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Special Educators' Views about the Effects of High Stakes Testing

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Abstract

The purpose of this mixed methods sequential explanatory study was to examine special education teachers' views about the impact of high stakes testing on curriculum, teaching, instructional strategies, work satisfaction, stress, and accountability. From 16 southwest Georgia school districts, 423 of 515 (82%) special education teachers responded to the survey. Group comparisons revealed homogeneous responses across survey items by race or ethnicity, gender, and school configuration. However, an independent means *t* test was statistically significant with a medium effect size indicating special education inclusion teachers' total scores were significantly higher (i.e., they agreed more positively) than self-contained teachers' total scores on the survey. After completing the statistical analysis, questions were generated for the qualitative component. Interviews and focus groups included a total of 31 special education teachers. Teachers' positive and negative responses to these follow-up questions were analyzed for a more in-depth understanding of the quantitative results.

Keywords: accountability, high stakes testing, standardized testing, special education

Until the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), special education teachers and students inhabited a world that was parallel to, but distinctly separate from general education. The cornerstone of special education has been providing specialized instruction to meet the unique needs of each student identified with a disability. Special educators are expected to utilize individualized, referenced decision-making, to plan continually, and to adjust curriculum and strategies to educate and motivate their students (Hardman & Dawson, 2008).

Special education teachers developed achievement goals, tailored instruction to meet the unique needs of each student, and often measured academic progress against incremental growth targets rather than grade-level norms. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2001) changed public education mandating all students to be tested including the six million students with disabilities. This mandate was issued to ensure all individuals are held to appropriately rigorous standards (USDOE, 2012). Not only does federal law require all students to participate in standards-based accountability reform efforts, but it also mandates testing programs to publish disaggregated data on students' performance. The law requires states to provide alternate assessments for severely disabled students who cannot participate in regular testing (USDOE, 2012). The mandate that all children participate in statewide assessment and reporting systems made academic achievement for students with disabilities relevant and a priority in education (Zane, 2012). Including students identified with a disability in a standards-driven system within the general education curriculum requires educators to use the individual educational plan (IEP) as a blueprint for achievement, altering goals as necessary to ensure progress in the general curriculum (Pavia, 2012). Recently, these standardized test scores were used to hold teachers and schools accountable for student achievement results used for the College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI) (GADOE, 2015).

Including students with disabilities in required high stakes testing has had both positive and negative impacts on special education teachers, students, and the curriculum (Wynn, 2008; Ysseldyke & Nelson 2004). On the positive side, evidence indicates (a) an increased special education students' participation in assessments, (b) raised academic expectations, (c) provided appropriate assessment accommodations, (d) aligned IEP's to assessments, (e) improved access to general education for special education students and teachers, (f) an enhanced instruction for students with disabilities, (g) an increased supplemental or remediation curriculum instruction, (h) changed promotion and grade advancement decisions, graduation and diploma options, and improved educational outcomes (Katsiyannis, Zhang, Ryan, & Jones, 2007; Thurlow, Lazarus, Thompson, & Morse, 2005; Tindal, 2012; Ysseldyke & Nelson, 2004). Wynn (2008) indicated special education teachers felt these high stakes tests encouraged teachers to increase the quality of their instruction. On the negative side, students with disabilities are particularly vulnerable given the consequences of failing such tests. Negative consequences of high stakes testing include (a) the challenge of students with disabilities to achieve proficiency, (b) students with disabilities who fail make schools look less effective, and (c) students are stressed by taking high stake tests and not reaching state standards (Katsiyannis et al., 2007; Wynn, 2008). Potential unintended consequences from the inclusion of students identified with disabilities in high stakes testing include lowered expectations on IEPs to ensure mastery, increased dropout rates, increased retention, increased exemptions, and increased absenteeism (Browder, Wakeman, & Flowers, 2006).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the views of high stakes standardized testing on special education teachers in the areas of curriculum, teaching, instructional strategies, work satisfaction, stress, and accountability. The demographic characteristics of gender, race or ethnicity, school configuration, and classroom setting were examined to determine if there were differences in responses towards high stakes testing. Finally, individual and focus group interviews were conducted to disclose a deeper understanding of the quantitative results.

Methodology

The methodology section is divided into four subsections. First, we will discuss the research design. This will be followed by a discussion of the participants and the instruments. Finally, we will discuss data analysis.

Research Design

The research design for this study was a sequential, explanatory mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). During the quantitative phase of this study, a questionnaire was developed from existing surveys to identify the views of special education teachers in southwest Georgia on high stakes standardized testing in the areas of curriculum, teaching, instructional strategies, work satisfaction, stress, and accountability. In addition, group comparisons of special education teachers in southwest Georgia were used to determine if there were statistically significant differences in the total score of the questionnaire by (a) gender, (b) race or ethnicity, (c) school configuration, and (d) classroom setting.

For the study's qualitative phase, the point of interface for mixing data was determined after examining questionnaire responses which required further explanation. A purposeful sampling of questionnaire participants led to individual interviews and focus groups to add insight into the quantitative results.

Participants

Special education teachers in the state of Georgia constituted the target population, while the accessible population was special education teachers in southwest Georgia. The southwest Georgia region for this study is comprised of 16 school districts, 91 schools, and 515 certified special education teachers. Surveys were returned by 423 of 515 (82%) certified special education teachers. The demographic characteristics of responding the teachers were as follows: (a) 394 teachers were female and 29 teachers were male, (b) 233 teachers were identified as minorities and 190 teachers were identified as nonminority, (c) 168 elementary-school teachers, 149 middle-school teachers, and 106 high-school teachers, and (d) 255 teachers were inclusion teachers and 168 teachers were in self-contained classrooms.

Of the surveyed population, 31 certified special education teachers participated in interviews and focus groups. The demographic characteristics of the teachers were as follows: (a) 24 teachers were female and seven teachers were male, (b) 18 teachers were identified as minorities and 13 teachers were identified as nonminority, (c) eight elementary-school teachers, 12 middle-school teachers, and 11 high-school teachers, and (d) 21 teachers were inclusion teachers and 10 teachers were in self-contained classrooms.

Instrumentation

The Special Education Teacher High Stakes Testing Survey. The instrument was adapted from two existing surveys (Brockmeier, Green, Archibald, Pate, & Leech, 2014; Pedulla, Abrams, Madaus, Russell, Ramos, & Miao, 2003) about high stakes testing and standardized testing. Part 1 of the questionnaire included items about special education teachers' views of high stakes standardized testing in the areas of curriculum, teaching, instructional strategies, work satisfaction, stress, and accountability. Responses to items were collected using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Part 2 of the questionnaire included items about the frequency, types of assessments, and types of test preparation utilized by special education teachers. Part 3 of the questionnaire included demographic characteristics items. This section included questions about the participants' gender, race or ethnicity, school configuration, and current classroom setting.

Validity. Content validity was established using a panel of experts in the field of special education, including two special education teachers, one district special education director, and one special education university professor engaged in research of special education. This group of special education experts analyzed the survey for clarity of directions, adequacy of items to answer the research questions, item clarity, and grammatical accuracy. The special education expert panel members did not suggest the addition of any items or the deletion of any items for improvement of the questionnaire.

Reliability. Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the internal consistency of the questionnaire items. *The Special Education Teachers' High stakes Testing Survey* was found to be adequately reliable (45 items; $\alpha = .86$). Cronbach's alpha for the nine curriculum, 12 teaching, seven instructional strategies, six work satisfaction, six stress, and five accountability items were .62, .76, .94, .58, .85, and .76, respectively.

Interview Questions. An interview protocol was developed once the quantitative data were analyzed. The interview protocol included scripted beginning and ending questions designed to develop and guide the interview process and share critical details about the study (Creswell & PlanoClark, 2008). The items were examined by a panel of experts in the field of special education including two special education teachers, one district special education director, and one special education university professor engaged in research in the area of special education. Items were reviewed for clarity and grammatical accuracy and the expert panel found no changes needed to be made nor did the expert panel identify additional items or items for deletion for interview improvement.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data Analysis. Descriptive statistics such as the percentage of responses, median, mean, and standard deviation were generated for most survey items. In a couple of cases, frequency and percentage of responses for an item were generated. Inferential statistics employed with these data included an independent means *t* test, ANOVA, and factorial ANOVA. Statistical considerations and the assumptions were checked for the inferential statistics. Less than 1% of items had missing data and, in this case, the median value for the item was imputed. Two outliers were identified but we chose not to eliminate them from the data. The preponderance of evidence indicated the normality assumption was met and the homogeneity assumption was met.

Qualitative Data Analysis. Interviews with open-ended questions and probes were utilized to yield in-depth responses about people's experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings, and knowledge (Patton, 2002). All interviews were audio-recorded. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed and coded for major keywords. After coding, data were sorted by major categories and themes for each question.

Results

The results section consists of three subsections: item-level analysis, inferential analysis, and qualitative analysis of the interviews. First, we will report the summary descriptive statistics of each scale. Second, we will present the results of the inferential statistics. Finally, we will report the results of the qualitative analysis of the participant interviews.

Item-Level Analysis

Views on Curriculum. Table 1 presents the percentage of special education teachers responding to curriculum items. Teachers agreed high stakes testing does require them to teach to the test (84%) because Georgia's statewide curriculum and test content are closely aligned, as indicated by their responses (67%). Additionally, 78% of special education teachers also concurred high stakes testing led them to reassess their beliefs about which material is most important to teach. In contrast, most teachers (80%) disagreed special education students' scores on a high stakes test accurately portray the quality of a school's curriculum or reflect the content special education students learn through a school's curriculum (60%).

Table 1 Percentage of Responses and Descriptive Statistics by Item for Views of Curriculum

Item	1	2	3	4	5	Mdn	M	SD
1 High stakes testing has led special education teachers to reassess their beliefs about subject matter important to teach.	3	12	7	50	28	4.00	3.90	1.03
2 High stakes testing is counter to the idea of a balanced curriculum (equal attention to subjects).	7	14	9	57	13	4.00	3.56	1.09
3 Special education students' scores on a high stakes test accurately portray the quality of a school's curriculum.	51	30	8	10	1	1.00	1.80	1.00
4 High stakes testing requires special education teachers to teach to the test.	3	6	7	44	40	4.00	4.12	0.97
5 High stakes test items accurately reflect the content special education students learn through a school's curriculum.	21	42	14	21	2	2.00	2.39	1.07
6 High stakes testing promotes certain subject area content over other subject area content.	1	2	16	54	27	4.00	4.05	0.75
7 Special education students' scores on high stakes tests provide feedback for schools to improve the curriculum.	21	39	15	22	3	2.00	2.46	1.13
8 High stakes test content is aligned with the school curriculum.	4	14	14	60	8	4.00	3.54	0.97
9 Special education students' individual education plans (IEP) are aligned with high stakes tests.	18	40	16	24	3	2.00	2.52	1.12

Note. 1 (*Strongly Disagree*), 2 (*Disagree*), 3 (*Neither Agree nor Disagree*), 4 (*Agree*), and 5 (*Strongly Agree*).

Views on Teaching. Teachers agreed (64%) their teaching is influenced by their schools' and students' results on high-stake tests (see Table 2). In addition, 76% of teachers agreed high-stake testing leads teachers to teach in ways that contradict their ideas of good educational practices. About three-fourths (72%) of the teachers disagreed high stakes testing leads to better teaching. In addition, 67% of teachers disagreed high stakes testing permits special education teachers to use their full range of teaching skills.

Table 2 Percentage of Responses and Descriptive Statistics by Items for Views of Teaching

Item	1	2	3	4	5	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
10 High stakes testing permits special education teachers to use their full range of teaching skills.	21	46	13	17	3	2.00	2.34	1.08
11 High stakes testing leads to better teaching.	31	41	9	17	2	2.00	2.16	1.09
12 My teaching is influenced by the schools' results on high stakes tests.	2	17	15	55	11	4.00	3.55	0.96
13 My teaching is influenced by my students' results on high stakes tests.	6	15	14	59	6	4.00	3.46	1.01
14 High stakes testing leads teachers to teach in ways that contradict their own ideas of good educational practices.	2	9	12	52	25	4.00	3.90	0.93
15 Students' scores on a high stakes test are a valid way to determine the quality of education that students received.	40	41	9	7	3	2.00	1.92	1.01
16 The quality of special education teachers' instruction is directly related to student performance on a high stakes test.	44	32	7	15	2	2.00	1.99	1.13
17 High stakes testing requires test preparation that diminishes time to teach other subject content.	3	7	8	52	30	4.00	3.98	0.98
18 Special education students' scores on a high stakes test provide information for teachers to improve their teaching.	19	30	20	28	3	3.00	2.65	1.16
19 High stakes testing motivates special education teachers to improve the teaching and learning process.	15	35	16	33	1	2.00	2.70	1.11
20 High stakes testing has increased cooperation among general and special education teachers.	11	25	29	32	3	3.00	2.92	1.06
21 High stakes testing has increased cooperation among principals and special education teachers.	12	25	34	27	2	3.00	2.84	1.02

Note. 1 (*Strongly Disagree*), 2 (*Disagree*), 3 (*Neither Agree nor Disagree*), 4 (*Agree*), and 5 (*Strongly Agree*).

Views on Instructional Strategies. Special education teachers 85% of the time that high stakes testing influenced the amount of time using example test questions for students (see Table 3). In addition, special education teachers agreed such high stakes testing influences the amount of time used for whole-group (68%), differentiated instruction (64%), hands-on learning (66%), cooperative learning (62%), and basic skills instruction (68%).

Table 3 Percentage of Responses and Descriptive Statistics by Item for Views of Instructional Strategies

Item	1	2	3	4	5	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
22 High stakes testing has influenced the amount of time that I use whole-group instruction for special education students.	3	9	20	54	14	4.00	3.65	0.94
23 High stakes testing has influenced the amount of time that I use differentiated instruction for special education students.	3	16	17	49	17	4.00	3.59	1.04
24 High stakes testing has influenced the amount of time that I use hands-on learning (manipulatives or experiments) for special education students.	3	16	15	52	14	4.00	3.59	1.00
25 High stakes testing has influenced the amount of time that I use computers or technology for special education students.	4	12	18	54	12	4.00	3.59	0.97
26 High stakes testing has influenced the amount of time that I use cooperative learning instruction for special education students.	4	18	15	52	11	4.00	3.49	1.03
27 High stakes testing has influenced the amount of time that I use basic skills instruction for special education students.	3	14	19	46	18	4.00	3.70	1.16
28 High stakes testing has influenced the amount of time that I use example test questions provided by the state or textbook publishers for special education students.	2	6	7	44	41	4.00	3.62	1.03

Note. 1 (*Strongly Disagree*), 2 (*Disagree*), 3 (*Neither Agree nor Disagree*), 4 (*Agree*), and 5 (*Strongly Agree*).

Views on Work Satisfaction. Teachers agreed 84% of the time their work satisfaction is less when the focus is on high stakes testing and outcomes (see Table 4). However, 54% of teachers agreed on work satisfaction increases when they have input into test development. Special education teachers agreed 62% of the time high stakes testing diminishes the desire to become a special education teacher.

Table 4 Percentage of Responses and Descriptive Statistics by Item for Views of Work Satisfaction

Item	1	2	3	4	5	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
29 Special education teacher morale has increased because of high stakes testing.	44	41	7	6	2	2.00	1.80	0.94
30 High stakes testing diminishes the desire to become a special education teacher.	6	14	18	41	21	4.00	3.54	1.16
31 Special education teachers leave low-performing schools because of high stakes test results.	4	32	42	18	4	3.00	2.86	0.89
32 The use of high stakes testing as a single measure to determine students' achievement leads to special education teachers leaving the profession.	3	11	27	44	15	4.00	3.56	0.98
33 Special education teachers' work satisfaction diminishes when the focus is on high stakes testing outcomes.	3	5	8	56	28	4.00	4.00	0.92
34 Special education teachers' satisfaction increases when they have input into the development of high stakes tests.	1	3	42	47	7	4.00	3.55	0.73

Note. 1 (*Strongly Disagree*), 2 (*Disagree*), 3 (*Neither Agree nor Disagree*), 4 (*Agree*), and 5 (*Strongly Agree*).

Views on Stress. Table 5 presents the percentage of special education teachers responding to stress items. Special educator teachers agreed district supervisors (82%) and principals (85%) pressure to increase test scores increased stress. Special education teachers (76%) agreed they experience stress in the effort to maintain their school's CCRPI rating. Teachers agreed that 86% of the time that punitive measures associated with high stakes testing increase stress.

Views on Accountability. Table 6 presents the percentage of special education teachers responding to accountability items. Teachers agreed 64% of the time high stakes testing has increased special education teacher accountability for special education students' academic performance. Special education teachers (78%) agreed high stakes testing increased awareness of the accountability issues in education. Teachers (83%) disagreed that special education students' scores on high stakes tests are an indicator of whether a school is staffed with highly qualified special education teachers.

Table 5 Percentage of Responses and Descriptive Statistics by Item for Views of Stress

Item	1	2	3	4	5	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
35 Special education teachers experience stress in the effort to maintain their school's College and Career Performance Index (CCRPI) rating.	1	5	17	51	26	4.00	3.99	0.82
36 Punitive measures associated with high stakes testing increase special education teachers' stress.	2	2	10	45	41	4.00	4.20	0.88
37 Special education teachers' stress increases with public advertisement of a school's high stakes test results.	1	3	27	47	22	4.00	3.87	0.81
38 District supervisors' pressure to improve high stakes test scores increases special education teachers' stress.	3	2	13	52	30	4.00	4.02	0.90
39 Principals' pressure to improve high stakes test scores increases special education teachers' stress.	3	3	9	56	29	4.00	4.05	0.88
40 Special education teachers leave the profession because of stress related to high stakes testing.	1	13	32	40	14	4.00	3.55	0.92

Note. 1 (*Strongly Disagree*), 2 (*Disagree*), 3 (*Neither Agree nor Disagree*), 4 (*Agree*), and 5 (*Strongly Agree*).

Table 6 Percentage of Responses and Descriptive Statistics by Item for Views of Accountability

Item	1	2	3	4	5	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
41 High stakes testing has increased special education teachers' accountability for special education students' academic performance.	5	11	20	52	12	4.00	3.56	1.00
42 High stakes testing has increased special education teachers' awareness of the accountability issues in education.	3	6	13	60	18	4.00	3.83	0.89
43 High stakes testing is an effective means of determining the quality of public education for students with disabilities.	50	28	8	13	1	1.00	1.86	1.07
44 Special education students' scores on a high stakes test are an indicator of whether a school is staffed with highly qualified special education teachers.	45	38	8	7	2	2.00	1.81	0.94
45 High stakes testing is a reform measure that improves the quality of education.	35	35	16	13	1	2.00	2.09	1.04

Note. 1 (*Strongly Disagree*), 2 (*Disagree*), 3 (*Neither Agree nor Disagree*), 4 (*Agree*), and 5 (*Strongly Agree*).

Views on Test Preparation. Table 7 presents the frequency and percentage of types of test preparation strategies used by special education teachers. Special education teachers most frequently selected (percentages greater than 40%) to prepare students by encouraging students to work hard (51%), teaching test-taking skills (49%), teaching the standards known to be on the test (45%), and to provide students with items like those items on the test (44%). Approximately 6% of special education teachers did no test preparation.

Table 7 Frequency and Percentage of Test Preparation Used by Special Education Teachers

Type of Test Preparation Strategy	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
I do no test preparation.	25	6
I teach test-taking skills.	212	49
I encourage students to work hard and prepare.	218	51
I provide rewards for completion.	110	26
I teach the standards known to be on the test.	193	45
I provide the students with items like those on the test.	188	44
I provide test-specific preparation materials developed commercially by the state.	130	30
I provide students with released items from the high stakes test.	108	25

Inferential Analyses by Selected Demographic Characteristics

A factorial ANOVA, an ANOVA, and an independent *t* test were used to determine if selected demographic characteristics affected special education teachers' views of high-stake testing on the total score.

For the factorial ANOVA, the interaction effect of gender by race or ethnicity was not significant, $F(1, 419) = 0.05, p = .82, \eta_p^2 < .001$. The results for the main effect of gender ($F(1, 419) = 0.09, p = .77, \eta_p^2 < .001$) and the main effect of race or ethnicity ($F(1, 419) = 1.14, p = .29, \eta_p^2 = .003$) were not significant. The results of the ANOVA indicated there was no statistically significant difference ($F(2,419) = 0.20, p = .82, \eta_p^2 < .001$) by school configuration on the total score of special education teachers' views about high stakes testing. On the other hand, the independent means t test ($t(423) = 4.56, p < .001, d = 0.46$) was statistically significant. Special education inclusion teachers' total scores were significantly higher (i.e., they agreed more positively) than self-contained teachers' total scores on the survey. In addition, Cohen's d value indicated the difference was of medium practical significance.

Qualitative Analysis

Interview questions were developed to provide additional information to enhance the results of selected survey items. Responses to several questions are presented in this section.

Interview question 1 asked special educator teachers about high stakes testing requiring teachers to teach to the test. Special education teachers expressed several reasons high stakes testing caused them to teach to the test. The first was Georgia's state curriculum standards align to all state-mandated high stakes tests. Georgia's Department of Education purposely developed a curriculum that aligns with required high stakes tests to assess student achievement annually suggested 25 of 31 (80%) interviewed teachers.

Georgia's teacher evaluation system was the second reason that caused teachers to teach to the test. Special education teachers discussed the teacher evaluation program, which evaluates teachers on various performance standards as factors related to teaching to the test. Performance standards include professional knowledge of standards to ensure teachers can demonstrate knowledge of them, instructional planning of standards to ensure all lesson plans and activities are tied to standards, instructional strategies or use of differentiated instruction of standards, assessment strategies for standards, and student achievement results on the standards that are taught. Given these requirements, 18 of 31 (58%) teachers interviewed expressed that they felt pressure to teach the curriculum standards because a failure to do so could negatively affect their annual evaluations and, ultimately, their job.

The responsibility of properly preparing students for high-stakes tests was the third reason causing teachers to teach to the test. Teachers admitted a need to adequately prepare students annually for high-stake testing. In some school districts, promotion and graduation requirements were directly tied to student results on high-stake tests, which caused teachers to feel responsible or accountable when students were unsuccessful. Special education teachers also mentioned the federal guidelines that all students participate in high-stake testing and the fact that IEP goals are directly tied to state curriculum standards to ensure equal education for students with disabilities. Additionally, IEP progress goals are tied to the academic curriculum and tested standards. Certainly, public access to student, school, and teacher scores was also another major factor causing teachers to teach to the test. Teachers acknowledged feeling obligated to their students and the public to teach the standards and prepare students as best they could.

Interview Question 2 asked special educator educators how high stakes testing prevents them from using their full range of teaching skills. Based on qualitative results, 14 of 31 (45%) teachers, stated high stakes testing did not prevent them from using their full range of teaching skills. Teachers admitted teaching students basic or foundational skills that are not part of their current grade level tested state standards. Other inclusion teachers simply used differentiated instructional strategies to deliver instruction to students on their ability level. Teachers felt high stakes tests encouraged the use of student results to drive instruction to meet the needs of all students on their ability levels. Some teachers working in 'pull-out' or self-contained settings were able to use various instructional strategies to teach students freely on their ability levels using technology and smaller cooperative learning groups.

Inclusion was named by 10 of 31 (32%) teachers as a major factor preventing special education teachers from using their full range of teaching skills. This group stated that co-teaching in an inclusion classroom forced them to consider all learners, instead of differentiating instruction and focusing on individual learners in smaller cooperative groups. One reason included limited collaborative planning times with general education teachers to strategically plan lessons that will meet the various academic and social needs of students with disabilities.

Inclusion students with ability levels far below their current grade levels presented difficulties as well. For example, the secondary student who is also a non-reader and unable to comprehend written directions independently requires more academic support than a student on grade level. Finally, teachers mentioned various reasons such as large student caseloads, instructional responsibilities, extreme student behaviors, and lack of instructional resources as factors preventing them from using their full range of teaching skills.

Interview question 3 asked how high stakes testing contradicts personal ideas of good educational practices. In response to high stakes testing contradicting personal ideas of good educational practices, interview results further explained quantitative results. The inability to consistently teach special education students their needed foundational skills led 26 of 31 (84%) teachers to teach in ways that contradicted their ideas of sound educational practices. In the inclusion classroom, teachers mentioned that limited time for basic skill instruction is frustrating when students are expected to perform at grade-level on high stakes tests. Secondary teachers mentioned missed opportunities for students with disabilities to excel in school and life as they are lacking several basic skills such as counting money, social skills, and phonetic reading that are not included in their current grade-level standards. Ironically, these teachers also admitted to creatively differentiating lessons to incorporate these needs, such as integrating writing and math.

Interview question 4 asked special education teachers about how students' results on high stakes testing influenced their instruction. Teachers (62%) revealed that student test results influenced instruction and required them to focus on addressing students who were weak in academic areas and that 45% of teachers revealed using differentiated instructional strategies. Teachers (39%) reported the test score results also increased the frequency of student progress monitoring to influence instruction was also a result of student test scores. Finally, 29% of teachers utilized student IEP goals to address and monitor student progress in preparation for high stakes assessments.

Interview question 5 asked special education teachers about how much time throughout the year they spent using specific instructional strategies. Whole-group instruction was the most frequently used instructional strategy, with teachers indicating it accounted for 45% of their instructional time. In contrast, teachers indicated spending (5%) or less of their time utilizing specific test preparation strategies. The remaining instructional strategies were used almost equally (10%) of the time, hands-on learning activities, computers, cooperative groups, and basic skills techniques. Whole-group instruction was mentioned by 19 of 21 (90%) inclusion teachers because of the minimal planning time needed for implementation. However, 8 of 10 (80%) self-contained teachers admitted to having the freedom to consistently use various differentiated instructional strategies more frequently due to their ability to adjust their plans.

Interview question 6 asked about how much time teachers spent specifically on test preparation. Special education teachers (94%) revealed that they used the month before a high stakes assessment for test preparation. Teachers stated test preparation continues throughout the school year as standards and curriculum are being taught. However, once all standards have been introduced and covered, teachers utilize daily test preparation in weak academic areas to raise test results.

Interview question 7 asked if special education teachers were aware of punitive measures because of high stakes testing test results. Almost all 29 of 31 (94%) teachers were personally unaware of punitive measures associated with high-stake testing and special education teachers. However, teachers shared stories of other punitive measures not associated with high stakes testing, such as transfers due to poor annual evaluations and personality conflicts with school administrators.

Interview question 8 asked teachers if special educator work satisfaction diminished due to the focus on high stakes testing. Approximately 82% of special education teachers reported their work satisfaction declined due to the focus on high-stakes testing outcomes. Interviews also revealed 9 of 31 (29%) teachers felt administrators and peers diminished their work satisfaction due to high-stakes testing outcomes. Teachers admitted they were depressed because of consistently low scores among special education students, compared to regular education students. Teachers mentioned other reasons for low scores, such as a students' home life, no academic support at home, remediation at school, and poverty. Also, inclusion special education teachers indicated they were frequently pulled away from instruction by administrators to cover other classes, and then being blamed for low student achievement when test results were reviewed.

Interview question 9 asked if special education teachers' accountability for special education students' academic performance due to high stakes testing. Approximately 42% of teachers reported their accountability increased due to student test scores, whereas 35% of teachers reported accountability has increased due to inclusion in their teacher evaluation. Special education teachers (16%) reported accountability increased due to now being a part of the curriculum and instructional collaboration meetings. Accountability has also improved teacher awareness of student progress throughout the school year with weekly, monthly, and quarterly reports.

Discussion

Concerning curriculum issues, these special education teachers agreed high stakes testing requires them to teach to the test. Teachers considered the Georgia Department of Education purposely developed a curriculum that aligns with required high stakes tests to easily assess student achievement annually (GADOE, 2016). The assumption by many critics of high stakes tests is that test preparation and good teaching are mutually exclusive (Phelps, 2013). In their eyes 'teaching to the test' has become a negative epithet that narrows curriculum and restricts the creativity of teachers by imposing on their instructional time (Abrams et al., 2003; Crocco & Costigan 2007; Jones & Egley, 2004; Pedulla et al., 2003; Phelps, 2013; Rosenbusch, 2005; Zastrow, 2004). However, teaching to the test can be positive if curricula are carefully developed by educators, academically rigorous, and the test is written with the curricula in mind (Au, 2009; Lamb, 2007; Pavia, 2012). With these factors in place, teaching to the test means teaching students the knowledge and skills we agree they ought to learn—exactly what our teachers are legally and ethically obligated to do (Phelps, 2006; Phelps, 2013).

True curriculum and high stakes testing alignment happen when content embedded in a test or the level of performance demanded by a test matches the content or intensity of an associated prescribed curriculum (Au, 2009; Phelps, 2012; Ysseldyke & Nelson, 2004). Naturally, the more closely aligned the curriculum is to the test, the more likely students who have mastered the content will perform well on the test (Phelps, 2012). Furthermore, when the content domains of a test match a jurisdiction's required content standards, aligning a course of study to the test is eminently responsible behavior (Carr, 2012; Phelps, 2012; Winfield, 2013).

Interviewees were divided as to whether high stakes testing prevented them from using their full range of teaching skills. Results showed some teachers felt being inconsistent in teaching special education students their needed foundational skills lead them to teach in ways that contradict their ideas of good educational practices. In the inclusion classroom, teachers had limited time for basic skill and social life skill instruction not included in grade-level standards. Teachers cited limited collaborative planning times with general education teachers, students with varied ability levels in one classroom, large caseload of students, varied instructional responsibilities, extreme student behaviors, and lack of instructional resources as factors preventing them from using their full range of teaching skills. Ironically, these teachers also admitted to sometimes creatively differentiating lessons to incorporate students' needs on specific ability levels.

Other teachers expressed high stakes testing did not prevent them from using their full range of teaching skills. Teachers said they taught students basic or foundational skills that were not their current grade level in creatively designed differentiated instructional strategies. They believed this type of testing encourages using student results to deliver instruction to students at their ability levels. Teachers' reported student high stakes test results were a major influence on instruction. Scores were analyzed and the results were used as a guide in lesson planning. Student results on high stakes tests forced teachers to address academic weaknesses through differentiated instructional strategies.

The one-size-fits-all accountability across our nation dramatizes the importance of ensuring that students with disabilities have access to appropriate curricula, engaging instruction, and other resources that support them (Brimijoin, 2004). Differentiation is a conceptual approach to teaching and learning that involves careful analysis of learning goals, ongoing assessment of student needs, and instructional modifications in response to high stakes result (Tomlinson et al., 2003). Throughout the school year, in preparation for high stakes testing, some teachers tend to focus only on tested grade-level standards (Au, 2011; Madaus & Russell, 2010). On the other hand, other teachers spend more time on content to ensure students have a thorough understanding. This sometimes means teaching remedial skills to bring them up to their current grade level.

Still, others try to balance the curriculum by using differentiated instructional strategies to deliver grade-level standard instruction and basic skills instruction (Diamond, 2007; Musolenno & White, 2010; Pavia, 2012; Roberson, 2014; Tomlinson et al., 2003).

Special education teachers unanimously agreed high-stake testing has influenced the amount of time various instructional strategies are utilized. For instance, greater instructional time has been noted for all of the following strategies: whole group instruction, DI, hands-on learning, cooperative learning, basic skills instruction, and state-released test preparation questions. These teachers indicated during their interviews that whole-group instruction was the most popular instructional strategy. The remaining instructional strategies were used almost equally: hands-on learning activities, computers, cooperative groups, and basic skills techniques. A majority of the teachers mentioned using whole-group more in inclusion classes due to the minimal planning time needed. However, self-contained teachers admitted to having the freedom to consistently use various instructional strategies more frequently, due to their ability to adjust plans as needed. These findings paralleled previous empirical data indicating high stakes testing not only influences what teachers teach, but how they teach (Clarke, Abrams, & Madaus, 2001; Pedulla et al., 2003).

Reduced work satisfaction and lower teacher morale were experienced by teachers when the focus was on high-stake testing outcomes. Interviews revealed teachers felt administrators and peers are less satisfied at work due to the low scores on high stakes testing of special education students. Teachers admitted being depressed as a result of consistently low scores in comparison to other regular education students. Southwest Georgia special education teachers also indicated pressure from administrators and district level supervisors to improve these scores increased stress. Empirical results suggested teachers who reported feeling pressure from either their district superintendent or building principal were also likely to work in schools with lower teacher morale (Abrams et al., 2003). The impact of high stakes testing policies figures prominently in teachers' accounts of how they describe their jobs (e.g., stress, feeling drained, overwhelmed by deadlines, regulations, and extra duties associated with high stakes testing mandates. These factors in turn negatively affect school climate and school culture (Assaf, 2008; Bridwell, 2012; Quain, 2009; Reich & Bailey, 2010).

Teachers have experienced increased accountability for student academic performance. They are also more aware of issues in education as a result of high stakes testing. Teachers have been under increased scrutiny from administrators closely analyzing student test results for use in teacher evaluations, trends in student achievement, and an overall report of how students are performing academically at the school, district, and state levels. Special education teachers have benefitted from being a part of curriculum and instructional collaboration meetings within their schools and districts. Accountability has also improved teacher awareness of student progress during the school year. These findings are similar to Brockmeier, Green, Pate, Tsemunhu, and Bochenko (2014). There is a growing trend to use student results and metrics to improve schools, principals, and teachers and promote reform at the system level (Au, 2009; Brockmeier et al., 2014; Carr, 2012; Galley, 2011; Williams & Engel, 2013).

Conclusion

A sample of southwest Georgia special education teachers responded to the *Special Education Teachers' High Stakes Testing Survey*. From those teachers surveyed, volunteers participated in individual and focus group interviews to investigate special education teachers' views of the impact high stakes testing has had in the areas of curriculum, teaching, instructional strategies, work satisfaction, stress, and accountability.

Overall, teachers responded homogeneously to items on the survey by gender, race and or ethnicity, and school configuration. However, statistical data results indicated greater statistical significance by classroom setting for high stakes testing on the total score of inclusion teachers than those who were self-contained. The impact of inclusion special education teachers' total scores can be attributed to the fact that students in inclusion classes participate in high stakes tests causing them to be more aware of the effects of high stakes standardized testing (Dessementet, Bless, & Morin, 2012; Floyd, 2014). Self-contained special education students participate in Georgia's Alternative Assessment programs and complete a portfolio of student work to demonstrate achievement and progress related to selected skills aligned to the state's curriculum (GADOE, 2013b).

In the area of curriculum, Georgia southwest special education teachers agreed that high stakes testing requires teachers to teach to the test. Teachers mentioned their belief that the Georgia Department of Education purposely developed a curriculum that aligns with required high stakes tests to easily assess student achievement annually (GADOE, 2016).

If none of the curricula is tested, we cannot know if any of it has been learned (Phelps, 2013). Without high stakes tests, no one outside the classroom can reliably gauge student progress. Therefore, teachers must teach to the test to ensure students are prepared for assessments and show progress each school year toward meeting curriculum standards (Phelps, 2006; Phelps 2013). The key to positive results concerning narrowing of curriculum, or teaching to the test requires a research-based designed curriculum specifically aligned to the high stakes test that teachers give (Abrams et al., 2003; Au, 2009; Carr, 2012; Madaus& Russell, 2010; Ysseldyke& Nelson, 2004).

Special education teachers agreed high stakes testing leads teachers to teach in ways that contradict their ideas of good educational practices, and their teaching is influenced by students' and schools' results on high stakes tests. Qualitative data results revealed some teachers felt high stakes testing prevents them from using their full range of teaching skills; others felt high stakes testing does not do so. However, all teachers admitted using students' high-stake test results to creatively design differentiated lessons designed to incorporate various students' needs at specific academic ability levels.

A negative, unintended consequence or effect of high stakes testing on teaching is some teachers are excessively drilling students on test material throughout the school year and concentrate on subjects and material that will be tested (Jones et al., 2003; Madaus& Russell, 2010; Welch, 2014). In some school districts, the lowest-performing students must also take remedial classes in reading and math to address academic weaknesses (Bunomo, 2012; Carr, 2012). However, these same high stakes exam results have positively influenced instruction by giving teachers an instant roadmap of the type of differentiated instructional strategies needed for students based on their areas of academic weakness (Pavia, 2012). Teachers should focus on utilizing differentiated instructional strategies to deliver a blend of the statewide curriculum and specific foundational basic skills in which special education students may be weak so that the needs of various types of learners may be met (Au, 2011; Pavia, 2012; Wynn, 2008).

Teachers agreed high stakes testing has caused a noticeable increase in the use of various instructional strategies noted earlier in this chapter. Teachers also acknowledged using test preparation activities throughout the entire school year. However, the month before high stakes testing is to begin, teachers utilize stricter daily test preparation activities to focus on student weaknesses for increased student test results.

As teachers prepare students for high-stakes assessments, several instructional strategies are employed to meet the needs of various types of learning styles and focus on an individual's area(s) of weakness (Lamb, 2007; Musoleno& White, 2010; Popham, 2001). Teachers should incorporate technology, cooperative learning, basic skill instruction, hands-on lessons, and test preparation to reinforce the curriculum and in preparation for the statewide assessments (Lamb, 2007; Musoleno& White, 2010; Popham, 2001; Thurlow et al., 2005; Tindal, 2012).

Diminished work satisfaction and lower teacher morale were noted by teachers when the focus is on high stakes testing outcomes. A pervasive fear of punitive measures associated with low testing results being used against teachers was also a cause of stress for teachers. However, interviewed teachers were personally unaware of such actions being used.

School leaders should better communicate the benefits of high stakes testing to the educational community, particularly teachers, instead of using it as a threat (Gonzalez, 2015; Pedulla et al., 2003; Quain, 2009). The idea from teachers that increased stress and decreased work satisfaction stem from high stakes testing reveals an underlying misuse of student results for standardized testing (Bointott, 2014; Gonzalez, 2015). Teachers and administrators agreed the single most important element gained from high stakes standardized testing is the data uncovered for instruction. From this, the public can know how well students are learning. They all agree that often the same data can be used improperly in an abusive and cruel way that embarrasses and punishes classroom teachers and principals when results are low, instead of as a tool to find and address student weaknesses (Phelps, 2013).

As teachers increase their assessment literacy, they will become more aware of the information that assessment results can and cannot provide to practitioners (Brockmeier et al., 2014; Yeh, 2005). Teachers also remarked upon the increased accountability for student academic performance and awareness of issues in education as a result of high stakes testing. The qualitative portion revealed special education teachers have benefitted from increased participation in curriculum and instructional collaborative meetings in schools and district-wide.

Implications from this current study reveal that school leaders should support teachers by encouraging collaboration between the special education community, general education teachers, and school leaders (Franklin & Snow-Gerono, 2007; Galley, 2011). One way to reduce the stress or pressure teachers feel as a result of high stakes testing is to improve school culture by promoting cooperation and collaboration between teachers (Brevetti, 2014; Franklin & Snow-Gerono, 2007; Jetter, 2009). Therefore, a goal for the entire education community should be to use accountability through high stakes testing as a useful tool to aid schools in attaining high academic standards by having more positive interactions between teachers, instructional consultants, curriculum specialists, and administrators. If successful, this may, in turn, positively impact student performance on statewide high stakes tests (Brockmeier et al., 2014; Education Law Consortium, 2005; Galley, 2011; Madaus & Russel, 2010; Phelps, 2003; Phelps, 2012).

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