SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES OF ALTERNATE
ASSESSMENTS

by

Jodi Griffin
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DEDICATION

I gratefully dedicate this thesis to my family who has supported me throughout all of these years. Especially for my children, Joel and Hayley, who are eager to have more time with their mom.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES OF ALTERNATE
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Attrition of special education teachers who are specially trained to teach students who are

the most severely disabled is of great concern. This thesis examines special education

teachers' perceptions of alternate assessments, specifically with the Virginia Alternate

Assessment Program (VAAP). Issues surrounding difficulties special education teachers

faced, the ongoing debate about which type of curriculum should be primary in

classrooms, functional or academic skills curriculums, and data from previous studies

were discussed. Teachers who left the field, "goers", and those who have remained,

"stayers", were interviewed about their personal experiences with the VAAP based on

common themes from past research. The two groups were bounded to be examined as a

multiple case study and results indicated that there were both similarities and differences

between the two cases. Uncovered from the interviews were positive attitudes, student

focused strategies, and collaborative supports in place by those who remained in the field.

Discussion, implications and recommendations are also presented.

CHAPTER ONE

Special education teachers were leaving the field in droves. Research indicated

great concern regarding the attrition rate of special education teachers some stating it as

an "epidemic" across the field of special education (Wasburn-Moses, 2005, p. 35).

Attrition of Special Education Teachers

Ninety-eight percent of school districts across the nation reported shortages of

special education teachers according to the Higher Education Consortium for Special

Education, HECSE, (2010) and 49 states reported that for the 2013-2014 school year that

they would have a shortage of special education teachers (HECSE, 2015) . The annual

attrition rate for special education teachers had stalled out at around 10% for many

decades; in 2004 it was 13%, in 2009 it was 12.3% (Bettini, Cheyney, Wang, & Leko,

2015; National Education Association, 2015; HECSE, 2015). For a teacher to be highly

qualified as a special education teacher it meant that a one held state certification, had a

license to teach special education in that state without any certification or license

requirements waived, and had at least a bachelor's degree (National Education

Association, 2015). The HECSE (2015) reported that 51% of all school districts and 90%

of high poverty school districts had a great deal of trouble recruiting special education

teachers who were highly qualified, which may have led to the fact that 82 to 99 percent

of secondary teachers were not highly qualified in the academic area they were teaching HECSE (2010).

Attrition rates were 60 percent for alternative preparation routes, 30 percent for four year programs, and 10 to 15 percent for five year programs within three years of becoming a licensed special education teacher (HECSE, 2010). Gehrke and McCoy (2007) found that thirty percent of special education teachers studied left the field by the end of the first year. Billingsley and the Council for Exceptional Children confirmed these findings in that the "most serious obstacle to the appropriate and effective education of students with disabilities" was the national shortage of qualified special education teachers (as cited in White & Mason, 2006, p. 191). With all of this considered, from now until 2018, the expected increase for the demand for special educators was expected to increase by 17 percent (HECSE, 2010).

If schools did not have enough teachers to start the school year, schools may have been forced to hire teachers who were not highly qualified for the position for which they were hired. In fact, in the state of Virginia, one could have become provisionally licensed to be a special education teacher with having completed only one special education course and begin teaching immediately without any further experiences or preparation. These practices could have perpetuated further attrition because hiring teachers with inadequate training to fulfill vacancies made the problem worse as insufficient certification is one reason for attrition according to Berry, Petrin, Gravelle, & Farmer (2011). Due to the attrition of special education teachers and lack of required

skills, there were shortages of qualified teachers in special education classrooms across

the country with no solutions to the problem.

Teachers Were Specially Trained

Special education teachers were specially trained to meet the unique needs of

students within the special education classroom, and students with disabilities required

their specific level of expertise. Bettini, et al. (2015) established that through an effective

education from high quality special education teachers, students can be successful.

Knowledge from courses about specific disabilities, teaching reading and math, and

behavior management were just some of the skills teachers learned in preparation to

fulfill students' individual necessities on a daily basis. Teachers utilized best practices

for students with disabilities and exhibited proficient skills that developed with classroom

experience over time. "Improving educational results for children with disabilities is an

essential element of our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full

participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with

disabilities" (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 1997, p.2).

Students with severe disabilities needed to leave school especially having

mastered as many skills as possible to be more equipped to successfully participate,

work, and live in their communities. Teachers who were specially trained in the field and

used best practices in the classroom understood the importance of the child's education to

foster independence and life skills that generalize outside of the classroom setting. The

HECSE (2015) affirmed that students with disabilities may be hampered to reach their

full academic potential on account of the shortage of highly qualified special education teachers.

Students with disabilities were entitled to receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE), and as a result of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 1997, p.3), "children with disabilities are included in general state and district-wide assessment programs, with appropriate accommodations, where necessary." Additionally, IDEA required state or local agencies to develop guidelines and begin alternate assessments for children who could not appropriately participate in state and district-wide assessment programs no later than July 1, 2000 (IDEA, 1997). According to The Mentoring Induction Project (2001), adapting instructional strategies and curriculum so that the experience of success and achievement of one's full potential by students with disabilities was of utmost concern, especially with today's focus on increasing inclusion, standards based reform, and high stakes assessments. As a result, a plethora of new expectations regarding alternate assessments were added on top of the myriad of responsibilities already assigned to special education teachers.

Difficulties Teachers Faced

A newly hired special education teacher was required to be an expert and consultant to ensure effective instruction for his or her students with disabilities that may have been in multiple grade levels at differing levels of curriculum. Legal issues and surplus of paperwork were daily challenges faced by teachers from day one of teaching (Whitaker, 2010). Teaching was stressful and had an effect on career decisions (Yost, 2008), especially with beginning teachers who were easily overwhelmed and left the

profession (Fieman-Nemser, 2003). Browder et al. (2005) noted that including students in accountability systems may have caused teachers to feel pressure to show improvement in scores without actually knowing how to do so. Furthermore, because of teacher shortages, teachers were simultaneously trying to increase competence by learning how to teach and assess students with disabilities while balancing time to complete alternate assessments with their students. Large caseloads, paperwork burden, behavior management problems, and difficulty relating to other adults in the building were reasons cited by special education teachers leaving the field (Wasburn-Moses, 2005).

Alternate Assessments

Previously, students with severe disabilities were exempt from participating in state assessments that were part of school reform movement in the late 1990's that focused on holding teachers and schools accountable for student academic success and individual student performance and allowing states to improve education programs based on results. However, students with disabilities were later required to be part of school accountability assessments (Browder, Karvonen, Davis, Fallin, & Courtade-Little, 2005). Thurlow, Lazarus, Thompson, Blount Morse (2005), noted that exactly how to appropriately measure academic achievement for students with disabilities was wrestled with by those making policy decisions and resulted in states creating a variety of alternate assessments. Although some students with disabilities could participate in state assessments using their accommodations, Roach, Elliott, and Berndt (2007) supported that it was the students who cannot participate in district and state assessments, even with

accommodations, for which alternate assessments were intended. Different from the state general education assessments, alternate assessments were defined as other ways to evaluate the performance of students with disabilities on state academic standards. Thurlow et al. (2005) indicated that alternate assessments were intended to enable a subgroup of students with disabilities to participate in the state accountability system who otherwise could not participate even with accommodations. The alignment of alternate assessments was linked to the state standards.

If best practices were needed and alternate assessments were required, qualified personnel were essential for quality special education programs with high expectations and accountability for achieving results (Whitaker, 2010). Goldstein & Behuniak (2012) claimed that students with disabilities challenged academic instruction, and it was the teacher's disposition that impacted the effectiveness of instruction and assessments for students with disabilities. School systems were stretched financially, and students were affected by high teacher turnover (Wasburn-Moses, 2005). Positions were difficult to fill, if even at all, for students who required the most skilled teachers. Students needed teachers who stayed long enough in the field to become consistent users of best practice methods in the classroom, as well as, teachers who were able to create, maintain, and complete state-level alternate assessments. Students with disabilities required quality special education teachers to achieve on alternate assessments.

Expectations associated with assessments changed for special educators over time. At one time, students with disabilities were exempt from standardized state testing; however, now these particular students must participate using the alternate assessments in

their states. Special education teachers have gone from a time of non-participation to a time of being the ones expected to design, instruct, and implement alternate assessments.

Goldstein & Behuniak (2012) found that teachers not only provided an alternate assessment to their students, but also provided opportunities and instruction that allowed students to make progress towards standards and promote curriculum access. While it was not only the law, it was also important for students in special education to be able to access as much as possible to work towards the same, or similar, standards and curriculum as their general education peers. Through students' participation in their state's alternate assessments, students in special education were able to be included in the state accountability system as required by IDEA (1997). Therefore, over the past decade, schools were held accountable for all students' learning by participation in large-scale educational assessments (Towles-Reeves, Kleinhert, & Muhomba, 2009).

No matter which state assessment, general education or alternate assessment, students had to participate to show their proficiency on state standards. Goldstein & Behuniak (2012) believed that alternate assessments were seen as a significant change for students with severe disabilities by special education experts. Teachers now had to document and were accountable for achievement of state level standards for student with disabilities. By contrast, in the past, demands on teachers to include state level standards within instruction and provide evidence of progress were not necessarily established and followed through upon. Browder et al. (2005) claimed that as a result of alternate assessments, educational programs may be improved, but they caution that just because it

was possible for progress to be shown it does not guarantee students with disabilities were able to make such progress.

The following section discusses the 3 possible types of alternate or alternative assessments that students who have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) were eligible for rather than taking the general education assessment in his or her state.

AA:MAS. The first type of alternate assessment was based on modified academic achievement standards (AA-MAS), and according to the National Center for Educational Outcomes (2012), was for students with disabilities who work on grade-level content covered on the general education state assessment, but required more time to master the content due to the nature of their disabilities. While this assessment measured mastery of grade-level content, the alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards was generally less difficult than grade-level achievement standards (National Center for Educational Outcomes, 2012).

Virginia's answer to an alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards was the Virginia Modified Achievement Standards Test (VMAST). The VDOE (2012), stated that the VMAST was "intended for students with disabilities who are being instructed in grade level content but are not likely to achieve proficiency in the same time frame as their non-disabled peers" on grade-level content standards. Students who participated in the VMAST had to have instruction in the grade-level, general education content because the VMAST was an online, multiple choice assessment based on these general education standards. Acknowledging that students may not achieve grade-level proficiency within the course of the school year, this test

was shorter in length, offered only three answer possibilities to multiple choice questions, and had additional instructions, reminders or hints, as well as other supports for these students throughout the test. Designed through research, the assessment was created with classroom supports and simplifications in mind. On their website, the National Center for Educational Outcomes (2012) noted that of the seventeen states offering this level of assessment, many phased it out by 2014. Virginia had added this level of alternate assessment for math in the 2011 – 2012 school year and reading for the 2012 – 2013 school year (VDOE, 2012). However, in order to comply with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act waiver application, Virginia discontinued the large use of the VMAST after the 2013 – 2014 school year according to the September 21, 2012 Commonwealth of Virginia Superintendent's Memo after only a short time of implementation.

AA:GLAS. Another alternative assessment based on grade-level achievement standards (AA-GLAS) was for "students with disabilities who need testing formats or procedures that are not included in the general assessment or not addressed with use of accommodations" (The National Center for Educational Outcomes, 2012). The same grade-level content as the general assessment was included in these assessments, as well as the same descriptors as the general assessment to describe achievement.

According to the Virginia Department of Education's web page (2012), the Virginia Modified Achievement Standards Test (VGLA), which matched the AA-GLAS, was for "students who qualify to participate in the VGLA are required to demonstrate individual achievement of grade-level content standards as presented in the SOL test

blueprint for the academic content area in which they are being assessed" (VDOE, 2012).

Students who generally participated in the VGLA were students who could not show

mastery on multiple choice formats. This type of portfolio alternative assessment was

only offered by two states, Virginia and Massachusetts. Teachers created assessments on

students' performance on all of the grade-level general education standards in formats

other than multiple choice, provided instruction on state standards, and then collected

portfolio data in students' classrooms in regular testing settings. Teachers compiled the

students' work into binders and submitted portfolios of student work matching each of

the state standards. The binders of evidence were scored by other teachers against the

general education grade-level standards to be given a score for the portfolio assessment.

AA: AAS. Finally, the third type are alternate assessments based on alternate

achievement standards (AA-AAS) which were appropriate for the students with the most

significant cognitive disabilities and based on "grade-level content covered by the general

assessment, but at reduced depth, breadth, and complexity" (National Center for

Educational Outcomes, 2012). This assessment was for 1% or less of all students, or less

than 10 percent of all students who have disabilities, with separate definitions of what

was considered proficient from the state's general education test in terms of how well and

how much students knew and were able to do (National Center for Educational

Outcomes, 2012).

Virginia's version of the alternate assessment based on alternate achievement

standards was another portfolio assessment called the Virginia Alternate Assessment

Program (VAAP). In use since the 2000 – 2001 school year, the VAAP, according to the

Virginia Department of Education's (VDOE) web page (2012), was "designed to evaluate

the performance of students with significant cognitive disabilities who are working on

academic standards that have been reduced in complexity and depth." The standards for

students participating in the VAAP were called Aligned Standards of Learning (ASOL),

which were modified from Virginia's general education Standards of Learning (SOL).

The ASOLs were less in number and complexity. For instance in math, Virginia had five

general education strands: Number and Number Sense; Computation and Estimation;

Measurement and Geometry; Probability and Statistics; and Patterns, Functions, and

Algebra. Within these strands were the content standards that a student was assessed on

at the end of the school year. The seventh grade math SOLs were made up of sixteen

standards, while the 7th grade math ASOLs were comprised of eight standards. An

example of how an ASOL standard differs from an SOL standard for the same strand is

shown in the table below.

Table 1
Virginia SOL vs. ASOL Example

Grade 7: Math	SOL 7.3	VAAP ASOL: 7M-NSCE 2 (based off of SOL 7.3)
Number, Number Sense, Computation and Estimation	The student will: a) model addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division of integers b) add, subtract, multiply, and divide	The student will: a) solve multiplication problems with products to 100 b) solve division problems with divisors up to five and also with a divisor of 10 without remainders

integers.	c) demonstrate the value of various money amounts using decimals.

Note. Adapted from *Standards of Learning (SOL) & Testing* and *Alternative & Alternate Assessments: Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP)* by the Virginia Department of Education, 2012.

Teachers selected the student's grade level ASOL and from each strand chose one standard to collect evidence, which was unlike the SOL assessment where students were expected to be able to answer questions on all standards. Teachers then had to create, collect, and organize student samples to show a student's performance with each of the standards, or ASOLs, for each subject area being assessed in that year for that grade student. Teachers scored each assessment for accuracy, and this sample was included as a piece of evidence in the student's portfolio. The entire portfolio of evidence was provided as documentation of the student's knowledge and understanding of the ASOLs which was then assessed by a scorer to rate the student's level of proficiency. Once each of the ASOLs of the portfolio was given a score, the portfolio assessment overall score was then included in the student's school's assessment accountability program.

The products of the two remaining alternate assessments, individual student portfolios, varied slightly. Teachers were tasked to individualize the creation, maintenance, and completion of all materials based upon each child's specific needs.

Often, teachers were on their own to take the time to create materials that were able to be used by just one student in the room due to that student's individual needs. As the materials were used, the student was required to show mastery with different products, and more samples were created to enter into the portfolio. Modeling, prompting, practicing, and reteaching were all occurring during this time for the individual student, and chances were that a student might not achieve academically the first time. The exact procedure was followed for the next student, and the next, and so on, but all the while at the same time. Teachers were expected to juggle individual learners, while keeping up with all students' needs. The time taken to keep up with these tasks was time taken away from other aspects of the teacher's job throughout the day. Consequently, teachers were often forced to work above and beyond their typical school day hours to keep up with the alternate assessment portfolios, along with their other daily responsibilities.

Table 2 illustrates a summary of the three alternate tests offered by the state of Virginia in terms of the type of test, format, and whether the students were working on grade level content and if grade level expectations were assessed for the alternate assessment.

Table 2

Virginia Alternate/Alternative Assessment Option for Students with Disabilities

Assessment	Format	Students working on grade level content standards	Grade level expectations assessed

VMAST (AA-MAS)	Online, multiple choice	Yes	No
VGLA (AA-GLAS)	portfolio	Yes	Yes
VAAP (AA-AAS)	portfolio	No	No

This study focused on and examined special education teachers' perceptions based upon the last alternate assessment noted, the VAAP, as shown in Table 3 below. The VAAP was designed for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who represent 1% or less of all students. Students identified with significant cognitive disabilities may exhibit communication difficulties or be identified as having multiple disabilities, intellectual disabilities, or motor impairments. Students who participated in the VAAP generally had below average intellectual functioning and concurrent deficits in adaptive behavior. These students may have had limited spoken language skills, required support with daily living skills including eating, dressing, and bathing, and made limited progress with academic skills over time. Students who participated in the VAAP often spent the majority or all of their school day within a special education setting with little to no access to the general education setting.

Table 3

Virginia Alternate/Alternative Assessment Option for Students with Disabilities

Assessment	Format	Students working on grade level content standards	Grade level expectations assessed
VMAST (AA-MAS)	Online, multiple choice	Yes	No
VGLA (AA-GLAS)	portfolio	Yes	Yes
VAAP (AA-AAS)	**portfolio**	**No**	**No**

Academic vs. Functional Curriculum

There is also great debate among special educators, administrators, and policy makers related to the content included within the assessment of students with the severe disabilities who qualify for participation in the VAAP. Ryndak et al. (2014) explained at least three issues including the question of appropriateness of grade-level standards for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, some perceptions that content should only have included essential functional skills, and the thought of some who believed that assessments were the sole focus of the classroom and must be completed in isolation of all other classroom activities if there was even time left over for those after completing the assessment. Students' progress being accurately reflected in an alternate assessment was an ongoing concern as new alternate assessments were created. The attitudes, beliefs, and practices of special education teachers can substantially influenced by assessment tools and procedures according to Ryndak et al. (2014).

Ayres, K. M., Lowrey, K. A., Douglas, K. H., & Sievers, C. (2011), reminded that the "what" and "how" to teach students with disabilities has been an ongoing topic since the beginning of special education. Standards based curriculum has become the focus of classrooms for students with severe disabilities, more frequently pushing aside or replacing, functional skills curriculum making them exclusive of each other. Ayres et al (2011) argued that these should not be exclusive; however, learning pieces of high level academic skills should not trump learning life skills for functioning in society. In fact, functional, life skills curriculum, according to Ayres (2011), should have been the most significant part of planning curriculum for students with the most severe disabilities and believed that without this type of curriculum, students would not receive a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). Students would have acquired splinter skills rather than had an individualized education based upon assessment of their needs for the future if they would have an academic skill based curriculum.

Contrary to and in response to Ayres (2011), Courtade, Spooner, Browder, & Jimenez (2012) insisted that students with severe disabilities would receive full educational opportunities from a standards based curriculum. While curriculum for students with severe disabilities has evolved and there is a place for functional, life skills during the students' day, Courtade (2012) argued 7 reasons for students to have access to the general education curriculum. Among these are opportunities for students to have access to the general education curriculum is a right for every student, including those with the most severe disabilities, students' potential is unknown, functional skills are not prerequisite skills to academic skills, standards based is not a full replacement for

functional skills curriculum, and the achievements of the students drove the changing

academic expectations (Courtade, 2012).

Special education teachers were on both sides of this curriculum isle. Teachers'

experiences drove their perspectives about what should be included in the curriculum that

was taught to their students. Therefore, what students were assessed on through the

VAAP, may or may not have been what the teacher believed was best for that student and

perceptions about alternate assessments were formed around these viewpoints.

Special Education Teachers' Experiences with Alternate Assessments.

In 2005, Flowers, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Browder, & Spooner indicated that teachers

spent up to almost 60 hours outside of classroom time to complete just one portfolio, and

special education teachers did not just teach one student. For 10 students, one teacher

may have spent at least 600 hours outside of his or her school day to only work on

alternate assessments for students. That means teachers were not getting paid for the

personal time spent on ensuring students were showing their mastery on state-level

assessments, not to mention other tasks teachers completed outside of the school day

since the establishment of these assessments. In the end, there may have been little time

for the teacher to rejuvenate for the next day, just to do it all over again. At this pace, one

can see how alternate assessments were burdensome to a teacher who was likely trying to

juggle behavior plans, IEP plans, IEP goals, curriculums, alternate assessments, grading,

progress monitoring, parent requests, just to name a few aspects of a special education

teacher's job during school hours. It was difficult for teachers in special education to

keep this pace, at this rate, without experiencing burnout and leaving the field of special education altogether.

In 2001, Kampfer, Horvath, Kleinert, & Kearns examined special education teachers' perceptions of Kentucky's state alternate assessment. This was notable because Kentucky led the way with an alternate assessment for students with disabilities with a portfolio assessment that assessed students on standards that were based off of the general education state standards. The researchers felt it was necessary to address teachers' concerns and issues related to their opinions and recommendations for the alternate assessment as part of the critique and refinement of the state's assessment practices for students with disabilities. Kampfer et al. (2001) stated that historically teachers' opinions were ignored about what would work best for their students and that the "lack of attention to teacher input seems imprudent" (p. 363). The authors went on to say that the importance of educators' opinions was necessary to implement reform in education and to design and evaluate assessments for all students whether or not they have an IEP (Kampfer et al., 2001).

As a result, Kampfer et al. (2001), created a teacher survey to answer questions about portfolio scores and teacher time, teacher effort, and instructional variables and portfolio scores, and finally aspects of concern for teachers. Two hundred six special education teachers completed the one page survey about elements forming portfolio variables and information variables. Quantitative results from the study included data on the items on the survey that teachers reported as requiring moderate to extreme effort. Determining the portfolio entry, which included deciding what to include in a student's

portfolio and how to create and implement such a student sample, resulted in the most

time and effort with teachers reporting a mean of 4.1 out of range of minimal (1) to

extreme (5) (Kampfer et al., 2001). Correlations between variables showed a .42

correlation between student involvement and score obtained on the alternate assessment

and a .37 correlation between a student's score and the items embedded in regular

instruction. A weaker, yet still positive, correlation was discovered between student's

score and the number of hours a teacher spent on the alternate assessment (Kampfer et

al., 2001).

Qualitative data was also analyzed for themes from teachers' comments on the

survey. Of the comments made by teachers, 50% noted the alternate assessments as time-

consuming and remarked that there was an "enormous amount of paperwork involved in

the development of the assessment" (Kampfer et al., 2001, p. 369). Outside of regular

instruction time, teachers reported spending between 25 and 35 additional hours on each

student's portfolio. Thirty-nine percent discussed the benefit, or value of the assessment,

to the students. Questions were raised by 26% of participants in regards to the

assessment actually assessing the student's knowledge rather than the teacher's ability to

tolerate and endure the process of accurately creating assessments and collecting relevant

data on a student's ability on a particular standard. Common themes noted by teachers

also included scoring (27%), training (14%), changes in the system (18%), and feelings

of lacking support (15%) (Kampfer et al., 2001). The general population of teachers in

this study reported that the assessments were time consuming and involved a great deal of

paperwork, yet they still remained in the classroom.

Kampfer et al. (2001) specified that, among other specific results from teachers' comments, future studies should examine teachers' opinions and concerns about their state alternate assessments. This should, as a result, have aided in the process of comparing state to state data to improve the impact on teachers' experiences with alternate assessments on a personal level. Additionally, the authors of this study argued that what teachers find to be most helpful may be the key to creating and providing alternate assessments programs that are user-friendly and effective in reporting students' proficiency levels on content standards.

In 2005, Flowers et al. examined teachers' perceptions of alternate assessments in five different states that used different approaches of score reporting of alternate assessment results. The first approach was a portfolio in which student data samples (teacher made or student created) were collected and complied into a binder. Performance-based was the second approach in which students were given a task and asked to actually perform the task for the teacher. Finally, a checklist approach was used by teachers to check off skills as successfully achieved. According to the authors, policymakers who were making decisions needed to accurately understand alternate assessments to improve the educational experiences of students with disabilities. "Assessing teachers' perceptions of alternate assessments may provide insights into the effects alternate assessment is having on the educational experience of those students" (Flowers, et al., 2005, p. 82). A 65 item Likert-scale question survey was developed, distributed, and then completed by 983 special education teachers from the five states. Thirty-nine questions examined teachers' perceptions and were then broken into two

categories: alternate assessment impact on students' educational experiences, parent involvement, and IEPs and beliefs, resources, and technical quality.

Teachers reported that, on average, it was an additional 58.1 hours outside of instructional time to complete one student's portfolio assessment. The time to complete a mix of performance based and checklist assessments averaged 42 hours per student assessment. The performance based only assessments took teachers 3.7 hours, and the checklist only assessment took teachers 2.9 hours to complete one student's assessment on average (Flowers, et al., 2005). Furthermore, most teachers, or 82%, agreed with the statement that with the inception of alternate assessments there was now more paperwork than ever before. Teachers reported that the overload in paperwork, especially those completing a portfolio alternate assessment, competed with teaching time, attending to individual needs, and did not ultimately achieve the overall benefits teachers initially hoped for with such an assessment (Flowers, et al., 2005).

Fifty-three percent of respondents noted that there were benefits to having students participate in the state accountability system, but only 25% agreed that students were now getting a better-quality education overall. The time to complete students' alternate assessments and the noted paperwork burden on teachers competed with instructional time in the classroom, which according to Flowers, et al. (2005), suggested that alternate assessments may not be achieving the expected benefits for students, teachers, and schools that were desired by IDEA 1997. In 2005, Flowers, et al. claimed that teachers needed resources to meet the paperwork demands that impacted their instructional and personal time. Since Kampfer et al.'s 2001 study, more states

developed alternate assessments that were presented to teachers with additional

requirements and few guidelines about how to balance their time. Teachers were

expected to independently determine how to successfully accomplish the task on their

own. Flowers, et al. (2005) indicated that special education teachers were presented with

new requirements without the time or extra supports to assist teachers in the management

of such an enormous task. These new policies were another example of unrealistic

expectations put on special education teachers and how their perceptions impacted their

decisions to leave or stay in the field.

Results also indicated that special education teachers perceived overall problems

with the alternate assessment process, including the assessment's reliability and validity.

The authors noted that creating alternate assessments was difficult due to the nature of the

complexity of the students for which the assessments were designed and the technical

quality must be improved. Although teachers seemed to be in agreement about students'

participation, teachers lacked trust in the alternate assessment in their states leaving the

educational benefits for students unclear. "Teachers are some of the most important

individuals in students' educational experiences" as stated by Flowers, et al. (2005, p.

91). Unless special education teachers believed in the value of alternate assessments for

their students, the quality of education for students with disabilities would not improve.

In 2006, Kim, Angell, O'Brian, Strand, Fulk, & Watts found that a teacher must

be concerned with improving the quality of alternate assessments for students who were

identified with disabilities who cannot reasonably participate in state-wide high stakes

assessments. This argument brought the primary responsibility to improve alternate

assessments down to the personal, teacher level, to be included on top of all other previous requirements of being a special education teacher. According to Kim et al.'s (2006) study, the research performed on teachers' perspectives and practices about alternate assessments was conducted mainly in the state of Kentucky prior to 2006 and thus only provided data from one state's perspective. As a result, researchers in Illinois attempted to describe special education teachers' perspectives about their state's alternate assessments, which were created in 1999. This study and survey was created and completed by teachers in Illinois at a time in which many other states were just beginning to implement their alternate assessment systems. Two hundred thirty-four special education teachers completed a survey about their general perspectives, classroom practices, perceived benefits to special education teachers and students, concerns regarding implementation of the alternate assessment, and teachers' suggestions for improving the alternate assessment system. This was important to note because it was not until 2006 when teachers were first asked to make recommendations about the alternate assessments even though teachers had expressed concerns about alternate assessments at least five years previously.

Kim et al. (2006) found that teachers had negative perceptions of the state's alternate assessment for various reasons, and teachers reported the need for finding a better way to authentically assess students' progress. Approximately 59.4% of teachers indicated that there were no benefits to teachers and 70.09% reported no benefits to students. Themes regarding teachers' concerns included: 38.46% reported that the assessments do not reflect students' needs, 38.04% stated it was time consuming, 19.95%

felt the assessment was actually an assessment of teachers rather than students, and 10.26% indicated the assessment as having both an unreliable and invalid grading method (scoring system) which did not accurately assessing students' progress (Kim et al., 2006).

Kim et al. (2006) referenced Kampfer et al.'s (2001) study in Kentucky in that the results gained in Illinois about teachers' concerns about alternate assessments were consistent with those from Kentucky approximately five years prior. Amount of time, appropriateness, and accurate reflection of students' needs were all concerns of special education teachers in Illinois. Teachers reported that completing portfolios takes time away from teaching with a mean of 4.63 on a scale with 4 being "agree" and 5 being "strongly agree", which was a theme from the aforementioned studies in 2001 and 2005. Consequently, 25.21% of teachers responded that in order to improve the system, assessments should include using a student's IEP instead of the state's alternate assessment. The other recommendation by 21.79% of teachers was to ultimately discontinue the alternate assessment altogether. Kim et al.'s (2006) recommended that future research include collecting data regarding teachers' current practices with alternate assessments through the use of qualitative research and perform these studies in states other than Kentucky and Illinois.

In 2007, Roach et al. set out to understand variables that factor into teachers' perceptions of alternate assessments in Wisconsin. Roach et al, indicated that because the educational practice of alternate assessments was fairly new, data on teachers' experiences with, and perceptions of, alternate assessment for students with disabilities was limited (2007).   Researchers investigated what instructional variables influenced

teachers' perceptions regarding Wisconsin's state-level alternative assessments. One

hundred thirteen special education teachers completed a survey that asked about their

perceptions of the rating approach for the state's alternate assessment. Again, this study

examined the general population's perceptions, but did not consider the same on a

personal level.

Results from Roach et al. (2007) indicated that teachers were "generally

ambivalent to somewhat positive" (p. 172) about the process and results of Wisconsin's

state-level alternate assessments. Teachers believed that the alternate assessment

facilitated the inclusion of students with disabilities in an accountability system, provided

an accurate measure of a student's skills, and aligned items with the state standards for

skills and concepts. However, teachers noted concerns about the time it took to complete

the portfolio assessment, instructional utility, and meaningfulness of the process and

results. There was slight variation in teacher's perceptions based upon student grade

level with less positive feelings as the grade level increased; teachers of 10th graders

reported more reservations about meaningfulness and utility of the alternate assessment.

Roach et al.'s research in Wisconsin in 2007 suggested that collecting more data

after numerous years of implementation could afford useful evidence including teachers'

use and attitudes toward alternate assessments. The authors stated that the aims of

alternate assessments facilitated accountability, provided general education curriculum

access, and motivated special education teachers to provide standards-based curriculum

to all students (Roach et al., 2007). Additional training and support for teachers were

determined as possible strategies to improve teachers' perceptions of the alternate

assessment process in Wisconsin and thus meet these goals.

In 2009, Towles-Reeves et al. reviewed the literature on alternate assessments

since the inception of alternate assessments in 1997. Through the review, Towles-Reeves

et al. (2009) determined that a significant amount of work still needed to be accomplished

if alternate assessments were to achieve the anticipated impact on special education

programs. In the research, there were themes of paperwork burdens, large amounts of

time necessary to complete student assessments taking away from instructional and

personal time, lack of available research documenting the technical adequacy, including

reliability and validity, of alternate assessments, as well as a call for more research from

stakeholders' perspectives as supportive evidence. Towles-Reeves et al. (2009)

concluded that there still was not sufficient data-based evidence on this topic. Technical

adequacy of alternate assessments, supportive documentation of access to general

education from use of alternate assessments, and correlation between alternate

assessment results and other valid measures of student learning must be investigated in

the future. Researchers concluded that significant gaps remain in researchers' ability to

provide special education teachers and policy makers with research-based strategies to

substantiate alternate assessments.

Towles-Reeves et al. (2009) examined literature based solely on the AA-AAS and

pointed out that this review did not include AA-GLAS or AA-MAS which, at that time,

had been recently introduced by changes to federal policy. This review, along with the

other studies previously mentioned, had primarily focused on the alternate assessments

based on alternate achievement standards, or AA-AAS. This alternate assessment was used with students with the most severe cognitive disabilities, and all fifty states had an AA-AAS measure for these students. Within the research on teachers' perspectives about alternate assessments most seemed to focus primarily on the AA-AAS.

All of these studies examined the larger, general population of special education teachers and their perceptions of the impact of the addition of alternate assessments on their overall responsibilities in the special education classroom. What were individual teacher's experiences and perceptions of alternate assessments? What attitudes, strategies, or supports were needed to keep teachers in the classroom year after year?

Purpose

Since the inception of alternate assessments of state standards, there were numerous changes to the nature, execution, and expectations of students and special educators involved in the assessment process in all states' accountability systems. Moreover, Towles-Reeves et al. (2009) identified gaps in research-based strategies enabling alternate assessments to implement IDEA's notion of improving educational results for children with disabilities as an essential element of our national policy. State and local policy makers need to decrease the high rate of attrition resulting in low experience levels of teachers that could produce the same negative results. Past research has established that students with disabilities rely on focused, high quality instruction.

There seemed to be a vast amount of research about attrition of special education teachers and alternate assessments with the general population. However, there was a gap in the research to attempt to examine these on a personal level. This research study

attempted to fill the gap in the current research about the experiences of special education

teachers, both past and present, on the personal level to determine how teachers perceive

and experience alternate assessments. The purpose of this paper was to examine

teachers' perceptions of alternate assessments through exploring similarities and

differences between those who remained and those who have left the field.

CHAPTER TWO

Methods

  My Experience. I always wanted to be a teacher. When I realized I wanted to help struggling learners the most, I "found" special education and looked forward to college so I could get started teaching as soon as possible. I graduated from Penn State University with a bachelor's degree in Special Education after going through classes and classroom experiences that I would later find out were beyond what I could have imagined by thoroughly preparing me with the skills needed for becoming a special education teacher. The past three years, I have headed the special education department in a middle school in a large school district in northern Virginia supporting special education teachers. Before this, I spent 13 years in the classroom teaching students with learning disabilities, emotional disorders, other health impairments, autism, speech and language impairments, hearing impairments, and students who were deaf and hard of hearing. I team taught with general education teachers and taught my own small group settings, and I helped prepare students who participated in the SOLs, VGLA, and VAAP assessments. The work was difficult and challenging, but involved some of the most rewarding experiences of my life.

  The variety of my experiences in and knowledge regarding special education over the past 16 years supported my understanding of the perspectives of special education

teachers first hand. I spent hours creating differentiated lessons and materials to prepare my students to understand difficult content, assessing students with assessments that met their unique needs, and putting together work samples for binders that would be scored by others who did not know my students. On a daily basis I worked with students whose behaviors greatly impacted their education and made them unavailable for learning. Spending my own money and time away from my family was commonplace. Some days were difficult; other days harder. Every day was a new day, and I wouldn't have had it any other way.

As a researcher who was currently involved with the very subject I was studying, it could have been difficult to be unbiased, blind to some issues, or easily overlook the personal experiences of others. However, as a result of my own experiences in special education, I valued the perspectives of my special educator colleagues, and challenged myself to work through the data with a clear lens. Anything else was unacceptable; special education teachers deserved the chance to be heard in their own right through this study.

Research Questions

One's perspective was one's truth or reality (Baxter & Jack, 2008). To better understand the perspectives of special education teachers through collaboration, the research for this study was qualitative in design using a multiple case study.

The research questions this study attempted to answer were:

1. How did these teachers perceive and experience alternate assessments?

2. What are the similarities and differences between those who remained in
    the profession and those who decided to leave?

3. What were the attitudes and strategies of those who remained in the
    profession? What were the supports they experienced?

The Participants

The participants' experiences were bounded as two groups to analyze their similar
experiences as special education teachers (Baxter & Jack, 2008).   One group shared the
experience of leaving the field of special education and the other group had the common
experience of staying in the field of special education. The two cases for this study
comprised of five participants each. Each teacher's interview was developed into a case
study to draw comparisons between the similarities and differences of the cases (Baxter
& Jack, 2008) allowing the original expectations to be confirmed or rejected (Yin, 2013).
Cross case analysis was used to determine if there was replication or contrast between the
two groups.

Participant Selection.

Current and past teachers were selected to be interviewed for this unique case
study. Purposeful selection of participants occurred in that each was selected based upon
their experience with teaching the specialized population of students with severe
disabilities who qualified and participated in the VAAP.   For all of the participants, I
had some level of a professional relationship with each of them within special education,
yet did not know details about their personal experiences. Participants were all chosen

based upon their experience with the VAAP and if they were either currently teaching or

had left teaching special education. They were a homogeneous group geographically; the

area from which all of the participants were selected was northern Virginia.

For the purpose of this thesis, teachers who left their classrooms in which they

had students participating in the VAAP assessment were called "goers". Those who were

still teaching students who participate in the VAAP assessment were referred to as

"stayers". Figures 4 and 5 summarize the goers and the stayers.

Table 4
The Goers

The "Goers"	Gender	Special Ed Degree	Level(s) Taught	Left Special Ed
Goer #1	female	masters	middle	after 5 years
Goer #2	female	bachelors	high school and elementary	after 23 years
Goer #3	male	masters	middle, elementary, and high	after 10 years
Goer #4	male	masters	elementary and middle	after 4 years
Goer #5	male	licensure	middle	after 10 years

Table 5
The Stayers

The "Stayers"	Gender	Special Ed Degree	Level(s) Taught	Years Teaching Special Ed
Stayer #1	female	bachelors	preschool, elementary, middle, and high	16 years so far
Stayer #2	female	masters	middle and high	10 years so far

Stayer #3	female	licensure program	elementary, middle, and high	8 years so far
Stayer #4	female	masters	high	9 years so far
Stayer #5	female	masters	preschool, elementary, and high	9 years so far

The "Goers"

Goer number one earned her degree in Special Education through a five year master's program at James Madison University where her bachelor's degree was in Liberal Studies, and she began teaching immediately the following school year after graduating. In one school district in the middle school setting, she taught special education classes for mathematics, Algebra I, science, history, English, social skills classes, organizational skills classes, life skills and work awareness and transition classes. She left special education after teaching seven years.

Goer number two earned her bachelor's degree in Special Education and master's in School Consultation at Duquesne University and started her career teaching in a private high school teaching math to students with disabilities. She later moved on to teaching at a public school and taught in an elementary school grades 1 – 6 in a variety of special education settings. She left special education after teaching 23 years.

Goer number three earned his degree from John Hopkins while teaching special education simultaneously. He started working at a private school for two years and then moved on to a public middle school. At that time, he got his degree in Special Education

through a 51 credit master's program in three years. Through summer programs, he taught elementary and high school age students in special education. Interestingly, this goer was one of the original drafters of the VAAP at the Virginia Department of Education level. He left special education after teaching 10 years.

Goer number four earned his degree in Economics from William and Mary, and he earned his master's in Special Education from the University of Virginia through a cohort program. He taught special education for a few years, took a short break from the classroom, and then transitioned back by starting as a long term substitute in an elementary school. Then, this goer taught in a middle school setting until recently taking a job as a sixth grade teacher. He left special education after teaching 4 years.

Goer number five earned a Liberal Arts degree from St John's University. He worked in private industry for some time and decided to enroll in a career switcher's program through George Mason University. He completed the credits to earn his licensure in Special Education, but decided that he had had enough and fell short of the master's degree by just one class. This goer started as an aide, became a teacher, and switched to an aide before finally teaching part time all in a middle school. He left special education after teaching 10 years.

The "Stayers"

Stayer number one earned her undergraduate degree in special education at Penn State University where she did a variety of hands on training in different schools and different level of kids with special needs. Later, she also earned a master's in early childhood education. She has taught in special education classrooms ranging from

preschool to high school non-categorized, intellectually disabled, autism, high functioning autism, dually identified, learning disabled, other health impaired, both team taught and self-contained. This stayer currently teaches in a middle school classroom for students with primarily intellectual disabilities. She has been teaching special education for 16 years so far.

Stayer number two earned a bachelor's and master's degree in psychology and another master's degree in special education. She started her career as an instructional assistant, and then taught students with learning disabilities and emotional disabilities, and now she is currently teaching in a middle school special education classroom for students with autism where she has been for the past three years.   She has been teaching special education for 10 years so far.

Stayer number three earned her bachelor's degree in psychology from St. Thomas Aquinas in New York and started as an instructional assistant in an elementary school special education classroom years later. After being approached to be a teacher and some personal life changes, she went back to school at night and completed a licensure program through various schools. She taught for two years at a middle school and at a high school for an additional 6 years, both in classrooms for students with autism.   She has been teaching special education for 8 years so far.

Stayer number four completed a five year master's program in special education at James Madison University. She started her career in a high school teaching students with severe disabilities at the low-level, and now she is currently teaching students with

severe disabilities at the mid-level. She has been teaching special education for 9 years so far.

Stayer number five earned a bachelor's degree in communications and then started as an assistant in a private elementary school in Florida for students with learning disabilities, ADHD, and Asperger's Syndrome for two years and then another year as a teacher. Upon moving to Virginia, she got a job at a head start program for three years until getting a job at a high school working with students with severe disabilities at the low-level while earning her master's in special education from George Mason University. She is currently working on her general education and adapted curriculum endorsement. She has been teaching special education for 9 years so far.

Data Collection

Data was collected through approximately one hour interviews with each participant that were recorded and then transcribed. Questions asked during the interviews can be found in Appendix B. The purpose of interviewing the participants was to have face to face interaction while getting answers on a personal level that included details described by the participants. Attitudes about their experiences were part of the desired outcome of the interview. Individuals expanded upon feelings and told stories during interviews that would not have been expressed solely through the use of questionnaire.

Data Analysis

The data was converged to understand the entire case as a whole and not merely the individual members of the case (Baxter & Jack, 2008), yet each case study was treated individually to synthesis the data (Yin, 2013). Once the data was collected, it was organized in tables by categories, or codes that were established prior to the analysis with the known information and if there were similarities between the two groups. Codes to be used included: time (Kampfer et al., 2001; Flowers, et al., 2005; Kim et al., 2006; Roach et al., 2007; Towles-Reeves et al., 2009), paperwork (Kampfer et al., 2001 ; Flowers, et al., 2005; Towles-Reeves et al., 2009), value/benefit/utility (Kampfer et al., 2001; Flowers, et al., 2005; Kim et al., 2006; Roach et al., 2007; Towles-Reeves et al., 2009), additional expectations/requirements (Flowers, et al., 2005), and overall problems (Flowers, et al., 2005; Kim et al., 2006; Roach et al., 2007). Any meaningful statements not already coded were used as emerging codes and collapsed into themes along with the predetermined codes. These tables were examined for patterns to assist with identifying evidence to draw conclusions that were based upon the strength of the data which were be studied for replication or contrast with each other across the cases (Yin, 2013).

Strategies for Validity

Strategies were used to control the validity of the study to minimize possible threats to validity. First, there was a purposeful selection of participants who all taught students with severe disabilities that qualified for and participated in the VAAP. To manage researcher bias, the open ended nature of the questions for participants to answer was essential. Also, interviews were structured and transcribed to get exact wording from participants' responses. Finally, my emotions throughout the interviews were kept

confidential. I did not respond negatively or positively to comments made by the participants and followed up by only asking clarifying questions carefully not leading the participants one way or another.

CHAPTER THREE

Results

The cases were analyzed and coded using the following perceptions and experiences surrounding: materials for the VAAP, teaching or instruction regarding VAAP content, amount of time spent by teachers on the VAAP, and the scoring process or scores. Also, the overall value/relevance for students, academic value/relevance for students, and functional value/relevance of the VAAP were examined. These were all codes that were derived from the research. Emerging from the interviews was each participant's attitudes, strategies, and supports while teaching students with severe disabilities who participated in the VAAP.

The Goers

Goers: Descriptions of Classrooms. At the beginning of the interviews, goers were asked to give a description of their classrooms as a way to establish a reconnection to their time in their classroom to anchor their thoughts to the desired personal connections for this research. One goer felt that the other special education teacher in their shared classroom helped make a structured, disciplined classroom setting where kids were continuously working on increasing their flexibility because not all things will be the same all of the time. This goer noted that from year one to year two in the classroom, the make-up of students and their needs changed, and it made for major adjustments of

how the class was set up and how academics were approached. Alternate assessments were approached in such a way that students could tie new concepts to ideas that they could already relate to from their previous knowledge. Another goer discussed the classroom as it related to instruction and alternate assessments that stretched throughout the year. Sitting a student down for a one time, sit down, session to complete all of the assessments was not how the classroom was run. Breaking the ASOLs over time was how this goer approached the classroom.

Another goer described what the classroom looked like, stating "lots and lots of papers and binders". This teacher felt that the classroom had to be well organized and materials readily available for use when possible 8-10 students were in the classroom at a time. Another goer mentioned that the classroom had students completing not only the VAAP assessments, but also preparing for the SOL. Students with a wide range of severe to moderate disabilities rotated through a set of teachers in different classrooms for the school day. Finally, one teacher stated that "the VAAP did not change the setting of my classroom" or had "a significant impact on my instruction". This goer believed the VAAP to be a "procedure or requirement that I needed to fulfill", it "didn't guide my instruction in any way", and "not anything that was actually a helpful tool for programming purposes". Descriptions of the goers' classrooms were more teacher centered or focused rather than student centered or focused.

Goers: Process to Complete the VAAP with Students. The goers described how the VAAP process was completed with students in their classrooms in basic, simple ways. One goer described the VAAP as it is, in that, it is an adaptation of the general

curriculum, and one had to "design assessments to match the VAAP requirements" more so than match the abilities or needs of the students who were working on through the functional, life skills curriculum in the classroom. Another goer described how the VAAP was not just a spontaneous activity to do one day, but rather completing it "the way it was intended to be done…as part of instruction and curriculum and then assessment." One more goer stated that "it was never a one-time thing" and students were never coaxed through an assessment because time was spent preparing materials, especially materials that included pictorial representations that could be seamlessly transferred from instruction to assessment.

Preparing students through instruction to actually complete an assessment for the VAAP was something one of the goers spent time on in the classroom. Following directions, completing tasks independently, and teaching skills to start, continue through completion, and stop activities were part of the preparation for VAAP assessments in this goer's classroom. Lastly, one of the goers indicated that the students' IEP goals were the main focus in the classroom because this goer said, "I believe a good special education teacher knows that the goal is to get these kids independent when they get out of school especially for lower functioning kids." The goer considered the ASOLS to be "not a goal you wanted to do, not a goal you thought was important, but a goal your kid could be successful at" and believed that the ASOLs that came from the state SOLs were standards that students who qualified for the VAAP should not be doing. The goer articulated that a student who could not identify numbers should not be expected to show graphing on a coordinate plane and had experience with working at the state level to create the

aforementioned standards with people who did not even have experience working with students with disabilities. In the end, all of the goers presented a complex process in a way that revealed their naivety about an enormously involved process.

Goers: VAAP Process Examples. Specific examples from the goers describing what occurred seemed to all include examples of the ASOL that they felt were difficult or not developmentally appropriate for their students. One goer questioned the value of teaching students who were lower functioning about the different branches of the state legislature and what their roles are "for no other purposes than the VAAP because you're not helping the kid" who is working on a functional life skills curriculum. For some higher-functioning students who are reading, writing, and speaking, this goer felt that some exposure to some of the grade level content of the ASOLs could be appropriate for some.

"The teaching part I was faithful to," was how an additional goer described how instruction was planned for; examples of the five simple tools were set up in the classroom for this goer's students to actually physically be able to touch and work with visually. This goer created a visual assessment that matched instruction and that students performed well on because they'd been exposed to the content in a similar fashion. Another goer talked about how the specifics of the details of the test had to be taken in consideration. This goer planned a vocabulary worksheet assessment that involved using a dictionary, but giving clues, including using a dictionary, was not allowed to be used as evidence. So, as a result, this goer felt that in the planning stage, one had to pay close attention to detail and be really organized so that the evidence a teacher created did not

"waste the students' time" because it wouldn't be allowed to be scored or used as evidence.

A different goer also expressed that for math, making sure the evidence matched the strand that the state expected had to be carefully considered ahead of students actually taking the assessment so it was "even worth being a piece of evidence for them." Using community based instruction as a way to help collect evidence for the VAAP was how one goer helped collect evidence about reading comprehension for a student. To show reading comprehension of written text, the goer took pictures of a student holding a book the correct way and a student holding a clean plate at a buffet next to a sign about taking a clean plate for each trip to the buffet. This goer felt that finding an ASOL to include in the VAAP evidence that a student might be able to do and finding a task to show it was achieved was how the VAAP had to be approached. It was also revealed by this goer that VAAP weeks or days would occur so that they could "just get it all done here so we can get back to our real teaching" was the feeling that was expressed. Whenever common assessments could be used for more than one student, this goer referred to the assessment time as an "assembly line" of evidence for students. Overall, goers felt the VAAP difficult and inappropriate for their students to be completing based upon the severity of their students' disabilities.

Goers: Student Responsibilities and Involvement. The amount of student involvement and responsibilities with the assessment process varied from each of the goers. Two of the goers said that students were not involved at all other than actually taking the assessment. One cited the fact that in order to pass the VAAP assessment,

there are very specific requirements so the teacher could not imagine any purpose to involving the student other than them completing the work sample. The other three said that students were involved with some other aspects, but it depended on the students' capabilities or the type of evidence being collected. Other involvement or responsibilities that they noted included gathering and returning materials, filing the work sample, or recording information or data to use to complete a piece of evidence. The goers did not seem to find ways to involve their students in the process to help alleviate intense perceptions about the VAAP.

Goers: Time Spent on VAAP. When asked about the amount of time spent on the VAAP assessment, all of the goers shared an equally strong, negative reaction. One of the goer's first thoughts was "Oh God. Oh come on. Oh man. So much", while another one stated "Ugh, I mean qualitatively too long, just way too long". After thinking about time, one of the goers said that at the beginning of the year about 40% of the week was spent preparing VAAP materials, but by the end of the year when it was time to provide the documentation, time spent working on VAAP was about 75-80% of the day. Time was spent planning the activity, doing the activity, making sure the activity was appropriate, doing the "nit-picky stuff" like logging, filing, and recording the materials.

Another one of the goers remarked that student compliance can be a big issue in the time due to students' varied skill sets and "appetite for work sessions". This teacher said that using the goldilocks test, the time is somewhere around the middle due to the difference in the number of subject areas for differing grades; 7th grade has two subjects whereas 8th grade, for example has five subject areas for a student to complete VAAP

assessments. Two of the goers spoke about starting the process as early as possible and not waiting until just before the VAAP binders were due, like many of their colleagues. Two areas of frustration were a desire to not just go through the motions and irritation about colleagues who would throw things together in days to just be done.

Finally, one of the goers specifically remarked that when working in private industry, he thought he worked hard and never put in the kinds of hours that he did as a teacher, spending 60 – 70 hours per week, which he felt was "crazy." He also said, "To be very honest with you, that was one of the main reasons why I decided after four years I was done." Strong, negative feelings regarding the amount of time to complete the VAAP was very apparent from the goers' responses to this question during their interviews.

Goers: Elements that were Easy Regarding the VAAP. As far as what's "easy" about the VAAP, there was no consensus among the goers. Two out of five of the goers reported having the materials ready was easy about the VAAP. The longer one worked with students over the years, the more materials one had collected to form a better understanding of what needed to be done to complete the assessments. Spending the time upfront to create and prep materials made going through them easier with the kids according to one goer.

Another goer mentioned that once the evidence was completed by the students, putting those materials together was concrete and straightforward at the end. "Really good teaching" for students in special education by task analyzing and chunking instruction to break instruction down into smaller parts was noted by another goer.

Nevertheless, one of the goers stated firmly that "Nothing. Nothing. I wouldn't say anything was easy at all." This goer felt that if a student needed to learn a set of skills and those were not skills included in the ASOLs of the VAAP, then the student was going to be taught something completely "meaningless." What goers remarked as easy about the VAAP did not relieve their overall perceptions of alternate assessments to counteract difficult experiences.

Goers: Perceptions of Difficulty Regarding the VAAP. In terms of what was "hard" about the VAAP, many of the goers discussed the fact that the VAAP seemed to be contrived, outside of student's abilities, and not meaningful or appropriate for what the students needed. One goer felt that the contrived nature of the assessment took away from the meaningful skills a teacher should be teaching students participating in the VAAP, especially since the VAAP required a lot of time and extra work on the part of the teacher. The extra work and planning was also mentioned by a goer. Another goer believed that the ASOLs could be outside of the students' abilities and the materials were artificial in that they "kind of look like what they should be, but they really are not" because this goer suggested that a student who cannot accurately select from a field of two or three consistently, cannot write, and may not understand verbal directions due to the impact of the student's cognitive disability, was going to have great difficulty with the concept of the Virginia Legislature.

A fourth goer believed that the hard part about the VAAP is the amount of time teachers spend creating materials just "to give your kids a chance to pass something." This goer also stressed that students who meet the criteria to participate in the VAAP

really need to be taught individually-focused, realistic skills that these students would require beyond age 22 when they age out of the public school setting. This goer stated that this was "one of the reasons why, lead me to leaving the classroom, is because I didn't feel like I was accomplishing what was needed but I was doing what I was told was needed, but wasn't necessarily what the kids needed." The last goer cited the communication around yearly changes, getting support when sought, and determining the appropriateness of the ASOLs. This goer said that "some of those things were impossible, you know. You can't make it meaningful" as this goer's emphasis was to make everything meaningful to his students and teach things of value. Overall, the goers felt that what was difficult about the VAAP was that it was not appropriate or meaningful for their students, and this highly impacted their perceptions concerning the VAAP in a negative respect.

Goers: Valuable About the VAAP. Goers discussed the value in the VAAP in terms of the philosophy behind the VAAP, the score, and tracking students' progress. One goer considered the way the VAAP evidence evaluated what students learned, showing their achievement and knowledge of the content. Giving standards to students who hadn't been included before and a tool to score or measure progress was of value to one goer. One goer supported the perceived philosophy behind the VAAP that teachers need to actually be teaching academic work to students and be held accountable for student learning.

The value in somebody putting "something in place to show that your kid is making progress" and that the VAAP, rather than the SOLs can "check the system to

make sure that something's being done for their educational needs" were important to one of the goers. Making the VAAP meaningful was of value to the last goer. Whenever IEP goals and VAAP instruction could be combined, this goer "got double out of my effort" without "going through double the work." Although they identified something valuable, it was obvious that the goer's perceptions related to what was valuable about the VAAP was not sufficient to impact them staying in the classroom.

Goers: Not Valuable About the VAAP. What was not valuable to each goer differed, but all concerns focused on students' needs. One goer said that not using the VAAP as part of the instructional program was not valuable to the students. Thinking that most other teachers would agree with him, a goer claimed that the VAAP is "not a true assessment of the students' abilities". Another agreed, saying that "it wasn't a true indication of the kids," but rather "just how well teachers can put a binder together." This goer essentially called out the score of the VAAP as score of "how well did the teacher put it together versus how well did the student do."

Two of the goers were concerned that there was lack of value in the goals or content of what was actually being tested. Basic reading, writing, and math academic skills were noted as important, but behavioral skills needed to be focused on, perhaps more so than the history or other academic skills, for this group of students. A goer said that some of the ASOLs were "just so far out there" and "that's not going to help him or her" and not really measuring what students can or can't do in terms of more functional life skills. Another one claimed that the ASOL goals are "just impossible" and "they don't bear any resemblance to the reality of the day to day lives of these kids." The

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goers' perceptions about what was not valuable were abundant and compelling based on their personal experiences with the VAAP.

Goers: Valuable in Teacher Created VAAP. When the goers were asked about creating their own version of the VAAP, none of them had a clear answer as to what they would do. The first goer said that all students should have IEPS with measurable goals. Progress is checked each quarter focusing on the progress to or mastering the annual goals. This goer believed that "goal setting is good," but that one "shouldn't complain when you don't have a better alternative" to the VAAP. Another goer plainly stated that "they need to accept the fact that a certain percentage of the kids needs just be exempted." This goer expressed a desire to incorporate IEP goals or use an assessment such as the Brigance to measure progress. Students' progress should be measured on some sort of trajectory based "on previous year's progress, not just some random number."

Using students' IEPs, as the assessment tool instead of the VAAP was preferred by another goer. Behaviors, direction following, and other physical or behavioral aspects should be included and focused on, along with some reading, writing, and math, rather than all of the core subjects. A portfolio associated with students' IEP goals with data taken at the beginning, middle, and end of the year would hold teachers accountable for instruction on these goals that would help ensure a child to be a "functional member of society." This goer also felt that any proof towards not meeting these goals would also need to be included. Life skills continued to be a theme with another goer who clearly stated that "developing goals that would help kids get through life that would be a

wonderful thing" and a VAAP focusing on life skills would be the thing to do. This goer discussed trying to find a way to mix in behavioral goals with interdisciplinary core content, as appropriate, to make this version of the VAAP meaningful for students. Knowing what had been accomplished previously for each student in order to make appropriate materials for each student was a difficulty that would have to be overcome in this goer's version of the VAAP.

Finally, the last goer wasn't sure about any assessment system and especially not a scoring system around an assessment for students eligible for the current VAAP assessment. This goer wanted to "focus less on academics and more on what's meaningful to them" and remove any scoring system at all. The VAAP, to this goer, is "an unnecessary stress on everybody" and that "kids and families are not just numbers." When discussing the VAAP as it currently stands, this goer articulated that the VAAP score can communicate the message to parents that "not only can your kid not do any of this, we gave them a test for kids like them, and they still fail." Even if they were the ones to design an alternate assessment, goers did not share any common, clear idea of how it should be constructed.

The Stayers

Stayers: Descriptions of Classrooms. At the beginning of the stayers' interviews, they were asked to give a description of their classrooms as a way to establish a connection to their classroom in order to anchor their thoughts to the desired personal connections for this research. Classrooms using alternate assessments were described by each of the stayers. When using alternate assessments, one stayer remarked that the

classroom was different than the general education setting in that the special education classroom had many more manipulatives and hands on activities for instruction. The classroom was physically broken up into work areas where students can work in small groups or independently with one of the teachers. Another stayer split subject areas with her coworkers and was responsible for English and science portions of the students' VAAP binders. Each class period looked different for this stayer as the students rotated through different subject areas with different teachers.

The third stayer noted that the students' schedules didn't vary from the rest of the school as they were all on block scheduling, even though they were working on the ASOLs for the VAAP with students with severe disabilities who rotate through different classrooms for each core class. One year this stayer had 12 students to collect evidence for each student's VAAP binder. Also, another stayer's students rotated through different teacher's classes for their core classes, each teacher including this stayer, was responsible for choosing the ASOLs, teaching the units, and then compiling the final binder for the VAAP evidence for their subject area. At most, this stayer had nine students and the least was three students. The last stayer taught all four core subjects to her students. One year she only had one student who was in a grade level that participated in the VAAP, and then the most was four whom she collected evidence for the VAAP. The descriptions of classrooms by the stayers were more about the students and their needs, rather than being teacher focused.

Stayers: Process to Complete the VAAP with Students. The stayers completed the VAAP with their students in a variety of ways. One stayer kept an ongoing binder of

student work samples to keep track of what to work on with the students. The samples were organized so that evidence did not have to be created separately, but rather was pulled out and used after instruction occurred. The next stayer used pencil/paper types of evidence that typically follow instruction in the content covered for the ASOL. This teacher broke up the aligned standards into smaller portions to help ensure student success in the area covered.

Another stayer examined the ASOLs and determined which ones were appropriate for that year's group of students. The stayer next decided how to prove that the student learned the material on a piece of evidence. Working as and relying on a team is how the next stayer described how VAAPs were completed. The team assembled to discuss the ASOLs, determined what the state is looking for in students' evidence, and decided how best to prove the ASOL with students. Finally, the team broke up the subject areas to teach and work on with the students for the data collection.

The last stayer explained how she also worked with other teachers as a group, starting with examining the ASOLs, creating the unit materials, and then sharing the lessons among the team members. Student evidence was collected and then this stayer and the other teachers passed around completed binders to check to ensure that nothing was missed before turning in the students' binders of evidence. The stayers had well-defined processes and teamwork strategies in place for them to be able to complete the VAAP.

Stayers: VAAP Process Examples. When they described the process to complete VAAP assessments, the factors discussed by the stayers differed. One stayer

described how she taught and assessed the three stages of water in science. She found a Power Point online to instruct her students and used interactive pictures for students to manipulate on the smart board to match the correct phases. Pictures were taken of the students successfully completing the task and the stayer wrote anecdotal records to go with the picture for each of the students' binders. Another stayer created an activity where students had to cut out pictures of predators and prey to match the appropriate relationships after having taught students throughout the year. Various science lessons, videos, and other activities were developed and used after the assessment was made for the students to complete. A unit on World War II including the Holocaust was one unit in a whole year's worth of curriculum units that another stayer discussed. From the ASOLs, PowerPoints were created to break down the information from the beginning of the war until the end. As chunks of information related to an ASOL, data sheets were completed by students to show understanding of the content being presented. Comprehension of the material had to be shown over multiple pieces of evidence over time as it is not just a one day lesson and completion of a worksheet, as this stayer explained.

Collaboration with others on science lessons for VAAP data collection was how a stayer explained how data was collected. Lessons were tweaked and combined to form units. Hands on activities were made to have as many visuals as possible to give students many different ways students may grasp the same material. This stayer said that all materials are shared with new teachers, and new teachers are led to other experienced teachers so they are not on their own.

The last stayer also emphasized the importance of working with other teachers while completing the VAAP with students. Each teacher took a specific content and shared their materials with each other. This stayer worked through history and science, shared that with others, and then received the other content areas from others. This teacher then took all of the materials and adapted them for each of the individual students that data needed to be collected for that year. This stayer also noted that the same group of teachers often revisits the ASOLs to build a library of sorts to use in coming years and to make alternate forms of data samples for students with different needs. It was evident from their responses that the stayers recognized the enormity of the task of completing the VAAP.

Stayers: Student Responsibilities and Involvement. The students in the stayers' classrooms did not have any other specific responsibilities during the VAAP assessments other than to complete the task. One stayer said that everything was created ahead of time for the students and they were to write as much as they were able. Whenever a student was not able to write, this stayer used hand over hand to assist in name writing and uses other modifications such as tracing, highlighting, or cutting apart strips of a story, for example to glue down in the correct order. Another stayer noted that the students don't have other responsibilities in that "they're not motivated to be successful on the test" so anything else is not a "reasonable task" for them. This stayer stated that "the tests are… proving the, what kind of teaching goes on here" and that it is "basically on us to make sure whatever practice opportunities or exposure is necessary for them to master the content."

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In addition, the next stayer noted that "it's the same expectations" for the students as all of the time and not "any different from the regular non-VAAP instruction." This stayer felt that "we work hard to make sure it's all student work, but this is the way it's all supposed to look with the paperwork" so students were not involved after their individual evidence is completed in the classroom. "Pretty typical of everything I ask them to do on any day in my class" including paying attention and participating were the only responsibilities noted by another stayer. "No. No way," was the response of a stayer because "the state is so particular with the VAAP and what they're looking for." The stayer remarked that "every page has to have a sticker and it has to have this and that. We can fail if a sticker isn't on a page. So we're that nervous about it. It's basically grading how well we put the binders together," so students had no other responsibilities than to take the assessment in this stayer's classroom. In the end, students in stayers' classrooms were responsible for following the regular, daily expectations in the classes.

Stayers: Time Spent on VAAP. When asked about the time that was spent on the VAAP, the stayers were in agreement that it was a significant amount of time. The first stayer said plainly, "a ton," so much so that the stayer noted that it comes to a point where life skills, social skills, and other functional skills have to be given up. Time was needed to make sure requirements of the VAAP are proven over "some of the stuff that really could have more of an impact" according to the stayer. The next stayer listed some of the things that go into the VAAP assessment beyond the preparation, instruction, and assessment such as making the labels, scoring the documents, putting the pages in order, grading the work, completing cover sheets, and filling out the affidavits with all

appropriate signatures. This stayer thought VAAP consumed weeks, perhaps three weeks, per student, ongoing throughout the year to make it authentic, allowing for changes based upon student performance, and not damaging to the teacher, adding that the VAAP was "time consuming and invasive".

"Oh God" was the first response of another stayer. Everything that goes into "typical teaching" is what this stayer does that takes up so much time. Along with the additional VAAP expectations, "hours, and hours, and hours" was spent by the stayer. Another stayer declared that she has worked "entire weekends… planning VAAP lessons" spending "hours and hours… putting together VAAP lessons, putting together Power Points, handouts for kids, putting together projects" that she expected of herself as a teacher. The stayer disclosed that she was doing everything herself, so she enlisted help from others to help cut down on some of the time with the binders, but the planning and teaching hours for the VAAP were still enormous. Ending with the last stayer's thoughts, time can be broken down into "useful hours" which include prepping materials and teaching so that students comprehend the material that the stayer declared "you know what? If that took a million hours, I'm fine with that." However, the stayer explained that "what I do mind is the useless hours of having to put those binders together. That takes hours and hours and hours." The stayer felt that there's an "unbelievable amount of busywork… which is a shame." The stayers exhibited intense attitudes regarding the time to complete the VAAP which were similar to the goers' intense perceptions.

Stayers: Elements that were Easy Regarding the VAAP. What makes the VAAP "easy" to the stayers was consistent: years of experience. Two stayers felt that

once a teacher was able to manage the organization and materials of the VAAP, then a teacher knew exactly what is expected. Knowing what kinds of work samples met the requirements, what specific tasks aid in student success, and how to pick strands based on knowing your students helped make the VAAP easy. Organizing the work samples and pieces of the binder, including stickers and cover sheets, also aided in the ease of administering the VAAP.

A third stayer also agreed that once one had decided on the ASOLs to teach, a teacher had guidance to help plan the curriculum for the entire year. Additionally, yet another stayer added that being familiar with the entire process over time just made it a little easier. The final stayer said the easy part was planning the curriculum for the year after having done it for a few years. Even using lessons that had been more engaging in the past was something the stayer noted as easy to use to engage students at the start of the year using a lesson that was a "big hit" to set expectations. The stayers' experiences with the VAAP over time while creating procedures and habits seemed to have helped minimize negative attitudes and increase positive perceptions of the VAAP.

Stayers: Perceptions of Difficulty Regarding the VAAP. On the other hand, what's "hard" about the VAAP varied among the stayers. One stayer said that putting the VAAP binder together to be scored was difficult. Teachers had to prepare and present students' samples well in a "pretty binder" to make sure "all your i's are dotted and t's crossed because you get dinged for every little thing". The second stayer replied that "breaking it down enough" to find "a way to come up with something tangible" to

"demonstrate mastery" was hard. When some students don't write, don't read, or don't speak, this was a challenge for the stayer.

What was hard according to a third stayer was making sure the evidence matches what was expected from the state on the particular ASOL. Words like evaluating, identifying, describing, and examining were difficult to prove on a sheet of paper in a binder, notwithstanding the concept being addressed. Asking a student who qualified to participate in the VAAP to discuss something like the effect of Mark Twain's *Common Sense*, when the teacher had to research the answer first to break it down for students who don't understand if Mark Twain was even a boy or a girl, was difficult. Even more difficult was when a binder for a student doesn't pass, and then there's no explanation about it for the teacher.

What makes it hard for another stayer was that much of the VAAP was subjective. How teachers interpreted the words of the ASOLs and then how the graders interpreted the evidence were both subjective. The stayer expressed the difficulty that "VAAPs that are very similar and should both pass and if you have one student, one scorer will pass it and another one won't." Also what's hard, according to this stayer, was the feeling that it's not "a fair judgment of what the student knows, I think it's an unfair mark against the teacher." The stayer alleged that "it's not a good test for a student's ability at all" and "it seems as though the person who modified the SOLs down into ASOLS has never met a severe disabilities kid that uses like an eye gaze to pass tests."

The last stayer felt the hard part was the "subjectivity of it all." Some binders passed, others did not. Also, the ASOLs tended to be written in a more complex way than needed, according to the stayer, and many of the ASOLs required a certain level of background knowledge. Many ASOLs required background information that needed to be taught before the stayer can even begin to teach the standard of the ASOL. This stayer has had students who were "new to the country, didn't speak English, and had a severe disability" and had to learn about the U.S. Civil War. In one instance, teaching the expected background knowledge took this stayer two months and then teaching the information of the ASOL another month. Perceptions of the reasons for difficulty of the VAAP varied, but the stayers noted factors that were generally outside of their control.

Stayers: Valuable About the VAAP. In rating how the VAAP is valuable, the stayers brought up different features. One stayer expressed that there's value in keeping a portfolio of what students are doing, even though they don't get the collection of work back. In addition to the binder itself, this stayer believed holding teachers "accountable for having to deliver instruction" made teachers accountable "to teach." Another stayer expressed that the theory behind the VAAP "proving a pace for instruction and a foundation for the content that should be covered from grade to grade" was valuable. Furthermore, providing a modified, adapted curriculum for students was valuable, but in some cases still sometimes "doesn't provide the most relevant instruction". Exposing students to curriculum topics that other students are covering was valuable to a third stayer because "it's a way for them to understand other things that are happening around

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them". Information can be tied to what's happening around their school or in the news so the students can "connect with other kids and other people in their world that way."

A fourth stayer felt that the VAAP was valuable to push teachers "out of their box" giving them new topics and concepts to teach students. Exposing students with disabilities to the content that the rest of their nondisabled peers are learning, doing, and talking about was valuable for moving the field of special education forward for students with disabilities. Agreeing with the value of students with disabilities accessing curriculum, the final stayer spoke about how her students were able to participate with the entire school during an assembly about the Holocaust because the class had learned about the topic earlier and could tie the classroom lessons to what the speaker would be talking about during the assembly. The stayers all found something of value in the VAAP, regardless of any negative perceptions held about the alternate assessment.

Stayers: Not Valuable About the VAAP. Alternatively, what was not valuable about the VAAP from the stayers' perspectives differed between ideas around the VAAP not assessing student's knowledge, the VAAP being abstract, overall disrespect for teachers, and scoring as not meaningful for students. One stayer disclosed feelings that the VAAP didn't assess students' knowledge but rather the teacher and what the teacher could put together. The stayer raised concerns that the VAAP was "not an authentic assessment." The fact that the VAAP took away from "things that would be beneficial as far as functioning in society," was abstract, and was "outside of reasonable content for them to ever apply outside of needing to come up with a VAAP sample," was not valuable to another stayer. In fact, the stayer said there's a lot of time working on

students' VAAP binders that "feels similar to what feels like banging your head against a wall." A third stayer articulated that "the VAAP itself isn't valuable in the way that it's presented. It's presented as if the teacher puts the book together, the book passes. If the teacher doesn't put the book together or forgets a sticker or something, it doesn't pass." The VAAP's value in supposedly assessing the student was missing for this stayer, along with the "disrespect" for teachers who are working on assessments through IEPs and whatever was appropriate for each individual child in elementary, middle, or high school.

"It doesn't really seem like it means anything" said another stayer. The stayer stated that ASOLs seemed to be created to give students in special education something other than the SOLS, and while students may be passing the assessments, "what does it do for anybody," suggested the stayer. The last stayer didn't feel that the subjectivity of the scoring was valuable. The teacher explained that general statements were sometimes, but not always, provided back to the teachers about binders that did not pass. In one case, it was noted that the scorer wrote that it did not pass because the student did not do the work independently. However, this stayer knew for a fact that student had indeed done the work independently, yet "this kid didn't pass the VAAP because supposedly somebody thought that the kid didn't do their work." "There needs to some kind of objectivity and then there needs to be an explanation of how that objectivity works," expressed the stayer. The stayers' perspectives about what was not valuable about the VAAP varied which brought to light that there was not just one thought about the lack of value about the VAAP, but there were many aspects that the stayers had concerns

regarding. Nonetheless, the stayers' perceptions were student focused and best for their students.

Stayers: Valuable in Teacher Created VAAP. If the stayers were in charge of the VAAP, a variety of features would be valuable for their students. The first stayer wanted to keep the running portfolio of student work, but wanted to change the scoring and details in the preparation of the binder. Something that was put together "in such a way that's not so time consuming and tedious", that didn't need to be so "perfect", that showed students' work to see what they were doing was valuable to the stayer.

The next stayer thought it was valuable to include more "academic skills that are relative to function in life" starting in the middle and high school aged students, rather than focusing on topics such as the accomplishments of the Founding Fathers. Also, moving away from scoring and passing scores that this stayer believed to be more "representative of the teacher's effort" would have helped move away from the stress behind the VAAP. In addition to the other stayers' ideas, the next stayer's assessment would have followed the students' IEPs. Regular data probe sheets, classroom assessments, and work samples were kept for each student, so "if somebody wanted to see that, they should be able to take all of that and get a very good picture of our student". This stayer reflected, "I think if the VAAP set out to do what I think people thought it could do, it'd be fine. But it doesn't properly, fairly, or even necessarily assess our kids properly in a positive way."

Another stayer expressed feelings that "the VAAP is not necessary for teachers that are doing what teachers are supposed to be doing." There was value in providing

teachers with examples for what was exactly expected or meant by the ASOL so there was no subjectivity or inaccurate interpretation of the standards because "no one knows and everyone's just guessing" as to what evidence was supposed to "look like." Even teachers sometimes had a difficult time understanding and trying to prove mastery with a piece of evidence in a binder. This stayer also wanted an assessment that needed to take into account who they were, meaning the students who qualified for the VAAP and their disabilities. Contrary to the rest of the stayers, the final stayer stated that "I do actually feel that the VAAP is necessary because I've had people come into my classroom and be surprised that I'm actually teaching or teaching academics." This stayer also wanted to be able to explore more of standards from the SOLs to understand how they were made into the ASOLs and explore more of the curriculum standards that were not covered in the ASOLs that students do not typically have access to do such as science laboratory concepts and history curriculum topics such as ancient history or mythology. The stayers certainly had the best interest of their students in mind when thinking about what would be valuable if they were able to recreate an alternate assessment for their students.

DISCUSSION

This study examined special education teachers' perspectives of alternate assessments. Previous literature studies identified topics surrounding teacher's concerns about alternate assessments. When asked about personal experiences with the VAAP during interviews for this study, those same themes were identified by both cases, stayers and goers, in the field of special education.

Overall themes found in previous studies were consistent with those established in this study. The Kampfer et al. (2001) study support the findings of this research in that teachers in both reported an extreme amount of time and effort in determining, creating, and implementing student work for the portfolio. Kampfer et al. (2001) noted that 50% of teachers described the assessments as a time consuming, enormous amount of paperwork. The teachers in Flowers et al. (2005) reported feelings of being overloaded with paperwork due to alternate assessments that impacted both instructional and personal time without achieving the intended benefits. Without supports, teachers felt a lack of trust in the benefits for their students of participation in the alternate assessments.

Teachers in the Kim et al. (2006) study noted negative perceptions of alternate assessments. Lack of benefit to teachers and students, time consumption, who was being assessed through the assessment (the teachers or the students) and questionable scoring

system to represent student skills were some of the teachers' concerns. Time away from teaching was a consistent issue throughout the studies.

Many of the teachers of the 2007 Roach et al. research study represented those with the mindset that alternate assessments facilitated the inclusion of students with disabilities in an accountability system, provided an accurate measure of a student's skills, and aligned items with the state standards for skills and concepts.   Reoccurring themes of concerns about the time it took to complete the portfolio assessment, instructional utility, and meaningfulness of the process and results were also noted by Roach et al (2007).

In 2009, Towles-Reeves et al. amassed multiple transpiring research findings in which teachers reported that large amounts of time and paperwork take away from instructional and personal time and question technical adequacy (reliability and validity) of alternate assessments.

Similarities and Differences. Using cross case analysis, there were similarities and differences between the two cases. Overall, the goers experiences and perceptions about the VAAP were teacher centered and often times had strong, negatives attitudes towards the VAAP altogether, whereas the stayers frequently experienced the VAAP in a student centered approach.   When describing the process, the goers seemed to perceive the task of completing VAAP assessments as simplistic, although the stayers seemed to recognize the VAAP as an enormous task. The stayers brought up many different factors to complete a student's final VAAP binder.

What was easy and difficult about the VAAP assessment differed between the two groups. Goers had differing experiences about what made the VAAP easy for them, while the stayers agreed that having more experience was the key to making the VAAP easy. What made the VAAP difficult for the goers actually seemed to be within their control versus the stayers whose experiences of difficulty tended to be out of their control. Teachers' personal experiences, negative or positive, immensely factored into their perceptions of alternate assessments.

The groups shared some common perceptions regarding alternate assessments. Both the goers and stayers' students experienced participating in the VAAP in a similar way. Students generally were responsible for doing the work without many more responsibilities for the most part. The significant amount of time spent on VAAP binders was an equally negative experience for all participants, and they did not hold back their attitudes when this question was asked during the interviews. All of the teachers agreed that all of the aspects of the alternate assessment combined took up entirely too much time.

When identifying aspects of the VAAP to value or not value, especially for a teacher created alternate assessment like the VAAP, the two groups shared some commonalities, but were not quite in agreement. Both groups found something of value, but the stayers seemed to have more positive perceptions regarding the value of the VAAP than the goers. When it came to identifying what was not valuable about the VAAP, the two groups brought up a myriad of dissimilar issues. However, they were consistent with the perception and attitude that the value in the VAAP needed to be

student centered and whatever was best for their students to successfully complete the alternate assessment.

When the groups discussed a possible, teachers created VAAP and what would be valuable to include, the goers and stayers were all over the map. No clear sense of what the alternate to the current alternate assessment would look like emerged. In spite of this, the goers' and the stayers' attitudes were both actually about what was best for their students.

Attitudes, Strategies & Supports. The stayers seemed to perceive alternate assessments in a different light than the goers. While they had similar experiences at times, the stayers' attitudes appeared to have a more positive tone than that of the goers. Stayers frequently mentioned working as a team and having collaborative structures in place to assist with the many difficult, time consuming aspects of the VAAP. They relied on these supports to complete the task, whereas the goers rarely mentioned such a support system in their experiences. Stayers sought out each other and depended on their own prior experiences as a strategy to help scaffold the VAAP process. From planning, to creating materials, to finding support with morale, stayers pursued opportunities to stay positive and do what was best for their students. The goers' attitudes based on previous experiences road blocked their thought process for how to complete the VAAP with ease and find value for their students. Student focused, positive attitude, and acknowledgment of reliance on supports characterized the stayers in this study.

Implications

Consequently, from this research and previous studies, shared themes regarding concern about lack of materials, teaching practices, time commitment, consistent scoring, and overall value and relevance surrounding alternate assessments still remain. However, special education teachers' perspectives on the personal level must be addressed.

Attitudes of new teachers could be monitored to help establish those who were requiring more support due to negative feelings about alternate assessments. Support from teachers with more well established, supports and resources could be dispersed to those who needed more assistance.

Another possible implication of this study is that those who are very early in their career could be exposed to these common themes and leave very early on no matter what supports were established for them. Similarly, those who are preparing for a career in special education and are exposed to these themes may choose to avoid the classroom altogether. Professors and cooperating teachers during student teaching experiences must prepare future special education teachers about the expectations to complete the VAAP with students and involve them in the process whenever possible to alleviate negative attitudes regarding the VAAP. Teaching them strategies about how to complete the VAAP and relying on working collaboratively with others throughout the process is necessary to help for positive perceptions about alternative assessments.

Limitations

The intention of this study was not to generalize to a broader population, but limit in understanding the perspectives of my participants. These were all teachers that I knew having had some sort of professional relationship with before this research. They all

shared a common experience and were more likely to align with my prospective. All of these teachers worked in a large school district in northern Virginia.

Recommendations for Future Work

From the personal experiences of the teachers involved in this thesis, I would make a number of recommendations. First, local special education leadership should encourage teachers to work together and establish ways for collaboration with the VAAP (as it stands now) from the beginning of the process of creating instructional materials and assessments to putting the final binders together to be scored. Working together may cut down on time spent and questions about subjectivity, and also create ways to make the assessments more authentic for students. Teachers must be supported through this, and leadership must advocate this for their teachers.

Second, I would recommend more teachers be heard regarding their experiences with the VAAP assessments to add to and verify what would be valuable for another version of a VAAP assessment for students. All of the teachers in this thesis taught in large school districts. Perhaps teachers from smaller school districts have additional insight as to what would be valuable from their experiences with their students. Also, I would urge local special education leaders to examine this information to take to the state level to try to constitute changes to the VAAP assessment and ASOLs. In doing this, I would implore those leaders to involve more special education teachers who work with students participating in the VAAP who truly understand some of the limitations those students may face while completing a VAAP assessment binder. Finally, I would ask for reexamination of the scoring process and reporting of scores to explore what other ways

students' work could be accounted for in more appropriate ways for students with disabilities.

Past research identified the attrition of special education teachers as concerning as teachers who are in the classroom with students who qualify for the VAAP alternate assessment are specially trained were rapidly disappearing from the field. This study examined special education teachers' perceptions of alternate assessments. Similarities and differences between those who left and those who stayed in the field were established. Those who remained uncovered strategies and attitudes that seemed to be essential to them continuing to work with students with severe disabilities who qualified for the VAAP. Experiencing positive supports was necessary for successful completion of the VAAP alternate assessments. Students that qualify for participation in the VAAP benefit greatly from these "stayers" in the field of special education.

APPENDIX A

GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY

Office of Research Integrity and Assurance

Research Hall, 4400 University Drive, MS 6D5, Fairfax, Virginia 22030
Phone: 703-993-5445; Fax: 703-993-9590

DATE: February 9, 2016

TO: Erin Peters
FROM: George Mason University IRB

Project Title: [730031-1] Special Education Teachers' Perspectives of Alternate
                          Assessments

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE: February 9, 2016

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category #2

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Office of Research Integrity
& Assurance (ORIA) has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal
regulations.

Please remember that all research must be conducted as described in the submitted materials.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be submitted to the ORIA prior to
initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

If you have any questions, please contact Bess Dieffenbach at 703-993-5593 or edieffen@gmu.edu.
Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within George Mason
University IRB's records.

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Interview Questions

Background:
1. How long did you/have you been teaching special education?
2. What level did you teach (elementary/middle/high)?
3. What was your training/college experience level?

Alternate Assessments:
1. What was your classroom like when you used alternate assessments?
2. When you completed the VAAP with students, what did that look like?
3. Walk through an example of what you did for the assessment. What was the process?
4. What did students do during the VAAP? Did they have any specific "responsibilities"?
5. How much time would you estimate was spent-- Total? Per student?
6. What was easy about the VAAP?
7. What was hard about the VAAP?
8. What was valuable about the VAAP?
9. What was not valuable about the VAAP?
10. If you were in charge of the assessment, what would be really valuable?

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