several reasons: they create equity across schools by defining what teachers should teach, define what content should be taught and assessed, and align state curriculum standards directly to curricular frameworks, materials, and goals.

Students with significant cognitive disabilities access the general education curriculum through alternate achievement standards (Towles-Reeves & Kleniert, 2006). Alternate achievement standards "define student performance that differs from a grade-level achievement standards in terms of complexity, but these achievement standards must be aligned with a state's regular academic content standards, promote access to the

general education curriculum, and reflect high or challenging standards" (Nolet &

McLaughlin, 2005, p. 5).

Florida has created Access Points for those students with the most significant

cognitive disabilities who are deemed eligible under IDEA (2004). Access Points are

extensions of the general education curriculum content standards and are the essence of

the Next Generation Sunshine State Standards with reduced levels of complexity (Florida

Department of Education, 2010).

Florida is one of the 45 states that have adopted the Common Core State

Standards (CCSS) (Saunders, Bethune, Spooner, & Browder, 2013). The CCSS are

national standards for what students are expected to know in English Language Arts and

Mathematics. Students with significant cognitive disabilities will access the CCSS with

Common Core Connectors (CCC) that are currently in development and that will provide

access to CCSS for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Twenty-eight states

are part of the National Center and State Collaborative consortium and will use the

CCCs.

Assessment

The second critical component of the standards-based reform movement is the

standardized assessment of student progress. NCLB (2001) mandates that states need to

have one set of assessments that measure student performance on curriculum content

standards (Towles-Reeves et al., 2009). States must assess 95% of all their students in

reading/language art, math, and science, once a year in Grades 3-8 and once during

Grades 9-12 (Nolet & McLaughlin, 2005). NCLB (2001) and IDEA (2004) both allow

for states to create alternate assessments and alternate achievement standards for students

whom the grade level assessments are deemed inappropriate. However, no more than 1%

of the student population can take an alternate assessments (Kleinert et al., 2010).

Florida has created the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) for students with

significant cognitive disabilities based on the access points. The FAA is a performance-

based alternate assessment that measures student progress towards the access points and

is discussed in depth in the section on FAA.

Accountability

The third critical component is related to accountability. In the era of standards-

based reform, student performance data provides individual classroom and school

accountability measures (Roach et al., 2007). Accountability refers to an individual or a

group of individuals taking responsibility for the performance of students on achievement

assessments (NCEO, 2011). One of the tenants of NCLB (2001) is to increase

educational accountability for school and system-levels. The accountability system under

NCLB (2001) is mostly based on student assessment results represented in school report

cards. Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) demonstrates this school accountability (Nolet &

McLaughlin, 2005). AYP is calculated by the percentage of students in each grade level

and subgroup that reach Proficiency and Advanced levels of achievement on the state

assessments. To make the educational performance of schools more transparent, states

must release assessment results at the school, district, and state levels for each grade and

subject. The results must disaggregate the scores by "gender, race/ethnicity, and for

students identified as low income, special education, and limited English proficiency"

(Nolet & McLaughlin, 2005, p. 6). The purpose of disaggregating the scores is to ensure

the progress of all students, which makes sure that all students are meeting challenging

standards (McGregor, 2003). Students with significant cognitive disabilities can be part of accountability measure through alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards.

<div align="center">Alternate Assessments</div>

With the passing of the IDEA (1997), reauthorization in 2004, and NCLB (2001), all students regardless of severity of disability, must be included in statewide assessments and accountability systems. The words *all students* are heavily stressed within the three federal mandates: *all students* must be counted within accountability systems, *all students* must make adequate yearly progress, and *all students* must be assessed in reading, math, and science. It is important to understand how alternate assessments fit within the context of standards-based reform and its implications for teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities. The discussion focuses upon what alternate assessments are, the assumptions guiding this practice, who is eligible to take an alternate assessment, and different types of alternate assessments.

What are Alternate Assessments?

Alternate assessments are for students, who even with accommodations, are not able to take the standardized tests. Alternate assessments are designed to measure progress toward general education curriculum (Towles-Reeves et al., 2009). Alternate assessments are utilized to demonstrate competency in math, reading, and science. Pellegrino et al.'s (2001) suggested a "Assessment Triangle" that every assessment must test demonstrated in: "a model of how students represent knowledge and develop competence in the subject domain, tasks or situations that allow one to observe students'

performance, and an interpretation methods for drawing inferences from the performance evidence thus obtained" (p. 2).

Browder and Spooner (2003) discussed three assumptions surrounding alternate assessments for students with significant cognitive disabilities. The first assumption relates to alternate assessments being designed to provide accountability for students' performance towards grade-level curriculum content standards. "The expectation now is that all students will work toward state standards" (Browder & Spooner, 2003, p. 53). The authors proposed that this leads to higher expectations for students with significant cognitive disabilities. The next assumption relates to the change of curricular focus. Alternate assessments have created a new era of curriculum for students with significant cognitive disabilities. There has been a change in curricular focus from a functional-life skills approach to accessing general education curriculum standards (Browder & Spooner, 2003). The third assumption relates to rethinking the implications of alternate assessments on school wide membership and accountability measures. Past curricular trends have focused on students with significant cognitive disabilities being included into typical educational settings. Thurlow, Thompson, and Johnson (2002) asserted that transition work sites can become classrooms which allows students with significant cognitive disabilities to "work towards high educational standards across many settings while learning skills that will truly benefit them in their future adult lives" (p. 106). Now, one must rethink how students with significant cognitive disabilities are included within accountability systems. Browder and Spooner (2003) asserted that the inclusion of this group of students into accountability systems will lead to more consideration in planning school improvement.

Who is Eligible?

According to NCLB (2001), alternate assessments are for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities (Byrnes, 2004). Students eligible for an alternate assessment may have special education labels including autism, intellectual disability, deaf-blindness, or multiple disabilities; however not every student with this label qualifies for an alternate assessment (National Alternate Assessment Center [NAAC], 2005). The student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) team decides how the student will participate in state assessment systems. Each state has different guidelines for student participation in alternate assessments. The National Center on Educational Outcomes (2003) recommended that each student "participate in a way that accurately portrays the student's achievement of knowledge and skills so as to hold accountable the educational system responsible for the student's learning." With each state responsible for developing their own alternate assessment, controversy was aroused when determining how many students with disabilities were eligible for an alternate assessment. In May 2005, Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings introduced "A New Commonsense Approach to Raising Achievement for Students with Disabilities." This allowed states to extend the 1% rule to an additional 2% of the school population who were not able to reach grade-level achievement standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). States now had the option of offering an alternate assessment based on modified grade-level curriculum content standards for students with disabilities who are unable to score grade-level proficiency (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

Types of Alternate Assessments

The Office of Special Education Programs of the U.S. Department of Education summary "Including Students with Disabilities in Large-Scale Assessment: Executive Summary" (2006) outlined five types of assessment methods for the inclusion of students with disabilities that could be used for determining adequate yearly progress. These included: regular assessment based on grade-level achievement standards, regular assessment with accommodations based on grade-level achievement standards, alternate assessment based on grade-level achievement standards, assessment based on modified achievement standards, and alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards.

Alternate assessments can take the form of, but are not limited to portfolios, performance based assessments, and checklists. Portfolios are authentic measure that are directly connected to real-life contexts and provide a broader perspective of what the student is able to do (Denham, Bennett, Edyburn, Lahm, & Kleinert, 2001; Orelove, Sobsey, & Silberman, 2004). A benefit of portfolios is enhanced communication among parents, professionals, and peers (Kleinert et al., 2010). Whereas, performance-based assessments are a "direct measure of a skill under controlled assessment conditions…performance events may or may not be timed and are often referred to as "on-demand" tasks, in that students are expected to demonstrate performance under what would be called more typical testing conditions" (Kleinert et al., 2010, p. 13). The third type of widely used alternate assessment approach is a checklist. Teachers identify whether or not students are able to perform each predetermined skill, task, or activity (Towles-Reeves et al., 2009).

According to the National Center on Educational Outcomes (Altman, Lazarus, Quenemoen, Kearns, Quenomoen, & Thurlow, 2010), the frequency of states utilizing various forms of alternate assessment were as follows:

- 20 states-portfolio or body of evidence

- 18 states-standardized set of performance tasks

- 8 states-multiple choice test

- 2 states-other

- 7 states-were still developing or revising their alternate assessment approach.

Several states were using more than one type of these approaches to assess student achievement (Towles-Reeves et al., 2009). Since states can utilize more than one approach, an interesting issue was raised. "The format of the assessment may not be as critical in describing state approaches to alternate assessment as the degree of flexibility versus standardization within the assessment, as well as the specific points at which greater flexibility is given" (Kleinert et al., 2010, p. 13). For example, there is great variability in standardization when a teacher can create or select the skill and activity versus when teachers are given strict assessment guidelines that precisely state the exact skill, activity for that skill, and testing conditions. As a result, it is essential to understand how states conceptualize their alternate assessments involvement within the debate of flexibility versus standardization. This is needed in order to accurately capture the learning of students with significant cognitive disabilities (Gong & Marion, 2006). The next section discusses the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) for students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Florida Alternate Assessment

The state of Florida has three options for students with disabilities to participate in its accountability system: the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) without accommodations, FCAT with accommodations, or the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA). The FAA is a performance-based alternate assessment aligned to the Next Generation Sunshine State Standards (SSS) Access Points in Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science. Access Points are extensions of the general standards and capture the essence of the SSS with reduced levels of complexity (Florida Department of Education, 2011). The FAA is for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities for whom participation in the FCAT is not appropriate, even with appropriate accommodations. The FAA measures student academic performance on the SSS Access Points at three levels of complexity: participatory, supported, and independent. This section outlines what the qualifying indicators are to be eligible to take the FAA, specifications about the FAA, and scoring details.

In order to qualify for an alternate assessment, the Individual Education Plan teams must determine what assessment method the student with a disability must take. To be exempt from the FCAT, the IEP team must address the following questions:

1.   Is the student unable to master the Next Generation Sunshine State Standards even with appropriate and allowable course accommodations?

2.   Is the student's demonstrated cognitive ability the primary reason for the inability to master these standards?

3.   Is the student participating in a modified curriculum based on competencies in the Next Generation Sunshine State Standards Access Points for all academic areas?

4.   Does the student require extensive direct instruction in academic and vocational competencies, as well as domestic, community living, and leisure activities?

5.   Does the student have deficits in adaptive behavior, as demonstrated by the inability to function effectively and independently in everyday living skills (interpersonal and social interactions) across a variety of settings? (Florida Alternate Technical Report, 2010, p. 10)

If the IEP team answers yes to all five questions, then the FAA should be used to assess the student. The FAA is administered annually each spring and assesses students in Reading (grades 3-10), Mathematics (grades 3-10), Writing (grades 4, 8, and 10), and Science (grades 5, 8, 11). Figure 2.1 displays the number of students who took the FAA by grade level in the 2009-2010 school year. Florida has 341,632 students with disabilities, or approximately 14%, of the total school population (Florida Alternate Technical Report, 2010).

The FAA is designed for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities to work to their potential for each item in each curriculum content area. The purpose of the FAA is:

(1) to assess the annual learning gains of each student toward achieving the Next Generation Sunshine State Standards Access Points appropriate for the student's grade level;

Florida Alternate Assessment: Number of Students Assessed by Grade Level
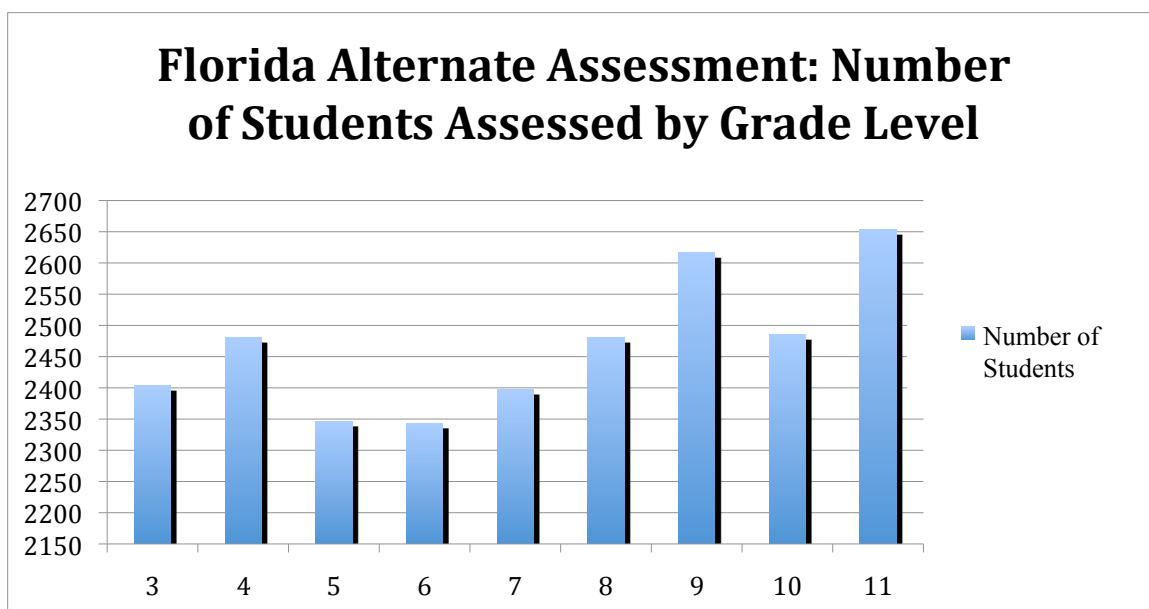
FIGURE 2.1: 2009-10 Florida Alternate Assessment: Number of Students Assessed by

Grade Level (Florida Alternate Assessment Technical Report, 2010, p. 11).

(2) to provide data for making decisions regarding school accountability and

recognition;

 (3) to assess how well educational goals and curricular standards are met at the

school, district, and state levels;

(4) to provide information to aid in the evaluation and development of educational

programs and policies; and

(5) to provide information about the performance of Florida students compared

with that of other students across the United States. (Florida Alternate Assessment

Technical Report, 2010, p. 4)

Students receive a final score based on the level at which they answer questions

correctly: participatory, supported, or independent. Table 2.1 displays the scaffold

approach of the FAA. The student starts out on the participatory level, moves to the

supported level, and finally the independent level. Each item contains the three different

levels access points (independent, supported, and participatory). Students start out on the

participatory level of each item. If answered incorrectly, a distracter is removed. If

answered correctly at this point, then the student earns a 2. If the student answers

incorrectly again, then another distracter is removed. A correct answer at this point would

yield 1 point. If the student refuses to participate even after two distracters are removed,

the student earns a 0. If the student answers the participatory question correct on the first

try, then the student moves to the supported level. If the student answers incorrectly at

this level, the score for that item is 3. If the student correctly answers the question at the

supported level, then the student moves to the independent question. If answered

correctly, the student score for that item will be a 9 or an incorrect answer would yield a

score of 6. The possible score for each item would be 0, 1, 2, 3, 6, or 9. The maximum

raw score for each test is 144.

Table 2.1 Spring 2010 Florida Alternate Assessment: Scoring Rubric

	Participatory Level Scaffolding			Supported Level	Independent Level
0	3	2	1	6	9
No response, student actively refuses to engage at any point during the Participatory Level	Student responds correctly at the Participatory Level	Student responds correctly after the removal of one distracter at the Participatory Level	Student responds correctly after the removal of two distracters at the Participatory Level	Student responds correctly at Supported Level	Student responds correctly at Independent Level
	• Present student with prompt as written If student responds correctly	Remove the incorrect response indicated by the student, repeat the Participatory	Remove the incorrect response indicated by the student, repeat the Participatory	• Present student with prompt as written If student responds correctly	Present student with prompt as written • If student repsonds correctlyscore the student at 9

move to the Supported Level If student responds incorrectly move to the 2 point scaffolding.	Level prompt. If student responds correctly score the student at 2 points If student responds incorrectly move to the 1 point scaffolding	Level prompt and lead the student to the correct response If student responds correctly score the student at 1 point If the student does not respond score the student at 0 point	move to the Independent Level If student responds incorrectly score the student at 3 points.	points If student responds incorrectly score the student at 6 points.

(Florida Alternate Assessment Technical Report, 2010, p. 44).

Reports are generated at the state-level, district-level, student, and parent levels. The state-level report "contains the number of students assessed and percentages of students scoring at each performance level (i.e., Levels 1-9) for each district as well as the state's overall results by academic area" (Florida Alternate Assessment Technical Report, 2010, p. 53). District level reports contain the same information for each school in a given district, as well as district's overall results by academic area. School-level reports, "include the list of students assessed in a given school along with their performance level (i.e., Levels 1-9), and total score by academic area. The report also contains a summary of the school's overall results" (Florida Alternate Assessment Technical Report, 2010, p. 53). Furthermore, "student and parent reports include the student's basic demographic information (e.g., name, grade, school), total score, performance level (i.e., Levels 1-9), performance-level descriptors, and a bar graph depicting comparative reading and mathematics performance levels for the 2009 and 2010 administrations" (Florida Alternate Assessment Technical Report, 2010, p. 53). The

information disseminated from the reports could be used to drive instruction and

influence teachers' daily decision-making while providing present levels of performance

for IEPs. The next section discusses the research that examines teacher's perspectives on

the relationship between alternate assessments and daily instructional decision–making.

Teachers' Perspectives Toward Alternate Assessments

Research on teachers' perspectives is an emerging area since alternate

assessments are a relatively new educational approach (Roach et al., 2007). Teachers are

the most significant factor for student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2000) therefore, it is

important to gather teacher perspectives of alternate assessments and explore potential

implications of these perspectives on teaching and learning. The majority of the research

on teachers' perspectives is based on the Kentucky Alternate Portfolio, which is

considered one of the most established alternate assessment approaches (Roach et al.,

2007). In light of this, additional research should focus on how teachers from other states

perceive alternate assessments. This section discusses the body of knowledge of teachers'

perspectives with alternate assessments. Included in the review is research on the

perceived benefits of including students with significant cognitive disabilities into

accountability systems, amount of time required, and the disconnect between assessment

and classroom instruction.

Kleinert et al. (1999) examined teachers' perspectives of the benefits when

students with significant cognitive disabilities were included in state and school

accountability measures. The data revealed that 29.8% of teachers reported that they

strongly agreed with seeing benefits of including this population in accountability

systems. While 28% percent of the teachers strongly agreed that their students regularly participated in academic activities in general education classrooms.

Kampfer et al. (2001) investigated 206 special education teachers' perspectives of the amount of time and effort that was required to administer and complete Kentucky's Alternate Portfolio Program. The results indicated that teachers spent a significant number of hours completing one portfolio. The average amount of time was between 25-35 hours outside of regular instruction.

Flowers et al. (2005) examined 983 teachers from five different states, on their perspectives of alternate assessments. Fifty-three percent of the teachers reported that they agreed with having students with disabilities be included in state accountability systems. Only 25% of the teachers believed that students with significant cognitive disabilities were receiving an overall better-quality education because of alternate assessments. However, the results indicated that administering alternate assessments negatively competed with teaching time (82% participant agreement) and individual student needs (48% participant agreement).

Kim et al. (2006) examined special education teachers' experience with the development of Illinois Alternate Assessment (IAA) portfolios. The purposes of the study were to explore special education teachers' self-reported classroom practices and perspectives of the benefits of the IAA. The overall results indicated that 59% of the teachers perceived no benefits of their students' participation in the IAA system. Kim et. al (2006), reported teachers' perceived benefits were limited, with 70% of the respondents indicated that there were no benefits for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. However, the researchers indicated that 4% of the teacher

respondents believed their student had exposure to a broad range of academics, 13%

believed their students had more access to the general curriculum, 3% of the teachers

perceive their students being proud of their progress, and 2% believed their students

became a part of the Illinois assessment and accountability process.

Roach et al. (2007) investigated what factors influence teachers' perspectives

towards the Wisconsin Alternate Assessment (WAA). The purpose was to understand

how teachers incorporated and managed integrating the WAA into their day-to-day

practice. The results indicated that the results of the WAA were useful for making

instructional plans with a mean score of 2.59 (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly

agree). Moreover, the teachers reported that the WAA items aligned well with the general

curriculum content standards with a mean score of 3.76 (1 = strongly disagree to 5 =

strongly agree). However, the teachers reported some uncertainties about the amount of

time required to complete the alternate assessment with an overall mean of 2.59 (1 =

strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

Research has indicated that overall teachers realized the perceived benefits of

including students with the most significant cognitive disabilities in statewide

accountability systems (Flowers et al., 2005; Kampfer et al., 2001; Kleinert et al., 1999).

Research has highlighted teachers' concerns with the amount of time required to

complete alternate assessments (Flowers et al., 2005; Kampfer et al., 2001; Kleinert et al.,

1999; Roach et al., 2007). Since teachers are one of the most important stakeholders in

students' educational experience, it is imperative to study teachers' perspectives of

alternate assessments. Flowers et al. (2005) explained the quality of education for

students with significant cognitive disabilities will only increase if teachers realize how

their perspectives of alternate assessments impact their instructional decision- making

and overall educational experiences for their students.

In summary, the research on teachers' perspectives of alternate assessments has

highlighted several implications for educating students with significant cognitive

disabilities. These include:

- perceived benefits of including students with significant cognitive

  disabilities in statewide accountability systems (Flowers et al., 2005; Kim

  et al., 2006),

- tension between the amount of time required to complete alternate

  assessments when competing with instructional time and individual

  student needs (Flowers et al., 2005; Kampfer et al., 2001),

- relationship between alternate assessment and instructional planning

  (Roach et al., 2007), and the

- instructional implications on using performance-based assessments

  (Kleinert et al., 1999).

In order to extend the discussion of alternate assessment and teachers' perspectives, it is

valuable to discuss curriculum for students with significant cognitive disabilities in more

depth.

<div align="center">Curriculum for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities</div>

The curricular focus of content for students with significant cognitive disabilities

has changed over time (Browder, Wakeman, & Flowers, 2009). The research on teacher

perspectives has highlighted the dichotomous nature of two major curricular models:

functional versus academic content. Legislative initiatives, NCLB (2001) and IDEA

(1997; 2004) have prioritized academic standards over other curricular models (Browder et al., 2009). This discussion involves a focus upon functional life skills curriculum, academic content model, blended curricular approach, access to the general education curriculum, and standards-based IEPs.

Functional Life Skills Curriculum

The functional life skills curriculum model focused on skills that students need to function in real life in four domains: community, vocational, domestic, and recreational. The functional curriculum model relies on teaching students based on their chronological age instead of students' mental age (Spooner & Browder, 2006). The creation of the functional curriculum model "was adopted in the absence of any other approach to impart skills to students with severe disabilities in the mid-1970s" (Spooner & Browder, 2006, p. 6). Teachers based IEP goals of functional routines that students would encounter in future environments such as "checking out a book from the school library," or "packing equipment at a hospital job site" (Ford, Davern, & Schnorr, 2001, p. 214). Browder, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Pugalee, and Jimenez (2006) stated functional life skills dominated and influenced the curricular planning of that time, but had the unforeseen consequence of teachers developing specialized learning curriculum geared towards home and community, while denying this group of students the opportunities of the typical school experience.

Academic Content Model

The academic content model focuses on accessing the general education curriculum. The standards-based reform and accountability movements influenced this trend. The philosophical stance asserts that "students with significant cognitive

disabilities should have the opportunity to learn the general curriculum…schools can be held accountable for all students' progress on state standards" (Browder et al., 2003, p. 166). Students with significant cognitive disabilities need to have access to general education content in the areas of reading, math, science, and social studies (Browder et al., 2008).

Knight, Browder, Angello, and Lee (2010) stated that students with significant cognitive disabilities could learn academic skills, and that the past curricular focus was limited. The researchers asserted that academic concepts were limited in the scope and complexity for students with significant cognitive disabilities, in spite of the fact that educational opportunities were increasing. Browder, Wakeman, Spooner, Ahlgrim-Delzell, and Algozzine (2006) found that most of the studies in reading focused on sight word learning, with only a few that focused on comprehension. Phonics or phonemic awareness skills were also almost omitted from the literature base. In math, Browder, Spooner, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Harris, and Wakeman (2008) found that almost all the studies focused on numbers and operations or measurements, specifically money skills. Algebra, geometry, or data analysis were almost non-existent. Browder and Wakeman (2007) asserted that increasing educational opportunities could enhance access to educational, vocational, and recreational activities for students with significant cognitive disabilities.

A current movement within the field of significant cognitive disabilities is re-examining the functional curriculum (Browder et al., 2004). The focus on general education standards-based curricula due to legislative initiatives has prioritized this curricular approach over a functional approach (Ayers et al., 2011). Some professionals believe that students with significant cognitive disabilities need functional academic

skills to adequately prepare them for post-school living. "Functional academic skills include basic math concepts, such as number recognition, counting, and computations that can be applied to such skills as telling time, managing money, and performing measurements" (Collins, Kleinert, & Land, 2006, p. 201). Ayres et al. (2011) examined what students with significant cognitive disabilities lost when the curricular focus was mainly focused on the general education standards-based curriculum. The researchers did not argue that students with significant cognitive disabilities could not learn grade level standards. They were concerned that students were not increasing their independence in post-school environments, thus increasing quality of life. Knight et al. (2010) state that educational opportunities that enhance access to educational, vocational, and recreational activities have also increased for students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Blended Curricular Approach

A blended or additive curricular approach allows students with significant cognitive disabilities access to general education curriculum standards while blending functional life skills throughout the school day. Ryndak (2003) argued that a blended curricular approach enhances the student's "(1) independence in both the inclusive settings and adult life, and (2) participation in general education activities with peers" (Ryndak, 2003, p. 90). Spooner and Browder (2006) asserted that an additive approach allows teachers to focus on functional life skills, and academics and prepares students with significant cognitive disabilities for life after high school (Spooner & Browder, 2006).

Access to the General Education Curriculum

Access to the general education curriculum has now become an expectation due to federal mandates of NCLB (2001) and IDEA (1997; 2004) (Browder et al., 2005). The change in curricular focus has altered how teachers perceive and teach students with significant cognitive disabilities (Browder et al., 2009). Traditional curricular focus was based on a functional-life skills approach (Browder & Spooner, 2006). Now, emphasis is placed on ensuring students with significant cognitive disabilities have access to the general education curriculum (Browder et al., 2005). This section discusses issues related to students with significant cognitive disabilities accessing the general education curriculum, where this can happen, and ways in which access can be ensured.

The IDEIA reauthorization of 2004 mandated that students with significant cognitive disabilities participate in alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards. Furthermore, educational programs must ensure access to the general education curriculum by identifying supplementary aids and services (Lee, Soukup, Little, & Wehemeyer, 2009). Access to the general education curriculum can be achieved through the inclusion of students with significant cognitive disabilities' placement within a general education classroom or within different service delivery models, such as self-contained classrooms (Fisher & Fry, 2001). However, access to the general curriculum does not have to happen inside a general education classroom. A highly qualified special education teacher can instruct students in general education curriculum in any type of classroom, including a self-contained setting (Browder et al., 2007).

Agran et al. (2002) found that teachers question the relevance of accessing the academic content for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Flowers et al. (2005) revealed that 28% of teachers do not agree that alternate assessments promote access to

the grade-level academic standards. 48% of the teachers believed that alternate assessments compete with the individual needs of their students. Flowers et al. (2006) examined states' alternate assessments and their links to academic content. The results indicated that states that had strong connections to academic content also found it challenging to assess the full depth and breadth of the grade-level academic content.

Browder et al. (2007) presented four reasons why promoting access to grade-level academic content was compatible for educating students for adult living in inclusive communities. The first reason highlighted the purpose of school reform. School reform aims at increasing adult competence. The educational initiatives supporting standards-based reform seek to define high-quality outcomes for students. "State standards are intended to improve the 'activity of life'" (Browder et al., 2007, p. 3). The second reason looked at increasing teachers' expectations for what students with significant cognitive disabilities could accomplish. Students with significant cognitive disabilities could learn academic content that was linked to grade-level standards that, ultimately, was beneficial to their lives (Browder et al., 2006). The next reason discussed equal educational opportunity for students with significant cognitive disabilities. In the past, academic instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities was underemphasized (Browder et al., 2007). Research has shown that students with significant cognitive disabilities could learn components of reading (Browder et al., 2006) and math skills (Browder et al., 2008). Finally, Browder et al., (2007) stated the last reason for teaching academic content gave students increased means and opportunities for self-determination. "Increased academic skills, like picture selection or written words, and also gives students additional ways to make their preferences known" (Browder et al., 2007, p. 4).

Teachers can use specific strategies to assist in promoting access to the general education curriculum. Spooner, Dymond, Smith, and Kennedy (2006) presented four general approaches to promoting access to the general education curriculum: peer supports, self-determination, universal design for learning, and teaching and assessing content standards. Each approach has evidence to support its effectiveness (Agran, Wehemeyer, Cavin, & Palmer, 2010). Access to the general education curriculum for students with significant cognitive disabilities can mean inclusion within a general education classroom or within different service delivery models such as self-contained classrooms (Fisher & Fry, 2001). Research has shown that some teachers do not believe that alternate assessments promote access to the general education curriculum (Flowers et al., 2005). However, research has shown that students with significant cognitive disabilities could learn components of reading and math (Browder et al., 2006; Browder et al., 2007).

Standards-Based IEPs

Discussion on how the needs of students with significant cognitive disabilities can be met within the standards-based reform movement has increased (Lynch & Adams, 2008). NCLB (2001) and IDEA (2004) require that students with significant cognitive disabilities make progress towards general curriculum content standards. Many states have alternative achievement standards linked to the state's general curriculum standards. However, the framework of accessing the general education curriculum does not match up with the curricular trends in the past (i.e. functional-life skills, self-determination, social inclusion, etc.) (Agran et al., 2002). This section addresses how teachers can meet the required standards of access to the general curriculum while meeting the individual

needs of their students through the development and implementation of standards-based IEPs.

IEPs must contain goals and objectives that reflect the individual needs of students with significant cognitive disabilities (Karvonen & Huynh, 2007). IEPs also require goals that reflect general curriculum standards (Nolet & McLaughlin, 2005). Agran et al. (2002) stated that teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities do not believe that access to the general education curriculum was appropriate for their students. The teachers reported social skills and communication skills as the most important skills for accessing the general curriculum. Furthermore, the teachers stressed that their students had specific and intense learning needs that would impede their progress towards general education curriculum. Research has also indicated that teachers do not fully understand how the education of students with significant cognitive disabilities can be linked to state standards (Agran et al., 2002; Flowers, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Browder, & Spooner, 2005).

Lynch and Adams (2008) outlined how teachers could write standards-based IEPs while taking into consideration the individual and unique learning needs of students with significant cognitive disabilities. The first step was to present the student's present level of academic and functional performance. This included analyzing the critical functions of the state's curriculum standards simultaneously with the student's adaptive skills needs and symbolic level. The teacher analyzed the state standard to tease out the critical function of that standard. Then the teacher identified the standard and critical function that best suited that student's adaptive skill needs and levels of cognitive and symbolic functioning. The symbolic levels of functioning included students who work at the

presymbolic, early symbolic, or expanded symbolic levels (Browder et al., 2006). The next step was to identify the desired functional outcomes or long-range goals. Finally, the teacher develops benchmarks or behavioral objectives on the IEP. The inclusion of students' symbolic level aided in the development of appropriate goals targeted to their level of performance, while demonstrating progression towards general curriculum standards (Lynch & Adams, 2008).

The individual needs of students with significant cognitive disabilities can be met through the development and implementation of standards-based IEPs as well as meeting the required standards of accessing the general education curriculum (Lynch & Adams, 2008). A crucial factor in meeting individual and academic needs of students with significant cognitive disabilities is the quality of instruction. The next section explores the discourse of instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities.

<div align="center">Instruction for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities</div>

Students with significant cognitive disabilities have differing instructional needs than their typically developing peers (Spooner & Browder, 2006). Therefore, instruction needs to meet the individual needs of each student. Good instructional practices allow for "multiple opportunities for all students to participate in meaningful ways" (Davern, Schnorr, & Black, 2003, p. 341). Aligning instruction to assessment is important (Wakeman, Browder, Jimenez, & Mims, 2010). The discussion of instruction encompasses an exploration of the underlying assumptions associated with instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities, discussion on how to deliver instructional programs, and data-driven instructional decision-making.

Assumptions Associated with Instruction

There are necessary components in order for students with significant cognitive disabilities to learn and use their knowledge in multiple settings, including school, community, and within their family dynamics (Taylor et al., 2005). These components include instruction that builds upon individual learning characteristics of the students. Taylor et al. (2005) emphasized that teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities need to align their instruction with the individual student needs in mind. This included instruction that is organized and structured, which is imperative for students to maintain and generalize acquired knowledge across various settings; and instruction that has an emphasis on meeting the needs of families.

Taylor et al. (2005) laid out three assumptions that guided teachers' delivery of instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities:

1) Students with intellectual disabilities share similar patterns of schooling with most students who do not have disabilities.

2) Most students with intellectual disabilities require explicit instruction if they are to master the knowledge and skills needed for the future.

3) Students with intellectual disabilities will make remarkable learning gains when provided with powerful instruction. (p. 283)

Before P.L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Students Act of 1975, students with significant cognitive disabilities were deemed 'uneducable.' Students with significant cognitive disabilities had little hope of becoming part of a school community. The assumptions that guide instructional practices have changed dramatically. Since the passing of P.L. 94-142, Taylor et al. (2005) highlighted how teachers now pay more attention to the pedagogical strategies contribute to effective instruction for students with

significant cognitive disabilities, including the instruction of academic skills. This analysis includes how teachers deliver instruction in a data driven way.

Data-Driven Instructional Decision Making

Federal, state, and local accountability policies are aimed at increasing and improving student achievement. Teachers are urged to use data from assessments to evaluate their practices and monitor their students' academic progress (Karvonen, Flowers, Browder, Wakeman, & Algozzine, 2006). Using student achievement data to make instructional decisions is intended to raise student achievement. Karvonen et al. (2006) reported that teachers collected data on student performance to monitor progress and adjusted instruction accordingly. The study also indicated that teachers used student data reports to summarize progress and plan for upcoming quarters.

According to Hamilton, Haverson, Jackson, Mandinach, Supovitz, and Wayman (2009) data could provide educators the tools to improve student data by:

> prioritizing instructional time, targeting additional individual instruction for students who are struggling with particular topics, more easily identifying individual students' strengths and instructional intervention that can help students continue to progress, gauging the instructional effectiveness of classroom lessons, refining instructional methods, and examining school-wide data to consider whether and how to adapt the curriculum based on information about students' strengths and weaknesses. (p. 5)

This section presents specific recommendations on how to utilize student data for instructional-decision making for students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Recommendations for Data-Driven Instructional Decision Making

The National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Science published a report on using student achievement data to support instructional decision making in 2009. The guide outlined five recommendations to create a framework for effectively using student data to make instructional decisions. The first two recommendations were aimed at classroom-level decision making. The recommendations were as follows:

(1) Make data part of an ongoing cycle of instructional improvement

(2) Teach students to examine their own data and set learning goals

(3) Establish a clear vision for school-wide data use

(4) Provide supports that foster a data-drive culture within the school

(5) Develop and maintain a district-wide data system. (Hamilton et al., 2009, p. 8)

Recommendation one suggested that data could be used as part of a cycle of instructional inquiry aimed at ongoing instructional improvement. Recommendation one was further described as: "(A) collect and prepare a variety of data about student learning, (b) interpret data and develop hypotheses about how to improve student learning, and (c) modify instruction to test hypotheses and increase student learning" (Hamilton, Haverson et al., 2009, p. 9). Recommendation two stated teachers needed to understand the factors that motivated student performance in order to adjust their instruction. This included providing feedback to students that is timely, specific and constructive, providing tools that help students learn from feedback, and using students' data to guide instructional changes (Hamilton et al., 2009).

It is extremely important for teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities to acquire effective practices in student data collection and implementation of

data-driven instructional decisions (Jimenez, Mims, & Browder, 2012). Some models of data collection are based on "principles of applied behavior analysis such as task analysis, frequency counts, and discrete trial data" (Jimenez, et al., 2012, p. 408). Jimenez et al. (2012) discussed how 31 teachers of students with severe intellectual and developmental disabilities from five states acquired a set of data-based decisions implementation guidelines through an on-line training session. The training presented four steps to making informed data based decisions. These steps were:

1. Collect data at three times per week,

2. analyze data every two weeks,

3. graph the data and plot an aim line on a graph, and

4. identify the trend of the data (i.e., mastery, no progress, slow progress, inconsistent, or steady progress. (Jimenez et al., 2012, p. 410)

After the training, the teachers were able to identify more data patterns and make more data-based decisions (pretest: $M = 4.5$, $SD = 2.2$; posttest: $M = 9$, $SD = 1.7$). In order to improve students with significant cognitive disabilities' progress towards acquiring academic skills, data-based instructional decision making is critical (Jimenez et al., 2012). We have explored assessment, curriculum, and instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities. The next section presents the connection between assessment, curriculum, and instruction.

Connection Between Assessment, Curriculum, and Instruction

The purpose of assessments is to show what students know and can do (Commission on Instructionally Supportive Assessment, 2001; Kleinert & Thurlow, 2001). Assessments have the potential to enhance instruction and learning for all students

(Pellegrino et al., 2001). Therefore, examining the philosophical assumptions about assessments could lead to a better understanding of the connection between assessment, curriculum, and instruction. This section presents the philosophical assumptions surrounding assessments, a model of cognition for students with significant cognitive disabilities and its implications for assessment, and research on the connection between assessment, curriculum, and instruction.

Assumptions About Assessments

Pellegrino et al. (2001) outlined three major sets of scientific principles and assumptions regarding assessments.

> First, every assessment is grounded in a conception or theory about how people learn, what they know, and how knowledge and understanding progress over time. Second, each assessment embodies certain assumptions about which kinds of observations, or tasks, are more likely to elicit demonstrations of important knowledge and skills from students. Third, every assessment is premised on certain assumptions about how best to interpret the evidence from the observations to draw meaningful inferences about what students know and can do. (Pellegrino et al., 2001, p. 20)

This formed an assessment triangle that represented the three key elements underlying any assessment. This included a model of student *cognition*, kinds of *observations* that provided evidence of students' competencies, and *interpretation* of results for making sense of the evidence. To be an effective assessment, each of the three elements must work in synchrony (Pellegrino et al., 2001). Pellegrino et al. (2001) asserted that each element must be articulated and aligned for the assessment to have integrity.

Model of Cognition for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

The history of assessment, curriculum, and instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities has its basis in behavioral analysis (Kleinert, Browder, & Towles-Reeves, 2009). The educational progress of this group of students relied on the teaching of measurable and observable behaviors in order to increase independence (Kleinert et al., 2009). Models of cognition were ignored mainly due to the promotion of a deficit model rather than a capacity-building model; "not relying on a cognitive framework for building assessments makes it difficult to develop an understanding of how students with significant cognitive disabilities actively construct knowledge and apply mental models and processes to the problems they encounter" (Kleinert et al., 2009, p. 306). Kleinert et al. (2009) applied the essential components of cognition as outlined by Pellegrino et al. (2001) to students with significant cognitive disabilities in order to construct a cognitive framework. These included consideration towards: working or short-term memory, long-term memory, metacognition skills, development and learning concepts, practice and feedback opportunities, transferring of knowledge, the role of social context, methods of observation and inference (Kleinert et al., 2009).

Taking the essential components of cognition as outlined by Pellegrino et al. (2001) into consideration, Kleinert et al. (2009) provided guidelines in instructional and assessment practices for students with significant cognitive disabilities. The guidelines included:

1. Some alternate assessment tasks should be familiar.

2. Some alternate assessment tasks should be novel and challenging.

3. Some alternate assessment tasks should be developed to understand how students think about the task.

4. Some alternate assessment tasks should be developed to determine how students respond with social and other supports.

5. Alternate assessment tasks need to be designed so that students at a presymbolic level of communication have the opportunity to nevertheless demonstrate meaningful growth. (pgs. 319-320)

Research on Connection Between Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessments

Turner, Baldwin, Kleinert, and Farmer Kearns (2000) investigated the correlation between overall program quality and IEP quality with alternate assessment scores. The data found that students' alternate assessment program scores had a significant correlation with overall program quality with a correlation score of .50 ($p < .001$). However, there was not a significant correlation between alternate assessment scores and IEP quality with a correlation score of -.09 ($p < .001$).

Towles-Reeves and Kleinert (2006) investigated the impact on one state's alternate assessment upon daily instruction and IEP development for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. The results indicated that teachers believed that the alternate assessment had more impact on the daily instruction (44.4% of teachers) that occurred in the classroom than on IEP development (34.5% of teachers). The teachers who reported that the alternate assessment had no impact on their instruction believed that they already teach the requirements of the assessment. Furthermore, the teachers reported that they spent an immense amount of time developing, preparing, and administering the alternate assessment. However, there was not a significant relationship

between amount of time preparing and assembling the alternate assessment and degree of positive influence of the alternate assessment on instruction.

Karvonen and Hunyh (2007) compared one state's alignment of standards with the curricular expectations outlined for students with significant cognitive disabilities' IEPs, along with considering what effect this had on students' alternate assessment scores. The state adopted a performance-based alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards that measured reading comprehension and number systems. The data revealed that half of the IEPs did not have any objectives aligned with reading comprehension, and more than one third did not contain objectives aligned with number systems. All in all, the research on the connection between instruction and assessment for students with significant cognitive disabilities is growing. Research has indicated the there are positive effects on alternate assessments impacting daily instruction.

Summary

This chapter has discussed the emerging research relating to including students with significant cognitive disabilities in standards based alternate assessments. Specifically, the chapter has explored issues related to standards-based reform, alternate assessments, the Florida Alternate Assessment, teachers' perspectives toward alternate assessments, curriculum for students with significant cognitive disabilities, instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities, and the link between assessment, curriculum, and instruction.

The standards-based and accountability movements are aimed at measuring progress towards high content standards (Nolet & McLaughlin, 2005). Alternate assessments are for those students who are unable to take in large-scale assessments even

with accommodations and modifications. Alternate assessments for students with significant cognitive disabilities were first introduced in 1997 (IDEA, 1997). Before this time, students with significant cognitive disabilities were left out of large-scale accountability systems. NCLB (2001) mandated alternate assessments to focus on assessing student progress on academic curriculum content standards. In context of this, every state is responsible for the creation and implementation of alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards (Hager & Slocum, 2005). This chapter has shown that this leads to variability in the translation of policy to practice. States utilized three major alternate assessment approaches: checklists, portfolios, and performance events (Thompson & Thurlow, 2003). Florida has implemented a performance-based alternate assessment. The FAA is aimed at providing students, parents, and educators information on student progress towards learning the skills and knowledge towards the SSS Access Points. Results of the FAA can assist educators improving instructional decision-making, developing and writing IEP foals, and informing instruction (Florida Alternate Assessment Technical Report, 2010).

The inclusion of students with significant cognitive disabilities into accountability systems has impacted how this group of students are perceived and instructed (Ayres et al., 2011). Alternate assessments have led to a major curricular shift toward access to the general education curriculum (Browder & Spooner, 2006). This chapter has discussed the shift from a functional life skills approach to one more concentration on academic skills, which has been well documented and debated (Kleinert et al., 2010). This change in curricular focus leads to the encouragement of higher expectations for student learning (Browder et al., 2004). Accountability policies and practices are aimed at increasing and

improving student achievement through data driven instructional decision-making

(Hamilton et al., 2009). Teachers are urged to use student achievement data to make

instructional decisions that are intended to raise student achievement (Hamilton et al.,

2009; Jimenez, 2012).

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of six teachers serving students with significant cognitive disabilities on the instructional impact of the FAA. This chapter contains a description of my theoretical perspective of the methods, research design, descriptions of participants and settings, data collection, and an analysis that included the ethics of the study.

It was important that I selected a research design that aligned with my beliefs about teaching while identifying and accepting my dual roles of practitioner and researcher. To me, teaching is about building bridges and relationships with students and colleagues in order to produce productive citizens that become contributing members of society. This view can be seen in Ayers (2001). "Teaching is often bridge-building; beginning on one shore with the knowledge, experience, know-how, and interests of the student, the teacher moves toward broader horizons and deeper ways of knowing" (p. 64).

Theoretical Perspective

A qualitative, interpretivist framework offered me an opportunity to explore how teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities perceived how the FAA has impacted their practice. Litchman (2013) described interpretivism as "a doctrine that emphasizes analyzing meanings people confer on their own action" (p. 24). Hammersley (2013) continued, stating that interpretivism "requires a researcher to adopt an exploratory orientation and in particular, to learn to understand the distinctive

perspectives of the people involved and perhaps also to observe how their patterns of action unfold in particular contexts" (p. 29). I was interested in understanding how the teachers experienced and interacted with their social world and the meaning it had for them (Merriam, 2002).

An interpretivist design was necessary to align with the study's goals of understanding how teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities make meaning of a situation or phenomenon. This was specifically true when considering the impact of the FAA (Litchman, 2013). The research design allowed me to engage in conversations with teachers who had practical experience implementing the FAA, and how the alternate assessment process has impacted their daily decision-making. Through interviews, I was afforded insights into the teachers' beliefs and perspectives about the FAA. If teachers' practices and experiences are influenced by their beliefs and prior assumptions, then exploring these beliefs can assist in illuminating the classroom implications of the FAA (Fang, 1996). A qualitative, interpretivist approach allowed me to explore how the teachers made meaning from their experiences with the FAA, and how the FAA impacted their practice. These experiences were seen to often impact the creation and development of Individual Education Plans (IEPs). This supported the work of Towles-Reeves & Kleinert (2006), who urged researchers to "better understand what exactly about the alternate assessment positively influences instruction and/or IEP development" (p. 37).

The role of a researcher in a qualitative study is of vital importance. "Qualitative research is a way of knowing that assumes that the researcher gathers, organizes, and interprets, information with his or her own eyes and ears as a filter" (Litchman, 2000, p.

7). Research methods can be portrayed as a highly technical process with daunting usage of language (Jones, Whitehurst, & Hawley, 2012). Jones et al. (2012) asserted that it is critical and beneficial for practitioners conducting research "to view themselves as capable inquirers into their own practice" (p. 4). I appreciated and accepted that my experiences learning with and teaching students with significant cognitive disabilities would affect the research. According to Litchman (2010),

> The researcher plays a pivotal role in the qualitative research process. Data are collected, information is gathered, settings are viewed, and realities are constructed through his or her eyes and ears. Further, the qualitative researcher is responsible for analyzing the data through an iterative process that moves back and forth between data collected and analyzed. (p. 16)

I served as the filter for the meaning and, through an interpretivist lens, embraced this research as being value-centered rather than value-free (Paul, Gaffam, & Fowler, 2005). I accepted that I was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2002). Therefore, it was important at the outset of this study to embrace the fact that as a practitioner researcher I "can never completely separate what is being described from the describer" (Bochner, 2005, p. 65).

I had been teaching students with significant cognitive disabilities in a self-contained, middle school classroom for nine years. During this time span, I had many experiences that have influenced my overall views about the learning, teaching, and assessment of this group of students. From my experience within the classroom and from immersing myself in the literature of best practices, I believe that the curriculum for students with significant cognitive disabilities should be mixed between teaching

academic skills and functional life skills. I give my students opportunities to explore pre-vocational skills, and access to academic content.

I administered the FAA to my students for the past four years. As a result of the implementation of the FAA, I altered my daily instructional decision-making and instructional approaches to assist in preparing my students to take this assessment. However, I did not agree with most of the test items that the students encountered on the FAA. This was mainly due to the rigid academic standards that were assessed. Even though I did not agree with the content in the FAA, I understood that it was my obligation as a teacher to prepare my students to take this assessment and to develop greater understandings of the process.

It was important to be aware of the experiences that I brought to this study, since I had a major influence on the research process. All the data collection and analysis were filtered through my values, beliefs, and perspectives. "The researcher thus brings a construction of reality to the research situation, which interacts with other people's constructions or interpretations of the phenomenon being studied" (Merriam, 1998, p. 23). Therefore it was imperative that I was open to all kinds of responses that I encountered during the study. I had to acknowledge my experiences and become as Merriam (1998) states, a "good communicator" (p. 23). "A good communicator empathizes with respondents, establishes rapport, asks good questions, and listens intently" (Merriam, 1998, p. 23). My role as the researcher was to listen to the participants and use the data to tell their story. I had to always be aware that I, as a researcher, was the conduit through which all the information flowed. The data collected and analyzed were shaped by my senses, but more importantly, I was shaped by the

research itself (Litchman, 2013). I explored and embraced my experiences through a research journal. I also used a research journal to engage in critical self-reflection of my involvement within this research study and explore my role as a researcher.

Research on teacher perspectives of their experiences, and perspectives of the impact of alternate assessments, is scant and limited (Roach et al., 2007). From conducting a literature review and drawing from my own experiences as a practitioner and researcher, the following research questions emerged.

Research Questions

1. How has the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) impacted teachers' perspectives of daily instructional decision making for students with significant cognitive disabilities?

2. How do teachers perceive that the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) has impacted the curriculum and instruction of students with significant cognitive disabilities?

3. What is the nature of teachers' views about how the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) has influenced how they develop and write IEP goals?

4. What is the nature of teachers' views about the value of the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) on their perspectives of accessing general education curriculum standards for their students with significant cognitive disabilities?

Research Design

The research design involved collecting data from six classroom teachers to obtain their perspectives of the impact that the FAA has had on classroom instruction, data based decision making, standards-based IEPs, and accessing general curriculum.

Data were collected through interviews, a research journal, and gathered IEP artifacts. This is illustrated in Figure 3.1. The use of the three data sources was necessary to develop a comprehensive and holistic understanding of the teachers' perspectives. Each of the data sources was combined and interwoven to gain a deeper understanding of teachers' perspectives within their particular professional context.
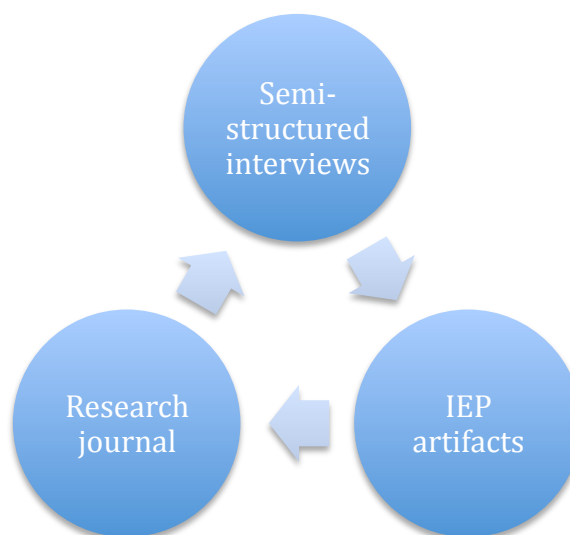
FIGURE 3.1: Data sources

Participants

A purposeful sample was used to identify participants for this study. The goal of the study was to explore teacher perspectives on the FAA and its instructional implications. Therefore, it was imperative to choose teachers who had experience administering the FAA and who could provide rich information on their experiences and the instructional implications of the FAA. Six special education teachers who teach in self-contained special education classrooms serving students with significant cognitive disabilities participated. A purposeful sample allowed the researcher to identify teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities who administered the FAA. Purposeful

sampling is "the process of selecting cases that are likely to be information-rich" (Gall et al., 2007, p. 605).

The teachers were recruited from a large southeastern public school district. They taught in different schools throughout the district and had administered the FAA during the 2010-11 school year. An email invitation was sent to 266 teachers of students with intellectual disabilities across the district. The invitation included a brief description of the study, and nine teachers responded to the initial email. Out of the nine teachers, six of them met the criteria for participation I had developed. These criteria ensured a wide range of teachers with various experiences that included:

- Teachers who had recent experience administering the FAA.

- Teachers who currently teach students with significant cognitive disabilities.

- Teachers who have some graduate level course experience.

- Teachers who represented each level of school (elementary, middle, high) at a general education setting.

- Teachers who represented each level of school (elementary, middle, high) at one of the exceptional centers.

Table 3.1 illustrates the educational background and teaching experiences of the participants. Of the six teachers, three had Master's Degrees. The range of the overall teaching experience was three to twenty years; three had six to eight years of teaching experience. All the teachers held the required state teaching certifications, which meant they were highly qualified underneath NCLB requirements and had attained additional endorsements to serve students with intellectual disabilities. These included elementary

education K-6, library media science, ESOL, middle grades integrated curriculum, ASD, health, and physical education.

TABLE 3.1: Demographics of Participants

Characteristics	Number of Teachers
Female	5
Male	1
Bachelor	3
Master	3
Certifications Held	
1-3	3
4+	3
ASD Endorsement	1
Years Teaching Students with Intellectual Disabilities	
0-7	3
8+	3

The different levels of schools (elementary, middle, high) were necessary for me to explore the different responses from the teachers who have experience with the continuum of services offered for this group of students. I was interested in how the curricula foci might be varied within the different levels of schools, thus impacting the teacher responses and beliefs. Furthermore, the different settings (general education and exceptional centers) were necessary for me to examine whether the teachers' current classroom contexts might have influenced their beliefs.

The district was the third largest in the state of Florida, with $194,737$ students at 254 schools and a student with disabilities population of 15%. The district had two exceptional education schools that served 429 students with significant cognitive disabilities. This amounted to 0.02% of the total student population within the district. Students enrolled in these two schools were identified as requiring a special day program necessitated by their significant behavioral challenges, delays in intellectual

development, or medical needs requiring continuous intervention. There were 30 self-contained classrooms located on mainstream campuses spread throughout the elementary, middle and high school phases.

<div align="center">Ethics and Informed Consent</div>

At the outset of this study all the USF IRB processes were completed. The teachers were assured that their participation was voluntary and all identifying information remained confidential and anonymous. Ethical practices were centered on the following question: "will any physical or psychological harm come to anyone as a result of my research?" (Fraenkal & Wallen, 2006, p. 54). This study followed Fraenkal and Wallen's (2006) three important principles that researchers should address surrounding ethical practices: "the protection of participants from harm, the ensuring of confidentiality of research data, and the question of deception of subjects" (pp. 55-56). The first step was protecting participants from harm. The teachers signed informed consent forms that outlined potential risks involved in the study. The second principle was ensuring confidentiality of research data. The teachers were not required to give their names. Each teacher received an I.D. number, which ensured confidentiality of responses. The last principle was the question of deception. This study did not entail deceptive tactics.

Informed consent consisted of the teachers understanding their role within the research. Furthermore, informed consent ensured that their responses would be respected in a confidential and anonymous way (Orcher, 2005). It is the researcher's responsibility "to do the best you can to provide complete information" about the study's purpose, about how they can choose whether or not to be involved in the study, and that the study

may diverge in a direction that may become uncomfortable for them to continue in the study" (Litchman, 2013, p. 53). From an ethical standpoint it was crucial to ensure: "participant confidentiality, considering the consequences that participation in the study might have" (Yeager-Woodhouse & Sivell, 2006, p. 192). This study engaged teachers in a discussion of critical and sometimes controversial topics; these included students with significant cognitive disabilities' place within the large-scale accountability and standards-based reform movement, as well as teacher perspectives on this topic.

Approval from three levels was needed to perform this study: USF institutional review board, the individual school district, and informed consent from the teachers participating in the study. Prior to the implementation of this study, an Application for Human Subject Research Review was sent to the University of South Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval. After approval from the IRB, consent to conduct research was obtained from the school district. Once the district approved the study, an email was sent to teachers who have been pre-identified during the selection process who have administered the FAA during the 2010-11 school year. The email asked for the teacher to participate in two separate interviews. The email gave detailed information on the nature of the study, time expected to complete the study, and reassurance that no one is obligated to participate or complete the study. The teachers verbally agreed during the first interview to give individual informed consent and signed the informed consent form. Confidentiality was not invaded during this process. Teacher names were not used to identify participants. Each participant received an I.D. number for coding and analysis purposes.

Data Collection

Three primary sources of data were used in this study: interviews from each of the six teachers, the researcher journal, and IEP artifacts. The three types of data collection allowed me an opportunity to use multiple sources of evidence to develop "converging lines of inquiry" (Yin, 2003, p. 90). Each of the data sources converged to give a deeper understanding of teachers' perspectives.

Interviews

The use of interviews in the data collection process aligned with the interpretivist approach of this study by helping me understand experiences in which I did not participate (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The purpose of the interviews was to gather the teachers' perspectives, hear about their experiences and explore the meaning of their responses (Litchman, 2013). The interviews allowed me to build a deeper understanding about how the teachers perceived their classroom practices had been altered by the implementation of the FAA.

The interviews were a mix of structured, predetermined questions that allowed me to "set up a situation in which the individual being interviewed will reveal to you his or her feelings, intentions, meanings, sub contexts, or thoughts on a topic, situation, or idea" (Litchman, 2013, p. 190). This allowed me to have predetermined questions and ask additional probing questions that emerged from the participant responses. Probing questions were used when I felt that the topic required additional exploration.

This study involved two interviews with each of the six teachers. All interviews were face-to-face, individual interviews that were recorded with a digital tape recorder and then transcribed. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes to one hour. The

interviews took place at a pre-determined location suggested by the teacher participant that included the local bookstore, coffee shop, or public library. I helped establish rapport with each teacher, by introducing and providing some background information on myself, and then asked icebreaker questions before proceeding with the interview questions (ex. How is your school year going, why did you agree to participate, etc).

The initial interview consisted of nine pre-determined questions (see Appendix A). Question one had the teachers describe how they got into teaching, including the schools and teaching assignments they have held and demographic information (years teaching, highest level of schooling, certifications, experience with administering alternate assessments). Questions two through eight were constructed from a synthesis of literature on teachers' perspectives on classroom practices related to the alternate assessment (Kim et al., 2006), how alternate assessments positively influenced classroom instruction and IEP development (Towles-Reeves, & Kleinert, 2006), perspectives of teachers on alternate assessments (Kim et al., 2006), and research on how teachers use data from alternate assessments to improve classroom practices (Thompson et al., 2001). Question nine asked the teachers if they had any other comments on alternate assessments, curriculum and instruction, or accessing the general education curriculum for their students.

Piloting the First Interview Questions

It was important to have someone examine the questions and provide feedback as to the appropriateness to the study's goals. A teacher with experience in administering the FAA reviewed the first interview questions. We then engaged in a conversation about the

clarity and purpose of the questions. After the discussion, we concluded that the interview questions correlated and aligned with the study's goals.

I then conducted a pilot interview to test the clarity and flow of the questions. The pilot interview consisted of a teacher who was not part of the study group, but who also fit the criteria for participant selection. The pilot interview focused upon clarity of the questions, length of the interview, and whether the interview questions aligned with the overall research goals. The teacher was asked to make suggestions to improve the overall interview process. The outcome of the pilot interview was confirmatory and no major changes were needed. The pilot interview also allowed me the opportunity to practice my interviewing skills and write in my research journal while conducting the interview.

Second Interview

The second interview was an informal, conversational interview. This allowed me to present questions tailored to the individual participant and gather further insights into issues that were raised during the first interview session, specifically how they have translated FAA policy into practice (see Appendices C-H). I also presented the transcripts generated from the first interview session to elicit further conversations from each teacher. The teachers had the opportunity to review their responses, and to correct or clarify any of their stated ideas or statements from the first interview, as part of the member checking process. Member checking consisted of "having the research participants review statements in the report for accuracy and completeness" (Gall et al., 2007, p. 475).

Research Journal

A research journal was kept during the data collection process. Included in the research journal were field-notes taken during all the interviews, and included reflective thoughts and detailed moments of awareness that occurred during the interview or analysis of comments. Detailed moments of awareness included nonverbal communication. Nonverbal communication included facial expressions or gestures, and noting silences that added "meaning to the exchange" (Merriam, 1998, p. 98). Furthermore, the field-notes offered an opportunity to document " key words in people's remarks that will stand out later" (Merriam, 1998, p. 105). This allowed me, during the analysis phase, to "mentally play back remarks and scenes during breaks in the talking" (Merriam, 1998, p. 105).

Furthermore, the research journal included an on-going reflective journal that allowed me to be transparent about my position. This was accomplished by engaging in a critical reflection on the processes of this research and my role as a practitioner researcher. The use of this journal was necessary for me to engage in self-reflection (Meloy, 1994). Litchman (2010) summed this up by having us ask ourselves: "In what ways are the researcher, the participants, and the setting shaping each other?" (p. 121). Furthermore, Meloy (1994) explained that since qualitative research requires personal rather than detached engagement in the context, "it requires multiple, simultaneous actions and reactions from the human being who is the research instrument" (p. 68).

I wrote in the research journal before I collected data, and explored my prior experiences about the teaching, learning, and assessment of students with significant cognitive disabilities. One example of my attempt to be transparent and embrace my

position was my exploration of the following question: am I capable of conducting research while I am still in the classroom? I also wrote in the research journal during the collection of the data and during the analysis phase. For example, I wrote how I believed that some of the teachers viewed me as a teacher instead of a practitioner researcher and if this would alter their responses to the questions presented. Also, I explored how it would be very difficult for me to not interject while conducting interviews, because I was not their professor or teacher and my role was to listen and let the data tell the story. More samples from my research journal are included within the findings chapter.

IEP Artifacts

Artifacts "serve to enrich a study and often provide information not available from interview or observational data" (Given, 2008, p. 25). Merriam (1997) reported that artifacts are a good source of data for the following reasons: they contain information that is easily accessible, are considered stable data, can ground the study in the context of the problem being studied, and can "furnish descriptive information, verify emerging hypothesis, advance new categories change and development" (p. 126).

In addition to the personal interviews and the research journal, I asked each teacher for three IEPs, for a total of 18 IEPs. I received USF IRB and district approval to obtain student IEPs. The IEPs were from the 2011-12 school year and became another form of data. The IEPs allowed me to explore the nature of the curricular focus and the influence of the FAA. To protect the student identity as well as the district, the teacher redacted all the names and student identification numbers associated with the IEP before I received them. The IEPs were analyzed to see the extent the IEP related to the standards-based reform movement, and see the development of the FAA in writing IEPs

through the use of an IEP checklist. I created the IEP checklist based on pertinent

components of IEP development as highlighted in the literature (Lynch & Adams, 2008;

Walsh, 2001) (See Appendix B for IEP analysis checklist). Table 3.2 demonstrates a

breakdown of how the interview questions and IEP artifacts corresponded to each

research question, and illustrates how data collection and research questions were

aligned.

TABLE 3.2: Correspondence of Research Questions to Interview Questions and Artifacts

Research Questions	Interview Questions	Artifacts
1. How has the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) impacted teachers' perspectives on daily instructional decision making for students with significant cognitive disabilities?	4. Explain the process you used to prepare your students to take the FA. 5. In what ways has your daily instruction changed (or not changed) as a result of the implementation of the FAA? 8. What issues have you seen emerge as a result of administering the FAA? What issues have you seen emerge as a result of your students participating in the FAA?	
2. How do teachers perceive that the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) has impacted the curriculum and instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities?	7. Before the FAA, what influenced your curricular focus? In what ways has the implementation of the FAA influenced and impacted your curricular focus for teaching students with significant cognitive disabilities, specifically the dichotomy between academic and life-skills? 8. What issues have you seen emerge as a result of administering the FAA? What issues have you seen emerge as a result of your students participating in the FAA?	18 IEPs
3. What is the nature of teachers' views about how the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) has influenced how they develop and write IEP goals?	6. Tell me how you write and develop IEP's. Explain how the FAA has influenced the writing and development of your students' IEPs. 8. What issues have you seen emerge as a result of administering the FAA? What issues have you seen emerge as a result of your students participating in the FAA?	18 IEPs
4. What is the nature of teachers' views about the value of the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) on their perspectives of accessing general education curriculum standards for their students with significant cognitive disabilities?	2. What is your understanding of the No Child Left Behind Act and the Florida accountability system as they relate to students in your class? 3. What does access to the general education curriculum mean to you and your students? 8. What issues have you seen emerge as a result of administering the FAA? What issues have you seen emerge as a result of your students participating in the FAA?	18 IEPs

Trustworthiness

Guba (in Shenton, 2004) proposed four criteria that should be considered in pursuit of a trustworthy study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. According to Merriam (1998) credibility can be defined as how congruent are the findings with reality. According to Johnson and Turner (2003), research validity is based on the following question: "Do experts (e.g. academics, practitioners, or anyone else who carefully examine a research report) consider the research to be well done and worthy of readers' attention?" (p. 300). In other words, how true are the inferences generated from the study?

Strategies that were utilized to promote the credibility of this study included stating my experiences as it related to the overall contribution of the study. This was necessary to increase the transparency of the study. In the research journal, I attempted to state my experiences and thoughts through every stage of the research process in order to be more transparent. I needed to recognize and accept that my role as a researcher shaped the research, and in turn, my role was also shaped by the research. "As a dynamic force, the researcher constantly adapts and modifies a position with regard to the research topic, the manner in which questions are formulated, and the interpretations given to the data" (Litchman, 2009, p. 164). During the data collection phrase, the study incorporated the use of three data sources. These included the use of interviews, IEP artifacts, and my research journal. In addition, the study utilized member checking through the second interview. Member checking consisted of "having the research participants review statements in the report for accuracy and completeness" (Gall et al., 2007, p. 475).

Transferability refers to the extent in which the study's findings can be applied to other situations (Shenton, 2004). The use of thick description of the concepts under investigation was provided to "allow readers to have a proper understanding of it, thereby enabling them to compare the instances of the phenomenon described in the research report with those that they have seen emerge in their situation" (Shenton, 2004, p. 70).

Results are dependable only "to the extent to which results are consistent" (Orcher, 2005, p. 54) and the "extent to which other researchers could arrive at similar results if they studied the same case using exactly the same procedures as the first researcher" (Gall, et al., 2007, p. 651). Reliability in qualitative research refers to "whether the results are consistent with the data collected" (Merriam, 1998, p. 206). The processes within the study were reported in detail, thereby allowing a future researcher interested in exploring teachers' perspectives to repeat the work.

Finally, conformability refers "to the extent the researcher admits his or her own predispositions" (Shenton, 2004, p. 72). In the investigator's position, I explained the basis for selecting the teachers and the social context from which the data is collected (Merriam, 1998). A research journal was kept that included the prior statements, as well as critical self-reflection on how I made sense of the research process.

Data Analysis

The goal of choosing a data analysis within an interpretivist framework was for depth of understanding (Merriam, 2002). The data was inductively analyzed to arrive at common themes cut throughout the data set, which included the interviews, IEP analysis, and research journal (Litchman, 2009). The analysis of the data set consisted of two phases.

First Phase of Data Analysis

The first phase of the data analysis consisted of five steps.

1. Phase one consisted of unpacking and transcribing all the interviews.

2. The next step was to group the responses by interview question in a single document. Each response had the teacher's ID number so I could attribute the responses to the correct teacher. Within this step, the text was broken into meaningful segments within the database. Segments are defined as "a section of the text that contains one item of information and that is comprehensible even if read outside the context in which it is embedded" (Gall et al., 2007, p. 466).

3. The third step was to further explore the data. After the initial reading through of all the data in the groups that were established, a general understanding and a qualitative codebook were formed. The qualitative codebook included the development of categories. Gall et al. (2007) defined categories as "a construct that refers to a certain type of phenomenon mentioned in the database" (p. 467). The developed categories sought to explain and describe the studied phenomenon and were considered theoretical (Gall et al., 2007). The researcher created a color-coded chart of the codes that emerged out of the interviews.

4. The next step was to code each segment using the developed categories. For example, one teacher stated:

I just wish that the people that wrote these tests would actually come to our

school and look at the 1% (6).

This segment was coded with the category "disconnect with reality and student need."

5. The fifth step was to group the category segments. Within this step, the researcher arrived at a set of categories. The researcher created a poster chart of each of the research questions and the assigned interview questions. The categories fit as the emerging themes for each research question as subcategories. Figure 3.2 demonstrates the continuum of how the interview data were analyzed.

| Prepare Data (transcribing, member checking) | Grouping (group responses by interview question, idetifying segments/ quotations) | Explore data (development of codes, grounded theory approach, color-code responses) | Coding segments | Group category segments by research Question |
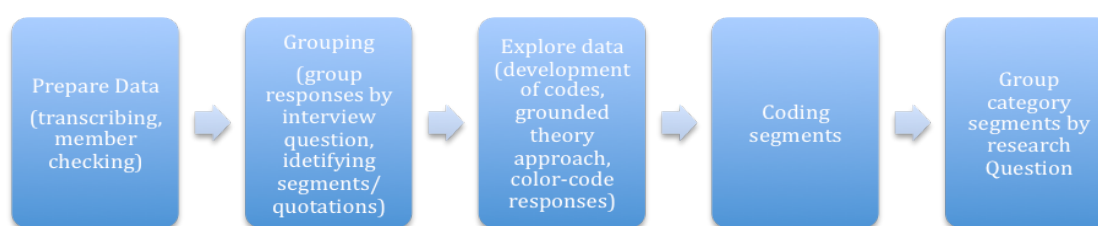
FIGURE 3.2. Steps in Data Analysis

Second Phase of Data Analysis

The second phase of data analysis occurred simultaneously during the first phrase. The second phase consisted of the analyses of IEPs and my research journal. Each of the 18 IEPs were analyzed using the IEP checklist (Appendix B) to ascertain if the IEPs contained evidence of the FAA influencing the writing and development of IEPs, along with the integration of general education curriculum standards.

The research journal was analyzed by highlighting statements that corresponded to each research question. This process allowed me to make sure that the codes and themes that emerged were not influenced by my prior experiences. This also helped me stay focused on the data instead of my own thoughts and experiences. Within each of the prior steps, the data, codes, and themes were constantly compared to find similarities and

differences. This cyclic process, as illustrated in Figure 3.2, was used to establish analytic

distinctions and to discover overall themes that emerged from the three data sets. Each

theme that emerged included data from the interviews, IEP analysis, and research journal

to support that theme.

Summary

This chapter presented a discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of the

research before exploring the research design and methods, and how the data collected

aligned with the research questions. Prior to discussing the research tools that included

the two interviews, the pilot interview process, research journal, and IEP artifacts, this

chapter detailed the teacher selection, ethical issues and informed consent. Also, this

section described issues of trustworthiness associated with this study. Lastly, the process

of data analysis was explored as a foundation for the results chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This chapter presents the results of the teacher interviews, IEP analysis, and research journal. The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of six teachers serving students with significant cognitive disabilities on the instructional impact of the FAA. The study offers insights into the following research questions:

1. How has the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) impacted teachers' perspectives on daily instructional decision making for students with significant cognitive disabilities?

2. How do teachers perceive that the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) has impacted the curriculum and instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities?

3. What is the nature of this specific group of teachers' views about how the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) has influenced how they develop and write IEP goals?

4. What is the nature of teachers' views about the value of the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) on their perspectives of accessing general education curriculum standards for their students with significant cognitive disabilities?

The data analysis of the interviews about their perspectives of the instructional impact of the FAA, IEP artifacts, and my research journal yielded eight themes and 18 subthemes. As an overview to the results of the data analyses, Table 4.1 displays the

distribution of the four research questions. It is clear that for each research question a number of themes and subthemes emerged. This level of detail was necessary   to highlight the differences and similarities within the two different contexts (general education versus center setting) in which the teachers serve students with significant cognitive disabilities. This demonstrates a connection between themes, subthemes and the professional context where the teacher serves their students (i.e., center setting or general education setting).

The themes and subthemes were derived from a theme extracting approach as influenced by an interpretivist framework. This consisted of making comparisons during each stage of the data analysis and constantly revisiting data, codes, and themes throughout the entire analysis process. This cyclic approach allowed me to "compare data with data, data with category, category with category, and category with concept" through an inductive process (Charmaz, 2006, p. 187). Within each step of the data analysis process, the data, codes, and themes were constantly compared to find similarities and differences. The themes that emerged from the interviews, IEP analysis, and my research journal were grouped by similarities by research questions, thus themes and subthemes emerged.

<center>Interviews</center>

I conducted two sets of interviews with each of the six teachers. The first interview consisted of a set of pre-determined questions that explored the teachers' perspectives on the instructional impact of the FAA, as well as explored their perspectives on accessing the general education curriculum, daily instructional decision-making, and the influence the FAA has had on IEP development and writing. The second

interview consisted of the teachers having the opportunity to review their responses from

the transcriptions and questions geared towards eliciting further conversations on their

perspectives of the instructional impact of the FAA.

TABLE 4.1 Data Distribution Across Themes, Subthemes and Connection to

Teacher Context

Research Question	Theme	Subtheme	Number of Teacher References	Context of Teachers
1. How has the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) impacted teachers' perspectives on daily instructional decision making for students with significant cognitive disabilities?	1.1 Teachers perceive that the FAA ignores the complex needs of their students.	1.1a Disconnect with reality and student need.	3	Center setting
		1.1b The impact of the FAA process on students.	4	Center and general education setting
	1.2 Teachers perceive that they have had to integrate more daily assessments similar to the FAA format.	1.2a Use of practice materials.	3	General education setting
		1.2b Dedicated preparation time for the FAA.	5	Center and general education setting
		1.2c Emphasis on choice making.	3	Center setting
2. How do teachers perceive that the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) has impacted the curriculum and instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities?	2.1 Curricular tensions between academics and life skills.	2.1a Increase and more focus on academics.	3	Mostly general education setting
		2.1b Decrease in functional life skills time.	3	Center setting
		2.1c Use of academics as life skills.	3	General education setting
	2.2 Curricular resources related to FAA.	2.2a Creation of new materials.	2	General education setting
		2.2b Adoption of ULS.	3	Center setting
3. What is the nature of teachers' views about how the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) has influenced how they develop and write IEP goals?	3.1. The variability of use of FAA results.	3.1a Only within testing section.	3	Center setting
		3.1b FAA results drive IEP goals.	2	General education setting
	3.2. Context influence on IEP goal development.	3.2a Instructional content is academic in nature.	3	General education setting
		3.2b Instructional content is life-skills in nature.	3	Center setting

(Continued) TABLE 4.1 Data Distribution Across Themes, Subthemes and

Connection to Teacher Context

4. What is the nature of teachers' views about the value of the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) on their perspectives of accessing general education curriculum standards for their students with significant cognitive disabilities?	4.1 Teachers beliefs vary about the value of Access Points.	4.1a Access points are not attainable/appropriate.	3	Center setting
		4.1b Importance of Access Points.	4	Mostly general education setting
	4.2 Teachers perceive that higher standards lead to higher expectations.	4.2a Increase in student accountability.	3	General education setting
		4.2b Increase in teacher accountability.	5	Center and general education setting

Research Journal

Due to my dual position of being a practitioner researcher, it was necessary for me to state my own experiences and thoughts. I have been teaching students with significant cognitive disabilities for nine years within a self-contained, general education setting. A research journal was created before the data collection phase, during the collection of data, and during the analysis of this study.

The research journal assisted and helped me organize my interpretations of the teacher responses. I was able to increase transparency throughout the data collection and analysis of the data by writing down and exploring my own experiences and how this would impact the interpretation of the data. The research journal allowed me to be open-minded and intently listen to the responses of the teachers instead of the responses being infiltrated by my prior experiences. For example, when I was interviewing Participant 3, I knew that we teach within the same context. The research journal explored my experiences about teaching, learning, and assessment of this group of students and how

this impacted my way of thinking. The data from the research journal helped me remain focused during each phrase of the data analysis process.

The research journal also included field-notes from each interview. The field-notes included detailed moments of awareness as well as my reflective thoughts. The detailed moments of awareness included non-verbal communication that each participant displayed during the interview. The journal also included key words and remarks from the interviews. These allowed me to mentally playback remarks and specifically remember tense or important moments within the interview.

<div align="center">IEP Artifacts</div>

Three IEPs from each teacher (total of 18 IEPs) were collected and analyzed using the IEP checklist (Appendix 3). The IEP checklist examined the extent to which the IEPs related to the standards-based reform movement. The IEP analysis explored to what extent each criteria was present for each of the teacher's three IEPs (ex., 2 out of 3 represents that 2 out of the 3 IEPs collected from that teacher included the criteria stated). Table 4.2 illustrates the data resulting from this analysis of the IEPs.

The data extracted from the analysis of the interviews, IEPs, and research journal provided the supporting documentation for each theme and subtheme.

<div align="center">TABLE 4.2: Analysis of IEPs</div>

	General Education Setting			Center Setting		
	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 1	Participant 5	Participant 6
Results of past FAA listed	2 out of 3	3 out of 3	3 out of 3	3 out of 3	3 out of 3	3 out of 3
Student's current academic achievement includes data-based information	3 out of 3	3 out of 3	3 out of 3	3 out of 3	3 out of 3	3 out of 3

(Continued) TABLE 4.2: Analysis of IEPs

IEP goals skill domain: instructional content is academic in nature-Reading, Language Arts, Math, Science, and/or Social Studies	3 out of 3	3 out of 3	3 out of 3	0 out of 3	3 out of 3	3 out of 3
IEP goals skill domain: Instructional content is life-skills in nature-Pre-vocational skills, independent functioning, social skills	0 out of 3	0 out of 3	0 out of 3	3 out of 3	0 out of 3	0 out of 3
IEP goals: To what extent are the goals aligned with the grade-level academic content standards	0 out of 3	3 out of 3	3 out of 3	0 out of 3	1 out of 3	3 out of 3
IEP plops: Mentions student performance relative to Sunshine State Standards Access Points	0 out of 3	3 out of 3	1 out of 3	2 out of 3	1 out of 3	3 out of 3
Effects of disability on involvement and progress in the general curriculum	3 out of 3	3 out of 3	3 out of 3	3 out of 3	3 out of 3	3 out of 3

Research Question One: How has the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) impacted

teachers' perspectives on daily instructional decision making for students with significant

cognitive disabilities?

In relation to research question one, two major themes arose from the data: (a)

teachers perceive that the FAA ignores the complex needs of their students, and (b)

teachers perceive that they have had to integrate more daily assessments similar to the

FAA format. These themes had a number of subthemes as illustrated in Table 4.3. Table

4.3 also demonstrates the number of teacher data references and the professional context

of the teachers.

TABLE 4.3: Summary of Themes and Subthemes for Research Question 1

Research Question	Theme	Subtheme	Number of Teacher References	Context of Teachers
1. How has the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) impacted teachers' perspectives on daily instructional decision making for students with significant cognitive disabilities?	1.1 Teachers perceive that the FAA ignores the complex needs of their students.	1.1a Disconnect with reality and student need.	3	Center setting
		1.1b The impact of the FAA process on students.	4	Center and general education setting
	1.2 Teachers perceive that they have had to integrate more daily assessments similar to the FAA format.	1.2a Use of practice materials.	3	General education setting
		1.2b Dedicated preparation time for the FAA.	5	Center and general education setting
		1.2c Emphasis on choice making.	3	Center setting

Theme 1.1: Teachers perceive that the FAA ignores the complex needs of their students.

The analysis of the teachers' perspectives concerning the impact on the FAA on

their daily instructional decision-making revealed two sub-themes for research question 1

as illustrated in Figure 4.1. The first sub-theme discussed disconnect with reality and

student need. The second sub-theme described the impact of the FAA process on students. The two sub-themes highlight the apparent disconnect with what students are expected to know for the FAA and how this process impacts the students. The data revealed disconnect with student needs and abilities and the FAA.

Theme 1: Teachers perceive that the FAA ignores the complex needs of their students.

Sub-theme 1.1a: Disconnect with reality and student need.

Sub-theme 1.1b: The impact of the FAA process on students.
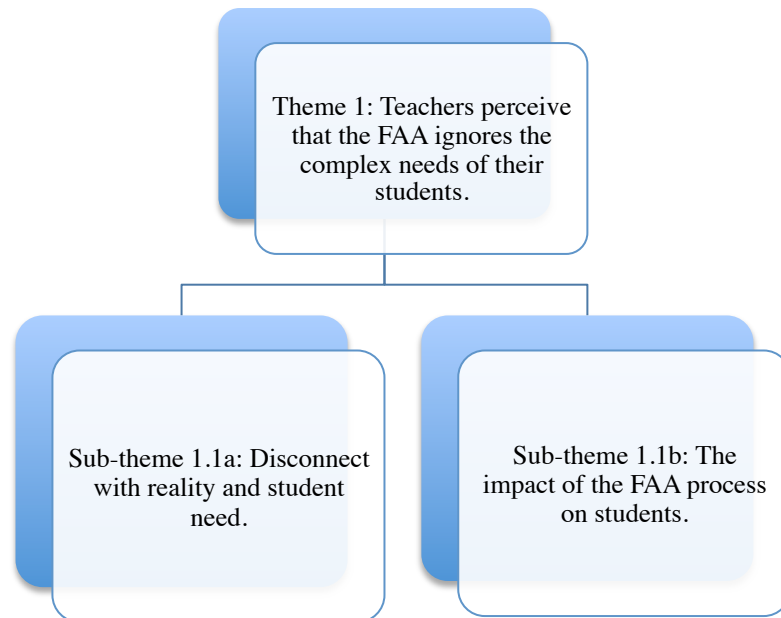
FIGURE 4.1: Subthemes for RQ 1 Theme 1

Sub-theme 1.1a: Disconnect with reality and student need.

I wrote in my research journal before the collection of the data that I believed there is disconnect with policy makers and the implementation of the FAA. I do not believe that policy makers fully understand how disabilities negatively impact students' ability to perform on standardized assessments (Hawley Journal, p. 7).

The teachers also expressed concern with the overall functioning levels of their students during the interviews. Some of the teachers believed that their students'

developmental level prohibits them from fully accessing the standards and the material on

the FAA.

> *I think especially that with the kids that I have who are functioning between 6*
>
> *months and 3 years of age, the developmental level is not there to teach some of*
>
> *those access points. No matter what we do, we will never going to know if they*
>
> *have a true understanding (6).*

The teachers from the center school also expressed concern with the perceived disconnect

between their students and the policy makers expectations of their students' abilities.

They commented on the need for the policy makers and legislators to visit the center

schools to explore the complex learning needs of their students before implementing

policies. One teacher added,

> *I just wish that the people that wrote these tests would actually come to our*
>
> *school and look at the 1% (6).*

I noticed during the interviews that the teachers from the center schools were very

passionate when speaking about their students and their capabilities (Hawley Journal, p.

14). As the above examples demonstrated, students may have significant cognitive

disabilities that were not accounted for in the FAA. These specific cases were

characteristic of a view from teachers that their students' disabilities do not allow them to

access the test holistically due to their inherent abilities.

Sub-theme 1.1b: The impact of the FAA process on students.

The second sub-theme revealed from the analysis explored the impact of the FAA

process on students participating in the FAA. Individually and collectively, the teachers'

responses explained the various beliefs that the FAA has on their students. The teachers

from the general education settings focused more on the visible effects that the FAA has on their students. For instance, one teacher stated,

> *It's lengthy and they get tired. Especially, my higher kiddos, when I have to run*
>
> *through those two I call warm-up questions, because they get frustrated (4).*

However, I noted that one teacher from the general education setting had a very difficult time answering how the FAA has impacted her students. She stated that she never considered how her students would be impacted (Hawley Journal, p. 16).

The three teachers from the center school expressed concern on how they have to be cognizant of how their students' various complex disabilities would affect their engagement on the FAA.

> *Well mine all have seizure disorder. So you have to figure out health wise, okay, I*
>
> *can't test him today because he just had a seizure so he's not going to give me*
>
> *any responses that will mean anything because his brain is off right now (1).*
>
> *I know several of them in the afternoons, when they get hooked up on their*
>
> *feeding pumps, it affects their whole body metabolism, so they are just sleepy and*
>
> *tired. They are not going to make any choices on their own (1).*

The previous examples highlighted teachers' perspectives about the visible affects the FAA has on their students. The teachers focused on the inherent characteristics of their students' disabilities and on the students' medical conditions that conversely had a negative affect on their overall engagement with the material presented on the FAA. However, the teachers accepted their students' involvement within the state's accountability system and presented ways in which they helped their students be more successful with the assessment.

Theme 1.2: Teachers perceive that they have had to integrate more daily assessments similar to the FAA format.

The second theme that arose dealt with how the teachers perceive that they have had to change their daily instructional decision making by integrating more daily assessments similar to the FAA format. From this second theme, three sub-themes were revealed. The first sub-theme indicated that teachers perceived they have integrated the use of the FAA practice materials into their daily instructional practices. The second sub-theme described the dedicated daily preparation that teachers have perceived they have integrated as a result of the FAA. The third sub-theme revealed that teachers perceive that they have had to emphasize instructing students how to make a choice out of 3 options. The subthemes for research question 1 theme 2 are illustrated in Figure 4.2. The teachers presented instructional and assessment methods that they have integrated within their daily routines in order to adequately prepare their students to take the FAA.
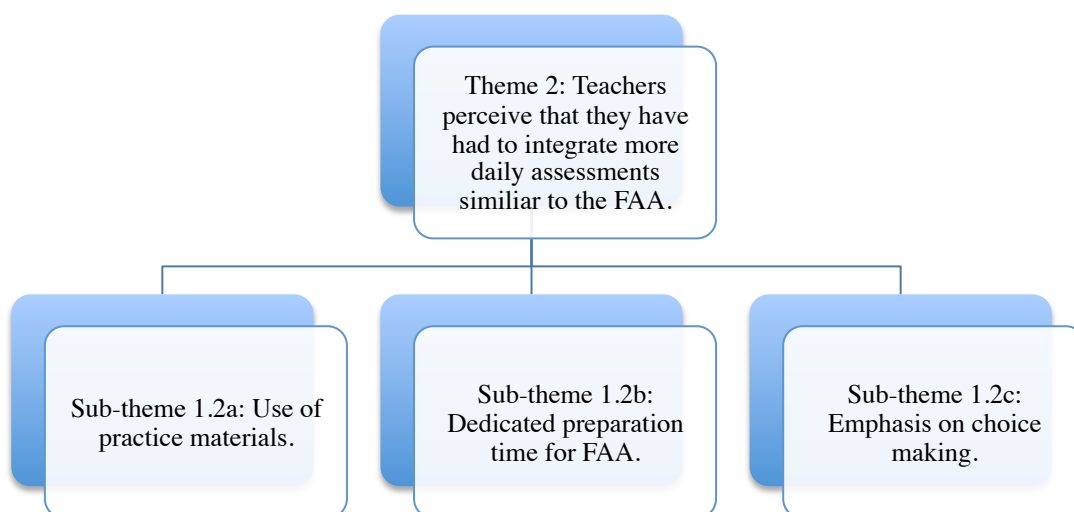
FIGURE 4.2: Subthemes for Research Question 1 Theme 2

Sub-theme 1.2a: Use of practice materials.

The first sub-theme was specific to the general education setting. The teachers talked about utilizing the practice FAA materials to help prepare their students with significant cognitive disabilities to take the FAA on an ongoing and daily basis. The teachers have integrated the practice materials into their daily instruction. The teachers stated,

> *Well, we do go over some of the practice cards. They send us booklets with the sample questions (2).*
>
> *The state provides us with materials to help practice, and I use that format (3).*
>
> *I use the format of the FAA and the standards and the FAA practice materials (4).*

I reflected upon my own practices before the collection of data. I explored specific ways in which I have changed my personal practices to adequately prepare my students to take the FAA. For example, I integrated daily FAA practice from the materials that the state provides us (Hawley Journal, p. 6).

The integration of the FAA practice materials that the state provided the teachers was one way that the teachers expressed a change in their curricular and instructional approach. Another way that teachers expressed was dedicating time within the school day to specifically prepare for the FAA.

Sub-theme 1.2b: Dedicated preparation time for the FAA.

The second sub-theme discussed how the teachers from the general education setting implemented the format of the FAA into daily instruction. The teachers stressed

the need to prepare their students adequately to take the FAA. They believed that by integrating daily preparation into their instruction, the students would be more apt to successfully access the assessment.

One teacher commented,

> *Basically we implement on a regular basis, even a daily basis, the style and the*
>
> *format. We start at the beginning of the year (3).*

My research journal included a discussion on how I have altered my classroom practices. I have started implementing the format of the FAA into daily practice by using verbiage from the FAA (one more than, author's purpose, etc.) within my instruction (Hawley Journal, p. 6).

The above example demonstrated how teachers from the general education setting have altered their instructional planning to prepare students for the FAA. Conversely, the teachers from the center settings expressed a different approach to prepare their students.

Sub-theme 1.2c: Emphasis on choice making.

The third sub-theme emerged from the teachers from the center schools stated that they focused their daily instruction on their students making a choice. The teachers commented that they perceived that they centered their instruction on making a choice out of three options. One teacher believed that the integration of three options has been a positive addition to her classroom instruction.

> *They are always supposed to get a choice of 3. My students always get the*
>
> *scaffolding so they can take one away, so now pick one out of 2. That has actually*
>
> *been a good thing. I think the only good thing was that it forces people who would*

> *normally give their students choices to give them choices in order to prepare them*
>
> *for it (1).*

However, one teacher believed that the integration of making a choice out of three

options has not been a positive addition to her daily instruction.

> *I have seen a lot of teachers spending the whole day teaching them to make three*
>
> *choices as if that is the end all be all. I have seen the other extreme where*
>
> *teachers don't do anything but trying to get them making a choice between three*
>
> *pictures all day long, everyday (6).*

I noted during the interviews of the teachers from the center school that they focused a lot

of attention about speaking about the importance of choice making and offering three

choices (Hawley Journal, p. 23). I also discussed the importance of choice making within

my journal before the interviews (Hawley Journal, p. 5).

> This was also evident within IEPs written by teachers from the center schools.
>
> *Ronde will make a correct selection when presented with a set of three picture*
>
> *cards including but not limited to classmates, classroom activities, toys and core*
>
> *curriculum concepts, with 100% accuracy 5 out of 5 opportunities by annual*
>
> *review (IEP artifact #3).*

All in all, the teachers explored how their students' inherent characteristics of their

disabilities negatively impacted their ability to access and to be successful on the FAA.

The teachers also acknowledged their roles and their students' roles within the state's

accountability system and expressed how they have altered their daily instruction making

to adequately prepare their students for the FAA. The next research question explored

how teachers perceived the FAA has impacted their curriculum and instruction.

Research Question Two: How do teachers perceive that the Florida Alternate Assessment

(FAA) has impacted the curriculum and instruction for students with significant cognitive

disabilities?

Two major themes arose from the analysis of data in relation to research question

2 as illustrated in Table 4.4: (a) teachers perceived curricular tensions between academics

and life skills, and (b) teachers perceived that they have had to create new materials or

have adopted curriculum to mirror the FAA. Table 4.4 also shows the number of teacher

data references and professional context of the teachers. The themes represent teacher

sentiment towards the dichotomous philosophical perspectives of academics versus life

skills and changes in curricular resources as a result of the implementation of the FAA.

TABLE 4.4: Summary of Themes and Subthemes for Research Question 2

Research Question	Theme	Subtheme	Number of Teacher References	Context of Teachers
2. How do teachers perceive that the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) has impacted the curriculum and instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities?	2.1 Curricular tensions between academics and life skills.	2.1a Increase and more focus on academics.	3	Mostly general education setting
		2.1b Decrease in functional life skills time.	3	Center setting
		2.1c Use of academics as life skills.	3	General education setting
	2.2 Curricular resources related to FAA.	2.2a Creation of new materials.	2	General education setting
		2.2b Adoption of ULS.	3	Center setting

Theme 2.1: Curricular tensions between academics and life skills.

The analysis of how teachers perceived that the FAA has impacted the curriculum

and instruction for their students with significant cognitive disabilities revealed three sub-

themes. The first sub-theme indicated that teachers perceived an increase focus on

academics. The second sub-theme described the perceived decrease in functional life skills time. The third sub-theme revealed that teachers perceived that they have been using academics as life skills. The subthemes for research question 2 theme 1 are illustrated in Figure 4.3. The apparent curricular tensions explored how teachers felt their curriculum and instruction has changed due to the implementation of the FAA.

Theme 2.1: Curricular tensions between academics and life skills.

Sub-theme 2.1a: Increase and more focus on academics.

Sub-theme 2.1b: Decrease in functional life skills time.

Sub-theme 2.1c: Using academics as life skills.
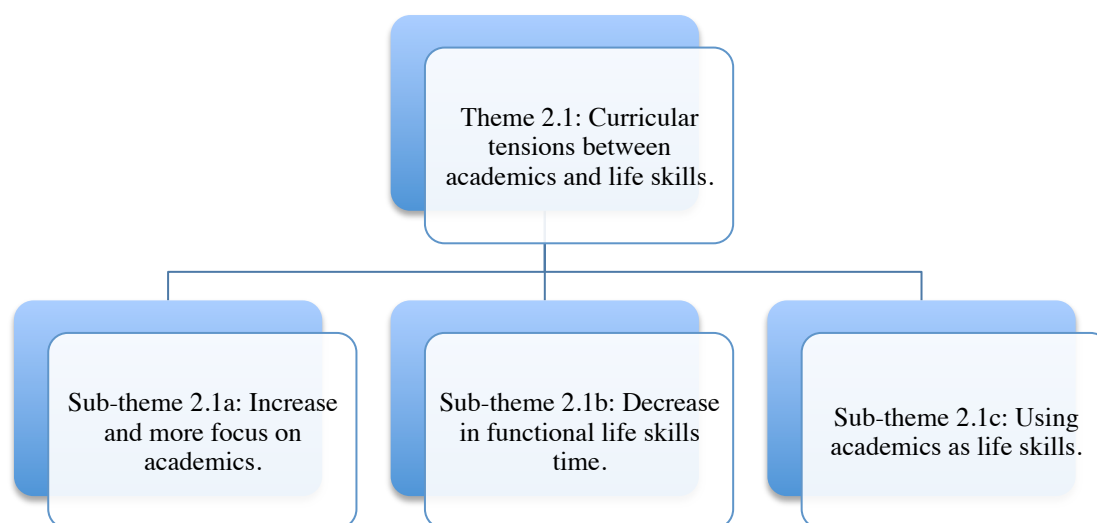
FIGURE 4.3: Subthemes for Research Question 2 Theme 1

Sub-theme 2.1a: Increase and more focus on academics.

The first sub-theme addressed the increase and the perceived additional focus on academics. Individually and collectively from both the center and general education setting, the teachers discussed how the perceived increase of academics effects on the curriculum and instruction of their students with significant cognitive disabilities.

For example,

We have more of a focus on academic skills (6).

The teachers expressed that having an academic focus was an essential and important impact on the curriculum and instruction for their students with significant cognitive

disabilities. Furthermore, one teacher stated a perceived increase in accountability by the integration of an academic focus.

> *You can't just, that old ESE joke, you're in the back room and you are working on cooking for like four hours. You can't do that anymore. It guarantees that these children are getting at least a portion of their day on academics (2).*

Within my research journal, I explored how I have seen an increase focus on academic skills (Hawley Journal, p. 2).

This sentiment was also evident throughout the IEPs written by the teachers from the general education setting.

> *After reading a level 1 passage consisting primarily of sigh words and phonetically regular words, Ashley will answer questions related to the passage with 80% or greater accuracy, including questions about main idea/detail, sequencing, cause/effect, author's purpose, and story elements, as measured by documented observation and student work product (IEP artifact #7).*

The above examples highlighted how teachers perceived that the FAA has changed their curricular and instruction approach to educating their students with significant cognitive disabilities. However, this change in the addition of academic focus has also impacted the perceived loss of functional life skills.

Sub-theme 2.1b: Decrease in functional life skills time.

The second sub-theme expressed the teachers from the center school's perspective that an increase in academic time has caused a decrease in functional life skills time. The teachers believed that functional life skills were more important for their students with

significant cognitive disabilities. One teacher voiced his concern about the importance of functional life skills in increasing the quality of life.

> *When you work with them all the time and especially when you talk to the parents and the majority of the parents that I have spoken with their concerns are based more off life skills than academic skills so for instance, I would rather have a student that can learn to toilet themselves correctly than to identify the number 5 (5).*

One teacher commented on how the decrease in functional life skills was detrimental to the overall quality of life her students had. She believes that life skills are more important than academics,

> *because they will be doing the rest of their lives is going to be more important for them to be doing some things independently and maybe in group homes or facilities. They are not going to be at a level where they are going to be getting jobs and using academics but they will always will need to have some level of independence and the more that they can do themselves; the better quality of life they will have* (6).

This sentiment was also highlighted within my research journal before I conducted interviews. I discussed how I constantly think about what are the ultimate post-school goals for my individual students with significant cognitive disabilities and how can I facilitate the learning of skills that are necessary for successful post-school living (Hawley Journal, p. 2).

One teacher from the center school included functional life skill goals within her IEPs.

Mikayla will increase her self-care skills by washing and drying her hands

thoroughly, with assistance as specified in each objective (IEP artifact #16).

The teachers from the center school expressed their concern that the increase of

academic focus had a negative impact on their ability to focus on valuable functional life

skills. In order to compensate for this perceived loss, some teachers stated that they have

integrated academics as life skills within their curricular and instruction approach.

Sub-theme 2.1c: Using academics as life skills.

The third sub-theme dealt with the how teachers have perceived that academics

can also be life skills. The teachers reported integrating reading and mathematics into

social and life skills lessons.

For example, one teacher from a general education setting commented on the

perceived challenge of integrating life skills within her curriculum and instruction

without losing a life skills focus.

That's been a challenge because with the population in which I teach, which is

students in a supported varying exceptionalities classroom. It's always a

challenge to meet those life skills without losing an academic focus. I believe the

way we have changed our instruction to try to find a happy balance is to

incorporate reading and writing into those social skills and life skills lessons, so

you still have more opportunities to teach life skills, but the students are held

accountable for more print exposure and more language and everything in

developing those skills. They're both very important and sometimes I feel that the

life skills component are what's going to make the difference between them being

more independent or not, so we really have to address those needs. And reading

and writing are life skills (3).

Another teacher from the general education setting discussed how she believed that you

could blend academics and life skills within the classroom.

But just like general ed, there is a balance where we teach life skills and

academic skills in the classroom. We talk about sharing, we talk about turn taking

and we talk about those types of skills. Like I said, at this level I feel we really

need to work on academics. But as I mentioned before, just like in the gen ed,

there is a blend of life skills. Its just needs to be age appropriate life skills in the

elementary level. We need to work on turn taking, standing in line, and managing

your things (4).

I explored how I believe that functional skills can also be academic skills within my

research journal. I do not believe in a strict academic track for my students with

significant cognitive disabilities, but a blend of academic and functional life skills

(Hawley Journal, p. 2-3).

This was also evident within IEP artifacts.

Norma will increase her ability to use and figure correct computation in various

life skill situation with 80% accuracy by the end of the IEP (IEP artifact #4).

Due to the implementation of the FAA, teachers have expressed how their curriculum and

instruction has changed. The teachers believed that due to the increase focus of

academics, they have sacrificed teaching functional life skills. However, some teachers

have explored using academics as life skills to fill that void. Nevertheless, the teachers

also stated that they have had to create new materials or have adopted curriculum to mirror the concepts presented on the FAA.

Theme 2.2: Curricular resources related to FAA.

The analysis revealed that teachers perceived that they have had to create new materials or have adopted curriculum to mirror the FAA. Two sub-themes emerged from the data: creation of new materials and the adoption of Unique Learning Systems (ULS) as illustrated on Figure 4.4. The teachers believed these two areas within the curriculum and instruction domain have been directly impacted due to the implementation of the FAA.
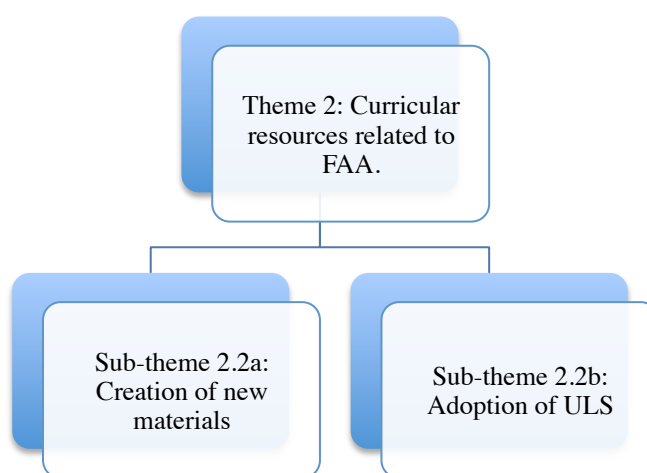
FIGURE 4.4: Subthemes for Research Question 2 Theme 2

Sub-theme 2.2a: Creation of new materials

The first sub-theme addressed the creation of new materials. The teachers from the general education setting expressed their belief that they have had to create new materials to adequately prepare their students to take the FAA. One teacher voiced her concern that it was harder for teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities to address the standards with their adopted curriculum. She had to create new materials that aligned with the curriculum content standards and FAA.

Science and writing are hard because there aren't a lot of science and writing

curriculum that goes to the Access Points. So we have to make it all ourselves and

really get to know the standards, it's very time consuming, it's very hard. I think

it's hard on teachers, where you are a general ed teacher, you just get the science

basil out of the science book. The standards are in there and you know what to do

(4).

I explored my process of creating new materials and how this has impacted my

curriculum and instruction within my research journal before the interviews (Hawley

Journal, p. 6).

The prior examples expressed how teachers from the general education setting

altered their curriculum and instruction as a result of the FAA. They perceived that the

materials they have do not adequately prepare their students to be successful on the FAA,

therefore they have created their own materials to mirror the FAA. However, the teachers

from the center school explained how their schools have adopted curriculum specifically

to prepare students to take the FAA.

Sub-theme 2.2b: Adoption of ULS

The second sub-theme that emerged from the data dealt with the adoption of

Unique Learning System (ULS) within the center settings. Collectively, the teachers from

the center schools commented on the adoption of ULS and the perceived focus on the

curriculum and instruction. ULS is a standards-based curriculum designed to differentiate

instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities.

We use curriculum called ULS or Unique Learning Systems that was written for

kids that function lower cognitively but written at an age appropriate level (6).

Another teacher explained that she used ULS to track her students' progress towards the curriculum content standards and Access Points.

> *For the academic piece of them we track where they are in the curriculum, the ULS curriculum currently and where we want them to go and we use that to drive our academic goals since they are aligned to our state standards and access points (6).*

This is echoed in the IEPs written by the teachers from the center school.

> *Jess will use his alphabet knowledge to sound out and spell grade level vocabulary words presented in monthly lessons from Unique Learning System curriculum with nor more than one (1) physical/verbal prompt per word with 100% accuracy (IEP artifact #13).*

Overall, teachers expressed that they changed elements of their curriculum and instruction to prepare their students for the FAA. The teachers explored how the curricular focus changed to an academic focus due to the implementation of the FAA. However, some teachers used academics as life skills to fill the void left by an enhanced academic focus. Moreover, the teachers from the general education setting explained how they created new materials to adequately prepare their students for the FAA, whereas the teachers from the center schools adopted a curriculum that specifically prepared their students for the FAA format.

Research Question Three: What is the nature of teachers' views about how the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) has influenced how they develop and write IEP goals?

The data revealed two themes on how teachers perceived how the FAA influenced how they write and develop IEPs: the variability of use of FAA results and context on

IEP goal development as illustrated in Table 4.5. Table 4.5 also shows the number of

teacher data references and professional context of the teachers.

TABLE 4.5: Summary of Themes and Subthemes for Research Question 3.

Research Question	Theme	Subtheme	Number of Teacher References	Context of Teachers
3. What is the nature of teachers' views about how the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) has influenced how they develop and write IEP goals?	3.1. The variability of use of FAA results.	3.1a Only within testing section.	3	Center setting
		3.1b FAA results drive IEP goals.	2	General education setting
	3.2. Context influence on IEP goal development.	3.2a Instructional content is academic in nature.	3	General education setting
		3.2b Instructional content is life-skills in nature.	3	Center setting

Theme 3.1: Variability of Use of FAA results.

  Two sub-themes emerged from the data on how teachers perceived they used the

results of the FAA to influence how they wrote and developed IEP goals: only within the

testing section and FAA results drove IEP goals. These results emerged from the artifacts

(IEP analysis) and within the interviews. This is illustrated in Figure 4.5. The

development and writing of IEP goals were influenced by the context in which the

teacher served students with significant cognitive disabilities. The teachers from the

center school reported the results of the FAA within the testing section of the IEP

whereas the teachers from the general education settings used the FAA results to drive

IEP goals.

```
┌─────────────────┐
│  Theme 3.1: The │
│ variability of  │
│  use of FAA     │
│    results.     │
└────────┬────────┘
    ┌────┴─────┐
┌───────────┐ ┌───────────────┐
│ Sub-theme │ │  Sub-theme    │
│ 3.1a: Only│ │  3.1b:        │
│ within    │ │ Teachers      │
│ testing   │ │ report that   │
│ section.  │ │ FAA reults    │
│           │ │ dirve IEP     │
│           │ │ goals.        │
└───────────┘ └───────────────┘
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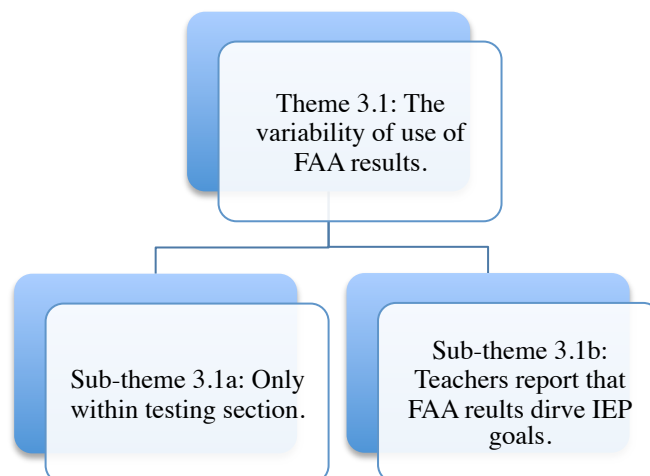
FIGURE 4.5: Subthemes for Research Question 3 Theme 1

Sub-theme 3.1a: Only within testing section.

The first sub-theme dealt with the teachers collectively from the center schools only using the results of the FAA within the testing section of the IEP.

> *The only time I ever mention the FAA is where the IEP prompts me to in one particular section (5).*

This is also evident within the artifact analysis. The results of the FAA were listed underneath the results of other statewide or district wide assessments section. Some of the IEPs included only standard scores without explanation of what the scores mean.

> *Spring 2011 Florida Alternate Assessment*
>
> *Reading: 37, Performance Level 2 Math: 27, Performance Level 2 (IEP artifact #15).*

This teacher also expounded upon why he only used the FAA results within the testing section and how the results did not influence the writing and development of IEP goals.

> *Because I think the results don't really paint the picture for what and how the*
>
> *child can actually do, so I guess the best way to put it is that I find the results to*
>
> *be somewhat irrelevant (5).*

Whereas, another teacher reported the FAA scores and offered an explanation of what the scores corresponded to.

> *Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) Spring 2011*
>
> *Reading: Total Score 48; Performance Level 3*
>
> *Writing: Total Score: 50; Performance Level 3 Reading/Writing performance*
>
> *reflects basic understanding of learning standards, academic expectations &*
>
> *core knowledge of topics contained in the participatory grade level access points.*
>
> *Minimal prompting and assistance is required and performance on participatory*
>
> *level skills is primarily accurate. Math: Total Score 44; Performance Level 2*
>
> *Math performance reflects partial understanding of learning standards, academic*
>
> *expectations, & core knowledge of topics contained at the participatory grade*
>
> *level access points. Frequent prompting and assistance is required and*
>
> *performance on the participatory level skills is limited and inconsistent (IEP*
>
> *artifact #18).*

The prior statements were examples on how teachers from the center schools used the results of the FAA. These teachers did not have evidence of the FAA influencing how they develop and write IEP goals.

Sub-theme 3.1b: FAA results drive IEP goals.

The second sub-theme emerged dealt with the teachers from the general education setting stating that the results of the FAA influence the writing and development of IEP goals. One teacher expressed,

> *So I write them to the standard using the gaps I found in the FAA, if that makes any sense (4).*

Another teacher indicated that she used the results of the FAA when developing IEP goals.

> *Only in as much as I look at participatory versus supported level (3).*

This was indicated within one of this teacher's IEP artifact.

> *When given a problem related to the 8th/9th grade science curriculum based on the Sunshine State Standards Access points on the supported level, Talisha will observe and explore objects and activities, and recognize a solution with minimal adult assistance, 8 out of 10 times, as measured by teacher observation and student work product (IEP artifact #9).*

Another teacher used the results of the FAA to influence the development and writing of IEP goals.

> *Given an independent level text, Joshua will identify the main idea, problem/solution and the author's purpose in fiction/non-fiction texts with visual supports (as needed) (IEP artifact #10).*

The prior examples demonstrated how teachers from the general education setting used FAA results to influence how they develop and write IEP goals. This dichotomous view was also evident with the influence the FAA had on the development and writing of IEP goals.

Theme 3.2: Context influence on IEP goal development

The second theme that emerged from research question 3 revealed that IEP goals varied based on setting. This was evident by the emergence of two sub-themes: instructional content is academic in nature, and instructional content is life-skills in nature. This is illustrated in Figure 4.6. Teachers from the general education setting wrote goals that were primarily academic in nature, whereas teachers from the center setting wrote goals that focused on life-skills.

Theme 2: Context influence on IEP development.

Sub-theme 3.2a: Instructional content is academic in nature

Sub-theme 3.2b: Instructional content is life-skills in nature.
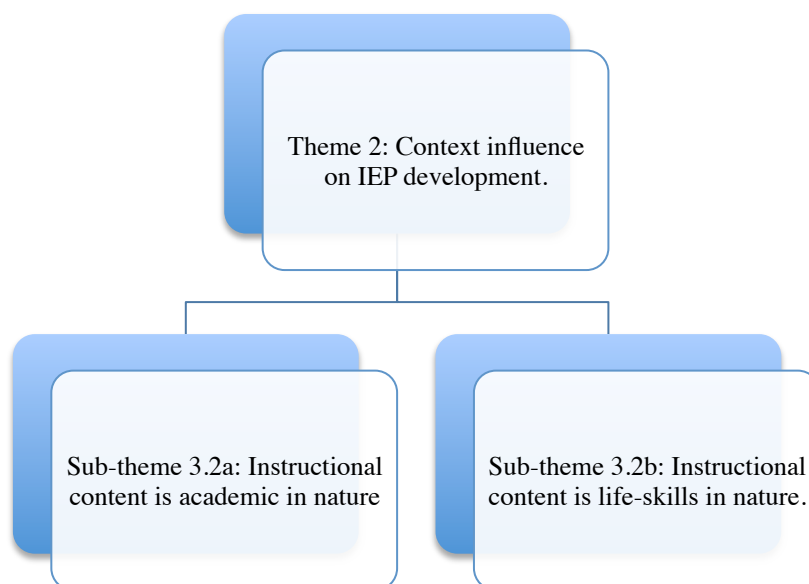
FIGURE 4.6. Subthemes from Research Question 3 Theme 2

Sub-theme 3.2a: Instructional content is academic in nature

The second sub-theme was the instructional content outlined in the IEP goals was academic in nature. The teachers collectively from the general education setting developed and wrote their IEP goals that were more academic in nature.

One teacher included the following goal within one of her student's IEPs within the curriculum and instruction domain.

Anthony will solve addition facts with sums to 18 and related subtraction one-

digit facts families (ex. 11+7=18, 18-11=7) with manipulative and no more than

one verbal prompt (IEP artifact #11).

Furthermore, another teacher included the following curriculum and instructional goal.

Norma will read orally a short story selected from a 2nd grade reader with no

more than 3 errors within a 10 minute period by the end of the IEP (IEP artifact

#4).

The prior IEP goals reflected how IEPs developed and written by teachers from the

general education setting were academic skills in nature and were influenced by the

implementation of the FAA.

Sub-theme 3.2b: Instructional content is life-skills in nature

The second sub-theme that emerged was that the teachers from the center school

developed and wrote their curriculum and instruction IEP goals that were based on life-

skills.

One teacher wrote the following curriculum and instruction goal that is more life-

skills in nature.

Chris will participate in a work related task (such as wiping a table, sorting

cans/bottles for recycling, or handing someone a paper to be shredded) for at

least15 minutes, with whatever level assistance is required, by IEP renewal date,

4/18/2013 (IEP artifact, #18).

The teachers reported that the FAA has had an impact on how they developed and wrote

IEP goals. However, the extent of the influence depended upon the context in which the

teachers served students with significant cognitive disabilities. The teachers from the

general education setting reported that they used the results of the FAA to drive the development and writing of IEP goals and wrote goals that were academic in nature. Conversely, the teachers from the center settings only use the results of the FAA within the testing section of the IEP and wrote goals that were life-skills in nature. This dichotomous perspective between teachers from the general education setting versus the center settings was also evident when discussing the value of accessing the general education curriculum.

Research Question Four: What is the nature of teachers' views about the value of the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) on their perspectives of accessing general education curriculum standards for their students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Two major themes emerged from the data on the teachers' perspectives of accessing the general education curriculum standards: teachers' beliefs vary about the value of Access Points, and teachers perceive that higher standards lead to higher expectations. This is illustrated along with the subthemes for each theme in Table 4.6. Table 4.6 also shows the number of teacher data references and professional context of the teachers. The perspectives of the value of access points on accessing the general education curriculum varied based on the context of the teacher, where the teachers from the general education setting expounded upon the importance of the access points and the teachers from the center settings discussed how the access points were not attainable for their students.

Theme 4.1: Teachers' beliefs vary about the value of Access Points

Two sub-themes emerged from the data that addressed research question 4: access

points are not attainable/appropriate, and the perceived importance of the access points.

This is illustrated in Figure 4.7.

TABLE 4.6 Summary of Themes and Subthemes for Research Question Four.

Research Question	Theme	Subtheme	Number of Teacher References	Context of Teachers
4. What is the nature of teachers' views about the value of the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) on their perspectives of accessing general education curriculum standards for their students with significant cognitive disabilities?	4.1 Teachers' beliefs vary about the value of Access Points.	4.1a Access points are not attainable/appropriate.	3	Center setting
		4.1b Importance of Access Points.	4	Mostly general education setting
	4.2 Teachers' perceive that higher standards lead to higher expectations.	4.2a Increase in student accountability.	3	General education setting
		4.2b Increase in teacher accountability.	5	Center and general education setting

Sub-theme 4.1a: Access points are not attainable/appropriate.

The first sub-theme addressed the teachers' from the center school settings

perspective that the Access Points were not appropriate or attainable. They believed that

the Access Points did not take into consideration the various and complex needs of their

students with significant cognitive disabilities.

One teacher commented that the Access Points were too complex and included academic

skills that were perceived to be too high for her students, and therefore were not

attainable.

> *Mainly based off students' needs because a lot of access points are way too high*
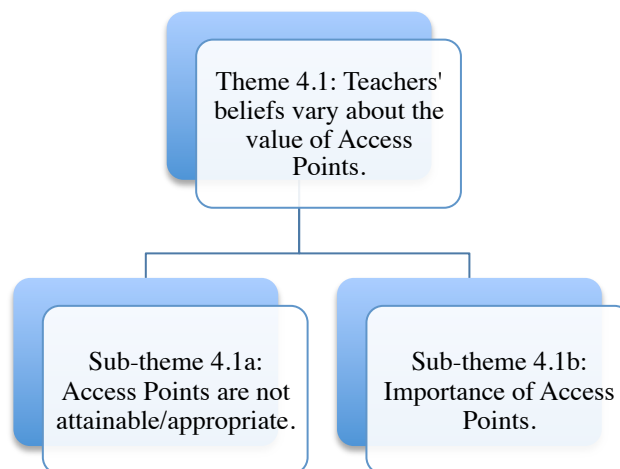>
> *for my students too (1).*

FIGURE 4.7. Subthemes for Theme 4.1

Another teacher explained that she perceived that her students did not have the developmental level to access or obtain the Access Points. As a result the Access Points were perceived inappropriate for her students with significant cognitive disabilities.

> *No I mean seriously I think especially that with the kids that I have who are functioning between 6 months and 3 years of age, the developmental level is not there to teach some of those access points (6).*

Within my research journal before the interviews, I highlighted that I do not believe that the Access Points allow for multiple ways for students with significant cognitive disabilities to access the general education curriculum (Hawley Journal, p. 5). However, I expounded upon the benefits of the scaffold approach of the Access Points that increase the flexibility of meeting individual needs of students due to their splinter skills in some academic areas.

As highlighted above, teachers from the center setting did not believe that the access points were appropriate for their students. Furthermore, this group of teachers perceived that the complex characteristics of their students' disabilities negatively impacted their progress towards general education standards and curriculum.

Sub-theme 4.1b: Importance of Access Points

The second sub-theme addressed the perceived importance of the Access Points. The teachers from the general education settings collectively believed that the Access Points were beneficial, appropriate, and attainable.

One teacher commented,

I think the access points are fine. I think the Access Points are developed

appropriately (2).

When asked about the Access Points, the teachers from the general education setting commented on how students with significant cognitive disabilities could access the general education curriculum through the Access Points and helped the teachers focus on the important areas to teach.

One teacher elaborated on the perceived appropriateness and the attainability of the Access Points for her students with significant cognitive disabilities.

I think the Access Points have a clear scope and sequence, in between

participatory, supported, and independent and across the grade levels. Again I

only know the elementary ones, but they never get so complex where I feel that

they are unattainable (4).

During the interviews with one of the general education teachers, I noticed that she would laugh every time I would ask a question about the benefits of Access Points or the FAA. I think she could not step back from her current teaching context to focus on perceived benefits (Hawley Journal, p. 16).

Furthermore, the IEPs written by the teachers from the general education setting included specific levels of Access Points within the goal.

When given a problem related to the 8th/9th grade science curriculum based on the

Sunshine State Standards Access Points on the supported level, Talisha will

observe and explore objects and activities, recognize a solution with minimal

adult assistance, 8 out of 10 times, as measured by teacher observation and

student work product (IEP artifact #9).

The teachers from the general education setting discussed how the FAA influenced their

curricular focus and the perceived appropriateness and attainability of the access points.

However, the teachers from the center setting reported that the access points were neither

attainable nor appropriate for their students due to the complex disabilities negatively

impacting their access to the general education curriculum.

Theme 4.2: Teachers perceive that higher standards lead to higher expectations.

The second theme that addressed research question 4 dealt with teachers

perceiving that accessing the general education standards led to higher expectations for

their students with significant cognitive disabilities. Two sub-themes emerged: increase

in student accountability, and increase in teacher accountability. This is illustrated in

Figure 4.8.
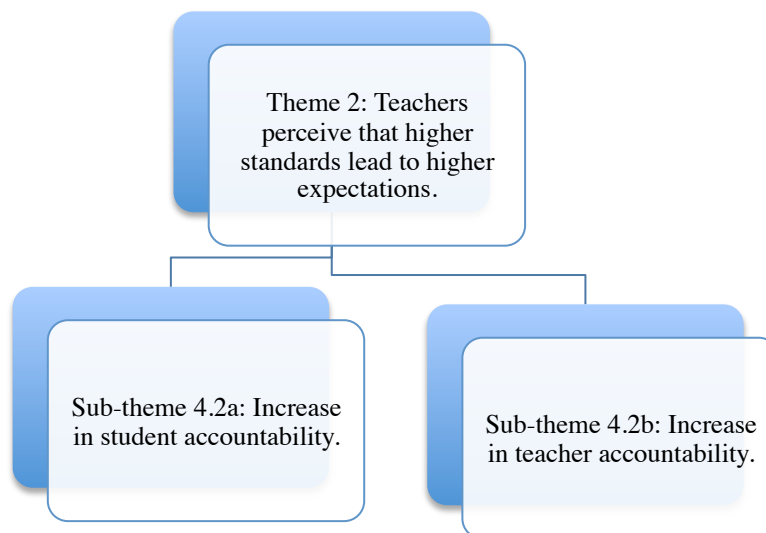
FIGURE 4.8: Subthemes for Research Question 4 Theme 2

Sub-theme 4.2a: Increase in student accountability.

The first sub-theme addressed a perceived increase in student accountability due to the implementation of the FAA. The teachers believed that accessing the general education curriculum through Access Points and through the implementation of the FAA had led to more focus on student accountability.

One teacher commented that she believed that staff members within her school had higher expectations for her students, and that her students were held more accountable for their learning.

> *The parents and other people in the school have more of an understanding that our students can be capable of more academically and they're going to be held accountable academically. And I think it's given people a different outlook to our program and to our student's capabilities and I hope that's a good thing (3).*

Before the interviews I explored the need for higher expectations and the importance of having higher standards for my students with significant cognitive disabilities. I stated, "Never underestimate my students! They always surprise me with their abilities once I

introduce new concepts and materials to them" (Hawley Journal, p. 7). I had a difficult

time during the interviews when teachers from the center school downplayed their

students' abilities. To me, they seemed more focused on a deficit view of their students

instead of the strength-based approach that the teachers from the general education

setting presented (Hawley Journal, p. 15).

The above statements demonstrated how the teachers believed that the FAA has

increased student expectations and overall accountability for students.

Sub-theme 4.2b: Increase in teacher accountability.

The second sub-theme that emerged was the perceived increase in student

accountability. All the teachers collectively and individually believed that accessing the

general education curriculum and involvement within statewide assessments had an

increase in teacher accountability.

One teacher stated,

> *And I understand that even students in ESE programs are going to be held*
>
> *accountable, and their teachers are going to be held accountable for their*
>
> *learning (3).*

Another teacher commented on the importance of teacher accountability,

> *Well I believe that it is important for teachers to not sell their kids short and*
>
> *having higher standards keeps our expectations higher. I believe being*
>
> *accountable for what we do everyday is important (6).*

One teacher focused on the importance of operating underneath the least dangerous

assumption, having higher expectations, and an increase in teacher accountability.

High standards are important for every group of students. Students will rise to the

occasion. I was talking about this in our ESE team meeting this morning, when we

were talking about the importance of teaching creative writing even to children

that don't hold pencils. And I said, "If you never give him the opportunity to be

able to construct a story using pictures, then how will he ever construct a story

using pictures?" You have to operate under the least dangerous assumption and

try to figure out a way to get the knowledge in their brains. Because once they do,

they'll amaze you every time. The higher I've set my bar, the more amazed I've

been with my kids. Accountability. And especially now that they are part of the

school improvement plan. It's making administration, and other teachers, and it's

kind of raising the bar for everyone. It's stretched me as a teacher, it continues

to" (4).

Within my research journal, I explored that my teaching philosophy is grounded in the

least dangerous assumption. I am driven by the notion that higher standards lead to higher

expectations and an increase in teacher accountability can benefit every student (Hawley

Journal, p. 2-3).

The prior examples highlighted how the teachers believed that higher standards

have led to higher student expectations due to their students being involved in the state's

accountability system.

Summary of Findings

In review, the findings of this study offered an insight into teachers' beliefs about

the instructional impact of the FAA within the context of their individualized teaching

experiences. Themes and sub-themes emerged from the interviews and artifacts that were

correlated with the research questions. The major themes included: the FAA ignored the complex needs of their students, integration of more daily assessments similar to FAA, curricular tensions between academics and life skills, creation and adoption of curriculum to mirror FAA, varied results of utilization of FAA results on IEP development and writing of IEP goals, inclusion of life-skills and academic IEP goals, varied beliefs of the value of Access Points, and perspective of higher standards lead to higher expectations.

All the teachers collectively and individually shared their perceived experiences of the instructional impact of the implementation of the FAA. The teachers suggested that the FAA ignored the complex needs of their students, but at the same time, integrated more daily assessments similar to the FAA to prepare their students to take the FAA. The teachers from the center school indicated that they have a curricular emphasis of instructing their students to make a choice out of three options. The teachers also commented on the perceived curricular tensions that have arisen between life skills and academic skills. To counter the increase of academic skills, the teachers stated they created or adopted curriculum to adequately prepare their students to take the FAA.

The next chapter discusses the emerging themes and sub themes in relation to current research, literature and issues of professional context. Chapter Five will also include a discussion of implications for future research and practice.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the emerging themes and subthemes in relation to the research questions and to current research and literature on the instructional implications of alternate assessments. The teachers' responses to the interview questions, the research journal, and the IEP artifacts were collected and analyzed to provide a cohesive picture of the collected narrative on the instructional impact of the FAA. A discussion of the limitations of the study and implications for future research and practice is included.

This study sought to add to the knowledge base by interviewing teachers with experience administering the FAA, who teach students with significant cognitive disabilities, and who would share their perspectives on the instructional impact of the FAA. This study was undertaken because there is scant literature on the instructional impacts of alternate assessments and on teacher perspectives of how data can inform instruction (Roach et al., 2007). It was important to understand and explore how teachers perceived how alternate assessments impacted their instructional-decision making in curriculum planning, instruction, development and writing of IEP goals, and defining access to the general education curriculum. This was imperative because teachers need to understand what is means to provide access to the general education curriculum as well as how to provide students opportunities to successfully meet these standards and higher expectations. Plus, teachers are the most significant factor for student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

The purposes of this study were to explore teachers' perspectives towards how they used the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) to improve instructional decision-making, influenced how they developed and wrote IEP goals, defined access to the general education curriculum, and informed instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities. The standards based reform movement and the use of assessments to measure progress towards standards has been the topic of educational reform for over the past two decades (McGregor, 2003; Nolet & McLaughlin, 2005). Towles-Reeves et al. (2009) stated that more research was needed that examined how teachers perceive the instructional impact of alternate assessment on the learning, teaching, and assessment of students with significant cognitive disabilities.

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How has the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) impacted teachers' perspectives on daily instructional decision making for students with significant cognitive disabilities?

2. How do teachers perceive that the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) has impacted the curriculum and instruction of students with significant cognitive disabilities?

3. What is the nature of teachers' views about how the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) has influenced how they develop and write IEP goals?

4. What is the nature of teachers' views about the value of the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA) on their perspectives of accessing general education curriculum standards for their students with significant cognitive disabilities?

Six special education teachers were interviewed to explore their perspectives about the instructional impact of the FAA and how the FAA has influenced their current understandings of the teaching, learning, and assessment of students with significant cognitive disabilities. In addition, I kept a research journal that helped me remain transparent and kept me open-minded while conducting the interviews. Furthermore, three IEPs from each participant (total of 18) were used to analyze how teachers developed and wrote goals as related to the standards based reform movement.

The major contribution of this study revealed that teachers' perspectives of the instructional impact of the FAA differed based on the teachers educational setting (center versus general education setting). This was important because it revealed that teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities perspectives were influenced by their experiences within their current educational settings. This could have major implications for having high expectations for students with significant cognitive disabilities, as well as influencing the overall education experiences for students with significant cognitive disabilities, depending on the students' educational placement (center versus general education setting). One of the differences between context was the use of FAA results within the development and writing of IEPs. The teachers from the center schools only used the FAA results within the testing section of the IEP, whereas, the teachers from the general education setting used the FAA results to drive IEP goals and instruction.

There were no major differences in overall teachers' perspectives based on level of school (i.e., elementary, middle, or high school). The more interesting story that emerged was the differences in perspectives based on the teaching context (center versus general edcuation setting).

Research Question One

Daily Instructional Decision Making

FAA Ignores Complex Needs of Students

One of the major themes that arose from the data was revealed that teachers perceived that the FAA ignored the complex needs of their students. All of the teachers stated that they believed that the FAA process had a direct impact on their students. Individually and collectively the teachers reported on the perceived visible effects the FAA had on their students. They stated that their students got tired, frustrated, and had a difficult time focusing for the length of time it took to administer the FAA. In addition, teachers from the center school expressed that the students' complex disabilities negatively affected their ability to perform on the FAA. One teacher stated,

> *I think especially that with the kids that I have who are functioning between 6 months and 3 years of age, the developmental level is not there to teach some of those access points. No matter what we do, we will never going to know if they have a true understanding (6).*

The three teachers from the center school also discussed the apparent disconnect with the FAA and their students' needs. They shared their concern that the FAA competed with individual student needs. This concern was affirmed within the literature on teachers' perspectives. Flowers, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Browder, and Spooner (2005) found that 48% of the 983 teachers surveyed believed that their state's alternate assessment competed with individual student needs. In addition, Kim et al. (2006) found that teachers strongly perceived (*M*=4.09; 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) that the alternate assessment within their state did not assess their students' educational needs.

The teachers continued by stating they believed that the policy makers who created alternate assessment policies did not have a clear understanding of the unique learning needs and abilities of their students. One teacher from the center school added,

The lawmakers have never met the 1% that I work with. I have one student who has Miller-Dicker Syndrome, which means that their brain is perfectly smooth. It has no ridges on it. So their neurons just randomly fire, and it does not matter how great of a teacher he has, I can't make him have ridges on his brain. I can try to give him as many experiences and make him achieve to his highest level; but, he's never going to read, never going to write, he's never going to hold a pencil (1).

Kearns et al. (2011) researched and defined the population that take alternate assessments. The researchers examined student characteristics. The majority of the students fell within the intellectual disability, autism, and multiple disabilities IDEA categories which described the students that all the teachers within this study served.

However, despite the apparent disconnect that the teachers reported between reality and student need, research has affirmed that alternate assessments were effective means to measure overall performance for this group of complex learners. Restorff et al. (2012) found that 65% of the 401 teachers they surveyed believed that their current alternate assessment was an effective way to assess the performance of their students.

Integration of More Daily Assessments Similar to FAA

Teachers also reported that they dedicated preparation time for the FAA in order to prepare their students to take the FAA. Five of the teachers stated that they dedicated preparation time for the FAA. One teacher added,

Basically we implement on a regular basis, even a daily basis, the style and

format (3).

The impact of alternate assessments on daily instructional decision-making is well documented within the literature. Restorff et al. (2012) found that 55% of the teachers they surveyed believed that their state's alternate assessment has helped them align their classroom instruction with their state standards.

Furthermore, Kim et al. (2006) found that teachers strongly disagree (*M*=1.84; 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) that the alternate assessment positively affects their classroom instruction. Roach et al. (2007) found that teachers mildly disagreed that the results of the alternate assessments were useful in making instructional plans for their students (*M* = 2.59; 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. However, Towles-Reeves and Kleinert (2006) found that 44% of teachers surveyed reported that their state's alternate assessment had a positive effect on their daily instruction.

Another theme that arose was the integrated use of practice materials on a daily and on-going basis by the three teachers from the general education setting.

Well, we do go over some of the practice cards. They send us booklets with the

sample questions (2).

The state provides us with the materials to help practice, and I use that format

(3).

I use the format of the FAA and the standards and the FAA practice materials (4).

These sentiments are affirmed within the literature. Flowers et al. (2005) found that 58% of the teachers they surveyed stated that they implemented elements of alternate assessments within their everyday classroom routine. Kim et al. (2006) indicated that

teachers felt mostly neutral (*M*=2.84; 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) when asked if they integrated the alternate assessment within their daily instruction.

Two sub-themes emerged from this study that are not affirmed in the literature. There are no specific studies that addressed the impact of alternate assessment process on students or an increased emphasis on choice making. Four out of the six teachers in this study expressed concern about the impact the FAA has on their students. For example, some of the teachers stated that their students could not focus for that amount of time and got anxious. One teacher voiced,

> *It's lengthy and they [students] get tired. Especially, my higher kiddos, when I have to run through those two I call warm-up questions, because they [students] get frustrated (4).*

The other theme not affirmed within the literature is the perceived emphasis on choice making. The teachers from the center school discussed that they center their instruction on students making a choice out of three options.

> *We do a lot of decision making. Pretty much everything that we show them we give them three choices to select from, which is exactly what the FAA is (5).*

Questions on the FAA forced students to select the correct answer from a choice of three options. Therefore, the teachers from the center school expressed their perspectives that they were preparing their students to take the FAA and assisted their students in making decisions.

Research Question Two

Perspectives on Curriculum and Instruction

Curricular Tensions Between Academics and Life Skills

All the teachers discussed the perceived curricular tensions and curricular resources that arose since the implementation of the FAA. The teachers from the general education settings discussed the perceived increase and focus on academics, whereas the teachers from the center settings were concerned about the decrease in time dedicated to functional life skills time. This dichotomous view on the changes in curricular focus is well documented in the literature (Browder et al., 2009). Flowers et al. (2005) reported that teachers believe that functional life-skills were being overshadowed and overpowered by the increased focus on academic standards.

The narratives from the teachers from the general education settings narratives concur with research on the movement of prioritizing a curricular academic approach over a functional approach (Ayers et al., 2011). Ayers et al. (2011) pointed out that a functional life skill and standards-based curricula should not be all exclusive, but the current focus on standards-based curriculum "sets them up as such" (p. 11). All the teachers from the general education settings discussed an increase in academic focus, which they believed was an important curricular change due to the implementation of the FAA. Browder et al. (2003) asserted that change in the curricular focus could have potential for higher expectations and an increase in accountability. The teachers from the general education settings echoed this philosophical theory. One teacher said,

You can't just, that old ESE joke, you're in the back room and you are working on

cooking for like four hours. You can't do that anymore. It guarantees that these

children are getting at least a portion of their day on academics (2).

All the teachers from the center setting expressed concern over what Ayers,

Lowrey et al. (2011) called the re-examination of the functional curriculum. The authors

asserted the need "to maintain a functional curricular approach as the priority when

developing curricular for individuals with severe disabilities" (p. 12). The teachers in the

center setting believed that functional skills were necessary to increase independence and

overall quality of life post graduation.

One teacher commented,

When you work with them all the time and especially when you talk to the parents

and the majority of the parents that I have spoken with their concerns are based

more off life skills than academic skills so for instance, I would rather have a

student that can learn to toilet themselves correctly than to identify the number 5

(5).

Flowers et al. (2005) found that only 36% of 983 teachers surveyed believed that they use

a functional curriculum. Browder et al. (2004) found that across all states surveyed

performance indicators on the alternate assessments reflected a predominant academic

curricular philosophy (54%), followed by a functional skills philosophy of only 18%. The

implications of this study indicated that there was an increase in expectations for

academic learning with a loss of functional priority.

Furthermore, all the teachers from the general education settings voiced their

persepctive that they also used academics as life skills. The teachers reported that they

integrated reading and mathematics into social and life skills lessons. This affirms the findings of Collins et al. (2006), who found "functional academic skills include basic math concepts, such as number recognition, counting, and computations that can be applied to such skills as telling time, managing money, and performing measurements" (p. 201). To alleviate some tension of how teachers could meet the individual needs of their students while at the same time ensuring access to the general curriculum, Browder et al. (2004) advocated for a "threaded" curriculum where functional and academic skills were addressed simultaneously (p. 177). According to the researchers, this area needed to expand to include more instructional options on how to effectively teach these skills.

Curricular Resources Related to FAA

The two sub-themes that emerged in relation to research question two were the creation of new materials and the adoption of a curriculum. Two of the teachers from the general education setting discussed the creation of new materials that aligned with the state standards and access points. They believed that the creation of new materials directly impacted their curriculum and instruction. One teacher explained her process,

For the writing part, we do some different things now to combine words to make sentences and using word cards and filling in the end of the story and things like that that might not have been a natural part of instruction before (3).

Collectively, the teachers from the center school stated that their schools adopted a curriculum to prepare students to take the FAA, specifically Unique Learning Systems (ULS). ULS is a standards-based curriculum designed to differentiate instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities. ULS allows teachers to track students' progress towards the standards and Access Points.

One teacher added,

Well I have to teach what Unique Learning is. I only use Unique Learning System

(1).

To date, there are no published studies that examined the efficiency of ULS as a

published curriculum. However, other studies focused on curricular designed specifically

for students with low incidence disabilities. Whalen, Moss, Ilan, Vaupal, Fielding,

Macdonald, Cernich, and Symon (2010) examined the efficacy of TeachTown.

TeachTown is a computer assisted instruction program that addresses early learning

standards and IEP goals for students who are developmentally 2 to 7 years old. The

findings concluded that those students utilizing TeachTown showed more improvement

overall on language and cognitive outcome measures as compared to the control group.

Nevertheless, Restorff, Sharpe, Abery, Rodriquez, and Kim (2012) found that

only 29% of teachers surveyed perceived that the alternate assessment expanded their

curriculum. Furthermore, the researchers found that 66% of the teachers perceived that

the alternate assessment results influenced what they taught.

<div align="center">Research Question Three</div>

<div align="center">Development and Writing of IEPs</div>

The Variability of Use of FAA Results

The nature of the variability between teachers' perspectives of how the FAA

influenced how they wrote and developed goals depended on the setting in which the

teacher worked. Karnoven and Hunyh (2009) stated that the alignment of IEP goals and

alternate assessment outcomes was meager and limited within the literature. Browder et

al. (2003) asserted that the relationship between instruction and alternate assessment

outcomes was imperative in raising the academic outcomes of students with significant cognitive disabilities. Furthermore, Lynch and Adams (2009) explained that standards-based IEPs ensured access to the general curriculum while meeting the individual learning needs. There is scant research on how alternate assessments directly impact the development and writing of IEP goals.

The three teachers from the center schools mentioned that they only used the results of the FAA within the testing section. One teacher commented,

> *The only time I ever mention the FAA is where the IEP prompts me to in one*
>
> *particular section (5).*

Another teacher explained why the FAA results did not influence how they developed and wrote IEPs.

> *Because I think the results really don't paint the picture for what and how the*
>
> *child can actually do, so I guess the best way to put it is that I find the results to*
>
> *be somewhat irrelevant (5).*

Whereas, two of the teachers from the general education setting stated that the FAA results drove their IEP goals (participatory, supported, or independent levels). This was echoed in the following IEP goal.

> *Given an independent level text, Joshua will identify the main idea,*
>
> *problem/solution and the author's purpose in fiction/non-fiction texts with visual*
>
> *supports (as needed) (IEP artifact #10).*

This apparent dichotomy of the usefulness of alternate assessment data to drive the development and writing of IEP goals is mirrored within the literature. Restorff et al. (2012) found 42% of the 401 teachers surveyed believed that alternate assessments

improved or helped them develop IEP goals. Whereas, Roach et al. (2007) found that

teachers were neutral (*M*=2.99; 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) when asked if

the results of the alternate assessment were useful for the development of IEP goals,

objectives, and benchmarks.

Context Influence on IEP Goal Development

The paradox of the overall influence of alternate assessment on the development

and writing of IEP goals was highlighted within this study and is mirrored within the

literature. Karnoven and Hunyh (2009) found that only half of the IEPs within their study

had objectives within the IEP that aligned with reading comprehension and number

systems. Restorff et al. (2012) found 68% of the 401 teachers surveyed believed that the

results of their state's alternate assessment did not help them develop IEP goals and

objectives.

Lynch and Adams (2008) showed that teachers could write standards-based IEPs

while still taking in the unique learning needs of students with significant cognitive

disabilities. Flowers et al. (2005) indicated that teachers did not fully understand how the

education of students with significant cognitive disabilities could be linked to state

curriculum content standards. This paradox of teacher perspectives was evident within

this study. The three teachers from the center school setting included IEP goals that were

life-skills in nature. For example,

> *Chris will participate in work related tasks (such as wiping a table, sorting*
>
> *cans/bottles for recycling, or handing someone a paper to be shredded) for at*
>
> *least 15 minutes, with whatever level assistance is required, by the IEP renewal*
>
> *date (IEP artifact, #18).*

Whereas, the three teachers from the general education setting used goals within the curriculum and instruction domain that were academic in nature. One teacher included the following goal within the IEP,

Norma will read orally a short story selected from a 2nd grade reader with no more than 3 errors within a 10 minute period by the end of the IEP (IEP artifact #4).

The addition of academic curricular goals is mirrored within the literature. Browder et al. (2004) suggested that IEPs were to be dominated by documenting progress in academic areas due to an increase in academic priorities. The inclusion of academic goals was a result of federal regulations and non-regulatory guidance. Thurlow (2008) commented that the latest flexibility to NCLB (2011) and IDEA (2007) expanded the total student population that could count on taking alternate assessments based on modified academic achievement standards (AA-MAS) to 2%. This has also led to more regulations specifying that IEPs are to be based on standards. The "Non-Regulatory Guidance" for modified achievement standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2007) stated,

If the student's IEP includes goals for a subject assessed under Sec 200.2, those goals must be based on the academic content standards for the grade level in which the student is enrolled. (Sec. 200.1[e][2][B][iii]).

The inclusion of academic content standards is reflected within the IEP goals of the teachers from the general education setting.

Research Question Four

Accessing the General Curriculum

Varied Beliefs About Value of Access Points

One of the major themes that emerged in relation to the fourth research question concerned teacher' beliefs about the value of access points. Accessing the general education curriculum is now a required expectation for this group of students due to federal mandates (Lee et al., 2009). Only one of the teachers within this study indicated that their students received access to the general education curriculum through inclusion within a general education classroom (Ayers et al., 2011). The rest of the teachers reported that their students received access to the general education classroom through state curriculum content standards in self-contained classrooms under the supervision of a highly qualified special education teacher (Browder et al., 2007).

The data suggested a divaricated view on the value of Access Points to the overall access to general education curriculum standards for students with significant cognitive disabilities. The teachers from the center setting expressed concern that the Access Points were too complex and included academic skills that were perceived to be too difficult and unattainable. They continued by voicing concern that the Access Points were not appropriate for their students with complex learning needs. One teacher stated,

> *I think especially that with the kids that I have who are functioning between 6*
>
> *months and 3 years of age, the developmental level is not there to teacher some of*
>
> *those access points (6).*

This concern is also shared in the literature. Flowers et al. (2005) found that teachers did not agree that alternate assessments promoted access to the grade-level academic

standards. This study found that all the teachers from the general education setting

perceived that the Access Points were appropriate and an important facet of their

curriculum and instruction. This supports the literature in which accessing content

standards can promote overall access to the general education curriculum (Spooner et al.,

2006). Kim et al. (2006) found that 13% of teachers responded that students could gain

more access to the general education curriculum through the alignment of curriculum

content standards.

One teacher commented,

I think they [access points] were meant to ensure that all teachers are looking to

the general education curriculum to see how much a student can access it (3).

However, Restorff et al. (2012) found that 55% of the teachers they surveyed believed

that their state's alternate assessment helped them align their classroom instruction with

their state curriculum content standards.

Higher Standards Lead to Higher Expectations

The second major theme to emerge in relation to research question four discussed

how higher standards lead to higher expectations for this group of teachers and students.

The three teachers from the general education setting reiterated that the FAA had an

increase in student accountability, whereas five of the teachers believe that the FAA had

an increase in teacher accountability.

One teacher stated,

We have been working with the access points to the general curriculum for

several years now and to me that gives higher standards for my students. And it's

a way of challenging them to do their best towards those access points (3).

The teachers' perspectives that the inclusion of their students with significant cognitive disabilities has led to higher expectations are confirmed in the literature. Restorff et al. (2012) found 23% of the 401 teachers surveyed believed that alternate academic standards raised their expectations of their students. Browder et al. (2007) found that higher standards ultimately lead to higher expectations and outcomes for students with significant cognitive disabilities, while at the same time, improved activity of life and increased means and opportunities for self-determination.

One teacher from a general education setting commented that other staff members within her school had higher expectations for her and her students due to their involvement in the school-wide accountability programs.

The parents and other people in the school have more of an understanding that our students can be capable of more academically and they're going to be held accountable academically. And I think that it's given people a different outlook to our program and to our student's capabilities and I hope that's a good thing (3).

The notion that all students must be included in state and district assessments is well documented within federal mandates (Browder et al., 2003). Flowers et al. (2005) reported that 28% of the teachers who participated in their survey perceived that their students had greater access to the general education curriculum due to the implementation of an alternate assessment.

Limitations

This study was not without inherent limitations. The sampling of participants was limited to a small group of teachers within a single school district and had a specific criteria for involvement. These requirements included:

- One teacher from each level of school (elementary, middle, high) at one of the exceptional centers

- Currently teach students with significant cognitive disabilities

- Some graduate level course experiences

- Included one teacher representing each level of school (elementary, middle, high) at a general education setting.

Therefore, the results may not indicate the true reality of teachers' perspectives on the instructional implications of alternate assessments. While the small sample size leads to limited generalizability into other contexts, it also gave an in-depth insight into how this one group of teachers perceived the instructional implications of alternate assessments (Gall et al., 2007).

My own experiences and current beliefs about alternate assessments and the curriculum and instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities could have been seen as limitations. I attempted to be constantly aware of the impact of these and documented this influence in my research journal. My role as a practitioner researcher could also have been a limitation. My prior experiences teaching students with significant cognitive disabilities and administering the FAA could have conflicted with the participant's constructions or interpretations of the topics. However, within the interpretivist framework, I embraced my position and my experiences in order to increase the transparency of this study. This research study provided the teachers and myself an opportunity to engage in discourse about the instructional implications of the implementation of the FAA and current and relevant issues in a professional context.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

This section discusses the implications for future research on alternate

assessments and includes:

- Expanding upon special education teachers' beliefs about the instructional

  implications of the FAA

- Blending academic and functional life skills effectively

- Suggestions for professional development

- How higher standards can lead to higher expectations.

Expanding Upon Special Education Teachers' Beliefs About the Instructional

Implications of the FAA

The teachers were very passionate about their perspectives on how the FAA

impacted their instructional decision-making, and how they balanced theory to practice.

Further in-depth conversations with teachers would provide more of an understanding on

how teachers specifically balance federal regulations and theories into their classroom

practices.

According to Towles-Reeves et al. (2009) there were no research studies on the

instructional impact of alternate assessments. Therefore, it would be important to analyze

instructional practices and how they have increased student access to the general

education curriculum and higher standards. Furthermore, it is imperative to define and

discuss perceived barriers to content instruction since "there are not many evidence-based

studies to help define what appropriate instruction is" (Thurlow, 2008, p. 135). Kim et al.

(2006) reported an apparent "mismatch between the underlying principles of

accountability assessment and teachers' perspectives and self-reported practices" (p. 92).

This mismatch with teacher perspectives was due to many variables including training, lack of experience with alternate assessments, and rationale with accessing general education curriculum.

One way to alter teachers' beliefs about instructional impacts is for school, district, and state leaders to provide a vision and adequate professional development about the importance of using assessment results to drive instructional decision making. Educational leaders must make appropriate connections between policy and best practices in order to positively impact the learning and assessment of students with significant cognitive disabilities.

There is a need to examine best models of instructional processes based off data received from the alternate assessment. Teachers need examples of best practices and models of quality instructional planning. This could provide insight in how to meet the individual and complex needs of students with significant cognitive disabilties and of federal requirements; specifically NCLB (2001) and the goal of 100% proficiency by 2014.

Blending Academic and Functional Life Skills Effectively

One major area of concern that was highlighted within the literature and within this study was tension between how teachers could meet the individual needs of their students while ensuring access to the general education curriculum. Future research could focus on how teachers effectively and efficiently implemented a "threaded" curriculum approach. Browder et al. (2004) advocated for a "threaded" curricular approach where functional and life skills were addressed at the same time. This approach would serve the

individual and unique learning needs of students with significant cognitive disabilities while ensuring access to the general education curriculum standards.

Future studies could examine how educational leaders bridge the gap between policy and classroom practice, and how this has impacted the curriulum for students with significant cognitive disabilities. More attention could be placed on whether schools that adopted a functional life skills approach have better educational and post-school outcomes for students with significat cognitive disabilities, versus schoools that have adopted an academic approach or a threaded curriculum.

Suggestions for Professional Development

Another area for future research and practice is the need for more professional development for teachers serving students with significant cognitive disabilities. Professional development is needed for teachers to fully understand the relationship between state standards and IEP objectives and goals, as well as bridging the gap between policy and best practices. Research has indicated that teachers do not fully comprehend how instruction and assessments can be linked to state standards (Agran et al., 2002; Flowers et al., 2005). Nolet and McLaughlin (2005) reported that a barrier to providing access to the general curriculum was that teachers did not understand the meaning of curriculum. Therefore, it is imperative that more emphasis on professional development is aimed towards revealing how standards-based IEPs and appropriate curriculum can ensure access to the general curriculum, while meeting the individual needs of students with significant cognitive disabilities (Lynch & Adams, 2008).

Professional development opportunities could be maximized if teachers were able to share and collaborate on developing and planning appropriate instructional

opportunities that integrate best practices. Teachers serving student with significant cognitive disabilties have unique knowledge based on their experiences, that would benefit teachers in similar teaching contexts. Furthermore, professional development could focus on how formative assessments in the instructional process can drive future instruction based on the individual learning needs of each student. These sessions must provide teachers a solid base of how instruction, curriculum, and assessment is a cylclic process, and how each component is neceeasry to provide educational opportunities to maximize student growth. Professional development must be emmersed in practice and have on-going opportunities for follow-up with teachers.

How Higher Standards Can Lead to Higher Expectations

The last area of recommended future research and practice is examining how higher standards can lead to higher expectations. Literature has confirmed that teacher perspectives on the inclusion of their students with significant cognitive disabilities in standards-based movement has led to higher expectations (Browder et al., 2004; Browder et al., 2007; Flowers et al., 2005). The inclusion of students with significant cognitive disabilities into accountability systems have led to powerful shifts in the perspectives of how this group of students are instructed (Ayres et al., 2011). With the implementation of higher content standards and assessments, teachers are being encouraged to have higher expectations for students with significant cognitive disabilities (Flowers, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Browder, & Spooner, 2005).

The results of this study support how teachers' philosophical beliefs can make a difference in the overall learning and educational opportunities of students with significant cognitive disabilities. It is essential for teachers to work collaboratly to

identify best practices and appropriate instructional techniques that includes higher standards. By having teachers adopt higher standards for their students with significant cognitive disabilities, they are ultimately providing higher expectations for their students, which can lead to increased educational and post-school outcomes. Furthermore, district and school leaders should also adopt higher expectations for this group of students. Everyone should be held accountable for higher expectations based on higher standards.

As a result, future studies could examine the variables that are associated with perspectives of how higher standards can lead to higher expectations that ultimately lead to increased outcomes for students with significant cognitive disabilities (Browder et al., 2007). Furthermore, studies could examine the differences in policy implementation throughout the schools and if this has a direct or indirect impact on teacher perspectives on student expectations.

All the teachers expressed graitutude about being involved in this study. The appreciated that their voices were being heard and valued especially since there is little research that highlights the views of teachers with significant cognitive disabilities (Jones, 2005).

Overall, two subthemes emerged that were not affirmed or highlighted in the current literature on alternate assessments and students with significant cognitive disabilties: the disconnect with reality and student need, and the emphasis on choice making. These two subthemes, along with the differences highlighted by the teaching context (center versus general education setting) were the major contributions of this research and warrant the need for further research.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the emerging themes and subthemes in relation to the research questions and to current research and literature on the instructional implications of alternate assessments. The analysis of teacher perspectives informs policy makers, researchers, and practitioners on the instructional implications of the FAA. This study affirmed the variability of teachers' perspectives on the impact of the FAA on their daily instructional decision-making, development and writing of IEPs, and the overall education experience of students with significant cognitive disabilities. Finally, in the words of Les Brown, "shoot for the moon. Even if you miss, you'll land among the stars."

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Appendix A

Interview I Questions

1. Tell me about how you got into teaching, including the schools and teaching assignments you have held (including demographic information, years teaching, highest level of schooling, certifications, experience with alternate assessments).

2. What is your understanding of how the No Child Left Behind Act and the Florida accountability system as it relates to the students in your class?

3. What does access to the general curriculum mean to you and your students?

4. Explain the process you used to prepare your students for the Florida Alternate Assessment.

5. In what ways has your daily instruction changed (or has not changed) as a result implementation of the Florida Alternate Assessment?

6. Tell me how you write and develop IEP's. Explain how the Florida Alternate Assessment has influenced the writing and development of your students' IEPs?

7. Before the Florida Alternate Assessment, what influenced your curricular focus? In what ways has the implementation of the Florida Alternate Assessment influenced and impacted your curricular focus for teaching students with significant cognitive disabilities, specifically the dichotomy between academic and life skills?

8. What issues have you seen emerge as a result of administering the Florida Alternate Assessment? What issues have you seen emerge as a result of your students participating in the Florida Alternate Assessments?

9.   Do you have any other comments on alternate assessments, curriculum and instruction, or accessing the general curriculum for your students?

Appendix B

IEP Analysis

Domain/Characteristic	Evidence within IEP
Results of past Florida Alternate Assessment listed	
Student's current academic achievement includes data-based information	
IEP goals Skill Domain: Instructional content is academic in nature-Reading, Language Arts, Math, Science, and/or Social Studies (circle each academic area addressed)	
IEP goals Skill Domain: Instructional content is life-skills in nature- Pre-vocational skills, independent functioning, social skills	
IEP goals: To what extent are the goals aligned with the grade-level academic content standards	
IEP plops: Mentions student performance relative to Sunshine State Standards Access Points	
Effects of the disability on involvement and progress in the general education curriculum	

Appendix C

Interview Questions 1-2

1. So you mentioned that you used the Unique Learning System. Do you think that the curriculum was a result of the implementation of the FAA, why or why not? In other words, what came first?

2. You also mentioned that when writing IEP goals you write them to fit your classroom needs instead of being influenced by the FAA. Do you also look at the Access Points to write them or mainly based off of student's needs?

3. And you also said your curricular focus changed for your students by offering three choices. Has anything else in your curriculum and instruction changed, such as the specific content you are teaching?

4. Do you use the results of the FAA to drive your instruction?

5. Also do you use the results to drive your curriculum instruction?

6. What do you believe the positive benefits of the FAA?

7. What are the negative aspects?

8. Do you believe that the FAA and Access Points are beneficial to the overall learning opportunities for this group of students?

9. Are there any aspects that are missing from the FAA and the Access Points?

10. Do you believe that Access Points are sufficient access to the general curriculum? do according to the general curriculum. So I would have to say probably yes.

11. What do you think is more beneficial, academic, life skills or a blended approach?

12. Finally, do you have any additional comments on the Alternate Assessment or curriculum instruction?

Appendix D

Inteview Questions

2-2

1. You mentioned that you are the facilitator when your students access the general curriculum. Can you give me a specific example of how you do that?

2. Can you provide a specific example of what you have added to your curriculum as a result of the FAA?

3. Do you write your instruction goals based off the Access Points or do you base your goals off of something else?

4. Do you use the results of the FAA to drive your instruction?

5. Do you believe that the Access Points in the FAA are beneficial to the overall learning opportunities for this group of students?

6. Are there any aspects of the Access Points or FAA that you think are missing?

7. Are there any aspects of the FAA or Access Points that are missing?

8. What do you believe are the positive benefits of the FAA and Access Points?

9. What do you believe are the negative points of the FAA and Access Points?

10. Do you believe the Access Points are sufficient enough access to the Gen Ed curriculum? Why or why not?

11. What do you think is more beneficial for these students, an academic focus, a life skills or a blended approach?

12. Do you have any additional comments you want to add on Alternate Assessment or

curriculum instruction?

Appendix E

Interview Questions

3-2

1. Why are higher standards important for this group of students?

2. You mentioned that you include different assessments similar to the FAA. Can you tell me what they are and describe them?

3. Do you use the results of the FAA to drive your instruction?

4. Does the results of the FAA influence how you write your IEP goals?

5. Does the results of the FAA drive your curriculum and instruction?

6. What do you believe are the positive benefits of the implementation of the FAA?

7. What do you believe are the negative aspects of the implementation of the FAA?

8. Do you have any additional comments on alternate assessment or the curriculum and instruction for this group of students?

Appendix F

Interview Questions

4-2

1. Why are higher standards important for this group of students?

2. Why do you think academic skills are more important for your students than life skills?

3. Do you use the results of the FAA to drive your instruction?

4. Does the results of the FAA influence how you write your IEP goals?

5. Does the results of the FAA drive your curriculum and instruction?

6. What do you believe are the positive benefits of the implementation of the FAA?

7. What do you believe are the negative aspects of the implementation of the FAA?

8. Do you believe that the Access Points and FAA are beneficial to the overall learning opportunities for this group of students? Are there any aspects that are missing or should be focused on more?

9. Do you believe that Access Points are sufficient enough access to the general ed curriculum? Why or why not?

10. What do you think is more beneficial for this group of students? Academic, life-skills, or a blend?

11. Do you have any additional comments on alternate assessment or the curriculum and instruction for this group of students?

Appendix G

Interview Questions

5-2

1. Why are higher standards important for this group of students?

2. Why do you think academic skills are more important for your students than life skills?

3. Do you use the results of the FAA to drive your instruction?

4. Does the results of the FAA influence how you write your IEP goals?

5. Does the results of the FAA drive your curriculum and instruction?

6. What do you believe are the positive benefits of the implementation of the FAA?

7. What do you believe are the negative aspects of the implementation of the FAA?

8. Do you believe that the Access Points and FAA are beneficial to the overall learning

opportunities for this group of students? Are there any aspects that are missing or should

be focused on more?

9. Do you believe that Access Points are sufficient enough access to the general ed

curriculum? Why or why not?

10. What do you think is more beneficial for this group of students? Academic, life-

skills, or a blend?

11. Do you have any additional comments on alternate assessment or the curriculum and

instruction for this group of students?

Appendix H

Interview Questions

6-2

1. Tell me why higher standards are important for this group of students?

2. Do you think academic skills are more important than life skills?

3. Do you use the results of the FAA to drive your instruction?

4. Do you use the results to write your goals?

5. What do you believe are the negative aspects of the FAA?

6. Do you believe that the access points and the FAA are beneficial to the overall learning opportunities for this group of students?

7. Do you believe that the access points are sufficient enough access to the general curriculum?

8. Do you have any additional comments about the alternate assessment, curriculum and instruction or access to the general curriculum?