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Special Education Teachers' Experiences and Perceptions of the Georgia Alternate Assessment

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SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE GEORGIA ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT

by

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(Under the Direction of Jason LaFrance)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the experience of Georgia Teachers with administering the Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA) to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities and determine how those experiences informed their perception of the Georgia Alternate Assessment. The GAA was designed to assess students with significant cognitive disabilities on grade level standards. The goal of including students with significant cognitive disabilities in standardized testing and statewide accountability systems is to positively impact the curriculum and instruction, and the teaching and learning process for these students. Georgia's special education teachers experience the GAA from within and are in an insightful position to share their perspectives of whether the GAA is meeting this goal.

Experiences and perceptions for this study were provided by Georgia teachers who had experienced administering the GAA to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities. A grounded theory analysis revealed common experiences and perceptions among the participants.

Findings from the participants revealed the participants experienced the administration of the GAA as a balancing act in which they had to balance often

conflicting aspects of meeting state and federal guidelines and meeting the daily instructional needs of their students with significant cognitive disabilities. Continued analysis revealed that these participants perceived the GAA to be a meaningless tool for teaching and a meaningless measure of assessment for elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities. Finally, continued grounded theory analysis resulted in the emergence of a theory. The participants of this study found the GAA to be an ineffective tool for measuring the teaching and learning of elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities. While not completely abandoning grade level standards, these participants advocated that teaching and high stakes assessment of elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities be based on a curriculum that has a more pivotal impact on their quality of life outcomes. They advocated teaching and assessment of daily living and functional life skills.

INDEX WORDS: Georgia Alternate Assessment, Students with significant cognitive disabilities, Teacher perceptions, Grounded Theory

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. Thank you for loving, supporting, and praying for me. To my parents, Isabell and Sylvester Harris, thank you for instilling in your children a love of God and the importance of education. To my sisters, Cynthia Johnson and Cassandra Harris, thank you for your love and support. To my nephews, Tre'von and Jishaun Harris, with hopes that you will fly higher than either you or I can imagine. There is a King in you.

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INTRODUCTION

While tests have always had their place in education, high-stakes testing has become a national concern. In this age of accountability, test scores not only provide data to help drive instruction, but are now used to identify teachers and schools as successes or failures (Thurlow, & Ysseldyke, 2002). These high stakes tests are used to determine if teachers and schools are providing a quality education to all students. Consequences, positive and negative, are then applied based on student assessment results. Thurlow and Ysseldyke (2002) assert that, "the use of student test scores has raised the stakes for all education employees" (p. vii).

Federal legislation now mandates that even students with the most significant cognitive disabilities participate in state and district assessments, and that their test scores be reported and included in statewide accountability and assessment systems (Lazarus, Thurlow, Lail, & Christensen, 2009). The impetus behind standards-based assessment and accountability legislation, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA), the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004), is improved performance of by all students. This is in expectation "that educators will channel more time, resources, and attention to minority students, poor students, and students with special needs when their performance is made public and schools are held accountable for results" (Jennings & Beveridge, 2009, p. 153).

To meet legislative mandates and ensure students with significant cognitive disabilities have access to the general curriculum and an opportunity to demonstrate what

they have learned, the Georgia Department of Education developed the Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA). The GAA is a portfolio assessment designed to assess student progress on grade level standards in English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies (Georgia Department of Education website, n.d.). Students are assessed in grades 3 through 8 and 11.

Teachers collect evidence of student performance of tasks aligned to content standards during two collection periods during a school year. The first collection period provides baseline data or evidence of a student's initial skill level. The second collection period provides evidence of progress. There must be at least 14 calendar days between the first collection period and the second collection period. Student performance on the GAA is scored for four elements: "fidelity to standard, content/context, achievement/ progress, and generalization" (Georgia Department of Education website, n.d.). Each element is assigned a separate score. These scores have been reported on past annual yearly progress (AYP) reports, but they will now be reported on Georgia's new College and Career Readiness and Performance Index (CCRPI).

Purpose Statement

The goal of including students with significant cognitive disabilities in standardized testing and statewide accountability systems is to positively impact the curriculum and instruction, and the teaching and learning process for these students. Georgia's special education teachers are the professionals trained to teach students with special needs. Likewise, they are the teachers working each day with students with significant cognitive disabilities and the test administrators collecting and assembling the evidence required by the GAA. Georgia's special education teachers experience the GAA

from within and are in an insightful position to share their perspectives of whether the GAA is meeting its goal. The purpose of this study was to understand Georgia school teachers' experiences and perspectives of administering the GAA to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Problem Statement

Most studies that focus on teacher perceptions of alternate assessments were conducted on the Kentucky Alternate Assessment. Other studies addressed the alternate assessments in Wisconsin, Arizona, Tennessee, New Jersey, and Massachusetts. One study addressed Georgia middle school special education teachers' perceptions of the Georgia Alternate Assessment. But, no studies have examined Georgia elementary special education teachers' perceptions of the value of the GAA to the daily instruction, student learning, or overall educational experience of students with significant cognitive disabilities. Although the results of the GAA will now determine the type of diploma a student with significant cognitive disabilities will receive, the impact on the teaching and learning of these students remains a question. This grounded theory study sheds light on special education teachers' experiences and perceptions of administering the GAA to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following overarching research questions: (a) How do special education teachers experience the administration of the Georgia Alternate Assessment to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities? (b) How do their experiences with the administration of the GAA shape their perceptions?

Significance of the study

Students with significant cognitive disabilities are a vulnerable subset of our student population. These are students who will always need someone to care for them and who will always depend on someone to advocate for their needs. They have ridden the educational pendulum as it has swung from having no presence in public education to being in public schools but contained from their nondisabled peers. They have changed from simply being physically present in the regular education classroom to actual engagement in regular education classroom activities. They have traversed curriculum-focused changes from a life skills curriculum to a modified academic curriculum more suited to their functioning grade level. They have shifted from a focus on socialization with nondisabled peers in the regular education classroom to now having access to and expected performance on general grade level standards. Students with significant cognitive disabilities have gone from no role in school accountability measures to now being the student group that causes some schools to meet and other schools to fall short of federally mandated outcomes. As a result, these schools and their teachers may be labeled as successes or failures.

Federal legislation mandates that students with significant cognitive disabilities have access to grade level curriculum standards, participate in state district assessments, and that their scores be included and reported in statewide accountability systems. This is in anticipation that educational leaders will channel more resources to students with disabilities and other at risk groups when they are held publically responsible for these students' performance. To meet federal requirements and ensure students with significant cognitive disabilities have access to the general curriculum and an opportunity to

demonstrate progress on grade level standards, the Georgia Department of Education developed the Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA). Federal legislation and implementation of the GAA have brought Georgia's special needs students, their quality of education, and their teachers back to the attention of school leaders.

Georgia's special education teachers work daily to meet the educational, social, physical, biological, and medical needs of students with significant cognitive disabilities. They meet at least yearly in Individual Education Plan (IEP) teams to discuss and determine annual goals for these students to work towards. These annual goals have historically been focused on functional skills to increase daily living independence and improve vocational potential. Special education teachers must now either discontinue this historical focus on functional skills or find a way to juxtapose it with grade level academic standards on which they and their schools will be judged. This is an especially precarious position for teachers of the upper elementary grade levels that are most commonly assessed. These teachers are also in an advantageous position to share their experiences and perceptions of the administration of the GAA.

If students with significant cognitive disabilities attend school from ages 3 to 21, 180 days per year, and 7 hours per day, they will have approximately 3,780 hours of instruction. By definition, these students require more opportunities for direct instruction and practice of skills to be learned (Ayers, Douglas, Lowery, & Sievers, 2011). It is important to study reform efforts, like the GAA, affecting students with significant cognitive disabilities to ensure that this precious and unrecoverable time is used to "reap the maximum return on the time invested" (Ayers et al., 2011, p. 15).

Procedures

This qualitative study utilized a grounded theory methodology to explore the experiences and subsequent perceptions of teachers who have administered the GAA to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities. A grounded theory design was selected since it is an effective method for research when there is little prior research and the desired outcome is generation of an explanatory theory (Birks & Mills, 2011). A grounded theory approach allows the researcher to follow carefully planned and precise steps to construct a theory that is grounded in data (Crotty, 1998).

The researcher used interviews to collect data for this grounded theory study. A purposeful sample of volunteers was sought via email from a southeast Georgia school district. Participants were required to have administered or will administer the GAA to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities. The first six educators who volunteered were employed. The researcher developed two interview protocols (Appendices A and B) designed to elicit their experiences and perceptions. The interviews were conducted in two sessions. The sessions occurred after work hours, in the classroom or participants' offices and lasted no longer than an hour. The interview sessions were digitally recorded. The digital tapes were transcribed verbatim and the data analyzed using the method outlined by Charmaz (2006).

Definition of Terms

Alternate Assessment Based on Alternate Achievement Standards (AA-AAS) - an assessment based on standards that differ in complexity and through which students with significant disabilities participate in educational accountability assessments (Kleinert, Browder, Towles-Reeves, 2009).

Alternate Achievement Standards - standards that differ in breadth and depth from grade level achievement standards (Kleinert et al., 2009).

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) - "one of the cornerstones of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). It is a measure of year-to-year student achievement on statewide assessments. Schools, school districts, and states must demonstrate a certain level of performance on reading and/or language arts and mathematics assessments" (The Governor's Office of Student Achievement, Report Card Overview, n.d.).

College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) - the new Georgia school accountability system approved February 2012 (Georgia Department of Education, Accountability, n.d.).

Cognitive Disability - mental retardation or any other condition that renders the student with an IQ below 70 (Friend, 2008).

Functional Academics **-** the reading, writing, and math used in everyday life and needed for independent living (Friend, 2008).

Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA) **-** a portfolio assessment based on alternate achievement standards administered in grades K, 3 through 8, and 11 for students identified with significant cognitive disabilities who are unable to participate in general assessments even with maximum accommodations (Georgia Department of Education, Testing/Assessment, n.d.).

High Stakes Test **-** a test in which the results may impact a school's promotions, certification, graduation, or apply other important consequences (Thurlow & Ysseldyke, 2002).

Individualized Education Program (IEP) - a written plan of instruction that guides the delivery of special education services for a student identified by a school system as a student with a disability. This plan is developed and revised yearly by a team of educators (Thurlow & Ysseldyke, 2002).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) - the "federal law, first enacted in 1975, that protects the educational rights of infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities (ages birth to 21)" (Friend, 2008, p. 520).

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 - the "federal school reform legislation reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and including increased school accountability for student learning, more choices for parents and students, greater flexibility for schools in the use of funds, and an emphasis on early reading intervention" (Friend, 2008, p. 522).

Portfolio - "a purposeful and systematic collection of student work that is evaluated and judged against predetermined scoring criteria" (Kleinert et al., 2009, p. 303).

Regular Education Diploma - a diploma given to students who have met the school and state requirements for graduation and who meet the criteria to enter college, technical school, or the military.

Self Contained Class - a class separated from the general school population for all academic subject areas.

Student with Significant Cognitive Disabilities - a student with an IQ 55 and below and receiving special education services in a self-contained setting.

Chapter Summary

The Georgia Alternate Assessment was developed for students with significant cognitive disabilities in response to legislation requiring that all students have access to and make progress towards general curriculum standards, and that this progress be reported in district and state accountability systems. The teachers charged with this duty are special education teachers who were formerly charged with instruction that focused on the acquisition of functional life skills. Teachers are taking valuable and dwindling instructional and planning time to teach and assess the standards and to collect and assemble evidence. Currently, there is no research available to shed light on how the administration of the Georgia Alternate Assessment is impacting the teaching and learning of elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities in Georgia. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences and subsequent perspectives of Georgia special education teachers' administration of the GAA to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Characteristics of Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

Students with significant cognitive disabilities are characterized by significant deficits in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior. Intellectual functioning refers to mental ability, including the ability to problem solve, reason, and comprehend abstract ideas. Schools determine a student's intellectual functioning by standardized intelligence and achievement tests. Adaptive behavior is an indication of how the student functions in daily life, including practical life skills, independence, and coping skills. Schools use standardized and informal behavior rating scales to measure adaptive behavior (Lowery, Drasgrow, Renzaglia, & Chezan, 2007).

Students with significant cognitive disabilities "learn slowly; have deficits in self-help skills; have problems with generalizing behaviors across people, setting, and time; and need long-term supports across multiple environments to enhance their functioning and quality of life" (Lowery et al., 2007, p. 244). Many of these students may have medical conditions that require interventions, including medication and therapy (Lowery, et al., 2007). The U.S. Department of Education defines students with significant cognitive disabilities as

> the small number of students who are (1) within one or more of the existing categories of disability under IDEA...and (2) whose cognitive impairments may prevent them from attaining grade-level achievement standards, even with the very best instruction. (Kearns, Towles-Reeves, Kleinert, Kleinert, and Thomas, 2011, p. 3).

The U.S. Department of Education has estimated that students with significant cognitive disabilities make up about 1% of the student population (Kearns et al., 2011) . Kearns, Towles-Reeves, Kleinert, Kleinert, and Thomas (2011) found that the categories of mental retardation, autism, and multiple disabilities are the most common labels of students participating in alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards. Towles-Reeves, Kearns, Kleinert, and Kleinert (2009) found that these students usually exhibit deficits in expressive and receptive communication and often need assistive technology communication systems. They conducted a multistate study of students taking alternate assessments based on alternate academic standards and found that approximately 80% of the students were using symbolic oral speech or an assistive technology device to communicate. Approximately 10% to 12% of the students functioned at an emergent level of communication through symbols by using pictures, objects, or gestures. Finally, approximately 8% to 10% of these students had no communication. This group also had a low engagement level and required physical assistance to complete motor tasks. Academically, "these students need increased time for skill acquisition, fluency, maintenance, and generalization, with each phase requiring specific programming" (Kearns et al., 2011, p. 4).

History of Alternate Assessment

Alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards were born out of the standards-based reform movement started in the 1980s. This reform movement was launched after national reports such as A Nation At Risk (Kleinert & Kearns, 2010) which asserted that ". . . the educational foundations of our society are presently being

eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 9).

Policymakers and other stake holders began to try to identify what all students should be required to learn. Maryland and Kentucky were the pioneers of new public school accountability requirements involving state assessments of student achievement. Recognition soon followed that for all students to benefit from the accountability systems, all students had to be included in state assessments. Researchers in the 1990s found that excluding students from the accountability systems resulted in increased referrals to special education, exclusion from the general curriculum, and lack of data to inform educational improvement (Kleinert & Kearns, 2010). A major conclusion was reached: ". . . all students must be included in school accountability, including students who cannot participate in the general assessments, even with accommodations, adaptations, or other supports, because of potential negative effects" (Kleinert & Kearns, 2010, p. 7).

More recently, Towles-Reeves, Kleinert, and Anderman (2008) surmise that if students with disabilities are exempted from state accountability assessments, they will likely not benefit from school reform efforts. "Ysseldyke and Olsen (1999) state that 'when students with disabilities are out of sight in assessment and accountability systems they are out of mind when policy decisions are made and when educational structures and programs are designed' (para. 1)" (Musson, Thomas, Towles-Reeves, & Kearns, 2010, p. 67). Additional unintended consequences of not assessing all students include: educators engaging in "creative accounting practices" that exempt predicted low-performing students from state tests, and educators redirecting resources to students close to passing

the test and away from special education students whose scores do not count (Jennings & Beveridge, 2009, p. 153). Towels-Reeves, Kleinert, and Anderman (2008) state that advocates of including students with cognitive disabilities in state assessment and accountability measures cite improved instruction, higher expectations for student learning, and increased visibility to policy makers and administrators as benefits.

Prior to 1997, students with special needs were consigned into one of three tracks: the general curriculum with expectations for grade level achievement; a remedial curriculum with off grade level academics and a focus on basic math and reading skills; and a functional curriculum with a focus on daily living skills (Browder, Wakeman, & Flowers, 2009). Students with significant cognitive disabilities were tracked into the functional curriculum (Kleinert & Kearns, 2010). "Functional life skills curricular planning used a catalog approach. Similar to making selections from a clothing catalog, individualized education program (IEP) teams selected skills that were needed and preferred" (Browder et al., 2009, p. 329).

Students' chronological ages were considered in planning but not grade level. The academics that were taught were limited to those functional academics used in daily life. For some students exhibiting extreme life skills deficits, academics were completely omitted from the IEP (Browder et al., 2009). Bowder et al. (2009) argued, "Ironically, there was no research to show that mastering functional life skills (e.g., hand washing, dressing, cooking) was a prerequisite to academic learning" (p. 330). However, within the last 3 decades, a "philosophy of normalization" (Kleinert & Kearns, 2010, p. 7) has been fostered, recognizing "that people with severe disabilities needed the opportunity to

participate in the same valued activities and rhythms of life as everyone else" (Kleinert & Kearns, 2010, p.7).

Students with disabilities were required to participate in district and statewide assessments through the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994. However, this act did not consistently enforce this regulation (Musson et al., 2010) and students with disabilities were often excluded from these assessments. Enforcement came with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA). IDEA stated, "'as appropriate, the State or local agency (i) develops guidelines in alternate assessments for those children who cannot participate in State and district-wide assessment programs' (sec. 612 (a)(17))" (Musson et al., 2010, p. 67). This act required that states develop alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards. This regulation was reiterated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) which further required that the results of the alternate assessments be reported and included in statewide accountability and assessment systems with the included goal of proficiency of all students by 2014 (Musson et al., 2010).

IDEA (2004) further pushed the proficiency requirement for students with disabilities by mandating that all students have access to the general curriculum and "show adequate yearly progress on state standards in language arts/reading, math, and science" (Browder, Flowers, & Wakeman, 2008, p. 137). Access to the general curriculum and inclusion classes was no longer sufficient. All students were expected to demonstrate learning of the standards (Browder et al., 2009). Alternate assessments linked to grade level standards were required to be in place by July 2001 (Kleinert et al., 2009).

These amendments suggest that the historical underachievement of students with disabilities was the product of low expectations for learning and limited access to the general education curriculum (Zigmond & Kloo, 2009). Towels-Reeves, et al. (2008) noted:

> The critical element of all three pieces of legislation (i.e., IDEA, 1997, 2004; NCLB, 2001) is to hold teachers, schools, and states accountable for ensuring that each and every student has the opportunity to achieve at high standards while accessing the general education curriculum. (p. 123)

Kleinert et al. (2009) identified three emerged approaches to alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards as the portfolio, the checklist or rating scale, and the performance assessment approach. A portfolio is a collection of evidence. It "is a purposeful and systematic collection of student work that is evaluated and judged against a predetermined scoring criteria" (Kleinert et al., 2009, p. 303). The second approach, the checklist or rating scale, "requires teachers to identify if students are able to perform certain skills or activities rated dichotomously or on a Likert-type scale" (Kleinert et al, 2009, p. 303). Last, the performance assessment approach "is a direct measure of a skill in a typically one-on-one assessment format (e.g., responding to questions about a reading passage in language arts)" (Kleinert et al., 2009, p. 303).

Alternate Assessments Based on Alternate Achievement Standards (AA-AAS) must adhere to the federal regulations of Title 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) which addressed the academic achievement of the disadvantaged and improvement of programs provided by local education agencies. The Alternate Assessments must also meet the standards of technical quality, including reliability,

validity, accessibility, objectivity, and consistency, that are required of other high stakes educational tests (Kettler et al., 2010). AA-AASs also must have:

- An explicit structure.
- Guidelines for determining which students may participate.
- Clearly defined scoring criteria and procedures; and
- A report format that communicates student performance in terms of academic achievement standards. (Kettler et al., 2010, p. 458)

The Georgia Alternate Assessment

The Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA) is administered to students with significant cognitive disabilities in Kindergarten, grades 3 through 8, and the 11th grade. The GAA is a portfolio assessment designed to assess student progress in English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies (Georgia Department of Education website, n.d.). Developers of the GAA determined a portfolio assessment was the optimum approach to alternate assessment. The developers believed that a student's special education teacher is in the best position to determine which academic content the student can achieve and how the student can demonstrate that achievement. Also, a portfolio allows for ongoing assessment and documentation, individuality in demonstrating achievement, and a meaningful way to communicate student progress with parents (Fincher & Flowers, 2009).

Teachers collect evidence of student performance of tasks aligned to content standards during two collection periods during a school year. The first collection period provides baseline data or evidence of a student's initial skill level. The second collection

period provides evidence of progress. There are a minimum of 14 calendar days between the first collection period and the second collection period.

Student performance on the GAA is scored for four elements: fidelity to standard, content/context, achievement/progress, and generalization. Each dimension is assigned a separate score (Georgia Department of Education website, n.d.). Fidelity to the standard gauges the degree to which a student's work is aligned with the student's grade level standard and is scored on a 3-point scale. Context assesses the extent to which the student's work demonstrates the use of grade appropriate materials in a real-world or natural situation and is scored on a 4-point scale. Achievement/progress assesses the student's demonstration of progress across the two collection periods and is scored on a 4-point scale. Generalization, which takes into account all the portfolio entries, assesses the student's ability to apply the skills to environments and individuals other than the special education classroom and special education teacher. Generalization is scored on a 4-point scale. Teachers are provided a rubric by which the entries are evaluated (Fincher & Flowers, 2009).

Students are able to obtain a 1, 2, or 3 for fidelity to the standard and a 1, 2, 3, or 4 for context, achievement/progress, and generalization. A 1 or 2 score is considered not passing. Students must obtain a 3 or a 4 score for each discrete dimension to pass that subject. If a student obtains a failing score for generalization, the student then obtains a failing score for that specific subject area despite possibly achieving passing scores in the other discrete dimensions. The entry may also be reported as nonscorable if required paperwork is missing, the task is not aligned to the standard, a teacher assesses on the wrong grade level or a standard not identified in the blueprint, or if there are fewer than

14 calendar days between the first and second collection periods. For the student, teacher, and school, a nonscorable entry is considered a failing score (Georgia Alternate Assessment Examiner's Manual, 2011).

The score report details for each subject the score received for each of the four dimensions. Rubric scores are inserted into a formula. The resulting value is classified as emerging, established, or extending progress. Students demonstrating a beginning understanding of the knowledge and skills assessed are delineated as emerging. Students obtaining this score are reported as showing progress on work that does not address academic content or the work may only address academic content on an entry level. Emerging is considered a failing score.

Students demonstrating an understanding of the knowledge and skills assessed are delineated as established. These students are reported as demonstrating progress on academic content at an entry or access level. Established is a passing score. Finally, students demonstrating an understanding of the knowledge and skills and demonstrating progress on near to grade level academic content are considered to have achieved extending progress. Extending progress is a passing score (GAA Score Report, 2011).

Teachers are provided a GAA blueprint of eligible standards. Language arts and math have a required content standard and a teacher-selected content standard. Grades 3 through 8 have a teacher-selected content standard for science and social studies. Grade 11 has two teacher-selected content standards for both science and social studies. Kindergarten is only assessed in English/language arts and math. Each entry is made up of primary and secondary evidence collected in two collection periods, for a total of four evidences per standard. Primary evidence is produced by the student and includes

photographs, videos, or student work that demonstrates the skill (Georgia Alternate Assessment Examiner's Manual, 2011). "Secondary evidence documents, relates, charts, or interprets the student's performance on instructional tasks" (Georgia Alternate Assessment Examiner's Manual, 2011, p. 14). Secondary evidence must be produced from an instructional activity different from but related to the primary activity.

Each piece of evidence is required to be annotated. The annotation must include a description of the task, the skill being assessed, the setting in which the skill was assessed, and any interactions the student had during the task with general education peers or other members of the school or community. The evidence is collected, annotated, and organized in the portfolio using procedures outlined in the examiner's manual (Georgia Alternate Assessment Examiner's Manual, 2011).

Teachers' Perceptions

Early noteworthy studies of teachers' perceptions of alternate assessments focused on the Kentucky alternate assessment. A 1997 study identified teacher perceived benefits of alternate assessment as increased student choice making and use of schedules by students. Teachers also identified frustration with the documentation of evidence and the time consuming process of completing the portfolio. A1999 study found that while teachers perceived benefits to students, they were challenged by the time consuming process. These teachers expressed concern about scoring reliability and questioned whether the resulting score on the alternate assessment was more a reflection of teacher rather than student performance. A 2001 study found student outcomes to be more a result of instructional variables rather than the time spent completing the portfolios (Towels-Reeves, Kleinert, & Muhomba, 2009).

More recently, Flowers, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Browder, and Spooner (2005) found that only 28% of teachers felt students with significant cognitive disabilities had increased access to the general curriculum; 25% believed progress on IEP objectives increased; and 25% felt their students were receiving a better quality education due to alternate assessments. A more positive impact was perceived when alternate assessments were included in school and state accountability systems. These authors suggested a decrease in the amount of required paperwork and staff development as ways to better address standards designed to achieve the hoped for benefits of alternate assessments.

Roach, Elliot, and Berndt (2007) found Wisconsin teachers to be ambivalent towards the alternate assessment process, monitoring of student learning, and identification of what was important to teach students with significant cognitive disabilities. The teachers studied had reservations about how meaningful the scores were and how useful the scores were for instructional planning. Elliott and Roach (2007) also found when they investigated the perceptions of teachers in Washington that these teachers felt their portfolio-based alternate assessment was more a reflection of the teacher's creativity and ability to assemble a portfolio according to prescribed guidelines than an accurate reflection of student achievement.

Most recent studies reiterate the findings previously stated. Williams (2008) investigated Arizona's special education teachers' perception of the Arizona Alternate Assessment. While the teachers did not feel the test accurately accessed students with the most severe disabilities, they found value in the alternate assessment's information for guiding their teaching. Kenny (2009) studied Virginia's special education teachers' perceptions of the Virginia Alternate Assessment. The teachers interviewed found the

test unrealistic and perceived that it assessed teacher creativity rather than student achievement.

Special education teachers interviewed by Smith-Woofter (2010) perceived that expectations for students with disabilities had increased although they did not believe that alternate assessments were impacting instruction or student achievement. These participants also restated the need for more professional development, specifically to increase their content knowledge. Special Education teachers administering Tennessee's alternate assessment perceived that classroom instructional methods changed as a result of the test, and that the data collected while compiling the portfolio were used to help plan classroom instruction and impacted classroom routines. While the Tennessee teachers used the results from the test to help develop goals and objectives IEPs, they believed administering the assessment took significant time away from students and classroom instruction (Orellana, 2010).

Goldstein and Behauniak (2010) conducted a focus group of special education teachers in Connecticut. These teachers felt that, due to the wide range of ability levels among students with significant cognitive disabilities, it was difficult to assess them using the same instrument. They also felt increased pressure resulting from time spent covering the curriculum. Their students exhibit severe processing deficits and require more time and repetition. They also reported that at times, when working with medically fragile students, they had to be more concerned with whether the student was breathing as opposed to whether the student was looking at a picture. These teachers reiterated the request for more professional development and instructional materials to teach students with significant cognitive disabilities grade level standards.

Finally, Roden (2011) interviewed Georgia middle school teachers. This investigation found that teachers had separate GAA times and IEP times in their classroom instruction. She found little connection between objectives in students' IEPs and the Georgia Performance Standards. These Georgia teachers agreed that access to the general curriculum was important for students with moderate cognitive disabilities, but were divided on the benefit to students with severe cognitive disabilities. Support from the building administrator was cited by these participants as important in the effort to obtain the needed materials, impact collaboration between general education and special education teachers, and provide time to work on the portfolios.

Access to the General Curriculum and Grade Level Standards

Morgan, Frisco, Frakas, and Hibel (2010) address the topic of students with disabilities having access to the general curriculum and participating in state and district accountability systems. They propose that students receiving special education instruction consistently lag behind their peers in general education. Findings from their study indicate that the specialized and individualized education provided to elementary students with disabilities may not be adequate to prevent basic skill deficiencies.

Specifically, they found that services provided through special education in reading and math had either a negative or no effect on the reading and math skills of young students with special needs. Zigmond, Kloo, and Volonino (2009) argue that this lack of achievement is due to the pervasive culture of low expectations linked to the separate classes, curricula, and expectations of special education. They propose that the passing of IDEA 1997, the federal legislation requiring participation of all students with disabilities in state and district accountability measures, is a testament to the fact that lack

of access to the general curriculum is a contributing factor to this continual underachievement.

Harmon, Kasa-Hendrickson, and Neal (2010) contend that students with significant cognitive disabilities are better able to master their IEP objectives and general curriculum standards when they receive their education in the general curriculum setting. Studies have also been conducted which suggest that students with significant cognitive disabilities can learn grade level math and science general curriculum content (Browder, Spooner, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Harris, & Wakeman, 2008; Browder et al., 2012)

Courtade, Spooner, Browder, and Jimenez (2012) propose that teaching students with significant cognitive disabilities grade level standards offers them a complete educational experience. These authors argue that teaching academic skills to students with significant disabilities does not prevent teachers from also teaching them functional life skills. They agree that students with significant cognitive disabilities should be taught skills that will lead to adult independence and that teaching these students only grade level academic skills would be a disservice. These authors offer seven reasons why students with significant cognitive disabilities should be taught and expected to progress on grade level standards.

They begin with the belief that students with significant cognitive disabilities "have a right to a full educational opportunity" (Courtade et al., 2012, p. 4). They proposed that students with significant cognitive disabilities have had to prove they can learn in public school, and have proven that they benefit from interacting with their nondisabled peers. They argue that an opportunity to learn the general curriculum

content is the right of every child and to deny someone that right requires a more compelling reason than what opponents are offering.

Second, they believe that general curriculum standards are relevant to students with significant cognitive disabilities. The number of college programs for students with significant disabilities is increasing, and these students have increasing opportunities to travel outside their local communities. Exposure to the general curriculum will help ensure that these students are "career or college ready" (Courtade et al., 2012, p. 6).

The authors identify a third reason as "we do not yet know the potential of students with severe disabilities" (Courtade et al., 2012, p.6). They argue that what is known about what these students can learn has been limited by the priorities of their educators. Recent studies have found that students with significant cognitive disabilities can learn early literacy skills, content vocabulary, algebra skills, and science and social studies concepts.

The fourth and fifth reasons identified by Courtade et al. (2012) posit that learning functional skills is not a prerequisite for learning academic skills and the standards-based curriculum is not meant to replace a functional curriculum. They assert that a student does not have to learn to tie his shoe before learning how to solve a math problem and that some students with significant cognitive disabilities will need support with functional skills for their life time. They further contend that there are people without disabilities who depend on others to cook, clean, wash clothes, and help with finances, and while educators do not need to cease teaching functional skills, they do need to make some decisions about what functional skills to teach and when.

The sixth and seventh reasons identified by Courtade et al. (2012) recognize that an individualized curriculum is limited in its ability to anticipate future needs of students and that students with significant cognitive disabilities are "creating the changing expectations with their own achievement" (Courtade et al., 2012, p. 8). These students are demonstrating what is being asked of them on alternate assessments.

Ayers et al. (2011) question at what cost do we require students with significant cognitive disabilities to learn objectives from grade level standards. While maintaining that educators should maintain high expectations for students, they argue that learning fragments of grade level academics should not be accomplished at the cost of learning functional daily living skills. They do not question that students with significant cognitive disabilities can learn grade level content, they question if they should. These authors do not believe that learning "watered down" (Ayers et al., 2011, p. 17) skills in science and math leads to these students becoming more independent and able to function daily in society.

This sentiment was made more poignant by a parent of a child with significant cognitive disabilities in an IEP attended by one of the authors. The parent stated, "My son can identify Saturn, but he still can't request a snack or even wipe his ass" (Ayers et al., 2011, p. 12). Ayers et al. (2011) advocate a focus on more functional skills that will lead to independence, including consumer skills, community participation skills, and domestic and self help skills. Their response to the suggestion that special education teachers take the time to teach both grade level academics and functional skills or that teachers integrate grade level academic skills with functional life skills is that time spent

learning the grade level academic standards is time lost in learning skills that will improve a student's future independent adult functioning. They go on to argue:

> There is no reasonable way to integrate Chaucer or volcanoes into a community based instructional lesson related to paying for a meal at a restaurant. Addressing general education standards simply because they are the general education standards does not end in meaningful achievement towards adult outcomes for most students with severe disabilities. This is simply a zero sum formula that threatens to impinge on a student's opportunity to learn valuable life skills. (pp. 15-16)

High Stakes Testing in Elementary School

In all 50 states, students in the upper elementary grades, grades 3 through 8, bear the largest responsibility for accountability in education. In all states, all students in these grade levels are tested in English/language arts and math. Science and social studies are increasingly being added to the testing requirements. Six states test students in grades lower than the grade 3. Georgia is one of these six states (Anderson, 2009).

Hatch (2010) refers to the required access to and progress on the standards-based curriculum and inclusion in high stakes testing as an "accountability shovedown" (pg. 261). This author maintains that this model of educational reform has been proven unsuccessful and that it is based on the belief that lack of student achievement in education is due to a lack of effort by teachers and students. He argues that elementary teachers are now having to follow scripted curriculum materials, and that these young students are being trained to perform and will never know the internal satisfaction of

being self motivated learners. He contends that high stakes testing and accountability reform is:

> . . . not about learning or doing what it would take to improve all children's chances to learn in school contexts. It is about the threat of negative consequences unless very narrowly defined indicators of academic achievement are verified via the administration of standardized assessment instruments. (p. 261)

While some elementary teachers report high stakes testing, accountability reporting, and the pressure to raise test scores has forced them to stress memorization over higher order thinking stills and spend a large amount of classroom time on test preparation activities, Anderson (2009) found that the curriculum in elementary schools has not narrowed and instruction of lower-level thinking skills has been the focus in the last half century and still remains the norm. Gewertz (2010) also acknowledges that while some educators feel this heightened focus on high stakes testing will result in the elimination of play-based learning and increased student retention, proponents argue that this same data can be used to help schools and teachers make data driven decisions regarding student achievement.

Another concern of increased high stakes testing in elementary schools is the effect on non-high stakes testing subjects, including science, social studies, art, recess, and physical education. Teachers of these subjects fear that their area of instruction is becoming inconsequential (Manzo, 2008). Manzo (2008) found this to be a possibility because the majority of elementary schools in the nation increased their time in reading and math instruction by 75 minutes.

High Stakes Testing and Students with Disabilities

Anecdotal and empirical evidence was studied by Yesseldyke et al. (2004) to determine the consequences of high stakes testing for students with disabilities. They found the consequences include increased inclusion and performance on standardized tests, higher standards, improved instruction, increased access to the general curriculum, improved communication with parents, and an increased school completion rate. These effects were also identified in a study by Kaatsiyannis, Zhang, Ryan, and Jones (2007) who, in addition, found that inclusion in high stakes testing resulted in increased training in the general education content for special education teachers. Negative effects identified by Kaatsiyannis et al. include increased stress felt by the students and dealing with schools appearing ineffective because of students failing.

Merit Pay and High Stakes Testing

How the GAA will factor into possible future accountability measures including merit pay or pay for performance has not yet been addressed in the literature. While the idea of incentive pay has increased in popularity over the last decade previous studies suggest that teachers object to using student test scores or test score gains to measure teacher performance (Yuan et al., 2012). Historically, educators who view the child as a whole and his progress as the sum of what the teachers before him have contributed, reject the idea that a system can "'account for their individual contribution to a collective enterprise'" (Rice et al., 2012). Gaining teacher buy in for test score based incentive measures is made exponentially more difficult if teachers mistrust the performance measure (Yuan et al., 2012).

Chapter Summary

Federal legislation requires that all students have access to the general curriculum, and their progress on grade level standards be assessed and reported in statewide accountability measures. In order to include students with significant cognitive disabilities, states have developed alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards. Georgia has developed the Georgia Alternate Assessment which is a portfolio assessment administered in grades 3 through 8 and grade 11 in English /language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies.

The federal requirements have brought forth questions and concerns about high stakes testing in general as well as high stakes testing of elementary students and students with special needs. One school of thought questions the time spent and efficacy of teaching students with significant cognitive disabilities academic skills that will not help them lead independent lives. Another school of thought argues that students with disabilities deserve to be taught the same curriculum as all other students, and that their inclusion in statewide reporting systems will ensure their inclusion in student improvement measures.

Teachers from states including Kentucky, Virginia, Tennessee, and Washington have been studied and report both positive and negative impacts of including students with significant cognitive disabilities in the general curriculum, assessing them on grade level standards, and including those results in accountability measures. Georgia middle school teachers were divided on the benefit of alternate assessment standards for students with severe cognitive disabilities.

Inclusion in this testing and assessment process has as its goal to positively impact the curriculum and instruction as well as the teaching and learning process for elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities. Georgia's special education teachers are in an insightful position to share their experiences and subsequent perceptions as to whether the Georgia Alternate Assessment is meeting this goal.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This grounded theory study investigated the perceptions of teachers who have administered the Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA) to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities. The purpose of qualitative research is to "provide an in-depth description and understanding of the human experience" (Lichtman, 2006, p. 8). The methodological strategies associated with qualitative research are suited to capitalize on the meanings and perspectives of participants (Creswell, 2003). Grounded theory is an effective method for research in which there is little, if any, available information on the topic and the desired outcome is the generation of an explanatory theory (Birks & Mills, 2011). Grounded theory requires a series of precise steps to construct a theoretical concept. The carefully planned steps ensure that the theory emerges from the data (Crotty, 1998). The grounded theory design of this research used qualitative data from interviews with six purposefully selected participants to answer two overarching research questions.

Research Questions

As a means to explore the perceptions of teachers who have administered the Georgia Alternate Assessment to students with significant cognitive disabilities, the following overarching research questions were considered: (a) How do special education teachers experience administration of the Georgia Alternate Assessment to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities? (b) How do these teachers' experiences with the GAA shape their perceptions?

Research Design

The intent of a grounded theory approach is to go beyond describing the experience of individuals to explaining the experience. The theory generated is grounded in the data obtained from participants and analyzed by the researcher. Creswell (2003) defines grounded theory as "a qualitative research design in which the inquirer generates a general explanation (a theory) of a process, action, or interaction shaped by the views of a large number of participants" (p. 63).

Grounded theory was developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss during the mid-1960s amid a declining regard for qualitative research. Quantitative methods were the dominant approach of the time. Qualitative methods, grounded in logical positivism, advocated facets of the scientific method including objective observation, replicable experiments, concrete evidence, and deductive reasoning. The importance of observation and experiment was advanced by Karl Popper (2002) who proposed the idea of falsification. He proposed that a theory is false if it can be shown to be false by observation or experiment.

Under positivist researchers, the inquirer was an objective and passive collector of data that were used to quantitatively describe human experiences. These researchers gave no credence to the effect of human values or researcher bias. They questioned the validity and scientific value of research that espoused interpretation of participants' experiences, and found qualitative research approaches to be vague, biased, and disorganized. While focusing on systematic approaches, concrete evidence, and deductive hypothesis, positivist researchers used quantitative approaches that contributed to refining already discovered theories but that very seldom constructed new theories (Charmaz, 2006).

Glaser and Strauss contributed to the resurgence of qualitative research with their introduction of grounded theory. They applied positivist assumptions to develop a systematic process for qualitative research (Charmaz, 2006). They posited that qualitative data, if analyzed systematically, could produce theories about social experiences and interactions that were "'grounded in data from the field" (Creswell, 2003, p. 53). These researchers refined and made explicit the process of qualitative research with the purpose of moving past merely describing experiences to constructing a theoretical framework to explain and understand the phenomena. Grounded theory is based on the following underpinnings as espoused by Glasser and Strauss (1967, as cited by Charmaz, 2006):

- Simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis
- Constructing analytic codes and categories from data, not from preconceived logically deduced hypothesis
- Using the constant comparative method, which involves making comparisons during each stage of the analysis
- Advancing theory development during each step of data collection and analysis
- Memo-writing to elaborate categories, specify their properties, define relationships between categories, and identify gaps
- Sampling aimed toward theory construction, not for population representativeness
- Conducting the literature review after developing an independent analysis. (pp. 5-6)

Constructivism

Charmaz (2006) has advanced the assumptions of grounded theory and curtailed the positivist influence by advocating a constructivist ideology. Vygotsky (1978) was one of the first scientists to advocate that "the scientist's task is to reconstruct the origin and course of development of behavior and consciousness" (p. 7). For the constructionist, as the word implies, meaning is not discovered but constructed when human beings interpret or make sense of the environment in which they engage (Crotty, 1998). This viewpoint posits that "all knowledge, and therefore meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context" (Crotty, 1998, p. 42).

Therefore, when there was no human consciousness in the world to interpret the world, then the world had no meaning. Constructivists do not believe that meaning is created from nothing, but that the world and the objects within give us material to interpret and meaning to construct. This perspective, therefore, concedes that the same reality can be interpreted in different ways. However, the different interpretations may be informative or insightful but not identified as true or false (Crotty, 1998).

This blending of objectivity and subjectivity is evident in the constructivist view of the researcher historically as a "*bricoleur*" (Crotty, 1998, p. 50, emphasis in original). While there is no direct English translation, "the *bricoleur* is a makeshift artisan, armed with a collection of bits and pieces that were once standard parts of a certain whole but which the *bricoleur*, as *bricoleur*, now reconceived as parts of a new whole" (Crotty, 1998, p. 50, emphasis in original). This principle promotes the idea of the researcher not

being confined by traditional paradigms but approaching research with a broad openness to construct new and richer meanings (Crotty, 1998). As Crotty (1998) summarizes, "it is an invitation to reinterpretation" (p. 51).

Charmaz (2006) employs the constructivist practice of interpretation with the fundamental underpinning that "research participants' implicit meanings, experiential views-and researchers' finished grounded theories-are constructions of reality" (p. 10). She also recognizes the role and impact of the researcher on the study process. The researcher brings his values, experiences, and priorities to the process of analyzing the data, identifying categories, and constructing the theory (Creswell, 2003). Charmaz maintains that any theory constructed through grounded theory is an interpretation of the phenomena, not an exact picture of it.

To ensure that the theory developed as a result of this research emanated from data, two interview protocols were designed to discover the experiences and gauge the perceptions of a sample of the available population. The social facet of constructivism was addressed with the interview. Six educators were sought to participate. This research, therefore, culminated in the construction of a theoretical model to explain the perceptions of elementary school teachers' experiences with administering the GAA to students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Methodology

The intent of grounded theory is to generate new knowledge in the form of a theory that is grounded in data gathered from participants who have experienced a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2003; Birks & Mills, 2011). When aiming to analyze beyond simply describing and exploring, researchers select grounded theory as an

appropriate research method for developing a theory that explains a phenomena (Birks & Mills, 2011).

A grounded theory is derived inductively from data gathered from participants who have experienced the phenomena. In a grounded theory study, research does not begin with a theory that is verified by data, rather, research "begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 23).

Grounded theory goes beyond description of a phenomenon. According to Birks and Mills (2011), "the strategies used in data collection and analysis results in the generation of theory that explicates a phenomenon from the perspective and in the context of those who experience it" (p. 16). The process uses concepts to group and label similar data. This analysis of data to determine relationships requires not just a summary but an interpretation of the data. These concepts are then related to develop a theoretical framework (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

The role of the researcher in a grounded theory study is more than that of a passive observer. Charmaz (2006) suggests that "we are not passive receptacles in which data are poured" (p. 15). Both the researcher and the participants bring previous knowledge and experiences that influence their views and perceptions. This previous knowledge influences the decisions made about the categories and coding labels throughout the analysis process (Charmaz, 2006). A balance must be achieved between approaching the research with an open mind and being able to discern significant theoretical concepts in the analysis process. The grounded theory process is successful when preconceived impressions are not imposed on the developing theory while the

knowledge and experiences possessed are used to help discern relevant concepts (Birks & Mills, 2011).

Sampling and Sampling Procedures

The identified target population for this study was special education teachers who have administered the Georgia Alternate Assessment to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities in an identified southeast Georgia school district. This study required analysis of school system records and the assistance of gatekeepers to attempt identification of participants who met the criteria.

Criterion Based Sampling

To meet the initial requirement of gathering rich data (Charmaz, 2006), the researcher had to ensure that the participants had experience with the phenomenon being studied. Criterion based sampling was employed to identify teachers who had administered the GAA to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities. For this study, participants included present educators in a southeast Georgia school district who had administered the GAA to elementary students at least once or educators who would administer the GAA to elementary students for the 2012-2013 school year. Allowing for both past and present administrations broadened the pool of possible participants and helped protect the anonymity of volunteers. Participants must have met the following criteria:

- Current certification in special education or speech language pathology.
- Currently employed in the southeast Georgia school district.
- Previous administration of the GAA to at least one student with significant cognitive disabilities in one of the elementary school grade levels, or

- Will administer the GAA to at least one student with significant cognitive disabilities in one of the elementary school grade levels for the 2012-2013 school year.

This population was identified through the review of district records identifying teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities. Of the 805 teachers, support personnel, and administrators in this southeast Georgia school district, 16 of them met participant requirements.

Purposeful Sampling

Purposeful sampling is often used in qualitative research to ensure that research participants have experienced the phenomena and can provide rich knowledge to aid in the understanding of the research problem (Creswell, 2003). Therefore, the researcher employed purposeful sampling to identify six of the 16 teachers in the southeast Georgia school district who had administered the Georgia Alternate Assessment to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities and who were willing to volunteer as participants. If more than six educators were willing to participate, the additional ones would serve as alternates if one of the original six withdrew from the study.

Although this sample size was small, Charmaz (2006) advises that quality data obtained from intensive and extensive interviews of key participants can result in sufficient empirical data, ensuring the validity and reliability of the research. Also, "for both Glaser and Stern, small samples and limited data do not pose problems because grounded theory methods aim to develop conceptual categories and thus data collection is directed to illuminate properties of a category and relations between categories" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 18).

Creswell (2003) also advises in qualitative research not only to study a few individuals but to collect the extensive data and details that the individuals provide. Brkich (2011) completed a constructivist grounded theory study utilizing six participants which resulted in a theory grounded in research and foundationally solid. The goal of qualitative research is not generalization but elucidation of the individual or experience being studied.

The researcher wrote a letter to the superintendent of the southeast Georgia school district outlining the purpose of the study and requesting permission to conduct the study in the district and employ the district's personnel as participants. The letter was hand delivered. Once the researcher obtained permission, volunteers were recruited via an emailed letter to district personnel who met the participant criteria. The letter outlined the purpose of the study and requested volunteers.

The first six educators to respond as willing to participate were chosen. Creswell (2003) indicates that participants in a grounded theory study need to provide consent to be studied. After the researcher identified the volunteers, appointments for the interviews were scheduled. The interviews occurred in participants' offices or classrooms after work hours. Each participant was interviewed in two sessions with each session lasting no more than an hour. The divided sessions allowed participants to end their work day more quickly and allowed the researcher time to develop follow up questions. The interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed verbatim.

Gatekeeper

This research topic required selection of study participants who had experience administering the GAA to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities. In order to ensure access to all possible participants, the researcher requested assistance from the Executive Director of the Division for Exceptional Learning. This Director had access to teacher certification records and data detailing which educators met the criteria to participate and thus acted as a gatekeeper. A gatekeeper is defined as someone who is considered an insider of the participants being studied and can serve as the initial contact between the researcher and possible participants (Creswell, 2003).

The Executive Director had primary knowledge of and access to educators who met the criteria. This gatekeeper had data identifying the certification area of present and former teachers. This Director also had data indicating which educators had administered the GAA to elementary students with significant disabilities and which educators would administer the GAA to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities during the 2012-2013 school year. This gatekeeper, who already had an established rapport with possible participants, could also make initial contact with possible participants.

Instrumentation

Charmaz (2006) advises that quality data obtained from intensive and extensive interviews of key participants can result in sufficient empirical data, ensuring the validity and reliability of the research. She proposes that credibility can be gained with consideration of the range, number, and depth of interviews and their sufficiency in supporting the constructed theory. Credibility of the research is supported through intensive interviewing, gathering of rich data, and systematic analysis of the data.

Seidman (2006) proposes that "if the researcher's goal, however, is to understand the meaning people involved in education make of their experience, then interviewing provides a necessary, if not always completely sufficient, avenue of inquiry" (p. 11). For these reasons, interviews were used as a means to gather data and the data was analyzed using the method outlined by Charmaz (2006).

Lichtman (2006) identifies interviewing as the most frequently used form of data collection for qualitative research and Creswell (2003) identifies interviews as central to data collection in a grounded theory study. Therefore, data was collected through intensive interviews. Charmaz (2006) argues that intensive interviewing has historically been a useful method for gathering data for the various types of qualitative research, and defines interviews as a candid conversation which "permits an in-depth exploration of a particular topic or experience and, thus, is a useful method for interpretive inquiry" (p. 25). Interviews allow the researcher to seek understanding by drawing out the participants' interpretation of their experiences (Charmaz, 2006) and dimensionally add to the understanding of the situation (Lichtman, 2006). Intensive interviewing is differentiated from general interviewing by its in-depth exploration of a particular topic with a participant who has the applicable experience (Charmaz, 2006).

The researcher developed the interview questions. The interview was guided or semi-structured, which involved asking participants the same predetermined questions, but allowed room for variance as the situation necessitated (Lichtman, 2006). With this method, the researcher focused on the predetermined questions on the topic but could still ask clarifying questions, change the conversation, and follow her intuition (Charmaz, 2006). The questions were open ended, as suggested by Charmaz (2006), to allow for

emergence of unpredicted comments and stories. Using the predetermined interview prompts (Appendices A and B) as guides, responses were sought that revealed feelings, intentions, meanings, and subcontexts (Lichtman, 2006).

The researcher's role as interviewer in this grounded theory study was not that of passive observer. The feelings, intentions, meanings, and subtexts revealed by the participants were filtered through the researcher's eyes, mind, and point of view (Lichtman, 2006), which is consistent with this study's constructivist framework.

Data Collection

The research questions guided the context of the interview prompts. Demographic data were also obtained during the interview process. The interview sessions were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure that the words and ideas of the participants were captured (Lichtman, 2006). Individual, face-to-face interviews facilitated gathering of rich data by allowing a sample of educators who had experienced the phenomena of administering the GAA to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities to share their experience in their own words. The digital recordings and typed transcriptions will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the home of the researcher.

To ensure the protection of volunteer participants and the integrity of the GAA administration process, any procedural discrepancies between what was indicated in the GAA Administration Manual and participant responses were addressed to the whole group during the monthly professional learning sessions.

The digital recordings were transcribed verbatim and the data analyzed using the method outlined by Charmaz (2006). Charmaz outlines the grounded theory process as

beginning with gathering rich data. She defines rich data as "detailed, focused, and full" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 14). Gathering rich data involves "seeking 'thick' descriptions" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 14) and asking open ended questions in a way that reveals the words, ideas, points of view, feelings, intentions, and actions of the participants (Charmaz, 2006; Lichtman, 2006).

Data Analysis

The analysis involved in grounded theory requires that analytic questions are asked of the data as it is gathered. This process of stopping to ask analytic questions while in the process of collecting the data is called coding. Coding aids in furthering the understanding of the phenomena and helps guide continuous gathering of data that address the analytic issues of the study. Coding is at the heart of the grounded theory process and is the link between data gathering and theory construction. Charmaz (2006) describes the coding process as moving beyond the concrete statements made by the participants to analytically interpreting their meanings. Charmaz (2006) proposes that "coding generates the bones of your analysis. Theoretical integration will assemble these bones into a working skeleton" (p. 45).

Initial Coding

Coding begins with initial coding which gives the researcher the first conceptual categories. This involves giving each word, line, or segment of data a name. Segment by segment coding was used which involved giving each segment of transcribed data a name. Dissecting data segment by segment allows for common topics, concerns, or ideas to be revealed and those may then become the categories. This type of coding helps provide an early corrective to reduce the likelihood that preconceived ideas of the

researcher are superimposed on the data. These initial codes are concise, "provisional, comparative, and grounded in the data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 48).

Charmaz (2006) suggests looking for action in each segment and naming the segment with a word that encompasses the sentiment of the data and reflects that action. She suggests the use of gerunds when coding to assist in highlighting the importance of action and the process of concurrent data collection and analysis in grounded theory research. Naming the exact words and actions of the participants helps ensure that analysis begins from the perspective of the participants and that the resulting grounded theory will reflect an insider's perspective. Because this analysis occurs early in the process, it also helps identify gaps in the data early in the research stage.

Focused Coding

The second cycle of coding towards realizing a constructed grounded theory is focused coding. Focused coding entails identifying the most salient or frequent categories to compare and interpret. This involves making a decision about which initial codes make the most sense to categorize the data wisely and completely. This is an active process for the researcher. The data is acted upon rather than passively read. The goal is for new threads, perspectives, and ideas to emerge through the comparison of the experiences, interpretations, and actions shared by the participants. Through this comparison, the focused code is developed (Charmaz, 2006).

Theoretical Coding

The third and final cycle of coding and the culminating step towards realizing a grounded theory is theoretical coding. This step elucidates the possible relationships between the specified categories and shifts the analysis towards a theoretical path

(Saldaña, 2009). Saldaña (2009) uses the simile "like an umbrella" (p. 163) to describe the function of the theoretical code. It brings the codes developed thus far and categories back together under a central idea that explains "what the research is all about" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 163).

Memo Writing

While collecting data and coding, the researcher engaged in memo writing as advocated by Charmaz (2006). Memos are a record of the researcher's thoughts, feelings, impressions, insights, and ideas in relation to the study. It is not an optional activity but is fundamental to the development of a constructed grounded theory. Memo writing is an ongoing activity that the researcher engages in during planning of the study until completion of the study (Birks & Mills, 2011). It occurs at every stage simultaneously with data collection and the coding process.

Charmaz (2006) advocates memo writing as a pivotal step between collecting data and writing the draft. This process is an opportunity for the researcher to actively engage the materials and helps the researcher analyze the data early in the research process. Memo writing is a conversation the researcher has with herself about the data put down on paper. It is the beginning of transitioning the data to narrative form. The application of memo writing allows the researcher to think about the data, look for patterns, compare data, and communicate inferences (Charmaz, 2006).

Memo writing allows the researcher to uninhibitedly articulate, explore, and question interpretations, instincts, and ideas (Birks & Mills, 2011). Engaging in memo writing aided in the process of moving from evidence to ideas and finally to theory (Saldana, 2009). Birks and Mills (2011) suggest the following as possible memo topics:

- Your feelings and assumptions about your research.
- Your philosophical position in relation to your research.
- Musings on books and papers that you have read.
- Potential issues, problems and concerns in relation to your study design.
- Reflections on the research process, including factors that influence quality in your study.
- Procedural and analytical decision making.
- Codes, categories and your developing theory. (p. 42)

Theoretical Sensitivity

Theoretical sensitivity is a personal quality necessary for the researcher to possess. It is defined as "the ability to recognize and extract from the data elements that have relevance for your emerging theory" (Birks & Mills, 2011, p. 59). Theoretical sensitivity involves being aware of the implicit and subtle meanings conveyed in the data. This is achieved through exhibiting insight and understanding, assigning meaning to the data, and separating what is significant from what is not. Theoretical sensitivity allows the resulting theory to be grounded in data, conceptually solid, and well composed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Reporting the Data

The findings from the interviews are reported in a traditional format. Charmaz (2006) speaks of this process as "rendering through writing" (p. 172). This involves making the analysis of what is happening in this area of inquiry accessible or understandable to the reader (Birks & Mills, 2011). Rendering involves more than

reporting acts or facts; it involves recognizing that "the act of writing is intuitive, inventive, and interpretive . . . ." (Charmaz, 2006, p. 183).

Birks and Mills (2011) propose that there are advantages to producing a dissertation of how the grounded theory methods were utilized, a report of findings, and revelation of the subsequent constructed grounded theory. These authors assert that "early dissemination of findings, development of writing skills and confidence and maintenance of a professional profile," are all advantages to presenting the grounded theory in the traditional dissertation format (Birks & Mills, 2011, pp. 135-136).

Standards of Quality

As with other research, grounded theory research must adhere to specific scientific canons. Most qualitative researchers maintain that while the standards used to assess quantitative research are inappropriate to evaluate qualitative studies, qualitative research must still be evaluated and good research standards maintained (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Because qualitative research is considered both a scientific and creative process, there is little agreement on what the evaluation should include (Strauss & Corbin, 2008).

While Strauss and Corbin (1990) identified data quality, the research process, and empirical grounding of the theory as the most salient criteria on which to judge qualitative research in their earlier work, their later work (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) they proposes that the criteria offered by Charmaz (2006) are the most comprehensive because they address both the scientific and creative aspects of grounded research. For this reason, the researcher used Charmaz' (2006) four validation criteria in evaluating the

constructed grounded theory for this research: credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness.

Credibility

Credibility ensures logic and conceptual grounding of the final theory (Birks & Mills, 2011). Strong links should exist between the data gathered, the argument, and the analysis. It is essential that the theory emanates from the data and the data is sound enough to support the theory. The evidence should be sufficient to allow the reader to form his own assessment and agree with the research claims (Charmaz, 2006). Credibility will be achieved through memo writing. Memo writing helps provide the audit trail of thoughts and rationales for decisions throughout the coding and analysis processes.

Originality

Originality refers to the social and theoretical significance of the study (Birks & Mills, 2011). Throughout the analysis, the categories should be fresh and offer new insights. The final theory should challenge, further develop, or refine existing concepts (Charmaz, 2006). Studying the experiences and perceptions of teachers administering the GAA to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities will help fill the gap in the literature of teacher perceptions.

Resonance

Resonance addresses the meaning the theory has to those to whom the theory applies (Birks & Mills, 2011). In the analysis, the categories should encompass the fullness of the experiences shared. The data, analysis, and resulting theory should make sense to the participants and offer them enhanced insights about their experiences (Charmaz, 2006).

Resonance was achieved by following Charmaz' (2006) coding process, staying close to the data when engaging in initial coding, digitally recording the interviews, and transcribing the interviews verbatim. This helped ensure the constructed grounded theory emanated from the data and, therefore, maintains the essence of the participants' experiences and perceptions.

Usefulness

Usefulness refers to the practical applicability of the theory and knowledge gained (Birks & Mill, 2011). The analysis and resulting theory should be useful in the daily lives of the participants. The research should contribute to existing knowledge, spark further research, and make the world better (Charmaz, 2006). As Georgia and other states continue to grapple with the requirement of high stakes testing and increasing student achievement, it is this researcher's goal that this study contribute to the knowledge base used to determine how to ensure students with significant cognitive disabilities are appropriately assessed and included in statewide assessments.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations

This study was limited by the ambiguous nature of determining when the theory is sufficiently grounded and suitably constructed. Creswell (2003) advises that the theory is developed when categories are fully saturated. Charmaz (2006) defines saturation as "when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of these core theoretical categories" (p. 113). Charmaz outlined the following criteria for credibility within grounded theory studies. First, the researcher must be intimately familiar with the setting or topic. The data has to be sufficient to justify the

claim. Comparisons should systematically be made between observations and between categories. The categories should encompass an extensive range of empirical observations. The links between the gathered data and the analysis should be strong and logical (Charmaz, 2006). Finally, the research should provide "enough evidence for your claims to allow the reader to form an independent assessment—and agree with your claims" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 182). Also, this study depended on the willingness of participants to share their opinions in a non-anonymous yet confidential setting with the researcher.

Delimitations

This study was delimited to special education teachers in a southeast Georgia school system who had administered the Georgia Alternate Assessment to upper elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Subjectivity Statement

The foundational underpinnings of constructivist grounded theory recognize that data collection is a social interaction and that the researcher plays an active role in the research process (Charmaz, 2006). Birks and Mills (2011) argue that areas of research are often chosen because of the researcher's passion for, personal interest in, or experience with the topic. They suggest transparency in the research process to ensure existing knowledge and assumptions about the topic are not imposed on the data. Strauss and Corbin (1990) also acknowledge that the researcher plays a role and may bring helpful background knowledge to the study. They advise that "this knowledge, even if implicit, is taken into the research situation and helps you to understand events and

actions seen and heard, and to do so more quickly that if you did not bring this background into the research" (p. 42).

Accordingly, this researcher acknowledges having a background in special education. While the majority of the researcher's teaching experiences were with students with mild cognitive disabilities, she had the opportunity to teach students with significant cognitive disabilities. The researcher has also observed the GAA process but has not administered the GAA. Seidman (2006) and Birks and Mills (2011) contend that the previous knowledge of the researcher can be viewed as a strength in a study as it is used to help discern relevant concepts, respond and adapt to situations, and effectively apply grounded theory methods.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of special educators who have administered the Georgia Alternate Assessment to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities. The sample was comprised of six educators who had administered the GAA in the past or who would administer the GAA in the 2012-2013 school year. These six educators were purposefully selected to participate in two face-to face-interviews in their classrooms or offices at the end of the school day. The results are presented using a grounded theory paradigm. Grounded theory is an appropriate methodological approach for research which draws on the experiences and perspectives of participants and in which little is known about the subject. The findings from the interviews are presented in narrative format.

CHAPTER 4

REPORT OF DATA AND DATA ANALYSIS

This study examined teachers' perceptions of their experiences administering the Georgia Alternate Assessment to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities. Presently a void exists in the literature on how Georgia's elementary school teachers perceive administering the Georgia Alternate Assessment. This study was conducted from the perceptions of current Georgia teachers from a southeastern school district who have administered the GAA to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities. The overall purpose of the study was to develop a theory explaining how these teachers experience administering the GAA and how these experiences inform their perceptions.

Findings

Participant Demographics

Six teachers participated in two face-to-face interviews with the researcher. Their experience working with students with significant cognitive disabilities ranged from 3 to 15 years. All participants had administered the GAA to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities for at least the last 3 years. All participants currently worked in the same school district in southeast Georgia and all of them would administer the GAA in the 2012-2013 school year. The participants and their respective schools were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Blossom.

Blossom works at Isaiah T. H. Elementary School. She presently teaches students with significant cognitive disabilities/autism. This is her 6th year as a teacher and her 4th year administering the GAA to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Chris.

Chris is a teacher of students with significant cognitive disabilities/autism at Emmanuel H. Johnson Elementary School. He has worked with students in this area for 15 years and has administered the GAA to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities for 2 years. He has also administered the GAA to students with significant cognitive disabilities at the middle school level.

Gladys.

Gladys teaches students with significant cognitive disabilities/autism at Austin Elementary School. She has worked with students with special needs for 15 years. She has administered the GAA to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities for 6 years.

Juan.

Juan has been a special education teacher for 7 years and has worked with students with significant cognitive disabilities for the entire time. He presently teaches students with significant cognitive disabilities/autism at Mitchell Elementary School and has administered the GAA to students with significant cognitive disabilities for the past 5 years.

Kataryna.

Kataryna has worked in the field of special education for 12 years. She has worked all 12 years with students with significant cognitive disabilities. She presently teaches students with significant cognitive disabilities/autism at Dasher Elementary School and has administered the GAA to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities for 6 years.

Katie.

Katie has taught students with significant cognitive disabilities for 3 years. She presently teaches students with significant cognitive disabilities/autism at Pollock Elementary School and has administered the GAA to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities for 3 years.

Summary of Findings for First Research Question

The first research question asked, "How do special education teachers experience the administration of the Georgia Alternate Assessment?" To address this question, the researcher engaged the grounded theory methodology. The data analysis began with developing initial codes. To develop initial codes, the researcher assigned gerunds to segments of the interviews. Gerunds were assigned as a reflection of the active process of the GAA test administration and as a reflection of the action of the researcher interacting with the data. The GAA administration process is not an invigilator and an examinee silently working side by side. It is an active and interactive process that involves continuous adjustments as well as verbal and physical prompting of students. Initial codes were generated while trying to stay true to the explicit feelings and accounts of the participants. The process involved identifying the message the participant was

conveying in answering the questions. Often the initial code was derived from the exact terminology used by the participant.

The researcher engaged in memo writing to facilitate emergence of focused codes. Writing memos allowed the researcher to identify salient relationships between the initial codes to solidify into focused codes. The memos included the researcher's interview reflections as well as real time reflections and connections as the data were analyzed. As the analysis process ensued, less salient focused codes were collapsed in to more salient codes. For example, both focused codes of planning and embedding were collapsed into the concept of balancing grade level standards and IEP goals/objectives.

The researcher continued the grounded theory analysis process by converging the focused codes to formulate the theoretical code. Memo writing was a fundamental component of the process to juxtapose the focused codes and facilitate emergence of the theoretical code. Teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities experience administration of the GAA as having to balance adhering to state and federal requirements for their students to be assessed on grade level standards with addressing what they believe to be a more appropriate expectation—progress on daily living skills and independence. The findings are presented in narrative form. Appendix C depicts the grounded theory analysis process for the first research question.

Balancing state/federal requirements and daily/functional needs.

Participants balance the federal/state curriculum and testing requirements with the daily living and functional needs of students with significant cognitive disabilities. Federal and state laws require that all students are taught the standards of their grade level. While only grades 3 through 5 are assessed on the GAA, elementary teachers of

students with special needs may have up to six grade levels in their classrooms. Special education teachers are required to teach each of their students the standards of the grade level to which they are assigned. They are also required to address the IEP goals that are different and specific to each student's needs. The IEP goals are skills-based and most often address functional and daily living skills.

The grade level standards provided in the GAA provide a tool for teaching and assessment of students with significant cognitive disabilities. The elementary teachers are required to choose two English language arts standards, two math standards, one science standard, and one social studies standard for each student. A student's IEP also provides a tool for teaching and monitoring the student's progress on needed skills identified by an IEP team. The goals and objectives identified in the IEP are often functional and focus on daily living skills and activities that will help the student function in post school life with as much independence as possible. These may include toileting, feeding, conveying personal information, making a choice, dressing, cleaning, cooking, and consumer math. Gladys stated specifically, "These children need to know how to pull up their pants or pull down their pull ups" (Gladys, Interview # 1). Katie's example included the importance of working with a student with cerebral palsy to "give me the cup, or show me what you do with a cup. Just life things that he needs to know" (Katie, Interview #2). Juan gave the example of a student needing to know "how to turn the washing machine on and fix the hamburger helper" (Juan, Interview # 2).

The GAA assessment window encompasses 7 of the 10 months of school. From the start of administration of the GAA, which includes choosing which standard to asses for each student, teachers begin the delicate task of balancing teaching and assessing

those standards with teaching and monitoring progress towards acquisition of the skills identified in the IEP. In order to ensure that students receive instruction on grade level standards as well as meet IEP goals and objectives, the participants hunt to identify IEP goals precariously embedded in the standards. This is an important step in the process of administering the GAA, and Kataryna and Juan begin their administration with this thought in mind. When determining which standards to asses, they try to ensure that the standards chosen can also be used to address the student's goals and objectives in the IEP.

Kataryna indicated, "I look for things that I know my students can actually do. The things that I am already working on" (Kataryna, Interview # 1). Juan stated, "I ensure that the standards chosen can be used to also support the student's current goals and objectives" (Juan, Interview # 1). Another example would be to count change as part of an activity to teach the grade level standard on functions. Blossom tries to embed some of the fine motor skills or communication practice a student needs into the GAA activities. She may have the student use a switch to communicate an answer. She stated in regards to a particular student, "I will also look at her fine motor skills at the same time and look at assistive technology. I am able to embed some of the skills she needs in the GAA. I work very closely with the speech teacher" (Blossom, Interview # 2).

These participants do not see the standards and the GAA assessment process as relative to the future quality of life for these students. Time administering the GAA is time taken away from teaching the daily living skills that may help a student live more independently in the future. Juan summarized this sentiment stating, "You have less time to do life skills with those that need it the most . . . Why are we not teaching them the

skills that are needed to live in a facility, the skills that are needed to care for themselves if they are home with a parent or family member?" (Juan, Interview #1)

While having to address grade level standards and IEP goals, teachers of students with special needs must also perform other required teacher duties including professional learning, hall/bus duty, writing lesson plans, grading papers, communicating with parents, etc. Chris, emphasizing the meticulous search for and necessity of finding embedded goals in the midst of all that is expected of him stated, "It may be 1/10 of a part of my IEP goal, but I can find something to pull. Otherwise, you are never going to stop spinning" (Chris, Interview #2).

Teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities are required to instruct students on grade level academic standards in content areas. They must also address individual student weaknesses specified in the goals and objectives of the IEP. These goals and objectives are most often skills-based and address the daily living and functional skills these students will need to function as independently as possible. As school years shorten and while working with students that require extensive repetition, these teachers must balance addressing the grade level content with teaching skills their students will need to function independently. They attempt this by trying to choose standards which address daily living skills. Since this is not always possible, these teachers find the content standards are not relative to the future quality of life for their students and believe their students would benefit more from repetitive instruction in daily living skills.

Balancing higher and lower functioning students.

The participants also weigh the appropriateness of the GAA for all of their students. They balance their experiences with the GAA in relation to their higher and lower functioning students. Students with significant cognitive disabilities range from students with near to average IQs with autism to students with IQs 55 and below. Many of these students are nonverbal or have other physical impairments including blindness, deafness, and cerebral palsy. Some may have violent behaviors and others may have health issues that cause them to be medically fragile.

The participants recognize that some higher functioning students with significant cognitive disabilities may actually show progress towards grade level standards, and the GAA may, therefore, be a more appropriate assessment tool for them to measure achievement. These students are more able to accomplish pencil and paper tasks which provide a less subjective demonstration of progress. These tasks may only require the special education teacher to modify a general education task by reducing the number of answer options rather than creating an original task. Performance on pencil and paper tasks does not require the level of annotation that pictures require. They reflect a more objective demonstration of evidence of progress as opposed to an anecdotal report by the teacher of what the student said or where the student focused his eyes.

Kataryna referenced a student with autism who "whizzed through it" (Kataryna, Interview # 2). Blossom acknowledged, "For students that are higher functioning, it is good to see them be able to show progress based on standards" (Blossom, Interview #1). Kataryna, Katie, Blossom, and Gladys see the GAA as a challenge for their students, and learn from this process that some of their students can do more than they realized. These

students are showing progress towards the grade level standards by acquiring some of the prerequisite skills that lead to the standard. They may not be able to organize a budget but may be able to determine a need from a want. Gladys stated, "While we are doing the GAA we're discovering some capabilities that our children have" (Gladys, Interview # 1). Katie stated, "They are responding well and that's good" (Katie, Interview # 1). Kataryna affirmed, "We are also challenging them. I am seeing that they can do more. As long as you break it down. It builds. You start out real small then build up to what they can do" (Kataryna, Interview # 1). Blossom, who indicated that she has students with skill levels from one extreme to the other in her classroom, believes exposure to the standards for the higher functioning students is appropriate. She stated, "Sometimes I feel like it's a good assessment for those that are higher functioning self contained" (Interview #1).

These teachers are discovering new skills among their students and have found themselves developing higher expectations for their students. They have found that students can match colors or follow multi-step directions to complete math problems. Chris sees the GAA process as documentation of the level of academics that he is exposing his students to and achieving in his classroom. He pointed out, "My principal looks at my portfolio and sees what my kids are doing. He sees how hard they are working. He asks, 'Are they really doing that?' Are they really working on this level?' 'Have you really pushed them that hard?'" (Chris, Interview # 1) This is in contrast to the views of some that academic teaching is not going on in special education classrooms or that special educators have low expectations for their students. This has been a welcome discovery for his principal and surprising to many of the general education teachers around him.

While not addressing the negative characterization of pervasive low expectations of students among special educators, Kataryna sees the GAA as a way to force teachers not to give students "what we know they can do all of the time" (Kataryna, Interview # 1). Katie agreed, stating, "It makes me push them a little bit harder" (Katie, Interview # 1). The GAA not only challenges the students to progress on grade level standards, but it challenges the teachers to expose them to those grade level standards in a manner commensurate to their level of ability.

For students identified as significantly intellectually disabled, profoundly intellectually disabled, and medically fragile, the participants suggested that a more functional curriculum be taught and these students be assessed on their progress toward meeting the functional and daily living skills goals identified in their IEPs. The teachers often find themselves providing hand over hand prompting for students to complete GAA tasks. They question if such academic tasks with full physical prompting realistically convey the student's progress on the standard and, therefore, if the GAA is validly measuring the achievement of their lower functioning students.

While believing the GAA can appropriately assess the higher functioning of students with significant cognitive disabilities, Gladys chided that "one size does not fit all" (Gladys, Interview # 2). Kataryna does not believe the GAA is "the right thing to do" (Kataryna, Interview # 2) for lower functioning students. Specifically, she stated, "I don't think that a student with a severe intellectual disability (SID) or a profound intellectual disability (PID) should have to do the GAA. They should have something different" (Kataryna, Interview # 2.) She questioned if these students truly comprehend the material because it is so much higher and she suggests these students work on the goals

and objectives from their IEPs. The goals and objectives are usually based on functional and daily living skills deficits. For Gladys, there is no standard in the GAA that any of her lower level students can really do or that relates to anything in their everyday life. Some of her students are nonverbal and have physical impairments and, for her, the standards do not transition to what they can do once they are adults and are out of school. She maintained, "These standards do not really transition to what they can do once they are in adulthood. There is nothing that's relative in these standards that they will be doing when they get older" (Gladys, Interview # 1).

Katie does not believe the GAA measures anything for students with significant or profound cognitive disabilities. The majority of her students require "hand over hand" (Katie, Interview # 1) prompting and she had to demonstrate that some students were responding by "eye gaze" (Katie, Interview # 1). For this group of students Katie indicated, "I can't say they are not going to learn. I am saying that they are not going to change money or balance a check book. But, you can ask them to hand you a napkin or give me your shirt. Just some things that can make them a little bit more independent" (Katie, Interview # 2).

Chris believes that, in the upcoming school year when he administers the GAA to his student with an IQ of 19, "frustration will be rampant" (Chris, Interview # 2). He expects this student to bite, scream, and hit. Juan, who suggested that the GAA is a mirror image of the CRCT, believes its purpose is to make students college and career ready. Recognizing that students with significant cognitive disabilities are not going to college to obtain an academic degree, he believes their school time is better spent working on life skills. He proposed that for both special and general education students,

once outside of school, they are only tested on life and their ability to live and take care of themselves. He maintained, "When a student becomes nonschool age, what are they tested on? They are not tested on anything but life. They are tested on life and their ability to make decisions to take care of themselves and live" (Juan, Interview # 1). The GAA focuses on grade level standards and not the skills these students will need to live as independently as possible in a facility, with parents, or with other family members. Blossom stated succinctly, "I understand that they have a right to be exposed to it, but I have some students that if they can't wipe their tail, they shouldn't have to tell me where Greece is" (Blossom, Interview # 2).

These participants recognize that these lower functioning students may never go to college and get a degree. Some may never hold a job, and if they do, it will be in the lower level careers. Juan explained, "Those are the individuals that may be the one cleaning a restaurant or stocking. They will be the one out back at Wal-Mart unloading the truck. They will not be the ones doing the inventory" (Juan, Interview # 2). Experience has shown these teachers that over time many of these students can be taught life skills such as “how to make a sandwich, how to make up their bed, how to clean up behind themselves" (Juan, Interview # 2). For students taught a standard, they question how knowing a grade level standard will relate to their future lives.

Just as in the general education classroom, the skill level of students with significant cognitive disabilities also varies. These teachers find that while some of their higher functioning students are making progress towards the standard, the lower functioning students are not. They also maintain that whether high or low functioning, the content standards are not relative to enriching the future lives of their students.

Balancing, progressing, and staging.

As a criteria for passing the GAA, students must demonstrate progress on the standards. The participants are challenged to have their students who are well below grade level, demonstrate progress on the grade level standards. The participants balance the GAA criteria to demonstrate progress with the obligation to reflect genuine student understanding of the standards. Although the participants believe the GAA may appropriately assess the achievement of higher functioning students with significant cognitive disabilities, the teachers still question the validity of the test and indicate that the ability to stage pictures to ensure a passing score is a concern. Kataryna indicated that to her, the test shows what the teacher can make students do. When she has to provide hand over hand prompting, it is her doing the work and not the student. Katie agreed, adding that she believes the GAA tests how creative the teacher can be. Specifically she stated, "It just shows what I've done and how creative I've been in the pictures that I took. I mean you're going to make a hundred if I do it hand over hand on a work sheet. It shows absolutely nothing. Every one of those pictures are staged and that shows absolutely nothing" (Katie, Interview # 2). She suggests that if all the tasks are completed using hand over hand prompting, then all she is really doing is exposing them to different standards and material. Katie explained, "They don't have any way to tell me except through eye gaze, but you don't know. Is that really what they are telling me" (Katie, Interview # 1)? Gladys also explained, "If I put the proper spin on a particular picture. If I write it so that it appears that the child has moved. If I pose that child in a certain way. You can write anything and send it away and say that the child did it. How

do they know" (Gladys, Interview # 1)? For Gladys, the GAA does not concretely assess what her students can actually do or not do.

Blossom expounded on this belief that the test is more a reflection of teacher creativity and ability to deliver what the assessors are looking for. She admitted to taking a student's failing score personally and seeing it as a reflection of her inability to do something right as opposed to the possibility that the student did not show progress on the standard. She stated, "It makes me mad and makes me feel like I failed. I didn't do something that I needed to do. I failed, not the student. It's a reflection of what I did" (Blossom, Interview # 2). Kataryna also expressed, "The GAA is based on me and not the kid" (Interview # 1).

Finding the balance between staging the photographs to ensure that the student passes and showing actual progress on the standards is a dilemma experienced by the participants . Federal and state laws require that all students be assessed and the results reported in statewide reporting systems. School systems and individual schools are judged on how their students perform on high stakes tests. Therefore, it is important to these teachers and for their students that the students pass. The teachers therefore feel the pressure to stage the pictures to ensure that evaluators see progress. The evidence of progress on the standards can by demonstrated by way of actual student work, pictures with annotations, video/audio tapes, observations, and interviews. A number of these options can be manipulated to show progress.

Gladys admitted, "They are assessing how a teacher has written it. If they are assessing how a student is eye gazing, for all they know, music is being played and the student has their eyes looking at where the music is coming from" (Gladys, Interview #

2). Kataryna agreed stating "I think that the teacher is being graded more than the student. It's how well we can type it up to sound like the child has made progress. One of my kids is hand over hand the entire time. Thank God she passed, but it's me doing the work, giving her what I need for her to make the correct answer" (Kataryna, Interview # 1).

As educators, student progress is important and they teachers are eager to show true progress. As Chris lamented, teachers do not want to, "Sit here and say here it is, put it there" (Chris, Interview # 1). It took him a month and half to create a task to assess one of his students who was nonverbal, deaf, and blind in the area of speaking, listening, and viewing. Chris emphasizing the importance of "keeping it real" (Chris, Interview # 1) stated, the participants do not want to create something that, "Just looks good on paper" (Chris, Interview # 1). They want to, "Find something in there somewhere that you can learn" (Chris, Interview # 1).

Balancing the demonstration of actual student progress on the standard with the requirement to show progress to pass is a concern for these teachers. The portfolio approach to assessment includes pictures and annotations that are easily manipulated to accomplish the requirement to demonstrate progress and to these teachers, assess more their creativity than student progress on the standard. Teachers provide varying levels of prompting to accomplish tasks, from none to full hand over hand prompting and question if such accommodations result in demonstrating true student understanding of the standard.

Balancing Classroom and Personal Time

The participants work to balance the special education classroom time, general education classroom time, and personal time required to complete the GAA administration. The participants work in a school system that provides them with one day a month to meet at the board of education to work on the GAA. This gives them the opportunity to work uninterrupted and also an opportunity to share ideas, and help each other by reviewing each other's work. Chris summed up how helpful these days are stating, "I don't know if I could do it with sanity if I didn't have the review and share sessions. Even if I just come there and type and vent with my fellow colleagues and they are doing something that is way more complex and I look and take one element and make it work for one of my students" (Chris, Interview # 2).

While appreciating the time to share and review, the participants find themselves balancing the time needed to complete and document the tasks with the needs of their students. Having uninterrupted time to work on the GAA, as well as time to commune with fellow teachers administering the GAA seems to be a valuable opportunity for the participants. But, this does require that they leave their classroom and students in the hands of a substitute teacher. Juan is challenged by time. He admitted, "Challenges are balancing the GAA administration time period with normal teaching and normal teacher duties" (Juan, Interview # 1). These duties may include grading, keeping attendance, teaching, progress monitoring, and conducting IEP meetings. Just as the other participants, he also works to ensure time to teach his students life skills. Gladys added, "You know, it's like we're not working with children when we're doing paperwork" (Gladys, Interview # 1).

Meeting the GAA requirement of generalization also places the participants in a position where they must balance their needs with that of the general population. While they are grateful for those general education teachers that are willing to collaborate, the participants recognize that bringing their students into that general education class, obtaining students to interact with them, and taking pictures is a disruption to that general education class and teacher who are trying to cover grade level standards themselves. Katie explained, "I take pictures of everything we do. I pull them into a general education class and include their students. The teacher usually gives me three or four students to work with" (Katie, Interview #1).

Gladys is challenged by the generalization requirement. She feels she is interrupting their already limited instructional time and disrupting their class when she has to ask a general education teacher to allow her students to complete their GAA tasks in that general education classroom with the help of some of the general education students. She described, "As much as I try to not have my child be a distraction while I am taking pictures of one of their students helping my child, it is disruptive no matter what you do" (Gladys, Interview # 1). She admitted, "Interfering with our regular education time is a problem" (Gladys, Interview # 1). While grateful for the collaborating teachers and students, the participants find themselves balancing once again.

Blossom and Juan agreed that there is not enough time in the school day to complete all the paperwork required for the GAA. The level of paperwork required to annotate and complete the other requirements of the GAA necessitates that the participants spend their personal time to ensure a successful administration. These

teachers spend evenings and weekends seeking out resources, creating tasks, and compiling paperwork. The required paperwork includes completing entry sheets identifying the standards and activities and correctly annotating evidence including student work and pictures.

Juan explained, "You have to work on it at home. If you don't, you won't be successful. How much personal time? Who knows? Thirty to forty hours a week, easily" (Juan, Interview # 1). While Chris spends his time creating tasks, Katie spends her time examining her resources. Blossom observed, "We do have lives outside of this job. My first year, I had 11 students on the GAA. I cried all the time and took the paperwork home with me" (Blossom, Interview # 2). This was reiterated by Gladys who experienced a number of personal tragedies last school year. "But, they don't take that into consideration," (Gladys, Interview # 1) she exclaimed.

Balancing the time it takes to administer and annotate the GAA with time away from addressing daily living skills, away from the students, and away from school is another challenge for teachers. In an already dwindling school year, time taken to address grade level academic standards is time taken away from teaching daily living skills. To meet the generalization requirement of the GAA, teachers often must interrupt the teaching and learning going on in the general education classroom to have students interact and take pictures. The time it takes to sufficiently complete the documentation required by the GAA is also time teachers spend away from their students and away from their families since they often have to complete the work at home.

Balancing summary.

In order to meet federal and state requirements as well as meet what they believe to be an essential need of their students, teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities continuously try to balance their obligations. Participants balance the federal/state curriculum and testing requirements with students' need for instruction in daily living and functional skills. These teachers are finding that while some of their higher functioning students are making progress towards the standard, the content standards are not relative to enriching the future lives of their students. Balancing the requirement to demonstrate progress to pass the GAA versus conveying student achievement of the grade level standard is a concern for these teachers. The time it takes to adequately complete the documentation required by the GAA must also be balanced with time away from their students, since they need professional learning time, and away from their families, as they often have to complete the work at home.

Federal and state laws require that all students are taught and assessed on the standards of their grade level. The perceptions of these participants that they are balancing factors to ensure a successful administration of the GAA and meet the needs of their students have implications that may help inform and improve the process of ensuring that students with significant cognitive disabilities are more appropriately assessed and included in statewide accountability measures.

Summary of Findings for Second Research Question

The second research question asked, "How do their experiences with the administration of the GAA shape their perceptions?" To address the second research question, the researcher again followed the grounded theory analysis process. Gerunds

were assigned to segments of the interviews as a reflection of the active process of the GAA test administration and the action of the researcher interacting with the data. The researcher's goal was to stay true to the explicit feelings and accounts of the participants. The process involved identifying the message the participant was expressing in answering the interview questions. Once again the initial codes were often derived from the exact terminology used by the participant.

The researcher again engaged in memo writing to facilitate the emergence of the focused codes. Memo writing allowed the researcher to identify prominent relationships between the initial codes to develop into focused codes. The memos included reflections made during the interviews as well as real time reflections and connections as the data were analyzed.

The researcher continued the grounded theory analysis process through continued memo writing and converging the focused codes to bring about the emergence of the theoretical code. These teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities experience the administration of the GAA as having to balance differing aspects. They find that the curriculum and data results provided by the GAA do not meet their needs or the needs of their students. The participants, therefore, perceive that the GAA is a meaningless tool for measuring teaching and learning of elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities. The results are reported in narrative form. Appendix D depicts the grounded theory analysis process for the second research question.

GAA as a meaningless measure of assessment.

Student results on the GAA are provided to teachers and parents by way of a score report. Participants find themselves simply filing the students' GAA score reports.

Identifying student progress on the standards as emerging, established, or extending is not helpful in determining their students' level of achievement on the standards or helpful in instructional planning. Juan explained, "When I get a score report back of 2, 3, 2, what does that tell me? They met the standard. But, it does not tell me if they can read, comprehend, or respond . . . . It does not tell you where they were weak and what you need to teach" (Juan, Interview # 2).

Kataryna explained how the GAA is an assessment based on grade level standards, but her students are not on grade level. The results may indicate that a student obtained an extended score in fourth grade math, but her students are "learning how to add or subtract. The students are mostly on single digits" (Kataryna, Interview # 2). As she indicated previously, when she provides hand over hand prompting, she feels she is doing the work and not the student. The score, therefore, does not reflect the student's performance on the standard. As a result, she does not use the results of the GAA to guide her daily instruction. She further explained, "The self contained classroom is based on what the students need and where they are skill-wise and behavior-wise. My daily instruction is based on the students' individual needs. The GAA is not based on the individual's needs" (Kataryna, Interview # 2).

These teachers do not use either the numerical scores or the descriptors that accompany them to make data driven decisions about instruction, and they find the data useless after a long and arduous assessment process. Gladys responded, "If a teacher supplies all the prompts to a nonverbal student and gives physical assistance, how can there be assessment?" (Gladys, Interview #2) The participants provide the score reports to the parents and place a copy in students' files. They then make data driven decisions to

plan and evaluate student achievement using the progress monitoring they gather themselves on the students' IEP goals.

Gladys expounded, "I don't do anything with it. I don't think the scores really help. I don't see what those scores do" (Gladys, Interview # 2). She does not see how the scores help her or her students and explained that in her school system, IEP goals are based on the student's skill level. She questioned the usefulness of the score reports, "How does that help me? I don't see how that would help her. We were told not to use standards to write goals. We were told to write skill-based goals" (Gladys, Interview #2). Katie agreed and stated, "It doesn't measure anything. It measures nothing. It gives them good exposure, but other than that it doesn't measure anything" (Katie, Interview # 2).

Blossom also does not find that the score reports reflect what her students have learned. She does not believe the GAA results show what her students know in the content areas and, although a student may receive a passing score, she does not feel the GAA administration process was necessarily "successful in him being able to gain some knowledge in that particular area" (Blossom, Interview # 2). She and Chris believe that, "In essence, it's the GAA incorporated with what I can pull from it to tie into some kind of functional relationship that's going to truly allow my kids to show that success and make progress" (Chris, Interview # 2). It is not the progress reported by the GAA results that these teachers use to assess the success of their teaching or their students' learning.

GAA as a meaningless tool for teaching.

These teachers use the standards provided in the GAA blueprint as a tool to teach their students because it is required, but they do not see the standards as relevant to the true needs and prospective futures of their students. The Georgia Alternate Assessment

Manual 2013-2014 advises that the tasks assigned from the standards should be a natural part of students' daily instruction. The standards provided in the GAA blueprint are a fraction of the grade level standards. Teachers are expected to ensure that students with significant cognitive disabilities have the opportunity to access these and other standards, and not simply those chosen for GAA assessment.

Students with significant cognitive disabilities are assessed on alternate achievement standards. These standards differ in complexity or breadth from grade level standards but must still be tied to grade level content. English language arts options for the first entry include language, reading foundational, reading informational, or reading literary. Options for the second English language arts entry include writing or speaking/listening. Math options for the first entry include operations/algebraic thinking, numbers/operations-base 10, or numbers/operations-fractions. Options for the second math entry include measurement/data or geometry. Options for the science entry include earth science, physical science, or life science. Options for the social studies entry include historical understandings, geographic understandings, government/civic understandings, or economic understandings.

Although recognizing that implementation of the GAA and inclusion of the results in local and statewide reporting systems has had a positive impact on their academic expectations for their students and some students' academic progress, these participants to do not believe this main focus on progress on grade level standards is relevant to the present and future success of their students with significant cognitive disabilities. These teachers also do not lament teacher accountability. They accept responsibility for the teaching and learning of their students but believe the teaching,

learning, assessment, and accountability should be based on student progress on functional and daily living skills.

Gladys specifically remembered administering the GAA to a student and recognizing that he could match colors. She feels that it would have been more appropriate to use that skill to help him with independent skills like matching his socks or sorting laundry rather than matching a picture of Henry Ford outlined in red with a picture of the automobile outlined in red. She stated, in reference to the GAA, "There is not one thing in here that I feel like is relevant to what these children need" (Gladys, Interview # 1). Her goal for her students and their future is for them "not to be a drain on his family but physically produce and know basic life skills" (Gladys, Interview # 2). She believes that their needs are to be as self sufficient as their capabilities allow. Gladys stated, "The GAA curriculum wants these students to comprehend things that most high functioning adults do not remember, the Pythagorean theorem for instance. I strongly recommend that some of these people in Washington D.C. or Atlanta come down here and walk a mile in my shoes. There is way too much emphasis on the paperwork and less emphasis on the needs of the child" (Gladys, Interview # 2). She considers time spent teaching academic standards that are irrelevant to the needs of her students as well as the documentation process of the GAA administration as time not spent meeting the needs of her students. She expounded, "We have wasted valuable time taking pictures. Can they tell me the point of all of this? Who have we made happy? Who have we pleased?" (Gladys, Interview # 2)

Blossom also believes it is more important that students with significant cognitive disabilities exhibit success with functional living skills than academic skills. She feels it

would be more relevant for her students to be assessed on and show progress towards skills that allow them to help themselves and be successful in their environments. For her lower functioning students, "The functional aspect of living is more important versus academics" (Blossom, Interview #1). Daily living skills are more needed by her students as opposed to the English/language arts and math found in the GAA. She finds the standards in the GAA to be irrelevant for her students. She questioned, "Is identifying Greece important when they can't even tell you they have to go to the bathroom and they are still working on fine motor skills to feed themselves?" (Blossom, Interview # 2) She also admitted that there are days where "a whole lot of academics don't get done, it's just behavioral stuff . . . I'm the mom, testing coordinator, nurse, etc." (Blossom, Interview # 2).

The need to focus on more functional needs is also espoused by Kataryna who struggles with choosing the most appropriate GAA standards for her students' assessments. She indicated, "It's hard sometimes, especially when you have a child in the fourth grade and they function on a Pre-K level, to pick and choose standards that you know they can't do. I feel sometimes I am setting them up for failure" (Kataryna, Interview # 2). Katie agreed that the exposure to standards is good, but "they are not going to change money, and or subtract, or balance their checkbook. But, you can ask them to hand you a napkin, give me your shirt. Just things that can make them a little bit more independent" (Katie, Interview # 2).

For Katie, the future independence of her students is her foremost focus. She gets satisfaction from exposing the students to the content of the grade level standards but does not believe they need to be tested on it. Speaking about a specific student, she

stated, "I get satisfaction out of showing, exposing him to different areas, but I don't think he needs to be tested on content he will never need" (Katie, Interview # 1). For her students overall, she stated, "For this group of students, for the SID students, it's needless. It's ridiculous actually. I think they just need to concentrate on their IEP goals" (Katie, Interview #2).

Finally, in addressing arguments for standards-based assessment and the GAA and addressing arguments for functional and daily living skills, these teachers recognize the importance of having high expectations, assessing, and including students with significant cognitive disabilities in statewide accountability measures. They see that these requirements lead to the school system, individual schools, and individual teachers being accountable to ensure that all students receive a quality education. They see the exposure to grade level standards and grade level peers as a positive outcome of the GAA. However, these participants see independence and accomplishing daily functional living skills as the curriculum focus that provides the pivotal impact on future quality of life for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Juan summarized this conviction stating, "The bottom line is before, they were doing life skills. They were given more time to do life skills because they were not doing an alternate assessment . . . . If you can teach a child to select from a field of choices for a standardized test that is really going to mean nothing to them after they graduate, why can't you spend more time to get them to learn how to do life skills that they will use after graduation?" (Juan, Interview #2)

While recognizing the fundamental need of these students to obtain daily living and functional skills to increase their independence, these participants do not want to eliminate academics completely from the curriculum. Blossom, recognizing that she has

skill levels from one extreme to the other in her classroom, admitted that she has "mixed feelings about leaving academics totally behind" (Blossom, Interview # 2). Kataryna explained, "I think there should be a happy medium . . . . I am trying to teach my kids so when they are 22 they can live in assisted living or live on their own. I think you should be able to teach the standards and how to tie their shoes" (Kataryna, Interview # 2). Chris expounded, "If I was in a school system where it was purely academic and not functional stuff, then I would feel like I was not doing my job" (Chris, Interview # 2). These teachers agree that exposing their students to grade level standards is good. But, they do not believe grade level standards which do not translate into skills these students will need to be successful should be the focal point of the curriculum and high stakes assessment for students with significant cognitive disabilities.

GAA as a meaningless tool for assessment and teaching summary.

These teachers do not use either the numerical scores or the descriptors that accompany them to make data driven decisions about instruction for their students with significant cognitive disabilities. They find the data provided about student progress on grade level standards to be meaningless to the daily instruction of their students who are well below grade level and require IEP goals focused on their individual functional skill levels. These teachers use the standards provided in the GAA blueprint as a tool to teach their students because it is required, but they find the standards to be meaningless to the true needs and prospective futures of their students.

These participants favor a curriculum, assessment, and accountability in the area of greater importance to their students' future quality of life. Juan explained that he could bring all the content area and special education experts together to work with a

student for 12 to 16 years but questions if that student will be college ready. He questioned, "Or, will they be life ready if we work with them from 12 to 16 years on life skills? I think they will be closer to life ready if you work that side of the tree than if you did working the other side of the tree to make them college ready . . . . If I had a choice, I would focus specifically on life skills and I wouldn't have to balance everything" (Juan, Interview # 2). For students whose success will not be measured by college degrees or climbing the corporate ladder but measured by their independence while being cared for by immediate or distant family members, these teachers feel a more fair and critical focus for curriculum and assessment should be progress on daily living and functional life skills.

Theory

This research had as its goal to examine the experiences of Georgia teachers giving the Georgia Alternate Assessment to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities and subsequently to develop a theory of how they perceive the GAA. Figure 4.1 illustrates the experiences and subsequent perception of the participants of this study. Participants experience the GAA administration process as having to balance often conflicting obligations to meet federal and state requirements and also meet the individual needs of the student.

The GAA assessment process begins with teachers having to choose grade level academic standards in English, math, science, and social studies on which to assess students who are well below grade level. They must then teach and assess those standards and document the assessment process. The assessment and documentation process entails interrupting the teaching and learning going on in general education classrooms to

take pictures and ensure general education students and staff interact with the students with special needs. In order to ensure the documentation is sufficient, teachers must abandon teaching and learning in their classrooms and participate in professional learning days in which they work on the documentation and collaborate with other teachers. During this process they must wrestle between reflecting how their students truly progressed on the standard and staging to show progress which is a requirement for the students to pass.

These participants and their students spend 7 of the 9 school months in this balancing act. They teach the grade level content standards reflecting skills such as the Pythagorean theorem and identifying the location of Greece, which they find meaningless for meeting the needs and future quality of life of their students. They then receive GAA score results and descriptions that do not validly convey their students' understanding and achievement of the standard which are also meaningless to the daily living and functional skill instruction these students require to live as independently as possible in their future environments.

These participants find this balancing act and the resulting teaching and assessment of GAA standards for students whose future does not include a college degree or a higher level thinking job to be an ineffective tool to assess the teaching and learning of elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities. The future quality of life and self worth of these students will depend on their ability to function as independently as possible in their future environments.

While the GAA exposes and assesses students on grade level standards, it is the daily living skills that teachers have to forgo that will have the most pivotal impact on

their future. During the GAA administration, teachers assess students working on prerequisite and below grade level skills on grade level standards. They provide prompting that may include verbal, gestural, or hand over hand assistance. They then receive a score report that may indicate that the student exceeded the standard. The teachers find this process and the resulting scores meaningless. The content is not meaningful to what impacts the future of their students, and the resulting scores do not help them meet the needs of their students. The GAA requires teaching and assessment of students on grade level standards. It does not require teaching and assessment of what is critically important to the lives of students with significant cognitive disabilities—daily living and functional life skills. The participants of this study perceive the GAA is an ineffective tool to assess the teaching and learning of elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities.

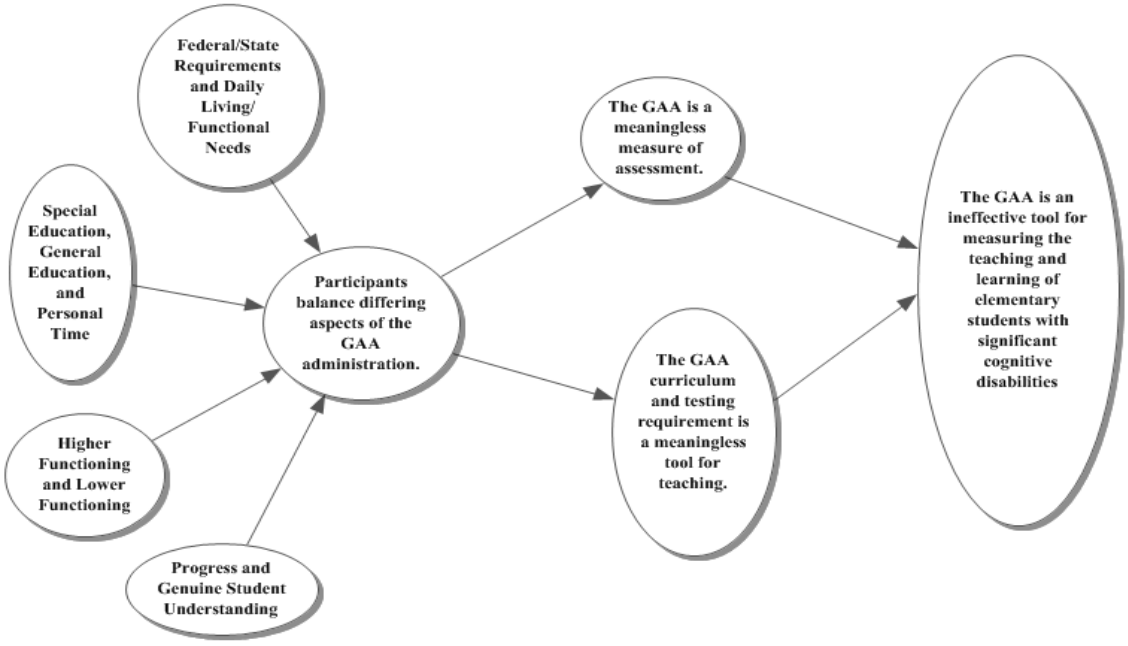

Figure 4.1. Georgia special education teachers' experiences and perceptions of the Georgia Alternate Assessment.

CHAPTER 5

IMPLICATIONS

Summary

This chapter summarizes research findings from this qualitative study conducted using grounded theory. The grounded theory method was used to seek the perceptions of Georgia teachers' experiences administering the Georgia Alternate Assessment to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities. This study was dual purposed. First, the results helped determine how special educators experience administering the GAA to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities. Second, the results helped shed light on how their experiences shape their perceptions.

Chapter 1 presented an introduction to this study and a short synopsis of standards-based assessments and the requirements of the GAA. While there are studies that examine teacher perceptions of alternate assessments, none focus specifically on Georgia's elementary school teachers. Georgia's teachers' perceptions are important in helping determine the role of the GAA in the teaching and learning of students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Chapter 2 provided a broad overview of the characteristics of students with significant cognitive disabilities and their journey to required access to the general curriculum. The researcher outlined the history of alternate assessments. Finally, special educators' perceptions of other state's alternate assessments as well as their perceptions of high stakes testing were examined.

Chapter 3 described the methodology of this study. The grounded theory method addressed teacher experiences and perceptions of the GAA. Six teachers from a Georgia school district were purposefully selected to participate in two face-to-face interviews.

By limiting the number of participants and employing a guided interview protocol, the researcher collected the rich data required for the data analysis process. The participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity. The researcher followed the data analysis process outlined by Charmaz (2006) including continuous memo writing, initial coding, focused coding, and finally theoretical coding to develop a theory grounded in data. Chapter 3 also provided the rationale for employing the grounded theory methodology, the sampling procedures, data analysis, and the final reporting of data.

Chapter 4 presented a narrative of the study's findings. For each research question, the data were analyzed after interviews were transcribed and initially coded segment by segment. Second, applying focused coding, the researcher identified the most salient categories to interpret and classify as focus codes. Finally, theoretical coding was applied to facilitate the emergence of theoretical codes and the final theory.

Discussion of Research Findings

This section discusses findings from this study in relation to prior research findings regarding teacher perceptions of alternate assessments. Similarities and contradictions between findings and the literature are discussed.

Discussion of Participant Findings

The objective of this study was twofold. First, the results helped determine how special educators experience administering the GAA to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities. In answering this first research question, the participants experienced administering the GAA as a balancing act. The second objective was to draw on participant experiences and determine how their experiences shape their perceptions. Having to balance often conflicting aspects of teaching and administering

the GAA led the teachers to perceive the GAA as a meaningless tool for teaching and assessing their students. Their perceptions converged into a theory that the participants in this study find the GAA to be an ineffective tool for the teaching and learning of elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities.

The participants of this study found the grade level standards, the assessment process, and the results of the GAA administration process to be meaningless to the teaching and learning of students with significant cognitive disabilities. The grade level academic standards that comprise the GAA do not translate to the daily living skills their students need to achieve. The score results on grade level standards and varying levels of prompting do not provide the teachers with data needed to improve the teaching and learning of their students. These participants advocate that these students be taught and assessed on their progress towards the individualized functional goals set by their IEP committees without the need to balance teaching the fragments of grade level standards found in the GAA. It is their progress on daily living skills, rather than the academic skills assessed by the GAA, that will most directly impact their future quality of life.

Participants in this study responded similar to earlier participants in studies of the Kentucky Alternate Assessment (Towels-Reeves, Kleinert, & Muhomba, 2009) in expressing frustration with the documentation of evidence and the time consuming process of completing the portfolio. The participants in this study specifically commented on the amount of time during which they are taken out of their classrooms as well as the additional personal time it takes to complete the documentation. For these teachers, it is time taken away from practicing the life skills they believe this group of students needs to be successful. Repetition and hands on practice are strategies needed

by students with cognitive disabilities to move skills learned from short term to long term memory. Time addressing geometry standards and identifying man made features is time that the students are not learning to feed themselves, dress themselves, identify personal information, and other life skills. Learning these life skills will help these students become more independent adults and take some tasks off the shoulders of their future care takers. Their self worth will increase as their lack of dependence on others decreases.

The amount of teacher personal time required to complete the GAA is another concern. Teachers already sacrifice personal time to ensure the needs of students, classrooms, and schools are met. Teachers spend personal time researching strategies, planning activities, decorating classrooms, and supporting after hours school activities. They come to work early and leave late. While they understand and accept that working during their personal time is part of being a teacher, meeting the requirements of the GAA has added to the personal time they give to their job. The teachers in this study expressed that, although given professional development time to work on the GAA during the school day once a month, they still cannot complete all the requirements of the GAA without working on it during their personal time.

Unlike previous research, participants in this study expressed concern about the time taken out of general education classes to ensure that generalization occurs and is documented. Generalization is a required and assessed component of the GAA. It encompasses assessing "the student's opportunity to apply the learned skills in other settings and/or with various individuals in addition to the teacher or paraprofessional" (Georgia Alternate Assessment Examiner's Manual 2013-2014). The setting has to be

meaningful and purposeful to the standard and task being assessed. To meet this generalization criteria, special education teachers often have their students complete the GAA assessment in the general education classroom. To provide the evidence required, the teachers take pictures of their students completing the assessment. While trying to be as unobtrusive as possible, these steps cannot be completed without disrupting and taking away from the regular routine, lesson plans, and class time of the general education classroom. All of these time infringements come at a time when mandated teacher furlough days are decreasing class time for students and decreasing pay checks for teachers.

Like the teachers in the Kentucky, Washington, and Virginia studies, these Georgia elementary teachers questioned the validity of the alternate assessments and viewed the assessment as a test of teacher creativity in documentation and ability to assemble a portfolio according to guidelines (Towels-Reeves, Kleinert, & Muhomba, 2009; Elliott & Roach, 2007; Kenny, 2009). The participants of this study specifically questioned the vagueness of captioned photos and pointed out the possibility of staging progress rather than actually achieving it simply for the purpose of receiving a passing score. The participants of this study also question the meaningfulness of the resulting score reports. They do not find the rubric scores and general descriptions helpful in planning the day-to-day instruction for their students on their individual skill levels.

The participants in this study, along with Wisconsin teachers (Roach, Elliot, & Berndt, 2007), questioned the meaningfulness of the alternate assessment scores. Neither group found the scores to be useful in instructional planning. The participants in this study use data collected in the process of progress monitoring to guide their instruction.

Their perceptions are contradictory to the perceptions of Arizona and Tennessee teachers who found the data collected during the assessment process to be helpful in planning classroom instruction and guiding their teaching (Williams, 2008; Orellana, 2010). While Tennessee teachers use the results from their alternate assessment to help inform goals and objectives for students' IEPs, the participants in this study address functional and daily living skills in their students' IEPs and do not use the data provided by the GAA to drive their decision making process.

Connecticut teachers saw their alternate assessment as difficult to use for all students due to the wide range of ability levels among students with significant cognitive disabilities (Goldstein & Behauniak, 2010), while Arizona teachers did not find their alternate assessment to accurately assess students with the most severe disabilities (Williams, 2008). This was consistent with teachers in this study who also recognize the range of ability levels and believe the GAA to be a better assessment for the higher functioning students with significant cognitive disabilities. They recognize that some of their higher functioning students make progress towards the grade level standard.

The GAA process has forced these participants to challenge their students more and they are discovering that their students have some skills they were not aware of. The teachers are challenged to step out of their comfort zone and not just give students what they believe they can do. They are also challenged to create instructional materials to facilitate their students' access to the standards. This increase in expectations of students with significant cognitive disabilities was also experienced by the special education teachers interviewed by Smith-Woofter (2010).

Having to instruct and assess students with significant cognitive disabilities on grade level standards brought the lack of available appropriate materials to accomplish this task to light for both Connecticut teachers and these participants. The participants in this study spend personal time and money, which was not noted in previous research, to create instructional and assessment tasks that are both on grade level and appropriate for the cognitive level of their students. They, with Connecticut teachers, see the need for more instructional materials to teach students with significant cognitive disabilities grade level standards (Goldstein & Behauniak, 2010).

The participants in this study do not want to forego academics entirely for students with significant cognitive disabilities. While not admitting to low expectations, as espoused by Zigmond, Kloo, and Volonino (2009), they have found that some of their students are engaged in the process and can do more than they previously thought. The students often have skills that teachers were not aware of and show progress towards the standards. Agreeing with Courtade et al. (2012), they believe that teaching academics does not prevent teachers from teaching functional life skills.

The participants of this study propose that they no longer have to balance the requirements of the GAA with the functional needs of their students and that their main focus be the daily living skills these students will need to function in their post school environments. While not suggesting that grade level academic skills should be completely abandoned, they agree with Ayers et al. (2011) that time spent learning grade level academics is time lost in learning skills that will improve a student's independence as an adult. It is time taken away from the teaching and learning in some of the general education classrooms, time taken away from their personal lives, and time taken away

from teaching their students the daily life and functional skills they need to have a more independent future and life outcome.

While the participants in the studies referenced did not specifically mention they experienced the alternate assessment administration process as a balancing act, they did mention concerns expressed by participants of this study. This includes the time it takes, the validity of the test and test scores, the decrease in time available to address daily living and functional skills, and the personal time it encompasses. They also have concern for the appropriateness of the tests for their lower functioning students.

This study probed further into how the participants' experiences informed their perceptions and subsequent theory. The participants of this study perceived the GAA to be a meaningless measure of assessment and a meaningless tool for teaching elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities. They consider the GAA to not validly assess what it purports to assess, and that it does not assess progress on the curriculum that most crucially affects the future life outcomes of students with significant cognitive disabilities. Finally, the participants of this study judge the GAA to be an ineffective tool to measure the teaching and learning of students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Implications

Teacher responses to the research questions that guided this research study provide recommendations for consideration by state and federal legislators, state board of education members, and advocates for students with disabilities. Given that many students with disabilities do not have the cognitive or communication ability to provide their opinion of the GAA and its focus on teaching grade level standards, the voices of

the teachers involved in the process provide the greatest insight for lawmakers involved in high stakes testing.

By investigating teacher perceptions of alternate assessments in Georgia and other states and objectively listening to their recommendations and reasons, lawmakers may be able to produce an assessment tool that assesses the true achievement of students with significant cognitive disabilities that teachers believe is reliable and worth the time it takes to complete. Specifically, from this research, policy makers may consider reassessing the broad range of disability levels encompassed in the definition of students with significant cognitive disabilities and provide an alternate expectation for lower functioning students whose IEP teams determine that their focus should be more functional.

School and district level administrators are also challenged to provide the special education teachers administering the GAA with the time and the professional development needed to complete the documentation required. The participants of this study were resolute in their belief that the time away from the classroom to work and the time to share ideas with colleagues was critical to their ability to successfully administer the GAA.

Educator preparation programs that focus on teaching students with significant cognitive disabilities are also challenged to ensure that their program addresses strategies to ensure access to grade level standards for students with significant cognitive disabilities. These programs must continue to be aware and make future teachers aware of the changing expectations for students and teachers.

Test makers may want to revisit aspects of the GAA identified in this research that lead to questionable validity, including pictures and annotations as evidence of progress. The test makers may also want to explore providing more usable information about student achievement in the score reports so the results become useful in making data driven decisions.

Curriculum makers are challenged by the results of this study to provide more appropriate curricula and teaching materials for students with significant cognitive disabilities. As a result of this study, advocates for students with disabilities may help lawmakers become more aware of the functional needs of these students and the importance of teaching daily living skills to their independence as adults.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study presented a grounded research analysis of Georgia teacher's perceptions of administering the Georgia Alternate Assessment to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities. The perceptions of teachers who have experienced administering the GAA to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities provide insight into the process that the students themselves are not able to communicate. As a result of this research, additional questions are raised that warrant further study.

Just as this research recognized that Georgia's teachers are in an insightful position to be the voice for students with significant cognitive disabilities and speak on the experience and outcomes of the GAA administration, other studies presented the perceptions of teachers in their respective states including Kentucky, Wisconsin, Washington, Arizona, Virginia, Tennessee, and Connecticut (Towels-Reeves, Kleinert, & Muhomba, 2009; Roach et al., 2007; Elliott & Roach, 2007; Williams, 2008; Kenndey,

2009; Orellana, 2010; Goldstein & Behauniak, 2010). While recognizing the importance of teacher perceptions, the perceptions of a vital stakeholder, the parents of students with significant cognitive disabilities, are largely missing in the literature. The parents are the decision makers of post school choices as well as the primary care takers of these students for the rest of their lives. How the parents of students with significant cognitive disabilities perceive administration of the GAA and the subsequent outcomes is an open area for future research.

Teachers in this study were grateful for professional time to work with others, share ideas, and assemble the GAA. Teachers interviewed by Smith-Woofter (2008) and Connecticut teachers raised the topic of professional development and the need for increased professional development in the content areas and for teaching students with significant cognitive disabilities (Goldstein & Behauniak, 2010). This admission leads to questions about whether a relationship exists between the amount of professional development provided to teachers and teacher perceptions of the GAA as well as whether a relationship exists between the amount of professional development provided and student achievement on the GAA. Identifying the role of professional development and responding accordingly may help improve teachers' perceptions and improve teacher buy in. Improvement in teacher buy in may help ensure that the GAA is administered with fidelity and may, therefore, be a more accurate assessment of student achievement.

There are three identified approaches to alternate assessments. They include the portfolio, the checklist or rating scale, and the performance approach (Kleinert et al, 2009). The teachers in this study as well as the teachers interviewed in Washington (Elliott & Roach, 2007) viewed the portfolio assessment to be more a reflection of

teacher creativity rather than student achievement. A study comparing teacher perceptions of the different types of assessments may help identify an approach that is perceived to be more appropriate in assessing the progress of students with significant cognitive disabilities.

A void exists in the literature in addressing how the GAA will factor into possible future accountability measures including merit pay or pay for performance. While the popularity of the idea of incentive pay has increased over the last decade, studies suggest that teachers oppose using student test scores or test score gains to measure teacher performance (Yuan et al., 2012). A study of how the GAA is being used in assessing teacher effectiveness in school systems that have implemented merit pay would help in addressing this question.

Courtade et al. (2002) advocate that students with significant cognitive disabilities be taught and assessed on grade level standards because these standards are relevant and help them to be ready for increased future opportunities. Ayers et al. (2011) advocate for a functional curriculum that they believe will help students with cognitive disabilities function more independently in their environment. A study to identify and compare the post school outcomes of students who have participated in the two distinct curriculums would aid in determining which approach resulted in more success.

There has been an increase in the number of college programs available to students with significant cognitive disabilities (Courtade et al., 2002). A study to identify the college programs available and subsequent post college outcomes for students who attended would be important in determining the value of such programs and the goal in matriculating to them.

Dissemination

As required by the College of Graduate Studies, this dissertation will be made available through the Georgia Southern University Library. Committee members will receive a bound copy. Interview participants will receive a copy as requested. The researcher will also explore the criteria for publishing in scholarly educational and assessment journals as well as disability support and advocacy journals.

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APPENDIX A

FIRST INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

R1) How do upper elementary special education teachers experience the administration of the Georgia Alternate Assessment to students with significant cognitive disabilities?

Background Information:

1. How long have you been in special education?
2. How long have you worked with students with significant cognitive disabilities?
3. What is your current position?

Intermediate Questions:

4. How many years have you administered the GAA to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities?
5. Tell me about your process for administering the GAA.
6. Tell me about the class, and personal, professional time it takes to administer the GAA.
7. What challenges do you face administering the GAA?
8. What are some positive outcomes of students with significant cognitive disabilities being required to take the GAA and being included in statewide reporting processes?
9. What are some negative outcomes of students with significant cognitive disabilities being required to take the GAA and being included in statewide reporting processes?
10. Are there any events or administrations that stand out in your mind?

Ending Question:

11. Is there anything else you think I should know to understand your experiences?

APPENDIX B

SECOND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

R 2) How do these teachers' experiences with the GAA shape their perceptions?

Beginning Questions:

1. Have you had any thoughts since the first interview that you would like to share?

Intermediate Questions:

2. Tell me your thoughts and feelings about administering the GAA to students with significant cognitive disabilities.
3. What is your perception of the GAA as a tool for teaching students with significant cognitive disabilities?
4. What is your opinion of the ability of the GAA to measure the achievement of students with significant cognitive disabilities?
5. How do you respond to the argument that teaching and assessing students with significant cognitive disabilities on grade level standards is good and necessary?
6. How do you respond to the argument that teaching students with significant disabilities a more functional and life skills curriculum is good and necessary?

Ending Question:

7. Is there anything else you think I should know to understand your perceptions?

APPENDIX C

GROUNDED THEORY ANALYSIS OF FIRST RESEARCH QUESTION

R1) How do upper elementary special education teachers experience the administration of the Georgia Alternate Assessment to students with significant cognitive disabilities?

Beginning analysis during data collection. Wrote memos.

Segment by segment coding of transcripts

planning	differentiating	researching	responding	exposing
practicing	repeating	staging	daily living	measuring
progressing	creating	prompting	keeping it real	staging
documenting	failing	collaborating	reinforcing	embedding
spending	mixed feelings	transitioning	simplifying	incorporating
balancing	starting	changing	assisting	gaining
present level	low functioning	disconnecting	discovering	scoring
emphasizing	picking	breaking	comprehending	accessing
grading	meeting	understanding	relating	testing
graduating	modifying	choosing	retaining	growing
high functioning				

Utilized memo writing to facilitate grouping related codes into focused code categories.

standards = grade level	student needs	level of prompting	affects gen. ed.
IEP = skills based	can it be differentiated	pressure to pass	time for both?
academic future?	true achievement?	what is progress	personal time
time for both?	appropriate for some	keeping it real?	teacher sacrifices
realistic expectations	future of hf?	ethics in question	time management
embedding possible?	future of lf?	based on teacher or student?	generalization
life/daily living skills	who determines need		
federal/state requirements			
teacher perception of needs			

Utilized memo writing to facilitate the emergence of theoretical codes.

Participants balance the state/federal testing and curriculum requirements with the daily living and functional needs of their students.

Participants balance their experiences with the GAA in relation to their higher and lower functioning students.

Participants balance the GAA criteria to demonstrate progress with the obligation of reflecting genuine student understanding of the standards.

Participants balance special education, general education, and personal time to complete the GAA administration.

APPENDIX D

GROUNDED THEORY ANALYSIS OF SECOND RESEARCH QUESTION

R 2) How do these teachers' experiences with the GAA shape their perceptions?

Beginning analysis during data collection. Wrote memos.

Segment by segment coding of transcripts

progressing	achieving	scoring	emerging	meeting
establishing	extending	filing	comprehending	measuring
exposing	decision making	standardizing	relating	daily living
functioning	needing	mixed feeling	accessing	retaining
failing	prompting	not using	helping	assessing
needing	determining	describing	reporting	teaching
learning				

Utilized memo writing to facilitate grouping related codes into focused code categories.

score reports not utilized	grade level curriculum
do parents ask	how difficult to embed?
descriptions depict student achievement?	who determines need?
Information not student specific	what are their needs
strengths and weaknesses?	post school outcomes?
	what do parents want

Utilized memo writing to facilitate the emergence of theoretical codes.

The GAA is an ineffective tool to measure the teaching and learning of elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities.