Assessment in Secondary Environments: How Co-Teachers Navigate the Competing Demands of Theory, Policy, and Practice

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Assessment in Secondary Environments:
How Co-Teachers Navigate the Competing Demands
of Theory, Policy, and Practice

by

Sylvia Martinez Spruill

A Dissertation

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. He has and always will be the strength I need to live my life and be what He has called me to be.

To my husband, John “JB” Spruill, III…I dedicate this work to you. God gave me such an incredible gift when He brought us together. Since the day we met, you have been by my side through everything. Your love for me and our children amazes me every day. Without you, I would never have made it through this intellectual journey.

To my beautiful children, Olivia and Elijah…I dedicate this work to you because I want you to grow up believing that you can do absolutely anything you want to do with God’s love and strength. My heart is so full with the love I have for you.

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your prayers. I love you! Allison – the sister I never had but always wanted. I know that you didn’t want to like me from the beginning, but I’m so glad you did! Thank you for your support and love through it all – even those days when I smacked my gum on purpose in the back of your car! I know you don’t see it, but you are such a beautiful woman inside and out. You have so much to offer the world, so don’t let anything hold you back. Dream big and go for it! I love you.

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ABSTRACT

ASSESSMENT IN SECONDARY ENVIRONMENTS:
HOW CO-TEACHERS NAVIGATE THE COMPETING DEMANDS
OF THEORY, POLICY, AND PRACTICE

By Sylvia Martinez Spruill

The purpose of the current study was to examine how co-teachers in an inclusive environment perceive assessment as well as how they navigate and balance the challenges of a co-taught secondary classroom with assessment mandates from local and state levels. In this current era of accountability and assessment mandates, teachers have unprecedented pressure placed on them to effectively use assessment in the classroom. The literature suggests that teachers’ perceptions influence their instructional decisions, which includes the planning and implementation of assessment in the classroom. Also, co-teachers in secondary, inclusive classrooms have a particularly challenging task as ability levels in their classrooms vary greatly.

Qualitative measures were used to investigate how general and special education teachers’ perceptions of assessment and accountability mandates have an impact on their approach to assessment in the classroom, as well as those varying experiences and perceptions influence co-teaching in a secondary, inclusive environment. The four participants in this qualitative case study were selected using purposeful sampling from a group of teachers who co-taught secondary English in an inclusive setting with a state-mandated assessment as part of the course. The participants in this study represented a wide range of teaching experiences and unique educational backgrounds. This study used data collected through in-depth biographical interviews, open-ended interviews, observations, and lesson plans. Atlas-ti software was used in
facilitating the data analysis process. Data were first examined using open-coding to identify recurring ideas. Then, axial coding was used as the constant comparative process continued for further analysis and understanding. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What perceptions do general and special education teachers who co-teach in secondary, inclusive classrooms hold about assessment?

2. What impact do local, state, and federal accountability mandates have on general and special education teachers’ instructional decisions at the secondary level within inclusive environments?

3. How do general and special education teachers plan and implement assessment within a co-taught environment at the secondary level?

Findings reveal that teachers’ past experiences influence their current instructional decisions in the classroom and that assessment is viewed and implemented through the lens of teachers’ perceptions. The findings also show that working collaboratively is not only important to the cohesion of the co-teaching team, but necessary for effective implementation of formal and informal assessment practices.
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

“Instead of fostering a classroom culture of continuous improvement, our current assessment system often leaves teachers and parents feeling frustrated and lacking information that could help them accelerate student learning” (Duncan, 2010).

Background

Educational assessment continues to be a much debated and contentious topic of discussion among educators, researchers, and even politicians in this era of accountability and performance (Struble, 2007; Wiliam, Lee, Harrison, & Black, 2004). While references to classroom assessment are often used in recommendations to teachers, there is no common definition of it among researchers (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Clark, 2010; Frey & Schmitt, 2007; Orsmond, Merry, & Callaghan, 2004). In the past twenty years, there has been a growing shift in thinking about assessment as a purely individual endeavor to the idea that it is a dynamic and interactive activity embedded in the social and cultural context of the classroom (Gipps, 1999). Not having a clear idea of classroom assessment may lead to pedagogical confusion among teachers which may lead to little action occurring in classrooms. There are also growing demands on teachers to use classroom assessment effectively in order to improve student performance as measured by state standardized test scores and district benchmarks. There is an ambiguity that teachers have as they navigate growing demands to teach to the mandated test while encouraging creativity and variety in their classrooms. This has become more of a
challenge particularly in the inclusive classroom where teachers must utilize specialized instruction while navigating Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and/or accommodations and other adaptations for their students with special needs. Additionally, there remains the demand to address the needs of those students in their classrooms without exceptionalities or typically developing students; even though inclusive classrooms include students who receive special education, there is a growing concern that they are “‘in’ but not ‘of’ the class in terms of social and learning membership” (Ferguson, 2008, p. 111). This qualitative case study focuses on co-teachers in a secondary inclusive education classroom and how they negotiate local and state assessment mandates while navigating the competing demands of theory, policy, and practice.

With the advent of No Child Left Behind legislation [NCLB], (2002) increased pressure was placed on teachers to improve student performance on standardized tests (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006; Jones & Egley, 2006; Jones & Egley, 2007). Teachers were bombarded with a barrage of voices communicating assessment policy at district, state, and federal levels. No Child Left Behind legislation required that all students be assessed to determine adequate yearly progress (AYP). In an attempt to improve standardized test scores, teachers were then required by their districts to test students with benchmarks, diagnostics, and practice tests for these high stakes tests. Assessment policies and mandates were disseminated and teachers were asked to implement them. While administering these mandated tests created by outside sources, teachers were frequently left to their own devices to create and choose the formative and summative classroom assessments that seemed appropriate at the time.

Depending on how people make sense of ideas in their own social and cultural context, policies can become sociocultural tools (Cross, 2010). With this view, assessment in the classroom can be viewed as a sociocultural process because the way teachers respond to these
demands is often influenced by the social and cultural context in which they work (Bagley, 2010; Gipps, 1999). Teachers exist in this social and cultural world and are “thinking, historical, social, and culturally constituted subjects” (Cross, p. 438). Within it they rely on the world around them – in this case their teaching partners and colleagues – to gain understanding of the accountability mandates in their school and district and the particulars of each mandate. In yet another layer of complexity, the co-teaching relationship, teachers are called upon to collaborate and communicate in order to provide effective instruction and assessment for their students (Keefe & Moore, 2004; Murawski & Dieker, 2004; Rice & Zigmond, 2000). When people interact socially they express ideas and conceptualize and as a result, meaning begins to take shape (McGlonn-Nelson, 2005; Wang, Beckett, & Brown, 2006). Add implementing NCLB to their skill set and co-teachers are expected to make instructional decisions about assessment every day in the inclusive classroom for every one of their students.

The push for greater accountability in schools has led large scale standardized testing to become the primary method of measuring a student’s achievements and a school’s effectiveness (Towles-Reeves, Kleinart, & Muhomba, 2009; Volante and Jaafar, 2010). The political policies that seem to drive large scale summative assessment often dictate how teachers and students interpret curriculum standards and experience learning concepts (Daugherty, Black, Ecclestone, James & Newton, 2008; Diamond, 2007; Shepherd, 2000). Unfortunately, many educators and school leaders equate assessment solely with standardized, high stakes tests (Reeves, 2007, p.1). Often teachers and administrators use words such as assessment and testing interchangeably when referring to different ideas and as a result, miscommunication is inevitable. As James and Pedder (2006) posit, there are “opposing cultures…a culture informed by pedagogic values developed in the professional worlds of classroom teaching…and…a culture informed by
instrumental values to do with the distribution of resources, developed in the political world of policy-making” (p. 131), and teacher feel caught in the middle. There is an official curriculum mandated by the state and the implemented curriculum that each teacher creates for his classroom. The question for teachers becomes, “how do I make sense of all of these assessment demands?”

The differing perspectives and goals of administrators and teachers can create a tense professional relationship in which teachers believe their opinions are not valued (Hargreaves, 1996; Jones & Egley, 2006). Administrators are charged with enforcing policy and teachers with implementing it. The splintered relationships caused by those who create policy and those who are expected to implement it, have formed a chasm between what and how teachers believe they should assess and what and how they are being asked to assess. Teachers are often caught in an ambiguous whirlwind of policy, belief systems, and institutional directives and at the center of it all is assessment (Black & Wiliam, 2010). Teachers in inclusive classrooms are faced with the complex demands of effectively assessing all students, including those with special needs, to ensure that they are meeting state standards and at the same time answering to the assessment demands made by their school-level administrators.

Purpose of Study

Often quantitative research drives policy because it is supported by statistical evidence, yet qualitative research can provide answers related to ‘how’ and ‘why’ certain phenomena exist, thus expanding our understanding of conditions under investigation. In the current era of increased accountability, not every teacher’s ideology welcomes an environment where assessment is a primary goal (Horn, 2003). The purpose of this study is to examine how co-teachers in secondary inclusive environment perceive assessment as well as how they balance the
challenges of a co-taught classroom with assessment mandates from local and state levels that encompass competing theory, policy and practice demands.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide this study:

1. What perceptions do general and special education teachers who co-teach in secondary, inclusive classrooms hold about assessment?

2. What impact do local, state, and federal accountability mandates have on general and special education teachers’ instructional decisions at the secondary level within inclusive environments?

3. How do general and special education teachers plan and implement assessment within a co-taught environment at the secondary level?

Significance of Study

Over the last three decades, headlines related to educational assessment range from praise for achieving the intended outcome of raised expectations and instructional improvements in the classroom, to frustration as both students and teachers are thrust into an environment focused solely on standardized test preparation.

This assessment reform movement had its beginnings in the 1970’s with a heightened focus on test scores as a measure of student achievement which was a shift from using large scale testing primarily to evaluate programs (Horn, 2003). The need for even more accountability emerged in the1980’s with the publication of A Nation at Risk (National Commission, 1983) which sounded an alarm to the country for allowing the downward spiral of students’ academic performance as demonstrated on minimum competency standardized tests. The 1990’s saw the emergence of the most expansive legislative education reform the United States had seen in
modern times, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act. Policymakers became concerned not only with testing all students including those with special needs, but also how students would be assessed.

In the last decade, few topics in education are more contentious than assessment. The reauthorization of IDEA (Individuals with Disability Act) of 2004 aligned its mandates with NCLB legislation (2002) which required that students with disabilities be tested alongside their typical peers. Assessing all students including those with special needs, requires a collective approach and a sense of shared responsibility among educators (Roach & Elliott, 2009). The rights of a student with special needs include the right and opportunity to learn curriculum aligned with state standards and to be assessed on it as well (Katsiyannis, Zhang, Ryan & Jones, 2007; Salend, 2008; Schulte, Villwock, Whichard, & Stallings, 2001). The reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, included provisions that required states to have the same goals for students with disabilities as for general education students. It also required states to design alternative assessments aligned with new, more challenging academic standards (“Alignment with the No Child Left Behind Act,” 2007). Most recently, Race to the Top policy has formally connected student performance on standardized testing to teacher evaluations, placing teachers squarely in the middle of the debate (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2011).

Using high-stakes testing as a primary tool for reforming schools, however, may prove to be disastrous for students and teachers competing in a global economy (Berliner, 2009). The literature reveals that the negative consequences of testing on teachers and students outnumber the positive consequences and when looked at collectively, contradicts a rationale that supports improved academic achievement for all students and improved instructional practices for teachers (Volante and Jafaar, 2010). If we want to reform our current assessment systems, then
we should consult the teachers who implement and use it. Who defines what will be assessed and how it will be assessed? Teachers have been a crucial part of the equation to successfully implement assessment for learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Including teacher input as a part of the reform process can prove essential to the success of new assessment systems and measures (Volante and Jaafar, 2010) that will help educators evaluate student strengths and weaknesses and enable them to improve their instructional effectiveness.

Amidst the many voices shouting for reform, the teacher’s voice has largely been lost. Hargreaves (1996) argues that in the past, voice has been written about in terms of a generic or broad teacher voice and not the views of individual teachers who share their own unique experiences. He also recognizes that there is an absence of contextualized teacher voice in the research and educational policy: “How teachers voice their response to educational change depends on the context in which they experience it” (Hargreaves, p. 17). Assessment is not an inherently negative process and it must be supported so that it can help educators improve their pedagogy. How the assessment process unfolds and the political consequences tied to its implementation and outcomes can be counterproductive to classroom teachers. Teachers must be given opportunities to freely share their perspectives of their own unique experiences in the classroom. Substantial change in classrooms rarely comes from mandated policy; rather schools and districts must work for coherence by engaging teachers, administration, and the community so that the reform not only makes sense to all involved, but is strategic and distributed (Copland & Knapp, 2006; Diamond, 2007). Researchers have begun to question why reform efforts are not aimed at supporting the work of teachers in the classroom and listening to their reflections (Black & Wiliam, 2010; Jones & Egley, 2007).
This qualitative study highlights teacher voices and experiences in secondary co-taught classrooms as they navigate the complex, ambiguous and sometimes harried path to accountability. The context of this study is the collaborative, co-taught secondary classroom where teachers are working to develop a cohesive and collegial relationship among one another while implementing effective, researched-based instruction and assessment practices. This study addresses this gap with an exploration of the experiences of four co-teachers in an inclusive secondary environment as they confront the challenges that local, state, and federal mandates place on them. The ways in which these educators they respond to these challenges calls forth a firm grasp of formative and summative assessment practice within their classrooms.

Definition of Terms

- **AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress)** – A term associated with No Child Left Behind legislation that indicates the progress each school should show along the path to 100% proficiency for all students (No Child Left Behind, 2001).

- **Balanced classroom assessment** – A variety of assessment measures are utilized by teachers to evaluate student skills and knowledge in a comprehensive and authentic way. The assessment is high quality and varied to include formative and summative measures (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 3)

- **Common Core Georgia Performance Standards** – A framework of standards in English language arts, Mathematics, and literacy in science, history/social studies, and technical subjects that have been adopted in order to ensure that all students in Georgia are accessing and mastering the skills and content required to be successful beyond high school. These standards are the same core standards adopted by forty-four other states in the country (“Common Core Georgia Performance Standards”, 2011).
• **Co-teaching** – a widely accepted model for inclusive teaching in which two teachers (a general education and a special education) work jointly, teaching both general education and special education students in the same classroom (Rice & Zigmond, 2001).

• **GHSGT** – The Georgia High School Graduation Tests include five tests (Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, and Writing) taken by high school juniors in this study. In order to graduate, students must have passed all five tests. Also, student performance on the Language Arts and Mathematics tests are two factors that determine a school’s AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress).

• **EOCT** – The End of Course Tests within the current study are administered in 8 courses within the high school curriculum (9th Literature, American Literature, Mathematics I, Mathematics II, Physical Science, Biology, United States History, and Economics). The test accounts for 15% of a student’s grade in that course. Beginning in the school year 2011-2012, the tests have become part of the graduation requirements for students and also used as determining factors for a school’s AYP status.

• **Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)** – law that provides federally mandated services to children with disabilities; this act governs how states and publically funded entities provides services to children from birth until to the age of twenty-one (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2011).

• **No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Legislation** – Refers to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act created to close the achievement gap so no child will be left behind in education. The legislation offers flexibility, accountability, and choice as part of the method to achieving its goal (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002).
• **High stakes testing** – Testing that carries significant consequences for students and teachers (“Position statement on high-stakes testing,” 2000).

• **Assessment** – “A complete assessment system should include classroom level diagnostic tests for formative evaluation that are aligned with and complementary to state level standardized tests for summative evaluation” (Wang et al., 2006, p.321).

• **Classroom assessment** – using formative and summative assessment that is aligned (Clark, 2010) to determine what students have learned as a result of the instructional plan. It should originate within the walls of the classroom (Buhagiar, 2007).

• **Formative assessment** – Assessment done in the classroom, often daily, for the purposes of identifying student progress toward a learning goal or meeting a standard. It may also be referred to as formative or classroom assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

• **Summative assessment** – Assessment conducted to determine if students have achieved a learning goal or met a standard; measuring students against a standard or protocol. This could include not only standardized or high stakes tests, but also district level and classroom level summative assessment (Harlen, 2005).

**Summary and Overview of Chapters**

School reform and accountability measures have become an integral part of the United States educational system and as a result teachers will continue to feel the weight of mandates from a variety of sources. As researchers and policy-makers seek to define and re-define standards, assessment, achievement, and adequate progress, teachers will continue to assess their students in their classrooms every day. This qualitative study explores how co-teachers working together in an inclusive secondary environment navigate the varied assessment demands of accountability mandates within the normal event of assessing their students in the classroom.
This study reveals how teachers in a co-taught secondary setting interpret mandates related to classroom assessment and how they reconcile their perceptions of formal (i.e. federal and state) accountability demands with informal (i.e., formative) assessment through their own experiences and interactions with their co-teacher, other colleagues and students. The findings will reveal that there is a complex dynamic between the standardized assessments mandated by the state and the formative and summative classroom assessment that is not dictated yet determined by the co-teachers themselves. Additionally, the findings will reveal that some teachers are able to reflect upon and explicate this complexity while some cannot.

Chapter one provides a purpose for examining co-teacher perceptions of assessment and how accountability mandates impact their instructional decisions. It also discusses the significance of the study along with the research questions that frame it.

The literature review that follows in chapter two presents research related to classroom assessment, inclusive education and assessment, and the teacher’s role relative to assessment reform. It also includes the methodological framework and conceptual framework of the study.

In chapter three, the methodology for this study is presented.

Chapter four presents the findings of the study and chapter five will present a summary, discussion of findings, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

This literature review is written to examine relevant and crucial research relating to this study. The purpose of this review is to communicate what body of knowledge has been established related to the elements of assessment addressed in the research questions. It aims to provide a better understanding of the various types of assessment and the role that teachers play in its implementation and its reform. The review is informed by the following research questions:

1. What perceptions do general and special education teachers who co-teach in secondary, inclusive classrooms hold about assessment?

2. What impact do local, state, and federal accountability mandates have on general and special education teachers’ instructional decisions at the secondary level within inclusive environments?

3. How do general and special education teachers plan and implement assessment within a co-taught environment at the secondary level?

The first section of this chapter presents a historical overview. The next section focuses on literature in the areas of classroom assessment, formal assessment, inclusive environments and assessment, and the teacher’s role as it relates to assessment reform. The third section will present the theoretical foundation and conceptual framework being used for the study. The fourth section will present the methodological framework. The review will conclude with a summary.
Historical Overview

The current era of accountability has created challenges for school leaders responsible for improving student achievement for all students, including those identified as having disabilities. As a result, teachers are expected to effectively use assessment while identifying methods for improving student learning and implementing them in the classroom. Schools and school leaders are channeling unprecedented amounts of time, energy, and human resources into designing effective assessment as a way not only to meet these demands, but to improve student achievement (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Struble, 2007).

Historically, assessment, high stakes testing in particular, has always been used as a way to make instructional decisions based on a single measure. Formal, standardized assessment was a way to certify that a student had gained mastery apropos to the classroom teacher’s expectations (Chappius, Chappius, & Stiggins, 2009). A student’s performance on an assessment measure could provide job selection opportunities for the government and prevent political favoritism. Several countries around the world have used testing as a method for selection and certification for economic, financial, and professional decisions (Gipps, 1999). Over time, this purpose evolved from job selection to ability grouping in school. Assessment data from standardized tests and other objective measures led to undesirable outcomes as well, such as allowing schools to remove students who had special needs from the rest of the school population (Chappius, Chappius, & Stiggins, 2009; Roach & Elliott, 2009; Schulte, Villwock, Whichard, & Stallings, 2001). Assessment has continued to be a way for schools to identify where students should be educationally placed regardless of the bias and stereotyping characterized by so many standardized assessments (Gipps, 1999).
A balanced assessment system matches high quality standardized testing with high quality classroom assessment. A yearly test cannot provide a more comprehensive picture than the day to day assessment measures conducted by teachers in the classroom (Chappius, Chappius, & Stiggins, 2009; Stiggins, 1999; Stiggins & Dufour, 2009).

The literature reveals that educational policy driven by local, state, and federal governments often focuses on external standardized testing rather than classroom assessment as a tool for reforming schools and improving student achievement (Hargreaves, Earl & Schmidt, 2002; Hume & Coll, 2009; Stiggins, 1999). Incorrect assumptions about assessment, however, often serve as the foundation for these policies (Stiggins, 1999). Instead of serving as a source of useful data for teachers, externally imposed testing programs, “[can] prevent and drive out thoughtful classroom practices” (Shepherd, 2000, p. 100). Recent research has shown that raising assessment standards must be done in the classroom first as it is the primary place to engender reform. Black and Wiliam’s (1998) meta-analysis and synthesis of studies in assessment show that there are direct links between gains on standardized tests and teachers’ classroom assessment. Stiggins (2002) emphasizes that “without high quality classroom assessment, instruction cannot work, and school[s] cannot be effective” (p. 193), and while it is generally recognized that the most important factor in education is the classroom teacher, classroom assessment practices are often overlooked in the literature as a method for increasing student learning (Marzano, 2006). Despite the recent turn toward the classroom and the teacher as a source of reform, the literature presents a problematic view of classroom assessment (Black & Wiliam, 2010).

Classroom Assessment
The literature is replete with definitions of classroom assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Olinghouse & Santangelo, 2010; Serafini, 2002). It can be defined as a planned process of collecting data so that teachers can make informed decisions about individual students (Olinghouse & Santangelo, 2010; Serafini, 2002). It has been characterized as a tool for measuring student performance data and an indicator of school quality and accountability (Daugherty, Black, Ecclestone, James, & Newton, 2008; Serafini, 2002). Recently there has been a shift away from assessment as a measuring tool and more toward assessment as a learning tool know as ‘assessment for learning.’ Stiggins (2002) sought a term to explain what students know and could do (Buhagiar, 2007). Assessment that leads to learning must take place in the classroom with teachers and students interacting and inquiring (Chappius, Chappius, & Stiggins, 2009; James & Pedder, 2006; Frey & Schmitt, 2007). Even so, a definition for classroom assessment remains elusive (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Clark, 2010; Frey & Schmitt, 2007) and the literature treats the topic of classroom assessment differently based on the definition to which one ascribes.

There are some similar attributes among definitions, however, which aid our understanding of classroom assessment: (1) It should inform teachers about what their students know by employing a variety of methods; (2) it also includes all aspects of measurement that occur and originate within the walls of the classroom and not external sources (James & Pedder, 2006; Olinghouse & Santangelo, 2010; Shepherd, 2000); and (3) measurements are created by the teacher (Buhagiar, 2007).

There are several key components and characteristics of balanced classroom assessment. Dynamic assessment is an interactive way of assessing that allows teachers and students to collaborate about the progression of learning. The definition of dynamic assessment cannot be
standardized because its form and use is unique to each classroom context or experience. It teaches students to self-reflect and verbalize their understandings (Clark, 2011, p. 166). Prior knowledge refers to that which students already know and use to gauge their own learning. Often teachers determine students’ prior knowledge but never use it, despite its value in metacognitive instruction. Metacognition is a key outcome of the effective use of formative feedback. When teachers use feedback effectively, they direct students to engage in a meta-cognitive process and gain more ownership of their own learning (Clark, 2011, p. 162).

Another aspect of classroom assessment includes feedback which can come in the form of verbal or written leading questions and designed to help students identify errors they have made previously (Assessment Reform Group, 2002; Frey & Schmitt, 2007; Shepherd, 2000;). Effective and balanced classroom assessment includes a clear purpose and learning targets, sound design, effective communication of results, and student-involvement that causes students to take ownership for their own learning (Chappius, Chappius, & Stiggins, 2009). Classroom assessment provides teachers with the opportunity to use a variety of methods to determine the needs of their students and adjust instruction based on that data.

According to Marzano (2006), classroom assessment can only be effective under certain conditions based on many comprehensive reviews of research. Marzano has identified four relevant generalizations about classroom assessment:

- Feedback from classroom assessments should give students a clear picture of their progress on learning goals and how they might improve
- Feedback on classroom assessments should encourage students to improve
- Classroom assessment should be formative in nature
- Formative classroom assessments should be frequent (p. 3).
Even though classroom assessment is identified as informal (or formative) for purposes of guiding a teacher’s instruction, it has been suggested that the majority of classroom assessment still tends to be summative in nature (Buhagiar, 2007).

Formative Assessment in the Classroom

In their seminal article, “Inside the Black Box,” Black and Wiliam (1998) define formative assessment as evidence of learning gathered by teachers in the classroom that is used to adjust instruction to meet student needs (p. 140). Others agree with this definition of formative assessment and purport that assessment becomes formative when the data gathered are actually used to improve student learning (Hodgen and Marshall, 2005; Orsmond et al., 2004; Wiliam, Harrison, & Black, 2004). Historically, teachers have been “intuitively” implementing some form of formative assessment in their classrooms (Struble, 2007, p. 69). When this informal classroom assessment is used to inform teachers of student progress, modify instruction or to provide feedback to students about their own learning, it constitutes ‘assessment for learning’ and ‘assessment as learning’ (Stiggins, 2002). More recently, ‘assessment as learning’ has emerged as a process, when used effectively by teachers and students, that create a continuous cycle of feedback in which students are reflecting on their own learning and taking ownership of it by setting goals and self-monitoring their own progress (Clark, 2011, p. 163).

Using explicit criteria so that students know how they will be assessed is a common element of effective classroom assessment that is informative in nature (Hargreaves, Earl & Schmidt, 2002; Shepherd, 2000). Learners should be able to evaluate their performance much like teachers would. This process enhances learning for students because it puts them in charge of their own learning process and makes them accountable (Clark, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Nicol & MacFarlane, 2006). Assessment becomes learning as students work alongside
teachers to create and use their own practice assessments (Stiggins, 2007; Stiggins & Dufour, 2009). Students can become co-creators of criteria and begin to monitor their own learning process with the guidance of their teachers (Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009; Stiggins & Chappius, 2005). Self- and peer-assessment create a more collaborative relationship between teacher and student as well as between student and student (Shepherd, 2010). By affording students the opportunity to reflect on their own progress, they will be better equipped to regulate and improve their own learning.

Used collaboratively or individually, assessment for learning helps students focus on specific areas of weakness and refine their understanding of that weakness and how to transform it to one strength (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2004; Frey & Schmitt, 2007; Struble, 2007; Wiliam, Lee, Harrison, & Black, 2004). Self-assessment is formative when students are reflecting on their learning, and as a result, collaborate with teachers to make “meaningful interventions” (Struble, 2007, p. 159), creating a logical process for examining and responding to learning in the classroom (Heritage, 2007). The appropriate use of formative assessment allows for meaningful dialogue about learning among students and between student and teacher (Harris, 2007; Heritage, 2007; Orsmond & Callaghan, 2004).

While formative assessment as a tool for evaluation is not a new concept, there is an increasing focus on this form of assessment in the literature as it directly impacts teaching and learning. The term, formative, was initially used to discuss evaluations of programs. Formative meant there was still time to make adjustments to improve the instructional program (Scriven, 1996). It is the idea of “learning in progress” that is being promoted. Shortly after, Bloom (1984) connected the term to assessment when he argued that the purpose of formative assessment was to evaluate instruction that could be adjusted as needed to better meet the needs of students. He
would go on to assert that formative evaluation results in data that can be used in the classroom by both teacher and student to improve learning (Frey & Schmitt, 2007; Wiliam, 2006). The information obtained as a result of formative assessment in the classroom would ultimately be recognized as a process for making changes in teacher instruction and student approaches to learning (Wiliam, 2006).

Wiliam (2006) argues that the “crucial feature” of formative assessment is not the length, the location, or even who implements or responds to it; rather, it is the use of formative assessment in instructional decision-making that gives it its power (p. 285). Formative assessment, in other words, serves as “a link between teaching and learning” (Hodgen & Marshall, 2005, p. 172). The literature reveals not only a need for a shared language for assessment, but more empirical research, specifically from the United States, that points to the direct effects of formative classroom assessment on student learning (Harris, 2007). This lack of evidence remains a crucial piece of the puzzle on the foundations of effective classroom teaching and assessment in the literature (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Frey & Schmitt, 2007; Orsmond, Merry, & Callaghan et al., 2004).

Thoughtful classroom level assessment decisions made by teachers can result in improved student achievement as well as a source of reflective insight. Classroom assessment should inform teachers about what their students know and are able to do. Being formative, it can assist teachers with the instructional planning process, and it can include a variety of methods such as observation, performance tasks, reflections, projects, student self-assessment, and peer assessment (Olinghouse & Santangelo, 2010; Reig, 2007; Shepherd, 2000; Serafini, 2002; Zheng & Burry-Stock, 2003). These methods can be both formative and summative in nature (Chappius, Chappius, & Stiggins, 2009). Ideally, classroom assessment should support the
teaching and learning of skills and provide information to teachers that can be used to serve the individual needs of the students (Buhagiar, 2007). Assessment that leads to learning requires collaboration between teachers and students (Buhagiar, 2007; James & Pedder, 2006), so it is important that teacher and student roles in classroom assessment are clearly defined and delineated.

The Teacher’s Role in Classroom Assessment

The success of classroom assessment is highly dependent upon the classroom teacher (Stiggins, 1999). It requires teachers to develop high quality classroom assessment measures with clear achievement targets and goals. With this expectation comes the need for professional learning that allows teachers time, provides teacher with expertise, and encourages them to broaden their views of assessment through actual implementation of ideas in the classroom (Marzano, 2006; Stiggins, 1999). Unfortunately, teachers often feel unqualified and ill-prepared to create quality classroom assessment, particularly assessment measures that are formative in nature (Bulkley, Christman, Goertz, & Lawrence, 2010; Hargreaves et al., 2002; Zhang & Burry-Stock, 2003). This dilemma also affects inclusive classrooms in which a special education teacher is placed in the classroom with the express purpose of ensuring the success of students with special needs. If this teacher does not understand how to use assessment to appropriately monitor student learning progress, then the effectiveness of classroom assessment for diverse populations of students is diminished. All teachers must be knowledgeable in effectively assessing their students. A study conducted by Sato (2005) examined what guided classroom teachers in the design of their classroom assessments. The findings suggested that their approach to the work was a “reflection of who they are as teachers and people and what they hold as important” (p. 188). This is consistent with what Buhagiar (2007) terms an “an ideal
environment” for classroom assessment, that is, one where teachers and students feel comfortable about communicating with each other about what they know and what they do not know (p. 51).

In order to effectively implement assessment practices in the classroom, the teacher must play a significant role. Teachers must utilize their knowledge and skills when planning assessment of their students (Black & Wiliam, 2010). First, the teacher must have a thorough understanding of the content being taught and its specific domains. In addition, she must also be well-versed in the pedagogy of teaching and assessment, particularly within the discipline. She must know what instructional strategies and assessment types are the most appropriate to use and at what times during the instruction. Finally, the teacher’s knowledge must possess a detailed understanding of what her students know and are able to do with regards to the content and skills taught. These specific areas of knowledge and understanding must be in place before the teacher is able to effectively implement classroom assessment (Heritage, 2007).

Just as with any application of instructional practice, the teacher’s role also includes developing and maintaining a required skill set. The teacher must be able to create the conditions that are most conducive to the utilization of formative classroom assessment by both teachers and students. These conditions include a learning environment where honesty, respect, and willingness on the part of both student and teacher exist. In this kind of learning environment, teachers will be more successful in creating opportunities for students to develop a greater, more in depth understanding of their ideas as well as the ability to reflect (Galton, 2008; Harris, 2007; Heritage, 2007; Struble, 2007). The teacher’s role includes providing an appropriate structure to scaffold student understanding and help guide student learning (Harris, 2007; Hodgen & Marshall, 2005). Students must be taught to self-assess through modeling and targeted
questioning. If teachers are able to interpret and use the evidence obtained through assessment conducted in the classroom and created by them, they will be able to differentially match instruction to meet the students at their current and future levels of understanding (Heritage, 2007).

Finally, a teacher must possess and demonstrate several dispositions in order to successfully introduce and implement assessment practices that benefit her students. Wiliam et al. (2004) suggest that encouraging teachers via small collaborative groups might produce more effective assessment implementation versus strict issuance directing such implementation. In other words, the teacher must express a willingness to collaborate with colleagues so they can encourage and guide one another before the issuance of directives becomes problematic. A practical stance can enhance the design of effective classroom assessment and lead to the academic success of all students including those with special needs (Ferguson, 2008).

Also, teachers must be open to change. As Black and Wiliam (1998) point out, utilizing formal assessment data to truly adjust instruction and regulate student learning requires a shift in thinking for some (p. 143). Teachers must also be courageous as they refine their own practice for the sake of improved student learning. Any change requires patience as it often takes time for teachers and students to learn new habits (Black et al., 2004; Black & Wiliam, 1998). Most importantly a teacher must find her own way of introducing any kind of assessment into the daily framework of the classroom by translating research findings into real, practical actions and solutions with students (Black et al., 2004; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Wiliam, 2006).

Formal Assessment

Even though what drives learning is what actually takes place in the classroom with students and teachers (i.e. the implemented curriculum), large scale standardized testing has
become the method used to hold schools accountable (Towles-Reeves, Kleinart, & Muhomba, 2009). Succumbing to the increased pressure to improve student achievement as measured by standardized or formal, assessments, districts and others have begun the process of creating their own benchmarks. School districts often contend that their purpose for using benchmark data is to allow teachers to gather information on what standards their students have met, as well as provide a way for students to practice and prepare for future standardized tests (Clark, 2011). An intended purpose of external assessment data has often been to inform the classroom teacher’s instructional decisions. In many instances, however, districts use the data primarily as a predictive tool for student performance on state standardized tests (Bulkley, Christman, Goertz, & Lawrence, 2010). The waters between formal, standardized assessment and informal, classroom assessment are becoming muddied as a result. The tension teachers feel is not in the kind of assessment measures of they are using in the classroom, but in how they will be held accountable for student performance on formal measures of assessment.

Formal assessment can also include common assessments across grade levels or courses that are intended to periodically provide information to teachers and local school administration regarding student mastery of standards (Stiggins & Dufour, 2009). These are commonly used to make decisions about instruction or interventions, yet they are often designed by teachers working collaboratively. Many districts are formally administering regular benchmark or interim tests with their students as they attempt to move students toward improved performance on annual high stakes tests. These are typically standardized tests purchased for use in a school district (Shepherd, 2010). Teachers naturally will feel pressure to have their students perform well on these benchmark tests. It seems however that the purpose of these tests has taken a turn from improving instruction to improving test-taking ability (Shepherd, 2010, p. 253).
Formal assessment also includes what Stiggins and Dufour (2009) call “institutional-level assessments” which are standardized and designed to (1) identify which students are meeting the standards, and (2) determine the overall impact of the school’s effectiveness (p. 641). These high-stakes, large scale assessments are given to all students to determine mastery of the curriculum standards. A major concern regarding formal assessment is that it becomes the focus of the curriculum rather than a measure of mastery. Another concern is that it lacks connection to the curriculum. Finally, results can discourage both students and teachers, leaving teachers little time to make adjustments in instruction (Zimmerman & Dibenedetto, 2008). These concerns become stressors for both teachers and students and leave both groups confused about the intended purpose of assessment in general. Policymakers may believe that this pressure leverages change in the classroom, but as Jones and Egley (2007) argue, the preponderance of evidence in the literature does not support this.

Inclusive Education and Assessment

The body of literature on classroom assessment is voluminous. When the search was narrowed to classroom assessment and inclusive education, the focus of the literature shifted from explaining types of assessment and their implementation, to exploring the growing challenge of effectively and accurately assessing students with disabilities. Inclusive education is grounded in social justice; thus, a student’s exceptionality cannot exclude him from access to the general education curriculum or, the formal and informal assessment measures that accompany it. This does not mean that the assessment measures for students with disabilities should be identical to that of the general education population. The literature treats the subject of inclusive education as an issue of educational equity that can ideally counteract efforts to label and exclude students based on what they cannot do (Hall, Collins, Benjamin, & Sheehy, 2004;
Kozleski & Waitoller, 2009; Meek, 2006; Peters & Oliver, 2009; Ysseldyke, Nelson, Christenson, Johnson, et al., 2004). Thus, assessment for students with exceptionalities is a right that is guaranteed.

The body of literature researched for this review acknowledged the complexities of inclusive environments and the anxieties often associated with formally and informally assessing students with disabilities. Teachers face several challenges in their classrooms as standardized testing has become the primary method for measuring student performance (Meek, 2006; Salend, 2008). Not only do students with disabilities bring their unique exceptionality to the assessment table, they also bring diverse backgrounds and experiences. As teachers embrace and teach them, formal assessment at the end of a course looms large for those with exceptionalities in the classroom. Two empirical studies discussed the challenges teachers face in designing instructional practices that will assist students with disabilities as they access and learn the general education curriculum. In one study, the research focused on secondary courses that had rigorous content and requirements as identified by national standards (i.e. National Council of Teacher of English, National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. The study examined teachers’ perceptions of the readiness of students with special needs as they faced the challenge of these rigorous content standards. A second study explored how large scale assessment measures influenced their choices as they wrote IEP’s for students with special needs. In both studies, teachers often emphasized basic skills when working with students with special needs and they even admitted to being less confident that the students would be able to meet the minimum standard on the standardized test (Bulgren, 2006; Ysseldyke et al., 2004).

Another issue that emerged from the literature is the role that accommodations play in the classroom. Teachers indicate a willingness to adapt and accommodate, but in Bulgren’s (2006)
study, it was not observed in the classroom (p. 55). Some argue that accommodations aren’t fair to those who must test without them, while others support accommodations stating that they are the only way to measure the knowledge and skills of students with disabilities with any validity as they level the playing field. Ultimately, accommodations can’t be the only solution to achieving equity in the assessment of all students. When federal legislation raised the expectations for educators, it created a pressing need for more effective ways to assess students (Meyen, Poggio, Seok, & Smith, 2006).

Assessment can be an obstacle to creating an inclusive environment. Teachers must motivate students for a test that most often has negative consequences for poor performance (Meyen, et al., 2006; Wasburn-Moses, 2003). Teachers are socio-cultural mediators between their students and the content to be learned. The literature reveals a common perspective, and that is that standardized tests can encourage negative labels and unfairly focus on student deficits because assessments are “one size fits all” – that is, designed only to assess in one particular way and that one way is not likely to accurately measure the strengths of all students. When this becomes the only assessment tool to inform instruction, it cannot accurately reflect immediate progress (Kozelski & Waitoller, 2010; Lingo, Barton-Arwood, & Jolivette, 2011; Stanford & Reeves, 2005). Thus, what is needed is a more collaboratively developed, informal, classroom assessment in an inclusive environment characterized by collaboration between general and special education teachers and the creation of a variety of assessment methods to be used in the classroom. Further, there is an even greater need to invite new stakeholders to be a part of the decision-making process as new ideas for educational reform are created and launched (Copland & Knapp, 2006; Peters & Oliver, 2009).
According to the literature, the challenge for teachers in inclusive environments is not only knowing what content and skills to teach students with disabilities, but also how to teach those content and skills. Formal assessment, like standardized tests, has become a primary focus for many classroom teachers because of the pressures associated with students performing well on those more formal assessment measures. Thus, formal assessment has been deemed more important than classroom assessment that is developed and implemented by teachers even though formative, informal assessment often provides more accurate and relevant data for teachers in the classroom (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Students become their test score and remain in categories because formal assessment becomes the only way to demonstrate knowledge (Hall, et al., 2004; Meyen, et al, 2006). While formal assessments are designed to be objective, they are “informed by narrow notions of learning,” which contradicts the notion that assessment is intended for a variety of purposes (Kozleski & Waitoller, 2010, p. 663).

The Role of Co-Teachers in Assessment

Co-teaching is a widely accepted model for inclusive teaching in which there is shared teaching, a shared physical space, and collaborative planning, instruction, and teaching. Two or more teachers work together to teach all students in an inclusive environment (Murawski & Dieker, 2004; Rice and Zigmond, 2000). The emphasis in co-teaching is on collaboration and communication while planning and implementing effective instruction and assessment with the goal to ensure success for all students (Murawski & Dieker, 2004).

With this goal of improved student achievement, co-teachers face several challenges. Scruggs, Mastropieri, and McDuffie’s (2007) metasynthesis of qualitative research on co-teaching in inclusive environments revealed that administrative support and logistics like common planning time can make the co-teaching experience a positive one. Also, several studies
in their metasynthesis highlighted the need for teachers to volunteer to be a part of a co-teaching team and for compatibility to be recognized as necessary for success. Without the communication and collaboration, co-teaching may be less successful.

High-stakes testing can present a challenge for co-teachers because of the diverse and numerous needs represented in their classroom (Austin, 2001; Keefe & Moore, 2004). The task for co-teachers with regard to assessment is the same as it would be in a non-inclusive classroom, and that is to determine what students know and identify what instructional changes are necessary to move students forward. Communication is paramount to the success of co-teaching teams and with that, the relationship between teachers (Austin, 2001; Keefe & Moore, 2004). The special education teacher has the skill set to identify and communicate the specific needs of students with disabilities to his or her teacher partner so that proper assessment can occur in the classroom. Together, the co-teachers discuss and decide on other assessment options that are available to use when necessary in order to properly determine what the students know (Murawski & Dieker, 2004).

Despite the many challenges, the literature also points to several benefits of co-teaching. Co-teaching can bring benefits to both teacher and students. Participants in Rice and Zigmond’s (2000) study revealed that they learned from each other in their co-teaching teams. Specifically, when planning assessments, special education teachers helped general education teachers understand how differentiated assessment could increase student learning. As the special education co-teacher took on this role of facilitating learning with his/her teaching partner, they began to learn from each other through conversation and the act of co-teaching (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007). Within the co-teaching model, there is a clear emphasis on
collaboration and communication as a method for effectively teaching and ultimately assessing all students.

Assessment Reform

Even though school improvement reform often focuses on large scale standardized testing as the panacea for improving the quality of a school, there has been a recent shift from thinking of assessment as quality control in schools and classrooms to a more controversial view that identifies assessment as a reflective tool to teach students (Hargreaves, Earl, & Schmidt, 2002; Serafini, 2002). Teachers work in complex environments that require them to find balance between effective teaching strategies and preparing students to pass high stakes standardized tests; teachers must confront their own beliefs and teaching philosophies as a result of assessment mandates from district, state, and national leaders (Diamond, 2007; Mastropieri, Scruggs, Graetz & Norland, 2005; Upadhyay, 2009; Volante & Jaafar, 2010; Wa Ho, 2010; Watanabe, 2007).

Assessment reform can be particularly challenging because of the long standing value that educators and non-educators place on rankings and grades (Carless, 2005). In order to truly reform assessment and how it is used in schools and classrooms, teachers and administrators will have to confront their own beliefs and philosophies about assessment and reconcile them with the research (Buhagiar, 2007; Shepherd, 2000). Assessment reform is “not compliance with mandates” (Hargreaves, Earl & Schmidt, 2002, p. 85). Despite these challenges, Serafini (2002) urges educators to question the traditional view of assessment so that real reform can occur. Educators also share the responsibility for “improving educational outcomes” (Shepherd, 2000, p. 104) which would require their role in assessment reform to increase.

Teachers’ Voices in Assessment Reform
While ideas and methods for assessment reform have begun to take hold in the research community, practitioners have yet to reach full implementation of them. If teachers’ voices continue to be ignored, assessment reform is in jeopardy of losing its impetus and failing altogether (Buhagiar, 2007; Serafini, 2002). There is a sense of frustration that those who create policies for education don’t trust the educators who must implement them (Galton, 2008; Wa Ho, 2010). Also, if teachers do not feel that the empowerment offered them is genuine, then there will be little positive impact (Scribner & Bradley-Levine, 2010). Any effort for reform must consider how teachers make meaning of policy (Black & Wiliam, 2010; Ogan-Bekiroglu, 2009; Stein & Spillane, 2005 as cited in Park & Datnow, 2009; Tierney, 2006). In the literature reviewed, teachers’ voices were conspicuously absent. Even though teachers may share or attempt to voice their concerns, they become resigned to compliance of policies (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Galton, 2008). Teachers are given so many mandates and choices for assessing students that it becomes challenging for them to know which are valid (Frey & Schmitt, 2007). Without clear directions, ambiguity can ensue.

There is a dearth of literature investigating teachers’ thoughts related to assessment reform. Qualitative investigations around the way teachers negotiate growing assessment demands is increasing. Jones and Egley (2007) conducted qualitative research focused on teachers’ perceptions of assessment, but it still focused primarily on teachers’ thoughts regarding standardized assessment or prescribed curriculum mandates rather than classroom assessment. Also, in their case study involving nine new teachers, Achinstein and Ogawa (2006) explored resistance to prescribed curricula and the challenges teachers faced as a result. Although the literature continues to emphasize the need for teachers to be placed at the center of assessment reform, their voices continue to go unheard and unspoken.
After examining literature on classroom assessment and the role of teachers in assessment reform, there appears to be a dearth of research that explores how teachers make meaning of their own experiences related to classroom assessment and they ways in which they use their voices to promote ongoing assessment reform. There are studies that focus on students’ perceptions of classroom assessment (Bagley, 2008; Brookhart & Bronowicz, 2003; Brown & Hirschfeld, 2008). Bagley’s (2008) study examined how teachers used alternative assessments such as portfolios, narrative evaluations, and presentations in their classrooms and how these assessments engendered a more positive reaction from students. Another study conducted by Brown and Hirschfeld (2008) revealed that students perceived assessment in four major ways: (1) enjoyable, (2) irrelevant, (3) a way to improve learning, or (4) a way to make them accountable (p. 3). Research has also been conducted about teacher attitudes toward specific types of classroom assessment and there are studies that argue for teachers to be included in the assessment reform movement as well (Allen, Ort, & Schmidt, 2009; Black, Harrison, Hodgen, Marshall, & Serret, 2010; Hume & Coll, 2009; Wyse & Torrance, 2009). While there have been studies exploring how standardized testing influences overall classroom instruction (Diamond, 2007) or self-efficacy of teachers and students (Watanabe, 2007), more qualitative research examining teacher voice related to the challenges of assessment is needed.

When teachers do become involved in assessment reform, they must first be viewed as knowledgeable participants capable of thoughtful reflection. Also, they need support in their classroom as they move away from a traditional view of assessment to a more current, research-based approach (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Serafini, 2002). Tierney’s (2006) synthesis of classroom assessment suggests that educational research alone will not lead to actual changes in classroom practice. Only through an interaction of forces (teachers, researchers, policymakers,
and community stakeholders) can “classroom assessment [be] created, negotiated, and practiced” (p. 260). While exploring the teacher’s role in assessment reform, we must not forget that the classroom teacher is the connection between assessment and effective school improvement (Stiggins, 1999). Teachers must become more involved in school reform by becoming “teacher researchers.” The knowledge gained through this process of metacognitive exploration will allow teachers to learn more about their own instructional practice which could influence student learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is rooted in Dewey’s philosophy of education. Dewey (1938) purported that education itself is an act of communication that is participatory in nature, meaning that as people interact with each other, co-construction of knowledge begins. He believed that education is a social process involving not only cultivation, fostering, and nurturing from others, but also a social environment that “consists of those conditions that promote or hinder, stimulate or inhibit…” learning (Dewey, 1944, p. 11). In his view of education, people actively respond to and interact with others as part of the learning process. A crucial aspect of his approach to education also included the role of experience. In fact, Dewey argued that “there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education” (1938, p. 21). Educators should be able to use all their surroundings – both physical and social – from which to pull experiences useful for learning. An experience is what it is because of the interactions occurring between the individual and her environment. At the same time, in Dewey’s approach to education, a person’s past experiences must be recognized in order for learning to commence (Dewey, 1938). Teachers approach learning with previous experiences and knowledge; their learning will always be filtered through those experiences and one’s
identity (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978). Consequently, experience and one’s past plays a role in how one navigates the future.

A social constructivist framework provides a context that recognizes that humans are active participants in the learning process and in order to learn they must construct their own knowledge (Schunk, 2008). According to sociocultural theory, learning is a social and cultural process in which the individual’s context must be understood first (Vygotsky, 1978). People understand their world through the interactions with others in that world.

Sociocultural theory is defined in terms of two conceptual planes: the interpersonal plane, where there is conversation and interaction with verbal and body language creating a shared knowledge; and an intrapersonal plane, which is where an individual makes sense of the knowledge and makes it her own (Vygotsky, 1978). In other words, individuals first seek to make sense of information through their interactions with others and then shift to a more personal, individual level, manipulating and “trying on” new ideas in the context of past and prior knowledge (Wang, Beckett, & Brown, 2006). Vygotsky’s perspective serves as a basis for understanding the intersections of teachers’ understandings, their practice, and their everyday world (Cross, 2010, p. 437). A sociocultural perspective of learning suggests that individuals make meaning not only through their own experiences but also through their interactions with others (Gipps, 1999; John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Lund, 2008; Shepherd, 2000). Understanding this social construction of knowledge and the development of understanding can serve as an important foundation for thinking about education and instruction (Vanderstraeten, 2002).

Clark and Peterson (1984) bring together Deweyan thought and Vygotskian theory under the umbrella of teacher thought processes; Further, their synthesis of research draws a connection between teachers’ own learning and the learning that takes place in their classrooms. While
Dewey and Vygotskian theories explain how teachers can learn through sociocultural experiences, Clark and Peterson’s (1984) synthesis reveals how those learning experiences connect to teachers’ thought processes and ultimately influence their instruction. Their review suggested that teachers’ method of thinking and learning could not only influence teacher effectiveness, but also their practice of teaching as a whole. Clark and Peterson specifically speak to a teacher’s theories and beliefs as one category of thought processes. They argue that teachers develop their beliefs based not only on their classroom interactions, but also their thinking prior to the experience of teaching. Finally, as a result of this synthesis, the role of teacher as reflective thinker and professional emerges. Several studies reviewed by Clark and Peterson showed the impact that reflection can have on the development of teacher practice. In these studies, there were several examples of teachers making decisions based on their reflections of classroom experiences. These thought processes and the decisions made by teachers as a result can be extended to assessment practice.

The idea of reflection as a part of a teacher’s practice was further developed and extended by Schön (1987) who argued that reflection does not simply occur before or after the action, but during the action as well. He claimed that reflection was rooted not in technical thinking, but on experience. He gave examples through case studies of individuals who were able to solve problems in the midst of a situation and those who were not able to solve problems because they were unable to reflect in the process, or in his terminology, they did not use reflection-in-action (Schön, 1987, p. 104). The thinking process became not just about the person and the problem, but involved the environment as well as interaction with other individuals as a part of the reflection. In other words, it became more a social process. Schön’s approach to reflection hearkens back to Dewey who posited that reflection was about determining the relationship
between what we try to do and what actually happens in the environment. Not only did Dewey (1938) state that “education is essentially a social process” (p. 58), but he also believed firmly in the importance of reflection. Without it, knowledge is nothing, he argued. When people try to get others to learn without using reflection, Dewey believed it was a great waste of time. Using reflective thinking allows an individual to focus activities, plan with the end in mind, and act with specific and deliberate action (Dewey, 1964, p. 212). Reflective thinking moves an individual from a state of confusion to one where he/she can become settled from ambiguity to clarity. Thinking without reflecting is incomplete, argued Dewey (1964, p. 196).

Dewey’s (1964) views on education, experience, and reflection therefore serve as the foundation of the conceptual framework for this study. This reflective, sociocultural approach to this investigation will build on his ideas – chiefly, that experience and interaction within a specific environment coupled with reflection creates a situation where learning can occur. Without this approach, implementation of mandates in education may fail as suggested in Fernandez, Ritchie, and Barker’s 2008 study of teachers asked to implement a mandated curriculum. Teachers were not given opportunities to make sense of the curriculum before using it in their classrooms and felt disenfranchised. As a result of this lack of understanding and opportunity to make meaning, they only implemented those aspects of the curriculum that they already were doing and left out anything that was new or different from their current practice (p. 198). Teacher knowledge and development are often situated and mediated socially (Feryok, 2009). Learning can be enhanced when it is shaped by the interactions and shared experiences and perspectives of a group (Dewey, 1986; Wang, Beckett, & Brown, 2006). As such, the way teachers construct meaning can inform the process of learning that occurs in the classroom (Vanderstraeten, 2002).
Methodological Framework

For this study, a qualitative Case Study approach was used. This perspective assumes that there is not one, observable reality; instead, “reality is socially constructed” (Merriam, 2009, p. 8). With a qualitative case study, the researcher is charged with looking for the complex reality in the research setting. The goals of this study are to explore how co-teachers make sense of assessment mandates and how that translates into the reality (i.e. actions, instruction, decision-making) of their own classrooms. Using a case study approach offers insight into the complexities of the inclusive classroom where teachers are not only attempting to understand and implement required assessment policy such as informal, daily assessment, periodic benchmark testing, and the standardized test given at the end of the course, but also meet the immediate needs of all students.

In the literature reviewed, there were several case studies that focused on classroom assessment. There were several empirical studies that focused on the types of assessment used by teachers in the classroom and how they were created (Brookhart & Durkin, 2003; Suurtam, Koch, & Arden, 2010). In the area of teachers and classroom assessment, case studies exist with regards to decision making and implementation of various assessments to improve student learning (Sato, Coffey, & Moorthy, 2005; Walpole, Justice, & Invernizzi, 2004). In one case study, for example, researchers examined how teachers and students use assessment guidelines and criteria in the classroom. The findings suggested that when teachers integrate assessment into their everyday instructional practices, it becomes directly tied to learning (Lund, 2008, p. 49). There were also studies that focused on student perceptions of classroom assessment. The conclusions of this study note that when students clearly understand the expectations and requirements of the assessments given to them, then they take more control of their own learning
(Bagley, 2010, p. 101) Still, another study examined the impact of classroom assessment policy on students and the findings suggested that when there is a clear connection between assessment policy and purpose, students can use assessment as a learning tool (Van Zoost, 2011, p. 83). There is also a case study that specifically examined how assessment reform is actually implemented. The findings suggested that teachers need encouragement, time, and guidance as they implement assessment reform. Along with this, administration must understand that assessment reform takes time for teachers to embrace it (Carless, 2005, p. 49). While there were not many that gave their focus to teacher understandings, some studies explored how accountability and standardized testing mandates influence teachers’ classroom instruction (Diamond, 2007; Watanabe, 2007). The findings suggest that the accountability mandates often conflict with teachers’ views of teaching and learning (Watanabe, 2007, p. 355).

While exploring the aforementioned aspects of assessment, in particular the impact assessment mandates have on teachers’ instruction, it is necessary to explore why and how teachers plan for and use assessment in their classrooms. In the current study, teachers are given an opportunity to share and reflect on their responses to and implementation of, assessment mandates made by their local school administration. The current examination may broaden our understanding of the way in which teachers’ thoughts and actions around assessment coalesce to bring about possibilities for change in their practice and the practice of other educators.

Conclusion

This literature review focused on four major areas. In section one, classroom assessment, formal assessment, inclusive environments, and teachers’ role related to accountability mandates and reform were addressed. Also presented were the theoretical foundations and conceptual framework for the current study. Finally, the methodological framework was presented.
Overall, the literature treats the topic of assessment in the following ways. It exposes readers to the ideas that (a) formative assessment can improve student achievement, (b) informal and formal assessment, if implemented effectively, can help improve instructional practice, (c) formative assessment as an instructional practice must be presented and taught to teachers, and (d) informal assessment can help engender assessment reform. The literature suggests that classroom assessment that is formative in nature improves student achievement and learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Heritage, 2007; Wiliam, Lee, Harrison, & Black, 2004). Black and Wiliam (1998) argue that assessing students formatively can “raise standards of achievement” (p. 140); Furthermore, it can potentially help “low achieving students more than other students” (p. 141) which can help begin to erase the achievement gap while still improving the learning of all students. Besides raising the standards of achievement and learning for students, classroom formative assessment with reflection can raise the standard of teaching and ultimately move learning of both students and teachers forward (Heritage, 2007). Along with reforming classroom assessment, the power relationship present between teaching and assessment must be recognized while teachers must be educated and encouraged in their role as assessors of student learning (Gipps, 1999; James & Pedder, 2006). Finally, a recurring theme within the literature involves assessment reform, specifically, that it must be aimed at supporting the work of teachers in the classroom which implies that more work must be done to truly reform assessment in the classroom (Black & Wiliam, 2010; James & Pedder, 2006).

In the next chapter, the methodology for the study will be presented.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter will begin with a review of the purpose and research questions for the current study, followed by a discussion of its design. Next, the research setting, participants, and context will be explained. After that, the researcher’s role and positionality will be presented. Next, a description of the plans for collecting, managing, and analyzing the data will be presented. The final section of this chapter will include a discussion of the confidentiality and ethics required of the researcher. Finally, trustworthiness will be addressed followed by the limitations and summary.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of the current study is to understand how co-teachers in an inclusive, secondary classroom make decisions about classroom assessment and navigate the varied accountability demands they face at state, district, and local levels. The rich, descriptive data of a qualitative study provides a window into their thoughts and experiences (Bogden & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2008). The questions that guided this study are:

1. What perceptions do general and special education teachers who co-teach in secondary, inclusive classrooms hold about assessment?
2. What impact do local, state, and federal accountability mandates have on general and special education teachers’ instructional decisions at the secondary level within inclusive environments?
3. How do general and special education teachers plan and implement assessment within a co-taught environment at the secondary level?

Design

This design of this study is qualitative using case study methods. Merriam (2009) describes the key characteristics of qualitative research as: (a) focusing on how people make sense of their experiences; (b) using the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection; (c) gathering data inductively; and (d) describing data richly and fully. A qualitative case study model is the preferred method when the researcher poses questions that focus on ‘how’ and ‘why’ phenomena take place within a bounded system. In using this model, the researcher has little control over the events being researched and the focus of the study has a real life context (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2008). Using a qualitative case study model allows for an in depth examination of teacher voice and how teachers make meaning of the growing challenges of assessing students in the classroom. While a basic qualitative study focuses on people’s interpretation of their experiences and how they ascribe meaning to those experiences, a qualitative case study model allows for investigation of complicated bonded units that have many variables (Merriam, 2009; Yin 2008). Conducting case study research “allows researchers to unravel the complex school and classroom realities” (Fluckiger, 2010, p. 172). In order to reveal authenticity and get at the heart of the lived experiences of participants, this study utilizes naturalistic methods and data sources, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

In the current study, the bounded unit or system consists of the people who implement assessment decisions at the local school level. This group includes local school administrators who are responsible for communicating federal and district mandated plans for assessment to teachers. A main component of district assessment mandates includes requisite standardized
testing that is used to determine whether a student will graduate from high school as well as determine a school’s Adequate Yearly Progress status, which is reported publicly. Benchmark testing, diagnostic testing, and practice testing modeled after the formal assessments students must take are also included in the plan. Most importantly, the bounded unit for this study consists of the teachers who have been asked to implement and show results with these assessment plans in an inclusive education classroom. The unit of analysis is the teachers’ experiences in the classroom with assessment (Merriam, 2009). A case study method is also a useful method for studying the complex relationships that sometimes exist between school co-teachers; case studies are particularly effective when the relationships explored are “complex, situated, and problematic” (Stake, 2005, p. 448).

Context

The present study was conducted over an eight month period. To gain access to the site for research purposes, I consulted with the assistant principal for curriculum to identify potential participants. The only two criteria required were 1) the instructors’ course must have a state mandated End of Course test at the end and 2) the instructors’ course must include two teachers utilizing a co-teaching model. This study focused on the high school level as the frequency of standardized tests provides greater complexity for investigation. The participants are all colleagues with whom I have worked formerly, as a teacher or as an administrator. They all teach in the same school with me and they all teach English/Language Arts. One co-teaching pair teaches 9th grade Literature and Composition in an inclusive setting while the other co-teaching pair teaches 11th grade American Literature and Composition within an inclusive setting.

Gaining access to a site often begins with the relationships that are built over time (Merriam, 2009). My relationship with the participants allowed for greater access. Additionally,
having worked as an administrator and classroom teacher in the high school where the research was conducted and developed the collegial professional that exists created a level of trust to allow the study to go forward. Colleagues have watched me teach and work with other teachers, so they viewed my role more as a true information gatherer and not as an evaluator. None of the participants exhibited any concerns with any aspects of the data collection process. This is important because teacher layoffs have happened in recent years as a result of reduction in force as well as evaluative decisions; in light of this, teachers could have been hesitant to reveal their true feelings about classroom assessment and mandates delivered through school administrators. Also, there was a collegial, professional, and personal relationship that had already been established with members of the administrative team based on the previous school year. Two of the administrators participating in the study have already earned their doctoral degree which created a more open and honest dialogue related to my purpose as they have conducted educational research in the past and understand its purpose and complexities. The teacher participants and the administrator participants were provided with a brief explanation of the research study, including its purpose and data collection plan. They were also given multiple opportunities to ask any questions before data collection began and were informed that they could discontinue participating at any point if they chose to do so. This established trust from the beginning.

Setting and Participants

The research setting is a secondary school located in a suburban area of a major metropolitan city in the southeast United States. The school has 2054 students and 112 full time teachers. The student body demographic breakdown is 58% White, 33% African American, 4% Hispanic, 3% Asian American, and 2% other races. The most recent graduating class profile lists
that 76% of the graduating seniors planned on attending a four year college, 16% planned on attending a two year college or technical school and 8% reported that they would enter the military or work force. The top 10% of the class of 2011 had a 4.1 or higher grade point average on a 4 point scale and 57% of the graduating class was eligible for a state public school scholarship program. Less than 10% of the student body qualified for free or reduced lunch. A unique requirement of the school for all graduating seniors is a capstone project completed through their English courses consisting of a non-literary research paper, portfolio, and presentation of a product to a panel of community and teacher judges.

The primary participants are four teachers (two sets of co-teachers - one general education teacher and one special education teacher) in an inclusive education English Language Arts classroom. In the school, there are no small group special education classes outside of the following classifications: Mildly Intellectually Disabled, Moderately Disabled, and Severe and Profound. All students working toward a general education high school diploma are served in an inclusion setting. Additional participants included the principal and the assistant principal responsible for curriculum. These administrators are responsible for communicating any information, expectations, and policies regarding assessment, both classroom and formal, from the district level staff to the teachers. No student participants were included in this study.

The most common sampling technique used in qualitative research studies – and in the current study as well – is purposeful sampling because it allows the researcher to “select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). When using purposeful sampling, the researcher is able to select a sample that can potentially provide the most useful data. With a case study, there are two levels of sampling – 1) the bounded unit and 2) the selected sample within that set. The current study uses purposeful sampling with the following
criteria: the participants must be teachers teaching in an inclusive classroom at the secondary level and the course they are teaching must require a state mandated End of Course Test as one of its components. The voices of both general education and special education teachers who are teaching in a specific context are examined, which is why two general education teachers and their special education co-teaching counterparts were selected.

In the current research setting, co-teaching teams are matched up by the Special Education department chair who strives to assign the Special Education teacher only one content area. Within the co-teaching team, the expectation set by administration and district level Special Education staff is for the Special Education teacher to provide specialized instruction within the inclusive classroom while the General Education teacher provides both curriculum and instruction. In order to make this work, the general education teachers who co-teach are required to provide the lesson plans for the class the week prior to instruction so that the Special Education teacher can plan for that specialized event and include accommodations for her students. In most cases, the two co-teachers in a team do not share a common planning period. Also, as a result of budget cuts in the district, the Special Education Lead teacher position was eliminated which increased the responsibilities of the Special Education teachers to include writing all their own Individualized Education Plans for students on their case load. Special Education teachers are also responsible for setting up and conducting any meetings with parents and teachers to discuss progress toward identified learning goals.

Using two co-teaching teams increased the potential impact of the findings because they offered multiple participant perspectives (Yin, 2008). Gathering data from two different classrooms as well as two different participant’s perspectives from within each classroom (i.e. general education teacher and the special education teacher), provided a complexity and richness
of data. There was not only the layer of two different classrooms, but also one of two teachers within the walls of each classroom. Other participants include two administrators who function as instructional leaders in the school. Using participants from the same school allowed for a focus on how two different teams of teachers, consisting of four different personalities, make meaning from mandates delivered by the same administrators, and more importantly, consistency across population and setting.

Participants

The two co-teaching teams for this study were selected using purposeful sampling. Each team chosen was required to be teaching a course with an embedded state mandated assessment in an inclusive setting. Both co-teaching pairs were teaching in a secondary English/Language Arts classroom. The four participants that comprise these two co-teaching teams represented a range of personal and professional experiences. They all range in age from 27-47 and have 8-25 years of teaching experience. Pseudonyms were used throughout the study to provide for confidentiality and anonymity.

Co-Teaching Team #1 is comprised of Isabel and Sharon. Isabel, the general education teacher, has been teaching for 5 years and is preparing to leave the classroom for a school counseling position while Sharon, the special education teacher, is within 10 years of retirement. Isabel is an African-American who graduated from a historically Black university, and Sharon, a Caucasian, graduated from a majority Caucasian university. Isabel went into college with a strong inclination toward teaching and continued on that trajectory. In contrast, Sharon had plans of going into the broadcast journalism field and changed her mind after a couple of years of coursework. Isabel holds a teaching certificate in Secondary English and Sharon has two certifications, one in Secondary Social Studies and one in Special Education. Sharon actually
began her career as a middle school Social Studies teacher and moved to high school a few years later. Following several years outside of the classroom in the role of an instructional coaching position and reading consultant, she returned to the classroom as a Special Education teacher. They have been working together as a co-teaching team for one year.

Co-Teaching Team #2 is comprised of Joan and Alice. Joan, the general education teacher, has been teaching for 11 years and has recently begun to consider leaving the secondary classroom to pursue administration of college-level teaching. Alice, the special education teacher, has been teaching for 13 years and is currently pursuing additional certification in Secondary English. Her current certification is Special Education in all grade levels. Like the first co-teaching team, Joan and Alice have quite different backgrounds. Joan, who is African-American, spent much of her early childhood in a metropolitan, inner city environment while Alice, who is Caucasian, grew up in a homogeneous area of the Midwest where she was exposed to little racial diversity growing up. Joan graduated from a historically Black women’s college in a large metropolitan city and Alice graduated from a predominantly Caucasian college in the Midwest. While Alice went to college with the intent of becoming a teacher, Joan changed her career plans after attending college for a few years. Joan has certification in Secondary English and also in Special Education. She served as the Special Education co-teacher in the classroom for a year before returning to the classroom as the general education teacher. Alice spent several years teaching Secondary English to a small class of students with special needs. All the participants expressed a passion for teaching and easily identified reasons why they enjoy their jobs. The participants are all outspoken in their views but chose to share them in different ways. Also, each participant made the conscious choice to teach in an inclusive classroom.
Researcher’s Role

The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis and consequently must acknowledge any subjectivities or biases (Merriam, 2009). The researcher’s role was a serious one in this investigation as it involved listening to the voices of individuals who often feel that their voice is not heard. Having served as an instructional coach and school administrator, I have observed and evaluated many teachers. I was particularly careful to serve as an observer and listener rather than as an evaluator. In conducting classroom observations, participants were asked when they preferred me to come into their classes; unannounced observations were never conducted. This helped to build trust in the process of data collection. It emphasized that the research being collected was not about evaluation. Also, because of my current role as a classroom teacher who has strong opinions about assessment and accountability mandates, I realized that I had biases of my own. A conscious effort was made to avoid sharing any of those biases in the construction and administration of interview questions, follow up questions, or observation notes. Finally, through my doctoral program I read extensively on the topic of assessment so my knowledge base was broadened, as did my views and proclivities towards assessment. Despite my familiarity with the topic, all efforts were made to present myself as a peer and colleague when interviewing and observing my participants; in other words, I did not want to isolate them or portray myself as someone who knew more than they did.

In order to successfully conduct this study, I honed my skills as a listener and developer of questions. While being completely unbiased is not possible, flexibility and sincerity in hearing all opinions regardless of personal beliefs is, in fact, possible and necessary. Also, a firm grasp of the characteristics of case study was required (Yin, 2008). When I began this research study, I had developed a collegial relationship with the participants and they were open and honest as a
result. After completing data collection, it was clear that most of the participants did not share the same background knowledge regarding assessment.

Positionality

As I enter my sixteenth year of education, I have been reflecting on my pedagogical experiences with the multitude of students I have encountered. My career in education began with me teaching in a school described by many as one with a high risk population of students at a time when there was no federal legislation mandating how I was supposed to assess my students. As a young English teacher new to the field, I fondly remember spending hours after school each week tutoring students and designing lessons that would engage and teach them the skills of reading and writing. At the same time, I also remember staying up late the night before a test day (a date I had determined) typing the test I would give my students. I also remember using other teachers’ tests that they had shared with me and also of telling students the day of the test, “Skip questions 5, 10, 12, 15, etc.” because those were concepts, skills, or information that we had not yet covered. It seemed somewhat odd to me at the time, but not until I began to learn more about what “testing” or “assessing” students was really about. It doesn’t seem like that long ago that I was developing the tests the night before I gave them. I imagine this is also true for many new and experienced teachers. I created those last minute tests because I didn’t know any other way. I imagine many teachers still make those last minute tests because they don’t know any other way either.

After the introduction of No Child Left Behind legislation state performance standards and the inevitable changes facing our district, I began to question my former methods of testing and/or assessing my students. Shouldn’t I know what and how I am testing my students long before I test them? This prompted my introduction into professional learning. I began to learn
anything I could about research-based instruction and assessment through local school
professional development, Advanced Placement training opportunities, and the national board
certification process. What I discovered would completely change my approach to assessment
forever.

My experiences over the last sixteen years have been varied and include everything from
teaching at schools labeled as “needing improvement” to schools viewed as “high performing.” I
became a National Board Certified teacher in my field of English and I have received training in
teaching Advanced Placement courses. I have also been an instructional lead teacher and trainer
for the district which afforded me many opportunities to attend national conferences with
internationally known researchers and educators speaking on instruction and assessment. These
experiences awakened a thirst for knowledge about the craft of teaching, and I began to realize
that it is a profession, like many others, that requires continuous learning. As I remained constant
in my pursuit of information about how to become a better teacher, I was encouraged to pursue
administration. As a school administrator, I was required to evaluate teachers in areas such as
instruction and assessment. What I learned at this stage in my career, with the impact of No
Child Left Behind already being felt, is that teachers are frustrated because they feel that the
people who make demands on them have not been in a classroom in years and could not possibly
understand current issues and dilemmas. While I had a positive and successful experience as a
school administrator, I was constantly hearing the frustrated outcries of teachers regarding
assessment and mandated accountability. At the same time, I was also facing my own
frustrations…the ones that called me back to my first professional love – teaching in the
classroom.
After making the decision to return to the classroom, I began to feel the same frustration that those I evaluated had been feeling. I shared in their concern that our voices as teachers were not being heard. When I’d hear about proposed changes by state and federal leaders, I’d wonder, who helped design these changes? What were teachers being asked about these changes? How can teachers become a part of the changes that we are asked to implement? It seems that the constant change in policy results in more tests and accountability. While I don’t have a problem with accountability, my concern is the instrument and methods by which this accountability is measured. This frustration pushed me to read more and know more about the assessment machine that seems to be driving the political rhetoric and, ultimately, the lesson plans of classroom teachers. I wanted to know more about what assessment really looked like and how it came to be viewed as it had by researching classrooms with real teachers and real students.

Data Collection Plan

Five sources of qualitative data were collected in pursuit of answering the research questions for this study. They are: in-depth biographical interviews, open-ended interviews, focus group interviews, observations (field notes), and documents. The following questions guided this investigation:

1. What perceptions do general and special education teachers who co-teach in secondary, inclusive classrooms hold about assessment?

2. What impact do local, state, and federal accountability mandates have on general and special education teachers’ instructional decisions at the secondary level within inclusive environments?

3. How do general and special education teachers plan and implement assessment within a co-taught environment at the secondary level?
As fieldnotes were taken and collected, reflective comments were added by the researcher. Reflective fieldnotes, indicated by the abbreviation “O.C.” which stands for observer’s comment, provide an opportunity to record the researcher’s thoughts and opinions throughout the data collection process. Because the researcher’s role is so central to data collection, reflective fieldnotes provide the investigator an opportunity to be acutely aware of her own relationship to the setting, participants, and data (Bogden & Biklen, 2007). As a part of all observation fieldnotes and interview transcripts, observer’s comments were included. Finally, reflective memos, which are longer pieces written about the progress of the research and written throughout the data collection process, were completed and included in the data collection (Bogden & Biklen, 2007).

**Interviews**

Using interviews to gather information is one of the best techniques to use particularly when focusing on a small number of individuals (Merriam, 2009). In-depth biographical data such as years of experience, content area, background in education, and familiarity with classroom assessment were collected for each participant. Using a semi-structured process for interviews allowed for several predetermined questions to facilitate the interview, but also provided freedom to follow the lead of the teacher’s voice throughout the interview. In qualitative research, interviews tend to be more unstructured and open-ended. Merriam explains that this approach assumes “that individual respondents define the world in unique ways” (p. 90). The semi-structured interview process gave the researcher the opportunity to ask questions directly related to assessment mandates and their implementation in the classroom. All interviews were conducted in person and recorded using a digital recorder. Each interview provided an opportunity to focus not only on specific details as the participants speak, but also
any facial expressions or other elements of body language. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using a computer data analysis program, Atlas ti, which facilitated member checking.

Follow-up interviews with each teacher participant were conducted individually. After the in-depth biographical interview conducted at the beginning of data collection, 1-2 open-ended interviews were conducted. Individual interviews with the local school principal and the assistant principal responsible for curriculum were conducted during the final weeks of data collection. A list of questions can be found in Appendix C.

Focus Groups

In addition to individual interviews, focus groups were conducted to collect further data. The purpose of focus groups is to gather opinions and information from research participants in an open, non-threatening environment (Bogden & Biklen, 2007; Kruger & Casey, 2009). In the current study, each focus group was comprised of either Special Education co-teachers or the General Education co-teachers. This provided another window into the complexities that exist in the relationship between co-teachers and how they made sense of issues related to assessment and accountability. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) contend that focus groups give participants more ownership over the research process and an opportunity to make meaning through their shared experience of the interview. Also, the participants in a focus group influence are influenced by each other through the social interaction of the interview (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Because the goal of this study was to examine the perceptions of assessment by General Education and Special Education teachers and how their understanding of assessment mandates translates into classroom practice, focus groups gave participants another opportunity to discuss topics they were unable to address in the individual interview setting. Often, the focus group
discussion can stimulate each other to recognize and better understand their own thoughts on a subject (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

**Observations**

Another data source was the observation and fieldnotes. Because I currently teach in the research setting, time had to be spent practicing the skill of observation so that I not only viewed the environment with fresh eyes, but also paid attention to using rich, thick description and listened carefully to the participants. Also, as a former administrator and instructional coach, I am familiar with various methods to make my presence less intrusive, such as arriving before class begins and leaving after class ends or during an active transition. In addition, due to my former role as an administrator and evaluator of teachers previously, my presence in the classroom could have been perceived as intimidating, so I worked with the co-teaching pairs to set up observations and discussed in detail my role as an observer and colleague (and not former administrator) beforehand. Aspects of confidentiality and ethics with regards to data collection during observations were also discussed.

For each co-teaching pair interviewed, three separate classroom observations were conducted. I served as participant observer meaning that my objectives were known to the teachers and classes I observed. My role as a participant observer was secondary to my data collecting role which allowed more access; however, I was careful not to interfere with the processes or instruction that was occurring in the classroom (Merriam, 2009). For each observation, detailed notes were taken and when the observations were completed reflective memos were written as a way to reflect and process the data. Not using a specific observation protocol allowed me to notice many different aspects of the teacher such as classroom environment, teacher-student rapport, and the room itself. With the classroom observations, the
focus was how the teachers used and implemented assessment in the classroom. These observations along with the literature allowed for triangulation of data gathered through interviews and lesson plans (Watanabe, 2007).

Documents

Examining documents that are not produced specifically for the research study provided an opportunity to gather data from a source whose setting has not been altered or contrived (Merriam, 2009). Participants were asked to provide lesson plans for at least 6 weeks of the semester during which observations occurred. These are required by the school principal so participants did not have to produce them specifically for the research study. Each co-teaching pair provided two classroom assessments designed for use that semester. The documents combined with the classroom observations, individual interviews, and focus group interviews provided a window into the complexities of an inclusive classroom with two teachers working to implement effective assessment while navigating the harried demands of accountability mandates.

Data Management Plan

All data was managed using technology and paper copies. Digital copies of all data were kept in several locations: the researcher’s personal laptop, an external hard drive, and a password protected online backup repository. Hard copies of data documents were kept in a locked file cabinet and additional copies were stored in the researcher’s personal office at home. The schedule of observations and interviews was managed using a detailed table with dates and times. All interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and the hard copies were stored with other data. All data, it was explained to the participants, will be destroyed within 5 years’ time from the start of the study.
Data Analysis

Data analysis is a simultaneous inductive and comparative process that qualitative researchers continuously use (Merriam, 2009). Keeping fieldnotes is a crucial strategy for gathering and analyzing qualitative data. After conducting interviews and observations, qualitative researchers should reflect on the event as soon as possible in order to capture their own responses and questions as they begin to form. Keeping memos and writing observer comments in their fieldnotes allow qualitative researchers to begin that inductive process of moving from bits of data to concepts and ideas (Bogden and Biklen, 2007). Researchers should then identify those areas in their data that specifically address the research questions.

The data set for this study included transcribed interviews, fieldnotes of observations, documents pertaining to assessment mandates from the district, and reflective memos. From the beginning, categories were constructed using open coding through a technology data analysis tool, Atlas-ti. This assisted with identifying segments and categories. After that, margin notes, codes and comments were revisited through the process of axial coding which allowed for the creation of initial categories that were compiled. This list was lengthy, but still narrowed down the categories by being even more specific. Again, reflecting on this process through memo writing helped analyze the data (Merriam, 2009). Because qualitative data analysis is often a constant comparative process, the list of categories was continually revisited to refine and revise throughout the data collection and analysis process. It is important that any categories created be “responsive to the purpose of the research” (Merriam, p. 185). It should be an exhaustive list that is mutually exclusive, sensitive to the data, and conceptually congruent (Merriam, 2009).

Confidentiality and Ethics
Each participant in the study was provided with a consent form that ensured his/her confidentiality throughout the study. The consent form informed them that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative repercussions. Given my close relationship to school administration, I reiterated to my teacher participants that I am bound by academic integrity to keep all data collected completely confidential. To assist with this, each participant was assigned a pseudonym throughout the study. All documents were kept in password protected computer and online digital storage. The data collected as a result of the study were never discussed with participants or school administration to ensure that disruption of the research setting could be avoided.

With each interview, participants were given a choice of location to ensure a level of comfort. Interviewing them in their own space could potentially enhance their willingness to be completely honest. All but one participant chose to come to my classroom for the interview. The participants were also informed that all transcriptions of their interviews were kept secure. When observing their classrooms, participants were offered the choice of an announced or unannounced observation. The purpose of the classroom observations was to capture a snapshot of what teachers do on a day to day basis with regards to assessment, not to evaluate their teaching. All teacher participants chose to have their observations announced.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative methodology, achieving trustworthiness is similar to achieving validity and reliability in quantitative research. The research study was conducted rigorously and ethically in hopes of having any effect on the practice of teaching and assessing in the classroom (Merriam, 2009). Reliability and validity are based on assumptions that there is a reality or truth in the study and that findings should be replicable and congruent, respectively. With qualitative
research, one of the assumptions it is based on is that reality is constantly changing and multi-faceted; therefore, the premise of reality for this study is that it cannot be replicated or proven (Merriam, 2009). To achieve credibility, this study makes use of triangulated data using observations, interviews, and document analysis (Yin, 2008; Bogden and Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 2009). The study also makes use of member checking where participants were provided the opportunity to review any data collected in their classrooms or through interviews. This was done close to the actual date of collection to help with recall. Using member checks helped rule out possibilities of misinterpretation and identify any missing elements. Also, an aspect of triangulating the data came with the explanation of my biases and dispositions as a researcher in order to enhance my credibility. Being completely honest about these elements allows any readers to better understand how the thought processes and interpretations emerged. As a researcher I always attempted to use thoughtful questioning skills and avoided asking questions that were biased. I was sensitive to the participants concerns and listened attentively while teachers responded. To achieve transferability this study employed rich, thick description when collecting data. Also, using maximum variation with my selection of study sample should reassure readers that the findings may be transferrable to another context (Merriam, 2009).

Finally, the review of related literature will be utilized as part of the triangulation process. This will be achieved by presenting instances where the findings support, refute, or add something completely new to the literature on assessment.

Summary

This qualitative case study focused on the perceptions secondary General Education and Special Education teachers who teach in an inclusive environment have about assessment. It also focused on how these teachers co-construct instruction in a co-led environment as well as the
impact accountability mandates have on their instructional decision making. Using case study methods provided the opportunity to glean knowledge from practitioners that is concrete and contextual (Merriam, 2009). While there have been case studies conducted around the topic of classroom and/or formative assessment, many of them focus on student perceptions of these tools or the specific types and reactions to using assessment for learning in their classrooms. Focusing on the teacher’s voice in the realm of assessment and its reform will potentially add to the growing body of qualitative research in the area of classroom assessment. Who better to offer perspective than those who are assessing students regularly? The purposefully selected sample offers a perspective that allows readers to bring their own experiences and understandings to the case study (Merriam, 2009). The current study included the following data sources: in-depth biographical and open-ended interviews, focus group interviews, observations, and document analysis. A constant comparative method of data analysis allowed for the revelation of teacher voice around the subject of classroom and formal assessment and mandated accountability.

The next chapters include the results and a summary of the study. Chapter four will present the perceptions held by special education and general education who co-teach in a secondary classroom. The themes addressed will be the importance of a balanced approach to classroom assessment, the importance of personal experiences in the context of the inclusive classroom, and instructional challenges of implementing effective assessment in the classroom. Chapter five will discuss the impact that accountability mandates have on teachers’ instructional and classroom assessment decisions. This includes how co-teachers co-construct instruction in the inclusive classroom. It will also include a summary, discussion of findings, implications for teacher practice and assessment policy, and recommendations based on the results of the data.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand co-teachers’ perceptions of assessment in inclusive settings and how they made meaning of assessment mandates while negotiating the challenging demands of assessing students in their classrooms. Designing sound formal and informal assessment systems must balance student needs with district requirements. Chappius, Chappius, and Stiggins (2009) contend that professional teachers must have data from the large-scale standardized assessments available in a timely manner in order to use them effectively in designing sound formal and informal classroom assessment. Mastropieri and Scruggs (2001) assert that in inclusive settings, maintaining a balance of effective instruction, coverage of curriculum, and the challenge of high stakes testing can be challenging for teachers (p. 267) as the findings will reveal. This chapter presents findings from the current study using qualitative data analysis and is guided by the following three research questions:

1. What perceptions do general and special education teachers who co-teach in secondary, inclusive classrooms hold about assessment?

2. What impact do local, state, and federal accountability mandates have on general and special education teachers’ instructional decisions at the secondary level within inclusive environments?

3. How do general and special education teachers plan and implement assessment within a co-taught environment at the secondary level?

A brief background of each co-teaching team was provided in Chapter Three. This chapter will begin with an in-depth background of each participant singularly and as a team member. The next section of this chapter looks at co-teachers’ perceptions of assessment. Next,
this chapter examines the impact that assessment mandates have on participants’ classrooms and instructional decisions. The final section of this chapter addresses the challenges of creating assessment in inclusive classroom and how those challenges affect the implementation of classroom instruction and assessment.

Participants and Classroom Setting

Isabel, classroom teacher

Even though she recalled playing school with dolls and teaching them in her childhood, Isabel went to college with a major in sports management and marketing. She quickly realized that teaching was what she wanted to do and despite the challenges of being a teacher and particularly a teacher in an inclusive environment, she still loves teaching. For her the profession is about the relationships both with students and colleagues. She smiled as she shared the importance of positive student-teacher relationships:

…even seeing them years down the road…and seeing how successful they’re being and seeing I made a difference. Even this is just my second year at [this school], but even my students from last year come back and say ‘Oh my gosh. I miss your class. I’m learning but I really miss your class and I miss this.’ So that’s the rewarding part of it when the kids come back.

For Isabel, the challenges of the job include lack of time and pressure, whether externally or internally inflicted. As a co-teacher, she feels pressured to be consistent and timely with her feedback on daily assessments. She gestured to the stacks of research papers she had to grade while she mentioned other quizzes to check and continued planning that must be done. She also feels pressure with regards to ensuring that students know what they should know when they leave her classroom; however, when many students come to high school and her class with
significant learning deficiencies, she worries about how she can help them progress to where they need to be in one semester:

…you get these students [who] were kind of phased out of middle school and did not pass the CRCT (Criterion Referenced Competency Test)...[there] was social promotion or summer promotion...They’re here and now I have this student who did not pass their CRCT probably is not supposed to be here and now I have to figure out how to keep them from being behind… Or how to get them involved in a class setting and teach them these skills they should have already learned. So it’s hard. It’s pressure.

She also shared her school calendar that revealed the numerous IEP meetings she had to attend for her students receiving Special Education services and other department or school related meetings. Despite these challenges, Isabel continues to affirm her love for the job, particularly the co-taught classroom.

In the five years she has been teaching, Isabel has had at least one inclusion class every semester which means she has co-taught every year she has been in the profession. She really likes co-teaching and enjoys the benefit of working closely with a colleague. She is passionate about what the model does, not only for teacher collaboration, but most importantly for the students with special needs in the inclusive classroom. She believes that students with exceptionalities should not be isolated and that they benefit greatly from being in a classroom with typical peers. Isabel readily admits that she has much to learn about instruction and assessment and often looks to her colleagues and co-teachers to help her in this endeavor:

“…when I collab[orate] I get a chance to listen to what everyone else is doing and I can look at what they’re doing and what I’m doing and I can kind of compare.” Yildirim (2008), when discussing Vygotsky’s theories of learning and assessment, stresses that social interactions are
necessary to the improvement of learning (p. 302). Isabel takes full advantage of every opportunity for collaboration and conversation.

Isabel’s experiences with the types of standardized assessment as a student are similar to her current students’ experiences. She doesn’t remember her secondary teachers focusing much on standardized test preparation in the classroom. She recalls her teachers: “They taught to the best of their ability. They taught us the content and from there they expected us to know it in order to pass the test.” In this current era of accountability mandates, she shared that as a teacher she feels pressure to focus on standardized test preparation. As a student in high school, she took subject area standardized tests in Mathematics, Science, English, and Social Studies that had to be passed in order for her to graduate. Isabel also mentioned taking a variety of assessments in the classroom and even though she shared that she often got extremely nervous preparing for those, she did usually perform well: “…I knew that [tests] was a weakness for me I panicked…but 9 times out of 10 I did really [well] on them. It was just nerve-wracking.” Isabel freely shared the anxiety she felt in high school and still feels when taking standardized tests as a graduate student.

She also shared her struggles with the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and the American College Testing exam (ACT) that she took as college entrance assessments. These are tests on which she didn’t perform well. She admits that these experiences create a dilemma for her as a classroom teacher. Many times she has students who don’t complete classwork or homework, but do well on the mandated, standardized End of Course Test which is opposite of her own personal experience. She struggles with her assessment and evaluation of those students and whether or not the performance on a once a semester standardized test should indicate passing a class for those students who have not performed well throughout the course except on the End of
Course Test which is a minimum competency assessment. Her confusion with what constitutes the most accurate measure of student learning illustrates the multifaceted challenge of assessing students both in the classroom and beyond. Isabel has several ideas regarding assessment including her own personal experiences that she is trying to reconcile in order to provide the most effective instruction she can. Isabel’s perceptions of assessment seem to conflict with the district’s expectations of assessment (a standardized, minimum-competency test) which is another indication of the varying levels of complexity at play in the inclusive teacher’s classroom.

Sharon, Special Education teacher

Sharon entered college with no plans on becoming a teacher and by her own admission chose education as a major primarily because it enabled her to graduate with a Master’s degree in education in the same amount of time it would have taken her to graduate with a Bachelor’s degree in Broadcast Journalism. She quickly added that despite that reason, she also recognized that every year of her own school experience, she had at least one teacher that she loved which made her want to be that teacher for other students. Even though she chose to be a Social Studies teacher, she admitted there was “not a burning desire to change lives.” However, this changed as early as the first semester when she realized that she could in fact have a positive impact on students: “…I remember the kids I know I made an impression on that I would think still remember me today.” She recognized the impact of teachers even more as she watched her own child experience good and bad teachers; seeing the effect of teachers on her child helped her realize the power that teachers have with students. She stressed her belief that “[teachers] have the power to make a kid’s day really good or really bad or push him in a good direction or push him in a bad direction.” Even though her journey to being a teacher was not direct or even clear
at times, Sharon expresses confidence that she is right where she is supposed to be: “it led me to the right path cause I just love this and this is what I was meant to do.” She simply glowed as she talked about how much she loves the kids with whom she works:

“They keep you young and they keep you cool or...you think you’re cool...I love seeing them every day and how you can say something and they smile. Somebody told me [along] the way...pick the ones that nobody else picks you know so if it’s...a girl who we can tell in one of our classes doesn’t have a lot of friends...if I can just say that’s a really cute sweater or something...I just think it’s so important...my study skills boys tell me you’re like my second mom and I think that that’s great you know so it’s the kids. I love the kids.”

The passion and enthusiasm she exuded didn’t change even when she shared the challenges she faces as a teacher. She didn’t mention testing, time, or textbooks when first asked about these challenges. Instead, she stated that what frustrates her most about teaching is when students don’t do what they are supposed to do or what she knows they are capable of doing:

“They don’t help themselves and they don’t have support at home you know there’s nothing else that you can do and that’s hard. That’s hard.” For Sharon, students are at the center of everything she does as a teacher.

Sharon’s love for her students combined with her personal experiences with testing have given her a sympathetic, and even empathetic attitude, toward her students as they face the many assessments required by local and state mandates. When discussing the role of standardized testing and other accountability mandates, Sharon’s frustration was clear: “…I don’t believe that EOCTs [End of Course Test] give you a true picture of that student’s knowledge and our classroom...their semester long performance would give you a better picture than one
instrument.” She didn’t recall any high school level standardized tests as a part of her experience, but she did clearly remember one national test: “I just remember taking the SAT because my scores were horrible and it just made me feel stupid.” She continued to be completely frank and admitted that even though she is a teacher, she doesn’t know much about the NCLB mandates: “I just remember all of a sudden hearing the lingo and I was kind of supposed to know what it meant…so [there are] gaps…in my knowledge.” Like the other participants, Sharon does not recall ever being formally presented the specific mandates of NCLB.

Throughout her interview, Sharon continued to emphasize the importance of learning and working with her colleagues. She identified several times in her career where the support and collaboration of her peers helped move her in the right direction. From her experiences as a beginning teacher when she describes being surrounded by her positive influences to her experiences as a Special Education teacher when she tells of willing colleagues who taught her how to write an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), Sharon maintains that the social interactions she had with her peers helped her establish a solid foundation in education and continue to do so even now. When discussing her co-teaching relationships, this type of collegial relationship was also present. After changing from a Social Studies teacher to a Special Education teacher, Sharon began co-teaching and has co-taught 6 different classes with 8 different co-teachers. Despite the many changes, she describes only one as a negative experience. When asked what made the positive experiences so valuable, she quickly responded, “we collaborate more…we make changes as we need to more and…just work together more closely as far as all the ingredients of a lesson from beginning to end and what we want to do…that’s
just been incredible.” Conversations and constant, consistent collaboration were peppered throughout her discussion of co-teaching.

Isabel and Sharon as a Co-Teaching Team

Isabel, who is African American and a general education teacher, and Sharon, who is White and the special education teacher, had only been co-teaching together for a year at the time of this study. They had a rough beginning to their teaching partnership. Sharon describes their first meeting as interesting because “Isabel had desks set up in a circle…with an agenda outlining the responsibilities for each co-teacher.” She doesn’t recall there being much opportunity for discussion or collaboration about roles and responsibilities. At the end of the meeting, Sharon pulled Isabel aside and said, “I’m not that teacher. I will be here. I will do what needs to be done.” After that, a cooperative, collaborative relationship was engendered through continued open and honest communication. They began meeting in person as much as possible to plan lessons as well as discussing ideas about instruction via email communication. Isabel shared concerns about some students not learning the material and Sharon also communicated concerns about the pacing of the class. Both Sharon and Isabel identify the strengths of their co-teaching as the ability to communicate openly and honestly and the ability to feed off the other’s strengths, such as Isabel’s ability to connect with students and engage them in a discussion and Sharon’s ability to break down challenging topics so that students can learn the content.

While they differ greatly in age and teaching experience – Sharon is 47 with 25 years’ teaching experience, while Isabel is 28 and has 5 years of teaching experience – they share similar perspectives of standardized testing as students. Sharon felt frustrated as a high school and college student when she had to take tests because she didn’t always perform well on them. Isabel also shared that she often suffered from test anxiety and didn’t do well on tests. Both
Sharon and Isabel shared their struggles with standardized tests and felt that their own scores were not indicative of the kind of students they were in high school and college.

Isabel and Sharon co-teach an inclusive ninth grade literature and composition class. The topics of study and skills taught include reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing. The class consists of 31 students, 7 of them identified as students with special needs with Individualized Education Programs. Their identified exceptionalities include behavior disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and a variety of learning disabilities. At their school, all students with special needs who are graduating with a general education diploma are taught using the co-teaching model. Their school is located in the suburbs of a metropolitan city in the southeast. Isabel and Sharon’s class was almost evenly divided in terms of gender with 15 female students and 16 male students. The racial make-up of the Isabel and Sharon’s class is 52% White, 48% African American, and <1% Hispanic. The demographics of their class reflect the school’s racial demographics which are 58% White, 33% African American, 4% Hispanic, 3% Asian American, and 2% other races. The majority of graduating seniors at their school plan on attending a four year college or university while only 24% of them indicate that technical college, military, or work force will be their next step after graduation.

Joan, classroom teacher

Joan, a women’s college graduate, came to the teaching profession by default. She had changed to an English major after deciding that Biology and medicine weren’t in her future. As graduation grew closer, Joan realized that she didn’t want to go to graduate school and the jobs, primarily because of recent events of September 11, 2001, weren’t there. She was approached on her campus by a Teach for America recruiter. Teach for America is an organization that recruits college graduates to make a two year commitment to teaching in rural and urban areas of poverty
(Our Mission, 2012). She describes her decision to enter the teaching field as not one of “free will” yet as she taught in urban, inner city schools that she defined as low performing and high performing, she realized, “…it was something I did like to do. I felt proficient in it…I just couldn’t see myself just not being in education anymore.” Her experiences in teaching range from middle school Language Arts to high school English in both the General Education teacher role as well as the Special Education teacher position. She shared with enthusiasm that she has always had an interest in the field of psychology which explains her passion for working with the psychological aspects of the teaching profession. She finds it fulfilling to be able to positively influence a student’s behavior and “manipulate the situation just by the way [she] speaks.”

Joan’s passion for her profession is even communicated while discussing her frustrations with teaching. One of her greatest challenges is realizing that:

Everybody doesn’t care about being able to even leave high school and get a job…that can adequately take care of their family. And sometimes we are faced with kids who come from families who don’t really care or value education and so therefore the child cannot value or does not value education that’s never been taught to value education.

As she continued to express her frustration about teaching in general, she exuded great passion and intensity; she gave the longest answers of the biographical interview to those questions concerning the challenges and frustrations in the professional life of a teacher such as teacher accountability being measured through standardized tests. She was adamant that the educational system itself is not set up well in that, “obviously if you hold the teacher accountable you have to hold the student accountable.” She explained that the school district does not broadcast individual student test scores; rather test scores are published and attached as percentages next to a teacher name and school. She wished that the students’ responsibility was
addressed in the equation. Ironically, when asked about whether pressure was asserted on her as a teacher, she said it was more of a personal, self-inflicted pressure. She commented, “if kids are overall performing highly and then they come to my classroom and they don’t perform highly then that means that there’s something I didn’t do.” So despite her concern about the lack of student responsibility, she still believes that she plays a significant role in student success and learning.

Joan remembers little about standardized assessment as a student, but she does remember people telling her that she did well on tests like the writing test which had to be passed in order to graduate from high school. She recalls teachers warning students of the dangers of not passing these graduation tests, however, she never seemed to worry because most of the advice from teachers and counselors was to “…take your time, pay attention, do your best.” She remembers little focus on test preparation other than for the Advanced Placement test in English. While she recalls little emphasis on standardized testing as a student, as a teacher she was introduced to NCLB legislation through her Teach for America program: “Teach for America is like this machine and they basically feed you everything they think you need to know.” Not only did Joan receive information via her training program, but she also continued to receive information as a teacher when she took on more of a leadership role related to curriculum and assessment. As she reflected on how she really came to understand this legislation, she referred not to reading literature on it, but conversations and working alongside people who were examining and analyzing data. Experiences like these led her to feel more knowledgeable about the accountability mandates during her first few years of teaching.

When asked directly about her responsibility as a teacher in terms of accountability mandates like NCLB, she stated clearly and with a modicum of cynicism, “my job as a teacher
is] to teach my students how to learn. If a student is not involved or does not want to learn…how to think then it’s just my job to try and help get them through the system.” She was honest and direct about her feelings toward mandates and legislation that comes down from government and even district level leaders: “…with NCLB and any mandate that comes my way I think all of them are jokes because…what they put on writing is always higher than what the expectation really is because ultimately you can’t fail everybody. You can’t fail the majority.” Despite this stance, Joan feels a responsibility to her students and shared a sincere desire to ensure that they learn while in her class. She asserted: “My emphasis is on thinking and students being able to think critically and students being able to do things that I know they need to do to be successful.” She spoke passionately about taking students where they are and moving them up the ladder of success. Joan shared with quiet intensity: “whether…they can barely touch the ladder or whether…they’re climbing up successfully that’s just what I’m going to focus on.” Despite frustration shared during her biographical interview, Joan continued to affirm her confidence that teaching was something she fully enjoyed and wanted to continue with for years to come.

Alice, Special Education teacher

Alice, who has been teaching for over 10 years, grew up in the Western part of the United States and attended college there as well. She knew early on that she wanted to be a teacher: “My mom was a teacher and my neighbor was a teacher. I just had a lot of people in my life who went that way and it was something I felt comfortable with.” She recalled teaching in Bible school in the summer and being told that she had a gift for teaching which had a positive impact on her because as a young girl she didn’t feel confident; however, hearing positive feedback from a mentor encouraged her to pursue education. After earning a degree in Special Education and Elementary Education, she began her teaching career in the Southern United States as an
interrelated Special Education teacher in high school which means she can provide supportive services to students with special needs in a co-taught classroom with another teacher who holds certification in the core content academic areas. Alice also taught small group classes in English and Science at the beginning of her teaching career. Alice began co-teaching shortly after her career began and in the last few years she has primarily taught American Literature and British Literature in an inclusive environment.

Alice enjoys the co-taught classroom because working with another teacher gives her more opportunity to collaborate and discuss the needs of students in the classroom. She commented:

…two brains are better than one because ideas are coming together and they are kind of shaped and molded by the conversation…[and] come to an end product of what we’re going to teach or how we’re going to assess something or what does a standard mean or how can we work this into our lesson.

In addition to the benefits of collaboration she remarked that having a similar philosophy benefits not only the co-teaching team, but also the students. Alice shared, “…luckily most of the people I’ve worked with co-teaching… have similar philosophies and similar ideas about teaching.” She also discussed the challenges of co-teaching and asserts that having common planning time with a co-teacher makes a difference. She shared, that in her current situation, “…right now I’m able to collaborate with one person and not with the other and I can definitely see the difference.” She adamantly maintained that being able to plan with her co-teacher allows her to become more of “an equal partner.” Ultimately, Alice is grateful for her current co-teaching situation because over the last several years she has established trust and rapport with the several general education teachers in the English department of her school and doesn’t have
to spend time navigating potential conflicts regarding classroom issues like behavior or even approaches to teaching.

In the area of assessment, Alice had little experience with standardized testing as a student. In her educational experience, she didn’t have any graduation testing requirements because her graduation was based solely on fulfilling course requirements. She did take the ACT rather than the SAT because the colleges to which she applied only required the ACT. Alice was confident as she emphasized, “getting a score wasn’t an issue; I was trying to get a better score to get a better scholarship.” She struggled to recall any focus or emphasis on standardized assessments throughout her high school career, “there was no ACT review course offered…you were just kind of on your own.” She remarked, “a lot of us here focus on…SAT practice prep with our classes. We do vocabulary instruction on a regular basis in English courses. I never had vocabulary instruction. All the vocabulary I learned was from being a teacher and from reading on my own. So there was no push to…increase ACT scores in my high school…if you were already smart and you knew what was going on you did well and if not you just didn’t. “ Alice described herself as someone who loved school and even if it wasn’t her favorite subject, she would learn to love it. These experiences may be why her response when asked about her attitude toward testing in her current role as a teacher was, “…I don’t really worry about it too much…it’s not something that I can change as one person.” She doesn’t remember teachers varying instruction in the classroom; rather, it was mostly lecture. In terms of the influence her experiences had on her current teaching, she stated, “I…work opposite of what they were doing” She says that those experiences influenced her regarding what not to do in the classroom.
Even as Alice faces the challenges of the current era of accountability in education, she maintains a passion for her profession. She smiled as she shared what she loves most about teaching students with disabilities:

I enjoy seeing when kids are able to make progress when they make connections…when there’s that moment where they feel a little lost and then they kind of get it which is why I think I enjoy working with Special Ed kids in particular because they seem to be…not quite on the same page as other students and so when they finally do get it there’s kind of like that light bulb…and that’s when I can provide for them.

She enjoys that each day brings a new set of challenges and experiences with students. This is what keeps her going in a time where there is so much pressure on students and teachers. Her demeanor, while not overly enthusiastic, did change when talking about her positive experiences in the classroom such as the moments when students make a connection or when students really engage in a discussion. Rather than frustration, she revealed a satisfaction and contentment about her job as a teacher despite the challenges she faces.

*Joan and Alice as a Co-Teaching Team*

Joan and Alice are close in age and teaching experience; Joan is 32 and has been teaching for 11 years while Alice is 35 and has been teaching for 13 years. Joan is African American and Alice is White. They are a unique co-teaching team because they are both certified in Special Education and Secondary English. In their current co-teaching roles, Joan is the General Education teacher and Alice is the Special Education teacher. They have been teaching together for three years. While Joan has taught secondary English in both a non-inclusive English classroom and a co-taught setting, Alice has never taught a general education English class by
herself. They have also taught the same course, American Literature and Composition, during the three years of co-teaching with each other.

Even though they are both similar in age, they have different personal experiences with standardized tests and other mandated assessments as students. Alice doesn’t recall taking any standardized tests other than the national ones like the ACT or SAT. On the contrary, Joan recalls doing well on state required assessments in high school. They both recalled little about test preparation in high school or any review in advance of either state or national assessments.

Joan and Alice co-teach an inclusive American literature and composition class. The topics of study and skills taught include reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing. The class consisted of 31 students, 6 of them were identified as students with special needs and having Individualized Education Programs. Their identified exceptionalities include emotional behavior disorder, Attention Deficit Disorder, and a variety of learning disabilities. At the school, all students with special needs who are graduating with a general education diploma access the general curriculum through co-teaching. The class is not balanced with regards to gender. There were 21 male students and 10 female students. The racial make-up of the class was 61% White, 19% African American, 16% Hispanic, and <1% Asian.

Experience Shapes Teachers

The relationship between experience and education has continually been discussed in the literature as vital to the learning process (Brown, 2004; Clark & Peterson, 1984; Dewey, 1938; Diamond, 2007; Pajares, 1992). Experience and one’s past plays a significant role in how one learns and faces the future (Dewey, 1938, p. 23). Teachers often define assessment and make decisions about using assessment in their classroom based on their own experiences and perceptions. For many, previous experiences with testing either as a student or as a teacher guide
the decisions they make in their own classrooms. Clark and Peterson (1984) assert that not only do teachers’ theories and beliefs influence decisions, but that these beliefs are influenced by their own experiences. Teachers are constantly negotiating their own perceptions of assessment and the growing challenge of effectively assessing students while implementing mandated standardized tests. In the current study, both the general education and special education teachers approached assessment in their classrooms based largely on their own experiences as students.

All of the participants shared an aversion to mandated, standardized, and classroom assessment. The team of Isabel and Sharon shared passionate feelings of frustration that stemmed from their personal experiences with standardized testing. They both made a connection between their own experiences and their current attitudes as teachers in the inclusive classroom. These participants (Co-Teaching Team #1) felt that standardized testing is unfair because many people consider themselves poor test takers. When asked about testing in high school, they both recounted memories from high school and college with little hesitation. As a classroom teacher, Isabel, the youngest of the participants at 28, shared that “it’s the standardized tests where I struggled.” She struggled with test anxiety and said angrily, “I just remember taking the SAT because my scores were horrible and it just made me feel stupid.” She believed that her acceptance into college and even graduate school more recently was more dependent on her overall grade point average and other factors rather than the scores she made on the required standardized tests which she described as “minimum.” Sharon, her Special Education counterpart, shared that her frustration with mandated assessments is a result not only of her own experiences but also her child’s: “I don’t like standardized testing defining a kid cause I was a horrible test taker and my son’s a bad test taker...” When asked about her thoughts on No Child Left Behind and its accountability requirements, Isabel said:
I feel like it [NCLB] puts so much on testing when…you can’t really use that to determine if these kids are going to be successful in college because if it was up to them my GRE scores and my SAT and ACT scores would have determined my outcome but I’ve done better in college than people who had great SAT and ACT scores.

Isabel asserted that based on her own experiences, performance on a standardized test is not necessarily an indicator of future success. She approached her teaching the same way. In a review of the lesson plans Isabel provided, there were a variety of assessments listed in addition to references to practices for the End of Course Test which is the state required standardized test for 9th Literature and Composition. In the assessment category, there were references to Socratic Seminars, which are student-led discussions that serve as a way for students to demonstrate their understanding of a text or subject. There were also references to independent checks with the teacher, which provide students an opportunity to meet with the teacher individually for the purposes of assessing knowledge and skills. During a classroom observation (Field Observation, April 11, 2012), Isabel and her co-teacher, Sharon, were working with small groups for student-led discussions as an assessment of comprehension. Also, in their lesson plans, Isabel and Sharon planned for and implemented performance-based assessments, such as individual and group presentations. When asked about using alternative assessments in the classroom even when there is a standardized test at the end of the course which counts for 20% of the student’s grade, Sharon shared, “I know from my own experience legitimately, I think I’m extremely smart, [but] I don’t test well…It makes me very sympathetic to those that don’t test on standardized measures well.” Isabel had a similar response: “My experiences knowing that I wasn’t the best test taker I don’t want to drill the kids with quizzes, tests, and all that.” Both Isabel and Sharon’s experiences are reflected in their varied approach to assessment in the classroom. Rather than
assess students in only one way, such as a multiple choice test, their lesson plans and classroom observations indicate that they attempt to offer students multiple ways to demonstrate their learning.

The participants Joan and Alice of Co-Teaching Team #2 had somewhat contrasting perceptions of assessment than the other two teacher participants. While Isabel and Sharon had negative experiences with standardized tests as students, Joan and Alice, had a different view, one that was more positive. Joan’s recollection of standardized testing in high school involved state required tests in middle and high school. She describes her experience taking a test required for high school graduation:

In high school on the graduation writing exam…I got like one of the top scores and the counselor was like oh you’re [a] really good writer and I was like OK. You know I mean…it didn’t really ever matter to me because…I never felt like I would fail it.

Joan admits that standardized tests were never a challenge for her. She also doesn’t remember teachers placing much focus on the tests during class: “I don’t remember the teacher teaching us writing [specifically] for the CRCT writing exam, but I remember like the day before the test, her saying…these are some of the things that I want you guys to remember for the CRCT.” She even admitted that she is “probably more aware of testing now because as a student I didn’t really care [that] we had the graduation exam.” Her co-teacher, Alice, had a similar experience with standardized tests in high school: “As a student, I really had very few standardized tests because our graduation requirements were to complete course requirements.”

Like her co-teaching partner, Alice also performed well on standardized tests: “I knew I needed a good score to get into college. Getting a good score wasn’t an issue. I was trying to get a better score to get a better scholarship.”
Both Joan and Alice (Co-Teaching Team #2) felt that standardized tests address basic skills and if students master the curriculum and skills taught in the classroom, they will be prepared to pass the state mandated minimum competency assessments. When asked about her responsibility as a teacher regarding NCLB, Joan said, “it definitely does impact but I don’t think it’s a negative thing.” She firmly stated that:

We live in a society where you are judged off of one or two or three things that you do and somebody sees your ability to be able to do that on the spot...[meaning] I can do it, let me show you. I mean that’s just real life.

While she doesn’t believe that the tests required for her students don’t assess everything important in her opinion, she does believe that they do serve an important purpose:

I don’t think that the test [EOCT] encompasses the wide variety of things that we do in the class and the wide variety of things that they will be asked to do in college…but I do think that it gets to some basic skills that they [students] should have by the time they finish the class.

When talking about standardized tests, Alice agrees with Joan. She stated:

We focus on skills that they need both for real life things and when you go to college…and also things that are standards in the course. So we just teach those and then I kind of feel like if we’ve addressed those and taught those then most of the kids are going to do fairly well.

Throughout Joan and Alice’s lesson plans, there were a variety of assessments included such as an interactive notebook, RAFT writing which uses assigned roles, audiences, and formats, Socratic Seminars, technology projects, and a poster project that incorporated written, visual, and oral parts. Their attempt to vary the types of assessment in the classroom suggests that they
believe students need multiple options to show what they have learned. In their classroom observations (Field Observation, March 29, 2012), Joan and Alice were observed evaluating oral presentations, guiding group work, and facilitating discussions of both literature studied and application to real world concepts.

Mandates Without Guidance

Assessment is defined throughout much of the literature as a way of identifying areas where students have gained mastery of required skills or concepts as well as a way to pinpoint student weaknesses. The data gathered from effective assessment can provide teachers with a way to adjust instruction (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Olinghouse & Santangelo, 2010; Serafini, 2002; Stiggins, 2002). All the participants in the study had similar definitions of assessment that included references to ascertaining the mastery levels of students or what they have learned. When asked how to define assessment, Isabel, the general education teacher in Co-Teaching Team #1, paused and even commented that the question was difficult. She said, “assessment is a tool that is used to show mastery of something.” Her co-teaching partner and special education teacher, Sharon, also took some moments to consider the same question and then proudly stated that assessment is “an accurate representation of what a student has mastered at a particular point in time or through a particular point of time.” Her confidence in the definition was clear as she mused that perhaps she should write a book about assessment. With Co-Teaching Team #2, Joan, who is the general education teacher, was more confident with her understanding of assessment, while Alice, her partner, was not. Joan’s definition of assessment was less polished, but she was quick to respond to the question: “assessment to me would be something…some assignment or some work…[that] has to be something that you actually grade that’s graded with the intent of either gathering…what the students need to learn still or what they have learned.” Alice defined
assessment as, “…some means to determine what a student has learned and maybe where the skill level is.” Along with implementing classroom assessment, teachers also have to contend with state and district accountability mandates. Often these high stakes tests that are often a part of accountability mandates can be a challenge to successful implementation of effective classroom assessment (Black, Harrison, Hodgen, Marshall, & Serret, 2010; Wiliam, Lee, Harrison, & Black, 2004).

Formative Assessment in the Classroom

While the participants had similar definitions of assessment in general, they defined formative assessment with some variation and even used it in the classroom differently. In their seminal work on formative assessment, Black and Wiliam (1998) first define assessment as activities that teachers use to adjust teaching and learning strategies. They go on to assert that this assessment becomes formative when it is used to adjust the instruction to meet specific student needs (p. 140). Formative assessment is used in the classroom during instruction. It is strategic to help students grow and mature as learners. Assessment becomes formative when it is adapted to bring the student closer to the learning target (Clark, 2011, p.165). Ironically, although teachers have accountability mandates from federal, state, and district levels, they are left to their own devices regarding assessment and instructional decisions at the classroom level. This leads to inconsistency in the implementation of classroom assessment. With Co-Teaching Team #1, Isabel and Sharon both discussed formative assessment in terms of immediate feedback that helped them make immediate and short-term instructional decisions. When asked about the use of formative assessment in her classroom, Isabel shared the frequency and purpose of it:
Incorporating those at the end of the class period helps me know if they really get it because of a lot of times I think they get it and they’ll tell me they got it but when I look at their paper I’m like Oh they didn’t get it at all!

Isabel continued to share how the formative assessments help her start her lesson the next day:

So it [formative assessment] helps me start class the next day. So one thing I love to do at the beginning of class we kind of get off task a little bit but I love to talk to the kids. And so the beginning of the class I’ll read through some of the things that they wrote so that they can see how great or how ridiculous it was and then I let them give me feedback so it kind of helps me set the tone the next day.

Isabel’s co-teaching partner, Sharon, agreed that formative assessment helps ascertain what students know in order to plan instruction for the next day and beyond: “That’s what you want to know. You want to know are they getting it. Do they remember it? Can they apply it? That’s it.” Formative assessment is most effective when it is used to identify what students know and adjust future lessons in response to student needs (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Crumrine & Demers, 2007; Harris, 2007; Heritage, 2007; Otero, 2006; Stiggins & DuFour, 2009). In the assessment section of Isabel and Sharon’s lesson plans, they had an assessment identified for each day of class and the list included exit tickets, journal responses, and reading quizzes. When asked about listing journal responses as formative assessments, Isabel stated, “I love when we do the journal entries and they give me feedback through their journals because in a class of 30 kids it’s really hard to understand everyone but when I look back at their journals and really read I really kind of understand them more.” Sharon, the special education teacher, discussed the importance of formative assessment in their literature class:
If your formatives are good I mean sometimes summatives are redundant. If you’ve done it all along and you know they’ve got point A so I’m going to take them to B and they’ve got point B so we’re going to take them to Point C and then you test them all over again. It doesn’t really make sense…the formatives are more valuable than the summatives.

When discussing what assessment looks like in the co-taught, inclusive classroom, Sharon added, “formally and informally, I think sometimes the more meaningful measures would be the informal ones.” Sharon’s belief reflects a similar attitude of other teachers in a recent study conducted to examine secondary teachers’ perceptions of assessment; the study revealed that teachers perceive formative assessment positively because they see a direct connection to student improvement (Harris, Irving, & Peterson, 2008).

With Co-Teaching Team #2 comprised of Joan, the general education teacher and Alice, the special education teacher, the formative assessments referenced in their lesson plans and observed in the classroom were primarily reading comprehension quizzes, vocabulary quizzes, and teacher checks for understanding. Both Joan and Alice were also observed using whole group discussions to check students’ understanding of texts and concepts discussed in the class. They posed questions to specific students or to the class as a whole. As students responded, Joan and Alice did not record any student responses, but they did provide verbal feedback to each student response. When asked about how often formative assessments were used in the classroom, Joan stated, “probably at least once a week and as many times as 2-3.” She added, “the assessments are used to advise us what things the kids are getting and what things they’re not so that we can decide how much rigor to apply or how much remediation to apply.” Her special education co-teacher, Alice, stated a similar purpose for formative assessment: “I use formative assessment to really kind of get a pulse on how the students are doing at that point in
time.” Also, Alice added that formative assessment could be used “…to give the kids feedback uhm on their writing so that when they are you know working toward their summative essay then they kind of know where to go or what I was missing uhm here or there.” Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2006) asserted that NCLB describes effective teachers as those who can use research based instructional strategies to teach students and utilize data in order to remediate or enrich students; however, there is no specific direction of how to accomplish this for teachers which may lead to inconsistency among teachers regarding implementation of both formative and summative classroom assessment.

The Blending of Formative and Summative in the Classroom

Educators are constantly looking for ways to improve student achievement. As a result, they spend time, energy, and human resources to design effective assessment that improves student outcomes (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Struble, 2007). In a one-on-one interview, Sharon, who co-teaches with Isabel in a 9th grade English classroom, questioned her own use of summative and formative assessments. Sharon stating:

…Formative to doctor what you’re doing. Tweak it as needed. Reteach or move on. And then summative I mean that’s hard because summative should be like that’s it. It’s your chance to show us, but what if you don’t get it? You know?

Harlen (2005) discusses that in an attempt to use all classroom level assessment to aid student learning, summative assessment is often used formatively by teachers. Some teachers may choose to have students reflect on questions missed on a test in order to help identify areas of weakness. Also, teachers may ask students to use previous tests to practice writing new test questions in an attempt to help them prepare for future tests. Despite these examples, Harlen (2005) also stresses that “a more fundamental change is needed if assessment is to be designed to
serve both purposes from the start” (p. 217). Isabel, Sharon’s co-teaching partner, struggled to differentiate between formative and summative assessment. When asked about summative assessment, Isabel described it as showing mastery of content. The reference to mastery was also mentioned when she explained her use of formative assessment. Isabel added:

As far as the summative assessments, it just lets me know if they got it you know the whole unit overall…did they perfect the skills and then that gives me the chance to go back and say hey they’re not getting this tone or they’re not getting this voice so what can I do now to alter my assignments to make sure they’re getting it for the next unit.

Isabel affirmed this approach when asked about the purpose of classroom assessment:

“Asessment, the way that I use it in the classroom is mainly…to make sure they’ve mastered something.” Sharon further described summative assessment as a flexible method of determining students’ ability or knowledge. She stated, “…even though that writing assessment was going to be summative, now we’re changing it to formative so they’re going to have the chance to rewrite and change as they go and then that tells what they really need to know.” Forcing teachers to label classroom assessments as only formative or summative can be productive because of the multiple purposes they can serve (Hargreaves, 2005 as cited in Harris, Irving, & Peterson, 2008). Both Sharon and Isabel suggested that having the flexibility to adjust instruction even with summative assessments is imperative. How a teacher uses the classroom assessment determines whether it is formative or summative (Harlen, 2005).

Summative Assessment

Summative assessment, whether at the classroom level or at a larger level, should be “a positive part of the learning process for teachers and students” (Black, Harrison, Hodgen, Marshall, & Serret, 2010, p. 226). Teachers often make a distinction between classroom summative assessment, which they design and implement, and externally imposed summative
assessment, which an outside entity designs and they are required to implement (Harris, Irving, & Peterson, 2008). Even with classroom summative assessment, Black, Harrison, Hodgen, Marshall, and Serret (2010) assert that teachers often lack the skills and the confidence to effectively create it. In contrast to Isabel and Sharon’s use of summative assessment, Joan and Alice who comprise Co-Teaching Team #2 alluded to the finality of summative assessments and didn’t appear to blend formative and summative in the classroom. A reason to assess summatively is to document a student’s overall level of performance (Chappius, Chappius, & Stiggins, 2009). In Joan and Alice’s collaboratively designed lesson plans, summative assessments were identified at the end of a teaching unit and there were no indications of using the results beyond a final unit grade or performance. When asked about the frequency of summative assessments, Joan confirmed this when she stated, “Summative once a unit. At this current time, probably just once - four times a semester because we have four units.” Joan also added, “in terms of variety, I wouldn’t say there is a whole lot of variety with the exception of maybe the speaking listening category…” In their lesson plans, the summative assessments were connected with a section of the standards. Joan stated:

the writing is always pretty much going to be an essay. The reading is almost always going to be multiple-choice. And the multiple-choice will always include work that they’ve never seen before to assess whether or not they actually understand the concept.

Neither Joan nor Alice discussed re-teaching concepts if students did not show mastery. Both Joan and Alice stated that some of their students with special needs may need minor adjustments to summative tests to address their needs. When there is a focus on improving the outcomes for students with special needs in the classroom, teachers can “maximize the
probability that these efforts will result in better outcomes for all students” (Roach & Elliott, 2009). Joan stated:

If she [the co-teacher] wanted to go back and change the arrangement, font, or format of it she could. I mean that’s never happened but there’s some things that I think should be happening like for those individual students who might get jumbled easy…changing the format or even the font.

Similarly, Alice stated, “I worry that our kids do know a lot more than what they show us on assessments and so sometimes just being able to talk things through is really helpful.”

Although both teachers in Co-Teaching Team #2 indicated a willingness to make these kinds of adjustments to their classroom assessments, none were observed or noted in their lesson plans.

Standardized and Mandated: End of Course Test

While the co-teachers in this study were busy negotiating the challenging demands of assessing students in the inclusive classroom, they were also expected to meet the assessment demands of federal and district mandates which in this situation is the End of Course Test. The lesson plans of Co-Teaching Team #1, Isabel and Sharon, listed regular references to practice for the mandated assessment at the end of the semester: “EOCT Terms Quiz…Work on selected EOCT practice exercises to improve scores…Finish/Score Monday’s EOCT practice…EOCT strategies will also be introduced to help students eliminate answers on the test…Intro to Weekly EOCT Vocabulary…Individual EOCT practice for final assessment…EOCT Practice in English Computer Lab…EOCT Benchmarks” When asked about the frequency of these activities, Isabel stated:

I try to do it throughout the whole semester so that it’s not freaking them out. So every week we do a practice so you know get them used to it. Then when it comes down to the
actual test I do hit em hard. I do think I made a little pressure on them too but they perform you know….It comes throughout. We do them every Thursday in detail and we go over them. We spend about 30 minutes on it every Thursday but the drilling like the really getting into it, that happens right before. Cause I do a big EOCT tournament and that helps them a lot because it’s fun and they know they’re going to get a prize at the end.

Also, during a classroom observation the day before the test, Isabel and Sharon lead an EOCT tournament with students participating in teams to review selected literary terms for the EOCT. Isabel expressed excitement and passion when introducing the tournament: “We are down to the final four! Come on up here!” As students came up, they were energized and did not hesitate. There was no mention of a specific prize, but students seemed genuinely interested in which student was going to win. Even during the actual competition, students were yelling out answers trying to help the final competitors win. In another classroom observation two months before the test, Isabel told her students, “everything we’ve done through the semester including roots is on your EOCT.” During a classroom observation it was noticed that Isabel and Sharon had placed a list of EOCT terms in large print on one wall and a list of critical thinking verbs that might be encountered on the test. The EOCT Word Wall included literary terms while the wall of verbs included words like, “Summarize…contrast…formulate…”

In a review of the lesson plans from Co-Teaching #2 comprised of Joan and Alice, I noticed that references to EOCT practice were limited to the two weeks before the actual test. Some of these references included, “EOCT Review Quiz…EOCT Review Packet [as a homework assignment]…EOCT Stations – Students will work on test prep based on their
pretest...small groups will pull out for EOCT review” When asked about the inclusion of standardized test preparation during class time, Joan responded:

Are we saying the word EOCT every day in the class? No. Are we deciding to do this particular lesson on tone and mood for the EOCT in particular? No. But we’re doing this lesson on tone and mood because we know they don’t get it and we know it’s a critical standard that they need to you know understand about literature.

In response to the same question, Alice stated, “We know it’s [End of Course Test] imminent and especially…this couple of weeks prior to we do major adjustments to instruction just for that purpose.” When I entered for a classroom observation the week before the test, the class had just finished some test preparation for the upcoming EOCT: “Class had just returned from the Media Center. When I asked what they had been doing in there, the teacher responded that they had been working on USA Test Prep (a standardized test preparation software program) as the EOCT was coming up next week” (Field Observation, May 2, 2012). When asked about what level of impact standardized testing has on her classroom instruction, Alice stated:

I feel like more than it should, so I feel like sometimes we rush through you know enjoying a story for enjoyment’s sake or really delving into some of the themes that might relate to their lives because we’re reviewing for End of Course or we need to review some writing conventions.

When asked how different her classes would be without the state mandated End of Course test, Joan’s response differed from her co-teacher’s:

I would like to think that they wouldn’t look too much different. Outside of the couple of weeks that I spend trying to get them to realize how to answer a multiple-choice or going over specific skills, you know I don’t think it really looks a lot different.
Joan shared her concerns that administrators, teachers, and even parents rely on standardized tests as the primary measure of student learning. Teachers often feel frustrated and even a sense of hopelessness when it comes to mandated assessments because they don’t feel they have a voice at all in the design or implementation (Jones & Egley, 2004). Joan summarized her perspective on standardized tests this way: “At the end of the day for me if it’s a minimum skills test then I don’t care about proficiency levels.” She referred to proficiency levels, “does not meet,” “meets,” or “exceeds,” on the minimum competency End of Course Test required in American Literature and indicated she doesn’t place much value on a test that measures basic skills. Joan reflected that teaching to the course standards will prepare her students for any test designed by someone else to assess minimum competency. Joan’s responses reveal her realization that teachers have no control over the skills and knowledge tested through the mandated standardized test.

Added Pressure

While all participants revealed that the End of Course Test, which is required in 9th Literature and American Literature courses, adds pressure to students and teachers, each team handled that pressure differently. Both Isabel and Sharon of Co-Teaching Team #1 shared that the assessment mandates from the federal and state level increase the level of concern and frustration for both students and teachers. Isabel, the general education teacher, stated:

It does put pressure on you as a teacher because it’s different if they say ok we want good scores but when they put up the data and say this is where we rank in comparison to all of the schools in the district and this is where we rank…it’s like oh pressure pressure.

Isabel also suggested that the pressure is not limited to teachers: “…you have this student who has an A, who is capable of performing, and is a great writer but that one test that test
anxiety freaks them out.” Sharon, her special education counterpart, discussed similar concerns, “I mean…they’re [standardized tests] not differentiated. They’re standardized. So, you know the kids that need it which is who I spend most of my day with they don’t get it. That’s really sad. This is a downer.” She added, “It’s an inaccurate measure of what a student knows.” While standardized tests provide important information about what students know, they don’t provide teachers with everything they need to know in order to make important instructional decisions (Horn, 2003).

The participants in Co-Teaching Team #2 also discussed the pressures associated with the mandated standardized tests in their course. Joan asserted, “At the end of the day the pressure is there because you want to do well. You don’t want to be that person that your scores weren’t great so now AYP [Adequate Yearly Progress] isn’t met because of you.” When discussing standardized tests, Alice shared that, “it’s always kind of in the background of our mind but I don’t really worry about it too much.” She went on to say that her concern is more for the students:

What really worries me is just those fringe kids like a couple of those kids who are super low…that worries me kind of on a more consistent basis. And then uhm that their skills are so low that I’m just trying to give them basic skills and I don’t know if that’s going to be enough to pass the assessment at the end but I hope it will be.

Joan shared concerns of added pressure: “…You know it’s nerve-wracking and puts pressure on the kids.” She also indicated that the pressure can sometimes be self-imposed:

When I’ve worked in low performing school ironically I felt less pressure because to me I worked in low performing schools and the kids came with inadequate skills. There’s only so much I could do with somebody who can’t read on grade level… But I feel like in a
high performing school….I feel like well if kids are overall performing highly and then they come to my classroom and they don’t perform highly then that means that there’s something I didn’t do. So it to me it is more of a situation where I need to make sure that I did everything I could do to prepare them as students.

Even though they referenced individual pressure and pressure on students, both Joan and Alice, shared frustration and disappointment about the utilization and reporting of standardized test scores. Joan commented:

Everybody knows that a teacher teaches, but can’t pour knowledge into a student’s head so it makes sense to me that obviously if you hold the teacher accountable you have to hold the student accountable. But we are in a system where the student is not held accountable for having to learn anything…I just have a problem with my performance being attached to something that’s not completely my responsibility.

When asked about her responsibility regarding student performance on accountability measures, Alice shared concerns about the reporting of test scores and what they really represent: “…they should be…giving kids a more realistic view of where they really are cause I kind of feel like we’re giving them a false sense of security about where kids really are in their skills.”

Both Alice and Joan emphasized that although the standardized test required for their course focused on basic skills and minimum competency, the pressure was still there for students and teachers to perform at the highest level possible..

The Challenges of Assessment

Teachers in secondary, inclusive classrooms face many challenges as they plan and implement instruction and assessment for a group of students who represent varied levels of knowledge, understanding, and skills (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001). A study examining
challenge of inclusion in secondary classrooms revealed that teachers were often concerned about the ability of their students with disabilities to meet standards in rigorous content area classes because teachers also believed that students with disabilities did not have the prerequisite knowledge or skills required (Bulgren, 2006, p. 54). This concern also arises when discussing the challenge of preparing students with disabilities to take the mandated, standardized tests as well (Washburn-Moses, 2003). Even though measuring students’ ability with one test in order to make decisions about their future has been a part of educational practice for years, teachers have begun using multiple measures such as performance-based and project-based assessment to assess students. The caveat is that more tests or alternative assessments don’t always translate into high quality evidence (Chappius, Chappius, & Stiggins, 2009). Not only are teachers in secondary, inclusive classrooms facing the multiple challenges of planning and designing effective instruction that meets the needs of all students, they are also attempting to effectively assess all students as well.

Participants discussed numerous challenges to effectively planning and implementing assessment in their secondary, inclusive classrooms. This was true for both general education and special education teachers in the study. These challenges included designing quality classroom assessments, meeting the academic and even emotional needs of all students in the class, and finding the time to collaborate and plan instruction.

Designing Quality Classroom Assessments

Participants indicated that identifying and designing the appropriate classroom/informal assessment is difficult. Often teachers are not prepared to design sound assessments and neither are their building administrators (Heritage, 2007). Isabel stated, “There are so many different levels and it’s hard to assess and figure out the differentiation. It’s hard to figure out what works
best for that student…so many different students. Especially when you have a class of 34.” She tapped her head as if trying to remind herself and added, “Meaningful assignments. I need to get that in my head.” While Isabel’s desire to create appropriate assessments for her students was clear, her responses suggested that she may not have had the proper training to do so.

Isabel’s Special Education counterpart, Sharon, discussed the challenges of trying to assess more than once if students aren’t grasping the concept: “often then you gotta kind of figure out how to redo it [the assessment] so they can do it or more can get it.” Sharon expressed her belief that all students can learn and do learn, but ascertaining what they know through effective, appropriately designed assessment can be challenging. Sharon shared:

…[my experiences have] made me more conscious on the tests that I develop to make sure that they’re representative. Do you know what I mean? Not have the trick question…and make sure that if it’s on the test that we have covered it in one way or another in the classroom.

During a visit to Co-Teaching Team #1’s class, students were observed discussing their understanding of a novel by making personal connections to it. According to a handout provided by Isabel and Sharon, the oral presentation observed was an alternative to a paper and pencil test. Students were asked to identify themes and analyze characters from a novel. At the end of the presentation, students were also required to share a similar struggle or decision that connected to a theme or character in the novel. The content of their presentation had to be delivered using a web-based technology. The students who presented were wearing more formal clothes, such as dress pants and collared shirts or dresses and heels. According to the rubric, they were being evaluated on their professional dress reflecting a real world connection in the assessment. After one group finished presenting, Sharon responded, “You’re going deep and I’m really proud of
you guys. So impressed. You really put yourselves out there with the personal connections you made to the book through theme.” The assessment appeared to be focused on analyzing the theme, making a difficult and ethical decision despite one’s circumstances. Isabel and Sharon were attempting to challenge their students to use their higher order thinking skills of analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. Isabel summarized her approach to designing assessments:

I have students who are great writers and may not be great test takers. Of course I have to give them writing assignments to make up for those low test grades so I think it’s you have to balance the assessments. It can’t be all about test, test, test, test. It has to be performance-based as well.

It seems that Isabel tries to provide a variety of ways in which all students can demonstrate their understanding. This attempt to differentiate assessment for students was evident in the instruction and lesson plans of both Co-Teaching Teams.

Another challenge to designing quality assessments emerges when teachers have to ensure that the assessment accurately reflects the skill it was intended to measure. Teachers must be careful when using assessment in the classroom because selecting the inappropriate method of assessment can compromise the results (Chappius, Chappius, & Stiggins, 2009). Alice, from Co-Teaching Team #2, stated, “the most difficult thing about assessing students is really about building an assessment that really a) matches the standards and then b) that really matches up with what you instructed so it seems fair…” Joan, her co-teaching General Education counterpart, also commented that one of the greatest challenges to assessing students in the inclusive classroom is the design of the assessment itself:

Making sure that the assessment itself is getting to what I’m trying to assess. Trying to make sure it’s a viable assessment for the particular standard. So if I’m trying to assess
whether or not they can infer then I need to make sure that what I’m giving them and the question and the way that the question is worded that they’re all viable so that you know the wrong answer is because they don’t understand it versus it’s a bad test question or it wasn’t a good wasn’t worded properly or the story itself was not a good story.

While both Alice and Joan display an analytical approach to designing assessment, the greater analyst appeared to be Joan, the general education teacher, who also discussed attempts to be purposeful when planning summative assessments. She feels that if the standard being assessed is a writing standard, then the assessment must involve writing. She went on to state: “The reading [standard] is almost always going to be multiple choice [assessment]. And the multiple choice will always include work that they’ve never seen before to assess whether or not they actually understand the concept.” She desires her assessments to be a true measure of what students know related to the criterion referenced in the standards. Joan believes they should reflect the categories of the standards: “Every unit I try to assess the students in all the main categories…listening and speaking, reading, and writing…the expectation is that they do some major thing in each of those categories surrounding the standards that we’ve been going over.”

The participants seemed to emphasize the importance of designing quality assessments while also admitting the challenges that accompany it.

Meeting the Needs of All Students

Participants shared a common frustration with the wide variety of student needs in their classrooms. These needs included academic as well as emotional. In the school where the study was conducted there are no small group classes where students with special needs are taught the academic core classes like Mathematics, English, Science, and Social Studies. Only students who are identified as Mildly Intellectually Disabled, Moderately Intellectually Disabled,
Severely Intellectually Disabled and Profoundly Intellectually Disabled are served in a small group setting. All other students with disabilities are served in a co-taught environment. Because of this, there is a wide range of academic ability represented in co-taught courses. While discussing the students in her co-taught English class, Isabel commented:

You have students who should really be in honors. You have students who are true on level college prep students. You have Special Ed students who are great in literature and their accommodations may be in science. And then you have Special Ed students where English is their weakness.

Isabel sighed as she stressed the vast differences among all of her students. Isabel’s co-teacher, Sharon, who is the Special Education teacher, shared her concern and emphasized the plight of the lowest performers in their classes: “It makes it really hard because you want to take those…I worry the most about the one third that’s the lowest and to do everything you want to do with them.” She described their class:

I feel like we have uhm like equal thirds…we have a surprising number of low students but then we have the average but then we’ve got some you know they’re higher level maybe their behavior doesn’t match what they could do academically but…you can tell they’re really really smart.

One of the greatest challenges faced by co-teachers in the inclusive classroom is meeting the needs of those students identified as having special needs. Not only do the students struggle with mastery of content, but the teachers who co-teach often struggle to meet their needs due to lack of communication or planning time (Murawski & Dieker, 2004). Joan, the general education teacher in Co-Teaching Team #1, recognized that the challenges are not a secret, but that doesn’t make them any easier: “if you’re in a co-taught class you’re with students that obviously been
designated as having some kind of learning disability so you know coming in that you have somebody who…may struggle with…the classwork and the concepts.” Alice noted that the mandated assessment at the end of a semester increases the pressure for her as a teacher to bring students to higher levels of learning especially with such varied ability levels in the class: “With End of Course tests and all these other standardized tests they have to meet this certain requirement but they come to us so unprepared.” She added that the challenge increases with students receiving special education services because they not only have to pass required tests in order to pass the class, but they also have their own individual goals that have been identified in their Individualized Education Programs (IEP):

It’s frustrating to…balance the Special Ed part of it and the uhm academic content area of it because it’s almost like those two things are asking different things. Special Ed is asking us to work with the kid where they are and to make progress on the objective we’ve set for them at their current level, but the standards require…the kids to be at a different level and so to balance and try to mesh those together and do both at the same time…remediate and teach new stuff at the same time. It feels nearly impossible.

Sharon, also a Special Education teacher, shared an example of the struggle teachers feel when pressured to move on with students who aren’t ready: “The kids that I work with often don’t get it you know?…On a summative [assessment] they’re not successful so how can we move on to a three paragraph essay when they haven’t mastered the basic paragraph?” Even with the challenges of meeting the needs of students with disabilities in the co-taught classroom, there are also General Education students who are struggling as well. Alice, of Co-Teaching Team #2, commented, “When it’s just one of us in front of the inclusive classroom of 30 kids, there’s
always four or five co-taught kids who are getting lost and probably four or five general education kids who are also getting lost.”

The vast differences among students in the inclusive environment are not limited to content knowledge and skills. There are also unique experiences among the students that make meeting their needs equally as challenging. Joan reflected on her own attitude toward school as compared to her students’:

Generally speaking when I was a kid I loved school. I wanted to go to school every day that it was open but we have kids who aren’t like that so you know as I’ve taught I’ve realized that I have kids who it’s a struggle for them to be just in the door. It’s just a struggle to sit there because they don’t feel successful. They feel like they’re stupid and everything I’m doing in that classroom is just an example for them of how stupid they are.

Joan’s emotions were clear as she stressed this point and wondered how to reach them all. During a classroom visit to Joan and Alice’s class, varying levels of student engagement were observed. During a discussion of a novel, some students were fully engaged as they asked questions, took notes, or read sections of the book. At the same time there were several students who had their heads down sleeping and some were talking to one another in hushed tones about things unrelated to the novel or discussion. Joan continued to share her concern for the different needs represented in her classroom including those students who have a difficult time recognizing the importance of an education:

Sometimes we are faced with…kids who come from families who don’t really care or value education...that’s probably my most challenging thing is dealing with a kid who for
a lack of a better word you know doesn’t care. You know isn’t really pushing for anything. Not even a grade.

Joan recognized that the challenges she faces each day in her secondary, inclusive classroom are not limited to meeting the academic and intellectual needs of all the students.

Finding Time to Plan

Participants commented on the difficulties that arise because there is a lack of time to plan instruction collaboratively. Neither of the co-teaching teams in the study had common planning time which the teachers desperately wished they had. Friend and Cook (1996) posit that co-teachers must have time to plan instruction and assessment as well as time to evaluate the learning experiences occurring in the classroom. Co-teaching provides an opportunity for teachers to communicate with and learn from each other as they co-construct knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978); however, if teachers don’t have the time to collaborate, they can become frustrated. Alice, who is Joan’s Special Education counterpart, mentioned that the lack of planning time has a negative impact on the classroom instruction and assessment: “It’s just lack of planning time. It’s hard to make time to do that. Not having common planning is horrendous. It’s so hard.” Alice also shared that she while she does have common planning with another co-teacher, she doesn’t have it with Joan: “I think in a co-teaching situation I think collaboration is super imperative. Like right now I’m able to collaborate with one person and not with the other and I can definitely see the difference.”

Joan, the general education teacher in Co-Teaching Team #2 and Alice’s teaching partner, shared her own frustration about the lack of time to collaborate: “without having a common planning we really for the most part it’s just been me planning it and then her trying to you know add something I guess here or there when she gets a chance to.” Alice, the special
education teacher, summarized her thoughts on the lack of time to plan collaboratively with her co-teacher for their classes: “I feel like that the class is just like a lost cause. I can’t devote enough attention to it. It’s I don’t know…maybe that’s my fault.”

Isabel and Sharon who comprise Co-Teaching Team #1 both explained that most of their collaboration occurs through email communication or those short moments in class while students are working independently or taking a test. Sharon, the special education teacher, talked about the need to plan and collaborate any time they could find: “whenever we can get the kids independent like yesterday they were watching Romeo and Juliet, so then Isabel and I are at her desk – even just 5 or 6 minutes and we’re talking about the rest of the week or what do we want to change from [period to period].” She followed up with a sigh, “You make it work, but it could be better.”

Finding Time for It All

All the participants in the study voiced concerns that finding time to plan as a co-teaching team was difficult. They also shared the frustration that there is not enough instructional time to accomplish all that is required to meet the needs of a class filled with such diverse needs while covering required standards for the standardized End of Course Test. Both of the General Education teachers in the current study mentioned not having enough time to grade as a challenge. Isabel, the General Education teacher in Co-Teaching Team #1, shared that with an English class in particular, there are challenges related to grading the assessments given:

Finding the time to grade especially with literature you’re giving essays, you’re giving research papers, and trying to balance that grading with more planning other assignments that come in the midst of that. Like right now I have stacks of research papers and I need
to grade but I still have quizzes I have to grade. The things students take daily…the assessments they take daily…

When asked about what she needed to help improve her classroom assessment, Joan, the General Education teacher in Co-Teaching Team #2, responded:

Just the time to grade and to actually analyze it…It’s just the time is not always there to do that you know question analysis. OK they all got number one wrong…it just takes time to do that. I did it sometimes but I wasn’t able to do it a lot.

In addition to grading, the participants also discussed the extra time demands outside of the classroom that come when being a co-teacher in an inclusive environment. Not only are there additional meetings for students’ Individualized Educational Programs, but there are also more collaborative meetings because the teams often don’t have a shared planning time. Isabel shared her frustrations concerning the lack of time she seems to have to accomplish everything expected of her which is not limited to planning for her classes:

It keeps coming and uhm meetings. With me teaching Special Ed and having that collaboration I have a lot of IEP meetings. If I could show you my calendar right now [laughing] and just in one week how many meetings I have. It’s hard so that’s the tough part. The demands of the job and the grading.

In the focus group interview, the Special Education teachers both discussed the variety of needs that they must try to meet as a teacher in the inclusive classroom. Alice, who teaches in Co-Teaching Team #1, commented:

Sometimes I kind of feel like being a Special Ed teacher you really have two jobs or you really have all the Special Ed job but and you’re also responsible for all of the General Ed knowledge and at least be familiar with the standards in that class. I kind of feel like if I
focus on one too much, I miss out on the other. So it sometimes feel[s] like you’re spread thin…

Both Alice and Sharon, the special education teachers of the co-teaching teams, shared that the struggle to be effective in the classroom can be overwhelming and often requires them to make choices in terms of what content to leave out because there is not enough time or choices of what learning activities to include. As a Special Education teacher, Alice has to make the difficult choice of how much she can be involved in the curriculum and instructional decisions in the classroom and still maintain all her responsibilities in writing and monitoring IEPs for her students with special needs. Alice and Sharon both contend that being involved in all the instructional and assessment decisions is impossible because that creates two full time jobs that one person can’t possibly do well. As a result, they have to make choices regarding their involvement in the instructional decision-making of their co-taught inclusive class. When asked what drives those choices, they both quickly responded almost in unison, “students’ needs.” In their study of co-teachers in the secondary classroom, Keefe and Moore (2004) found similar challenges mentioned by teachers. The participants in their study struggled with the fact that Special Education teachers could not be experts of content knowledge; Keefe and Moore also reported that teachers were not given directions on how to define roles for each other in the classroom.

While these challenges are all seemingly insurmountable challenges, even greater challenges emerge with the day to day instruction. Isabel, the general education teacher in Co-Teaching Team #1, expressed these concerns as she talked about her co-taught English class:

…I do think oh my goodness it’s like you have four units and you have four and a half weeks to do this unit and just the time constraints. I feel like everything is planned for
you and you’re trying to fit everything in here and it doesn’t give a lot of room you know to just try something different or try something new because you’re trying to be sure you get all this stuff in. So I just think the [about] the mandates of making sure everything’s covered. You have to do SAT prep and you gotta do EOCT prep and you gotta incorporate writing and you gotta incorporate reading comp. It’s a lot. So you have to really…be creative and figure out how all of this is gonna work.

Alice, the special education teacher in Co-Teaching Team #2, commented that the mandated test also drives how much time is spent teaching various concepts and skills: “Because we know it’s [the EOCT] is imminent and especially like in this couple of weeks prior to we do major adjustment to instruction just for that purpose.” While the mandated standardized test at the end of the course seems to influence instructional choices, the ability levels of the students also do. Sharon, the Special Education teacher in Co-Teaching Team #1, said, “I feel like we’re addressing EOCT needs but we’re also addressing what really should have been mastered last year and that’s our struggle…they’re just not coming knowing what they’re supposed to know. So then you really have to back up.” Alice commented similarly when she discussed the lack of time there is to effectively teach all that the students need:

…just the diversity of ability levels in that class. It’s like you don’t want to not challenge students on one hand but if you kind of go along with the pace…I mean for instance that American Lit class that’s co-taught…my co-teacher teaches three other sections of that course that are just regular on-level not co-taught and every time we plan a lesson…our lesson has to be different than the other class but I mean even just time wise it takes us so much longer to get through whatever it might be…time is another factor. I just don’t feel like there’s enough time to get through everything.
Alice expressed concern that she feels pressure to cover so much content because of what will be assessed on the End of Course Test. She shared her frustration that sometimes they have to eliminate pieces of literature or activities that might interest students more because they have to make room for standardized test preparation. The pacing of the course seemed to be a concern to Sharon as well as she made a similar observation about her co-taught ninth grade English class:

Even if you don’t have Special Ed not everybody is on the same level so figuring out the best way to do it for the most kids and then what to do with the ones that are at different places. You know…and then time. Like the kids I feel real good about [are] the kids I have in there that I also have in Study Skills because every day in first and third block I just make a pile of study skills and a post it like we gotta talk about this we gotta talk about that so they’re going to get it. It’s almost [that] they have Lit one and a half times a day you know so…but with the kids that don’t have Study Skills whether they’re Regular Ed or Special Ed I mean that’s harder.

Sharon felt that preparing all the students in the inclusive classroom for the End of Course Test requires so much time because of their varying ability levels. Some of the students with disabilities are provided with additional support from Sharon through a study skills class. Both Alice and Sharon stressed that the End of Course Test did influence the instructional decisions they made in their classrooms because so many of their students with special needs were not ready to take it.

Summary

This chapter examined participants’ perceptions of, and experiences with, assessment, the impact of assessment mandates within the classroom, and the instructional challenges co-
teachers face in the secondary inclusive classroom regarding assessment in answer to the following research questions:

1. What perceptions do general and special education teachers who co-teach in secondary, inclusive classrooms hold about assessment?

2. What impact do local, state, and federal accountability mandates have on general and special education teachers’ instructional decisions at the secondary level within inclusive environments?

3. How do general and special education teachers plan and implement assessment within a co-taught environment at the secondary level?

Findings suggest that the participants bring their past experiences to the forefront when making decisions regarding instruction and assessment connected to learning in co-taught, inclusive secondary settings. It also appears that assessment mandates without clear direction leave teachers to make their own instructional decisions which leads to inconsistency among teachers’ implementation of effective classroom assessment and instruction. Finally, the data reveal that co-teachers who work collaboratively and assess all students jointly are overwhelmed particularly in an inclusive classroom. In Chapter 5 a discussion of the findings will be presented based on these results. Chapter 5 will also reveal implications for P-12 teachers, local school administrators, and teacher preparation programs. Chapter 5 will conclude with limitations of the study and recommendations for future research, education policy, and teacher practice.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Introduction

The present study explored the perceptions of assessment held by general and special education teachers who co-teach in a secondary, inclusive environment. The study also examined the impact of accountability mandates on instructional decisions made in the secondary, inclusive classroom as well as how general and special education teachers plan and implement assessment in that co-taught environment. Chapter 4 presented the findings of this study. Chapter 5 will present a discussion of the findings. The following sections will also be included: a summary of the study, implications for P-12 teachers, local school administrators, and teacher preparation. This chapter will conclude with limitations of the study and recommendations for future research, education policy, and teacher practice.

Summary

The purpose of the current study was to examine how co-teachers in an inclusive environment perceive assessment as well as how they navigate and balance the challenges of a co-taught classroom with assessment mandates from local and state levels. In this current era of accountability and assessment mandates, teachers have more pressure placed on them to effectively use assessment in the classroom. The literature suggests that teachers’ perceptions influence their instructional decisions, which includes the planning and implementation of assessment in the classroom. Also, co-teachers in the secondary, inclusive classroom have a particularly challenging task as ability levels in their classrooms vary greatly.

Qualitative methods were used to investigate how general and special education teachers’ perceptions of assessment and the accountability mandates impact their approach to assessment in the classroom, as well as those varying experiences and perceptions influence co-teaching in a
secondary, inclusive environment. The four participants in this qualitative case study were selected using purposeful sampling from a group of teachers who co-taught secondary English in an inclusive setting with a state-mandated assessment as a part of the course. The participants in this study represented a wide range of teaching experiences and unique educational backgrounds. This study used data collected through in-depth biographical interviews, open-ended interviews, observations, and lesson plans. Atlas.ti software was used in facilitating the data analysis process. Data were first examined using open-coding to identify recurring ideas. Then, axial coding was used as the constant comparative process continued for further analysis and understanding. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What perceptions do general and special education teachers who co-teach in secondary, inclusive classrooms hold about assessment?

2. What impact do local, state, and federal accountability mandates have on general and special education teachers’ instructional decisions at the secondary level within inclusive environments?

3. How do general and special education teachers plan and implement assessment within a co-taught environment at the secondary level?

Findings reveal that teachers’ past experiences influence their current instructional decisions in the classroom and that assessment is viewed and implemented through the lens of teachers’ perceptions.

Bringing Past Experiences to the Forefront

According to Marzano (2006) even in this era of accountability mandates and externally imposed testing, the most important factor in education is the classroom teacher. The present study seeks to examine the perceptions of assessment held by general and special education
teachers who teach in inclusive secondary settings. Based on the findings, it appears that each participant approached assessment based on their own educational experiences. The findings also suggest that the reflective thinking process is required in order to design and implement quality classroom assessment.

The participants’ current attitude toward assessment reflected their educational experiences, whether they were positive or negative. In Dewey’s (1938) philosophy of education he purports that people’s experiences influence their approach to learning and that even though experience isn’t a cognitive process, it can lead to a developed attitude or perception. Both teachers in Co-Teaching Team #1, Isabel (general education) and Sharon (special education) had negative experiences with assessment when they were students. As they shared their experiences, they used the word assessment to describe only standardized testing or summative paper and pencil tests in the classroom. Both Isabel and Sharon even labeled themselves poor test takers. Because of her own assessment experiences as a student, Isabel clearly stated that she did not want her students to feel the anxiety and disappointment that she felt when being labeled by a single test score. Similarly, Sharon, her co-teaching partner, expressed a sincere desire to assess her students’ knowledge fairly in contrast to how she was evaluated as a student. In contrast, Co-Teaching Team #2, comprised of Joan who is the general education teacher and Alice who is the special education teacher, had experiences with testing that were more positive. Both Joan and Alice recalled performing well on standardized tests as well as classroom assessments. Even though their experiences were different than Co-Teaching Team #1, their experiences still contributed to their perceptions of assessment. Joan, who shared multiple examples of doing well on standardized tests, also revealed that she felt the tests didn’t accurately reflect her total body of knowledge. For example, she explained how well she performed on a secondary, state-
mandated test in the subject of Mathematics which was a professed area of weakness for her. Joan recognized that the test was nothing more than a minimum-competency assessment. Alice, who Joan’s co-teacher, only recalls college entrance exams as her experience with standardized tests and in the same breath mentioned that she only retook them to improve her score. Both Joan and Alice emphasized that the End of Course Test, the mandated assessment for the course they co-teach, is a basic skills test and that passing it meant little for students beyond high school. The participants’ current attitude toward assessment was rooted in their own educational experiences.

The participants’ perceptions of assessment influenced their approach to planning and implementing assessment in their classroom. Teachers’ beliefs influence their perceptions which then connect to their actions in the classroom as seen in their planning and instruction (Clark & Peterson, 1984; Pajares, 1992). More recent research by Brown (2004) further confirms that most pedagogical actions committed by teachers in the classroom are inextricably connected to their perceptions and beliefs. Isabel and Sharon, who comprise Co-Teaching Team #1, expressed frustration that the main medium of assessment used to evaluate their students at the end of the course was a standardized, paper and pencil test referred to as the End of Course Test. They also communicated passionately that students should be provided with a variety of ways and even multiple opportunities to demonstrate their understanding. Stiggins (1999) maintains that a once a year test cannot provide the most accurate picture of a student’s learning and that in order to improve student achievement, high quality assessment must be implemented in the classroom (p. 193). When teachers include a variety of assessment options in the classroom they are able to see a more detailed and full picture of a student’s performance (Chappius, Chappius, & Stiggins, 2009). As seen through classroom observations, lesson plan documents, and even their own words, Isabel and Sharon approached assessment in their classroom with a focus on assessing
students consistently through formative assessments, as well as periodically with summative assessments that were performance-based, such as projects, oral discussions, and real-world applicable writing assignments, rather than paper and pencil. They made conscious decisions, as shared in their interviews, to implement instruction that they believed accurately measured student understanding. Isabel and Sharon’s decisions reflect Dewey’s (1964) assertion that experiences and one’s past plays a role in how one learns and deals with the future. In this context, it is the experiences of two teachers that directly influenced not only how they perceived assessment, but also how they implemented it in their classroom.

While both Joan and Alice had successful experiences with standardized tests and other summative assessments in their own education, they took these experiences and measured them against what they knew to be effective teaching. In a small way, Joan and Alice were exercising their voice and doing what Serafini (2002) suggests is necessary for real assessment reform which is to question the traditional view of assessment. When Joan and Alice reflected on their own experiences with assessment as students and what they had learned as teachers about assessment, they recognized that spending an excessive amount of time preparing for a one time, minimum competency, test that is standardized such as the End of Course Test in American Literature was ineffective. They ascribed to the belief that teaching the standards of the course, reading, writing, and other modes of communication, would result in their students passing any minimum competency test. They did as Dewey (1964) argues which was to use their experiences and intelligence to make the decision that was best for their students.

In addition, the participants’ perceptions of assessment highlighted the need for reflection as classroom assessment is planned and implemented. Dewey (1964) asserts that experiences without reflection lack meaning. Also, Clark and Peterson’s (1984) seminal review of literature
on teachers’ thought processes concluded that reflective thinking plays an important role in how teachers move from their own experiences into classroom practice. The theme of reflecting on one’s practice emerged as all the teachers described their process of assessing students in the classroom. In Co-Teaching Team #1, Isabel and Sharon both spoke of regularly adjusting their instruction based on feedback they collect through formative assessments given to students. They also revealed that sometimes what was originally designed to be a summative assessment changed to a formative assessment based on the progress of students. For example, Sharon describes an instance where students had not demonstrated a proficient knowledge of key literary terms; as a result, she and her co-teaching partner, Isabel discussed the results of the assessment and determined that they would re-teach some concepts and re-assess. They reflected collaboratively in the midst of the experience in order to develop effective classroom assessment for their students. Schon (1987) viewed reflection as a process rooted in experience. He also stressed the importance of environment and interaction with others when reflecting. The participants’ approach to adjusting their instruction in the midst of the experience reflects Schon’s definition of reflection.

In Co-Teaching Team #2, both Joan, the general education teacher, and Alice, the special education teacher shared experiences where their reflection engendered a change in their use of classroom assessment. In a discussion of Deweyan thought on reflection, Rodgers (2002) maintains that reflection within in a collaborative relationship can have more impact than if the reflection occurs in isolation. Joan and Alice shared with each other a concern regarding the assessments they use being the most accurate measure of the standard being taught. Joan reflected that she often thought about the type of assessments used in the class. She worked to ensure that the assessments used in class accurately assessed the standards she taught. For
example, if the standard required students to analyze the theme of a text, she wanted the assessment to measure that skill and not something else. Alice, Joan’s special education counterpart, also shared concerns that the most challenging part of classroom assessment was to measure the right skill and that as a co-teaching team they constantly reflected on this issue. The participants’ responses revealed that actually creating the assessment is quite challenging and requires constant thought and conversation between the co-teaching partners. These results support Dewey’s (1964) argument that facts and bits of information mean nothing without the practice of reflection.

Assessment Is Learning

The present study seeks to examine the impact that local, state, and federal mandates have on the instructional decisions of general and special education teachers in an inclusive setting. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2006) argue that a key element to teaching involves how teachers thoughtfully consider and make meaning of the various contexts (social, political, economic and cultural) in which they teach. The findings reveal several themes related to assessment: 1) standardized tests are imperfect, yet influential, 2) learning is best demonstrated by doing, and 3) assessment is inextricably connected to learning. These themes were evident as all the teachers in the study revealed a frustration with standardized testing, yet spent considerable time preparing students for the tests. Also, the participants’ words, plans, and actions point towards a strong belief that students communicate their learning most effectively through performance-based assessment. Additionally, the participants emphasized that assessment should be a part of the learning process and not something set apart from it.

Participants viewed mandated standardized tests as imperfect and flawed if their sole use is to measure student knowledge. Jones and Egley (2007) contend that test scores alone are not
an accurate representation of student learning. However, for many school districts standardized test scores are used to make high-stakes decisions such as promotion, retention, and graduation (Horn, 2003). Teachers who in the classroom each day have more opportunities to evaluate students performance in relation to course objectives and standards using effective classroom assessment (Harlen, 2005; Jones & Egley, 2007). The participants’ responses revealed that they too believed that a single test cannot be an effective measure of student learning if used in isolation. Both members of Co-Teaching Team #1, Isabel and Sharon, planned for formative and summative assessments in the classroom. They also made a conscious decision to offer students multiple ways of demonstrating their learning. Joan and Alice, who comprise Co-Teaching Team #2, also believed in providing students with multiple opportunities to show their learning which was evident in the variety of assessments observed and noted in their lesson plans. Assessments for both teams included discussion, visual representations, written responses, and projects that involved technology and oral presentations. The participants’ responses also highlighted a concern focused more on students’ ability to write, read, and communicate effectively which are skills that aren’t necessarily evaluated through the standardized End of Course Test required as a part of NCLB accountability mandates.

Despite the participants’ perception that the mandated standardized test given to their students was not the best measure of student learning, the findings revealed that they still spent a considerable amount of instructional time preparing their students for it. Teachers often feel pressure for their students to perform well on high stakes tests and as a result may spend a considerable amount of time focused on test-taking strategies (Jones & Egley, 2007; Watanabe, 2007). Isabel, the general education teacher in Co-Teaching Team #1, talked about not wanting her students to “freak out” when the test comes, so she incorporates practice tests and test-taking
skills throughout the semester. In addition to the weekly practices, Isabel and Sharon, her special education co-teacher, spent at least three ninety minute class periods prior to the End of Course Test to review procedures, play review games, and answer any last minute questions students might have. While Joan and Alice, the teachers in Co-Teaching Team #2, didn’t spend as much time preparing for the End of Course Test as the other participants, they still spent several class periods in the computer lab where students completed practices on a test preparatory computer program. Joan shared that about a month before the End of Course Test is administered they gave students a diagnostic assessment to determine potential areas of student weaknesses for the EOCT and then designed specific practice assignments and tests for students to complete. Even though all the participants communicated a frustration about the mandated assessments consuming their instructional time, the assessments still dictated, to a certain degree, what and how they teach. These findings support the idea that teachers often spend considerable amounts of instructional time devoted to test taking strategies or practices in order to prepare their students to take the mandated standardized test (Jones & Egley, 2007).

Participants in the study emphasized that students learn and demonstrate learning best through performance-based assessment. The relationship between experiences and education is an intimate one; if the two are connected then an increase in knowledge occurs (Dewey, 1938). In the classroom, assessment that is performance-based and rooted in experience can provide students with in depth learning experiences that teachers can use to make thoughtful and timely evaluations regarding what students know and are able to do (Falk, Ort, & Moirs, 2007). Co-Teaching Team #1, Isabel and Sharon, incorporated opportunities for students to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding through performance assessments such as participating in discussions, presenting information orally using technology, and even acting as facilitators of
whole class discussions. They looked for ways to get to all students and recognized that students are all smart in different ways. In the classroom, not all experiences are those that are equally educational; some can stunt or distort growth and others can encourage it (Dewey, 1938, p. 25). Assessing students in a way that met their unique needs weighed heavily on Sharon, perhaps because she is a special education teacher and had worked with students who often couldn’t communicate their understanding via standardized tests; she had watched how this experience for some students actually impeded their progress.

Joan and Alice, who comprise Co-Teaching Team #2, also placed emphasis on using classroom assessment as a way for students to demonstrate their understanding through a variety of methods rather than just paper and pencil tests. The literature distinguishes classroom assessment as those tasks assigned and evaluated by teachers for the purpose of monitoring and evaluating student progress (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Frey & Schmitt, 2007). They included poster projects (which required students to use visual representations accompanied with an oral explanation), Socratic Seminars (which are student-led discussions of content), and multi-media projects (which incorporated a variety of media forms to answer an assigned thematic question). The participants used numerous experiences in their classroom as a way for students not only to demonstrate their learning, but also as a method for learning. Dewey (1938) claimed that educators should be able to pull from physical and social surroundings to create experiences useful for learning. The participants in the study shared a belief that all students can learn and can demonstrate it if they are presented with options of how to communicate their learning. Frey and Schmitt (2007) describe performance assessment as any assessment that requires a student to demonstrate a skill or create a product (p.416). Including performance-based assessment as part of their classroom assessment approach revealed the participants’ desire to give all students the
opportunity to show that they have attained a concept. Regardless of the mandated, standardized assessments, the participants used performance-based assessment in their classroom because they believe it is a more accurate and fair representation of what students know.

Finally, participants expressed that assessment shouldn’t be viewed as an entity separate from learning. They believed that assessment, whether it is labeled formative or summative, is valid to them if it can be used in planning and adjusting instruction for improved student learning. Classroom assessment should not only include a variety of methods, but it should also directly inform teachers of what the students know and are able to do so that they can adjust instruction and meet the needs of all students (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Buhagiar, 2007; Marzano, 2006; Olinghouse & Santangelo, 2010; Reig, 2007; Shepherd, 2000; Serafini, 2002; Stiggins, 1999; Zheng & Burry-Stock, 2003). Isabel and Sharon, who comprise Co-Teaching Team #1, viewed and implemented assessment as a consistent part of their instructional practice. Sharon, the special education teacher, placed value on those regular, formative assessments and even commented that if the assessments are thorough enough, then a summative assessment may not even be needed. Her general education counterpart, Isabel, shared that she also valued the formative assessments the most because they gave her a more detailed view of what the students were thinking. She referenced open-ended exit tickets and journal responses that she used in class as examples of really seeing what the students learned. She even commented that Sharon was better at reminding her to include some kind of formative assessment every day. Again, Sharon, as a special education teacher, seemed more cognizant of the need to assess continuously and in multiple ways.

Using formative assessment consistently and purposefully makes it a part of the learning process and not an isolated occurrence. Stiggins (2002) claims that assessment can not only be
used to show what has been learned (“of” learning), but it can also be “for” learning and “as” learning. Shepherd (2000) contends that teachers must consistently use formative assessment data and other forms of feedback to adjust their teaching and learning process particularly if they want students to do the same (p. 103). Isabel and Sharon also used classroom assessment to help students understand how to reflect on their learning experience. For example, there were several instances where students had to provide feedback to other students on presentations or self-reflect on their own performance. Wiliam (2006) asserted that assessment used formatively is a way to improve student learning through adjustments to teacher instruction and how students approach the process of learning. Sharon, the special education teacher in Co-Teaching Team #1, and Joan, the general education teacher in Co-Teaching Team #2, seemed to place the most emphasis on using formative assessments as a learning tool.

Both Co-Teaching Teams used formative and summative assessments as a consistent and continuous part of their teaching and learning cycle. They also blended formative and summative assessment and really valued the flexibility to use both types of assessments as learning tools. Wiliam (2006) asserted that any type of assessment can be formative depending on how it is used by the teacher. Teachers must know how to create an environment conducive to progress and provide the scaffolding necessary to promote learning (Harris, 2007; Hodgen & Marshall, 2005). Sharon, the special education teacher in Co-Teaching Team #1, talked about several examples of assessments that began as summative assessments and resulted in being used formatively. She talked about an essay that was written originally as a summative assessment of a summer reading text. As she and Isabel, her general education co-teacher, began to evaluate the student work, they quickly realized that using the assessment formatively as a learning tool to teach a variety of
writing and analysis structures would be more valuable. They decided to make that adjustment by closely examining student work.

Joan and Alice, who comprise Co-Teaching Team #2, also used a variety of classroom assessments for multiple purposes. They both talked about concerns for students, particularly those with special needs who were falling behind because of their performance on assessments originally intended to be summative. Joan and Alice were concerned about creating an environment in which students feel comfortable communicating what they know and do not know (Buhagiar, 2007). Alice shared an experience when a student with special needs performed poorly on a test and she decided to pull her aside and talk with the student. Alice, who is the special education teacher, used oral questioning with the student to assess the same content that was on the traditional paper and pencil test. The student was able to effectively demonstrate her knowledge of the content through an alternative format. For Alice, this was further confirmation that not only should assessment be offered in varied formats, but it is also a part of the learning process for students. The participants in the study communicated and demonstrated a desire to design quality assessments that accurately assess what they are intended to and promote learning in the classroom.

Limitations

This study was designed to add to the body of research on teacher perceptions of assessment and the effect those perceptions have on the planning and implementation of assessment in the co-taught, secondary, inclusive classroom. Even though this study reached its purpose, there were some limitations. This participants of the study consisted of 4 teachers from the same secondary school and within the same subject area which makes generalizing the findings to a larger group of teachers difficult. While the participants represented general
education and special education, they were all co-teaching literature and composition classes. As teachers, their experiences with assessment were limited to the types of assessment, both classroom and standardized, used in the English classroom.

Also, even though the setting of this study has students representing white, African American, Hispanic, and Asian races, as well as a group of students identified as economically disadvantaged, there is still a majority white population that is mostly from a middle or upper socio-economic level. The setting was also a high-performing school according to test scores and graduation rates. Even though there were several students in each class that did not perform well on the End of Course Test, the test scores for this school as a whole, even in the inclusive classroom, were usually above state and district averages. Perhaps teachers in a low-performing school where test scores are lower might have different views of accountability mandates.

Another limitation is that all the teachers were considered experienced teachers and they all have been teaching in the field for five years or more. All but one had been teaching before NCLB legislation and its accompanying accountability mandates went into effect, so they had the experience of teaching pre-NCLB and during-NCLB. While the teachers did represent a range in the years of teaching experience, there were no new teachers in this study. However, not having any first through third year teachers may have eliminated the possibility of inexperience and novice stress being an influential factor.

Finally, my role as a former administrator in the school could be a limitation. Teachers who I used to work with in a different capacity may not have been completely honest about their feelings because of my former role. Multiple measures were taken to reduce this potential limitation. A variety of data were collected including interviews that were transcribed and member checked, observations what were member checked, and lesson plans created by the
teachers. Also, I worked as a teacher alongside the participants for over a year before I began data collection, so relationships and rapport were built.

Implications for P-12 Teachers

Experiences and Reflection. Dewey (1938) asserted that in order for teachers to effectively lead students, they must recognize their own experiences (p. 38). Further, all experiences are not created equal. Some experiences can stunt growth while others can encourage it (Dewey, 1938, p. 25). The findings of this study reveal that teachers often use reflection as they make instructional decisions. This reflection can serve both teacher and student in the classroom as they work toward using assessment effectively. As teachers examine their past experiences with assessment, reflection will be an invaluable tool. Providing opportunities for reflection could allow teachers to thoughtfully consider the influence their own experiences have on their implementation of classroom assessment. Teachers must be given the opportunity to examine critically the values and beliefs that may have an impact on their current instructional practice (James & Pedder, 2006, p. 112). Reflection can also lead teachers to make more informed, thoughtful decisions regarding how they use assessment data in their classrooms. As a part of the reflection process, teachers can scrutinize data collected from formative and summative classroom assessments and consider ways to adjust their instruction. In light of the many challenges P-12 teachers face in the classroom – particularly those that are co-taught and where one discipline is being presented, teachers have a responsibility to lead students to deeper thinking and other meta-cognitive practices.

Black and Wiliam (1998) assert that self-assessment is a necessary part of formative assessment. By evaluating themselves, students reflect on their process which helps them gain confidence and understanding as they use the assessment for learning (Stiggins & Chappius,
The findings of this study suggest that teachers who know how to reflect will often model the practice of reflection for their students. This modeling as part of a formative assessment cycle could lead to improved student learning. When classroom assessment is designed to be “for learning” rather than simply summative in nature, “of learning,” then students will learn better the desired content or skills (Popham, 2009, p. 11). This calls for teachers to incorporate self-reflection for themselves and students as a part of their classroom practice.

Teachers need the skills and tools to guide students toward mastery of the recently introduced Common Core State Standards. The standards have introduced “ambitious goals for student learning” (Breakstone, Smith, & Wineburg, 2013, p. 53). Because the standards have specifically outlined more rigorous expectations for students, teachers will have to adjust their approach to classroom assessment. The traditional multiple choice tests will no longer be the most appropriate way to assess student learning. The new wave of standardized tests that will accompany the implementation of the Common Core Standards will assess students using multi-step performance-based tasks that include comprehension and analysis of complex texts (Doorey, 2012). The findings of this study reveal that teachers have already begun to include more performance-based assessments that require higher levels of critical thinking. In order to continue this progression, teachers could benefit from professional learning that focuses on designing quality classroom assessment that is balanced and varied in its approach. Teachers could use opportunities to create classroom assessments that align with the analytical skills outlined in the Common Core State Standards. In addition, professional learning should offer teachers opportunities to work collaboratively so that they can benefit from their peers as they design and implement these new assessments.
Commitment to collaboration. The key to effective co-teaching teams is an equal commitment to collaborating regardless of the circumstances. The literature consistently indicates that co-teaching teams must have time to plan together (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001; Murawski & Dieker, 2004; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & MacDuffie, 2007). Collaboration between co-teachers involves working together to design instruction that meets the needs of all students. Collaboration also involves co-teachers defining clear roles and supporting each other as decisions instructional and assessment decisions are made jointly. If co-teaching involves collaboration in this manner, then it can have a positive impact on the teaching and learning in a classroom (Isherwood & Barger-Anderson, 2008; Keefe & Moore, 2004; Murawski & Dieker, 2004; Thornton, 2006). The findings of the study showed that without time to plan collaboratively to implement instruction and assessment, co-teaching teams sometimes struggle to design quality classroom assessments. Ultimately co-teachers who find success with students in the classroom must find a way to plan collaboratively. The time spent discussing instructional and assessment plans also creates an opportunity for teachers to focus on improving student learning. Lingo, Barton-Arwood, and Jolivette (2011) contend that, “collaboration between general and special educators is more important than ever, as is a need for a variety of assessment strategies to support and document improved outcomes for students” (p. 6). When teachers are continually bombarded with accountability mandates and other challenges of the inclusive classroom, the willingness to collaborate is crucial. The partners can become co-constructors of knowledge which allows them to plan and implement assessment more effectively. An increase in collaboration and time set aside for it provide more opportunities for improved learning and instruction.
Professional Practice. The Race to the Top funding provided by the United States Department of Education has influenced state and district level decisions regarding assessment. The Race to the Top funding program awards financial support to states that develop effective assessments used to measure students’ knowledge and to provide teachers with the data necessary to improve teaching and learning (“Race to the Top Program Description”, 2013). As a result of this increased focus on assessment, accountability becomes inextricably connected to assessment. Also, in response to participation in the Race to the Top Initiative, states have begun to develop new systems for teacher evaluation. Embedded within these new systems are student growth measures that constitute a significant part of the teacher evaluations in the category of a teacher effectiveness measure (“Teacher and Leader Effectiveness”, n.d.). There is a growing trend of including student performance and growth on accountability measures as a part of assessing teacher performance. With these changes in many states’ teacher evaluations stemming from participation in the Race to the Top Initiative that provides grants to states and districts, teacher and student performance may be tied to financial incentives in the future. The findings in this study reveal that teachers feel pressure and anxiety regarding standardized testing even though in their current district student performance isn’t tied directly to teacher evaluations. As that possibility increases, teacher will continue to feel stressed as a result of accountability mandates (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006; Jones & Egley, 2007). As teachers work to improve the assessment implemented in their classroom, teachers must consider the larger impact student performance will have on their own professional practice.

The value of teachers’ voices. Educational policy and even educational research has often marginalized teachers’ voices (Hargreaves, 1996). As NCLB triggered accountability mandates measured by standardized tests, teacher perspectives have been lost in the fray. Lee (2011)
argues that even as the Common Core Standards have been introduced, “[t]oo many national reformers ignore the critical importance of immediate grassroots engagement, though they know that local teachers are the ones charged with making change happen in the classroom” (p. 44). The findings of this study reveal that teachers feel left out of any decisions regarding mandated assessment. They make the best decisions they can without any clear direction from those who created the test. Policymakers continue to make decisions regarding what will be tested, who will be tested, and how they will be tested. Teachers also feel they have little or no input about what content and skills are included on the standardized and mandated tests they administer to students (Heritage, 2007). The teacher’s voice is a valuable one and should be heard.

Teachers must advocate not only for themselves but also for their students. As many states are requesting and receiving waivers from the NCLB requirements, teachers must be a part of this reform. Buhagiar (2007) criticizes assessment reforms because they have failed to involve the wisdom and insight of teachers and other interested stakeholders (p. 53). The data suggest that teachers want to be creators and developers of assessment because they desire a just and thorough evaluation of their students. By demonstrating and practicing effective classroom assessment they can create opportunities to communicate and prove its benefits to student learning. The literature is replete with assertions that the classroom teacher is the most knowledgeable entity in terms of what students know and are able to do because they are with the students every day. Teachers must continue to seek opportunities to voice their opinions and take up the challenge of advocating for quality assessment that presents a full picture of what students know and are capable of accomplishing.

Implications for School Administrators
Given the importance of collaboration between co-teachers, school administrators must provide co-teachers with protected time to collaborate with their co-teachers. One of the most common concerns expressed in the literature is the lack of planning time provided for teachers who are co-teaching (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010). The findings suggest that teachers need and want time to collaborate regarding student progress as well as the design and implementation of classroom assessment. Without this time, teachers cannot ensure that students are maximizing their learning potential. School administrators should consider the time required to collaboratively plan instruction which includes developing quality assessments and evaluating student results.

Teachers need professional learning to provide them with the skills and knowledge to be literate in assessment (Popham, 2009, p. 5). Teachers must recognize the various forms and purposes of assessment and be able to use them at the appropriate times (Volante & Fazio, 2007). Knowledge of assessment and its uses should also extend to using the data collected to make adjustments to teachers’ instructional practice (Vogel, Rau, Baker, & Ashby, 2006, p. 42). The findings of this study reveal that teachers use the terms formative and summative assessment to describe their classroom assessments, but may not necessarily know when they are doing it or how to communicate their purpose for using it. Also, the findings suggested that teachers may not know how to formally analyze and interpret data. Teachers would benefit from professional learning designed to improve their assessment literacy (Popham, 2009). If teachers’ knowledge and understanding of assessment increased, school administrators could see that translate into improved learning environment in the classroom.

As teachers’ assessment literacy improves, school administrators must be open to the use of varied assessments and not just standardized tests as a means for measuring student growth.
The teacher is in a better position to delineate what each student needs better than a standardized test given once a year (Chappius, Chappius, & Stiggins, 2009). Principals and school administrators who have a sound knowledge of assessment understand that teachers must use a wide variety of assessments in the classroom to evaluate what students have learned (Arter, Stiggins, Duke, and Sagor, 1993). If school administrators communicate that multiple choice benchmark exams are to be used formatively but also use them as predictors for student performance on future standardized tests, then there can be no real change. Teachers who are using more performance-based assessments in a school where the school leaders are not literate in assessment may find themselves in a challenging situation. Being knowledgeable about classroom assessment and its uses should not be limited to teachers.

Implications for Teacher Preparation

Co-teaching brings together teachers with different areas of expertise and when implemented effectively can benefit students of all abilities (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain & Shamberger, 2010, p. 15). With all its benefits, co-teaching can be challenging to implement, particularly in the secondary setting (Isherwood & Barger-Anderson, 2008; Keefe & Moore, 2004; Murawksi & Dieker, 2004). The findings of this study suggest that teachers learned how to work in a co-teaching team in the field rather than in their teacher education programs. In this study, none of the teachers were required to take any coursework in their teacher preparatory programs that specifically focused on co-teaching in the inclusive classroom. Teacher preparation programs should be a place where teachers gain exposure to and experience with co-teaching (Austin, 2001; Keefe & Moore, 2004). Many teachers who are new to the field of education end up in a co-teaching position. That could be done in a variety of ways. There are a variety of ways that co-teaching and collaboration could be presented to pre-service teachers:
modeling by professors and other faculty in the teacher education program, required or encouraged collaboration could be required as a part of assignments related to teaching and learning pedagogy and perhaps most important, teacher candidates should have a co-teaching experiencing before they graduating from the program. In light of the findings, these possible experiences could enhance co-teaching teams in the classroom.

Teachers must voice their perspectives beyond the classroom walls and insert themselves in the social and political milieu of educational policy and reform. Unfortunately, teachers often feel disenfranchised and reluctant to share their views publicly (Wade, 2003). The findings suggest that depending on the teacher preparation program they attend, teachers may not have been taught how to advocate for themselves or their students beyond the classroom. As a part of teacher preparation, teacher candidates should be provided with opportunities to develop their own advocacy skills by learning what that looks like from a variety of perspectives such as classroom teacher, school administrator, or teacher educator. Teacher preparation programs should equip teacher candidates with the skills to find their own voices and become advocates for themselves and their students.

Recommendations

Future Research. Although the present case study has produced an in-depth exploration of and analysis of the perceptions of general education and special education teachers in a secondary, co-taught, inclusive classroom, there is still more work to be done. Reproducing the study with more participants and incorporating participants from other content areas in secondary education would increase generalizability. Comparing teacher perspectives in a variety of schools, such as urban, rural, and suburban, could present an even broader view of how teachers navigate the challenges of assessment in an inclusive, secondary classroom. Also, examining co-
taught, inclusive settings in which there is no mandated, standardized test could provide more information about how co-teachers approach assessment when they teach a course without an accountability mandate attached to it. Finally, as the influence of NCLB has begun to shift due to waivers sought by many states, the impact of accountability mandates may not consist primarily of standardized test data. The Common Core Standards will have new assessments that are performance-based, yet still mandated. As the accountability mandates begin to change, examining teachers’ views regarding assessment in the Common Core era could be beneficial. Education Policy. Accountability based on test scores has been the main method of school reform in recent years (Jones & Egley, 2007). Also, those who make the policy have been accused of not involving teachers as they make decisions related to assessment and accountability. Findings suggest that teachers would welcome opportunities to share their experiences and input related to assessment. Including teacher input in future educational policy decisions is absolutely necessary to gain teacher support for any future assessment initiatives. Also, just as the Common Core consortium has been developing more varied assessments in response to the need for assessment of student growth related to the Common Core Standards, educational policy experts should continue to encourage teachers to use a balanced approach to assessment that would include a variety of methods and reflect a more complete and accurate picture of student learning and understanding.

Teacher Practice. Teachers must learn how to make reflection a consistent part of their professional practice. It will provide them with opportunities to process their own experiences in order to use them as moments of learning. Dewey (1938) claims that “every experience is a moving force” (p. 38). Findings of this study reveal that teachers often use reflection in an unstructured manner, but could benefit from guidance on how to incorporate it with students
more often as a tool for self-assessment. Using reflection regularly could encourage teachers to evaluate their approach to instructional and assessment practice. Also, teachers should consider conducting action research as a part of their classroom practice. Using action research could give teachers the opportunity to create, facilitate, and participate in professional learning that they design for their own needs. They are learning by doing – learning how to get improve their use of classroom assessment through researching their own practices.

Conclusion

This study was born out of my own increasing frustration with accountability mandates that seemed to overwhelm and confuse teachers wherever I went in my professional educational experiences. It seemed that every meeting or professional learning I attended addressed some element of mandated testing, remediation for testing, preparing for testing, and even rearranging curriculum for testing. Teachers feel stressed and underappreciated as the workload and pressure increase, yet at the same time I heard frustration and anger in the voices of teachers, I also heard a voice of concern and compassion for the students they taught each day within the four walls of the classroom. It is within those walls that the real education occurs. One or two teachers with an increasingly larger number of students working together to battle any challenge they may face whether it is a mandated standardized test looming on the horizon or the student with special needs who can’t read and is in 9th grade. The teachers in this study exhibited a passionate belief that all students can learn. When the participants were asked what they liked most about teaching, they all said emphatically, students.

Stiggins and DuFour (2009) assert that, “the ultimate test of effective assessment is simple – does it provide teachers and students with the information they need to ensure that all students learn at higher levels” (p. 644). In the inclusive setting, teachers who engage in the
active work of crafting and implementing effective classroom assessment are working to move all students forward regardless of any identified disabilities or deficiencies. Many of the teachers recognize their own experiences and the impact they have on how they approach their classroom. They make conscious and careful instructional decisions as they work tirelessly to educate all students. Ultimately, assessment is not really about accountability, it is about teaching and learning. Sergiovanni (2005) emphasizes that if teachers and administrators desire a school with a culture of leadership and learning, they must work toward building a collaborative culture focused on teaching and learning:

If teachers are able to work more productively at teaching and learning, principals, superintendents, and boards are going to be more successful. A teacher-centered approach, so it seems, helps everyone become a winner at the game of accountability for effective teaching and learning. Teachers get the support they need to be successful. Students learn more. (Sergiovanni, 2005, p. 113).

The future of education relies on the strength of classroom teachers who work each day to balance the challenges of the inclusive classroom and the growing focus on accountability that emphasizes tests as its primary measure. Just as teachers have done for decades, their passion and fortitude will gird them as they navigate the choppy waters of assessment reform.
References


Zealand Council for Educational Research’s Teaching Learning and Research Initiative Grant.


APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

My signature below indicates that I have read the information provided and have decided to participate in the study titled “Assessment in Inclusive Environments: The Ways in which General and Special Education Secondary Teachers Navigate the Competing Demands of Theory and Practice” to be conducted at Hillgrove High School between the dates of March 12, 2012 and May 25, 2012. I understand that my signature indicates that I have agreed to participate in this research project.

I understand the purpose of the research project will be to focus on teachers' beliefs and the ways in which they navigate local and state assessment mandates and that I will participate in the following manner:
1. Individual interviews
2. Classroom observations
3. Document analysis of my lesson plans

Potential benefits of the study are:
Increased understanding of teacher beliefs regarding federal and local assessment mandates
Increased opportunities for teachers to voice their opinions
Increased teacher understanding for how to navigate the demands of federal and local assessment mandates
Increased professional growth

I agree to the following conditions with the understanding that I can withdraw from the study at any time should I choose to discontinue participation.

- The identity of participants will be protected. Each participant will be assigned a pseudonym that will be used throughout the study.
- Information gathered during the course of the study will become part of the data analysis and may contribute to published research reports and presentations.
- One month after the study is complete, transcriptions will be shredded and audiotapes and videotapes will be destroyed.
- There are no foreseeable inconveniences or risks involved for my participation in the study.
- Participation in the study is voluntary and will not affect either employment status or annual evaluations. If I decide to withdraw permission after the study begins, I will notify the school of my decision.
- The expected duration of participation will be 4-8 weeks.
- I must be 18+ years of age to participate in the study.

Research at Kennesaw State University that involves human participants is carried out under the oversight of an Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding these activities should be addressed to the Institutional Review Board, Kennesaw State University, 1000 Chastain Road, #0112, Kennesaw, GA 30144-5591, (678) 797-2268.

If further information is needed regarding the research study, I can contact Sylvia M. Spruill (Sylvia.spruill@cobbk12.org or 404-629-0651)

Signature __________________________________________________________________________
Participant Date

Signature __________________________________________________________________________
Principal Date
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<th>Research Question: What I want to know</th>
<th>Why I want to know it</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
<th>What Was Learned</th>
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<td>What perceptions do general and special education teachers who co-teach in secondary, inclusive classrooms hold about assessment?</td>
<td>To understand how they negotiate the demands of assessing students formatively and summatively in the classroom</td>
<td>In-depth biographical interviews, focus group interviews, observations, and document analysis of lesson plans</td>
<td><strong>Passionate and emotional connections</strong>&lt;br&gt;“I just remember taking the SAT because my scores were horrible and it just made me feel stupid.” (Isabel)&lt;br&gt;“I don’t like standardized testing defining a kid cause I was a horrible test taker and my son’s a bad test taker...” (Sharon)&lt;br&gt;<strong>Confidence and Acceptance</strong>&lt;br&gt;“In high school on the graduation writing exam...I got like one of the top scores...it didn’t really ever matter to me because...I never felt like I would fail it [the standardized test].” (Joan)&lt;br&gt;“I knew I needed a good score to get into college. Getting a good score wasn’t an issue. I was trying to get a better score to get a better scholarship.” (Alice)</td>
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<td>What impact do local, state, and federal accountability mandates have on general and special education teachers’ instructional decisions at the secondary level within inclusive environments?</td>
<td>To understand how teachers’ planning and instruction are influenced and affected by accountability mandates.</td>
<td>In-depth interviews, focus group interviews, observations, and document analysis</td>
<td><strong>Co-Teaching Team #1 and #2 - Lesson Plans</strong>: listed variety of assessment methods (one on one checks, Socratic Seminar, performance-based assessments, various writing tasks)&lt;br&gt;<strong>Observations</strong>: oral presentation, student-facilitated discussions, technology driven projects</td>
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<td>How do general and special education teachers plan and implement assessment within a co-taught environment at the secondary level?</td>
<td>To understand how secondary general and special education teachers make sense of the assessment demands being made on them.&lt;br&gt;To understand how secondary general and special education teachers respond to the accountability challenges of assessing students in their classroom</td>
<td>In-depth biographical interviews, focus group interviews, observations, and document analysis</td>
<td><strong>Co-Teaching Team #1</strong>: Isabel placed importance on preparing students to specifically take the EOCT&lt;br&gt;“I try to do it throughout the whole semester so that it’s not freaking them out. So every week we do a practice so you know get them used to it. Then when it comes down to the actual test I do hit em hard.” (Isabel)&lt;br&gt;Lesson Plans: regular references to EOCT practices, quizzes, games, test taking strategies, and vocabulary&lt;br&gt;<strong>Observations</strong>: EOCT game style tournament, review of literary terms from the test as well as...</td>
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Co-Teaching Team #2:
Joan and Alice placed emphasis on the curriculum believing that if students have learned it, students will perform well on any standardized test.

“Are we saying the word EOCT every day in the class? No. Are we deciding to do this particular lesson on tone and mood for the EOCT in particular? No. But we’re doing this lesson on tone and mood because we know they don’t get it and we know it’s a critical standard that they need to…understand about literature.”

(Joan)

Lesson Plans: Any references to the EOCT were limited to the two weeks before.

Observation: the week before the EOCT – class had returned from doing test practice in a computer lab
APPENDIX C: IN-DEPTH BIOGRAPHICAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

In Depth Biographical Questions

1. What subject(s) do you teach?
2. What grade level do you teach?
3. How long have you been teaching?
4. If this school is not the only place you have taught, where have you taught?
5. What types of students do you teach?
6. What made you want to become a teacher?
7. What are your teaching certifications?
8. How long have you co-taught?
9. What has been your experience with co-teaching?
10. Describe your academic experience in high school.
11. What standardized tests did you take as a student? (any age)
12. How would you describe your attitude toward testing as a student?
13. How would you describe your attitude toward testing as a teacher?
14. What do you value most about being a teacher?
15. Is there anything else you would like to share that might be useful in understanding how you make sense of mandates delivered to you?

More Open-ended Response

1. Tell me about your teacher preparation (degree, courses, student teaching experiences, etc.)
2. What do you enjoy most about teaching?
3. What do you find most challenging about teaching?
4. What do you find most frustrating about teaching?
5. How do you define assessment?
6. What is the most challenging aspect of assessing your students?
7. When you hear the word inclusive classroom, how would you describe it?
8. Describe your experiences teaching in an inclusive classroom.
9. Most challenging about teaching in an inclusive classroom?
10. Most rewarding about teaching in an inclusive classroom?
11. What are the roles and responsibilities of the special education and general education teacher in this classroom?
12. How did you determine these roles?
13. How were you introduced to the mandates of No Child Left Behind?
14. What do you feel is your responsibility as it relates to the federal and state mandates regarding assessment?
15. How do you go about assessing whether students “get it” in your class?
16. What motivates you to implement varied assessments in your classroom?
17. How do you use evidence of student learning in your classroom assessment strategies?
18. What kinds of assessment techniques tell you the most about what students are learning?
19. What kinds of assessment most accurately capture what students are learning?
20. How is the assessment of student learning used to improve teaching/learning in your classroom? department?
21. At this school, what is the method for improving assessment in the classroom?
22. What is the message from administration regarding assessing students?
23. How was the message communicated?
24. How did you get clarity on what was being asked of you?
25. Describe any professional growth you have experienced regarding assessment.
26. What would help you in the endeavor of improving assessment in your classroom?
27. What hinders you in this endeavor?
APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. What role do you play in the instructional decision-making for your classes?

2. Who or what are factors in the instructional decisions made in your classroom?

3. How do you plan for your classes? Units? Daily lessons?

4. Based on your experiences, how do you feel federal education mandates like NCLB affect your classroom? Instructional decisions for your classroom

5. How much time would you say is spent in class on standardized test prep (over the course of the semester)? Direct or indirect?

6. Currently, what is going well in terms of your co-teaching experience? What could use some improvements?

7. Benchmarks: How are they used in the classroom? What are your opinions on using them? How many are required?