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# What are the socio-emotional experiences and perceptions of third grade students with high-stakes testing?

Anne Marie Juola-Rushton  
*University of South Florida*

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What are the Socio-Emotional Experiences and Perceptions of Third Grade Students with  
High-Stakes Testing?

by

Anne Marie Juola-Rushton

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Childhood Education  
College of Education  
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Stephen Graves, Ph.D.  
Darlene DeMarie, Ph.D.  
James R. King, Ed.D.  
Elizabeth Larkin, Ed.D.

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### Dissertation Committee

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of third grade students with high-stakes testing. The study was designed to address this issue from the perspective of the third grade students' experience and offer a venue for them to share their stories. The following research question guides this study: What are the socio-emotional experiences and perceptions of third grade students with high-stakes testing?

Data analysis employed here falls under the rubric of qualitative approaches of symbolic interaction and phenomenology written in a narrative format within the provisions of portraiture. This study uses the analytical procedures set out by Marshall and Rossman (1989) to give meaning to the data. The analytical procedures include: organization, synthesis, analysis, and presentation of the data. To ensure that the data remained in the purest form for the development of student portraits, the resulting themes and patterns were then reviewed under five strategies proposed by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997). These five strategies are: repetitive refrains, resonant metaphors, institutional and cultural rituals, triangulation and revealing patterns.

There were 51 participants in this study. Twelve were primary participants and 39 were support participants. The 12 primary participants were students who voluntarily

took part in in-depth interviews and focus groups and provided written reflections and drawings. The 39 support participants joined the 12 primary participants by providing written reflections and drawings. Themes that emerged are: (1) Self-Test, (2) Attribution, (3) Prevalent Influences, and (4) Emotions. These themes are analyzed and the results discussed. Then, the analysis turns to the development of portraitures. Three portraitures are revealed to provide the perceived experiences of the participants. A discussion of the findings, along with recommendations for practice and research conclude the study.

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

*“Anyone can confirm how little the grading that results from examinations corresponds to the final useful work of people in life.”*

Jean Piaget (1973, p. 74)

Assessment is an essential part of the educational process. Teachers, students, parents—indeed all stakeholders including future employers no less than the government agencies that provide the funding for education, need to know that the relevant material has been mastered, whether the specific content is basic literacy and numeracy, or more abstract knowledge such as knowing how to present a logical argument. No one wants to go to a dentist (or car mechanic) who was never been tested to determine whether they have acquired the necessary basic skills of their profession. That said, however, the question becomes how much testing, when, by whom, of what content material, and at what cost? This thesis will explore how third grade students experience and perceive what has been termed “high-stakes” testing, specific to those currently studying in the school districts of the state of Florida.

#### Statement of the Problem

A U.S. federal law that reauthorizes a number of federal programs, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, commonly known as NCLB, has as its goal the improvement of the performance of students in American schools through increasing the standards of accountability. NCLB is the latest federal legislation to enact the theories of standards-

based education reform which are based on the belief that high expectations and setting of goals will result in success for all students. Currently, grade level promotion for students as early as third grade is now determined by reading scores on a standardized assessment.

The effectiveness and desirability of measures used by the NCLB continue to be a matter of controversy. Teachers' unions such as the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers have opposed NCLB reforms almost from their inception. They question NCLB's effectiveness as presently written and funded, and note a number of difficulties school districts face in implementing its provisions. Amidst the controversy, a Gallup survey found as many as seven in ten Americans say they don't know enough to have an opinion about NCLB (<http://www.doe.org>). The same is true for parents, where 55 percent say they don't know enough to say whether or not the law is improving local public education. Broadly speaking, opinion surveys have shown strong public support for the concept of setting and enforcing standards in public schools, including the use of testing. Which should come first—accountability or instruction? In relation to formal examinations, Piaget (1973) argued that a contradiction existed because what labeled a student “successful” was ability to “adapt to the type of instruction” rather than “mastery of problems they appear not to understand” (p. 14).

In response to these initiatives, many states and school districts have increased the time that the student spends on reading, writing, and in practicing taking tests. The assumption is that scoring well on the state’s standardized test is both an indicator of

quality teaching and of quality learning. In Florida, the State Board of Education determines promotion criteria to the fourth grade by the performance in reading on the third grade Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). For Florida counties, an average of 12% of third graders per county failed to meet promotion criteria in their first attempt in 2006 (Institute for School Innovation, 2006).

Despite the increased number of hours that teachers are spending on student preparation for high-stakes tests, little research exists that demonstrates these tests are indicators of (a) quality education and (b) that the students' emotional and psychological well being is supported. Indeed, only minimal research exists directly soliciting the student's perceptions, experiences and socio-emotional states during these high-stakes situations (Triplett & Barksdale, 1995; Triplett, Barksdale, & Leftwich, 2003; Wheelock, Bebell, & Haney, 2002). This is regrettable because the students' perceptions, ideas, and feedback may provide useful knowledge about how to teach more effectively, how to improve the tests, and how to provide instruction and measures that best serve the student's and the society's needs. The voices of the children have been silent. We need to understand more about what happens to them during this period of their education.

Most people will agree that each child should be educated to the best of his or her ability. The problem arises as to how best achieve this. Opinions clearly differ. In the state of Florida children are gauged by their performance on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Tool (FCAT) initiated by the Sunshine State Standards, and approved by the State Board of Education in 1996. Continuing financial support was made contingent on



“school performance” as measured by the student test scores. Teachers have been reported as being in the frontline of the educational process. When there is conflict between accountability and instruction, often politically driven, it is the children themselves who are most at risk (Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000; Gordon & Reese, 1997; Hoffman, Assaf, & Paris, 2001; Triplett & Barksdale, 2005).

#### Statement of Purpose

In the following study, I will explore the experiences and perceptions of five classrooms of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade children divided into three levels of academic ability: high, medium and low as assessed by their previous year’s Stanford 10 scores and current year’s Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessment. The study will take place over a two-month period and seeks to discover and construct a narrative account of the students’ experiences as told from their own perspective.

Some of the specific issues to be investigated include:

- The experiences and perceptions 3<sup>rd</sup> graders have during the high-stakes testing period;
- The emotional impact the high-stakes of testing has on 3<sup>rd</sup> graders;
- The questions students raise during this time;
- The experience the students describe having while being tested;
- The nature of the children’s experiences.

## The Qualitative Nature of this Study

Qualitative investigations typically entail the interpretation of perceived experiences that are gathered from written and oral reflections. Depending upon the study, the interpretation of events, feelings, experiences and perceptions advance into a more tapered and focused representation. It is important to view this study as only one, in a series of links connecting a long chain of knowledge. This study yields knowledge of students' perceptions of high-stakes testing by allowing the voices of the children to be heard. It is important to emphasize that generalizing the results to other studies or even to other children is problematic. Just as no two children are exactly the same, one cannot expect their perceptions to be exactly the same either. Nonetheless, it may be possible to develop a preliminary model from the experiences reported here regarding student perceptions of high-stakes testing in the current state of our school systems that will be of service in future research.

## Purpose of Study

This study focuses on the socio-emotional experiences of third grade students during Florida State's high-stakes testing period at a low socio-economic school (52% free and reduced lunch). Children's individual experiences were restricted to themselves and to their grade level. This study did not focus on other grades experiencing high-stakes testing or on students from various states or socio-economic class. It also did not focus on the classroom teachers' perceptions toward high-stakes testing. Thus these

findings are highly specific to the particular participants. This is a study of a small group of individuals.

My intent is to present as much rich description, insight, and detail about the students' subjective experiences as I can. Pictures drawn and described by the students will be collected two weeks prior to testing, mid-way through the week of testing, and during the two weeks after the state examination. In addition, written reflections from the students describing their emotions, interviews of specific children and oral focus groups' taped interviews (during the course of the testing) will take place.

My objective in undertaking this qualitative study is to add to the state of knowledge and thereby allow the reader to construct applicability. As an interpretive study, it is important to provide the reader the opportunity to reflect upon the unique perceptions, described by the students as they encounter high-stakes accountability in their lives.

#### Research Question

*What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future* (National Commission, 1996), conveyed the most influential component of student learning as derived from the teacher's knowledge base and instructional delivery. However, nearly half the teachers surveyed by Jones and Egly (2002) contended that the directive to make school systems accountable from NCLB (2001) hindered the children's opportunity to construct knowledge through interactive curriculum and thus hindered rather than promoted their understanding of the knowledge base and the opportunity for quality instruction.

Much of the literature related to high-stakes testing has focused on the issues of accountability (Carnegie Forum, 1986; Holmes Group, 1995; National Commission, 1996; National Commission on Excellence, 1983; NCLB, 2001 Project Alliance 30, 1991) or on how educators have been impacted by the political exigency (Gordon & Reese, 1997; Johnston, Afflerbach, & Weiss, 1993; Johnston, Guice, Baker, Malone, & Michelson, 1995; Smith, Edelsky, Draper, Rottenberg, & Cherland, 1991). Little research has examined students' perceptions in this era of high-stakes testing nor the socio-emotional experience of being a third grader caught in the cross-fire between politics and pedagogy. The following research question is the focus for this study: What are the socio-emotional experiences and perceptions of third grade students with high-stakes testing?

#### Significance of the Study

A new contributing factor to the study of how students perceive high-stakes testing is brain research. Advances in imaging have allowed scientists to go deeper into how people think, perceive and learn. These new technologies seek to link how the brain reacts while learning how our children are taught. The connection between children's brain responses and their emotional maturity is a fascinating, new research area.

Scientists from various disciplines define emotions in a variety of ways (Davidson, 1992; Dodge & Garber, 1991; Holstege, 1994; Kagan, 1994; Siegel, 1999). From the perspective of physiological and cognitive psychologists (LeDoux, 1996), emotions are focused on as being something within, while social psychologists focus on the events and people that affect emotions (Harr, 1986). Almost all theorists consider

emotions to be multifaceted, to involve interaction with the environment, and to result in cognitive and biological change.

Some educators have suggested that emotional growth is the essence of maturation (Eliot, 1999; Gopnik, Meltzoff, & Kuhl, 1999; Healy, 2004; Wolfe, 2001). Too much of the wrong kind of emotion is considered harmful, such as when stress interferes with brain functioning (Gunnar, 1998; Gunnar & Nelson, 1994; Sapolsky, 1996). Diamond and Hopson (1999) find the stimulation of the brain's cortex directly related to the growth and absorption of sensory, motor, and intellectual experiences. The stimulation brought on by the quality of the schooling is thought to foster the child's future contributions to society.

Additional research (Ekman, Levenson, & Friesen, 1983; Levenson, 1992) connects different emotions to bodily feedback with disgust or surprise being distinguished on the basis of different ANS (autonomic nervous system) responses such as skin temperature or heart rate. The possibilities for the onset of emotional-specific feedback are astounding. In less than one second the striated muscles respond to a stimulus and then that sensation reaches the cortex (Damasio, 1994; Izard, 1992; Tomkins, 1962). Externally, the result is depicted for example, through expressions of joy or sadness. The knowledge that can be obtained by combining research from the neurosciences, psychology and education provides great potential for understanding third grade students' perceptions of high-stakes testing.

Triplett, Barksdale and Leftwich (2003) maintain that research on high-stakes testing fails to describe the point of view of the children within the school systems (e.g., what thoughts and feelings the children experience during high-stakes testing). These authors studied only children who felt stressed. As a result, the perceptions of those children who did not feel concerned or anxious were omitted.

When Wheelock, Bebell, and Haney (2002) studied middle and high school students' experiences with high-stakes testing, drawings were collected that depicted a variety of emotions. Reliance on the researcher's inference of student representation concluded there was a combination of positive and negative emotions in relation to high-stakes testing. However, the student's own explicit statements were missing. Through drawings and written responses from third through sixth graders Triplett and Barksdale (2005) examined students' perceptions of high-stakes testing. They focused on 225 third through sixth grade students. Findings supported changes being made in the testing culture, utilizing a variety of assessment options to alleviate student anxiety. Given the resources being spent and the potential importance of high-stakes testing upon the children's futures, in conjunction with the limited research in this area, it is essential to explore the experiences and perceptions of the students engaged in the testing.

The results reported in this study provide an opportunity for readers to better understand the experiences of third grade students educated in the era of high-stakes testing. Additionally, this dissertation provides an opportunity for the children to express their understandings, perceptions, and experiences of life as a third grader, that is, their

own phenomenology. The voices of third grade students have not been heard in the research literature. The present study provides further understanding of the interaction between students and their high-stakes experiences.

Much responsibility has been placed on our school age children. At present, there is an inadequate understanding of what happens during this crucial third grade school year. The experiences gleaned from the students' stories presented in this research may help future students, teachers, and administrators understand the process they are going through. It may also help professional development programs to plan and organize their curricula to maximize communication, acquisition of information, and mastery of knowledge.

Finally, the process of taking part in this dissertation may provide the students themselves with insights as they share their stories and come to understand each other's experiences. Most generally, the experiences recounted in this study may provide insights into how school districts can more effectively assist teachers and students during the critical year in which they experience high-stakes accountability in the school setting.

#### Terms and Definitions

*Attributions.* Beck defines attribution as the common, everyday explanations for the causes of behavior – our answers to the question, “Why did I (or another person) do that” (2005, p. 474).

*Changeable.* What happens now doesn't have to happen in the future.

*DIBELS*. Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills are a set of standardized, individually administered measures of early literacy development (<http://dibels.uoregon.edu/>).

*Emotion*. Multifaceted, incorporating interaction with the environment, cognitive processes and physical changes.

*Experience*. In this study, Flexner's (1987) definition for the term "experience" was used, i.e., "an instance or segment in one's life of personally encountering something and making this instance the object of one's consciousness; the totality of cognition, given by perceptions, that is, all that is perceived, understood, and remembered" (p.2).

*External*. Things outside the person.

*Florida Comprehensive Assessment Tool (FCAT)*. Standardized testing in the primary and secondary public schools of Florida that determine promotion for grade levels third, eighth, and tenth.

*Hermeneutic phenomenology*. Hirsch (1967) defines hermeneutics as the textual interpretation and reconstruction of the author's intended meaning. Merleau-Ponty (1962) describes phenomenology as the study of essences and therefore asks the question of "What is the nature or meaning of something?" The combination of hermeneutic phenomenology provides both the descriptive (phenomenology) and interpretive (hermeneutic) methodologies of understanding lived experiences (Van Manen, 1990).

*Internal*. The characteristic of the person or things the person can do.



*Liminality.* Anthropologist A. van Gennep (1960) defined liminality as referring to the specific times in an individual's life in which they leave one clearly identified social status and entered another. These are often characterized as states of ambiguity, confusion and discomfort. For the purposes of this study, liminality will be defined as this state of transition in which the students found themselves betwixt and between the various points in their experience.

*Phenomenology.* Van Manen defines the term phenomenology as “the study of lived or existential meanings; it attempts to describe and interpret these meanings to a certain degree of depth and richness” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 8).

*Portraiture.* A qualitative procedure bridging science and art. Portraits are shaped from the data in a narrative format that permits the reader to connect with the research findings in a story format from the participants’ perspectives.

*Prevalent Influence.* Power to effect because of position or ability is generally accepted.

*Primary Participants.* Those students who returned permission for the interviews, written reflections and drawings.

*Reflections.* Qualitative methods of gaining descriptive accounts of individual lived experiences. These experiences are captured either through interviews, group discussions, or written narratives.

*Stable.* If it’s like that now [hard], it’s not likely to change [will always be hard].

*Stanford 10.* A standardized assessment for grade level two students to demonstrate learning gains.

*Support Participants.* Those students who turned in permission slips for written reflections and drawings but not interview participation.

*Symbolic Interactionism.* A theoretical perspective that views how human beings make sense and meaning of their interactions with others on the “basis of how they believe other person behave toward them; and their self-perceptions and feelings tend to be mediated by how they think others see and feel about them” (Blumer, 1969; Van Manen, p. 186, 1990).

*Temporal validity.* The extent to which the study results can be generalized over time (Johnson & Christensen, p. 245, 2004).

*Self-Test.* A bearing existence of testing within the immediate surroundings.

#### Delimitations

Specific delimitations included the requirement that the students involved in the research are enrolled in the same school at which I am the Reading Coach. This past year I returned to this school, after being away for two years, and was appointed as Reading Coach. In that role I have day to day contact with the students. Onwuegbuzie (2003) asserts there is researcher bias when one person acts in the role of both researcher and data collector. A clear initial statement of intentions can delineate and diminish the effect of researcher bias.

To avoid any confound with maturation, the researcher will limit data collection to the 30 days surrounding the high-stakes testing. Johnson and Christensen (2004) define maturation as the physical or mental changes that individuals encounter over time. Mindful of the effect these changes might have on the students' experiences and perceptions; this internal threat to validity is controlled through timely data collection.

Drop-out is an additional potential problem in regards to the validity of the study. In this school, there is a transient population, causing a greater potential problem (Onwuegbuzie, 2003). To control for this, the researcher increased the sample size to allow for the possibility of dropouts.

Generalizing the results of the study across populations, settings and time threatens the external validity of the study (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). The findings from this study represent the experiences and perceptions of third grade students, hence, diminishing the ability to generalize the results to different populations. To enhance population validity, the researcher has selected students from high, medium and low ability levels based on Stanford 10 and DIBELS scores for the interview portion of the study. Temporal validity (Johnson & Christensen, 2004) is an issue because the data for this study will be collected during one school semester. Therefore, validity can only represent this time period and cannot be assured to withstand validity across time.

#### Limitations

During this study, I serve as Reading Coach and facilitate the reading remediation for their grade level. This relationship exists with all of the students and not just the 51

study participants. During the spring of 2007 I continued to serve as Reading Coach even as the students began to reflect on their assessment experiences. This relationship might pose a problem regarding my status as a female educator, supervisor, and researcher to the third grade students. To control for this I use triangulation of the interviews, drawings, and reflections to increase validity (Green, Caracelli & Graham, 1989).

### Assumptions

The following assumptions are made in reference to this study:

- The perceived experiences of the students are important to understand the third grade year from the students' perspective.
- The students are able to articulate their experiences and perceptions.
- The individual interviews, taped group discussions, drawings, and written reflections are valid methods of gaining information about the students' subjective experiences.
- Participants tell their stories and share their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions concerning their experiences openly and honestly, in both the written reflections and orally in the interview and group discussions.

### Organization of Remaining Chapters

The remaining chapters will present information on the significance of this study. Chapter 2 begins with an examination of the literature on the history of legislation focusing on scholastic performance. Next, the chapter provides a brief review of the literature related to student development and learning with high-stakes testing.

Concluding chapter 2 will be an exploration of existing research on middle school students' experiences and perceptions with high-stakes testing as no literature presently exists for third grade students.

Chapter 3 will focus on methodology and covers the methods, discussion of the participants, ethical considerations, procedures and study design. Chapter 4 will provide the results and support for the themes and patterns of the study. Chapter 5 will then take the results from Chapter 4 and present portrayures of third grade students' experiences and perceptions of high-stakes testing. In conclusion, Chapter 6 is devoted to discussion of the study findings and recommendations. The focus of the discussion will be to connect the themes and patterns found in the data to literature in the field. The purpose for recommendations will be to improve the high-stakes testing experiences and perceptions of third graders.

## CHAPTER 2

### Review of Literature

*“Children learn for the same reason that birds fly. They are learning machines. If your child is having problems in school, the question you should be asking yourself is: What’s turning off this learning machine?”*

-Edward Zigler (Professor of Child Psychology, Yale University)

The purpose of this qualitative study was to record the experiences and perceptions of a group of third grade children in a moderately low socio-economic school in southwest Florida as they prepared for the state of Florida’s high-stakes testing. Since this project employed an integrative model, several research domains were explored including the history of the political climate and national commission reports, the socio-emotional environment of children, gender differences, as well as research on the impact of “teaching to the test.”

I will begin by discussing a variety of Commission Reports issued over the past several decades and the evolution of their impact on high-stakes testing in the U.S. I will then discuss the literature relating to the child’s socio-emotional environment. In this section I will also survey the literature on gender differences from a neuroscience perspective. Finally I will review the literature on the impact of “teaching to the test” on the student’s emotions by examining several qualitative methodological studies regarding self-concept, attitude change, stress, anxiety, and the role of teachers.

## History of Commission Reports

Lee Iacocca, the past president of Chrysler automobile corporation was quoted by the National Commission as saying, “In a truly rational society, the best of us would be teachers, and the rest of us would have to settle for something less” (National Commission, 1996). These eloquent words came from a highly creative individual who took the helm of an automobile company on the brink of financial bankruptcy and brought it back to solvency. His statement assumes we live in a ‘rational society’. Many Americans, however, find their education system and prospect of serious predicament frightening. Like the Chrysler Corporation, some speculate that American education is on the brink of bankruptcy.

Many of the problems, difficulties, and possible solutions for reviving American education have been effectively and forcefully expressed over the past thirty years. A number of publications called for a variety of reforms (Carnegie Forum, 1983, 1986; Holmes Group, 1986, 1995; National Commission, 1996; Project Alliance 30, 1991). These “wake up calls” to the American public, the educational policy makers, teachers, principals, and deans of education to the critical state of the American public education system appear to have had only limited effect. Unfortunately, the general public does not hold the teaching profession in high esteem and often blame teachers for many of the problems (Guest, 1993, Holmes, 1986).

The 1986, publication *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative of Educational Reform* served notice on the American public clear that their educational system was in serious

trouble. Its catch phrase of a 'rising tide of mediocrity' (pg. 5) quickly achieved the status of a mantra regarding the state of education in our nation. The report, sponsored by the Carnegie Forum (1986) called for seriously taking stock of the inconsistencies in the public schools. Since only a minimal number of states answered the call for establishing comprehensive reforms, the Elementary Secondary Education Act (1988) was simply reauthorized in its original form. Calling for professional ranking and teacher assessment, reducing classroom sizes, and additional teacher-student time, the Act demonstrated only minimal change from its twenty-plus year predecessor.

In 1989, President George H. W. Bush and various governors from around the country responded by attending an Education Summit at which they formed the National Educational Goals Panel. Set up to monitor the progress of educational change, the Panel focused on raising academic standards (Jennings, 1995a). With no clear academic standards defined, Congress balked and in 1992 created the National Council on Education Standards and Testing (NCEST). The council agreed to the voluntary implementation of national content and performance standards, heeding the recommendation that equating state merit examinations would provide a uniform national measurement of progress.

When Bill Clinton assumed Presidency in 1993 his administration revamped the Elementary Secondary Education Act (1994) and decided that both it and the Goals 2000: Educate America Act would be written into law (Jennings, 1995b). Five principles guided the legislation: 1) upholding high standards for all children; 2) focusing on teaching and



learning; 3) providing flexibility in order to stimulate school-based and district initiative, coupled with responsibility for student performance; 4) stimulating links among schools, parents, and communities; and 5) targeting resources to where needs were greatest and in amounts sufficient to make a difference. These five principles enjoyed widespread bipartisan support.

This was not the first attempt to bring to light the serious conditions of the American school system. A couple of decades earlier, two books with similar titles had identified several problems in the teacher preparation programs in American universities. *The Miseducation of American Teachers* by James D. Koerner (1963) and *The Education of American Teachers* by James Conant (1963) both presented compelling evidence for ‘low standards’, ‘poor academic and qualified teachers’ and ‘weak content and pedagogy’. Koerner scathingly proclaimed:

...it is the truth and it should be said: the inferior intellectual quality of the Education faculty is the fundamental limitation of the field, and will remain so, in my judgment, for some time to come....Likewise, the academic caliber of students in Education remains a problem, as it always has...Course work in Education deserves its ill-repute. It is most often puerile, repetitious, dull, and ambiguous - incontestably (p.17-18).

Subsequent publications also attempted to stem the decline of the American educational system. Reform reports (The National Commission, 1996; Holmes Group, 1995; Project 30 Year Two Report, 1991; and, A Nation Prepared, 1986) all called for

improvements in how the teacher understands the learner, the developmental process of learning, and the influence of culture upon learners. A more recent publication, *What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future* (National Commission, 1996) outlines three major premises that have been clearly identified as possible solutions to the problem:

1) What teachers know and can do is the most important influence on what students learn; 2) Recruiting, preparing, and retaining good teachers is the central strategy for improving our schools; and, 3) School reform cannot succeed unless it focuses on creating the conditions in which teachers can teach, and teach well (National Commission, 1996).

These are exciting, although not necessarily new (See Conant, 1963; and Koerner, 1963) recommendations to help guide our educational system through increasing the opportunity for all children to learn. Ultimately, however, the burden of America's educational future rests squarely on the shoulders of tomorrow's teachers and specifically on today's students.

### Standardization of American Schools

In conjunction with an increase in teacher and student accountability, has come an emphasis on the quality and type of work the student is expected to produce. The 21<sup>st</sup> century economy has decreased in blue-collar workers to only about 10% of the workforce (Drucker, 1994; Hudson Institute, 1987). Accountability and expectation are not meshing. Gardner (1993), proposed a theory of what he termed "multiple

intelligences.” According to this view, a successful workforce requires a combination of organizational skills and teamwork along with greater technological abilities. The even faster pace of technological advancement and complexity required in the modern global economy likewise calls for an educational experience that allows students’ thoughts and drives to interact with their curriculum, peers and teachers (National Commission, 1996). While graduation rates and basic literacy skills of a now much more diverse student population have increased (US Department of Education, 2004) the problem remains that the skills being taught and assessed do not coordinate with socially vibrant and civil pluralism the nation requires (Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1985; Haney & Madaus, 1986; Koretz, 1988). The constant workplace dilemmas are mirrored in the educational domain. Compared to other advanced societies, today’s Americans:

- lead in rates of childhood poverty, homelessness, and morality rates for those under the age of 25;
- lag in preschool education enrollment rates;
- have most children living in a single-parent household during some point of their childhood;
- have many children arriving to school hungry, unvaccinated, and frightened because the plagues of modern life- crime and violence, drug and alcohol abuse, lack of adequate health care- rage on unabated;

It is predicted that by the year 2010, at least a third of all children in this country will be members of groups currently considered “minorities” (National Commission, 1996, pgs. 12-13).

A great many criticisms of education in America have been directed toward the resilience of quality teaching (Hargreaves, 2003, 2000, 1995; and Marzano, Pickering & Pollock, 2001) while the mandates that are not relevant to learning to future societal contributions generate emotional dissonance for practitioners (Nias, 1999; Farber, 1991; and Blasé, 1986). The past thirty years have seen both the proliferation of publications on educational reform in response to these criticisms as well as individual states and counties changing their mandates regarding the testing, scoring and assessment of their students. Rated as one of the most stressful professions (Nash, 2005; Pricewaterhouse & Coopers, 2001; and, Kyriacou, 2000), teaching has become a juggling act between policy and product.

These proposed educational reforms all have the aim of making students capable of meeting the demands of a changing society. No Child Left Behind (2001) continues to ignite many highly theoretical arguments as to the best methods of instruction for the education of the nation’s children. Sharing the goals of previous reforms, NCLB, heightens the accountability component with a systemic model at the inherent risk of diluting character of teaching (Carlson, 1992; Corbett & Wilson, 1991; Madaus, Harmon, Lomax, & Viator, 1992; Smith, 1991; Sykes & Plastrik, 1993). In addition to the character of teaching, the imposition of high-stakes accountability has dampened student

motivation toward learning (Gordon & Reese, 1997; Carlson, 1992; Dweck, 1992; Paris, Lawton, Turner & Roth, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1985; and Lepper, 1983). The standardization of American schools contradicts the prevalent aspiration to increase student achievement. These factors are of potentially great value in understanding changes in the educational environment of students experiencing high-stakes testing.

### Socio-emotional Environment

This section describes the research literature that assesses the impact of the socio-emotional environment on students experiencing high-stakes testing. High-stakes pressure can either increase or decrease depending on the level of the student's self-efficacy. Researchers studying self-efficacy have found that those students with intrinsic, rather than extrinsic, motivation have also experienced encouragement of self-regulation and self-evaluation by adults (Broadfoot, MacNess, & Osborn, 2000; Gordon & Reese, 1997; Perry, 1998; Pollard, Triggs, Reay & William, 1999; Roderick & Engel, 2001). These studies found that the students' self-efficacy was a function of their ability to regulate and evaluate themselves independently. Additional research corroborates the correlation between student self-efficacy and learning pressures. Pearson's (1983) gradual release of responsibility model allows for student empowerment that provides opportunity for positive emotions to be associated with his/her accomplishment. For example, when learning to read, modeling of rich, eye catching literacy occurs first. Next, the student progresses into the role of participant with a repetitive portion of the story to

share the reading experience which builds their individual confidence. Sitting side-by-side with a student, guiding their reading of simple texts with strong pictorial support while offering strategies to increase their independence when confronted with a book, the teacher gradually guides the child into the independent reading experience.

There are important variations in the development of student self-efficacy. One constant, however, is that information is remembered more easily if it is associated with positive emotions. Brookhart and DeVoge (1999), Butler (1988) and Duckworth, Fielding, and Shaughnessy (1986) found feedback to be a common characteristic in the achievement of student self-efficacy. When compared against performance from a similar previous task, those students who experienced success in earlier performances were more likely to transfer that feeling of success to a new task. Focusing feedback on the task rather than ego-involvement was associated with greater interest and effort (Brookhart & DeVoge, 1999; Butler, 1988).

According to Duckworth et al. (1986) there is a connection between students' perceptions of teachers' communication about test expectations with feelings of self-efficacy. The researchers continued to correlate the assessment culture with students' efforts. Positive conversations which incorporated collegiality increased student self-efficacy while negative results occurred when the focus was on the performance outcome. Leonard and Davey (2001) and Little (1994) found that students depicted themselves as having no voice regarding high-stakes testing. A study by Perry (1998) associated providing students with a voice with greater choice, that is, students given

some control over their learning attended to the significance of the content rather than merely referring to their product as being correct or not. Pollard et al (2000) corroborated this finding. They showed that students allowed to self-regulate increased the criteria level students used for self-evaluate.

Providing opportunities to support self-regulative skills for the self-evaluative development of children throughout their day can occur in a variety of forms. Roderick and Engel (2001) studied the relation between low achievement and the external support structure. The study showed that when low achievers were provided a high level of support from home and school, their self-esteem improved. The critical requirement is that adults must be sensitive to the individual needs and stress levels of the students.

Focusing on the self-efficacy, self-regulation and self-evaluation of the student learner brings renewed interest to the socio-emotional experiences and perceptions of third grade students with high-stakes testing. Despite the shift to high-stakes, the socio-emotional environment still requires the opportunity for increased self-directed learning. Educators must be keenly aware of the relation between student self-efficacy, self-regulation, and self-evaluation and the socio-emotional environment in the era of high-stakes testing. The next section reviews the literature on the relation between differential effects of gender and high-stakes schooling.

#### Gender Differences

While it is beyond the scope of the proposed research to engage in a comprehensive review of brain research, a brief discussion of gender differences is relevant. Given the

mismatch between boys' and girls' learning experiences, it seems more than appropriate that gender be considered by the educational institutions where students spend one-third or more of their waking hours. A greater sensitivity to gender issues is likely to make educational reforms far more productive. Gurian (2002) states, "Knowledge of the evolution of brain differences teaches us that societies are capable of creating intimate and fruitful human relationships that nurture *both* the best of the female and best of the male brains" (p. 115). Girls are negatively impacted when teaching is geared primarily to the boys' learning style. Tyack and Hansot (1992) found that whether "unconsciously or deliberately, schools played a part in the subordination of women" (p. 15). The feminist movement has tried to give girls a louder voice than they had previously had. Yet, by high school, gains previously made by girls in both academics and emotionality began to level off or even abate (AAUW, 1994; Sadker & Sadker, 1995).

If, on the other hand, the education is tailored to girls' learning style, boys level of participation and longevity are reduced. While girls outperform boys both academically and emotionally (Gurian, 1996; Kindlon & Thompson, 1999), boys undergo an educational disequilibrium. If this is not attended to, they drop out of school more frequently than girls and their college attendance decreases. Placed in a setting where the opposite sex already outperforms, boys are perceived as unmanageable, and therefore educated through the lens of a stereotype. Kindlon and Thompson's recommendation to parents and teachers is:



The most important thing to remember, the guiding principle, is to try to keep your son's self-esteem intact while he is in school. That is the real risk to his success and to his mental health. Once he's out of school, the world will be different. He'll find a niche where the fact that he can't spell well, or didn't read until he was eight, won't matter. But if he starts to hate himself because he isn't good at schoolwork, he'll fall into a hole that he'll be digging himself out of for the rest of his life (p. 166).

Environment has the potential to permanently alter the child's brain. Still capable of further and complex neurological growth, the brain of a two year old has quadrupled since birth. Plasticity opens diverse avenues for cognitive and emotional development. Pollack (1998) believes that it is the emotional environment that shapes a boy's early neurological development. He states, the environment "alters boys' neural connections, brain chemistry, and biological functioning" (p. 93) during the early years. Stereotyping boys with categories of either 'wild' or 'royalty' negates all that gender diversity can bring to the classroom.

It is through embracing some of the different relative strengths (and weaknesses) of boys' and girls' brains that educators may better meet the learning requirements, and thus the assessment of each gender. Of course since no two children are exactly the same, rigid gender generalization must be avoided. If teachers are aware that their female students, in general, have greater communication between brain hemispheres, they can be more sensitive to the advantage of automaticity they possess over boys in approaching

more complex learning tasks. The same awareness should be extended to girls working with abstract objectives since it is here the boys (again, on average) have more brain resources dedicated to spatial-mechanical functioning. Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRIs) have provided some neurological basis for the general impression gained over the years by most educators that a great number of boys are impulsive and have attention deficit disorder while more girls are conscientious. These learning differences may be relevant to the experience of high-stakes testing. It seems that each gender has an average advantage and an average disadvantage (while recognizing enormous individual differences within each gender) that can affect their high-stakes experience. Gender sensitivity can offer clarity for the preparation period, during and following the high-stakes experience.

Thus awareness to gender differences may be helpful reassuring and guiding students through the high-stakes assessments. Empirical studies conducted in 1992 (AAUW, 1994; Sadker & Sadker, 1995) suggested that gender issues in education be brought to the forefront with findings of less teacher attention being directed at girls than at boys, male average domination of athletics prevailing, and of girls experiencing, on average, lower self-esteem and greater fearfulness. Additional studies note the continued underperformance of boys in education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000) lagging nearly eighteen months behind girls in reading and writing by the end of their kindergarten year of school.

In 2003 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development released a three-year study that showed that primary grade school girls had greater knowledge and skills than boys in 35 different countries. PET and MRI brain scanning research by Gurian and Stevens (1994) demonstrated that boys and girls processed information differently. This implies that in learning a similar lesson, different tools for success may be necessary. Gurian and Stevens further noted that training in gender sensitivity enhanced outcomes. For example, one school district that had placed last out of 18 before training climbed to the top five after training. The states of Alabama and Kentucky both increased their student performance after gender awareness training: “after one year of this gender-specific experiment, girls’ math and science scores and boys’ Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) scores rose significantly” (p. 23).

In summary, increased awareness of differential gender sensitivity increase student achievement. Further, it adds another aspect to each child’s uniqueness. Increased academic and emotional performance could significantly expand as the gender sensitive classroom engages students of both genders in the use of specific strategies geared towards their specific strengths. Because the goal in administering high-stakes testing is to assure that no child be left behind academically, heightened gender sensitivity may play a vital importance in reaching that goal. Gender sensitivity can be an essential aid to the enhancement of the socio-emotional environment for both the experience and the perceptions third grade students develop in a high-stakes testing environment.

## Teaching to the Test

Both Leonard and Davey (2001) and Johnston and McLune (2000) researched the Northern Ireland end of primary school selection exam. Focusing on the impact of teachers, students and students' learning processes, Johnston and McLune collected interviews, questionnaires, and classroom observations to measure student learning dispositions, self-esteem, locus of control, and attitude toward the transfer grades obtained. They identified four main learning dispositions: (1) precise processing, (2) sequential processing, (3) technical processing, and (4) confluent processing. The classroom observations in this study were supported statistically by a positive correlation between precise/sequential learning dispositions and the students' self-esteem. Through interviews with the teachers, a mis-match between teaching style and student learning disposition demonstrated discrimination against students whose learning style was different from that of their educator.

Leonard and Davey (2001) represented the student perspectives for the preparation process, participation in, and the results of the British examination. Their study used focus group interviews along with written stories and pictorials of student experiences and feelings. Data collection occurred just after taking the test as well as the week before student results came in, followed by the week after scores were announced. Student perceptions of test anxiety and the impact on self-esteem were discovered. Grades achieved clearly depicted success or failure of the individual student according to

pre-composed expectations with the self-esteem of those scoring low plummeting. Reay and William (1999) found similar results in their much smaller-scaled study in a London primary school. The data were collected through individual and group interviews along with extensive classroom observations. Test-driven curriculum provided a climate of ability levels judged by achievement expectations. Self-worth coincided with the grade achieved. Those scoring high labeled by their peers were depicted as being “smart” and those who received low scores as “stupid.”

Over an eight year period, Davies and Brember (1998, 1999), studied primary school children in England. Changes in self-esteem of Year 2 (age 7) and Year 6 (age 11) cohorts were measured using the Lawseq questionnaire. Starting two years before the exams were introduced at Year 2, the study found a clear drop in self-esteem, with the greatest change occurring the year the exam was introduced. The researchers noted that once ‘an assessment culture’ was established, teachers and students alike incorporated the presence of the exam into their daily experience, self-esteem then recovered from the initial drop.

Davies and Brember (1998, 1999) concluded an analysis of national testing with the conclusion that generally there was little or no correlation between self-esteem and achievement. However, standardized mathematics and reading tests done post-nationally did find a small statistically significant correlation between self-esteem and achievement. What they found was that before the implementation of testing, low and high achieving

students had the same levels of self-esteem. After testing, the self-esteem of low achievers dwindled considerably compared to their high-achieving peers. The researchers caution against placing direct responsibility for the change in correlations on the assessment and urge further studies that mediate people and circumstances which influence students' testing experiences.

In the United States, Gordon and Reese (1997) and Paris, Lawton, Turner and Roth (1991) studied the impact of high-stakes testing on self-esteem for students of different achievement/ability levels. Teachers' perceptions of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) were explored through in-depth interviews. Their results assimilated the findings of the study in England by Davies and Brember (1998, 1999) with the self-esteem of lower achieving students diminishing. The findings of Paris, Lawton, Turner and Roth corroborated these results. Gathering information from the Michigan State mandated assessments, the researchers concluded that high-achievers had more positive self-perceptions than their lower-achieving peers.

### Testing Anxiety

High-stakes testing is not the only opportunity in which students experience a uniform assessment of their understanding to knowledge taught. In the day-to-day classroom there is a culture of grading, be it based on regular classroom assignments or informal assessments. Using a questionnaire format, Evans and Engelberg (1988) studied students' attitudes to, and comprehension of, receiving grades. The researchers were particularly interested in how these student perceptions changed from fourth to eleventh

grades. The results concluded that younger students attached less importance to grades than their older peers. The older peers also found their grades to be more cohesive to their personal investment. Those students receiving lower grades were noted to have a dwindling sense of personal value. These students whose sense of personal value dwindled also shared a lack of external support for their progress. A second portion of the study reviewed attribution. It concluded that the attitudes of both lower achieving and younger students related their grades to more external attributions. In contrast, the higher achieving, older students attributed more to their grades. The authors concluded that lower achieving students attributed their failure to external factors in order to protect their self-esteem. Keeping in mind that this was a study which focused on students of the span from fourth and eleventh grade, the issue of third grade being the first grade level in the state of Florida to receive letter grades will add to the literature on the testing environment and, specifically, to the experiences and perceptions with high-stakes.

#### Summary

In 2002 during George W. Bush's first term, Congress passed an education act to support the learning and development of all children. The *No Child Left Behind* (2002) initiative has had a marked impact on teachers' interaction with children, their instructional practices, and to some extent parents' and administrators' expectations for both teachers and students.

As early as the 1920s, John Dewey had opposed the traditional 19<sup>th</sup> century method of learning by rote as drilled by teachers. He believed that education should show

greater concern with the individual student and he emphasized that their real-life experiences should be taken into account. Subsequently numerous investigators have demonstrated that students find it highly stressful to be examined, and especially in high-stakes testing. The findings of this study add one further piece of information that may eventually be helpful to those interested in the ways to best educate children and prepare them for high-stakes testing.

A great deal of the research to date on high-stakes testing has focused on the administrative turmoil between mandates and practice. It has primarily examined teacher perceptions (Gordon & Reese, 1997; Paris, Lawton, Turner, & Roth, 1991) and student anxiety (Evans & Engelberg, 1988). However, there has been only limited research on the experiences and perceptions of students only in third grade with high-stakes testing.

This chapter reviewed the literature relevant to the study to be carried out. A summary of findings pertaining to the history of the political climate and national reports, the socio-emotional development of children, gender differences and the impact of “teaching to the test” were presented. Each of these topics was addressed in accordance to the socio-emotional experiences and perceptions of third grade students with high-stakes testing. Based on the limited research available on the third grade level in relation to high-stakes, this study sought to contribute knowledge for this young age.



## CHAPTER 3

### Methods and Procedures

*Childhood is not only something to be studied, it is something we all hold within us: a set of memories, a collection of ideas. . . . In studying children, therefore, there is a sense in which we are likely to be studying the child within ourselves.*

(Oakley, 1994; p. 28)

This chapter describes the methodology to be used in the study. It is organized under the following headings: (a) the purpose of the study, (b) the research questions, (c) the theoretical framework guiding the study, (d) the description of research, (e) the pilot test, (f) the researcher's bias, (g) the identification and selection of participants, (h) the collection of data, (i) the interviews, (j) data analysis, and (k) the validation of the thematic structure.

#### Purpose of the Study

This study will explore the experiences and perceptions of children as they take part in high-stakes testing over a one-month period during their third grade year of elementary school. A qualitative research design examined four separate sources of text gathered to understand these experiences. Interviews, focus groups, drawings and written reflections all provided data to help me discover and identify the experiences and perceptions of the students. The study was designed to allow the students' voices to be heard through the stories they provided during the high-stakes period.

### Research Question

The research question under investigation is: What are the socio-emotional experiences and perceptions of third grade students during high-stakes testing? An exploration of the naturalistic aspect of the study occurred through the integration of all information yielded from each portion of data collected. This allowed for a holistic result of my analysis of the results.

### Theoretical Framework

As defined by Strauss and Corbin (1998), qualitative research “produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification. It can refer to research about persons’ lives, lived experiences, behaviors, emotions, and feelings as well as about organizational functioning, social movements, and cultural phenomena” (pp. 10-11). When researching the details of individuals’ narratives about their lives, these authors recommended three useful precursors for implementing qualitative studies. They suggest qualitative research should be:

- (1) complementary to the preferences and personal experiences of the researcher;
- (2) congruent with the nature of the research problem; and
- (3) employed to explore areas about which little is known.

The present study utilized phenomenology written in a narrative format under the provisions of portraiture, an approach that incorporates symbolic interaction. The following sections provide a description of each component of the approach.

### *Symbolic Interaction*

Symbolic interaction is derived from Mead's (1934) theoretical perspective in social psychology, which is that the meaning of symbols is determined through the course of human interaction. Subsequently, methodological implications were drawn by Mead's students, especially Blumer (1969) and Hughes (1971), who argued that it was essential to interpret human experience through phenomenological analysis. The social reality of how humans interpret action and the reciprocation of others' behavior were defined as meaningful and derivative of these interpretations of interactions (Bruner, 1969; Sitter, 1982).

Symbolic interactionism starts with the assumption that human actions toward things are based upon the meanings those things have for that person. It rests on three premises (Blumer, 1969). The first premise relies on the regularity of the action to create meaning. The second premise is that human social interaction is the source of meaning of such things and does not exist outside of individual interpretation. The final premise is that interpretation gives meaning to constructs. Thus, human responses are not direct but rather are mediated through symbols, many of which are acquired by social interaction.

Since it is an exploration of the functional relations between self-perceptions, projections of others, and the acuity of each other, symbolic interactionism emerges through social and symbolical construction (Blumer, 1969; Sherman & Webb, 1988; Van Manen, 1990). Blumer (1969, p. 12) depicted the interactions of individuals as lines of actions or vectors that collectively must be recognized as the inter-linkage of separate

acts by various participants. Flick (1998) conveyed the importance of how meaning is derived from these vectors based on two distinct areas for reconstruction of the subject's perspective. He stated: "The first is the form of subjective theories, used by people to explain the world for themselves." Flick then continued, "The second is in the form of autobiographical narratives, biographical trajectories that are reconstructed from the perspective of the subjects" (1998, p. 18). Hence, the individual determines the meaning of the nature of an object based on its relevance to him or her. This interpretive process is followed by decisions and actions. Symbolic interactionists strive to distinguish the meaning that objects have by observing the interpretive process in which individuals engage while constructing meaning.

To summarize, symbolic interactionists probe the cycle of decision-making, along with the actions taken by individuals in context. Therefore, an important part of making sense of the meaning of the experiences of students during third grade high-stakes testing requires an understanding of the meaning it had for them. This requires analyzing and interpreting the processes by which they constructed meaning within the idiosyncratic situations they found themselves.

### *Phenomenology*

Investigating the third grade students' experiences and perceptions of high-stakes testing required extracting their essential structure by phenomenological analysis of the descriptions they provided. The rationale supporting attempts to understand individuals through their own lenses encompasses their field of perception (Bruyn, 1966). Thus, the

essential structure of a third grade student's experiences and perceptions of high-stakes testing is ascertained by learning what each student's conscious and immediately lived experiences (Husserl, 1970; Van Manen, 1990). This study focused on each of the third grade students as unique individuals. Problems associated with designs that solicit preconceived findings were avoided by keeping the process phenomenologically open and inductive.

During the erosion of French late structuralisms' grip on philosophy, The German scholars Husserl and Heidegger, German scholars, provided a bridge to the phenomenological movement of French scholars Merleau-Ponty and Sartre (Lanigan, 1979). More recently, Van Manen (1990) and Orbe (1994, 1998) applied phenomenology in the U.S. to issues relating to education through an interpretive, descriptive approach to qualitative research.

This study examines the lived experiences of third grade students through their textual expression (Van Manen, 1990). The process of reflection which places the reader into the lived experience of the individual undergoing the phenomenon has been divided into three phases (Orbe, 1994, 1998; Nelson, 1989; Lanigan, 1979, 1988). However, care must be taken to not give more credence to the resulting systemization than to the original observations (Ihde, 1977).

First, with description of lived experiences, interviews, written reflections and drawings with student explanations were collected. The assignment of meaning to third graders experiencing high-stakes testing is revealed through collective language and

directly from the data. Descriptions, rather than explanations, of the phenomena were drawn out of the data by focusing on the active and descriptive language of each student. The relevance of all initial descriptions were evaluated by returning to the initial data forms to ensure that each child's purity of language was represented by their original words (Ihde, 1977).

Next the data were reviewed through the method of reduction. Reduction is the process by which researchers examine the data for recurring phases which reveal themes that, in turn, can disclose essential meaning (Van Manen, 1990). The inter-relatedness of these themes along with their representation of the phenomenon was revealed by color coding related words or phrases from within the data (Orbe, 1994, 1998; Lanigan, 1988). In this study, each data set (that is, interviews, written reflections, and drawings) were coded separately and graphed before the next segment of data was so analyzed. Then, the pieces were combined, folding one in after the other until the cohesiveness of all pieces was coded.

Rather than being the final components, interpretation constitutes the third phase in the ongoing data review cycle. In order to ensure the integrity of the students' original intent the original language and the context of the information the students divulged were preserved in the interpretation.

### *Narrative*

This ongoing cycle of data review was then written in a narrative format as specified under the framework of portraiture. A framework was provided by Lawrence-

Lightfoot and Davis (1997), employed a methodology that bridged science and art in recording and analyzing the voices experiences and perceptions of student to high-stakes testing in third grade. Educational researchers such as Carter (1993), Noddings (1991), Van Manen (1991), Connelly and Clandinin (1990) all found power in collecting stories of people's lives. Entrapping the "richness and indeterminacy of our experiences" (Carter, 1993, p. 5), such stories became an important way to translate lived experiences into an understandable representation of the participant's perspective. In the present study of the socio-emotional experiences and perceptions of third grade students with high-stakes testing, the validity was checked by:

1. having an outside reader confirm the relationship between the narrative and the data upon which it was designed;
2. returning the narratives to the informants for self-checking; and
3. submitting the results to acknowledged "experts" in narrative writing.

Narrative accounts represent a significant way for students to ponder the experiences that surround them. Narrative research provides an opportunity for the social scientists to hear the experiences and perceptions of third grade students, therefore gaining greater understanding of high-stakes testing from the third grade students' lens. Based on his extensive work on cognitive psychology Bruner (1969) postulated that there were paradigmatic and narrative interpretations people provided of the events in their lives. In searching for universal truth the paradigmatic style is also known as the logical and scientific modality of reflection. More heavily structured into report formats and

systems that infer conclusions, Polkinghorne (1990) found rationality to be the main discourse of paradigmatic style.

Bruner then proposed that a second mode of thought, narrative style, was a form of reasoned knowing. In 1985 he argued that narrative knowledge surpassed emotive expression and suggested these two distinct forms of reasoning offer alternate ways in which to understand the world:

There are two modes of cognitive functioning, two modes of thought, each providing distinctive ways of ordering experiences, of constructing reality. The two (though complementary) are irreducible to one another...Each of the ways of knowing, moreover, has operating principles of its own and its own criteria of well-formedness. They differ radically in their procedures for verification (p. 11).

Narrative analysis synthesizes the experiences and perceptions of third grade students of high-stakes testing into an explanation of what it is like to be “in their shoes.” The researcher’s role was to take the elements represented in the data and unite them in a cohesive story that provides substance to the data. The significance of students’ experiences within this context of high-stakes testing is thus written into a history.

### *Portraiture*

The written narratives were created under the framework of portraiture. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) define portraiture as “an intentionally generous and eclectic process that begins by searching for what is good and healthy and assumes that the expression of goodness will always be laced with imperfections” (p. 9). This form of investigation does not attempt to idealize what it studies but rather sees the



“goodness laced with imperfections” as constituting a negotiation of vulnerabilities. I found evidence of these vulnerabilities within the third grade students in relation to their experiences and perceptions of high-stakes testing. It was in their negotiation through these vulnerabilities that the students’ experiences and perceptions were revealed.

Portraits of the twelve primary research participants were developed in effort to formulate an image of third grade students who were willing to allow their experiences and perceptions of high-stakes testing to be recreated in this study. The aforementioned work by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) has significantly contributed to the development of participant portraits. Retrieval of the data is combined by the portraitist, or researcher, allowing the reader to connect with the participant’s voice by revealing the data in a narrative developed from within the realm of the participants’ perspective.

I formed narratives as vivid descriptions of students who were very real to me and who willingly divulged their experiences and perceptions of high-stakes testing in an effort to aid my study. Each narrative contains quoted information directly from the students. The documented stories were written in an effort to provide a view of the participants’ experiences and perceptions as they grappled with the testing regimen.

The formation of the portraits was written in accord with the data gathered from the protocol of interviews, reflective writings and drawings with explanations. I chose to detail the portraits of the students by providing a character sketch of each of the 12 main participants. The sketches are ordered to provide a discussion of the

background of each of the students followed by a glimpse of their experiences before, during and after the high-stakes examinations. As I chose the data to be included, I looked for themes that recurred among these 12 primary participants and the 39 support participants. From there, before developing the representative portraits, there was a discussion on the overwhelming theme of ownership of learning that presented itself through (1) Self-Test, (2) attribution, (3) prevalent influences, and (3) emotions. Then, in accordance with the methodologies researched by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), I answered the following questions as I created the revealed portraits:

- Has contextual information been included as clarifying an introduction to and an edifying backdrop throughout the portrait?
- Has each individual voice been sufficiently revealed and modulated so that it will inform but not distort the interpretation presented in the portrait?
- Have relationships been respected and faith fully maintained with the actors on the scene throughout the shaping of the final whole?
- Do the identified emergent themes resonate throughout the language and culture of the actors on the site and do they adequately support the interpretation presented in the portrait?

In keeping with the methodological requirements (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), the purity of the collected data were written in narrative form and submitted as portraits.

## Description of the Research

This research examined the phenomenology of third grade students as they interacted and developed meaning of their perceptions of high-stakes testing in their social context by eliciting their descriptions and stories of their experiences. These descriptions assisted in the unveiling of the perceptions, attitudes, and cognitive interpretations of the third grade students as they made sense of their high-stakes environment.

The following sequence was followed during this research. First, I conducted a pilot study. Second, I explored my research biases. Third, I identified the participants. Fourth, I conducted the interviews, and gathered the participant drawings and reflective narratives. Fifth, I formed focus groups and recorded discussions, both of which were later transcribed. Sixth, I collected student reflective narratives and drawings of the high-stakes experience. Finally, I analyzed all the data. Each phase of the sequence will now be discussed in greater detail.

### Pilot Testing

As part of a graduate research course in 2002, I analyzed data collected on the perceptions of teachers and their third grade students as they participated in high-stakes testing. Throughout the six months of the research, I performed paradigmatic analyses of qualitative data. Twenty-four third grade students described their experiences throughout the high-stakes testing timeframe, by means of weekly written reflections and drawings. These data were collected two weeks after the completion of the state's high-stakes test.

Similarities and differences were correlated by color coding of the themes and repetitive phrases were graphed. The findings were categorized and presented in order to improve future high-stakes testing teaching practices and environments. This research also made me aware and allowed me to synthesize the lived experiences of third grade students during high-stakes testing. Several broad themes emerged from the research, inspiring me to delve deeper into the perceptions of the children. They expressed a diversity of emotions which related to their teachers, peers and parents as well as the classroom environment and their own sense of self.

#### Bias Exploration and Bracketing

As an implicit element of research, one's own bias is typically ignored as unnecessary in the usual control procedures of well designed research. However, with qualitative research it is necessary to incorporate awareness of bias into the process. I conducted repeated self-examination for bias throughout data collection and analysis. Neither quantitative, nor qualitative research can completely preclude biases. The 'stance' of the researcher throughout the process needs to be articulated by the researcher prior to the onset of the study (Van Manen, 1990).

To further clarify pre-existing assumptions (Sideman, 1991), the researcher submits to a bracketing interview. An experienced interviewer engaged me in answering the same, or quite similar questions to those used in the research process. The bracketing interview proved very valuable in revealing several areas of concern to which I needed to stay aware during my data collection and analysis. Of particular concern were my

attitudes and philosophy toward student-teacher rapport, my attitude toward high-stakes testing within the district, and the power relation between myself and the third grade students, especially since I was their Reading Coach.

An hour-long qualitative interview was conducted by a professor of education prior to me interviewing the participants in this study. I was asked the questions that I had prepared to ask the participants in my study. Within the tenets of a bracketing interview, these questions generally focused on the recollection of experiences with third grade as both a student and a teacher, my philosophy of education, and how I felt about high-stakes testing. Several biases were revealed some of which can be gleaned from the following personal narrative.

My personal education, as well as 14 years experience as an elementary teacher, took place in northern Michigan and in Florida. I was exposed to a multitude of educational philosophies and practices, from which I have constructed a personal belief that each child is completely unique and must be respected as an individual. I am committed to nurturing all aspects (emotional, social, intellectual, cultural and physical) of each child's development, which I consider to be inter-related.

My personal approach to education is child-centered. I like to believe each student embarks upon an inner journey during his or her education and that this is continually evolving, expanding and unfolding. The ultimate goal is to help the student create herself as an authentic learner. I also support an integrated and experiential curriculum in which

each child can weave her own tapestry and create her own connections, conventions, and communities.

My views may bias the third grade students in this study, all of whom I have interacted with in my capacity as their Reading Coach. The bias could alter the responses they gave during the interview processes. For example, if the students believed that I thought that testing was stressful, they may have exaggerated the amount of stress they reported. Another example, if the third grade students felt uncomfortable in making comments that related their experience to their classroom teacher, particularly if they perceived that I had a collegial relationship that teacher, they might have been reluctant to reveal any vulnerabilities they felt. To minimize bias in my data, I transferred as a Reading Coach, to the school where I conducted the research at the beginning of the term. Therefore, I had a marginal presence in the school context. I approached data analysis with caution to: (a) not interfere, or impose my background experience with the student or the teacher of mention as to what the student is saying, (b) avoid assumptions regarding the students' actions or interpretations regarding their classroom teacher.

The third grade students in the school might not have recognized my educational philosophy. Indeed, any conflict between my own philosophy and that found in the school may have placed the third grade students in an uncomfortable state as they progressed through their high-stakes testing time frame. Careful not to project my personal philosophy onto the third grade students or their answers, I was particularly cautious when interpreting their responses to topics I may have initiated.

The position of the school district was that high-stakes testing was required of all third grade students for grade-level promotion. I did often sense discomfort from some of the other teachers over my own discomfort regarding the mandates for such testing during my 14 years in elementary education. This was perhaps understandable since teachers have often assumed broad stances on the spectrum of the subject. My transfer to the research school at the beginning of the term was therefore beneficial in that it limited the teachers' familiarity with my strong negative beliefs about testing. These particular third grade teachers were as unfamiliar with me as I was them. However, this presented another potential challenge in obtaining the least biased reflections possible when exploring the perceptions of third grade students.

As a Reading Coach in the school, I may have brought to the research an adult-orientation that differed from the third grade students in this study. Any such adult-oriented tendency of domination may have been augmented by my previous fourteen years of classroom experience. Moreover, as a Reading Coach to these third grade students, a substantial teacher-student relationship had been established in addition to that of my role as a supporter to their classroom curriculum.

Although there was an established relationship, the power structure of coach-student existing between the students and myself could have produced feelings of apprehension within them. In addition, the grade level incorporated a variety of ethnicities and both genders. Being a Euro-American female, I may have provided an additional source of apprehension for students of different demographics. As revealed in

the bracketing interview, my experience as a third grade student was quite different than those of today. Hence, if the third grade students thought I might be unable to relate to their perspective of high-stakes testing, they may have decided to withhold from me. Although I have taught a variety of early grade levels, my exposure to the variety of ethnicities represented in the third grade student population has been limited to that of an outsider not a participant.

Review of these biases as well as recognition of their potential to influence my interpretation of the third grade students' perceptions was critical during the data analysis and write-up of this study. To maintain awareness of my biases and to provide validity to the information and analysis, two separate advisory groups were employed. The first was comprised of a small group of graduate students engaged in both qualitative and quantitative studies. This group kept focused on issues and questions during the formative portion of the study. The second group comprised professors from the field of education. It raised on-going issues during the validation portion of the study. Reviewing the bracketing interview prior to the interviews of the third grade students, the subsequent data analysis, and the formation of the narratives kept my biases at the forefront of consciousness.

#### Identification and Selection of Participants

Participants for this study were students at a Gulf Coast school district in the state of Florida. Permission to conduct the study was first received from the selected school (Appendix A). The students, who contributed as primary and support participants, were



from the elementary school which they were zoned to attend. The county had formally redistricted the school two years prior to the present study. The rezoning was based on ethnicity and socioeconomic composition. The elementary school population was diverse. It included 52 percent ethnicities (45 percent Hispanic, 7 percent African American) other than Euro-American, with 56 percent of the students qualifying for free and reduced lunches. The students met the selection criteria based on their current attendance in the third grade.

According to the school wide reading ability screener (DIBELS) and standardized assessment (Stanford 10) scores, the 12 students were grouped by ability. Those who turned in their Internal Review Board consent for interview participation represented the primary participants of the study. The students were from a pool of five third grade classrooms. These 12 students were divided into three categories: (1) lower academic test scores, (2) average scores and, (3) higher scores (Table 1). These levels were determined from the DIBELS scores equating to the following: (1) lower academic score of 65 words per minute and below, (2) average scores of 66 words per minute to 95 and, (3) higher scores of 96 words per minute and above. The Stanford 10 group were: (1) lower scores 34 percent and below, (2) average 35 to 79 percent, and (3) higher scores were 80 to 100 percent.

Table 1. Students and Test Score Categories

Student	DIBELS	Stanford 10	Ability
Sarah	45	31	Low
Maria	29	31	Low
Anna	61	18	Low
Jessica	82	75	Average
Lance	79	79	Average
Christopher	69	71	Average
Josephina	76	59	Average
Ethan	105	77	Average
Cayla	110	85	High
Daniel	115	83	High
Abegal	115	87	High
Amelia	130	83	High

I met with each of the third grade students in person prior to the beginning of the school semester in which the high-stakes testing took place and gave them a verbal and written explanation of the nature and process of the study (Appendix B). I emphasized the voluntary nature of choosing participants. The third grade students were given a week to decide on whether to participate. There were two Informed Consent Statements. One

(Appendix C) granted permission to participate in the interview portion of the data collection. The second (Appendix D) granted permission to participate in only the written reflections and the drawings portion of the data collection. Once a student agreed to participate, he/she was asked to review an Informed Consent Statement with their parents and return it with both the parents and student signature. I made the voluntary nature of the project as clear as I could and reassured the students that there would be no repercussions if they chose not to participate in the study or if, at any time during the study, they decided not to continue. The voluntary nature of participation was reiterated and reemphasized with the parent of the child during an individual conference or telephone conversation.

Initially 93 students were invited to participate in the research study. Twelve students and their parents signed the Informed Consent Statements granting participation in the interview portion of the study. The same 12 students and their parents signed Informed Consent Statements to participate in the written reflections and drawings portion of the study along with 39 of their third grade peers totaling 51 participants. Thirty-seven parents declined to participate in the study reported fear of interference with their students' results on the high-stakes assessment as their deciding factor. Five parents did not provide any specific reason for their preference not to participate. Of 93 third grade students, 51 students returned their Informed Consent Statements to participate in the study. The data collected from 12 primary participants and 39 support participants (Table 2) were deemed sufficient to carry out this study.

Table 2.Support Participants

Number	Gender	Race
1. F57	Female	African-American
2. F59	Female	Euro-American
3. F61	Male	Euro-American
4. F64	Male	Euro-American
5. F65	Female	Hispanic
6. F66	Female	Hispanic
7. F67	Female	Hispanic
8. D68	Female	Hispanic
9. F69	Male	Euro-American
10. F71	Female	African-American
11. F73	Male	Euro-American
12. D74	Female	Euro-American
13. F75	Male	Euro-American
14. F62	Male	Euro-American
15. F60	Male	Euro-American
16. F70	Female	African-American
17. F79	Male	Hispanic
18. D80	Male	Euro-American
19. F81	Female	Euro-American
20. F82	Female	Hispanic
21. F84	Female	Euro-American
22. F86	Female	Euro-American
23. F87	Female	Hispanic
24. F88	Female	Hispanic
25. F89	Male	Hispanic
26. F90	Female	Hispanic
27. F92	Female	Euro-American
28. F93	Female	Hispanic
29. F48	Female	Hispanic
30. F35	Male	Euro-American
31. F31	Female	Euro-American
32. F25	Female	Euro-American
33. F20	Male	Hispanic
34. F34	Female	Euro-American
35. F4	Male	Euro-American
36. F5	Female	Euro-American
37. F12	Female	Euro-American
38. F3	Male	Euro-American
39. F38	Female	African-American

## Collection of Data

Four sources provided the data. The primary source of information from the participants consisted of three 30-minute interviews, spaced evenly over the high-stakes testing period. The first interviews occurred during the week prior to the high-stakes test (middle of February). The next sets of interviews were conducted during the second half of the two-week time span of the assessment (end of February). The concluding interviews took place during the beginning of the second week after the testing ended (beginning of March). All interviews were conducted either during the student's lunch period or before or after school. During the interviews, the third grade students shared their experiences and perceptions of taking a high-stakes examinations. Afterwards, the interviews were transcribed. Interview questions (Appendix E) focused on the student experiences and perceptions. Guiding questions for the interview included, "What does it feel like to be a third grader?," "What are your thoughts about FCAT? [Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test]," "What is it like having high-stakes testing?," and "How would you describe high-stakes testing to someone who is new to third grade?"

A second source of data was the bi-weekly drawings (before, during, and after). The students drew to a prompt (Appendix F) and then wrote a summary on the back of each drawing regarding their experiences during the assessment. These drawings were collected on a bi-weekly basis, before, during and after the high-stakes testing period. The first set of drawings was collected two weeks prior to the high-stakes assessment from 47 of the 51 participants. (Four students were absent.) During the end of the first

week of testing, the second set of drawings was collected from the participants. The third set of drawings was collected at the beginning of the first week after testing. Forty-six of the 51 participants were present for the collection of the third set of drawings. To avoid infringing upon academic time, the drawings were done with their Art teacher in Art class during the student's special period.

A third source of data was the bi-weekly journal entries (before, during and after). In these third grade students wrote their response to an open-ended prompt (Appendix G) regarding their perceptions regarding the high-stakes assessment period. These written reflections were collected once each week for the week prior, during and following the assessment (four weeks total). The first journal entries were collected at the end of the last week before testing began from 49 of the 51 participants. All 51 students participated in the journal entry prompt for the second collection during the beginning of the first week during testing. The last set of journal entries took place during the end of the first week of testing and 50 of the 51 students participated. So as not to conflict with academic time required by the classroom teachers, the students reflected upon their high-stakes experience in the school computer lab during their special period with the facilitation of their computer instructor. The students previously had acquired independent computer processing skills and each journal entry was saved to the server for later retrieval.

A fourth source of data consisted of focus group discussions the participants held with each other regarding their experiences and perceptions during the high-stakes testing period. Essentially, the participants discussed what they had written in their journal

reflections. These discussions took place after the conclusion of all other data collection. The third grade students had the opportunity to listen to and reflect upon each other's experiences as they spoke about the preceding assessment period. These oral reflections were done in groups of 6 when possible. One group was composed of all female students (low, medium, high academic ability), the next all male students (low, medium, high academic ability) and the remaining group consisted of a mixed gender group (low, medium and high academic ability).

The focus group, for the all female participants, was composed of six of the eight girls who had permission agreed to participate in this portion of the study. Since there were four boys in the study, all four participated in the male focus group. For the mixed gender group, the ability levels composition was: one low ability student, four average ability students and, two high ability students. Three males participated in both the male and mixed gender focus groups. The context of the transcriptions demonstrated varied responses from the male participants to represent an array of data. To assure that all participated, the groups were organized by beginning with a game which involved participation from everyone. This transitioned into a more open venue and then returned to the game format. The game consisted of an open-ended focus question, answered in intervals, according to 'round robin' or 'popcorn format.' Each group's discussion was recorded and transcribed.

## Interviews

A series of unstructured interviews representing the narrative accounts of the participants was collected. I followed standard procedures in building rapport with my participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Mishler, 1986; Spradley, 1979) in listening, to the best of my ability with an unbiased and sincere ear, to the views being conveyed by my participants. I also supported the participants by offering additional topics for conversation.

I transcribed all interviews with a pseudonym and used them to open the next interview. The purpose of the transcribed interviews was to open the next session and thereby enable the students to confirm or clarify any portions to better represent their experience or perception. I used a guide (Appendix A) to keep the conversation related to the relevant issues. Not all participants raised the same issues. Conversations were allowed to develop within the realm of high-stakes testing and being a third grade student as deemed important to the participants.

## Drawings

A set of open-formed drawings were collected from each of the participants. I reviewed the pictorials, to the best of my ability, with an unbiased eye, followed Di Leo's (1983) conviction that each drawing:

1. Is a reflection of the personality of its maker;
2. Expresses affective aspects of the personality as well as cognition;
3. In the case of young children tells more about the artist than about the



object portrayed; and

4. That the approach of the examiner must of necessity be intuitive as well as analytical (p. 60).

To assist me in analysis of their student drawings, the participants wrote descriptions of their depictions on the back of each drawing. Hasebe-Ludt found art to be a venue that allows children to “represent who they are in relation to where they are” (1999, p. 49). This nonverbal representation is a natural mode of communication offering extraordinary information about how third grade students experience and perceive high-stakes testing.

The purpose of incorporating the student drawings as part of the study’s data collection was to provide an additional venue of expression. Consistent with research on early childhood art, I specifically focused on the content represented in the students’ work (Golomb, 1990; Malchiodi, C., 1998; Schroeder, 2006; Schroeder, Arguelles, & Bouman, 2006; and Koppitz in Van Tilburg, 1987). Student drawings were reviewed using a holistic approach which searched for repeated content themes and patterns. The trustworthiness, dependability, coherence, and authenticity of the data collected were determined by utilizing the Schroeder Student Drawing Assessment Protocol (Schroeder, 2004). This two-part protocol simultaneously looks for themes and patterns along with the whole depiction in the drawings themselves. Examples of themes and patterns in the drawings incorporate the figure of the student within the drawing; the location of the student within the drawing, or the various arrangements of the environment in which the

student is placed in the drawing. Also important was discernible content such as facial expressions or the presence of “thought bubbles.”

As each drawing is assessed using the Student Drawing Assessment Protocol (Schroeder, 2004) the state of the observer is focused. The bias exploration of the observer had to be reviewed to avoid tainting the viewing of the drawings with preconceived notions of the researcher. The first overall impressions of the drawings were recorded including any emotions evoked, perceived mood of the drawing, and reactions or impressions the drawings called forward.

Next, a matrix was designed for use during coding each drawing. Based on the coding scheme developed by Wheelock, Bebell, and Haney (2000a, 2000b), the matrix contained rows of features shown in the drawings of third grade students who had been given a prompt eliciting their experiences and perceptions associated with high-stakes testing. The column headings list the collection period of the drawings (before, during or after testing). Each student drawing collected for the study was coded individually and then transferred to the characteristics matrix which maps the frequency of various content categories contained in the student drawings (Table 3).

Table 3. Drawing Matrix

CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDENT DRAWINGS			
	Before	During	After
<b>Student Characteristics</b>			
In classroom	42%	100%	34%
Taking test	28%	96%	7%
Thinking/thought bubble	78%	86%	94%
Talking with teacher	65%	6%	23%
Talking with other student(s)	54%	3%	85%
<b>FCAT Present</b>			
Yes	51%	100%	11%
No	49%	0%	89%
<b>Other</b>			
Other students present	78%	65%	92%
Teacher present	72%	12%	34%
Family members present	49%	0%	13%
Multi-frame drawing	13%	0%	92%
Outside	16%	0%	83%
Strategies	12%	42%	7%
<b>Student Demeanor</b>			
Positive	8%	25%	68%
Negative	89%	42%	12%
Neutral	3%	33%	20%

### Participant Validation

Interviews were transcribed and used to guide the opening of the next interview session. A short summary was verbally provided which outlined what I consider to be the major points made in the previous interviews. This allowed the students to reflect on what they had said and to expand or clarify their previous experiences. Before continuing with the next interviews, the students were encouraged to clarify my verbal summary of

the interviews. To ensure maximum accuracy of their statements I reviewed final copies of the narratives with the students and asked them to correct any inaccuracies they saw.

### Data Analysis

In order to reveal the themes of the students' perceptions of their lived experiences I reviewed the interviews, drawings, weekly reflections, and transcribed focus group sessions through inductive, paradigmatic analysis. Here I was aided in this by following the sequence of the analytical procedures set out by Marshall and Rossman (1989): organization, synthesis, analysis, and presentation of the data. I adhered to the following categories: (1) organizing the data; (2) generating the categories, themes and patterns; (3) testing emergent hypotheses against the data; (4) searching for alternative explanations of the data; and (5) writing the report. In following these recommendations, I integrated all the sources of data into a unified and cohesive account to order to depict the perceptions of the lived experiences of the students.

I correlated the open-ended, semi-structured interviews, reflections and drawings and ended with the focus groups. I also organized the above sources into a matrix to further document the path of the primary research forms. Pseudonyms were assigned along with a number to each student and placed vertically in the first column followed by the gender, race, and ability level. The remaining columns were titled by the type of data collected. An 'X' collected and placed in the intersection of between the student name and column heading to designate student participation in that form of data.

In addition, two supporting forms of text were collected over the testing period from an additional 39 third-grade students. First, these students wrote bi-weekly reflections about their testing experiences every two weeks (before testing, during testing, after testing), over the same time frame as the primary participants. Next, and also during the same time frame as the primary participants (before testing, during testing, after testing), these students drew pictures which illustrated their high-stakes testing experiences and recorded their interpretative explanations on the back of the drawings.

The combination of support documents in the form of written reflections and student drawings with explanations of interpretation on the back of the drawings provided rich source of documentation for the third-grade students' experiences and perceptions. I organized these two sources of support documents into a second matrix. The names of students were replaced with numbers and placed vertically in the first column followed by their gender and race. The type of data collected, was used to label the remaining columns. An 'X' was placed in each cell by student name and column heading to designate student participation in the form of data being collected (Table 4).

Table 4. Data Participants

Participant #	Name	Gender	Race	Ability Level	Interview (B)	Interview (D)	Interview (A)	Journal (B)	Journal (D)	Journal (A)	Drawing (B)	Drawing (D)	Drawing (A)	Focus (girls)	Focus (boys)	Focus (mixed)
1 33	Sarah	F	W	L	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
2 49	Abegal	F	W	H	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
3 45	Ethan	M	W	M	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
4 37	Maria	F	H	L	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
5 18	Josephina	F	H	M	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
6 19	Daniel	M	B	H	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
7 17	Christopher	M	W	M	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	
8 48	Cayla	F	W	H		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
9 44	Anna	F	H	L	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
10 51	Jessica	F	B	M	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			
11 46	Lance	M	W	M		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
12 43	Amelia	F	W	H		X		X	X	X	X		X			

I began the analysis of the primary data by listening to the first recordings of each of the 12 individual student interviews. After transcription of each of the 12 student interviews, I transcribed the second interview recordings of each of the 12 interviews. I

followed the same procedure for the third set of interviews, and then transcribed the focus group recordings (in the following order: all girls, all boys; mixed gender). At this point, I went back to the first set of interview recordings and began to find quotations for each student response to the interview questions. I continued this pattern through the second and third interviews as well as for the focus group sets. This yielded a total of four tables, one for each phase of the interview process (Appendix H, I, J).

While listening daily to all of the student interviews, I read each student's recorded experiences and perceptions several more times. At this point, I began using colored highlighters to mark the passages of text amongst the 12 students that evidenced similar themes. Notations of key action and descriptive words followed by quotations were made into a table with the before, during and after interview as the column headings and the rows listing the student pseudonyms and their experiences and perceptions over time (Appendix K, L). Consistent themes emerged which covered a broad range of areas for the students as individuals, in gender groupings, race groupings and academic ability groupings.

Following grouping of all four of the primary participant's interviews and focus groups, the written reflections of both the primary participants as well as the support participants were constructed into tables in the same sequence of before, during and after testing (Appendix M, N, O). During this time, I continued to review the interview transcriptions while incorporating the coding of any additional distinct and overlapping themes. This process repeated itself with the inclusion of the student drawings. As I read

and reread the hundreds of pages of interview transcripts, written reflections and pictorial representations with interpretative explanations on the back of the drawings, distinct, yet overlapping patterns were validated for individual students, gender groupings, groups of similar ethnicity and groups of similar test scores.

Each piece of data has evolved into a pallet of distinctions. Some of these distinctions are actually unifying, converging the student's responses into a group depiction while others portray of individuals experiences and personalities. The sketches in Chapter 4 introduce the characteristics of the third-grade students from the primary participant portion of the study. From the character sketches, a table of group characteristics according to the students' process testing was developed. An additional return to the original transcriptions, written reflections and student drawings, one student at a time, provided a means of data reduction. Themes emerged took place within the reading of each transcript then, bringing in each of the data sources from the support participants. An umbrella of context formed and four major themes emerged. In addition to these themes, combing through the themes suggested existing patterns. These themes and patterns were then coded under the different contexts of ability, gender, and race.

The resulting themes and patterns were then reviewed under five strategies recommended by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997). Repetitive refrains, resonant metaphors, institutional and cultural rituals, triangulation and revealing patterns were all important in constructing the structure of the portraits. Taking each of the five above strategies above along with the four major themes found, characters began to take form.



The clearly defined themes were now able to follow a sequence of beginning, middle, and end with an emphasis on the prevalent patterns. An intriguing composite of the experiences and perceptions of third grade students with high-stakes testing took form.

#### Validation of Thematic Structure

I established two advisory groups to help maintain research integrity throughout the study. The first consisted of five Ph.D. candidates who met to provide feedback and insight on each other's work. Each of the five read my prospectus and made numerous suggestions. The second group consisted of three professors of higher education. They discussed the themes and findings of my study up to this point. I presented them with data in the form of drawings, graphs and tables which depicted the students' perceptions of their experiences. The group suggested areas that I might expand or explore further. In addition, I met with a small group of the students one additional time and had them review my rendition of their perceptions and the common themes that emerged provided yet a third validity check. Students were encouraged to respond to my description of their experiences.

## CHAPTER 4

### Data Analysis and Results

*Well if somebody just did rock, paper, scissors, to see if somebody went to third or fourth grade that wouldn't do it but a test would to see if they are smart enough or not.*

-Nine year old third grader

This chapter examines the transcriptions of the data and attempts to understand the experiences and perceptions of third grade students with high-stakes testing. The chapter consists of several sections. In the first section, I introduce the primary participants who shared their views and also summarize the characteristics of the sample overall. In the second section, I present themes derived from a cross-case examination of the primary participants, which I then combine with data from the wider support group. In the third section, I trace patterns within these themes. Finally, in accord with the recommendations of Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) I paint an intimate portrait of three of the third grade students as individuals with their socio-emotional perception and experience of high-stakes testing.

#### Primary Participant Sketches

**1. Sarah (Sarah originally indicated prior to the interview that she did not want to participate in the study, but then without any explanation, was one of the first to turn in her Internal Review Board documentation.)**

Sarah, age nine years, has been attending the same elementary school since kindergarten. She has no siblings at the school and attends the after school care almost

every day of the week. She has a quiet manner and seems always to be watching what is going on around her. She finds the academic part of school “difficult” and “hard,” yet “looks for the fun” in everything.

She really tracked me down. Sarah was a student I had not worked with much in my capacity as a Reading Coach. I was aware that she was receiving additional reading remediation though she speaks with an age appropriate vocabulary and grammar so any deficit is not apparent during social interaction. I knew she had been promoted each academic year and though she was a candidate for child study, she did not qualify for services.

From the first interview with Sarah, she eased into conversations about herself and her educational experiences. Sarah looked for the best in things, acknowledging that academically school was “hard” for her. “It’s a little bit difficult. Ah, but it’s fun.” Sarah describes third grade as “harder. The words and stuff they give us.” She says, “I just do my best.”

Now, as a third grade student who is faced with high-stakes testing, she feels scared, “I don’t know if I’ll pass . . . I don’t get much, like, it’s hard and stuff.” However, at the first day of testing Sarah recalled, “When I opened the test booklet and I looked at the pages and stuff I realized they weren’t so hard.” By the end of the first week of testing, she perceived herself to “be pretty good” yet when discussing the second week of testing she referred to a friend’s previous experience, “My friend took the FCAT before and told me the second part was pretty hard.” As Sarah described her experiences with

high-stakes testing, it became apparent that she was very disconnected from her academic journey as a third grader and relied on the voice of others to guide her, “My teacher told me.” “A third grade friend told me.” Sara summed up her completion of the testing as she wrote her last reflection about third grade, “It is exciting, it is cool, it is fun.”

**2. Abegal (Abegal was very inquisitive about the purpose and the steps of the research process. She would quite often talk non-stop from the classroom to the interview room.)**

Abegal, age eight years, has been attending the elementary school where the research is being carried out since her middle year of second grade when she moved to Florida from North Carolina. She has a brother who attends first grade in the same school. Her mother was hired by the school mid-year as an overflow kindergarten teacher. Abegal is talkative and curious with a laugh that is contagious and she exudes self-confidence. She told me, “We have our own rights to study what we want to when we have free time in the classroom.” When describing herself as a student, she said, “It’s absolutely fun! You get to do math facts and practice them a lot and normally your homework is easy.”

Abegal had a remarkably sunny outlook. In my role as a Reading Coach on campus, I had not previously interacted with her. Over the interview process, I found that Abegal’s happy perception also disguised an egocentrism that made her somewhat academically unaware. The evidence for this lay in her response to my question of how she would describe high-stakes testing to someone who was new to third grade. She said,

“Do your best, and if you don’t know it, you could just circle any answer or guess the one you think it is.”

Abegal remained at ease during her testing experience with the exception of the morning of the test when she said, “I was a little worried because it was different.” With her view that high-stakes testing “could be a little hard but might be a little fun too,” Abegal continued to demonstrate an easy-going attitude. She even said, “I feel like I’m going to pass.” When conversing about all of her studying, Abegal stated she “wouldn’t need to be prepared and wouldn’t be all getting our efforts [upset] to worry about it” if there weren’t high-stakes testing in third grade.

Upon completion of the high-stakes testing, Abegal continued to look over her experience in a positive light. Though she perceived the testing to be less invasive than some of her peers, she knew her score on the FCAT would determine whether she was promoted. Abegal attributed her perceived success on the FCAT to the strategies she implemented both before and during testing, “chewing bubble gum, [it] helped me not get a headache or be stressed out doing it.” Abegal shared her relief at the conclusion of the test, “I feel good about it. I’ve taken the test and it’s over.”

**3. Ethan (From the moment I met Ethan he just could not understand why I would be interested in what third graders had to say about high-stakes testing. He was conscientious about being ready for me when I came to get him for the interviews and, nervously chattered, each time while walking to the interview room.)**

Ethan, age nine years, has been a student at the school since kindergarten. With a sister in first grade at the same school, Ethan presents himself as her protector; walking with her to her classroom each morning and then picking her up at the end of the school day. Ethan is always aware of what's going on because his mother is the president of the PTO. He presents himself as possessing a sophisticated attitude although he demonstrates his fair share of clowning around.

As a student, Ethan refers to third grade as "hard" and requiring a lot of "focus." Being redirected is common practice for Ethan and he associates the strictness of his teacher in third grade to high-stakes testing, "I think that Ms. Jones is pushing us because today's the FCAT and she wants us to pass." The first year of receiving letter grades, Ethan communicated his desire to achieve all A's but recognizes it will require paying closer attention to the teacher. He is keenly aware of the connection between his efforts and his success, "[If] I get all A's it will be pretty cool because you'll go to fourth grade and you'll have learned everything because you've got it all right."

Connecting his desire to go to 4<sup>th</sup> grade with an uncertainty about the FCAT, Ethan perceives the FCAT as "a big test." He understands that the experiences of third grade require "show[ing] what you learned from the first part of the year and it keeps getting harder and harder." He describes his nervousness as stemming from the unknown, "it's a hard test and you could fail it because you don't get your results back until May. You think you might pass it every day" as well as the known, "if you fail, you'd be going

to summer school and you wouldn't get to go on vacation to the beach or Disney World or anything and that wouldn't be very fun."

As the first testing week progressed, Ethan shared how nervous he was in anticipation of the first day. He communicated the feeling of "relief" once the testing began and stated his confidence in both himself and his teacher, "I know everything on it and the teachers had a hard time working and teaching us all this stuff so we can pass it and they did do their jobs." The experience of taking part in the testing weeks was enough to keep Ethan's confidence up, "you've already done it and you read it first, you don't get all that nervous after you've already done it."

Ethan related his perceived success with the testing to strategies used in preparation for the test. He said you shouldn't "just say you can't do it because if you say you can't do it, you'll just not try and you'll fail," and during the testing, "I did good and I checked my answers and I didn't really find that many mistakes." Ethan accepts the challenge of high-stakes testing in third grade as a fair representation of grade level promotion but recognizes that not everybody has as easy a job of it. He told me that "some people in ESOL or like in special classes, many brown people, except Daniel and some other people, some of them have trouble reading so it might be harder for them."

**4. Maria (Maria has a smile that lights up a room. During the classroom time when I went in to request all of the student's participation and hand out the permission slips, Maria was very quiet and reserved but sat attentively with a smile that filled her entire face.)**

Maria, age nine years, moved to the United States from Mexico when she was three years old. She lives with her mother and three older brothers who attend middle and high school. Her mother speaks broken conversational English and her brothers translate most academic related materials for clarity. Maria lives in the low income housing that is within walking distance of the school. She has numerous cousins who also attend the research site school in grade levels above and below hers.

On the way to the first interview session with Maria I realized from our casual conversation that the language barrier would prove to be an obstacle for Maria during the process. What I soon found out was that even though many of her answers were short in response, our dialogue was much lengthier as Maria did not hesitate to ask for clarification or to provide examples in her responses. It was notable that the enamoring smile that I recalled during my classroom visit was absent when conversing about her experiences and perceptions with high-stakes testing.

Aware that Maria received extended test taking time, I was otherwise unfamiliar with her role as a student at the school. In my position as a Reading Coach I had never had a face to match to the name that I saw on the paper work. Understanding that her level of language acquisition required additional thinking time, I was excited about what Maria's experiences and perceptions would contribute to the study. As a student, Maria recognized the importance of reading to her potential success, "we read ummm by practicing reading long words" and described third grade as a time for "learning and listening."



Maria's perception of high-stakes testing is "that it's like really hard" and she sees the FCAT as "help[ing] me pass." Reflecting on the first morning of testing, Maria describes herself as "sad" and "wonder[ing] if I was going to pass or not." The depth of Maria's sadness overwhelmed her sense of preparedness while she repeatedly emphasized "I was the only one at the test that was sad." By the end of the testing week, Maria shared that she was happy, "I [was] forgot about it" though her face did not glow with the same happiness prior to the testing. When testing concluded, Maria began to return to her typical smiling self. Her advice to peers, "okay, like, just don't worry it will be easy," did not correlate with the description she provided of the experience. The last statement Maria made about the FCAT was that if she were going to change anything about it, she would make it more "fun." [I'd have it be] more easy."

**5. Josephina (Josephina is an outgoing, thoughtful third grader who greets every adult in the building with a smile and a hello at every opportunity she gets. She was excited about participating in the study and described the detail she had to go into with her mother to receive permission to participate.)**

Josephina, age nine years, has an older sister who did well on the FCAT two years earlier. Family is important to Josephina and she mentioned it throughout her interviews. Though her father lives in the home, Josephina's mother and sister appear to dominate. Immigrants from Mexico, Josephina's parents keep Spanish as the primary language in the home but speak English fluently. They work very hard to keep both the Hispanic and American cultures intact. Josephina is actively involved in her academics and aware of

her accommodations as a dual language learner. She said, “I go to ESOL and I get extra time than the others.”

In my role as a Reading Coach on the research site school, I have had numerous encounters with Josephina in an individual, small, and whole group format. She and I have a good rapport and appear to share mutual respect for each other’s roles. Josephina is a pleasure to work with. One trait that Josephina brought to her work groups was perseverance. Josephina puts great effort into her academic work and encourages and celebrates not only her successes but those of her peers as well.

Josephina recognizes FCAT as a component of life in the third grade that guides her recall of material learned. She told me, “If they didn’t have the test it would take a lot of hard time remembering everything that you learned the whole time [you’ve been in school].” She considers her time practicing at home and listening in class as essential to being a “good” student. Third grade is “kind of easy” because “my sister helps me.” She tells me “don’t be scared [be]cause it is kind of easy,” and my “mom gets math cards to practice math.” Josephina spoke of being “scared” the morning of testing. She attributed being scared to the uncertainty of what would be required and also to being removed from the classroom for testing. However, once Josephina received her test booklet to begin, her perception of the task being “easy” returned. It helped for her to be allowed to chew bubble gum while being tested. “It makes me concentrate on the bubble gum and like chew on it and it like makes me concentrate on the bubble gum. I’ll be like, I’ll be thinking hard.”

When Josephina and I met for the second interview, which took place mid-way through the testing, she shared that it was going “good” and it really “wasn’t hard.” She described her experience by stating, “Like the good that I’m saying is that you know what it was and I was finished quicker and quicker, because I knew what it was.” In discussion about the remaining testing time, Josephina voiced concern about being unprepared if there were to be any science on the test, “Mr. Smith doesn’t really, he forgets about science and so we don’t really know about that much of science.” After the testing concluded Josephina summed her testing experience up by saying, “I got scared a little bit of scared like shy afraid like that [when testing was starting] and then, now [that testing is over], I’m not that scared because I think I’m gonna pass, and now I’m doing more good stuff like that because I barely learned like a few things from [before] the FCAT.”

**6. Daniel (Daniel is like an adult in a child’s body. His mannerisms and demeanor demonstrate a maturity beyond his age.)**

Daniel, age nine years, set an academic goal for himself to qualify for the gifted program. However, his paper work did not agree and Daniel was turned down. His academic ambitions led him to strive harder. He was often the first to raise his hand to be called upon to answer a question. Daniel is diligent and pays attention in the classroom. In my role as a Reading Coach at the research site campus, I’ve collaborated with Daniel’s teacher in both a co-teaching and observational format for a good part of the school year.

Daniel puts a lot of “pressure” on himself academically yet tries to balance his “learning discipline” with “fun.” He explains his lifetime goals, “I want to go to college and I want to play in the NFL.” Daniel’s father is absent from his life so his mother and grandfather are raising him with his younger sister. Should Daniel attain his goal of entering college, he will be the first in his family to do so.

Both Daniel and his mother disagree with the high-stakes of the FCAT because it leaves Daniel with “lots of questions” about the test. “I don’t know [anything about the test] cause this is the first time [I’ve been] in the third grade. If I stay back then I will know more about it [though I don’t want to].” Daniel continued the conversation about what he would do if he had to repeat third grade because of the FCAT sharing, “If I have to stay back, I’ll get mad but then I’ll have to help the other little kids with their work. If I pass, I’m going to be happy and I’m going to have to listen for the hard stuff.”

Daniel perceived the FCAT to be “hard” based on second-hand accounts from some of his friends who have taken the test in the past. His “nervous[ness]” subsided once he started testing, stating “I pretty much liked it. I think the people who are telling us it’s hard they’re trying to scare you [me] because it’s pretty, it’s really easy.” After testing, Daniel returned to working on “getting organized” for fourth grade and continued “practicing at home.”

**7. Christopher (It was a challenge coordinating the first interview time at which to meet with Christopher because he was continuously behind in his class work and needed to complete assignments that he had not finished in class or at home.)**

Christopher, age nine years, is at his fifth elementary school since he began kindergarten. He does not speak of his family with the exception of an older brother who is in high school and lets him watch scary movies with him if “he doesn’t know I’m in the room.” Christopher can recount play by play, in detail, some of the most technical video games designed.

In monotone, Christopher is not shy about expressing his disgust with academics, “I hate school!” When conversing about the different subject areas, he says, “I like art class, sometimes math, social studies, hardly science. Reading is hard.” While co-teaching and observing in Christopher’s classroom, during my role as Reading Coach at the school, I’ve recognized Christopher’s interest in content being overruled by his difficulty in decoding text. Christopher explains his third grade experience as being hard, “hard to do work” and having “a lot more tests.”

Aware that reading is a main component of the FCAT, Christopher voices his perceptions of what it will be like. “The reading about the FCAT, that it’s sometimes might be hard.” Once testing began, he portrayed some buoyancy that had not been previously demonstrated, “I’m feeling that I get rid of what I said the last time and that I’m going to say what I say this time. The FCAT sounds pretty easy for third grade . . .” Sharing his perceptions of the next portion of the test, Christopher uses letter grade scoring. After the first week of testing, Christopher described himself as doing “good. I think I’m going to get an A-.” When preparing to go back in for the second week of

testing he states that he is “hardly happy about it because this one might make me get a B.”

When Christopher and I met for his last individual interview, his demeanor had changed back to the slow moving Christopher I had experienced before testing. When I asked Christopher why he was so down, he explained that his teacher had “changed a little [in a good way]” so his presence did not match what he was saying until he shared, “Same old, same old homework. I liked testing weeks better so I can get back to my life.” He described himself as feeling “blue” and “sleepy today.” Third grade to him was now “easier” and he struggled with describing it, “I don’t really know, a little gloom actually.” He continued, “Yeah, I don’t feel like I’m ready for fourth grade yet.”

**8. Cayla (Cayla is a joyful third grade girl who is always bubbly. She even bounces as she makes her way to the interview room greeting everyone with a good morning on her way.)**

Cayla, age nine years, has been a student at the research school since she was in pre-k. She has a younger sister in first grade. Her mother is the school librarian and has worked at the school since Cayla started. Cayla’s grandmother volunteers at the school on a regular basis. Her father, who is still married to her mother (she rolls her eyes as she shares) brings her McDonald’s for lunch every Friday. Cayla is very in tune to her family’s thoughts about FCAT, “My mom says that I’m gonna do good but I don’t think so” and in comparison to second grade she states that third grade is “a bit harder” and “teaches you more stuff.”

As Reading Coach at the school, I've worked on projects with Cayla's mother but had little contact with Cayla socially or academically. Seeing her in the hallways, I recognized Cayla as the librarian's daughter but never had the opportunity to work with or observe her in her classroom setting. Walking to the interview room together, Cayla's familiarity with the school campus was obvious as she led the way.

When describing what she is like as a student, Cayla points out that she's "learned lots of stuff from teachers and stuff." She continues on to share her perception that the purpose of learning is to "prepare for the FCAT." Not shy about how "nervous" she is for the FCAT, she alleviates built up stress by thinking about all of the preparation and studying she has done, "[I] practice fact and opinion and main idea. [My teacher said] there is a lot of fact and opinion and main idea."

At the interview that took place between the two testing weeks, Cayla's nervousness heightened to the level of fear. She described the morning of the first day of testing as "scary" and engaged in self-talk to ease her fear, "It was a little scary when I first started, and then when I actually looked in it and started doing it I was like this isn't that hard." In preparation for the second week of testing, Cayla found herself "not nervous anymore" and continues to explain, "because I'm done [with this part] and it's like after you've done it a little bit you don't feel as stressed out as you did before."

Once testing ended Cayla reminisced, "It wasn't that hard but I thought it would be a little harder on the NRT, but it was actually easier than the sunshine state standards." Happy that "the FCAT was over," Cayla identified two items of importance for

participating in the FCAT: “listening” and “not stressing.” How does Cayla explain school life now that FCAT is over? “My teacher said she won’t be as hard on us anymore and she will let us, like, won’t let us do as much work. She did that before so we could get ready for the FCAT and now that it’s over she won’t [have us] do as much work. She let us watch a lot of movies.”

**9. Anna (Anna has a very quiet, demure personality that grows into a strong and talkative one as she gets to know you.)**

Anna, age eight years, speaks English as a second language. She has a younger brother in kindergarten at the research school. She has completed all of her education at this school with the exception of one year. Due to the separation of her parents when she was in first grade she left the research school, but then transferred back during the first month of second grade. Her mother works as a second language paraprofessional at the school. Born in America, Anna spends her summers in Mexico with her mother, brother and grandmother.

I had no prior experiences with Anna in my role as a Reading Coach. I’ve provided some professional development training for her mother’s department but was not aware that she had children at the research school. Walking back to the interview room, Anna was very quiet and reserved but did engage in light, social conversation.

Anna shared that she was very “sad” about having high-stakes testing in third grade. Her perception was that there would “be a lot of questions.” In her written reflection, she noted “Every day I feel like I am going to explode. The FCAT is going to



be hard this year. The FCAT is closer and I am worried so I have [to] really study hard this week.” She shared her thought that it would help if [teachers] “tell [them] more about the FCAT. It would help them not to be sad.” In the interview which occurred mid-way through the testing process, Anna did not want to talk about the testing though her written reflection demonstrated some alleviation of her previous sadness through teacher support in additional preparation.

When testing concluded, Anna said that she no longer felt “bad [or] worried that much because it’s done.” She told me that “chewing bubble gum” helped ease her sadness. Not so happy about “having homework again,” Anna was happy to relax and “watch movies in class” now.

**10. Jessica (Jessica lights up a room when she enters. She is almost a head taller than her peers and is well-known by her classmates.)**

Jessica, age eight years, and her younger brother have attended the research school since she started second grade. Her mother works as a teacher’s assistant in a severely emotionally disturbed classroom at the school. She has never known her biological father. Jessica finds school to be “easy.”

The first time I met Jessica was when she came to my office to deliver her permission slips to participate in the study. She was comfortable in my presence and wanted to begin the research right then. Jessica’s conversation was loaded with information about how she perceived the world around her. She described just about everything as “cool” and highlighted portions of her day that incorporated opportunity for

socialization and independence. She said, “We get to go out for recess. We get to have snack after specials. We get to go to the library when we need to.”

When our interview began, Jessica’s perception of high-stakes testing was that it would be “hard,” but she also recognized that it would be “not so hard once you get to know the things on the FCAT you get to get really better at it and stuff.” Jessica attributed her studious attitude to her high self-esteem. She prepared by “going to the library” and “practicing on FCAT explorer.” At the interview during the testing weeks, her self-esteem never faltered, “[I] like it, [it’s] cool and when I find out if I’m going to third grade and if I don’t go to fourth grade, I’ll still be proud of myself that I tried and I’ll still remember that FCAT is FCAT and no matter how hard you try you’re still going to keep on going.”

Strategies were important to Jessica. Self talk guided her testing experience, “When I started [testing], I said in my mind that I’m doing it so just calm down and you’ll be alright.” A proponent to having bubble gum during testing, Jessica divulged “we eat bubble gum during FCAT but sometimes we can’t concentrate so I spit my gum back out.” Likening herself when testing to “a smart car that is driving getting all the math problems and things right,” Jessica advocates wearing wheels in her healies to school on FCAT day “because when I’m on my healies, I think I’m like a car.”

**11. Lance (Lance was on vacation for the seven school days prior to the FCAT testing and so was unable to participate in the first interview.)**

Lance, age nine years, is an only child. His mother is the vice president of the research school's PTO. Lance's mother and father took him on an extended cruise just prior to the FCAT to "help him relax." He brought his permission slips to participate in at the end of the first testing day. I had not previously had any interaction with Lance in my role as a Reading Coach at the school.

Lance began his description of testing day by telling me about how he had breakfast at home and at school but couldn't find himself up to eating much of anything. He said although his teacher told him "you don't have to be nervous" he still was. He portrays the testing experience as being "easy" yet he shares that this didn't become so until he had "done the first page." After testing was completed, Lance told me that he was "too nervous to remember" any strategies that he used during testing because he was anticipating the results though he "felt very happy" to have it over. His interview was cut short when the office called down for him to get his back-pack and go to the office. His mother was picking him up from school early. Lance was absent for the next 4 days.

**12. Amelia (Amelia told me she was excited about participating in the research when she turned in her permission slips. She then missed the first interview due to the death of her great-grandmother and also the last interview due to the death of an aunt.)**

Amelia, age nine years, has a brother who is a toddler. She attends the research school by choice because her grandmother is a fourth grade teacher at the site. My role as

a researcher is the first in which I've had direct contact with Amelia. As a Reading Coach on the school campus, our paths had never crossed.

Even though Amelia missed the first interview, she expressed her emotions about the FCAT during her first written reflection, "I feel nervous about the FCAT because this is the first time I have taken the test. It just feels weird. When I even think about the FCAT I get more nervous and when there's a lot of stuff to remember and part of the time I forget stuff." During the interview between the two testing weeks, Amelia shared that she was "really, really nervous." She said that she "got butterflies in her tummy" the first morning of testing but that as the first week progressed she was "not so nervous" anymore that "it was kind of easy." Going into the second week of testing, Amelia was "nervous" again. She perceived the upcoming week to be more difficult, "[I'm] a little nervous because Ms. Jones [my teacher] said it's going to be a little harder." Generally a very conscientious student, Amelia voiced a concern about needing "more time to read" and the desire to "practice more in math." As far as the FCAT determining Amelia's grade level promotion, her perception was equivocal, "I think I might go to fourth grade and I think I might not."

### *Group Characteristics*

This portion of the chapter presents sketches of the participants. The participant sketches were created as a result of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with third grade high-stakes test taking students. The sketches were presented to guide the analysis and

results portion of the study. A summary of the group characteristics from the primary participants is presented in the following table (Table 4).

Table 4. Group Characteristics

<u>GROUP CHARACTERISTICS AND TESTING EVOLUTION</u>								
Participant #	Name	Age	Gender	Race	Ability Level	Before Testing	During Testing	After Testing
1 33	Sarah	9	F	W	L	Scary	Should do good, nervous	Good
2 49	Abegal	8	F	W	H	Worried	Easy	Relief
3 45	Ethan	9	M	W	M	Uncertain	Good, not nervous anymore	Relief
4 37	Maria	9	F	H	L	Sad	Uncertain	Good, relief
5 18	Josephina	9	F	H	M	Good, scared, nervous	Not nervous anymore	Good, anxious for results
6 19	Daniel	9	M	B	H	Pressure, scary, nervous	Not nervous anymore	Relief, glad
7 17	Christopher	9	M	W	M	Hard, upset	Not Happy	Doesn't know how he feels
8 48	Cayla	9	F	W	H	Nervous, scary	Not nervous anymore	Good, relief, it was easy
9 44	Anna	8	F	H	L	Sad	No comment	Good, it was easy
10 51	Jessica	8	F	B	M	Cool, easy, hard	Confident, positive	Fantastic, relief
11 46	Lance	9	M	W	M	Nervous	Became easy	Happy, good, nervous
12 43	Amelia	9	F	W	H	Nervous, weird	Not nervous anymore	Not worried

## Thematic Analysis

After reading all of the character sketches, I returned to the original interview transcriptions, written reflections, and student drawings. Then, one student at a time, read them all several times more. I began data reduction by reading and re-reading all the sources. As themes began to emerge on the initial reading of each transcript, I brought in the written reflections and drawings of the support participants. Then, through an open coding procedure, I identified four major themes under an umbrella of ownership of learning.

The four emergent themes developed as follows: (1) self-test, (2) attribution (3) prevalent influences, and (4) emotions. In addition to these themes, the data also suggested the existence of patterns. The patterns indicated conflict of dual student perceptions: the perception of themselves as a third grade student as well as the perception of the implications of the high-stakes testing experience as a manifestation of each student's grade level promotion. Each student, in his or her own way, showed character and personality. This was most obvious in their determination to pass and so continue climbing their academic ladder.

The development of themes as portrayed through the voices of the students offered deep descriptions of their experiences and perceptions with high-stakes testing. The pages that follow are expressions of their experiences and perceptions. The purity of the every day vernacular is maintained to allow the reader to identify with the thoughts of third grade students taking high-stakes testing.

### *Self-Test*

The context for learning, that is, the combination of personal and environmental circumstances that children encounter (Berk, 2005) has a distinct affect on how a third grade student perceives and experiences high-stakes testing. The literature on learning contexts for children in Western society (Rubin & Coplan, 1998) focuses on the circumstances of children's experiences. This study focused on the environment as well as circumstances that mold the student. The theme of self-test refers to the students' encounters with the FCAT as an integrated part of their learning environment.

Students revealed that standardized testing was a constant presence in their elementary schooling. For some students, high-stakes measurement was accepted without forethought. For others, the high-stakes measurement was considered more as a component of third grade. In either scenario, the presence of high-stakes testing monopolized time from their school schedule just as reading class or mathematics would. Ultimately, however, each of the third grade students participating in this study was able to define high-stakes testing as what determines their promotion to fourth grade. The following excerpts reveal how the students incorporated high-stakes testing, referred to as the FCAT, into their every day school experience.

Sarah, who was identified as one of the lower academic ability students, recognized high-stakes testing as her ticket out of third grade. She commented, "I don't really know anything about it [the FCAT] except it's graded for if you pass." Parallel in her ability level, Maria mirrored Sarah's comment by also referring to her experience



with high-stakes testing as “help[ing] me pass.” However, Maria is a second language learner and associates her language acquisition with her difficulty of meeting the grade level promotion criteria. When asked to describe what she knows about high-stakes testing, she responded by saying, “You know FCAT is hard because it has long words and you cannot do it. You have to do it, read long words, and you will pass it and you will be in fourth grade.” Anna, also a second language learner, likewise characterized academically as having a low ability level, echoed the presence of high-stakes testing in third grade. She asked to be educated on the components of the FCAT, “Tell me more about the FCAT. It would help me not be sad.” For these lower academic ability students, knowing the FCAT determined their grade level promotion but being unaware of the connection to their studies as third graders proved to be a hurdle in their schooling experience.

Among the students interviewed who represented the moderate academic ability group, comments surrounding the high-stakes component of testing in third grade revealed a strong presence of their learning throughout the school year as well as an awareness of what would happen if they did not pass. The most animated response came from Ethan who said, “This is a big test and you gotta show what you learned from the first part of the year and it keeps getting harder and harder.” Ethan and Lance were both well aware that “if you fail, you go to summer school.” Christopher related his experience with high-stakes testing to standardized assessments administered in previous years, “It’s

the biggest test of all. And every grade it gets harder.” “Prep-tests” are a part of Christopher’s regular school routine.

Jessica joined Christopher in noting the prevalence of test preparation materials and added practice time on the computer based preparation program each day. She used self-talk to reassure herself. “I just have to finish the test. I’d probably get to fourth grade.” The only student in the moderate ability group who represented the FCAT as a component of the grade level was Josephina who said, “I need to study for third grade” when asked if she practices for FCAT or for third grade. She described the high-stakes factor as purposeful, “If they didn’t have the test it would take a lot of hard time remembering everything that you learned the whole time.”

These moderate academic ability level students differed from their peers of low academic ability in two ways. First, this group of students was able to connect their school learning to the high-stakes test. Next, the students of moderate academic ability recognized the consequence of “summer school” as an alternative, though undesirable, to grade level promotion. It was Josephina who represented a small percentage of the students in the study (7%) from this ability group who extended her perception of the FCAT similarly to that of the students of high academic ability.

The students in the high ability group shared Josephina’s viewpoint of FCAT being a component of third grade. Another commonality between Josephina and this group was the importance of study habits that covered a broader range of learning rather than focusing solely on preparation for the FCAT. Abegal was the only student in this

ability group who said that she wouldn't be practicing if there wasn't an FCAT. She said, "No, because we wouldn't need to be prepared and we'd be all getting our efforts not to worry about it."

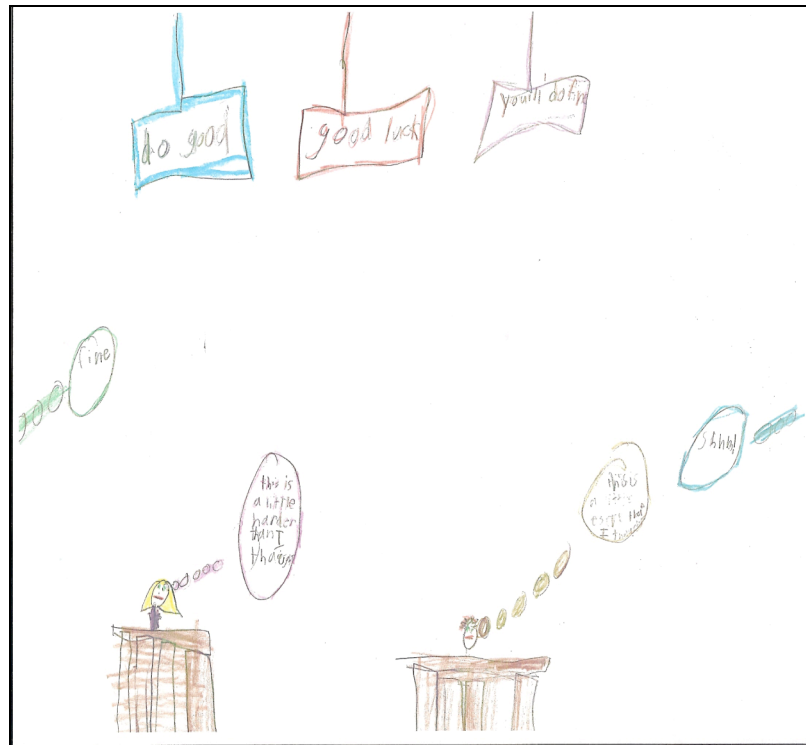
Two of the three students from the high ability group were available for the first set of independent interviews. These students saw high-stakes as a challenge and acknowledged the needing help from the teacher for them to succeed. When asked how she would describe the high-stakes testing to someone new to third grade, Cayla suggested you "go to the teacher and ask for extra work on the FCAT." She elaborated, "I've learned lots of stuff from teachers and stuff." Daniel found it imperative that "you listen to your teacher when he's writing on the board." The presence of the high-stakes testing was still there but lost its prevalence due to an equal weight being placed on learning along with their understanding of the teacher's role in guiding that learning. Daniel was the only student who differed from his peers as to whether he felt unwarranted pressure from the high-stakes testing. He stated, "My mom thinks that it's kind of not fair, and I think that it's kind of not fair."

The students of the high academic ability differed from their moderate academic ability peers because they were able not only to recognize the FCAT as a component of third grade, they also were able to connect their study habits to a broader range of learning. Learning to increase knowledge as students and calling upon their teacher for clarification in their learning allowed students from this ability group to associate their learning strategies with an increase in knowledge.

Along with these comments from the interview portion of the data surrounding the self-test connection of high-stakes testing, the written reflections of the support participants demonstrated a heavy presence of the FCAT in third grade. Forty seven students were present for the first written reflection. Of these, one went off-topic by writing material that did not relate to the question. Each of the remaining 46 students in the study noted the presence of the FCAT in their grade level during the first written reflection. For the second written reflection that took place mid-way through the FCAT, 68% of students had transitioned to a positive or neutral attitude toward the presence of the FCAT in their grade level, while less than half (32%) remained uncertain. After the conclusion of testing, the majority of the students (92%) continued to discuss the FCAT as a presence in their grade level without attaching any connotations of fear or anxiety towards the testing. The FCAT was synonymous with third grade promotion.

The results of the student drawings showed that students, regardless of race, gender, or academic ability level all depicted a self-test relationship conveying an everyday commonality of testing in their drawings during the high-stakes testing. Further, many students depicted themselves interacting within the testing environment. The drawing reproduced below illustrates such a depiction (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Student Drawing During Testing  
(*student interacting with testing environment*)



There was a stable presence of the FCAT in the third grade school environment. The interview transcriptions, written reflections, and student drawings demonstrated that the high-stakes component of the testing had a strong self-test presence in the grade level.

The degree of dominance of the self-test connection varied based on the ability level of each student. For the students with lower academic ability, recognition of the importance of the high-stakes assessment was present. Among the students with moderate academic ability, the self-test connection was incorporated into their daily routines as third graders. Some students from the moderate academic ability group also incorporated

the importance of studying to gain knowledge rather than for test preparation. The students with high academic ability shared with the others the self-test connections as a component of third grade and the importance of studying to gain knowledge with their moderate academic ability peers but also recognized their teacher as a valuable resource. All students recognized that high-stakes testing was part of being a third grader that was required for grade level promotion. However, the self-test connections were evaluated differently within each ability level.

#### *Attribution*

One prominent theme that emerged concerned attribution. Berk (2005) defines attribution as the common explanations for the causes of behavior. Heyman & Dweck (1998) originated the definition incorporating subsets of internal, external and stable, changeable. Their research describes internal as something that comes from within the child, connecting personal contributions to the potential outcome, external then coming from outside of the student's control. An attribution is then stable if there is no hope of any change yet changeable, if something can be directly implemented to alter the potential outcome. Dweck (2001) continues within attributions to signify students as having mastery-oriented attributions which credits successes to ability and learned helplessness which credits failure to ability. In relation to high-stakes testing within this study, the above definitions as researched from Berk and Dweck are applicable.

Most of the students stated that their belief in themselves regarding the high-stakes testing experience drew from internal, changeable forces. A majority proved to be

resilient when confronted with high-stakes testing. These explicit examples spoke volumes about the significance attribution played on the students’ experiences and perceptions of high-stakes.

Figure 2. Attributions

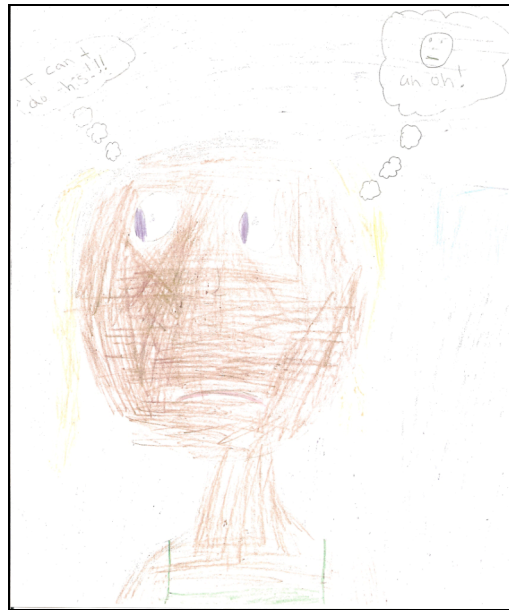
Ability	External, Changeable	External, Stable	Internal, Changeable	External, Stable
Low Academic		The test is hard and there isn’t anything I can do to get past that hurdle.		
Moderate Academic			Attributes success to strategies. If failure occurs, it will be attributed to strategies not learned or being used the wrong way. Next time, this student will work even harder at his/her strategies.	
High Academic			This student speaks of strategies which are under his/her control. Emphasis is on the repetitive attempts to use the strategies even if he/she fails.	

Sarah swayed between the hope that the FCAT would be fun and the reality that it had important consequences. She left her potential for grade level promotion to the test itself, “It’ll be a little hard. I’ll just try my best.” When asked what “her best” looked like,

Sarah evidenced no recognition of any personal behavior to increase her odds, thereby demonstrating an external, stable perception of the test. Maria continued along the external vein, “It [the FCAT] will help me pass” perceiving no changeable personal input, “I will pass . . .and then I’ll go to fourth grade.” Anna merely recognized a dominating aspect to the high-stakes test but made no connection between her input and potential results. This external, stable perception left Anna essentially helpless. These students do not see anything they can do to get past the test being “hard.” Figure 3, based on the student drawings collected before the assessment took place, provides a visual representation of the internal, stable attribution students experienced with high-stakes testing. These students saw the high-stakes test as a characteristic of themselves. This combination causes them to fail because they are less likely to change their effort to connect their contributions to the potential outcome.



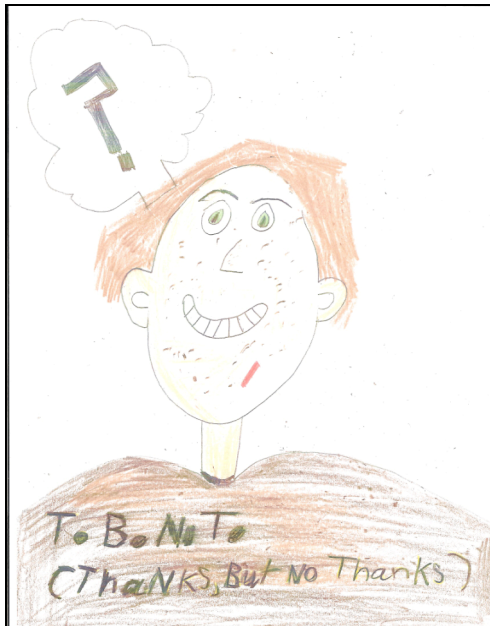
Figure 3. Student Drawing, Internal, Stable  
(*"I can't do this!!!"* and *"Uh, oh!"*)



Lance made his inability to pay attention in class a rationale for why he might not pass. Taking personal responsibility for his outcome he shared, "It means I didn't pay attention. I couldn't control myself." His internal, changeable perception of the testing helped connect his self-control to his potential in passing the high-stakes exam. This mastery orientation allows Lance to recognize he has control of his effort and if he fails, he'll blame his effort and be more likely to try harder in the future. Ethan presented an incremental view as he too recognized his internal focus as contributing to his potential success with high-stakes, "I think that I'll pass because I've been focused on what I'm suppose to learn and I've gotten all A's and B's." His internal, changeable attributions help him associate his efforts with his perceived potential for success.

Jessica, also master oriented, prepared herself for the test, practicing on the Internet test site. She recalled the use of self-talk as a reminder of her ability to be successful on the test, “When I started, I said in my mind that I’m doing it, so just calm down and you’ll be alright.” Jessica engaged internal, changeable attributions to the high-stakes test. Christopher also speaks of testing preparation materials but when asked if he knows how it helps him, he states, “No, it just feels like it does.” Not believing he is ready for the high-stakes test, Christopher attributes his experience to external, stable controls. The test will determine grade level promotion and nothing I do or don’t do will alter that. Figure 4, from the student drawing portion of the data collection, depicts Christopher’s external, stable attributions on which he based his testing experience.

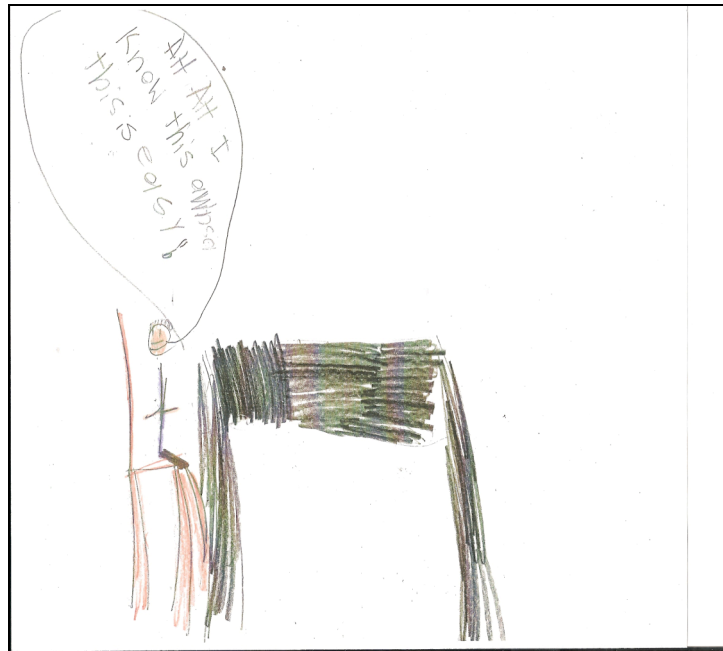
Figure 4. Student Drawing, External, Stable  
(to be or not to [thanks, but no thanks])



The high ability students shared an abundance of similarities in their motivation as learners with their perceived testing achievement. Internal, changeable attributions were revealed throughout this ability level. Abegal shared her drive to study and love of learning (internal) as a prospective reason why she might be successful on the assessment (changeable). When asked what it's like being a third grade student, she retorted, "You have to do your best and study a lot." Similar to Abegal's positive internal drive, David declared, "I study all the stuff we wrote for math so I can memorize it when the FCAT comes." Courtney and Amelia focused more on their academic strength area, reading. Courtney stated, "I got fact and opinion down pretty well and main idea I almost have down but not really yet." Amelia proclaimed herself as a good reader, "I'm a good reader.

I look at the questions before reading, underline, and listen to the teacher.” Their ability to relate their contribution to learning sustained an internal, changeable attribution to the potential of success depicted in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Student Drawing, Internal, Changeable  
(“Ah, ah. I know this answer this is easy!”)



Nine of eleven students (82%) perceived the outcome of the high-stakes test as being changeable. This was consistent with the results of the written reflections and the drawings from the remaining support students. The attributions demonstrated by the majority of students (79%) were expressed as changeable factors associated to their potential results on the high-stakes test.

Most interesting were the responses relating to attributions and how or why the students interpreted the control factor as they did. Often the factors that were voiced by

students included the ability to connect learning strategies to their potential testing success and to relate their effort as a learner (internal, changeable). The next theme provides evidence of the prevalent influence the students experienced when their ownership of learning is compromised in the arena of high-stakes testing.

### *Prevalent Influences*

In the literature, cognitive development allows for children to vary among strategies to cope. Socially acceptable ways to express themselves verbally increase with age. Student ability to appraise a situation and reflect on personal affect increases for school-age children (Brenner & Salovey, 1997). In this study, the students encountered influences that were prevalent in challenging their sense of self-efficacy. Family members, teachers and peers provided opportunity to influence the students' perceptions and experience with high-stakes testing. Prevalent influences, for the purpose of this study, are influences referred to by the students that were prevalent in their testing behaviors.

This theme addresses the question of where the students received their information about the FCAT. Prevalent influences included teachers, family, and peers. On average, half of the student participants from each mode of data collection (interviews, 45%, written reflections, 62%, and drawings, 49%) provided a reflection on the influence of other people on their perception of high-stakes testing.

For the female participants, the teacher influences increased their nervousness in some cases, but these students redirected their thoughts to override the teacher influence.

Jessica offered an affirmative experience to a teacher's influence by connecting that teacher with tools for test preparation:

Ms. Brown she gave us these little codes to put in our agendas and when it's computer time we, uhm, come in and we type our code on the computer and we go; to galactic library, third grade galactic library, and we do this game that gets us; ready for FCAT like words umm like stories, tests after the stories. She says we're ready to beat the FCAT.

When I asked Amelia how she was feeling about getting ready to take the test again the next day, she replied, "A little nervous because Mrs. Jones said it's going to be a little bit harder." She elaborated, "Because it's for comparing other third graders, other states to us." When I probed further into her prediction of what the test content would be like based on her current perception, she predicted, "a little bit harder and a little bit longer." Amelia recognized the teacher's influence as being potentially devastating. Indeed, she redirected her thoughts from that influence in order to increase her probability of success, "Don't be nervous, just think about the test and don't think about being nervous [about Mrs. Smith saying it will be hard]." Abegal discounted a teacher's somewhat ambiguous statement about the test. She shares, "The teacher's been telling us some of the areas are difficult and some are not. I think about that, I'm going to make it. I'm not going to fail. I'm going to pass."

For the male participants, teacher influences reduced their perceptions of success with the test. Ethan shared how he first learned about the FCAT when he stated, "Our

teacher told us that it's going to be a lot of reading, most of the test." He continued to share how reading was not his favorite subject and how in connecting these two elements, reading being prevalent on the test, and his distaste for it, he lost confidence in his ability to succeed on the test. Christopher was adversely affected by a teacher's influence as well. This student was not able to overcome his teacher's words. After requesting that the student share something he knew about high-stakes testing, he made the following comment, "My second grade teacher said that some of the questions might be hard in the FCAT. I don't think I'm ready." A further major influence on Christopher is the pressure to perform well on the FCAT to please his father, "It feels like that I might get a B. My dad says that as long as I get a good B he won't be upset."

Cayla disregarded her mother's influence which was actually of the positive nature, "My mom says that I'm gonna do good but I don't think I am." From the written reflection portion of the study, 13% of the other female students participating also discounted their family's influence. The remaining 87% were inspired by their family's influence. One student stated, "My mom told me I was smart and she also told me to believe that I can do it so I do." In relation to high-stakes testing and family influences, female students demonstrated concerns within the content of their drawing portion of the data collection relating to their fathers. Figure 6 depicts a female student's drawing of a discussion with her parents regarding the FCAT. She states, "Dad, mom, I'll pass" in her before picture, with her mom responding, "Okay" but the dad saying he's "angry." The

student's after side of the picture shows the student telling her parents she passed and their responses of praise.

Figure 6. Student Drawing, Families  
(Before: "Mom, Dad, I'll pass." "Okay." "I'm angry." After: "I passed!" "I knew it. Great job." "I knew it too!")



Josephina found security in her sister's prior experience with high-stakes testing, "my sister sort of helps me and she still remembers third grade stuff and takes me to the web site and stuff." She also found security in the verbal support she received from her sister who reminds her, "don't be scared, it is kind of easy." This allows Josephina to believe that, "[she] won't mess up for it." Among the Hispanic female responses regarding family influences, Josephina was the exception. The majority did not receive supportive influences from home. Their reflections spoke of potential beatings, feelings of disgrace, and inadequacy. There was no significant representation of prevalent family influences offered by the male students of the study.



Within the prevalent influence of peers, all students participating in the study who mentioned their peers as influential (69%) focused on discussions of the FCAT and remained confident in their ability to succeed. Daniel spoke of conversations he'd had with his peers about what high-stakes testing would be like. His insight was, "I think the people who are telling us it's hard, they're trying to scare you . . . Or, they're just saying that because they were held back." Another student shared, "I mostly think I'm going to pass even though a lot of kids stayed back because they got a lot of questions wrong." Sarah described about the first time she heard about the high-stakes of testing, "I heard it from my cousin" Sarah continued, "I was in second grade. She was in third. She said it was a little bit hard. I'll do my best."

Across academic ability groups, ethnicities and gender, peers provided the prevalent influence on the student participants. The student participants tended to respond hopefully, displaying a desire to overcome any influential negative comments.

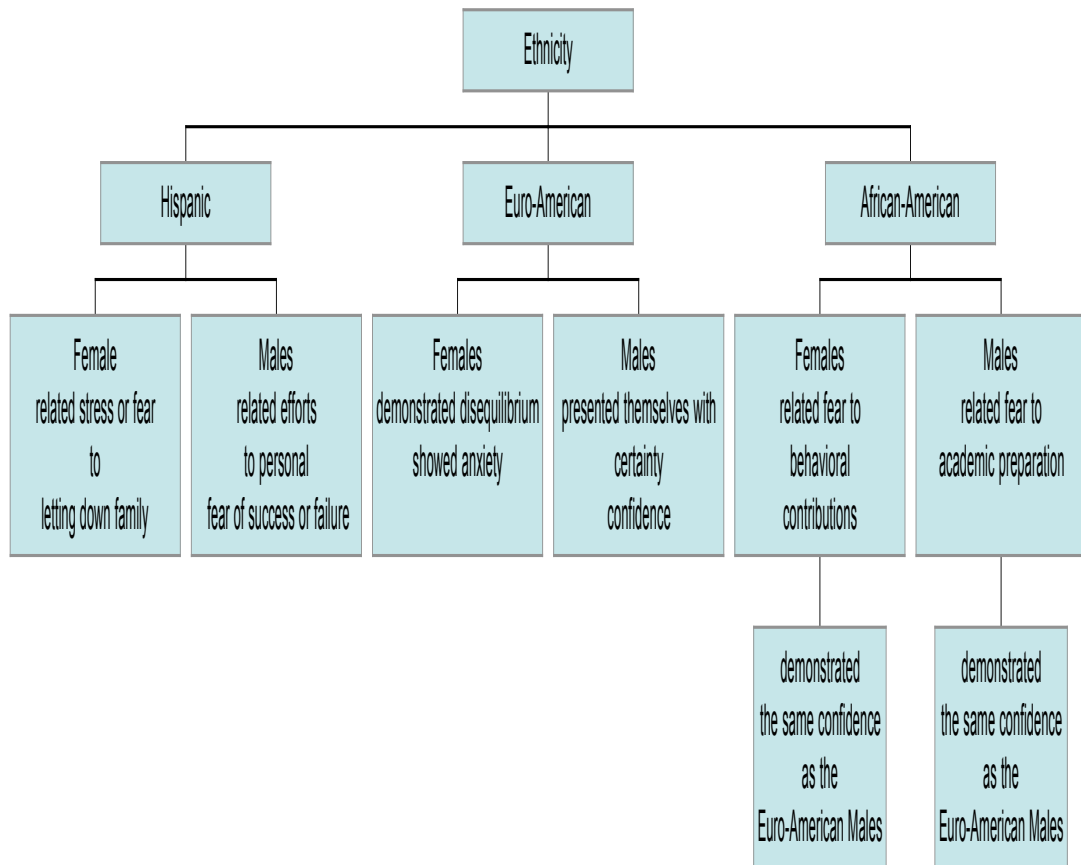
### *Emotions*

Students realize that expressions of emotions may not reflect true feelings (Saarni, 1999). School-age children are able to perform complex emotional reasoning. They are able to combine prior emotional experiences with those in the present. Schultz (2001) links students' abilities at early ages to understand empathy with favorable social relationships and prosocial behaviors. In this study, emotions are defined as multifaceted, incorporating interaction with the environment, cognitive processes and physical change.

Students portrayed the emotions they experienced as a result of fear and high-stakes testing over time within a combination of data options. Drawings, written reflections as well as interviews in some cases, opened the opportunity for student emotions to be represented. The student responses yielded a variety of comments as the testing period progressed. Excerpts from select students revealed interesting points regarding the dilemma of fear and high-stakes testing.

There were 51 students among the primary and support participants in this study. During the first reflection, in which students wrote about how they were feeling in reference to high-stakes testing in third grade, four students were absent and one student wrote off topic. Of the 46 remaining student reflections, 34 voiced a fear about their upcoming assessment. This 74% of the study population included 11 of the 12 primary student participants. Ethnicity and gender were major factors within this theme (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Ethnicity Factor with Emotions



The majority of the Hispanic females, who connected their feeling of stress and a perceived stressor of the test related their stress prior to testing to the potential of their results letting down their family. One student shared, “And when I got home I didn’t even tell my mom [testing was beginning]. I went to sleep but I could not sleep and the

teacher told us to have a great sleep. So in the morning when I went to school I could not eat breakfast.”

Trepidation filled the page of another Hispanic female student who wrote, “I think I might fail the grade and if I fail my mom will beat me and she will hit me and she will ground me.” Another student invoked her family as a guiding force, “I [am] going to do my best on the FCAT so I can pass to fourth grade so my mom can be happy at me and also my dad too so that my whole family can be so proud at me too so I’m going to be very nervous at myself when it’s the FCAT.”

The Hispanic male student representatives correlated their efforts to their personal fear of success or failure. One boy stated, “If I work a little hard I may have force to pass the test.” Similar elements voiced were, “I have been studying every day and when I go to school I learn more stuff about the FCAT.” One young man still left his results up to fate, “But if I study hard there will be a 50% [chance] of passing it. So you should have almost all the answers ready in your mind.”

The Euro-American females offered a variety of reasons for their pre-test fear. Similar to Sarah’s unease about the upcoming testing, “I am a little scared but in another way I am not. It seems freaked out, but I am not” her peer shared, “I am thinking that I’m going to fail and get a F and I want to go to fourth grade. But there is nothing to worry about.” Another student contemplated her potential perceived failure:

I feel like part of me is going to fail. The other part of me is excited and confident. I am excited because of FCAT Fun Day. I am also confident

because my math teacher is giving us a lot of tests and FCAT prep to help. Mr. Smith is giving reading FCAT prep and lots of tests too. I'm nervous because I've heard FCAT is hard, because people have failed because they don't pass the FCAT.

Following the same premise, an additional girl stated, "I feel nervous because the FCAT is coming. I feel excited because I have never done the FCAT before." To sum up, the following student provided an impressive representation of her experience. She proclaimed:

When I heard the FCAT was coming I leaped for joy and for being scared. I let the joy out of my body for one minute, next thing I know joy is gone forever. But joy gave me a call, he is coming back!!!!

Although the Euro-American female students demonstrated uncertainty regarding their ability, the Euro-American males provided a much more cut and dry representation of their perceived performance.

All three of the Euro-American males from the primary student participants reflected on the high-stakes component of the upcoming test. Christopher idealized the high-stakes component. He stated, "It's just so big. I don't want to think about it." Ethan and Lance mirrored each others responses. Ethan declared, "I don't want to go to summer school. I want to go to Disney World and swim and play with my friends." Lance echoed Ethan's apprehension, "I feel nervous about the FCAT because people said it's hard and

if you fail you go to summer school and take a harder test. I want to pass so I can go to fourth grade.”

Reflections from the support participants of this ethnicity group incorporate prior testing experiences. One student stated, “I’m going to fail because last year’s standard prep test was so easy but this year seems a little bit harder.” However, another exuded confidence, “I have passed the SAT two times already, why would I fail now?” Similarly, one continues:

I know I’ll get an A because I’ve always aced my FCAT’s  
[standardized assessments] before so there’s got to be at  
least got to be a ninety-nine percent it’s going to be an A,  
one percent I’m going to get an F.

The level of confidence the Euro-American males conveyed, whether in their potential success or failure, differentiated them from their female counterparts who discounted the efficacy of their preparation for the assessment to the high-stakes factor. Relatively speaking, the Euro-American females showed anxiety while the males were self-assured.

The African-American participants, represented by two females and one male, all related their behavior to their potential results on the assessment even though an underlying fear was prevalent. All three interlaced their fear of the high-stakes assessment with what they had contributed as a third grader. Daniel, a primary participant, stated, “I mostly am going to pass the FCAT because I am listening [to] all the things I need to now [be] doing [for] the FCAT.” One of the female students shared in

his confidence, "I know I can pass it." She continued, "Because I got a B on my writing test so I know I will do good on the FCAT." The third student was less confident, "I am nervous about spelling because I have been very bad for a third grader and that is why I [am] scared about the FCAT." This group of students emulated the same self- assurance demonstrated from some of the Euro-American males.

During the second reflection, 47 of the 51 primary and support students were present. This reflection took place mid-way through the high-stakes testing experience and responses evolved within the context of what the students would want a student new to the state of Florida to know about third grade. Thirty one of the forty seven student responses (66%) incorporated the FCAT as an important factor in grade three. Intriguingly, of this 66% only three students (less than five percent) remained in fear about the high-stakes of the testing when testing was not yet completed.

The reflections demonstrated that the majority of students, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or ability group had overcome their fear of the high-stakes testing mid-way through the exam. One student of low ability epitomized this finding when she said, "I would want them to know that you don't need to be scared or frightened. It is just the FCAT. Treat it just like a test. I even haven't taken it before so don't be scared." A complementary comment followed, "I would tell her/him that the FCAT is easy, at least for me. And tell them don't worry and don't be nervous that you might not pass." Another student followed up by saying, "They will take the FCAT and that they will do good on the FCAT."

The primary student participant interviews substantiated the above findings and provided some additional details about why the students re-gained such confidence with the test. Maria dismissed her fear by stating, “I mostly forgot about it.” Sarah said, “My Butterflies mostly went away.” Uncommon among her low ability peers, Anna held tight to her fears and at the second interview was unable to give voice to her thoughts and feelings. She could not tell where her feeling of sadness came from, and instead became paralyzed by the external control of the test itself. She retorted, “The FCAT, I am so sad.”

The middle ability group unanimously found their fears to subside once they began opening their test booklets. Ethan expressed, sheer “relief.” Josephina shared a similar experience, “After I looked at the test I wasn’t afraid anymore.” The high ability students also experienced relief at that moment. Abegal said after reading the test she found that, “this was pretty easy.” Cayla likewise noted her fear subsided as she looked through the booklet, “It was a little scary when I first started, and then when I actually looked in it and started doing it I was like this isn’t that hard.” Once the assessment started, fear diminished for the majority of both the primary and support participants. Figure 8 depicts the emotions of a student through the use of labeling before (scared) and after (happy) the test.



Figure 8. Student Drawing, Emotions  
(Before: “Scared” “D FCAT Now;” After: “Happy” “No More FCAT”)



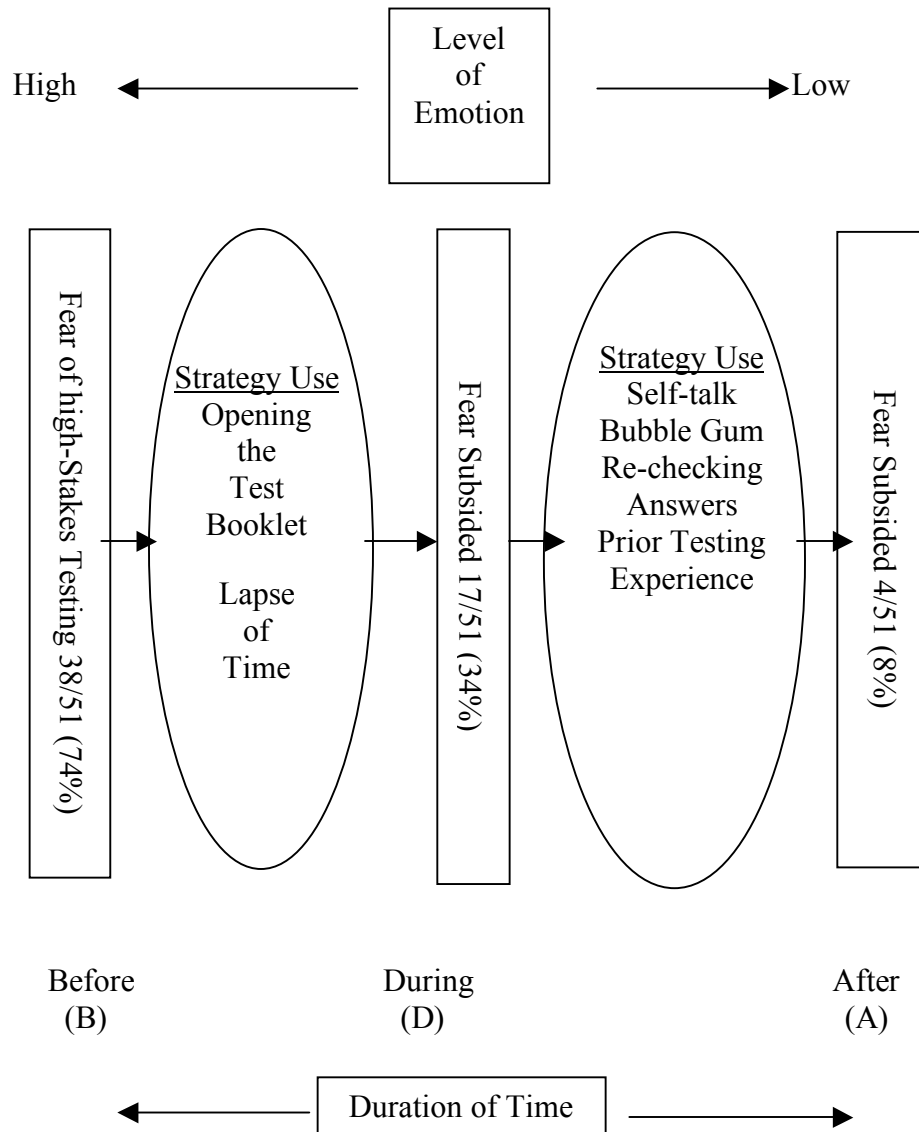
There were also forty-six student participants at the concluding reflection. This reflection focused on words of advice to upcoming third grade students. Of the forty-six student written reflections for this portion of the study, thirty three (72%) spoke of the high-stakes test as non-threatening, nine (20%) made no mention of it at all, while four students (8%) still expressed an underlying fear of the high-stakes component to third grade.

Daniel found the FCAT to be “easier [than other grades].” Students described themselves as “feeling good” now that FCAT was over. Others found third grade after the FCAT to be “pretty cool.” The interviews and written reflections followed the patterns of the mid-testing results with the addition that some of the middle to high ability students discussed strategies they implemented during testing which reduced their stress level.

Josephina reflected on having bubble gum as a source of comfort, “You would be attracted to the chewing gum and not like the test [and] it is finished and you will recognize that it went by faster than you thought.” Abegal agreed, “It [chewing gum] helped me not get a headache or be stressed out doing it.” Ethan was no longer worried, “because I checked my answers and I didn’t really find many mistakes.”

The perceptions of the majority of all participants expressed that they experienced a release from the fear of high-stakes testing once testing began. Regardless of the stated origin of their fear, the majority of all participants were able to overcome it. Figure 9 demonstrates the range of emotions experienced over the testing period. Regardless of gender, ethnicity, or ability level there was a decrease in negative emotions from before testing, (74%) to after testing (8%). As the Figure 9 shows, some students in third grade high-stakes testing had the ability to release themselves from the fear of high-stakes testing through the implementation of learning strategies.

Figure 9. Emotions



Acknowledgement of learning strategies was an essential component of the release of fear from high-stakes testing. Most interesting in the responses relating to fear and high-stakes testing was how or why the release of fear took place. The major factors

that were voiced by participants included the ability of the student to concentrate on the content at the first onset of testing and to relate their learning strategies to the content of the test. Figure 10 depicts a student chewing bubble gum, and the emotional relief she experienced in doing so.

Figure 10. Student Drawing, Strategies  
(*“Chew, chew, chew, chew!” “Wow!”*)



#### Discussion of Themes: Patterns

The students, who were of the primary participants in the study, identified as “low academic ability,” were those who had struggled with academics. These students saw the high-stakes factor as a measure of success; and a barrier to their grade level promotion. Since they desired to progress to the next grade level, they were aware of the need to pass

the FCAT, yet were not able to connect their academic behaviors with their potential outcome.

The “middle academic ability group,” refers to those primary participants who acknowledged the high-stakes assessment as a component of achieving their academic goal. The keen differentiation is related to their knowledge of the importance to focus on academics and apply learning strategies to accomplish their goal.

What distinguishes the “high academic ability group” from their peers in the “middle academic ability group” is their direct desire to gain knowledge beyond merely the requirements of the high-stakes test and to seek out assistance from their teachers to increase their opportunity for success. These participants identify grade level promotion as a component of their greater goal and compartmentalize the high-stakes assessment as just an element of third grade. Thus, these participants are on a holistic learning quest and seek out assistance in accomplishing their goal.

All three ability level groups desired grade level promotion and were entranced by the presence of high-stakes testing. It was their attributions, be they stable or changeable, internal or external, that determined the ownership level of the learning required for the pursuit of success.

In accord with the theme of Self-Test, the following two distinct types of patterns were referenced: external versus internal and stable versus changeable. Those who demonstrated external attributions seemingly had a reliance on the high-stakes test that was based on the sole presence of the exam. There was no separation between it and their

end goal and in some cases it was their end goal. The high-stakes test became the driving force for all grade level learning (stable). Fear of not gaining promotion to fourth grade initiated a receptive behavior of those students who demonstrated external attributions with the assessment. On the other side of the coin, the participants who demonstrated internal attributions formed a perception of learning that included but was not limited by the high-stakes of testing. The students with internal attributions were those who displayed a drive to gain knowledge and in some instances they sought out additional assistance to increase their knowledge (changeable). A relation could be drawn in terms of ownership of learning and attribution.

The specified emotions related to high-stakes testing were the attributions that empowered student achievement. For the invigorating patterns of this theme, I had to go deep into examples of attribution to distinguish: stable versus changeable and internal versus external. Internal was not always positive, and external was not always negative, but the students did want to be in control of their grade level promotion.

The students whose descriptions of high-stakes testing were consistent to their personal contributions were reflected as internal, changeable attributions. The internal attributions affected their emotions if the students perceived their ability and effort to increase their chances of passing the test. They were the determiners of their performance. The external attribution would in some instances overpower the students' perceptions of success if they saw the high-stakes test as stable thus, determining their grade level promotion regardless of their attempts to contribute (changeable). The pattern

demonstrated was that the higher the ability level of the student, the less likely he/she was to have attributions overcome their perceptions. This ability group generally referred to internal, changeable attributions as supporting their perceived success.

Prevalent influences such as teachers, family, and peers helped form the self-perceptions of students participating in this study. For all of the male students, primary and support, teacher influences yielded the highest affect on their perception. Family was most prevalent in the female participants' perception of the testing experience. In relation to peer influences, the majority of student participants tended to respond with hopefully, representing a desire to overcome any adverse comments.

The emotions, in accordance with the final theme, related the students' perceptions of high-stakes testing through the experience of the Self-Test, attribution, and prevalent influences. This can be seen in their representation of fear over the course of time it took to complete the testing. There were students who were released from their fear entirely, some who experienced a positive release from fear even though the results were unknown, and a few who were still under the threshold of fear. The first two patterns were the most dominant perceptions of the high-stakes testing experience. Participants revealed a relief for the conclusion of the high-stakes testing or, at a minimum, offered description of having moved on. A third pattern was revealed by a minority of participants who revealed their continuous fear of the high-stakes test regardless of the time elapsed.

### *Review of Findings*

The findings for each of the four main themes are described below based on all 51 participants' drawings and written reflections and the 12 participants interviews and focus groups.

#### Self-Test:

- The presence of high-stakes testing monopolized time in the school routines of third grade students just as reading class or math would.
- Students of low academic ability related their learning to the FCAT and believed the FCAT to be the essence of learning.
- Students of moderate academic ability related their learning to a demonstration on the FCAT as well as throughout the school year. This academic ability group also recognized summer school as an alternative, yet undesirable, route for grade level promotion.
- Students from the high academic ability group recognized the FCAT as a component of third grade and connected their study habits to a broader range of learning rather than focusing solely on the FCAT. These students also acknowledged the need of help from their teachers in order to succeed.

#### Attribution:



- Students of low academic ability perceived their potential for success on the high-stakes test to be of external, stable attributions. For example, the test is hard (external) and it will decide my grade level promotion (stable).
- Students of moderate academic ability perceived their potential for success on the high-stakes test to be of internal, changeable attributions. For example, how hard I study (internal) and what strategies I use (changeable) relate to my outcome. According to Dweck (1992), the functionality of these students is considered mastery oriented.
- Students of high academic ability perceived their potential for success on the high-stakes test to be of internal, changeable attributions. What differentiated this group of students from their peers of moderate academic ability was their connection to their strengths as learners.

#### Prevalent Influences:

- Female students were able to overcome an adverse teacher influence.
- Male students succumbed to adverse teacher influence.
- Female students succumbed to adverse family influences.
- Hispanic female students connected their family influences with fear.
- Male students were able to overcome adverse family influences.
- Both male and female students were able to overcome adverse peer influences.

#### Emotions:

- Ethnicity played a major factor within this theme.

- Hispanic female students related their stress or fear with testing to the potential of letting down their family.
- Hispanic male students related their efforts to personal fear of success or failure.
- Euro-American female students demonstrated disequilibrium and showed anxiety.
- Euro-American male students presented themselves with more certainty and showed confidence.
- African-American females related their fear to behavioral contributions as students. These females recognized, for example, their disinterest in learning as having an effect on their results.
- The African-American males in the study related his fear to academic preparation as a student.
- All three African-American students showed the same confidence as the Euro-American males.

#### Introduction of Portraits

The next chapter will represent the above themes and patterns under the context of the five strategies recommended by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) for the development of portraits: (1) repetitive refrains; (2) resonant metaphors; (3) institutional and cultural rituals; (4) triangulation; and (5) revealing patterns. This additional organization of the data coded the students' experiences and perceptions to provide glimpses of what life as a third grader is like with high-stakes testing. The resulting construction of three descriptive portraits of third grade students as

individuals with their socio-emotional experiences and perceptions of high-stakes testing will then be provided.

## CHAPTER 5

### Portraitures

*No single test score can be considered a definitive measure of a student's knowledge.*

National Research Council Report, High-stakes

#### Construction of Portraitures

Three portraitures were constructed based on the third grade students' experiences and perceptions with high-stakes testing. The five strategies recommended by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) under which the above themes and patterns were dissected are: repetitive refrains, resonant metaphors, institutional and cultural rituals, triangulation and revealing patterns. These strategies were important in constructing the portraitures. This was the canvas from which the three portraitures were created. Examples from the student data below illustrate each of the five strategies.

#### *Repetitive Refrains*

Repetitive refrains were articulated within the four major themes: self-test, attribution, prevalent influences and emotions. These themes were mentioned repeatedly by a diversity of students. An example of an immediately apparent refrain would be the testing rituals displayed in the third grade teacher practices. Ethan shared, "I think that Mrs. Jones is pushing us because today is the FCAT and she wants us to pass." Cayla followed up by commenting that the same teacher after testing concluded, "My teacher said she won't be as hard on us anymore and she will let us, like, won't let us do as much work. We sit around watching movies and stuff now."

A more subtly expressed refrain convergent with the testing ritual of Mrs. Jones relates to homework. Christian explained, “Same old, same old homework. I liked the testing weeks better so I can get back to my life.” By discontinuing homework assignments during testing, the students preferred to stay in the testing mode to avoid the return of homework assignments. Pushing curriculum, maxing student studies, and assigning homework all provide examples of repetitive refrains because they became the norm for third grade practices.

#### *Resonant Metaphors*

Through the use of implied comparisons, symbols, and figurative language (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) a resonant metaphor characterizes emergent themes. Examples of resonant metaphors represented in the student data include “I felt like I had butterflies in my stomach,” “If somebody just did rock, paper, scissors, to see,” “I’m a smart car, getting all the math problems as I drive along the way,” “Every day I feel like I’m going to explode,” “It’s like the championship game.” The students in this study used metaphors to explain some of their emotions and how they fulfilled their role as third grade students with high-stakes testing. The resonant metaphors embodied values and perspectives while giving them shape and meaning.

#### *Institutional and Cultural Rituals*

A representation of life as a third grade student with high-stakes testing was apparent through institutional and cultural rituals. Fullan (1991) found institutional and cultural rituals to be visible signs of community life. Some institutional or cultural rituals

did influence their students' experiences and perceptions with high-stakes testing. An example of an institutional ritual the students experienced was the scheduling of a Fun Day when testing was completed. The students explained, "We actually need a change to have fun after the FCAT." "It was a celebration that you have for taking the FCAT and studying all year and we did all that work." An example of a cultural ritual would be students engaging in prayer during their testing experience. One student stated, "If I am too worried, I would just pray to the Lord. I would say, 'Oh Lord, mighty Lord, please make me pass the test and go to fourth grade. In Jesus name I pray, amen,' that's what I would pray if I got too worried about the FCAT." The institutional and cultural rituals offer not only an aesthetic expression of values but also visible reflection of the expressions the environment evokes.

### *Triangulation*

Continuing the triangulation process throughout the analysis phase connected the tiered interviewing, focus group data, tiered written reflections and tiered student illustrations within the same umbrella of ownership of learning. These different lenses framed the students' ownership of learning within the contexts of: (1) self-test, (2) attribution, (3) prevalent influences and (3) emotion. Awareness of academic effort and high-stakes testing results was prevalent. The themes derived from factual evidence from triangulation of the data collection.

### *Revealing Patterns*

The purpose of revealing patterns is to locate structure in the experiences and perceptions of the third grade students. The revealing patterns comprised scattered pieces of information that did not immediately offer relevance to the experiences and perceptions of the third grade students. The structures formed dual conflicting perceptions for the third graders. Revealing patterns presented themselves in the self-perception of the third grade children as students and in their perceptions of the implications of the high-stakes testing experience. One student stated, “If I could pass another test I could pass this test with all the hard work I’m going to work my brain so I could do good in the FCAT test.” Another student voiced, “I’m nervous because maybe I don’t know a question and boom I stay in third grade again. I’m trying to stop playing too much.” A more explicit statement was, “But if I study hard there will be a fifty percent [chance] of passing it. So you should have almost all the answers ready in your mind . . . that way you can go to fourth grade.” The theme emerges from the revealing patterns through dual reflections: The students’ reflecting on their own experience (making connections along the way) and my reflecting on the students’ reflections (identifying and naming patterns I see).

### *A Glimpse of Third Grade with High-Stakes*

Following the framework of the portraiture, support is provided through a flowing and fluid form which breathed life into the following narratives. The clearly defined themes will now follow sequence of beginning, middle, and end emphasizing the

prevalent patterns for three students of varying ability. As events unfold, the balance of information and emotion establishes unity within the context of a day in the life of a third grade student experiencing high-stakes testing. In hopes of capturing both the head and the heart of the reader, the following portraits depict a composite of the phenomena of intrigue in the study of experiences and perceptions of third grade students with high-stakes testing (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).



Anna

A Different Kind of School Day

Anna Cuellar looked up at the glass of orange juice and the cinnamon toast in front of her. For some reason, on this particular morning, she couldn't bring herself to eat.

Her mother said, "Anna, cariño, hurry up."

Her brother added, "You don't want to be late on your big test day, do you?"

Instead of eating her breakfast, Anna just kept staring at the cinnamon swirls as they formed shapes into the toast, and at the particles of pulp that laced the circumference of her juice glass.

"You'll see, you'll do your best and then you'll go to fourth grade," her mother said. But her mother's soft, reassuring voice didn't seem to convince Anna. Anna knew it wasn't going to be easy answering all those questions, especially when she wasn't certain what kinds of questions there were going to be. Her teacher had taught her about fact and opinion but she didn't really understand it. She kept feeling more and more sad. She kept thinking what bad luck it was that she had to have the FCAT in third grade. She had had so many things to learn.

"It'll be over before you know it," said Anna's mother, as if she could read her mind.

Anna kept staring at the glass. Her brother interrupted her daydream when he chimed in, "Come on, Belita, hurry up. You're going to make me late." She gulped down

her orange juice, even though it bounced within the butterflies in her stomach. Anna shook her head, trying to shake the nervous thoughts from her mind.

She got up and grabbed her pink backpack. “Good-bye, Mami,” Anna said softly to her mother, who had already swiped away the morning dishes from the table.

“See you after school, my love. May God be with you,” her mother answered back, gently kissing Anna’s forehead. “Be good at school and listen to your teacher.”

“Yes, Mami. Good-bye,” said Anna, and she hugged her mother tighter than ever. Then she left the apartment. As the door closed behind her, Anna would have loved to have stayed in their warm kitchen filled with the smell of toasted bread. If only she could sit there all morning hugging her mother, who always made her feel safe and secure. But her brother grasped her hand and pulled her through the corridor of the apartment building.

By the time Anna and her brother got to the bus stop, the bus was already there. “Come on, Belita. Run,” her brother called out.

Anna’s feet felt as if they were planted in the cement. All she could think about was the big test waiting for her when she arrived at the school. She grasped the straps of her pink backpack on each of its sides as she joined the end of the line of children. Climbing onto the bus, Anna sank into the first available seat. All of the children around her were chattering away on the bus while all Anna could do was wonder why they weren’t all sad like her. From this point on, nothing about this day would be familiar.

## Breakfast at School

The hallways of the school seemed much larger this morning. Though usually lined with children, there were only a handful of students scurrying past her today. Anna was uncertain where to go. The wall where her classmates usually sat and waited for the bell was empty. Standing outside her classroom door, Anna's teacher greeted her, "Good morning." Many of the other children had already taken their seats. Some were talking with the children who were seated close to them while others just seemed to be waiting for class to start.

Anna placed her backpack in her cubby and slid quietly into her seat. Noticing her missing name-tag from the top center of her desk, Anna's eyes traveled up to the desk next to her and then noticed no one had their name tag on their desks. Scanning the classroom walls, there were large sheets of paper covering all the children's fairytale stories and the wall usually covered with "juicy \$50 dollar words" was bare. A chill ran down Anna's spine when Jessica sat down at her desk beside her, "It's because of the big test. We're not allowed to find the answers anywhere in the room, just what's inside our heads. I've been practicing all year." Anna dropped her head into her arms on her desk.

"Here's your breakfast." A classmate dropped a packaged doughnut in front of Anna's head. As she lifted her face to see what he was talking about, another boy came by with a carton of grape juice. Uncertain of why they had food in the classroom, Anna heard her teacher reading the names of each student while marking in a folder. Now

standing by the classroom door, the teacher looked up and reminded everyone to eat their breakfast. You could hear a pin drop as the testing time drew closer.

“It’s because of the big test too,” Jessica whispered, “everything is about the big test today.” Anna played with the wrapper on her doughnut package until she saw an adult standing in the doorway. She recognized this person from her school but didn’t know what her name was. “Anna, José, Javier and Maria,” her teacher called out, “you need to go to the cafeteria.” Anna felt her heart skip a beat as she rose from her seat and followed the woman with her other three classmates. With the woman, Anna and her three classmates stopped at another classroom and Anna’s friend Josephina and another girl Luz joined them. They all arrived in the cafeteria where other children were sitting far apart from each other. “Please take a seat and there is absolutely no talking!” Anna’s throat was dry as she sat on a bench with another child on either side of her. Another adult, a teacher Anna guessed, came and slid the children’s bodies to impart distance between them.

“Hello,” she said, giving Anna a warm smile. But it didn’t seem to make Anna feel more comfortable. “So you are. . .”

“Anna Cuellar,” she shyly replied. In Spanish she would have added, “para servirle,” but she didn’t know how to say that in English. So Anna kept quiet and folded her hands in her lap.

The woman marked a sheet of paper and handed Anna a booklet, a pencil, and a dictionary, “Here you go, now don’t open it until I say to.” Anna left the items set in front

of her and watched as the woman gave the same items to each child in her row. Josephina Perez looked up from her items as Anna glanced over from hers. She had long wavy hair and earrings so unlike Anna's long straight hair and ears longing to be pierced like all the other girls in her grade. Anna lowered her eyes, and neither girl said a word.

A few moments later, the woman stood in front of everyone holding a booklet that looked just like the one in front of Anna. At the same time, another woman placed a small, round, wrapped item about the size of a piece of bubble gum in front of each child. Anna looked up and saw the first woman open her booklet by running her pencil down the side. Anna watched as most of the other children did the same and so she picked up her booklet and followed them. After all of the booklets were open, the woman in the front reminded everyone not to talk, "If you speak from this point on, you will be asked to leave the room." She continued to read directions from a different booklet, prompting the children to follow along. "You may begin."

Anna felt her sadness deepen as she viewed the test booklet in front of her. She glanced over and saw Josephina unwrap the small item in front of her and placed it in her mouth. Too nervous to do so Anna stared at the words in the booklet. After awhile, she picked up her pencil and began answering the questions in the test booklet. The booklet was thick and the more Anna thought about how thick it was, the more sad she became. There were so many words inside it that she did not recognize. Once finished, Anna still felt the sadness within her. Closing her booklet, she laid her head down on her table top.

“Anna. Anna Cuellar,” the woman called out, her voice rising higher and higher. Anna awoke from her dozing and her dreams vanished like a puff of smoke. But it wasn’t the shrill of the woman’s voice that shook her out of her sleep but the silence that had followed with the eyes of five other students and her teacher squinting at her.

“I’m talking to you, Anna.” The woman was standing over the top of Anna with a look of impatience. Anna slumped down in her seat and looked at the room around her. All of the children were gone except for the five students who had walked to the cafeteria with her earlier. She didn’t know what she was supposed to do next so she stood up and followed the group out of the cafeteria.

#### Recess

When Anna returned to her classroom, all of the students were sprawled across the floor watching a movie. Anna was still feeling nervous. She didn’t know how the other kids could concentrate on the movie.

Jessica was whispering with a group of girls who were sitting next to Anna, “I thought it was cool. I just kept thinking that I’ve got the test and I just have to finish the test and I’ll probably go to 4<sup>th</sup> grade.” Another girl described how she closed her eyes and took a few breaths, and then, she explained, “I just started doing it and I... I probably passed.” Anna could feel knots in her stomach. The girl right next to her on the floor told how it was a little different for her because she was worried, “I thought it would be pretty hard but it was actually easy.”

Some of the children from the classroom next door came in to watch the movie. As the students got situated on the floor, some boys talked about how unfair it was to miss out on recess just because the whole school was testing. Anna thought about how they weren't going to be able to go out to the playground for two weeks.

As she was daydreaming about playing on the swings and how her hair would flow across her face as she pumped her legs high, one of the girls whispered, "I saw you in the cafeteria. I was so scared." It was Josephina, bringing her back from her daydream. Anna didn't say anything. She didn't want the other girls to know she was afraid she wouldn't pass. Josephina continued to tell all of the girls, "We go to ESOL and get extra time. They even gave us bubble gum to help us concentrate and chew on it to be thinking hard. It made it easy."

"I got butterflies in my tummy." One girl chimed in. "Me too," said another, "but I couldn't concentrate with the bubble gum in my mouth so I had to spit it out." Anna didn't know that all of the kids in third grade got to have bubble gum, maybe she would try it tomorrow. Her head wouldn't be so anxious and her heart might not be as sad. Jessica noticed how sad Anna looked. "You just have to do what I did. Tell yourself in your mind that you're going to do it so just calm down and you'll be alright."

Anna continued to listen to the other girls talk among each other about how relieved they were. Even Josephina felt better about going into the testing tomorrow. As the movie concluded, the students from the other class lined up to leave. One little girl who was sitting with the group by Anna leaned over to her and said, "I'm sad too. I just

keep wondering if I'm going to pass or not." Anna squeezed her friend's hand as she left with her classmates. Maybe her Mami was right when she told her before school that all she had to do was her best and then she would get to go to fourth grade like the other children.

### Homework

Over the next few days, Anna went to the cafeteria with some of the other children and continued to take more test sections. Recess and the remainder of the school day to take place as usual, watching movies inside because other children were doing make-up tests throughout the school. Anna began to enjoy socializing with the other girls, though she was still uncertain whether or not she would pass the test.

The teacher stressed how important the test was, and this made Anna more uncomfortable. She didn't know if she was answering the questions correctly. Worst of all, most of the other girls seemed to be gaining confidence as the week progressed. She heard one girl say to another, "I'm done and it's like after you've done it a little bit you don't feel as stressed out as you did before." Anna kept trying to forget about how hard it was but kept remembering her brother telling her how hard it was to pass third grade. "You have to really be prepared for the test. You have to get a good night sleep the day before. Listen to the directions the teacher says."

The school day routine was altered as the daily reading and math lessons were cancelled. The teacher stressed the importance of taking a break from daily studies during



the testing, and that meant no homework assignments during testing weeks. “It is important to go home, have dinner and get an early night’s sleep,” she would say.

All of the other students were glad not to have homework but Anna never seemed to mind working on schoolwork at home. On the last day of the first week of testing, Anna’s teacher allowed the students’ time to read silently in the classroom. Anna wandered between the shelves of books in the classroom. She didn’t have many books at home as her mother could not read English. She missed her daily reading homework. When the other children would exclaim in delight, “The best thing about FCAT is no homework,” Anna longed for things to return to the routine so she could take stories home to read. There were so many books to choose from. She would crouch down to look at all the titles carefully. Sometimes she took a book off the shelf to look over the cover. She was holding the book in her hand wondering how she’d ever be able to read a book with that many words. The teacher bent down next to her and said quietly placing the book back on the shelf, “We won’t be working on such hard things anymore. We have another week of testing to do beginning Monday. Let’s get back to our seats and get ready to go home.”

On the bus ride home, Anna sat by the window trying not to think about the test and how it would determine whether she would go to fourth grade. Staring at the trees and houses as they passed by, Anna could feel her nervousness return. She hung her head low and worried that all the other kids would think she was dumb if she didn’t pass the big test.

### Another Week of Testing

That Monday morning, Anna had trouble eating her breakfast again, and her brother was annoyed with her. “I don’t want to have to run to the bus again today, Belita,” he complained. “Make her hurry, Mama. She can’t be late for school. We all have testing this week.”

Her mother didn’t pay attention to her brother, but she did place Anna’s pack on her back. When she was headed out the door, Anna’s mother said softly, “You’ll do your best Anna.” She felt the butterflies flutter in her stomach.

Once Anna arrived at her classroom, the students were awaiting breakfast just like the week before. Everyone seemed to be more talkative today but Anna could not stop thinking about the test. She didn’t understand why they had to take two tests and heard one of the children explaining to another, “If you get a bad grade on the Sunshine State Standards but you get a great grade on the NRT, you will still go to fourth grade.” Anna didn’t understand what the difference was when she heard another girl continue, “If you get a two on the reading you fail but if you get a one on the Norm Reference test you can pass.”

Anna just thought to herself how sad she would be if she failed would have to repeat the same grade. “I would cry so hard.” Anna didn’t realize she had spoken out loud. “It doesn’t matter if you pass the FCAT.” Jessica said reassuringly to Anna, “Mrs. Jones said that it only matters on the reading.”

“It should matter on your grades,” another child retorts, “My grades were good!”

Each day this week when it was time to test, Anna went to the cafeteria with some of the other children. She didn't understand why she had to go every time but decided to try the bubble gum. Chewing did help the time go by much faster.

One afternoon at home, while having an after school snack, Anna's mother finally asked, "How was school today, Anna?"

Anna replied, "Fine." She didn't know what else to say. She felt as she couldn't tell her mother that her testing made her nervous. All of her classmates didn't seem to be nervous anymore and she didn't know why.

"Why so sad?" Her mother asked.

Anna couldn't bear to tell her mother that even though her mother believes she will do well if she only does her best, she is not convinced of it herself. Anna liked to please her mother, and she didn't know how she would score on the test. Each night when she would go to bed early to be better prepared for the test, the same thoughts kept running through her head, over and over again: How can I feel proud of how I did on my test when I don't know if what I did was right or wrong?

### Fun Day

The two days of the weekend flew by. The students were grew tired of watching movies and sat in small groups conversing about life after FCAT. Anna was finally feeling some relief from her nervousness.

"I liked the Norm Reference Test better than the FCAT." One girl explained, "It only had a page of questions although it had a lot more stories. Did I tell you all that my

mom bribed me? She said that if I get a five on anything I'll get \$100.00 and if I get a four I get \$50.00."

"But it doesn't matter on your math," another girl responded, "Did you hear Mrs. Jones say that if you come to school more, and you listen, you are going to go to fourth grade? Everyone looked at Justin because he hasn't been coming to school."

A buzz of responses arose until Jessica changed the topic. "The stuff on the FCAT matched what we were doing in school. The second test was better. It had a page of questions."

As one of the girls got up and changed her seat, she exclaimed, "I think our grades should decide if we go to fourth grade or not." The girl, now seated next to her, responded, "I got F's the first quarter, most F's. And now I got one A, two B's, one D and three C's. If it was based on that I wouldn't be passing."

"Maybe you started getting more better grades because you were paying attention for FCAT stuff?" The girl asked in consternation.

"I think it should depend on your report card." When Anna spoke, all of the girls simultaneously looked in her direction. "I don't feel bad, not worried that much anymore but that's because it's done. I think it should depend on your report card."

The girls unanimously agreed that the report card grades should count and Anna beamed from ear to ear for the first time in more than two weeks.

All the students had completed testing. Everything at school now revolved around the FCAT Fun Day. The classrooms were buzzing with excited children. The teacher

explained to the class that students could participate in the different carnival rides they chose. Across the campus, spirits lifted. The teacher had taken down the paper covering the children's fairytale stories and placed the heading, "What I Plan to Do on Summer Vacation" where the "juicy" descriptive words use to be. As a reward for coming to school on time each day and completing their tests, the students are rewarded with a Fun Day. "It's a celebration for finishing our FCAT" one of them explained. A student new to the school asked the group of girls what the FCAT was. Anna replied, "It is a test like an ordinary test. Don't worry." And Anna no longer did.

#### Discussion of Anna's Portraiture

The intention of relating Anna's portraiture in detail is to provide a voice for Hispanic female students experiencing high-stakes testing. It expresses the views of female Hispanic students who experienced stress both indirectly and directly from the FCAT (self-test). Indirectly, stress arose from being removed from the classroom environment. This group perceived themselves as being penalized, taken out of their familiar classroom setting and required to take a test under anxiety provoking conditions. This caused, in Anna's terminology, "deep sadness" (emotions) so much that she did not want to speak about the FCAT during the second interview. Anna represents her Hispanic female peers in her desire to do well in education without a being familiar with what that entails.

Additionally, the FCAT directly presented an external, stable stressful attribution for the Hispanic females. In their view, the test determined their grade level promotion

and nothing they did could alter the results. The desire to do well on the assessment to evoke pride from Anna's family (prevalent influence) was a characteristic of the Hispanic females in this study. The next portraiture will introduce you to Daniel who exemplifies the eager to please, dedicated male students who strive to succeed.

## Daniel

### School Experience

Daniel Burkshire enjoyed being with all the other kids in Mr. Smith's third-grade class. Unlike some of the other boys, he recognized the importance of listening to his teacher and paying attention when he was called to write on the board. Daniel prided himself on his study discipline and looked forward to each new challenge third-grade provided. When the bell would ring at the end of the school day, he would double check that he had his study notebook and then run for the door with the other kids.

Like most of the kids in his class, Daniel daydreamed a lot about what he wanted to be when he'd grow up. A few of the kids in his class wanted to be doctors or lawyers. Some of the other kids wanted to drive transporters. Daniel's closest friend, Ethan wanted to be a star athlete. Daniel and Ethan were always playing sports, trading sports cards, reading about sports, and talking about how they were going to make it big some day.

Daniel would spend every recess playing football with the other boys. His dream was similar to Ethan's in that he wanted to play football in the NFL. What was different for Daniel was that he understood all too well how important it would be for him to go to college. If he could conquer college, Daniel would be the first in his family to do so.

Serious about his future, Daniel would spend spare time reviewing the dictionary. When a project was assigned in class, he made it fun for himself and found every opportunity to connect his learning to preparation for the FCAT. Reflecting on his most recent reading project, a diorama, Daniel reminisced, "hmm, it helped me prepare to read

the book and start getting my stuff in on time, to get more creative too.” He set himself apart academically, finding it more exciting to read alone than with the other children during reading choice time. Aware of the high-stakes of the FCAT, Daniel found himself in uncharted territories, “This is the first time I’ve been in the third grade so if I stay back then I will know more about it, though I don’t want to [stay back].”

### Daniel’s Dilemma

One school morning Daniel was packing his backpack and realized that the high-stakes testing would begin on this day.

“If I fail I will have to stay in third grade and I feel like I will pass the FCAT and move on to fourth grade,” he told himself. Daniel sat on the edge of his bed. He had a problem. “Other people haven’t passed before,” he thought. “But then, you can pass, and you can not.” Daniel shook his head to refocus, “I’ll be ok because I’ve passed every year,” he said.

“Daniel! Daniel!” He heard his mother’s voice calling. “We need to get moving, come eat your breakfast. Why are you taking so long?” she said. “I’m going to be late for work and you’ll be late for school.”

Getting up from the edge of the bed, Daniel grabbed his backpack and ran out of the room. When Daniel entered the hallway his mother greeted him with a banana and scooted him out the door.



“Mom, I’ve got a problem,” Daniel said, as he put his backpack on the car floor and slid into the passenger seat next to his mother. “Seat belt,” his mother said. Clicking his seat belt into place, Daniel continued, “Today is FCAT.”

“You know I think the FCAT is kind of not fair, Daniel.” Daniel agrees with his mother, “Yes ma’am, I think it’s kind of not fair too but it’s here. Cause if we move to fourth grade I think I’ll get the questions that I really have to know and if I don’t get it I have to stay back.”

When he arrived at the school, Daniel stepped out of the car and tried to reassure himself that school is about having fun. He reminded himself of all the work his teacher had given him so that he and his classmates would do better so they could do whatever they needed to in their text book and how he would write it all down in his notebook so he would use it to prepare for the FCAT. As he entered the classroom door, and saw the stack of test booklets on Mr. Smith’s desk Daniel’s thoughts became interlaced with a discomfort over the number of questions that might be on the test. “Mr. Smith has done the FCAT before and has taught us everything we need to know to get us in the groove,” Daniel said under his breath while taking his seat. Paging through the dictionary Daniel looked for interesting words, as he did every morning, until the first bell rang.

### Testing

That day, staring at the test booklet in front of him, Daniel thought about all of the preparation he had done in order to pass the test. All mental notes provided references pointers for much of the material in front of him. He did not want to stay back in third

grade. Aware that students who did not pass last year had to go to summer school, Daniel thought about how it would ruin all of his plans – he wouldn't be able to play football with his friends or finish his 700-page *Harry Potter* book. If he stayed back his papa would ground him for a month or two. What really scared Daniel was the thought that his younger sister might have to stay back when it's her year to take the big test.

Returning his concentration to the test, Daniel found himself liking it. "I think these people who were telling us it would be hard were trying to scare us because this is pretty, this is really easy." Daniel continued to reassure himself, "This is pretty much like second grade when I took the SAT mostly like the same thing." Bouncing between confidence and nervousness, Daniel completed his test section in plenty of time for Mr. Smith to collect the booklets. "The test is over for today," Mr. Smith told the class.

A buzz of conversation arose among the students. They began to move around the room, stretch and yawn. Mr. Smith directed their attention to the clock and reminded them of the need to remain quiet due to all of the other rooms possibly still testing. Everyone lounged around the room eating snacks, visiting quietly and using the rest room. Looking up from the book he was reading, Daniel's attention was called to the students returning from other testing rooms, he wondered how they had done.

Next, everyone was given the option to stay with Mr. Smith and review some math to prepare for the math portion of the test for the next day or go next door to another third grade classroom to view a movie. Great conversation broke out as the majority of

the students quickly found a place in the line at the door and scurried out of the room. A small group remained along with Daniel for the math review.

While a couple of children from the other classroom joined Daniel's group, Mr. Smith provided some examples from last years FCAT tests of what the upcoming math portion of the test might look like. Daniel felt his nervousness subside and he joyfully transitioned to a math bingo game. The more games and activities Daniel participated in, the more comfortable he felt about the remaining days of testing.

During the learning games, a few of the boys who were sitting with Daniel began conversing about their testing experience.

"I studied hard which means there is a fifty percent chance I passed it. So I had almost all the answers ready in my mind," one boy shared with the group.

"Before I opened my test booklet, I didn't think I was going to pass," Ethan chimed in, "I really don't want to go to summer school but I really do want to go to fourth grade so I was glad I knew everything on it. My teacher really had a hard time working and teaching us all this stuff so we can pass it and they did do their job."

"Yeah, Mr. Smith taught me the stuff I needed to know too," another boy agreed. "I am thinking that I pretty much passed my first FCAT, although, I was scared at first."

"I listed all the things I needed to know doing the FCAT," Daniel shared, "I mostly think I'm going to pass."

"I want to pass the FCAT but if I don't I go to summer school. If I don't pass the FCAT I have to stay in third grade so, I hope I pass this year."

“If you go to summer school you take a harder test,” a boy reminded his peers. “I want to pass so I can go to fourth grade.”

“I’m nervous because maybe I didn’t know a question and BOOM! I stay in third grade again. I had to try hard to stop playing too much.”

As one of the boys in his group shared his confidence, “I know I’ll get an A, because I’ve always aced my FCAT’s before so there’s got to be at least a ninety-nine percent chance it’s going to be an A, one percent I’m going to get an F.” Mr. Smith called the boys attention to everyone else cleaning up in preparation for lunch. Daniel returned to his seat wondering why he didn’t feel so hungry yet. The doughnut wrapper inside his desk reminded him of the morning breakfast at school. “Breakfast in the morning, it kept my brain going.”

After lunch the day was comprised of more learning games and movies. The remainder of the testing weeks developed a routine of their own with testing in the mornings and the options for learning games or movies throughout the rest of the day. When the bell would ring, Daniel would grab his back-pack and head for the door, his study notebook untouched for many days now.

#### Advice to Others

As Daniel was walking to the car rider line with a group of third grade boys, conversation revolved around getting outside to play sports after school now that the testing was just about complete. Seated between his friends and some children of

different ages, a few of the second graders along with Daniel's cousin asked what FCAT was like.

Daniel shared the importance of multiplication, addition, subtraction, graphs, and all the other material he learned. "I'll teach you about the context clues and even teach you about the number order," he assured his cousin.

"My sister is in second grade. If she passes I will teach her a bunch of the times problems too." Daniel's friend added.

"Your teacher will teach you everything you need to know now about the FCAT. It is just some simple questions that the teacher taught you that year. But it is harder questions than the test you guys take and it is much more questions. Oh, and the teacher will always go really easy and do fun stuff when you finish part of the test." One 3<sup>rd</sup> grade boy shared.

"It is the nicest test of all." Another boy blurted out while sarcastically hugging his back-pack.

"But you have to work hard in third grade and you have to be focused," a boy added.

The rest of the boys agreed and provided the second graders with some additional information:

"You know your teacher has been working very hard with you. When it comes to FCAT you will need to work as hard as you can if you want to pass third grade."

“The FCAT is not hard, it’s only a test. If you’re afraid, just think what your teacher said, ‘Relax, it’s only a test.’”

“You might be a little scared when you have to take the FCAT. I think you will like third grade. It will be hard in the beginning but it will get easy later in the year.”

“You will pass it in no time. So don’t be scared, be excited like me.”

The last boy reminded everyone, “Most questions are easy, some are not. We have no homework. We have free breakfast. Best of all we have fun day when it is finished.”

Daniel’s name was called for his ride. Climbing into the car, he thought about how confused the second graders must be. It reminded him of when he and his friends would get together to play football. The receiver would run down the field with the ball until he was tackled. Then the team’s efforts were repeatedly challenged by the opposing team until they finally took control of the ball and headed down the field in the opposite direction. Back and forth the ball would go, with plays as varied as the responses Daniel and his friends provided to the younger children. What Daniel found similar about playing football and testing was the adrenalin rush of the unknown and the increase from fear to confidence when he’d begin to apply what he had learned.

“You’re in deep thought,” Daniel’s papa said as he studied his face, “how has testing been going?”

Daniel was ready for testing to begin. He shared, “when testing is over Mr. Smith lets us play games like math bingo or a reading board game to help us with the test parts.

I am actually kind of glad it's almost over because I get to go back to all of the stories and doings like math. Next week it's going to be early out and tomorrow there is going to be an assembly."

"What's the sign I saw about Fun Day for?"

"Hmm, it was part of a thing for getting perfect attendance for FCAT, it was supposed to be like a celebration for the week or time we took testing, for like us to take a break. It was lots of work and so they gave us a break, I can't really tell what they did but I know it was because we did so good in the testing. Last year I was sick."

As the car pulled in the driveway the conversation turned to there no longer being any assigned homework. Daniel understood all too well what was at stake. He would continue to study at home and work on FCAT preparation in hopes of attending fourth grade next year.

After study time, Daniel had a long awaited meeting time with his friends for a game of football at a nearby field. When his mother would return from work, he would come home to eat dinner, get ready for bed and look forward to the next day of school.

### More Than Just a Game

By the time Daniel arrived to the playing field that afternoon, a friend was already sitting in the bleachers. "Hey, what's up?" Daniel inquired. His friend shared his having a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. The FCAT testing was over. He was anxious about having to wait to get his results back. Daniel reflected on what a smooth experience he

had with the testing. For his friend, it all became a jumble in his mind. And his grand plan for being an NFL star? In the harsh reality of possibilities, it seemed like an impossibility. Daniel tried to cheer him up, “think on the bright side, if you don’t go on to fourth grade, you can be like a second teacher in your third grade classroom because you already know all of the stuff.” His friend took no comfort in Daniel’s words as they began tossing the football back and forth. He asked, “What is it with the clocks in school? Usually it feels like the clocks practically run backward, and the school day lasts forever. But if you’re doing testing, it’s like you just get through some of the reading and don’t have time to answer all of the questions.”

Taking a deep breath, Daniel continued tossing the football back and forth and replied. “I actually had more trouble with how quiet the room was. It wasn’t normal.”

His friend smiled as he thought of how odd it was that no one was allowed to ask questions or get out of their seat. “What’s the point anyway? It really was the greatest time-waster. At least we don’t have to worry about working in school anymore.”

“Yeah, but, you know, I still kind of wish we did because I think it will help me do better next year.” Daniel responded.

“Not me, I don’t even want to think about next year and I don’t want to think about going to summer school if I didn’t pass.”

The rest of the boys arrived and they began their football game. When his watch alarm sounded, Daniel squeezed a few more minutes of playtime in before heading home. There were three things that Daniel thought of as he was running home to dinner.



Daniel and his friends had all spent two weeks taking a test. The school was determining who should go to fourth grade or not. It was hard to imagine that one test could tell you if that many different kids could go to fourth grade. That was the first thing - how different everybody learns.

He got to the front step of his house and bent over to catch his breath. And while he breathed deeper, Daniel thought back over the past couple of weeks, especially about his first day of testing. That was the second thing - being careful in what he believed when kids from other grades talked about what the test would be like.

One peer had said, "It is so hard. You've never done anything as hard as that test."

"Hard as that test," Daniel repeated to himself.

*I did.* Daniel thought as he began to walk up the front walk. *I did do something as hard as the test.* And then Daniel remembered something.

When he went to kindergarten he didn't know how to read at all. He had loved to look at pictures in books but would have rather been playing catch with it or seeing how far he could throw the book. He would trade out a book for any type of ball at the drop of a hat.

For almost two years, whenever someone mentioned reading, he would go at it with a get it over with attitude. Then, in the middle of first grade, Daniel had a new teacher who introduced him to books about sports. He learned that if he wanted to become a player for the NFL, he had to become a better reader. That's when Daniel

thought of the third thing - taking the test just another part of school. He grinned and reminded himself, "I'm going to be in the NFL someday."

It was then as Daniel entered the house for dinner. That's when Daniel knew he would accomplish his goal no matter what.

By the time Daniel returned to school the next day, thoughts about the test weren't such a big deal anymore. He had a plan, a good plan, and he wasn't going to let a test get in his way. Deep down Daniel believed he did the best he could do. Daniel enjoyed taking part in the Fun Day with all of his friends. When other students prematurely checked out for summer vacation, Daniel settled back into his normal routine. He returned to reviewing words in the dictionary and writing them down in his study notebook that continued to travel back and forth from school to home with him each day.

#### Discussion of Daniel's Portraiture

The motivation Daniel projects is admirable. It is representative of the students in this study who recognized the self-test connection yet maintained a focus for their future (wanting to be an NFL player). For them, applying learning strategies could conquer obstacles, such as the FCAT, and assisted them in staying focused to achieve their task. Application of learning strategies and remaining focused on the content to be tested by the FCAT allowed Daniel, and students from the study like him, to keep the perspective that the test was a component of his academic growth (self-test). Daniel represented the students in the study who upheld an optimistic view of high-stakes testing. His

experience with the high-stakes test demonstrated the attributions of internal (“I study every day after school”) and changeable (“By studying, maybe, I will do [perform] better”) for the moderate academic ability group. Daniel’s academic ability group viewed contributions (study notebook, listening to the teacher) as having the potential to improve their performance on the FCAT. When faced with prevalent influences such as a peer sharing how difficult the test was (“It is so hard. You’ve never done anything as hard as that test.”), Daniel relied on his perseverance and remained focused. Emotions demonstrated from the students Daniel’s portraiture represents are: pride (“I am a good student.”); perseverance (“One test isn’t going to get me down.”); and hopefulness (“I’ll use everything I learned from my notebook and I should do okay.”).

The next portraiture will introduce you to Jessica whose story places high-stakes testing into the every day routine of being a third grade student. Jessica’s portraiture also represents her peers of moderate academic ability with some distinguishing elements from Daniel’s portraiture. Jessica represents the students who embrace high-stakes testing as a component of her grade level while: (1) recognizing the importance of performing well; yet, (2) is able to keep the test in perspective to their life events. She demonstrates the determination of those from a low socio-economic, single parent household. Throughout the student interviews, written reflections and drawings, a prevalent influence incorporated family dynamics such as Jessica’s younger brother who had a physical deformity. Jessica brought to light the experience of students from this study

with complicated home situations while upholding a passion and commitment to their academic growth.

Jessica

Today

*I always thought the biggest problem I'd ever have was passing third grade, but little did I know that it was going to be a piece of cake, or that someday the year would come when I would show everything I know.*

*It had been a double season of summers since I became aware of this thing called FCAT. I can place a finger on the very moment when I first heard the word. I was in first grade. I felt like a Saturday morning cartoon character. The one where the road runner is speedily racing down the road and the coyote keeps setting up obstacles. Then the road runner runs off and the coyote is left in the middle of his own prank. Boom! Pretty soon the coyote is blown to smithereens or has fallen off a cliff and all that kept him going was his determination. That's me, the coyote, determined to conquer my own obstacle, the FCAT.*

School is Back in Session

There Jessica was, minding her own life when the summer holiday was coming to an end and she was thrown into the frenzy of shopping for school supplies. Every kid in the nation was on the lookout for *Bratz products*: *Bratz* backpack, *Bratz* notebooks, *Bratz* folders. They even made *Bratz* pencils. Jessica was not like every other kid in the nation though. She had made a pact with her friend Libby when they were four years old. They decided, Libby and Jessica, they would graduate from high school with the same backpacks they chose together standing in Wal-Mart with their moms as four year olds

ready to enter the world of school. Besides, Jessica's mom wasn't made of money. She always said, "Jessica (that's me), choices are what make a person appreciate what they have." Deep down, Jessica would have loved to have just one package of *Bratz* pencils, just so the other kids would know that she's not so different. But, choices are choices and this was the year of the FCAT so, she skipped past the aisle of parents and children speaking nonsense about death overcoming them if they just did not have everything they asked for and moved on to the aisle of workbooks and activity sets that "guarantee an increase of your child's testing score" because they wouldn't want any child "left behind."

As they drove into Sunny Palms, Jessica packed up her test prep workbooks and flash cards already an absolute expert at fact and opinion as demonstrated by her nearly perfect scores of 8 out of 9. She only missed the one because Brian, her kid brother, mispronounced the question when he read it off the card. Brian raced out of the car, down the dry dirt road to see if Mr. Wilson was ready for his "personal assistant." Brian usually didn't fret about practice work for school being he's so smart and all. Besides, first grade doesn't have the FCAT. People were usually fooled by his looks and thought he didn't know much because he was born with his skin swirled. It was as if you'd dropped chocolate pudding into a bowl of milk and ended up with lumps of chocolate islands throughout the sea of white. Despite judgments some people made, he was smart as a whip and an excellent assistant to Mr. Wilson in his woodworking shop.

Jessica, on the other hand, stood beside her mother's old beaten up Toyota and wondered about why they named their trailer park Sunny Palms. The 'Palms' part she got because they were surrounded by palm trees, but 'Sunny,' this she did not get because the palm trees were so tall they shadowed the entire park. It really should be named, "Shadow Palms."

"Give it up Jessica," mom called back to her as she entered their trailer, "they're not going to rename the entire park because the name doesn't make sense to one little girl. "Come in and get showered so your brother can have some semblance of warm water when he gets back. Tomorrow is your first day of school."

After her shower Brian came back whistling his happy tune. He and Mr. Wilson always had their secret little projects going and then, one day, a wooden sailboat would appear anomalously at the doorsteps of someone who became ill, or lost their job, or some nonsense like that. Anyhow, Brian and Mr. Wilson would act all surprised and innocent, "imagine that." "What a nice thought." "Well what do you know?" As if the entire park didn't know it was coming from them. Meanwhile Jessica was home practicing her FCAT prep booklets trying to keep a positive perspective.

Jessica mulled over her sorry situation of starting school. "What if I don't pass the FCAT? What if I never pass the FCAT? Will I be in third grade when I marry?" Jessica would never again get an ounce of peace in her life. It would be FCAT, FCAT, FCAT. She was fed up and getting no sleep, so she started making a list of what she could do that would help her not worry so much about the FCAT. Jessica wrote across the top of a

clean page in her notebook, “How to Get Ready for The FCAT without Loosing My Mind.”

Jessica’s mom came in and lay across the side of her bed. Jessica scooted her notebook towards her to see if she had any ideas. Mom said that positive thinking was what she needed. How about writing, “I *will* be awesome on the FCAT?”

Mom always thought positive. She believed you could make things happen if you just kept your mind focused on the good. Before Jessica could write down mom’s suggestion, Brian came in and climbed over the top of mom and Jessica to get into his bed.

“Brian, you wrinkled my pages!” Jessica shouted smoothing her notebook, which was crinkled and half torn out of the spiral.

“Sorry,” he said, as he gathered his blanket, stuffed dog, and old raggedy t-shirt. His nighttime routine was so predictable.

“Well?” Jessica quizzed.

“Well, what?” he replied.

“Aren’t you going to ask mom to leave on the light?” Jessica retorted back with a tone to accentuate her frustration.

“No, I am starting first grade tomorrow. I’m not a baby anymore and don’t need a light on when I go to bed.” He stated with confidence.

“Alright then, good night you two.”



As mom left the room, Jessica thought, maybe if Brian can be brave, she could too. Maybe third grade won't be so bad after all.

#### As the Year Progressed

Jessica continued to develop lists throughout the school year. By spring she had lists of scores from her FCAT prep tests, lists of interesting words she'd learned that year, and even lists of things she was good at. As she chewed on the end of her pencil, she worked on her list of strengths. It included: (1) Looking out for Brian, (2) Spelling words, (3) Math facts, and (4) Practicing for the FCAT.

Mrs. Brown, the technology teacher and the absolutely most phenomenal person at Oceanside Elementary, gave Jessica a username and password when she walked into the tech lab after school one day. She said, "Jubilant Jessica (she always called children with an adjective describing them that started with the first letter of their name), today is a special day. I have something for you and I've already done a trial run to be sure it works. I give this to you with great expectations of what's to come." Then she scooped my hands into hers, squeezed tight and released my hands with a slip of paper cuddled up inside (Jessica would definitely remember *jubilant* from here on out.).

Mrs. Brown allowed Jessica and two other students to play on the computers after school while their moms finished working. It was breaking the school rules to have children in there, but Mrs. Brown didn't mind. She just smiled at them, started up the computers, and said, "Welcome to the world of wisdom." Justin Smith was one of the after-school computer kids. His dad was a teacher in third grade. He was the shyest boy at

Oceanside Elementary, and also one of the smartest. The other was Amelia Wallace. Amelia didn't hang out with all the other girls in third grade either, the ones who were always talking about what the other was wearing and where they would go shopping on the weekend. She was a social nobody at school, just like Jessica, but she believed she could fit in with the other girls if she wanted to. She was clear about Jessica being nothing special and once, even whispered, "*dummy*" when Jessica answered a question wrong. Since then, Jessica had never said a word to her and both girls were fine and dandy about that. After all, Jessica now had her own password and username to access *FCAT Explorer* from home.

That night and every night after when Jessica got the chance, she went to Mr. Wilson's trailer when Brian would go. The agreement was as long as Jessica didn't interrupt their work in the shed, she could practice for the FCAT inside on Mr. Wilson's computer.

"Done with today's work!" said Brian, coming through the door. He came over and stood beside Jessica, watching. "Jessica, how do you know what answer to choose?"

"I read the question and dig deep inside my brain for the right answer," Jessica said, not looking up from the computer screen. Slowly, re-reading the question with each possible answer to see if it made sense, she chose the one that made the most sense and clicked on it. Jessica loved practicing for the FCAT. It had become a part of her every day routine, something to look forward to at the end of the day. She was getting ready to write her score down in her notebook when the power went out.

“Looks like I better walk you kids home, it’s going to really come down out there.” Mr. Wilson said.

Jessica jotted the numbers onto the page and tucked the notebook up into her sweatshirt so that it wouldn’t get wet if the rain started.

That night, Jessica realized that the FCAT really wasn’t so scary. Third grade had enough good to make up for the bad. In her notebook, a new page was dedicated to “Third Grade, the Good and the Bad.” Under good, Jessica listed recess, snacks, special classes, open library. Under the bad, Jessica wrote, “hard, not so hard.”

#### When Testing Time Arrived

Part of Jessica couldn’t wait for testing to begin. The other part of her was wringing her hands of the sweat that kept oozing from her pores. She was like a furry dog right after bath time, shaking the water away from her skin. All of a sudden she collected all of the millions of questions that were swarming to the forefront of her thoughts and reminded herself “once I got to know the things on the FCAT, I got really better at it.” “I can do this.”

Each of Jessica’s classmates slid into their seats after eating the school breakfast. She usually had breakfast at school every day but not in the classroom, and not with everyone in her class. The room was plain, the class charts and projects no longer hung on the walls. The students’ desks were arranged in rows, just as they would be for a spelling or math test.

The teacher stood in front of all the students. She folded her arms and looked at all of them. Her face seemed tired, worry-tired. Jessica saw it in her eyes. She started to feel uneasy. “I know you are all aware that today is the first day of FCAT testing,” said her teacher, talking really fast as if the children wouldn’t hear the crackling in her voice as long as she didn’t slow down. “I’ve taught you the material you’re about to be tested on. The procedures are as follows. . .”

As she continued with the procedures for testing, Jessica’s mind wandered to all of the practice book pages, flashcard activities, and time on the website she did to prepare for today. Every student in the room was well aware of what was at stake. After all, if the school didn’t have the FCAT, nobody would pay attention in school.

“Open your test booklets and listen while I read the directions,” the teacher instructed. Then, she nodded and said, “You may begin.”

Jessica looked at the test booklet: it made her think, “I’m going to, I’ve just got the test, I just have to finish the test and I’ll probably get to fourth grade.” She opened the test booklet and that was the instant she knew with conviction that she could handle this life-changing, seriously important event.

The hours that passed felt like days and the days turned into weeks. When the children weren’t testing, their school day was filled with inside recess that mostly consisted of watching movies and visiting with other kids. They were finished with the FCAT and getting ready to start the NRTs upon return from the weekend. Jessica continued her daily routines as much as she could.

After school, Jessica still stopped by the technology lab to see Mrs. Brown. She was surprised to see her the first day and asked about how testing went.

“When I started, I said in my mind that I’m doing it so just calm down and you’ll be alright.”

Mrs. Brown was always available after school with an open ear. The other two students who usually came in with Jessica weren’t coming to the technology room anymore. “So, how was it today?” Mrs. Brown would ask each day.

“It’s cool,” Jessica would respond. “I was ready to learn.”

After Jessica was in bed that night, she closed her eyes but couldn’t sleep. She tried as hard as she could to remember everything she had learned for the FCAT. She kept reminding herself that the FCAT tells you which place they need to put you in so you can do better at math and reading and writing and stuff. Her mind struggled to stay calm as pictures of the test prep questions kept popping to the front of her brain. All that hard work kept surfacing and Jessica drifted off imagining what it would be like when she would find out if she was going to third grade and if she didn’t go to third grade, she’d still be proud of herself that she tried. Jessica reminded herself to remember that the FCAT is FCAT and no matter how hard she tries she’s still going to keep going.

#### What School’s All About

The minute Jessica entered the classroom, her teacher called for everyone’s attention, “Students, you’ve all worked very hard with the FCAT and NRT. This week

the entire school is going to have a Fun Fair, to celebrate all of the hard work everyone has done.”

Jessica smiled at her teacher as she plopped down in her seat.

The teacher was the one everyone prayed to get assigned to because every year after the FCAT, she showed the whole class fourth grade materials. It was her claim to fame. From this point on, she would let the students write stories about whatever they wanted. Jessica picked a great white shark. In math, the class started on division. The students didn't even have to take any more spelling tests after the FCAT because they had been worked so hard. And now, now the students were going to have a Fun Fair. On top of all that, Jessica's teacher was nice and didn't allow any put downs or students saying mean things, like about Brian.

Jessica busied herself in her desk until the starting bell rang. An interruption over the classroom intercom distracted her attention from organizing erasers in line by color.

“Room 221? We have a new student in the office for your class.”

“Thank you, I'll send someone right down to get her.”

Jessica was chosen to go with Justin to escort the new student back to the classroom. When they arrived, a plump girl with short curly hair, even curlier than Jessica's, stood up from the waiting chairs and quickly came right up to them and started chatting away as they walked back to the classroom. When she took a moment to catch her breath between thoughts, Jessica asked her if she wanted to know anything about third grade.

She said she moved here from third grade and knew everything about it already. Justin chuckled under his breath in a way that made the new girl uneasy.

“Never mind him,” Jessica said as the children approached the classroom door. “All you need to know is that here, third grade is a little bit hard and a little bit easy.”

Jessica learned that the new girl's name was Amanda. She was brilliant at math. Her dad did not live with her. She and her mom were living with her grandmother. Just like Jessica, her favorite color was purple.

After school, Amanda followed Jessica to the technology lab because Amanda's mom had to fill out more paperwork at the school office. Mrs. Brown hugged Amanda when she came through the door. “Amazing Amanda. I heard about the new third grade student starting today. Welcome to our world of wisdom. Do you already have a login and password for *FCAT Explorer*?”

Amanda lowered her head and spoke slower than Jessica had heard all day, “What's FCAT?”

Mrs. Brown and Jessica both giggled as she motioned for Amanda and her to sit in front of two computers that were already on.

“Wow. Are you sure you came from third grade?” Jessica asked.

Amanda had an uneasy look on her face. Jessica realized she was serious and blurted out, “It's so cool. It's a big part of third grade here. Don't worry though. I have practice books and flashcards and I can help you. It's really no big deal.”

While the girls logged into the computers, Mrs. Brown arranged a login name and password for Amanda. First she showed her all the parts of the website. Then she let her try some of the screens.

“Now, for you Jubilant Jessica, I have a surprise.” Mrs. Brown had a touch of mystery in her voice. “Close your eyes.”

Jessica closed her eyes.

“Okay, look at this! What do you think?” Mrs. Brown asked.

When Jessica opened her eyes, Mrs. Brown had changed her computer screen to a site Jessica had never seen. The site provided tons of vocabulary words for fourth graders. Jessica nodded her head in approval.

“Thank you for sharing with me, Mrs. Brown. This is the best grade in school yet.”

Mrs. Brown nodded with a smile. “I hope you’ll say the same about next year.”

#### A Change in Perspectives

That evening Brian and Jessica sat at the dinner table with mom watching *Jeopardy*. Brian would repeat the answers after the contestants would answer, sure that it was he who had given them first. He licked his fingers clean and took another slice of pizza.

“Jessica,” he said. “I love it when it’s your night to cook dinner. We get pizza every time.”

Mom smiled and Jessica sat up straighter and smiled.



“Oh, and I just remembered, I have a surprise. And since you worked so hard being a third grader, I, well, you’ll see.” He jumped down from his seat and went out the door and came back with a box that had a piece of cloth over it.

The minute Jessica saw it she stopped eating and her eyes brightened.

Brian stretched his arms across the table, sliding the box in front of Jessica.

“Jessica, this is for you.”

Jessica pretended she wasn’t surprised and reached for the box.

Brian watched with pride and anticipation. Mom looked on with an element of surprise herself when Jessica reached into the box.

“It’s a sailboat. Mr. Wilson and I made it just for you. In celebration of passing third grade.”

Before Jessica could say anything, Mom reminded Brian that she wouldn’t get the scores back until May at the earliest. His eyes glistened with hope and pride.

“That’s okay mom. The FCAT tells them which place to put me in. If I go to fourth grade, that would be fantastic. If I stay in third grade, I will be the smartest third grader there and I could help the new third graders not be so worried about the FCAT.”

Jessica held her sailboat tight and hugged Brian even tighter. Jessica was determined everything would go as planned and she would be in fourth grade next year with all of the rest of the kids.

## Tomorrows

*On the outside of things, not much had changed. Mom still never bought me the Bratz backpack, Bratz notebooks, Bratz folders or even the Bratz pencils. Kids at school would still sometimes make fun of Brian and I would still always defend him. My evenings were still spent writing in my notebook or practicing on the internet at Mr. Wilson's house for fourth grade. Some days, I swore I could predict what was going to happen next.*

*On the inside, I was different. I had experienced third grade. I had practiced for spelling, math, and the FCAT. I had used my learning strategies and done my very best. Me!*

*FCAT had taught me that you must be able to show what you know. In the end, the results will reveal themselves for what I really know. It was true. In Florida, my job was to learn everything I could and be the best student I could be. It worked for me. I really am like the coyote from the Saturday morning cartoon, determined enough to keep trying even when obstacles are standing in my way. School really was cool!*

### Discussion of Jessica's Portraiture

The portraiture of Jessica demonstrates how some students are able to put high-stakes testing into perspective. In the realm of Jessica's world, the FCAT became intertwined with her desire to excel at academics. Her happy-go-lucky perception demonstrated her comfort in her position as a student. Her story was representative of those students who were able to overcome adverse peer influences. Jessica's portrayal represents those students who walk to the beat of their own drum, breathing in the world

around them. Concurrent with the study findings, the ones able to alleviate fear were those who perceived themselves as being successful on the high-stakes test due to internal (“I can do this.”), changeable (“It won’t be so hard once you get to know the things on the FCAT.”) attributions. In the midst of life’s hardships students like Jessica demonstrated a determination and resilience that shined through.

The school environment emphasized the rigor and intensity of high-stakes testing. Even within the heavy self-test connections, almost every student I talked with in Jessica’s academic ability group was not intimidated by the expectations and pressures but gained or demonstrated confidence and stamina. Her portraiture represents the students from this study that recognized the demands of the high-stakes assessment as a component of third grade. Many spoke of the prevalent influences as: family (“Because I got advice from my family”); teachers (“I am also confident because my math teacher is giving us a lot of tests and FCAT prep”); and peers (“I know someone who didn’t pass and had to go to summer school but that’s not going to happen to me”). Within the theme of emotions, the students shared about their potential results of the high-stakes testing. The voices of this particular academic ability group revealed a barrage of emotions such as, joy, confidence, and hopefulness. Without the end results known, the students represented within this academic ability group expressed their experience with high-stakes testing as being a positive component of their third grade experience.

## Summary

Through direct quotes and written documentation of the experiences from the study participants, the above three portraits depict differing responses to the Florida's school district's compliance with the No Child Left Behind program. By interweaving the experiences and perceptions of the study participants, the life of these third graders epitomized the four distinct, prevalent themes found in this study. The next chapter will connect these findings to existing literature in the field. Then, recommendations based on the study results will be offered for improving the high-stakes testing experiences and perceptions of third grade students.

## CHAPTER 6

### Discussion & Recommendations

*What we want is to see the child in pursuit of knowledge and not knowledge in pursuit of the child.*

George Bernard Shaw

This chapter is divided into three major sections. The first section describes the results of the study. The focus of the discussion connects the themes and patterns found in the data to literature in the field. The second section makes recommendations for further research. Additional insights could be gained into the socio-emotional experiences and perceptions of third grade students with high-stakes testing by implementing further studies to complement the current study. The third section considers some practical applications. These recommendations focus on actions that political leaders, school personnel, university professors, and parents can take.

### Discussion

This study was conducted to examine the socio-emotional experiences and perceptions of third grade students with high-stakes testing in order to offer their perspective to fellow education researchers. There has been only a limited number of previous studies of this kind and have been with older students within the realms of: accountability (National Commission on Excellence, 1983; Carnegie Forum, 1986; Holmes Group, 1995; Project Alliance 30, 1991; National Commission, 1996; and No Child Left Behind, 2001); testing process (Broudy, 1972; Cole, 1991; Calkins, 1998);

testing anxiety (Evans & Engelberg, 1988; Triplett & Barksdale, 2005); teaching to the test (Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1985; Haney & Madaus, 1986; Koretz, 1988; Ryan & La Guardia, 1999; Sacks, 1999; and Kohn, 2000); teacher stress (Gordon & Reese, 1997; Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000; Hoffman, Assaf, & Paris, 2001; and Jones & Engly, 2002); and student motivation for learning (Carlsion, 1992; Dweck, 1992; Paris, Lawton, Turner & Roth, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1985; and Lepper, 1983). However, this body of research does imply the need for a wider representation of the student perspective is worthwhile.

It will be valuable to understand students' socio-emotional experiences and perceptions if high-stakes testing is to continue being a determinant of grade level promotion. Much of the existing research on students' experiences and perceptions of high-stakes testing is limited to information reported by students under stress (Triplett, Barksdale & Leftwich, 2003). Including this sparse representation of research, and explaining why and how some students overcome their stress increased the relevance of this study.

Four main themes emerged from the present investigation under the overall umbrella of "ownership of learning." I will discuss them in order, although they are interrelated:

- Self-Test
- Attribution
- Prevalent Influences
- Emotions

Embedded within each of the above categories there was a consensus signifying distinct individual characteristics as well as characteristics that supported the persona of third grade. For example, the characteristic of self-belief was depicted through independent interview transcriptions, but also was represented within the social context of the focus groups. This characteristic then fell collectively under the theme of attribution.

Numerous proclamations have indicated the relevance of measuring student knowledge gains in order to address the achievement gap (National Commission on Excellence, 1983; Carnegie Forum, 1986; Holmes Group, 1995; Project Alliance 30, 1991; National Commission, 1996; and No Child Left Behind, 2001). Several of these proclamations suggested that the implementation of high-stakes testing would integrate students into a more homogeneous academic pooling. For example, No Child Left Behind (2001) is the latest federal legislation to enact standards-based education reform.

Formerly known as outcome-based education, the belief is that high expectations and setting of goals will result in success for all students as future members of the nation's workforce. Other legislation reasserts the need for improvement of how the teacher understands the developmental and cultural elements of the learner (e.g., National Commission, 1996).

In accordance with these proclamations, it might be expected that the students in this study hold the key to their own success or failure. The findings from this study revealed that holding high expectations and setting goals were implicitly implied from the emerging themes of the data analysis. For the students to uphold belief in their ability when confronted with high-stakes testing, it was necessary for them to know the why and the how of the expectations and goals. This study also found that those students who sought out assistance from their teachers were better able to connect their effort with their potential results. The higher ability students in this study spoke of their teachers as facilitators of their knowledge acquisition, increasing the ownership of their learning endeavor.

### *Self-Test*

The students in this study articulated an awareness of where high-stakes testing retained a constant self-test connection, not mentioned in previous research. Prior studies have attested to the inclusion of test preparation in the classroom settings focused on the instructional practice of teaching to the test (Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1985; Haney & Madaus, 1986; Koretz, 1988; Ryan & La Guardia, 1999; Sacks, 1999; and Kohn, 2000). Students of all ability levels in this study voiced an understanding that high-stakes testing is part of third grade. Some spoke of it in comparison to a Friday spelling test and others to a component of their daily schedule. When asked what third grade is like, one student replies, “We have math, spelling, FCAT prep, and reading.” Another stated, “We have math tests, spelling tests and the FCAT tests.”



### *Attribution*

Another major theme to emerge in the present study concerned attribution. As the data analysis indicated, the students in this study regulated between internal and external influences with stable versus changeable attributes. This is consistent with what Heyman and Dweck (1998) found in their study of the relation between children's interpretation of human behavior and their beliefs about the stability from which those human traits derive. The students in this study also demonstrated their ability to hold different beliefs about the nature of their intelligence.

Two of the external stressors the students experienced with high-stakes testing were consistent with findings in existing literature about educators as practitioners. The Center on Education Policy (2006) found that three main stressors exist for educators and implicitly affect student performance. The report described the loss of instructional time on subject areas not being tested as one. This would be considered a malleable quality of intelligence that shapes the students' perception of themselves as learners.

An example of support from this study is, "We could use more time for math, like sixty minutes, but Mr. Smith is always saying, 'oops, put your math books away we need to practice for the FCAT now.'" Another student noted, "We don't have time for Science but my teacher said that maybe after the FCAT we can learn about it." The Center on Education Policy also characterized the replacement of creative teaching and learning with rote, test-preparation as an additional stressor. Students in this study found support through research findings of the social environmental conditions having an influence

through the psychology of the child (Blackwell, Trzensniewski, & Dweck, 2007). The students noted having the opportunity to play learning games after the high-stakes testing and concluded this would mean a positive change from their testing experience. For example, “I can’t wait till testing is over so we can stop doing so many workbooks and play more games to learn from like in second grade.” Or, “Our teacher said she won’t have to be so hard on us [when testing is over]. It will be more fun like school is supposed to be.” The implicitly implied external factor in this study was consistent with the reports from the Center on Education Policy (2006) and with the perceptions of influence of the learner for attribution factors as studied by Heyman, and Dweck (1998).

The findings from my study of students with low academic ability perceiving their potential for success on the high-stakes test to be of external attributions supports previous findings from Evans and Engelberg (1988). In a study on students’ attitudes to, and comprehension of, receiving grades, Evans and Engelberg found that lower achieving and younger students related their grades to more external attributions. Their findings concluded that the lower achieving students attributed their failure to external factors in order to protect their self-esteem. Students of low academic ability within my study of socio-emotional experiences and perceptions of third grade high-stakes testing also expressed more negative emotion toward the high-stakes testing than their peers of moderate or of high academic ability.

### *Prevalent Influence*

The prevalent influence of high-stakes testing over the time span of these third grade students' experiences was not in accord with findings from previous research on low- to-high-achieving student self-esteem outcomes (Davies & Brember, 1998, 1999; Gordon & Reese, 1997; Paris, Lawton, Turner & Roth, 1991). They found that relative to mid- and high-achieving students, low-achieving students completed their high-stakes testing experience with even less confidence in their academic abilities. This was not found in the present study. In conjunction with the results from year two of a study by Davies and Brember (1998, 1999), the students in the present study experienced an assessment culture thus perhaps recovering from some of the otherwise expected drop in their self-esteem. The assessment culture the students spoke of incorporated test preparation materials, interactive web sites for test preparation, testing accommodations for second language learners, and an absence of homework assignments during the weeks of the testing period.

The results of this study built upon the recommendations from Davies and Brember (1998) for developing a better understanding of how people and circumstances influenced the students' testing experience. In this study, the students did not voice a significant difference in self-esteem at the conclusion of high-stakes testing. The lower ability students did demonstrate a lack of ownership to their learning resulting in an entity view through their attribution for success than did their high ability peers. This finding was consistent with previous research on attribution, where lower achieving students

related their failure to more external attributes (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Evan & Engelberg, 1988). The lower ability students of this study demonstrated a perception of their high-stakes experience with the test taking the control over their own contributions.

### *Emotions*

The emotions displayed throughout the interviews, written reflections, and drawings ranged from anticipation to hesitation, joy to fear, discouragement to hopefulness, pride to sorrow, and confidence to doubt. Weiner (1980) found emotions to be responses to particular attributes. The findings of this study corresponded to Weiner's students of low academic ability perceived their potential for success on the high-stakes test to be of external (test deciding), stable (regardless of what I contribute) attributes. Similar to a study on successful Latino students in college who voiced their families as an important influence in the student's success (Zalaquett, 2005) my findings for the Hispanic female students in this current study demonstrated fears and hesitations shared to be related to the potential risk of "letting their families down."

The Hispanic male and African-American female students in my study engaged in Premack's Principle (1959). They voiced fear of not being able to participate in the Fun Day to their potential contributions for success or failure on the high-stakes test. As a result the Hispanic male and African-American females began to find the high-stakes test reinforcing. These students were then more motivated to perform the high-stakes test

because they knew they would be able to participate in Fun Day, a more desirable activity, as a result.

### *Connection to Recommendations*

The discussion offers a rich understanding of the importance of how the findings of my study contribute to the literature. Next, I present the recommendations for further research. Insights gained from the socio-emotional experiences and perceptions of third grade students with high-stakes testing can be further explored in research that complements the current study. Following the recommendations for further research I present recommendations that focus on actions which political leaders, school personnel, university professors and parents can take.

### Recommendations for Research

Since there is limited research on the socio-emotional experiences and perceptions of third grade students with high-stakes testing, it is relevant to continue future studies in this focus area. The recommendations for additional research offered here propose extension of the current study. Five specific proposals are made.

#### *1. Expansion of the Study*

The first suggestion for expansion of the current study would examine the kindergarten entry age of the third grade students to see if their socio-emotional experiences and perceptions compare with those of students who entered school in the same grade but at an older age. The current study included third graders who ranged from eight to nine years of age. The argument for studying school entry age is that there is a

strong correspondence between the grade level materials being called forth by testing preparation while the developmental capacity of the student is being pressured outside of their ability level.

Next, in order to enhance the present study, a dimension of observation could be added to the methodologies namely, to decipher what socio-emotional experiences and perceptions the third grade students actually exaggerate, if any, and so determine the extent to which the presentation the researcher makes of the content matches their perception. The observations would focus on student experiences in the classroom as well as more social settings such as waiting areas, the cafeteria or in special area classes.

An additional purpose for incorporating observations would be to observe student interactions with peers and teachers. Most of the students in this study referred to things they had under their control, that were changeable (effort, using strategies, etc.) attributes. Where did their view of the test originate? Observation of student traits in routine and stressful circumstances would be of value as well. What do teachers, peers, parents, etc. tell them that will help them be successful? Why do students listen to some (male students succumbed to their teachers' influences) while others did not (female students overcame teacher influences)?

## *2. Utilize Different Geographical Settings*

A supplementary study would incorporate the current study with the results from different states that also implement high-stakes testing. Among these different geographical loci, students may have different experiences and perceptions based on a

different orientation operating in their region. Since the finding of this study presented prevalent influences on the student's experiences and perceptions with high-stakes testing, it would be interesting to see, for example, if Hispanic females in other geographical areas also place as much value on pleasing their families. This study found the majority of students experienced some type of prevalent influence during their high-stakes testing. The political climate of the high-stakes testing within other geographical settings might affect the findings.

### *3. Longitudinal Follow Up*

One interesting possibility would be to follow up the same students when they reach their next grade level at which high-stakes testing is conducted. How similar will their experiences be? Does "test anxiety" return stronger, continue at the same level, or diminish somewhat with age and/or experience?

### *4. Extension of Prevalent Influences*

A study of how parents' and teachers' beliefs influence children's experiences in testing is warranted. The findings of this study showed that prevalent influences evoked different emotions in different students. Female students were able to overcome teacher influences, but not those of their families; male students were able to overcome family influences, but not those of their teachers. To what extent did the students responses in this study mimic those they heard from others?

### Recommendations for Political Leaders

The education of people always requires making choices and this includes political decisions. One decision, obviously involves the allocation of scarce resources, including funding. The advent of high-stakes testing interacts with and makes more difficult some of these political choices. One underlying assumption often stated is that the testing provides a degree of accountability and thereby improves the quality of education. However, it may be questioned whether high-stakes testing does develop the country to a higher rank in the global arena.

No Child Left Behind requires that every child deserves a “highly qualified” teacher and yet, many teachers are concerned about maintaining their jobs and thus resort to teaching to the test in order to protect their job. The findings in this study related to the self-test connection could enlighten politicians and administrators to the reality our young students are experiencing throughout the high-stakes testing process. The voice of students in this study describe the testing presence as monopolizing school learning time with the results that curricular areas such as science are delayed until spring when high-stakes testing has been completed.

### Recommendations for School Districts

The participants in this study portrayed a range of socio-emotional experiences and perceptions of high-stakes testing at grade level three. From low- to high- ability, the students demonstrated their capacity to adapt to the testing environment. One could interpret this to mean that there is no need for any change within the context of high-



stakes testing. However, I believe the results show that school districts should monitor the quantity of time spent on direct preparation for high-stakes testing. The students in this study reported that high-stakes testing monopolized time in the school routines the expense of content areas. One noticeable and undesirable example was that science instruction was cut out of the classroom instruction entirely.

The findings in this study generated implications of what school districts could do to improve the socio-emotional experiences and perceptions of third grade students as they undergo high-stakes testing. Three proposals are provided below. The recommendations for school district practices are closely interrelated to the findings of the study.

#### *1. Create a Student Orientation*

Create an orientation program for students as they enter the third grade level. This orientation would help them with their new roles as third graders, the presence of the high-stakes assessment, the connections between their daily learning, the high-stakes assessment, and the learning objectives in preparation for fourth grade. Students of low academic scores in this study related their learning to the FCAT and perceived their potential for success on the high-stakes test to external, stable attributions. Incorporating learning strategies into an orientation, much like the back-to-school nights or open houses some school districts currently provide would help the students from the low academic ability group to connect their own progress and impress on them that their own efforts can pay off.

The findings from the students of moderate academic and high academic ability show these students would also benefit from having high-stakes information incorporated into an orientation. This would provide them with an understanding of the expectations and resources supporting their own perceptions of utilizing learning strategies and knowing how the teacher can assist them in this endeavor. Some elements that the students in these academic ability groups found to contribute to their comfort with the high-stakes test that might be included in the orientation include connecting the learning practices to the assessment but also beyond, describing the organization of the assessment weeks, finding ways to take personal control for their learning and resources the teachers have to offer.

### *2. Establish Rich Literature About Testing*

Establish a resource library of literature that supports emotional development and models ways of dealing with high-stakes testing within the school culture. The district could do this through school libraries or offering mini-grants for development of reading material on high-stakes testing for classroom libraries (Appendix P). The study findings resulted in a variety of student emotions. Stress, fear, anxiety or on the flip side, confidence could all be addressed if the students were offered the opportunity to read about characters who can relate to their high-stakes emotions.

### *3. Be Cautious of Testing Pull-Outs*

Hispanic students being pulled out for testing accommodations actually voiced more stress and discomfort over going to a different location from their classroom than to

the high-stakes of the test itself. Another interesting finding from this study was that the students who were able to stay in their classroom environment then recognized their peers who were being removed to alternate testing locations as being different and less intelligent. This study offers a precaution to teachers to pay attention to how children view differences in how some groups are treated due to predetermined testing accommodations. The students in this study demonstrated a definitive understanding of being included/excluded from different groups in third grade. It bolstered their confidence if they aligned themselves to the perceived successful group (that is, the students who stayed in the classroom versus those who went to the cafeteria for testing accommodations).

#### *4. Administrative Preparation and Training*

Today's administrators are faced with a barrage of conflicting mandates. It is important that administrators be educated in the realistic implications of high stakes testing, the impact that testing has on children, and what to look for within their educational staff. It would seem important to train administrators in the art of curriculum design and high-stakes testing so that a clear representation of content and testing is relayed to their staff. It would benefit administrators to hear the voices of the students from this study. It was clear by the students' perspectives that "teaching to the test" was limiting their time with content areas outside of those on the high-stakes assessment.

## Recommendations for Teacher Preparation

Today's teachers, especially those in their first year, are faced with a barrage of conflicting stressors. It is important that teacher preparation institutions begin educating their students about the realistic implications of high-stakes testing and the impact that testing has on children. It is important to provide professional development for novice teachers in the art of curriculum design and high-stakes testing so that the two can be bound together.

### *1. Preparing Novice Teachers*

Teachers should not have to “teach to the test,” but should be schooled in connecting the standards for student knowledge gains to meet the depth of learning required for retention of material. Being familiar with the standards along with the developmental ability of the child would support integrating testing concepts into the curriculum. The students in the study recognized the imbalance between high-stakes testing preparation and the missing curricular areas.

University personnel can help provide professional development to aspiring teachers on how to incorporate the standards in order to integrate the curriculum rather than separate it for the sole purpose of testing. By modeling at the university level the importance of the why and how of learning, budding teachers can enter the high-stakes school environment secure in purposeful learning goals. This will help develop a connection for students between learning and future application that the students of

moderate and high academic ability possessed but the low academic ability students were lacking.

### *2. Disposition of Teaching*

There is a real art to the language and demeanor of teaching. The results of this study found teachers to be one of the prevalent influences on their students' high-stakes perception. It is important we make teachers aware of the impact their language and demeanor has on young children. Professional development on the impact of language and demeanor of teachers in the school setting would develop an awareness of educators while relieving some unnecessary stress on students in the classroom.

### *3. Gender Sensitivity*

Educate upcoming teachers on gender sensitivity issues in schools. The findings within the theme of prevalent influences were different for female and male responses. Knowing that female students were able to overcome teacher influences while male students succumbed to their influences warrants sensitivity to the rapport built between student and teacher.

### Recommendations for Parents

Parents need to take a proactive stance on the elements of high-stakes testing. Female students in this study attributed fear during the high-stakes testing to family influences. Going to their child's school and requesting information about how they can offer positive support at home would help parents support their child. A request for

materials to better understand the grade level promotion criteria would also allow parents to enter the high-stakes grade level more aware.

Test proctors are required during the high-stakes testing periods. Parents can find out what test proctoring entails and volunteer to assist their child's school as a proctor. Students receiving testing accommodations in this study voiced discomfort with being removed from their classroom setting. Having parents volunteer to proctor would give the parent a clearer picture of what the high-stakes experience is like for his/her child while offering a potential solution to the need of pulling students out of their classroom setting for testing accommodations.

#### Closing Statement

High-stakes testing is becoming more and more prevalent at earlier grade levels. To support positive socio-emotional experiences and perceptions of third grade students with high-stakes testing, political leaders and school boards must respect the boundaries of third grade students within their unique qualities and abilities. They must also understand that the individual needs of each third grade student may be different within the realm of high-stakes testing, and so might that student's attributions to success. School districts would benefit from implementing support mechanisms to assist third grade students in their pursuit of grade level promotion. Of course, they also have a duty to ensure that students have mastered the curriculum. The question is how to best to achieve these goals.

The students in this study found high-stakes testing to be a normal part of being in third grade. They devoted a great deal of energy to gaining grade level promotion. They demonstrated no signs of resentment nor did they shirk responsibility in attempting to achieve their promotion. Their efforts and contributions are worthy of recognition and admiration. Regardless of their academic ability level, ethnicity or gender, these children stated their wish to be able to gain ownership of their learning beyond that of high-stakes testing. This is a reasonable request that should be honored. The purpose of this dissertation was to provide a voice to those who, at such a young age, experience high-stakes testing. Their voices have the opportunity to contribute an increasing awareness of what the socio-emotional experiences and perceptions of third grade student with high-stakes testing are like.

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## Appendices

Appendix A: Permission from School Site

Elementary School

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Principal

Address

Assistant Principal

To: Internal Review Board  
From: Principal Elementary School

Dear IRB committee,

Please accept this letter as my notification that Anne Marie Juola-Rushton has full permission to collect the following data on our elementary school site:

Four sources will provide the data. The primary source of information for participants will comprise three forty-minute interviews, spaced evenly over the high-stakes testing period. The first interview will occur two weeks prior to the high-stakes test (beginning of February). The next interval of interviews will occur during the two-week time span of the assessment (end of February). The concluding interview will take place two weeks after the high-stakes testing ends (beginning of March). All interviews will take place over the student's lunch period or before or after school.

A second source of data will be the bi-weekly drawings (before, during and after) that the students will draw and summarize regarding their experiences during the assessment. These drawings will be collected bi-weekly, before, during and after the high-stakes testing period. To avoid conflict with academic time, these drawings were done in Art class during the student's special period.

A third source of data will be the bi-weekly journal entries (before, during and after) that the third grade students will write regarding their perceptions over the high-stakes assessment period. These written reflections will be collected bi-weekly for the weeks prior, during and after the assessment (four weeks total). Due to required academic time by the classroom teachers, the students will reflect upon their high-stakes experience in the school computer lab during their special period.

A fourth source of data will consist of focus group discussions the participants will have with each other regarding their experiences and perceptions during the high-stakes testing period. Essentially, the participants will discuss what they had written in their journal reflections. These discussions will take place after the conclusion of all other data collection. The third grade students will have the opportunity to listen to and reflect upon each other's experiences as they conversed about the preceding assessment period. These oral reflections will be done in groups of six. One group will be all girl students (low, medium, high academic ability), the next all male students (low, medium, high

## Appendix A: Permission from School Site

academic ability) and the remaining group will consist of a mixed gender group (low, medium and high academic ability). Each group's discussion will be recorded and transcribed with their pseudo-names.

I understand and give full permission for the selection of participants to take place as follows:

The students for phase 1 of this study will be 100 third grade students. The students for phase 2 of this study will be 18 students who will meet the selection criteria based on their current attendance in the third grade level. According to the school wide assessment (DIBEL) and standardized assessment (Stanford 10) scores, three male and three female students representing the lower academic quartile, three male and three female students scoring in the average range and three male and three female students representing the highest quartile will be selected from five third grade classrooms. None of the eighteen students chosen will receive testing accommodations.

I will approach each of the third grade students in person prior to the beginning of the school semester in which the high-stakes testing takes place. I will give them a verbal and written explanation of the nature and process of the study. The voluntary nature of choosing to participate will be emphasized. The third grade students will be given a week to decide whether to participate. Once a student decides to participate, he/she will be asked to review an Informed Consent Statement with their parent and return it with both the parent and student signature. I made the voluntary nature of the project as clear as I could and reassured the students that there would be no repercussions if they choose not to participate in the study or if, at any time during the study, they decided not to continue. This voluntary participation will be reiterated with the parent of the child via an individual conference or telephone conversation. All students and their parent will sign the informed consent statements before participation of the study may begin.

Please accept the above as my compliance to have reviewed the research and find it appropriate for the population targeted at Blackburn elementary. Based on the risks associated with the research, Anne Marie Juola-Rushton has provided adequate provisions to handle unanticipated/adverse events.

If I can be of any additional assistance in regards to this research study, please feel free to contact me at telephone number and extension number.

Sincerely,  
Principal

## Appendix B: Verbal Consent

### Verbal Script for obtaining assent

Anne Juola-Rushton

Just like you come to school and have assignments each day, I attend school at the university and have assignments too. And sometimes you have a big assignment that you need a little help with. One big assignment I have is to write a document called a dissertation. The dissertation I am writing is like when you do a large writing activity for Blackburn Writes. Just like you have a focus topic for when you write, I have a focus topic for my writing. My focus topic is about third graders and what it's like for all of you having the high-stakes test during your grade level. Do you know what high-stakes means (If reply is yes, have them explain it to me. If reply is no, I explain that it means that how they score on their test decides if they go to 4<sup>th</sup> grade next year or not)? In order for me to write my dissertation, my writing project, about being a third grader with high-stakes testing, I have to build my background knowledge about it. Have you ever tried to write a paper about something you didn't know very much about? But then, the more you talk with people about it and read about it, the more detail your writing has. I want my dissertation, my writing, to have as much detail as possible and because I am writing it as a realistic story, I would like your help since you are a third grader who will be taking a high-stakes test. Are you willing to help?

Answer Yes:

Great, for the next few weeks, while you're at Art and the Reading Lab, you will be asked to come about 4 times during the study. Each of these visits will take about 30 to 40 minutes. Over the next two months you will be asked to volunteer 2 hours. You're going to have time to draw and write about what it is like for you to be taking the high-stakes test. Nobody is going to tell you what to draw or write, it will be your own thoughts and ideas about what the testing is like for you. If it's o.k. with you, I would like to make copies of those papers. If it is o.k. with you for me to copy your drawings and writings, I will make sure that your name is nowhere on the paper so that no one will know except for you that it is your drawing or your writing. If you decide at any time that you do not want me to copy your drawings or writings, all you have to do is tell me, or your parents, or your teacher and I absolutely will not copy them anymore. Do you have any questions? Do I have your permission to copy your drawings and writings?

If answer is yes again:

Thank you. I appreciate you helping me with this assignment.

Remember, during this same time frame in the Reading Lab and Art class, you can

## Appendix B: Verbal Consent

volunteer copies of your student reflections (this means writing about how you're feeling) and drawings (about how FCAT makes you feel) will be collected. This is a part of the curriculum your special area teacher will be following over that time frame.

If at any time you do not want me to copy your drawings or your writings, all you have to do is tell me, your parents, or your teacher and I will not. If you think of a question after I go, you can just write it down and the next time you see me, I'll answer it right away. Thank you.

100 students will hopefully participate and from these 100 students I will be asking 18 students to go on for further participation. Those 18 students will be chosen based on their test grades. If you are one of those 18 students, you will be asked to come to the Reading Lab to be interviewed about what it's like being in third grade with high-stakes testing. The questions being asked are as follows:

- Tell me about yourself as a student
- Tell me what it's like being a third grader
- What is it like having high-stakes (testing that determines your grade level promotion) testing?
- How do you prepare yourself for the testing weeks?
- What are your thoughts about FCAT?
- How would you describe testing to someone who is new to third grade?

One of these interviews will take place two weeks prior to the FCAT, another will take place sometime during the two weeks of the FCAT and the third within two weeks after the FCAT ends. There will also be one group interview where you and approximately six of your peers will meet with me, Mrs. Juola-Rushton, after the FCAT is over to talk about what it was like.

If you are selected to participate in these interviews, again, you always have the right to change your mind and all you have to do is tell me, your parents, or your teacher and we will stop your interview portion of the study. If you think of any questions after I go, you can write it down and the next time you see me, I'll answer it right away. Thanks again.

Answered No:

Alright. Thank you for letting me explain the assignment to you. It at any time you change your mind, just let me, your parents, or your teacher know. Thanks again for your time.



## **Parental Permission to Participate in Research**

Social and Behavioral Research

### **Information for parents to consider who are being asked to allow their child to take part in a research study**

Title of Study: “What are the socio-emotional experiences and perceptions of high-stakes testing with third grade students?”

**IRB # 105389**

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The following information is being presented to help you/your child decide whether or not your child wants to be a part of a research study. Please read carefully. Anything you do not understand, ask the researcher.

We are asking you to allow your child to take part in a research study that is called:

“What are the socio-emotional experiences and perceptions of high-stakes testing with third grade students?”

The person who is in charge of this research study is Anne Marie Juola-Rushton. This person is called the Principal Investigator.

The research will be done at Elementary School.

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### **Should your child take part in this study?**

This form tells you about this research study. You can decide if you want your child to take part in it. This form explains:

- Why this study is being done.
- What will happen during this study and what your child will need to do.
- Whether there is any chance your child might experience potential benefits from being in the study.
- The risks of having problems because your child is in this study.

### **Before you decide:**

- Read this form.
- Have a friend or family member read it.

## Appendix C: Written Consent – Interview

- Talk about this study with the person in charge of the study or the person explaining the study. You can have someone with you when you talk about the study.
- Talk it over with someone you trust.
- Find out what the study is about.
- You may have questions this form does not answer. You do not have to guess at things you don't understand. If you have questions, ask the person in charge of the study or study staff as you go along. Ask them to explain things in a way you can understand.
- Take your time to think about it.

**It is up to you. If you choose to let your child be in the study, then you should sign the form.** If you **do not** want your child to take part in this study, you should **not** sign the form.

### **Why is this research being done?**

The purpose of this study is to find out more about how the third grade student perceives high-stakes testing. High-stakes testing is when grade level promotion is determined based on the score received on the FCAT test.

### **Why is your child being asked to take part?**

We are asking your child to take part in this research study because they are a third grade student participating in the FCAT assessment this spring.

### **What will happen during this study?**

During phase two of the study, two weeks prior, during the weeks of FCAT and the two weeks after the testing ends, your child will go with Mrs. Juola-Rushton to the Reading Lab for an informal interview about their experiences and perceptions of testing. Your child has been chosen to participate in phase two of the study based on their previous Stanford test and DIBEL scores.

A study visit is one your child will have with the person in charge of the study, Mrs. Juola-Rushton, the primary investigator. Your child will need to come for four study visits in all. Most study visits will take about 30-40 minutes.

At each visit, your child will be asked:

## Appendix C: Written Consent – Interview

- *The interview will begin with your child telling me what it's like to be in third grade and continue in a conversational manner incorporating but not limited to the following questions:*
  - Tell me about yourself as a student
  - Tell me what it's like being a third grader
  - What is it like having high-stakes (testing that determines your grade level promotion) testing?
  - How do you prepare yourself for the testing weeks?
  - What are your thoughts about FCAT?
  - How would you describe testing to someone who is new to third grade?
- *At the same time, during phase one of the study, your child will have an opportunity to write about how they're feeling when they attend the weekly computer session in the Reading Lab as well as draw about their experience when in Art class as part of the regular school curriculum.*
- *The last visit we will have will be with a small group of students from your grade level where we will all talk together about what it was like to take the FCAT.*
- *The procedures will include audio recording:*
  - a. *The tapes will be stored for approximately three years.*
  - b. *They will be used for additional writings or scholarly articles about the subject area. Remember at no time will your child be identified.*
  - c. *Your child will never be identifiable. The interviews will be transcribed with a pseudo-name (false name) to assure confidentiality.*
  - d. *Professionals from Mrs. Juola-Rushton's dissertation committee may review the transcripts of the interviews when assisting Mrs. Juola-Rushton in organizing her study.*

### **How many other people will take part?**

Eighteen students will participate in this phase two of the study, based on their prior Stanford Tests and DIBEL scores. These eighteen students will be chosen from the original 100 third graders taking part in phase one of this study at USF. Phase one of the study is where 100 students will write written reflections in the Reading Lab and draw pictures in Art class about their experiences and perceptions of testing. If your child is participating in phase one of the study, a separate consent form was provided.



Appendix C: Written Consent – Interview

**What other choices do you have if you decide not to let your child to take part?**

If you decide not to let your child take part in this study, that is okay. Instead of being in this research study your child can choose not to participate. They will still participate in the curriculum of the special area teachers but copies will not be provided to Mrs. Juola-Rushton for this study.

**Will your child be paid for taking part in this study?**

We will not pay your child for the time he/she volunteers while being in this study.

**What will it cost you to let your child take part in this study?**

There is no cost for your child to take part in this study.

**What are the potential benefits to your child if you let him / her take part in this study?**

The potential benefits to your child are:

- To provide a picture of what is it like to be a third grader with high-stakes testing.
- To provide an outlet for any anxiety or joys about high-stakes testing.

**What are the risks if your child takes part in this study?**

There are no known risks to those who take part in this study.

**If your child is harmed while taking part in the study:**

If you believe your child has been harmed because of something that is done during the study, you should call University Contact at phone number immediately. It is important for you to understand that the University of South Florida will not pay for the cost of any

## Appendix C: Written Consent – Interview

care or treatment that might be necessary because your child gets hurt or sick while taking part in this study. That cost will be your responsibility. Also, the University of South Florida will not pay for any wages you may lose if your child is harmed by this study. The University of South Florida is considered a state agency and therefore cannot usually be sued. However, if it can be shown that your child's study doctor or other USF employee, is negligent in doing his or her job in a way that harms your child during the study, you may be able to sue. The money that you might recover from the state of Florida is limited in amount.

### **What will we do to keep your child's study records private?**

There are federal laws that say we must keep your child's study records private. We will keep the records of this study private by filing them under a pseudo-name in a locked filing cabinet.

We will keep the records of this study confidential by not having any identifiers to associate your child with the data collected. A pseudo-name will be assigned to each interview tape, written reflection and drawing.

However, certain people may need to see your child's study records. By law, anyone who looks at your child's records must keep them completely confidential. The only people who will be allowed to see these records are:

- Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study. For example, individuals who provide oversight on this study may need to look at your child's records. These include the University of South Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the staff that work for the IRB. Individuals who work for USF that provide other kinds of oversight to research studies may also need to look at your child's records.
- Other individuals who may look at your child's records include: the Florida Department of Health, people from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), people from the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and from the

## Appendix C: Written Consent – Interview

Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP). This is done to make sure that we are doing the study in the right way. They also need to make sure that we are protecting your child's rights and safety.

We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not let anyone know your child's name. We will not publish anything else that would let people know who your child is.

### **What happens if you decide not to let your child take part in this study?**

You should only let your child take part in this study if both of you want to. You or child should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study to please the study doctor or the research staff.

#### **If you decide not to let your child take part:**

- Your child will not be in trouble or lose any rights he/she would normally have .
- You child will still get the same services he/she would normally have.

**You can decide after signing this informed consent document that you no longer want your child to take part in this study.** If you decide you want your child to stop taking part in the study, tell the study staff as soon as you can.

- We will tell you how to stop safely. We will tell you if there are any dangers if your child stops suddenly.
- If you decide to stop, your child can go on getting his/her regular educational experience. This interview process has no impact on their regular educational services.

**Even if you want your child to stay in the study, there may be reasons we will need to take him/her out of it. Your child may be taken out of this study if:**

- We find out it is not safe for your child to stay in the study. For example, your child's health may get worse.
- Your child is not coming for the study visits when scheduled.
- Your child moves from the school district in which Blackburn is zoned.

### **You can get the answers to your questions, concerns, or complaints.**

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, call Anne Marie Juola-Rushton at **phone number or phone number**.

If you have questions about your child's rights, general questions, complaints, or issues

Appendix C: Written Consent – Interview

as a person taking part in this study, call the Division of Research Integrity and Compliance of the University of South Florida at phone number.

If your child experiences an adverse event or unanticipated problem call Mrs. Juola-Rushton, the primary investigator, at phone number.

**Signature Of Parent(s) of His/Her Consent for Child to Participate in this Research Study**

It is up to you to decide whether you want your child to take part in this study. If you want your child to take part, please read the statements below and sign the form if the statements are true.

**I freely give my consent to let my child take part in this study.** I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to let my child take part in research. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Parent of Child Taking Part in Study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Parent of Child Taking Part in Study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of 2<sup>nd</sup> Parent of Child Taking Part in Study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of 2<sup>nd</sup> Parent of Child Taking Part in Study

*Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent*

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect.

I hereby certify that when this person signs this form, to the best of my knowledge, he or she understands:

- What the study is about.
- What procedures/interventions/investigational drugs or devices will be used.
- What the potential benefits might be.
- What the known risks might be.

I also certify that he or she does not have any problems that could make it hard to understand what it means to take part in this research. This person speaks the language that was used to

### Appendix C: Written Consent – Interview

explain this research.

This person reads well enough to understand this form or, if not, this person is able to hear and understand when the form is read to him or her.

This person does not have a medical/psychological problem that would compromise comprehension and therefore makes it hard to understand what is being explained and can, therefore, give informed consent.

This person is not taking drugs that may cloud their judgment or make it hard to understand what is being explained and can, therefore, give informed consent.

---

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

---

Date

---

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent



## **Parental Permission to Participate in Research**

Social and Behavioral Research

### **Information for parents to consider who are being asked to allow their child to take part in a research study**

Title of Study: “What are the socio-emotional experiences and perceptions of high-stakes testing with third grade students?”

**IRB # 105389**

---

The following information is being presented to help you/your child decide whether or not your child wants to be a part of a research study. Please read carefully. Anything you do not understand, ask the researcher.

We are asking you to allow your child to take part in a research study that is called:

“What are the socio-emotional experiences and perceptions of high-stakes testing with third grade students?”

The person who is in charge of this research study is Anne Marie Juola-Rushton. This person is called the Principal Investigator.

The research will be done at Elementary School.

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### **Should your child take part in this study?**

This form tells you about this research study. You can decide if you want your child to take part in it. This form explains:

- Why this study is being done.
- What will happen during this study and what your child will need to do.
- Whether there is any chance your child might experience potential benefits from being in the study.
- The risks of having problems because your child is in this study.

### **Before you decide:**

- Read this form.
- Have a friend or family member read it.

## Appendix D: Written Consent – Non-interview

- Talk about this study with the person in charge of the study or the person explaining the study. You can have someone with you when you talk about the study.
- Talk it over with someone you trust.
- Find out what the study is about.
  
- You may have questions this form does not answer. You do not have to guess at things you don't understand. If you have questions, ask the person in charge of the study or study staff as you go along. Ask them to explain things in a way you can understand.
- Take your time to think about it.

**It is up to you. If you choose to let your child be in the study, then you should sign the form. If you do not want your child to take part in this study, you should not sign the form.**

### **Why is this research being done?**

The purpose of this study is to find out more about how the third grade student perceives high-stakes testing. High-stakes testing is when grade level promotion is determined based on the score received on the FCAT test.

### **Why is your child being asked to take part?**

We are asking your child to take part in this research study because they are a third grade student participating in the FCAT assessment this spring.

### **What will happen during this study?**

During phase one of the study at the two weeks prior, during the weeks of FCAT and during the two weeks after the testing ends, your child will draw pictures in Art class and type a journal in the Reading Lab about their experiences and perceptions of testing. At each visit, your child will be asked to focus on their experiences and perceptions of testing through drawings or a written journal.

### **How many other people will take part?**

About 100 third graders will take part in phase one of the study at USF. There will be a phase two of the study where 18 students from the original 100 will be chosen based on their prior Stanford Tests and DIBEL scores to take place in informal interviews. If your child is chosen for phase two of the study, a separate consent form will be provided to you.

### **What other choices do you have if you decide not to let your child to take part?**

If you decide not to let your child take part in this study, that is okay. Instead of being in this research study your child can choose not to participate. They will still participate in the curriculum of the special area teachers but copies will not be provided to Mrs. Juola-Rushton for this study.

### **Will your child be paid for taking part in this study?**

We will not pay your child for the time he/she volunteers while being in this study.

### **What will it cost you to let your child take part in this study?**

There is no cost for your child to take part in this study.

### **What are the potential benefits to your child if you let him / her take part in this study?**

The potential benefits to your child are:

- To provide a picture of what is it like to be a third grader with high-stakes testing.
- To provide an outlet for any anxiety or joys about high-stakes testing.

If you believe your child has been harmed because of something that is done during the study, you should call University Contact at phone number immediately. It is



#### Appendix D: Written Consent – Non-interview

important for you to understand that the University of South Florida will not pay for the cost of any care or treatment that might be necessary because your child gets hurt or sick while taking part in this study. That cost will be your responsibility. Also, the University of South Florida will not pay for any wages you may lose if your child is harmed by this study. The University of South Florida is considered a state agency and therefore cannot usually be sued. However, if it can be shown that your child's study doctor or other USF employee, is negligent in doing his or her job in a way that harms your child during the study, you may be able to sue. The money that you might recover from the state of Florida is limited in amount.

#### **What are the risks if your child takes part in this study?**

There are no known risks to those who take part in this study.

#### **If your child is harmed while taking part in the study:**

#### **What will we do to keep your child's study records private?**

There are federal laws that say we must keep your child's study records private. We will keep the records of this study private by filing them under a pseudo-name in a locked filing cabinet.

We will keep the records of this study confidential by not having any identifiers to associate your child with the data collected. A pseudo-name will be assigned to each interview tape, written reflection and drawing.

However, certain people may need to see your child's study records. By law, anyone who looks at your child's records must keep them completely confidential. The only people who will be allowed to see these records are:

## Appendix D: Written Consent – Non-interview

- Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study. For example, individuals who provide oversight on this study may need to look at your child's records. These include the University of South Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the staff that work for the IRB. Individuals who work for USF that provide other kinds of oversight to research studies may also need to look at your child's records.
- Other individuals who may look at your child's records include: the Florida Department of Health, people from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), people from the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and from the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP). This is done to make sure that we are doing the study in the right way. They also need to make sure that we are protecting your child's rights and safety.

We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not let anyone know your child's name. We will not publish anything else that would let people know who your child is.

### **What happens if you decide not to let your child take part in this study?**

You should only let your child take part in this study if both of you want to. You or child should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study to please the study doctor or the research staff.

#### **If you decide not to let your child take part:**

- Your child will not be in trouble or lose any rights he/she would normally have.
- Your child will still get the same services he/she would normally have.

**You can decide after signing this informed consent document that you no longer want your child to take part in this study.** If you decide you want your child to stop taking part in the study, tell the study staff as soon as you can.

- We will tell you how to stop safely. We will tell you if there are any dangers if your child stops suddenly.
- If you decide to stop, your child can go on getting his/her regular educational experience. This interview process has no impact on their regular educational services.

**Even if you want your child to stay in the study, there may be reasons we will need to take him/her out of it. Your child may be taken out of this study if:**

Appendix D: Written Consent – Non-interview

- We find out it is not safe for your child to stay in the study. For example, your child’s health may get worse.
- Your child is not coming for the study visits when scheduled.
- Your child moves from the school district in which Blackburn is zoned.

**You can get the answers to your questions, concerns, or complaints.**

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, call Anne Marie Juola-Rushton at **phone number or phone number**.

If you have questions about your child’s rights, general questions, complaints, or issues as a person taking part in this study, call the Division of Research Integrity and Compliance of the University of South Florida at phone number.

If your child experiences an adverse event or unanticipated problem call Mrs. Juola-Rushton, the primary investigator, at phone number.

**Signature Of Parent(s) of His/Her Consent for Child to Participate in this Research Study**

It is up to you to decide whether you want your child to take part in this study. If you want your child to take part, please read the statements below and sign the form if the statements are true.

**I freely give my consent to let my child take part in this study.** I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to let my child take part in research. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Parent of Child Taking Part in Study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Parent of Child Taking Part in Study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of 2<sup>nd</sup> Parent of Child Taking Part in Study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of 2<sup>nd</sup> Parent of Child Taking Part in Study

Appendix D: Written Consent – Non-interview

*Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent*

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect.

I hereby certify that when this person signs this form, to the best of my knowledge, he or she understands:

- What the study is about.
- What procedures/interventions/investigational drugs or devices will be used.
- What the potential benefits might be.
- What the known risks might be.

I also certify that he or she does not have any problems that could make it hard to understand what it means to take part in this research. This person speaks the language that was used to explain this research.

This person reads well enough to understand this form or, if not, this person is able to hear and understand when the form is read to him or her.

This person does not have a medical/psychological problem that would compromise comprehension and therefore makes it hard to understand what is being explained and can, therefore, give informed consent.

This person is not taking drugs that may cloud their judgment or make it hard to understand what is being explained and can, therefore, give informed consent.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

## Appendix E: Interview Questions

### Interview Number 1

- Tell me about yourself as a student.
- Tell me what it's like being a third grader.
- What is it like having high-stakes (testing that determines your grade level promotion) testing?
- How do you prepare yourself for the testing weeks?
- What are your feelings about FCAT?
- How would you describe testing to someone who is new to third grade?
- What conversations about testing have you had about testing with others?

### Interview Number 2

- Tell me a story about an experience you have had while taking your test.
- How is school different during the weeks of testing than when you're not?
- What does the test mean to you?
- Is the test what you expected it to be?

### Interview Number 3

- Tell me about the past couple of weeks when you were testing.
- What experiences stand out for you?
- How, if at all, has this experience affected you?
- What was the easiest/hardest experience for you with the testing?
- What conversations have you had about testing with others?

## Appendix F: Drawing Prompts

1. Before: Draw what you think about FCAT.
2. During: Draw how you're feeling about FCAT.
3. After: Provide a drawing of you 'before' and 'after' FCAT.

Each drawing also has the following request for a description:

1. On the back of your paper, please describe your drawing.
2. Next, explain how it connects to FCAT.

### Appendix G: Journal Prompts

1. Before: FCAT is going to be soon. Please describe what you're feeling.
2. During: Every third grade student in Florida has to take the FCAT. What would you want a third grader new to Florida to know about third grade here?
3. After: Now that you've completed the FCAT, what would you like to share with the second graders who will be in third grade next year?

Appendix H: First Interview Graph with Question Headers

Student	Tell me about yourself as a student?	Tell me what it's like being a third grader?	What is it like having high-stakes testing?	How do you prepare yourself for the testing weeks?	What are your thoughts about FCAT?	How would you describe testing to someone who is new to third grade?
Name	Difficult Fun Hard "It's a little bit difficult ah, but it's fun."	We go to math "It's a lot harder. The words and stuff they give us." "I just do my best."	Scary "Don't know if I'll pass. . .I don't get much, like it's hard and stuff."	"practice again and again"	"I don't really know anything about it except it's graded for if you pass." Teacher told me 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade friend told me	"I'm not really sure. Do your best."



Appendix I: Second Interview with Question Headers

Student	How are things going?	Tell me about the first morning of testing?	Tell me how you felt after you got your test booklet?	Tell me how you felt by the end of the week?	You're going to test some more. How are you feeling about that?	Did any of your strategies for test taking change?	Is there anything we should know to help prepare you?	What do you think now about the FCAT determining if you go to 4 <sup>th</sup> grade or not?
Name	Reading long Math easy Pretty good	<p>“It was a little bit scary.”</p> <p>Anticipation</p> <p>“The first time I saw it I felt like I had butterflies in my stomach.”</p>	<p>“When I opened the test booklet and looked at the pages and stuff I realized they weren't so hard.”</p>	<p>“I think I should be pretty good.”</p>	<p>Nervous</p> <p>“My friend took the FCAT before and told me the second part was pretty hard.”</p>	<p>Sounding out the words</p> <p>Read faster.</p>	<p>Test prep booklets more similar</p>	<p>-----</p> <p>---</p>

Appendix J: Third Interview with Question Headers

Student	How are things going?	How do you feel now that it's over?	What is third grade like now that the test is done?	Were there any strategies during the testing that helped you?	Do you know why you had the Fun Day?	Do you have any advice for children coming into 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade next year?	If there was anything you could change about the FCAT, what would it be?	Do you believe in having FCAT determine your grade level promotion ?
Name	Good "I think I passed."	It's exciting . Exciting to have it and exciting to end it."	"Pretty cool. It's different.. .Like we play games now."	Look through it.  No homework so I could go to sleep earlier.  Underlining your stuff like find the like researching that story then underlying the answer and putting the answer there."	Like a reward for doing the FCAT.	"It's pretty cool."  "Try your best."	----- ----	----- ----

Appendix K: Boys (B-M-E)

Student Name	First Interview		Second Interview		Third Interview	
	<p>Hard</p> <p>Feels like I might get a B</p> <p>Does not want to go to summer school</p> <p>Hates school because of the learning</p> <p>Likes to do art class.</p> <p>Reading class is hard sometimes.</p> <p>I don't like reading.</p> <p>Should study [but it's hard]</p> <p>Hard to do work [learning makes it hard]</p>	<p>"My second grade teacher said that some of the questions might be hard in the FCAT."</p> <p>"Dad says that as long as I get a B he won't be upset."</p> <p>Sees practice as helping with the FCAT.</p> <p>Thinks someone would be weird if they've never heard of the FCAT.</p> <p>Would go to Italy to go to school if it meant not having to take the FCAT.</p> <p>Does not wonder about others learning abilities</p>	<p>Going good</p> <p>I think I'm going to get an A-</p> <p>Feels easy now.</p> <p>A little nervous about the testing continuing.</p> <p>Practice reading</p> <p>Hardly happy</p> <p>FCAT was pretty easy.</p>	<p>"I feel it [second week of testing] might be a little harder."</p> <p>"This one [NRT] might make me get a B."</p> <p>"Dad will yell at me, he usually does."</p> <p>Starting 4<sup>th</sup> grade work.</p> <p>"I'm feeling that I get rid of what I said the last time and that I'm going to say what I say this time.</p> <p>That the FCAT sounds pretty easy for third grade to fifth grade."</p> <p>"The question might look hard but they're easy."</p>	<p>Sleepy</p> <p>A little easier.</p> <p>A little gloom.</p> <p>Blue.</p> <p>Harder</p> <p>FCAT was a little easier</p> <p>Harder [in 4<sup>th</sup> grade].</p> <p>Easy.</p>	<p>"I was awake past my bedtime."</p> <p>"I don't really know how I feel now that the test is over."</p> <p>"I like testing week better so I can get back to my life [no homework]."</p> <p>"Well, I thought it was a little harder than the SAT in second grade."</p> <p>"Because the FCAT because third grade FCAT was pretty easy and I probably will get an A-."</p> <p>"I don't feel like I'm ready for 4<sup>th</sup> grade yet. . .because some people. . ."</p>

Appendix L: Girls (B-M-E)

Student	First Interview		Second Interview		Third Interview	
Name	<p>Little difficult. Fun. Little bit hard. A little bit scary. Don't know if you'll pass. Learning is hard. Doesn't get much. Repeated pattern of practicing the same things. Doesn't change strategies. Planning to have fun. Third grade is harder than second was.</p>	<p>Enjoys reading. Comfort is important. Independent learning a plus. Excited about what questions might be on the FCAT. Doesn't know anything about the FCAT except the high stakes. Teacher and cousins tell her how difficult it will be. Do your best. I just do my best.</p>	<p>Reading was long. Math was easy. Feeling pretty good. It was a little bit scary. Nervous about second test. Might be pretty easy. Read faster. Anxious about time. Butterflies mostly went a way.</p>	<p>Sounded words out and stuff. Opening the test booklet provided relief from fear. Did not connect practice booklet to actual test. Had a lot of anticipation. Peer's influence connects to fear. After FCAT, party.</p>	<p>Good Exciting Pretty cool [third grade now] Look through Sleep earlier Underline stuff It's [FCAT] pretty cool.</p>	<p>"I think I passed." Exciting to have and exciting to end. We play games. Sees Fun Day as a reward for doing FCAT. [Advice] "Try your best."</p>

### Appendix M: First Reflective Writing

Student	Gender	Description	Quote
1. B57	BF	Scared	"I am nervous about spelling because I have been very bad for a third grader and that is why I scared about the FCAT."
2. B59	WF	Completely Ready	"When I heard THE FCAT was coming I leaped for Joy and for being scared. I let the joy out of my body for one minute, next thing I know joy is gone forever. But joy gave me a call, he is coming back!!!!
3.. B61	WM	Confident	"I have passed the SAT 2 times already, why would I fail now?"  "Mr. X said that I would pass the test."
4. B64	WM	Scared	"I'm gunna fail because last year staderdprep test was so easy but this year sems a little bit harder."
5. B65	HF	Scared Will do good	"I have past onther test." "If I could pass onther test I could pass this test with all the hard work I'm going to work my brain so I could do good in the FCAT TEST." "It shows I am capable to go to 4 <sup>th</sup> grade, this test is my turn to go for a new grade."

### Appendix N: Second Reflective Writings

Student	Gender	Description	Quotes
1. D57	BF	Third grade class	"If I were new to Florida I would want to know what a 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade class would and some things to."
2. D59	WF	Easy Challenging FCAT	"If the FCAT was coming up I would listen to every word my teacher told me (even if it was boring) eney ways the FCAT is a breeze." Try to be confident and you'll pass."
3. D61	WM	FCAT Fun Day	"That every year after FCAT there is a special day called Fun Day. There is no learning and all kids have fun either drinking Gatorade, eating popcorn, dancing, jumping on floats or you can just relax."
4. D64	WM	FCAT Fun Day	"It is ok but fcata is longer closer to the end of the year and third grade is getting easier and cant wat untell FUN DAY."

### Appendix O: Third Reflective Writings

Student	Gender	Description	Quotes
1. F57	BF	FCAT	"I would tell them that the first day is harder when your teacher passes the test out but when you open your test it is easy [ps. The math is so hard.]"
2. F59	WF	FCAT Easy Belief in self	"It is the easiest test of all. You will zip past it. I am sure I aced it." "You can do the FCAT! Just think you can do it and you will!!"
3. F61	WM	Easy	"You will pass it in no time. So don't be scared be excited like me."
4. F64	WM	Hard Comparison to SAT	"FCAT is harder then SAT but some parts in FCAT is easy and if you work hard enough you will pass."

Appendix P: Literature Resource List

- Avi, A. (2003). *The secret school*. New York, NY: Harcourt.
- Clements, A. (2004). *The report card*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division.
- Cohen, M. (2006). *First grade takes a test*. New York, NY: Star Bright Books.
- Finchler, J. (2003). *Testing miss. malarkey*. New York, NY: Walker Books for Young Readers.
- Seuss, D., & Prelutsky, J. (2001). *Hooray for diffindoofer day!* New York, NY: Picture Lions.



### About the Author

Anne Marie Juola-Rushton received an Associates Degree in Child Development from Alpena Community College in 1990, a Bachelor's Degree in Childhood Education from the University of South Florida-Sarasota in 2000 and a Master's in Science degree in Reading Education from The University of South Florida-Sarasota in 2003. She started teaching preschool while working on her degree in Child Development, and continued on as a primary teacher, grades K-3 until she entered the Ph.D. program at the University of South Florida-Tampa in 2003.

While in the Ph.D. program at the University of South Florida-Tampa, Mrs. Juola-Rushton continued to work as a Reading Coach for her county school district. She coordinated the literacy practices of two elementary schools as a member of their Leadership Teams. She also has an active research agenda in which she presents nationally and internationally, has coauthored two book chapter publications, and is involved with service for the International Reading Association, American Educational Research Association, and Southern Early Childhood Association of Florida.