SECONDARY SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE GEORGIA ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT (GAA)

by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. Thank you for loving me and supporting me through this process. To my mom, Virgie Sinyard, you are my inspiration. You have always believed in me and stood beside me no matter what. Thank you for instilling in me a hard work ethic and an importance of education. To my husband, Dusty Salter, thank you for being my sounding board, my shoulder, and my support. Thank you for encouraging me, for supper deliveries while I was in class, and for going above and beyond with the kids so that I could achieve this dream. To my beautiful children, Cameron, Avery, and Gunner Salter, thank you all for loving mommy and reminding me every day why I work so hard. You three are my entire world!!
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The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine secondary special education teachers’ perceptions of the Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA) as an assessment measure for high school students with cognitive disabilities. The GAA was created in an effort to ensure accountability of teachers, schools, and states by assessing students with severe cognitive disabilities on grade level content and standards to ensure these students are being provided access to the same general curriculum as their same aged peers. Georgia’s special education teachers assess students using the portfolio approach, as mandated by the state. The participants in this study were six Georgia public high school teachers who have worked with the GAA for a number of years and have administered the GAA to high school students with cognitive disabilities. Consequently, these teachers were able to share their perceptions of the GAA’s ability to effectively measure student progress and growth.

Findings revealed that the secondary special education teachers in this study do not perceive the GAA to be an appropriate assessment for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. All six of the research participants expressed their
dissatisfaction with the GAA’s portrayal of their students’ progress and individual
growth. The participants unanimously agreed that the GAA was not a recommended
approach for assessing their students.

While participants did not have a unified response about a specific assessment
tool to replace the GAA, all participants agreed that for an assessment of this population
of students to be appropriate, the assessment would need to focus on individual student
goals that are more functional in nature. Participants unanimously agreed that assessment
for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities should include functional
skills, focus on IEP goals, and be individualized for each student.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Standardized tests have been utilized for decades in education, but the purpose of testing has shifted in recent years from measuring individual student growth to comparing students and evaluating teachers and schools. The amount of testing and the stakes involved have since increased, and results from standardized assessments are currently used as a measurement of accountability for school systems. In the past, students with significant cognitive disabilities were excluded from participation in high-stakes standardized testing; however, new legislation has emerged to ensure that all students, even those with significant cognitive disabilities, are now included in the current testing phenomenon (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

Background of the Study

Legislation such as No Child Left Behind (2001) and Race to the Top (2009) has been responsible for ensuring accountability of schools and teachers of students with disabilities. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), “This focus on accountability has been critical in ensuring a quality education for all children, yet also revealed challenges in the effective implementation of this goal” (NCLB and Accountability, para. 1). In accordance with legislation, states have adopted alternate assessments to assess student progress and growth for their population of students with significant cognitive disabilities at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.
According to a report issued by the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (2013), "Formerly excluded from measures of educational performance, students with disabilities (SWDs) are now explicitly recognized in federal and state accountability systems" (p. xi). This report states, "A number of provisions in the ESEA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act) and its accompanying regulations that are specific to SWDs have introduced additional variations across the states in the inclusion of SWDs in the school accountability system" (U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2013, p. 6). One such provision is the administration of alternate assessments for students with significant cognitive disabilities. While there are no limits on the number of students who can be tested through alternate assessments, there are limits at the district and state levels concerning how alternate assessment scores can be calculated in Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) scores. Consequently, in order to meet AYP goals, school districts should only have two percent of their population of students with disabilities participate in alternate assessments (U.S. Department of Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2013).

To address problems with Race to the Top (2009) and NCLB (2001), President Barack Obama signed a new education law on December 10, 2015 called Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), the new law “Requires for the first time that all students in America be taught to high academic standards that will prepare them to succeed in college and careers” and “Ensures that vital information is provided to educators, families, students, and communities through annual
statewide assessments that measure students’ progress toward those high standards” (A New Education Law, para. 6). ESSA was meant to replace NCLB, which was “too often a burden rather than a help to achieving these goals” (Executive Office of the President, 2015, p. 2) by “Helping states and school districts to push back on unnecessary or low-quality tests and test preparation” (Executive Office of the President, 2015, p. 4). However, since this law is new, its influences have not yet been adequately introduced in all capacities of education, particularly for students with significant cognitive disabilities who are still being assessed on grade level content and standards that often are not appropriate for the students’ cognitive functioning level and educational needs (Restorff, Sharpe, Avery, Rodriquez, & Kim, 2012).

Under the mandates of Race to the Top (2009) and NCLB (2001), accountability measures for students with significant cognitive disabilities are required. Each individual state has been allowed to create their own alternate assessment to measure progress and growth for this population of students. According to Katsiyannis, Zhang, Ryan, and Jones (2007), "This modified assessment allows the student another avenue by which to demonstrate the performance level required for graduation" (p. 164). The state of Georgia adopted a portfolio process called the Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA), in 2006, as a means to measure student progress and growth. Students in Georgia with significant cognitive disabilities are required to participate in the portfolio assessment in lieu of the general education state standardized tests in third through eighth grades and in the eleventh grade.
The Georgia Department of Education (2015c) outlines the process involved in administering the GAA. According to the GAA Examiner’s manual, evidence is collected over two collection periods. Assignments/activities are performed by the students over the course of a day, or several days (based on student needs) to show student progress and growth, with a minimum of fourteen calendar days between the first collection period and the second collection period (Georgia Department of Education, 2015c). Teachers determine a standard to introduce to their students from a list of approved standards provided by the state each year. Students are then given a grade level, teacher-created, pre-test at the beginning of the testing period to determine their current level of understanding of the chosen standard.

Teachers are then charged with the responsibility of writing commentary of student performance on the task, modifications and/or accommodations required by the student to complete the task, prompts initiated for the student, environment in which the student completed the task, and the generalization into the regular education setting with which the student was exposed while completing each of the required tasks (Georgia Department of Education, 2015c). The information obtained is compiled into a large individual student portfolio, provided by the state department, and sent to a review board (Georgia Department of Education, 2015c). According to the GAA Examiner’s Manual, the portfolios are given a score based on four domains; a score of 1-3 is assigned for fidelity to standard, with 3 being the highest score. A student portfolio may earn a score of 1-4 for content/context, achievement/progress, and generalization, with 4 being the highest score for these sections (Georgia Department of Education, 2015c). The scores
are reported for each school and are included in the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) reports.

Problem Statement

Students with significant cognitive disabilities have varying degrees of disabilities, requiring that they each be taught in a way that ensures progress and growth for that particular student. A student’s academic strengths and weaknesses are addressed in the student’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP). All students with disabilities have an IEP to provide educators with an overview of the student and his or her needs. An IEP will, and should, look different for each student based upon individual needs, accommodations, and modifications required by the student for success. In the current testing climate, however, special education students are now assessed against general curriculum standards; this assessment requires time and effort be spent outside areas of focus on each student’s IEP. Students with significant cognitive disabilities are now included in school accountability reporting statewide. While accountability is important in education, the current testing requirements in Georgia for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities do not adequately consider the needs and limitations of this diverse population of students. Special education teachers should be afforded the opportunity to advocate for students in order to ensure that appropriate measures are utilized to assess the ability level and progress of students being tested.

Purpose of the Study

Students with significant cognitive disabilities are now included in school accountability reporting statewide. The initiative to include this population of students
was implemented to ensure accountability for all states, schools, and teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities. According to the Georgia Department of Education (2016), the initiative to implement a formal assessment for students with significant cognitive disabilities required that schools ensure that all students, even those with the most significant cognitive disabilities, are provided with an equal opportunity for exposure to the general education curriculum content and standards.

The purpose of this study was to examine six secondary teachers’ perceptions of the Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA) as a measure of student progress and growth for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities and to explore factors that these teachers consider appropriate for assessing this population of students. Grounded in critical disability theory, this study also sought to share the voices of teachers who serve students that have traditionally been marginalized and to advocate for appropriate assessment practices for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Research Questions

This case study was guided by the following research questions: (1) How do secondary special education teachers perceive the Georgia Alternate Assessment as a measure of student progress and growth for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities? and (2) What factors do teachers believe are appropriate for assessing high school students with significant cognitive disabilities?

Theoretical Framework

This qualitative case study was framed in the transformative paradigm. Creswell (2014) notes that the transformative paradigm developed during the 1980s and 1990s
from researchers who felt that postpositivist assumptions, which were traditionally used to frame quantitative research studies, imposed structural laws and theories that did not fit with studies focused on marginalized individuals in society or issues of power and social justice, discrimination, and oppression that needed to be addressed.

Mezirow is considered the developer of the transformative theory, which emerged in 1991. In later research, he noted that learning takes place through developed assumptions that fit our “frame of reference” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 4) for our lived experiences. Cranton and King (2003) described transformative learning theory by stating, “In the process of daily living, we absorb values, assumptions, and beliefs about how things are without much thought” (p. 32).

Mezirow (1997) theorized that there are four processes in the transformative learning approach. First, Mezirow (1997) noted, “…to elaborate on an existing point of view” (p. 7), then he stated, “A second way to learn is to establish new points of view” (p. 7). Just in the first two processes, one can see that variations are evident. In the first process, one would take information given and accept it, elaborating on the existing point of view. The second process would entail developing one’s own point of view in regard to a topic. The last two processes are “…to transform our point of view” and “…becoming aware and critically reflective of our generalized bias in the way we view groups other than our own” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 7). In the processes of becoming reflective, one would consider the implication for not critically reflecting upon the learning processes of others, particularly those from marginalized groups, such as students with significant cognitive disabilities.
This qualitative case study investigated secondary teachers’ perceptions of the GAA as a measure of student progress and growth for students with significant cognitive disabilities, a group that historically has been marginalized. The researcher worked to ensure that the voices of the marginalized group were heard through interviews with their teachers. This intent of this study directly aligns with Mertens’ (2015) description of transformative researchers, who “consciously and explicitly position themselves side by side with the less powerful in a joint effort to bring about social transformation” (p. 21). This case study focused on the needs of a marginalized group within a minority of students with disabilities.

After determining that the transformative paradigm would frame this study, critical disability theory emerged as an appropriate theoretical framework in which to ground this work. In an effort to ensure equality for students with disabilities, education scholars (Hoskig, 2008; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Munger & Mertens, 2011) contend that analyzing disability issues through the lens of the emerging critical disability theory would prove beneficial in conducting research involving individuals with disabilities. Analyzing individuals with disabilities in this way ensures that the disability of the individual is highly considered in the research investigations. Critical disability theory can facilitate our understanding that various disability issues, including issues of inclusion and student equality, are prevalent in our schools today. In exploring the use of the Georgia Alternate Assessment with students with significant cognitive disabilities, critical disability theory was used by the researcher to analyze data and interpret emergent themes with the purpose of advocating for the needs of students with cognitive
disabilities as well as their teachers. Chapter Two includes a review of related professional literature concerning critical disability theory.

Perspective of the Researcher

As an educator and advocate for students with special needs, this researcher was intrigued to learn more about the alternate assessment and testing of students with significant cognitive disabilities. The researcher has been a special education teacher for thirteen years. Eight of those thirteen years were spent in a self-contained classroom for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Her career began in 2004 as a self-contained elementary school teacher for students in kindergarten through fifth grade. The disability levels in the classroom ranged from Moderate Intellectual Disabilities to the more Severe and Profound spectrum. It was during this time that the GAA began, in the year 2006. The researcher was responsible for administering the GAA to all students in her class that year, regardless of their grade level. In 2007, the researcher transferred to a high school setting; there she piloted a self-contained Moderate Intellectual Disabilities classroom and administered the GAA to high school students for seven years. She currently serves in a leadership role and has not administered the GAA for the last five years, but she has remained interested in both the process of the GAA and the teachers’ perceptions of the test. The researcher purposefully aligned with critical disability theorists in order to examine the GAA through a critical theory lens in an effort to understand how it affects a marginalized population of high school students with significant cognitive disabilities as well as the teachers who are required by the state to assess the academic progress of these students.
The researcher began this project with questions about why the state of Georgia chose the portfolio process as a means of assessment for students with significant cognitive disabilities, along with questions about teachers’ perceptions of the GAA process. Since the researcher had administered the GAA in the past, she entered into the research with an understanding of the GAA process and her own biases toward the assessment process. The researcher was intrigued to set her biases aside and speak with other Georgia secondary special educators about their perceptions of the GAA.

As an educator of students with special needs, this researcher has always encouraged students to use critical thinking skills, ask questions, and advocate for themselves in an effort to become productive citizens of their society. It is this researcher’s position that each student can and will establish self-efficacy skills to ensure their success after graduation from high school.

Methodology

This study focused on secondary teachers’ perceptions of the Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA). As a special education teacher and advocate, this researcher was innately interested in the research topic. According to Stake (1995), “Intrinsic case study designs draw the researcher toward understanding of what is important about the case within its own world…” (p. 242). Consequently, a qualitative case study methodology approach was selected to allow the researcher to gain further knowledge concerning the administration of the GAA to high school students with significant cognitive disabilities.

This qualitative case study was conducted in a middle Georgia public school district. After all of the required approvals were obtained, purposeful and convenience
sampling were used to identify participants who had multiple years of experience teaching special education and administering the GAA to high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. Participants were recruited via email. Six secondary special education teachers from different high schools within the district volunteered to be part of this study. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

Data collection occurred through semi-structured interviews with each participant. The interview sessions were held at the local public library, central to both the interviewer and each interviewee, in a small meeting room reserved by the researcher, after school hours or on a weekend. Meeting in the public library, away from the school setting, allowed the interviewee to speak openly with the researcher. Interviews were audio recorded with participant permission, and then transcribed by the researcher.

Interview transcripts were analyzed using constant comparison coding to identify commonalities and areas of concern among the participants. Codes were grouped into major emergent themes that were then interpreted based on the study’s theoretical framework. To ensure trustworthiness, credibility, and dependability the researcher used background knowledge, triangulation, member checking, and thick description.

Significance of the Study

There has been a growing dissatisfaction in the route of special education services since the early works of Lloyd Dunn. In a 1968 article, Dunn wrote, “In my view, much of our past and present practices are morally and educationally wrong” (p. 5). He further suggested, “Let us stop being pressured into continuing and expanding a special education program that we know now to be undesirable for many of the children we are
dedicated to serve” (Dunn, 1968, p. 5). At a time when preparation for life after high school and advancement of adaptive skills are of high importance for this population of students, this researcher was interested in the rationale for placing such importance on assessing high school students with significant cognitive disabilities against curriculum content standards instead of functional skills, such as the goals in the students’ IEPs.

For all students with significant cognitive disabilities, it is this researcher’s stance that it is crucial for each student to develop self-efficacy and self-advocacy skills to become productive citizens of society. These skill areas will most likely be addressed in a student’s IEP. It is this researcher’s belief that educators of students with special needs should focus on teaching students how to adapt to the changing world around them. As a special educator, this researcher contends that the student's individual growth and adaptive behavior could prove to be particularly pertinent information for the focus of an appropriate assessment for this population of students. In an effort to ensure appropriate assessment practices, when considering testing for individual students, certain questions should be considered. Questions such as, how has the student grown in his/her ability to function independently? Can he/she order food independently at a public restaurant? Did he/she wait for their change or walk away, leaving it behind? Did he/she look before they crossed the street? Does he/she know their name? Does he/she know their address? These social/adaptive skills are important for all students, particularly those with a significant cognitive disability, who more times than not lack these skills. Bessow, et al. (2010), in their multitrait-multimethod study, found that “In the current sample of students with disabilities, the strongest relationship is between adaptive behavior and
academic enablers, which appear to be highly, related constructs” (p. 471). It would therefore seem highly unlikely that academic achievement of students with significant cognitive disabilities could be measured effectively without first observing individual student adaptive behavior to aid educators in the process of assessing students.

Studies have addressed other states’ special education teachers’ perceptions of the validity of the GAA, (Flowers, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Browder, & Spooner, 2005; Kampfer, Horvath, Kleinert, & Kearns, 2001; Restorff et al., 2012) but there have been no studies that address secondary teachers’ perceptions of the GAA as a measure of student progress and growth for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. Because there have been no research studies conducted in Georgia, there has been a considerable gap in the literature on this topic for Georgia’s high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. It was the researcher’s goal to expand upon this literary field in an effort to find the answers that many special educators consider essential in their efforts to educate students with disabilities.

Schunk (2012) noted that there are important goals that should be evident in instruction to ensure student success. He stated that educators should “Show positive regard for the students” (Schunk, 2012, p. 356). Educators must ensure that students believe that they are valued as individuals. Schunk (2012) also suggested educators should, “Encourage personal growth by providing students with choices and opportunities” and “Facilitate learning by providing resources and encouragement” (p. 356). This research study provided meaningful understanding of the current Georgia Alternate Assessment guidelines for high school students with significant cognitive
disabilities. This qualitative case study also provided authentic insight into teachers’ perceptions of the GAA.

**Definition of Key Terms**

*Alternate Assessment:* Assessments created in compliance with the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) that mandated that all students, even those with the most significant cognitive disabilities be included in accountability testing (Hager & Slocum, 2005).

*Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP):* Adequate Yearly Progress is a measure of student achievement on state assessments from one year to the next. It was implemented as part of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

*College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI):* Georgia’s school improvement and accountability plan to promote college and career readiness for all public schools in Georgia (Georgia Department of Education, 2015b).

*Credibility:* To ensure that research is credible, researchers should use “well recognized research methods” (Shenton, 2004, p. 73). For research to be considered credible, it must reveal the research that it aimed to study (Shenton, 2004).

*Dependability:* To ensure dependability of a qualitative study, researchers should use “overlapping methods” (Shenton, 2004, p. 73). This will aid in ensuring that the study could be repeated by providing “in-depth methodological description…” (Shenton, 2004, p. 73).

*Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA):* A new education law signed in December 2015 by President Barack Obama. The U.S. Department of Education (2016) stated, “The new law builds on key areas of progress in recent years, made possible by the
efforts of educators, communities, parents, and students across the country” (para. 2). The new law is meant to replace previous legislation such as No Child Left Behind.

*Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA):* A portfolio assessment for students who have been identified as having significant cognitive disabilities and who are unable to participate in the general curriculum even with the maximum accommodations (Georgia Department of Education, 2015d).

*Individualized Education Program (IEP):* A written document that guides instruction of a student with a disability. The IEP is a legal document that must be understood and monitored by all those associated with the student. An annual meeting is held to discuss the IEP for individual students (Armenta & Beckers, 2006).

*Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA):* Federal law that ensures that all public schools meet the educational needs of students with disabilities (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2014).

*No Child Left Behind Act of 2001:* An act signed by President George W. Bush. It is a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). “NCLB significantly raises expectations for states, local school districts, and schools in that all students will meet or exceed state standards in reading and mathematics within twelve years” (Georgia Department of Education, 2015a).

*Portfolio:* A portfolio is “a collection of student work gathered to demonstrate student performance on specific skills and knowledge, generally linked to state content standards” (Almond & Case, 2004, p. 4).
Self-efficacy: A concept that “refers to a person’s sense of his or her own capability—whether or not the person is able to perform specific actions successfully” (Martinez, 2010, p. 29).

Student with a Significant Cognitive Disability: A student with a disability that affects their ability to participate in the general curriculum, even with the maximum supports in place. These students generally have an IQ lower than 55.

Summary

This qualitative case study focused on secondary special education teachers’ perceptions of the Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA) and sought to share the stories of six public high school teachers who work daily with students with significant cognitive disabilities. Chapter One introduced the reader to the background, context, problem, purpose, methodology, theoretical framework, and significance of the study. Chapter Two presents a review of related literature. Chapter Three describes the research design, and Chapter Four presents the results of data analysis. Chapter Five concludes the study with a summary, discussion of findings, implications, and recommendations.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In 2006, The Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA) was adopted as a statewide method for assessing students with significant cognitive disabilities in compliance with federal requirements that require all students have access to the general education curriculum. The purpose of this study was to examine secondary special education teachers’ perceptions of the GAA as a measure of student progress and growth for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities and to explore factors that these teachers consider appropriate for assessing this population of students. This study also sought to share the voices of teachers who serve students that have traditionally been marginalized and to advocate for appropriate assessment practices for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities.

This study addressed the following research questions: 1) How do secondary special education teachers perceive the Georgia Alternate Assessment as a measure of student progress and growth for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities? 2) What factors do teachers believe are appropriate for assessing high school students with significant cognitive disabilities? A qualitative case study methodology was used to address the study’s research questions.

This chapter describes the current research gap and presents a review of literature related to critical disability theory and the assessment of high school students with significant cognitive disabilities.
Addressing a Research Gap

Previous studies have addressed special education teachers’ perceptions of alternate assessments (Flowers et al. 2005; Kampfer, Horvath, Kleinert, & Kearns, 2001; Restorff et al., 2012). However, no studies have been published that specifically address secondary teachers’ perceptions of the GAA as a measure of student progress and growth for Georgia high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. Furthermore, there is no current research to suggest which method(s) secondary teachers consider to be appropriate for assessing high school students with significant cognitive disabilities.

These gaps in the educational literature were identified after extensive searches to find current and relevant research about the Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA). This researcher began searching in the ERIC EBSCOhost and ProQuest Databases using a combination of phrases such as Georgia Alternate Assessment, teachers’ perceptions of Georgia’s Alternate Assessment, and secondary special education teachers’ perceptions of Georgia’s Alternate Assessment. The researcher then refined the search to include only peer-reviewed articles. Suitable articles were organized in a large binder for further investigation. The reference lists of each journal article were analyzed to expand the search for relevant literature as it pertained to secondary teachers’ perceptions of the Georgia Alternate Assessment. Relevant books were also included in this review of literature.

The following criteria were used by the researcher to select sources for inclusion in this literature review:
1. The source included topics relevant to the study, including Georgia Alternate Assessment, assessment of students with special needs, teacher perceptions of the Georgia Alternate Assessment, accountability, critical disability theory, and the education of students who participated in the Georgia Alternate Assessment at the secondary high school level.

2. The source was written in English.

3. The source was peer-reviewed.

A review of professional literature sources follows. The researcher will discuss the tenets of critical disability theory and its use as a framework for analyzing research related to the assessment of secondary students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Critical Disability Theory

Critical Disability Theory (CDT), a term used interchangeably with Critical Disabilities Studies (CDS), is an emerging theoretical framework. The theory "emerged as a growing area of academic research and professional education across much of the Western world in the 1970s and has continued to expand into the 21st century" (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009, p. 48). This theory has only recently become widely accepted for scholarly studies involving individuals with disabilities. Mairian Corker (1999), a Deaf scholar, postulated:

Academics in the field of disability studies aim to develop a social theory of disability, which comes as close as possible to explaining the 'reality' of disabled people... However, pursuing the ideal may mean accepting that there will always be a gap between what any theory can offer and what disable people need to know
in understanding and changing their lives - a gap that may be exacerbated by power and knowledge inequalities and by the research project. (as cited in Gabel, 2005, p. 6)

In recent years, critical studies and critical disability theory have come closer to closing the gap that Corker (1999) described. Corker and Shakespeare (2006) claim, “A strength of disability studies has been its close connection between scholarship and activism” (p. 196). In an effort to ensure critical disability theory as an acceptable research paradigm, researchers advocate for changes in areas of concern faced by persons with disabilities, based on their research findings. Critical disability researchers are motivated to ensure equality for all persons with disabilities. Gabel (2005) explains, “Disability studies in education are primarily concerned with the view of issues and problems as defined by disabled people and as they relate to social exclusion and oppression” (p. 17). Critical disability theory was used to analyze and interpret the data collected in this dissertation study.

Critical Theory

Critical Disability Theory can be traced to the original framework of Critical Theory, which was first introduced in 1937 by Max Horkheimer,

Since it was first proposed by Max Horkheimer in 1937, critical theory has come to include a wide range of descriptive and normative bases for social inquiry which have the practical aim of maximizing human freedom and ending the domination of some groups by others defined by class, power, race, or other social construct. (Hoskig, 2008, p. 3)
Persons with disabilities could position themselves within the “other social construct” (Hoskig, 2008, p. 3) category mentioned above. "CDT, as a member of the critical theory family, is a theoretical approach to the concept of disability which is simultaneously explanatory, practical and normative" (Hoskig, 2008, p. 3). CDT strives to ensure that the voices of individuals with disabilities are heard. Corker and Shakespeare (2006) shared their rationale for accepting disability studies as a research paradigm:

We believe that existing theories of disability- both radical and mainstream- are no longer adequate. Both the medical model and the social model seek to explain disability universally, and end up creating totalizing, meta-historical narratives that exclude important dimensions of disabled people’s lives and their knowledge. The global experience of disabled people is too complex to be rendered within one unitary model of set ideas. (p. 15)

The goal of critical disability theorists is to change the way disability is perceived by our society. Corker and Shakespeare (2006) argued that the current research approaches were too narrow in design to include all aspects of disability. The authors considered the implementation of disability studies as imperative and beneficial for persons with disabilities. According to Ware (2005),

The degree to which disabled people have been stigmatized or oppressed as a consequence of particular cultural and historical eras' bias toward disabled people has proven to be one of the most critical topics of interrogation by disability studies scholars in the humanities. (p. 117)
CDT is a theoretical framework that focuses on disseminating the social constructs that are currently associated with disability. As noted by Hoskig (2008), "CDT provides a conceptual framework to understand the relationship between impairment, disability, and society and to inject disability interest into all policy arenas" (p. 17). When new policies and procedures are introduced into curriculum, oftentimes there is a lack of consideration for persons with disabilities. Erevelles (2005b) concluded, “For disability studies to be included meaningfully in the US curriculum, radical transformation is required in both curriculum theory and practice” (p. 435). It will require that all individuals involved are willing to change their thought processes as it pertains to disability. Watson (2012) proclaimed, “Disabled children have different needs and it is difficult to develop a 'one-size-fits-all' model, research agenda or policies to meet these needs” (p. 195).

In order to ensure that each student’s needs are being met and that students with disabilities are provided with equal access, educators must first ensure that they have an understanding of each student's needs and their disability. Ervelles (2005b) posited, “Responding to this call will require that educational administrators, teacher educators, and K-12 teachers in both regular and special education classrooms, re-examine their own discomfort and silences around issues of disability” (p. 435). If teachers, administrators, and other school personnel are not able to relate to and model appropriate interactions when working with individuals with disabilities, it becomes increasingly difficult for school personnel to model the appropriate discourse to non-disabled students. When inappropriate interactions are observed by students, educators produce another
just as critical theory has played a role in the emergence of critical disability theory as a research paradigm, so too has social construction played a role in the paradigm shift when researching persons with disabilities. Siebers (2011) stated that social construction plays a “fundamental” role in the “current thinking” about critical disability theory because “It provides a major alternative to the medicalization of disability” (p. 72). In the past, disability has primarily been researched and perceived as a medical phenomenon. Critical disability theory attempts to portray disability not only as a medical disability, but a disability, most often times, inflicted upon persons with disabilities by the society for which they are members.

Siebers (2011) explained, “The social model challenges the idea of defective citizenship by situating disability in the environment, not the body” (p. 73). In an effort to modify current thinking in regard to disabilities, social construction has been charged with changing “The landscape of thinking about disability because it refuses to represent people with disabilities as defective citizens and because its focus on the built environment that presents a common cause around which they may organize politically” (Siebers, 2011, p. 73). In suggesting that environment has a substantial role in shaping disability, social construction suggests that change is possible, if society and the environment first change their current perceptions and acceptance of persons with disabilities. Social construction places a fervent emphasis on the environment as the
cause of disability and suggests that only by changing the environment, will the view of disability also change. When reporting their research findings, however, Corker and Shakespeare (2006) caution, “Social theorists and researchers must face the real oppressive conditions of disablement if they are to be suitable allies of disability activists” (p. 133). For centuries, persons with disabilities have been oppressed in many different scenarios. To conduct trustworthy, credible, dependable research, both researchers and theorists must consider the background of oppression of persons with disabilities. Powell and Kalina (2009) suggested that, “Social constructivism is a highly effective method for teaching that all students can benefit from, since collaboration and social interaction are incorporated” (p. 243). When working with secondary students with significant cognitive disabilities, social interaction has proven highly effective for this researcher, as an educator in the classroom. The goal for all students is to graduate with the skills needed to become productive, functioning adults in society. Social interaction with others is a key component in successful integration into all types of social environments. Vygotsky (1978) is known as the founding father of social constructivism and believed in “Social interaction and that it was an integral part of learning” (Powell & Kalina, 2009, p. 243). In his book, Thought and Language, Vygotsky (1962) asserted, “The child's intellectual growth is contingent on his mastering the social means of thought, that is, language” (p. 94). When interaction and critical processing skills are prominent in the classroom, effective classroom environments, where students are actively engaged in the learning process, are formed.
Deconstruction

The idea of deconstruction is a theoretical and literary analysis created by Derrida (1967). Biesta (2009) stated, “Deconstruction is often depicted as a method of critical analysis aimed at exposing unquestioned metaphysical assumptions and internal contradictions in philosophical and literary language” (p. 392). Derrida’s (1967) intent was to break down the idea of certainty and truth and prove that there are areas in education that are not certain and that must be different. Current methods of teaching are focused on state standards and teacher accountability. Derrida (1967) might suggest that educators need to revise the current trend in education and focus on the uncertainties that persist within the system. This theory would be useful when working with students with special needs who, in most cases, require instructional accommodations to be successful in school. Sinha (2013) suggested, “…teaching is an activity that cannot be reduced to or unambiguously guided by any exemplar form, but calls upon both memory and imagination to envision the forms it can take” (p. 267). This statement is particularly relevant when working with students with significant cognitive disabilities since each student and disability are unique.

Teachers must introduce and utilize various methods based on individual student needs. Educators, parents, researchers, and persons with disabilities have advocated for the free appropriate public education (FAPE) for these students. Over the years, many innovative teaching strategies have been introduced to ensure FAPE for this population of students. Munday (2011) suggested, “If the teacher does not take account of the needs of particular students, then a certain amount of unhappiness will ensue” (p. 416). If they do
not feel that the material will benefit their success after graduation, secondary students with significant cognitive disabilities may inevitably lose interest during instruction; the students will become uninterested in learning.

Although special educators and school administrators are aware that the standards they are teaching students with significant cognitive disabilities are ineffective, they continue to teach in this manner in order to ensure that they are following government mandates. As Munday (2011) stated, “The fear of failure that haunts the teacher and school is the product of bad metaphysics” (p. 417). Only when teacher and student voices are heard and valued will effective teaching and assessment practices for students with significant cognitive disabilities flourish.

Research Methods

With the emergence of critical disability theory as a valid and acceptable research theory, new methods and approaches have also evolved. The most prominent method is referred to as the emancipatory method. In this method, the ideas, values, and beliefs of persons with disabilities are very much accepted. According to Gabel (2005), the emancipatory method “assumes that disabled people are the experts on disability and that their leadership and involvement in the research process is necessary for any research about them” (p. 9). Critical disability theorists are working to break the silence of persons with disabilities. Gabel (2005) suggested that for research to be effective, it must be “driven by the concerns defined by disabled people” (p. 9). Those persons being researched should have an active voice in the research process. He further suggested, “…emancipation is possible because disabled people are the ones who best know the
issues and problems and can best frame the questions that guide research and the analysis of data gathered through research” (Gabel, 2005, p. 9). In considering the application of the emancipatory research method in this study of the GAA, the researcher chose to interview teachers of students with special needs. While it would be valuable to enlist student participation in the study, this research was conducted at the height of the GAA test administration window and the researcher did not want to impose any undue stress on the students. As an educator of students with special needs, this researcher determined that the teachers of the students could provide adequate information in regard to this study. The teachers interviewed had direct access to the students on a daily basis as well as knowledge of the students’ perceptions of the GAA.

Federal Regulations

Federal regulations such as Race to the Top (2009) and NCLB (2001) advocate for full inclusion of all students, including those students with disabilities. Although these regulations advocate for full inclusion, many students with significant cognitive disabilities are unable to fully participate in the general education curriculum without extensive accommodations and/or modifications. This, in retrospect, adversely affects these students’ ability to participate in general education standardized testing. Under the mandates of Race to the Top (2009) and NCLB (2001), there must still be accountability measures for this population of students. Each state has been allowed to create its own alternate assessment to measure success and growth for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Katsiyannis et al. (2007) explain, "This modified assessment allows the student another avenue by which to demonstrate the performance level
required for graduation" (p. 164). Critical disability theory became relevant in the 1970s (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009) and has become more accepted and prevalent in the 21st century. According to Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2009), "The International Year of the Disabled People in 1981 raised disability as a human rights issue in the global public discourse" (p. 48). Individuals with disabilities who were once institutionalized were being released from institutions and introduced into public settings.

With the emergence of these individuals in the community, education for persons with disabilities became a topic for discussion. As argued by Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2009), "The growing presence of disabled people in the society, in particular their presence in the community following centuries of institutionalization, has further contributed to an awareness of the responsibilities of educational institutions to disabled citizens" (p. 48). For the many years that individuals with disabilities were institutionalized, their education was of little concern. Persons with disabilities were not in the public eye and were not considered teachable, but with their emergence into society, it became imperative that all individuals with disabilities be provided with an equal education and that their education and rights be considered just as important as any other individual within society. In 2005, Ware proclaimed, “K-12 schools must accept the challenge that disability studies present, and they must begin to include disability as a sense of ‘pride and empowerment’” (p. 120).

There was another shift in the research agenda for students with disabilities in the 1990s (Watson, 2012). The change “focused on impairments to one that prioritized action to reduce the disadvantage faced by disabled children” (Watson, 2012, p. 193).
Watson (2012) reported that since children actively participated in the research process, the “new paradigm also unpacked social, cultural, and environmental structures, practices, and barriers and in particular, adult behaviors, which acted to exclude children with impairments” (p. 194). The children were allowed to express their concerns throughout the research process.

It is a critical disability theorist’s stance that although much improvement has been made in the field of research of persons with disabilities, there still remain inequalities when educating students with disabilities. As Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2009) proclaimed, "What unites CDT theorists is an agreement that disabled people are undervalued and discriminated against and this cannot be changed simply through liberal or neo-liberal legislation and policy" (p. 65). According to Erevelles (2005b), “In recent years, despite the move to integrate more students with disabilities into regular classrooms, new labels, like 'at-risk', 'learning-disabled', 'emotionally handicapped', and 'gifted and talented' continue to segregate children in the name of upholding academic standards” (p. 434). As the demand for inclusion of students with disabilities continues to be on the rise, in many cases, there still remain special classes that are segregated and “populated by students who have been marked in oppressive ways by race, class, or gender” (Erevelles, 2005b, p. 434). The goal of critical disability theorists is to contribute scholarship to the field of research study involving individuals with disabilities to ensure equal and adequate education for all persons with disabilities.

In addition, Hoskig (2008) asserted "Critical disability theory centers disability as it compares liberalism's norms and values with their actualization in the daily life of
disabled people" (p. 5). Critical theorists research the individual with a disability in an
effort to gain insight into their daily routines and struggles. The focus for critical
disability theorists is to express the value and importance of persons with disabilities.

Hoskig (2008) also postulated seven elements of critical disability theory: "The social
model of disability, multidimensionality, valuing diversity, rights, voices of disability,
language, and transformative politics" (p. 5). Hoskig’s (2008) seven elements, and their
importance in the development of CDT, are described below.

The social model of disability is listed as the first major element. Hoskig (2008)
stated, "A theory which centers disability and proceeds from the perspective of disabled
people needs to have a conception of disability which is sufficiently inclusive to
encompass the population with which it is concerned" (p. 6). Simply stated, disabilities
have been assumed in the past, and even still in the present, as a personal problem; a
misfortune for those consumed with the disability. A critical theorist must have an all-
encompassing understanding of the disability area being studied and must strive to ensure
understanding of the disability by others. CDT views disability as a "social construct"
(Hoskig, 2008) that is only seen in this light because of the "institutional and attitudinal
(together, the 'social') environment which fails to meet the needs of people who do not
match the social expectation of ‘normalcy’" (Hoskig, 2008, p. 7). Because these
individuals are not perceived as being normal, based on society’s perceptions of
normality, society, in essence disables them more by devaluing their existence. Devlin &
Pothier (2006) suggest, "The claim that disability is not just an individual impairment but
a systematically enforced pattern of exclusion moves the analysis forward in important
ways” (p. 14). Real change can only occur when society realizes how current practices are debilitating the population of persons with disabilities.

In acknowledging and accepting different disabilities, Critical Disability Theory strives to ensure equality for all individuals with disabilities regardless of the severity of the disability. As noted by Hoskig (2008), "CDT recognizes and welcomes the inevitability of difference and conceives of equality within a framework of diversity" (p. 11). It is imperative that the rights of all individuals with disabilities are protected so that each person with a disability will become an active participant within their society.

By examining Georgia's approach to assessing students with significant cognitive disabilities through the perspective of Critical Disability Theory, it can be argued that Georgia's alternate assessment does not adequately measure student progress and growth of secondary students with significant cognitive disabilities. The Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA) focuses on ensuring that students are tested on grade level material, but does not focus on key components for successful implementation into society for this group of students. Ervelle (2005a) posits,

Depending on the severity of their disability, the skills learned in these segregated special education classes have permitted only a few disabled people to be employed in jobs located at the lowest rungs of the social division of labor while many more swell the ranks of the permanently unemployed, dependent on the welfare state for their daily survival. (p. 66)

Disability is an increasing area of concern among students today. In the United States, teachers are currently so focused on teaching grade level content to every student
that they cannot take the time to focus on the needs of the individual students being
taught. The “critical reality is that schools are increasingly located right at the heart of
social division of labor that marks distinction between mental and manual labor”
(Erevelles, 2005a, p. 79). Educators need to focus on the needs of individual students to
ensure their success after graduation from high school. Solis and Conner (2008) theorize,
“The realm of academia and the world of schooling should always be interconnected.
However, they continue to remain, by and large, virtually separate entities” (p. 115). For
students with significant cognitive disabilities, the aforementioned statement is most
certainly true. Most students with significant cognitive disabilities function significantly
lower than their same aged peers cognitively, socially, and academically. However,
teachers are required to test these students on the same grade level content and standards.

Disability and Oppression

According to Munger and Mertens (2011), "Approximately 54 million Americans,
or one in every seven individuals, have a disability, making people with disabilities the
largest minority group in the country" (p. 23). In accordance, Siebers (2011) noted, “At
nearly 20 percent, people with disabilities make up the largest population in the United
States, unless one considers women at 51 percent of the structured minority” (p. 71).
Even being the largest minority group, disabled persons "remain arguably the most
oppressed minority group" (Munger & Mertens, 2011, p. 23). Interestingly, not all
persons with disabilities are born with their disability, but instead become disabled over
the course of their life (Siebers, 2011). Gabel (2005) also suggested:
Educational disablement often begins in general education settings, as when reasonable accommodations are refused, school communities are exclusive, parents believe their child with an impairment will not receive equitable treatment in general education, or the necessary resources for full inclusion are not provided. (p. 17)

There are a number of persons with disabilities without jobs or who are impoverished. This "stems not from disabled individuals' innate functional limitations but from lack of opportunities to participate as equal and integral members of their communities" (Munger & Mertens, 2011, p. 23). It stands to reason that

… no group of people is less powerful, and has been more marginalized, than the disabled. In social situations, people with disabilities typically are rendered invisible. When they are present, other people often look away or refrain from interacting with them. (Corker & Shakespeare, 2006, p. 229)

Again, society at large is devaluing those who are considered “non-normal”. By providing critical analysis and information about disabilities, advocates can change the current mindset of society and help every person be valued and treated fairly regardless of disability.

As reported by Watson (2012), there are still many barriers that are faced by students with disabilities as well as barriers faced by their parents. He suggests that “Many of these may be the result of social barriers, but it is too simplistic to suggest that the experiences of disabled children can be reduced solely to an analysis of such barriers” (Watson, 2012, p. 194). There are many aspects and domains to be considered when
discussing individuals with disabilities. Disability is a “highly complex variable, it is multi-dimensional and it cuts across the range of political, social and cultural experiences” (Watson, 2012, p. 194). Because the study of disabilities is so complex, for it to become meaningful would require a drastic change in current mindset and practice. As Ware (2005) noted, “If disability is viewed as encompassing more than the dilemmas it poses in schools and in society, then as educators we will have to teach the value of disability in our lives” (p. 120). Critical disability theorists and advocates must shed light on the importance of each individual regardless of his or her disability. Siebers (2011) summarized the goal of disability studies when he stated, “Until everyone agrees that these children have a future, people with disabilities will remain the largest minority population subject to unjust and unrecognized oppression” (p. 196).

History of the Alternate Assessment

Hager and Slocum (2002) described the necessity for alternate assessments based on the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act in 1997 mandating that special education students were to fully participate in standards based reform and accountability. Interpreting the implications of the new mandates, Hager and Slocum (2002) suggested, "It is critical that the educational needs of students with severe disabilities are not overshadowed by the needs of the much larger number of students participating in the general statewide testing" (p. 268). The authors discussed the purpose of the assessment, the standards emphasized on the assessments, the forms of assessment, the scoring of the assessment, and the assessment reporting.
There is not one specific mandated standard for assessing students with significant cognitive disabilities. States are allowed to develop their own form of alternate assessment. In their study of three states (none of which were named specifically), Restorff et al. (2012) proclaimed that of the three states that were included in their study, all three employed a different form of assessment for their student population of students with significant cognitive disabilities. Georgia currently uses the portfolio assessment to assess their population of students with significant cognitive disabilities. While searching for evidence for Georgia’s decision to utilize the portfolio approach, this researcher used EBSCOhost and Google Scholar databases to search for phrases such as why did Georgia choose the portfolio alternate assessment, alternate assessment approaches, and who chose the portfolio approach for Georgia. There was no rationale that this researcher could find that directly stated why the portfolio was chosen as the alternate assessment approach for Georgia students.

The best form of relevant research that was located was provided by the Coweta school system. The Coweta County School System (n.d.) provided a document entitled, *Georgia Alternate Assessment: Frequently Asked Questions*. When addressing the premise for Georgia’s decision to implement the portfolio alternate assessment, the Coweta school system explained,

Both the Testing Division and the Division of Exceptional Students spent considerable time reviewing other states’ alternate assessments. The portfolio format was ultimately chosen because it provided the flexibility necessary to help
ensure this small, yet very diverse group of students receives instructional services that were meaningful and purposeful. (para. 6)

The rationale described by the Coweta school system (n.d.) for Georgia’s decision was that portfolios allow for more individualization and flexibility in assessing individual students using the portfolio assessment. Further noted was the contention that, “Other alternate assessment formats, such as performance tasks and rating scales are more standardized, with all students completing the same activities, therefore limiting opportunities for individualization” (para. 7). The idea for the GAA, in this respect, is that the instruction and assessment process be as individualized as possible, while also ensuring students are assessed on grade level content and standards. A further search utilizing EBSCOhost databases revealed that 29 other states also utilize the portfolio alternate assessment as their means of assessment: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, District of Columbia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, Wisconsin, and Wyoming (NCAA State Profiles, 2009). Although a total of 30 states assess their students through the portfolio approach, each state’s portfolio will look different based on state standards and requirements for portfolios.

In Georgia, upon completion of the portfolio, the assessments are sent to a review board. It is the process of review board reviews that warrant Georgia special educator concerns that the test scores received are subjective, invalid, and/or unreliable. In their 2001 study from the state of Kentucky, Kampfer et al. (2001) noted, “Based on their
comments, teachers seemed apprehensive about the validity of the Alternate Portfolio as an assessment tool for their students” (p. 372). The portfolios are individualized in such a way that each portfolio meets the need of a particular student participating in the alternate assessment process. A person/reviewer who does not have a firm foundation in special education practices, or the individual student needs, may not see the implications for assessing a student a particular way, thereby failing the portfolio and the student.

Thurlow, Lazarus, Thompson, and Morse (2005) researched the history, legal requirements and need for accommodations on state mandated tests. The authors made an assertion for the need for high-quality alternate assessments for students with significant cognitive disabilities; "Researchers, educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders must debate and discuss the assumptions underlying the alternate assessments" (Thurlow et al., 2005, p. 238). They further suggested, "Policymakers also need to consider thoughtfully what is the appropriate role of alternate assessments" (Thurlow et al., 2005, p. 238). The authors found that states vary in the development of their alternate assessments and the extent to which students are tested.

The quantitative study by Cho and Kingston (2011) studied the characteristics and performance of a group of elementary students that compared their 2009 alternate assessment scores with the students’ 2008 test type assignment and achievement scores. The authors suggested that their results raise concerns about inappropriate test type. Cho and Kingston (2011) proposed the importance that when assigning test type, teachers have "clear guidelines of what kind of standardized tests should be considered in this decision and how many test performances should be counted" (p. 70). The authors posit,
"Preservice and professional development should help teachers understand models of learning so they can recognize students' initial sense-making strategies" (Cho & Kingston, 2011, p. 71), thereby ensuring that students are assigned the correct test type and their educational skills are adequately assessed.

Katsiyannis et al. (2007) argued that some of the alternate assessments do not benefit students with disabilities. In their review of recent research literature, legislation, and court decisions, they stated that "It is imperative that efforts continue to ensure alternate assessments, and students' opportunity to learn adequate curriculum, align to state standards, and reliably assess student performance" (Katsiyannis et al., 2007, p. 161).

Another area of particular concern with the administration of a portfolio alternate assessment is the time constraints that it places on the teachers charged with assessing the students. In the quantitative research study conducted on 983 teachers, Flowers et al. (2005) found that the demand of time and the increase of paperwork required of teachers was an important implication for dissatisfaction with the alternate assessment approach. Just as the aforementioned research study proved, it was also this researcher’s experience that when compiling the GAA portfolio, a tremendous amount of personal time was devoted to ensuring that the portfolio was compiled in the appropriate format for submission to the state department.

In an effort to understand the premise behind assessing students with significant cognitive disabilities, other researchers have sought to provide an understanding of the new policies under No Child Left Behind (NCLB 2001) and the testing of students with
significant cognitive disabilities via an alternate assessment. Elliott, Kettler, and Roach (2008) provided a description of those students who would be tested using an alternate assessment approach, how tests could be modified, and the effects of the reported achievements and what they mean for students with significant cognitive disabilities. They explained,

Historically, in many states, students who have struggled on the general education grade-level test were given an out-of-level test, but such a test does not cover the same content as a test based on grade-level academic content standards and, thus, is not allowed under the NCLB. (Elliot et al., 2008, p. 140)

The authors argued that in the past, the general education tests have been too difficult and the alternate assessments have been too easy. Elliot et al. (2008) stated, "Thus, neither of the existing assessment options for the targeted group of students with disabilities has resulted in an accurate assessment of what they are being taught and what they know and can do" (p. 140). They posited that a possible solution might be the "development of an alternate assessment based on modified achievement standards (AA-MAS)" (Elliot et al., 2008, p. 151) and conclude that, “It will take time and money to develop and implement new tests and will require substantial professional development to ensure that the appropriate students are selected and that sound testing practices are used” (Elliot et al., 2008, p. 151). There should be educated judgment and decision making evoked when determining the appropriate tests for individual students with significant cognitive disabilities, at the secondary level.
Georgia Alternate Assessment

Browder and Cooper-Duffy (2003) posited that although new research is emerging in how states choose to test students with significant cognitive disabilities, many questions remain regarding the best way to accomplish this requirement. The authors provided insight for educators on curriculum considerations, instructional strategies, and the use of evidence based practices to ensure that the needs of individual students are adequately assessed, focusing on two instructional supports: how skills are defined and how skills are taught.

Browder and Cooper-Duffy (2003) note, "The limited research on academic content instruction for this population creates a challenge for practitioners seeking examples from the literature" (p. 161). According to the authors, "In spite of NCLB's numerous references to evidence-based practices, the inclusion of students with significant cognitive disabilities in expectations for progress on states' academic content standards appears to be a values-based, rather than an evidence-based, policy" (Browder & Cooper-Duffy, 2003, p. 161). Since this 2003 article, this researcher posits that there is a continued need for research to ensure that effective measures are being utilized to assess students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Georgia has deemed the portfolio assessment as the best method by which to assess their students with significant cognitive disabilities. According to the Georgia Department of Education’s Testing Brief (2013), Georgia’s portfolio assessment allows students to showcase their work and progress they have made in skills aligned to the current state mandated content standards. There is not, however, a standard plan for
secondary teachers to follow for each high school student with a significant cognitive disability. Educators are allowed to choose from a list of approved standards and may choose differing standards amongst the students within the classroom, based on individual student ability level.

Having the autonomy to select the standards addressed with each student, in this manner, allows for every portfolio to become individualized. According to Hager and Slocum (2005), “Perhaps the most critical is negotiating a balance between standardization and individualization” (p. 25). While individualization is possible with the portfolio process, Georgia lacks standardization of its alternate assessment. Again, since educators are allowed to choose varying standards and methods by which they address those standards and report the information to the state, there are no standard procedures that are followed by all educators.

Once completed, portfolios are then submitted to a review board for scoring. Members of the testing review board work for an assessment company named Questar Assessment Inc. On its website, Questar (2016a) boasts, “Questar Assessment is a K–12 assessment solutions provider focused on providing a bridge between accountability and student learning” (About us, para 1). Questar services include both production of assessments, if needed, and the scoring of assessments, which is the service provided for Georgia. In an effort to determine who the review members were, a further, more extensive search into the Questar (2016b) website revealed that the qualifications for a test scorer/reader were as follows:

- BA/BS in field related to content area being scored
• Excellent written communication and reading comprehension skills
• Ability to use computer and other technology for basic scoring functions
• Ability to concentrate and focus on computers for long periods of time
• Flexibility and openness to correction
• Ability to work under pressure to meet deadlines
• High degree of diplomacy and discretion in working with confidential information.
• Ability to quickly adapt to new technology and easily acquire new technical skills (test scorer/reader, para 4)

The grading of the portfolios is subjective, depending heavily on the reader of the portfolio. There have been instances in which several students have completed the same tasks to address a particular chosen standard and when teachers receive their score reports, they found that some of the portfolios passed the review, while others failed. This is quite daunting for educators, considering all students were instructed in the same manner and provided with the same tasks for completion of their portfolios.

If a portfolio fails or does not score as highly as anticipated, teachers are not provided with feedback as to how their students can improve their scores. Instead, educators are left to "figure it out" on their own and try another approach to complete the portfolio again with the student. Any high school student who is pursuing a general education high school diploma, but failed to receive a proficient score on the GAA, is offered retest opportunities. Students are only required to retest on the content areas for which they did not meet the proficient scoring range. The Georgia Department of
Education (2015g) provided a *Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA) Questions and Answers for Parents of Georgia Students* pamphlet outlining several aspects of the GAA, one in which is the procedure for retesting. There are three testing windows offered each year. Students may retest in the content area(s) in which they did not receive a proficient score (i.e., received a proficiency level of Emerging Progress) on each content area. There is no specification provided as to how many times a student may be allowed to retest in a content area. Students may also opt out of the retest option if they are not seeking a general education diploma. In this instance, the student would be awarded a certificate of completion instead of the general education diploma.

The GAA also offers an appeal process for any assessment that fails. The researcher searched the GAA website for information on how the appeal process worked. She was unable to gather any information from the site. Further investigation into the county procedures led her to the county’s GAA testing supervisor who explained that in order to appeal a GAA portfolio failure, the principal has to request an appeal. The county’s testing department then reviews the appeal and submits a form to the Department of Education. From there, the appeal is then sent to Questar. The GAA county testing supervisor also informed the researcher that there is a $75.00 fee attached to each appeal that is requested.

Another research study of particular interest was performed by Johnson and Arnold (2004). The authors researched the validity of one state’s alternate assessment, which was also a portfolio assessment, like the assessment Georgia administers. The authors’ results concluded serious shortcomings in several areas and suggested, "Other
states with similarly designed systems should conduct similar analyses to highlight potential problems with their alternate assessments” (Johnson & Arnold, 2004, p. 274). Interpreting the importance of alternate assessments, Johnson and Arnold (2004) stated, "The critical element of standards-based reform is the notion that well-designed, high-quality assessments will be the impetus for improving instructional practices" (p. 274). If this is to be the case, all assessments, including alternate assessments must be well designed and valid in their measurement of student progress and growth.

**Participation in the Georgia Alternate Assessment**

The Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA) is an assessment created so that all students, even those with significant cognitive disabilities, can be included in accountability testing. Participation in the GAA is determined by a committee during the student’s annual Individual Education Plan (IEP) meeting. The IEP committee consists of educators who work with the student, a parent/guardian of the student, any outside personnel who work with the student (i.e. Speech Therapist, Occupational Therapist, etc.), and a Local Education Agency Representative (LEA).

When considering the educators that will attend the meeting, one educator should be a teacher of students in the general education setting. While meeting with the aforementioned IEP committee members, the student’s progress, strengths, weaknesses, accommodations, modifications, and the extent to which he/she can access the general education curriculum is discussed. If the IEP committee determined that the student was unable to participate in the general education assessments, even with the maximum
amount of accommodations and/or modifications, an alternate assessment may be deemed most appropriate

The decision to include a student in an alternate assessment is generally made at the elementary and middle school level. Under current state mandates, students with significant cognitive disabilities can receive a general education diploma, but one of the stipulations to that is that the student “participated in the GAA during middle school and high school and earned a proficient score on the high school GAA in Mathematics, English/Language Arts, Science and Social Studies” (Georgia Department of Education, 2011, para. 7). If a student participates in the general standardized assessments, in elementary and middle school, and is then transitioned to the GAA track in high school, that student is no longer eligible to receive a general education diploma. Therefore, it is pertinent that the assessment determination be made prior to entering high school. The following chart, Figure 1, has been issued by the Georgia Department of Education (2015) to aid educators in making an educated decision in a student’s eligibility for participation in the GAA.
GUIDELINES FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE GAA

Can the student show what he/she knows on a general assessment using accommodations?

YES

NO

Does the student have a disability that presents "unique and significant" challenges to participation in statewide assessments regardless of available accommodations?

YES

Does the student have significant intellectual disabilities or a combination of intellectual disabilities with motor, sensory, or emotional behavior disabilities?

YES

Does the student require substantial adaptations and support to access the general education curriculum?

YES

Does the student require instruction focused on application of state standards through relevant life skills?

YES

The student should participate in the Georgia Alternate Assessment.

NO

The student should participate in general state assessments with or without accommodations.

Figure 1. Flow chart guidelines to aid IEP team members in determining if a student should or should not participate in the Georgia Alternate Assessment. From Georgia Department of Education (2015d). Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA): Information and resources for 2014-2015. Reprinted with permission.
Summary

This chapter described the current research gap and presented a review of literature relevant to the assessment of high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. Professional literature related to critical disability theory, critical theory, social construction, deconstruction, disability research methods, federal regulations, disability and oppression, history of alternate assessment, the Georgia Alternate Assessment, and GAA participation guidelines was reviewed and summarized. The following chapter presents the study’s research methodology.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This study focused on secondary special education teachers’ perceptions of the Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA). Jacob and Furgerson (2012) state, “Researchers may use different techniques, but at the heart of qualitative research is the desire to expose the human part of the story” (p. 1). This study sought to examine teachers’ perceptions of testing and accountability in the context of Georgia’s secondary special education classrooms and to share the stories of six public high school teachers who work daily with students with significant cognitive disabilities. This chapter describes the study’s qualitative case study methodology design and processes.

Problem Statement

Students with significant cognitive disabilities are now included in school accountability reporting statewide. While accountability is important in education, the current testing requirements in Georgia for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities do not adequately consider the needs and limitations of this diverse population of students. Special education teachers should be afforded the opportunity to advocate for students in order to ensure that appropriate measures are utilized to assess the ability level and progress of students being tested.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine six secondary teachers’ perceptions of the Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA) as a measure of student progress and growth
for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities and to explore factors that these teachers consider appropriate for assessing this population of students. Grounded in critical disability theory, this study also sought to share the voices of teachers who serve students that have traditionally been marginalized and to advocate for appropriate assessment practices for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities.

**Research Questions**

This study was guided by the following research questions: 1) How do secondary special education teachers perceive the Georgia Alternate Assessment as a measure of student progress and growth for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities? 2) What factors do teachers believe are appropriate for assessing high school students with significant cognitive disabilities?

**Qualitative Case Study Rationale**

Creswell and Miller (2000) explain, “The qualitative paradigm assumes that reality is socially constructed and it is what participants perceive it to be” (p. 125); therefore, “Those who employ this lens seek to actively involve participants in assessing whether the interpretations accurately represent them” (p. 125). In order to accurately represent the perceptions of secondary teachers who are required to administer the Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA), this researcher employed a qualitative case study methodology. According to Starman (2013), a large portion of studies published in educational research journals are conducted through qualitative case study and while “Case studies were one of the first types of research to be used in the field of qualitative research” (p. 29), multiple definitions of case study exist today. Baxter and Jack (2008)
define qualitative case study as “An approach to research that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its contexts using a variety of data sources” (p. 544). Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain that “The case study builds on a reader’s tactic knowledge, presenting a holistic and lifelike description that is like those that the readers normally encounter in their experiencing of the world…” (p. 359). According to Stake (1995), the primary use for case studies is to “Obtain the descriptions and interpretations of others” (p. 64). Yin (2004) states that qualitative case studies allow researchers to “Examine, in-depth, a ‘case’ within its ‘real-life’ context” (p. 1).

This study focused on secondary teachers’ perceptions of the Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA). As a special education teacher and advocate, this researcher was innately interested in the research topic. According to Stake (1995), “Intrinsic case study designs draw the researcher toward understanding of what is important about the case within its own world…” (p. 242). Consequently, a qualitative case study methodology allowed the researcher to gain further knowledge concerning the administration of the GAA to high school students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Setting

This study was conducted in a public school district in middle Georgia. The district serves 30,510 students in 39 schools; there are eight high schools, eight middle schools, and 23 elementary schools. 58% of students in this district are eligible for free or reduced meals, and 11.4% of these students have disabilities. Four percent of students in this district have limited English proficiency. District student demographics for race/ethnicity are: 3% Asian; 37% Black; 8% Hispanic; 47% White; 0% Native
Participants

Purposeful selection was applied to identify secondary special education teachers as participants for this research study. According to Creswell (2014), “The idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants (or documents or visual material) that will best help the researcher understand the problem and research question” (p. 189). For the purpose of this research study, in order to be considered an eligible participant, the researcher developed a protocol for participant selection. Participants were required to work in the school system in which the research study was focused. Participants had to have experience as a special education teacher at the high school level and participants had to have experience administering the GAA to high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. Once the protocol was established, teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities were identified in a middle Georgia public school district that encompassed six high schools. The researcher was employed by this school district from which the participants were selected; consequently, convenience sampling was also employed in this study. Convenience sampling is the process of eliciting participation from those who are easily accessible and available to participate in a research study (McMillan, 1996). Six secondary special education teachers with experience administering the GAA agreed to participate in this study.

Once IRB approval was granted (see Appendix A), the researcher solicited approval from each participating high school by first emailing the principal of each
school and requesting a meeting to discuss the study. After meeting with each principal and gaining written permission, the researcher presented the signed approval forms, along with other required documentation, to the county’s school board for approval from the Office of Professional Learning. Once the county approved the research request, the researcher sent a recruitment email (see Appendix B) to the secondary teachers within the school system who had administered the GAA to secondary students with significant cognitive disabilities. The email explained the purpose of this study and asked for teacher volunteers to participate in interviews with the researcher. The researcher accepted the first six qualifying teachers who agreed to volunteer for the study. The number of participants was intentionally limited to allow for in-depth interviews. As Adler and Adler (2012) explain in the National Centre for Research Methods Review Paper, “Qualitative researchers generally study many fewer people, but delve more deeply into those individuals, settings, subcultures, and scenes, hoping to generate a subjective understanding of how and why people perceive, reflect, role-take, interpret, and interact” (p. 9). Before the interviews, each participant reviewed and signed an informed consent form (see Appendix C). Pseudonyms were assigned in this study to protect the identity and privacy of participants. Six female secondary special education teachers volunteered to participate in this study. There were no male special education teacher volunteers. All six of the female participants worked in the same middle Georgia school district, but each worked at a different high school within the county and had experience administering the GAA to high school students. Participants’ years of experience administering the GAA ranged from nine to 12 years.
Data Collection

Rabionet (2011) states, “There is no doubt that qualitative interviewing is a flexible and powerful tool to capture the voices and the ways people make meaning of their experiences” (p. 563). This study focused on the perceptions of secondary special education teachers; therefore, individual interviews were used to collect data directly from each participant in order to gain a deep understanding of each teacher’s personal perceptions. As Stake (1995) explains, “The interview is the main road to multiple realities” (p. 64). It is important that researchers are skilled at conducting interviews so that participants are comfortable and research questions can be adequately addressed. Jacob and Furgerson (2012) assert, “Honing interview skills helps us nurture people through the storytelling process” (p. 1). They offer several suggestions for conducting successful interviews, including writing an interview protocol, using a script when conducting interviews, using open-ended interview questions, and that practicing the interview protocol with a friend or colleague before conducting interviews with study participants (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). In this study, a semi-structured interview protocol was used with all six participants (see Appendix D), and practicing beforehand with a colleague gave this researcher the opportunity to ensure that the interview questions were clear and understandable. The researcher followed Rabionet’s (2011) six-step process for designing and conducting interviews: 1) determine if the interview should be structured or semi-structured; 2) identify ethical guidelines; 3) create an interview protocol; 4) conduct the interview; 5) summarize the interview; and 6) report
the findings. In this case, a semi-structured interview protocol was used to ensure that all participants addressed the same questions while also providing flexibility for each participant to contribute additional information, thereby providing them with a sense of autonomy during the interview process.

The goal of this semi-structured interview process was to guide the participants with specific questions, but also allow them the opportunity to add information and to elaborate upon or clarify any comments. As a former administer of the GAA, this researcher considered some of the strengths and obstacles she herself endured with the GAA administration. Those situations, coupled with the researcher’s intrinsic interest in learning more about secondary special education teachers’ perceptions of the GAA, served as the foundation for designing the interview protocol. The interview protocol (see Appendix D) was designed so that multiple teachers’ perceptions could be collected, organized, analyzed, and then shared within the findings of this research study.

Data Analysis

Interview sessions were audio recorded and then transcribed by the researcher. Once transcriptions were completed, constant comparison analysis was used to analyze the data. Constant comparison analysis, also known as coding, is recommended “when a researcher is interested in utilizing an entire dataset to identify underlying themes presented through the data” (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007, p. 565). While hand coding data can be time consuming, the researcher found it to be the most appropriate approach for this research study, as hand coding provided the opportunity to engage deeply with the collected data. During this analysis, the researcher transcribed and reviewed the data
for reoccurring words or phrases to create categories called chunks (Creswell, 2014; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Once chunks were created, they were reexamined to determine if the chunks could be combined into fewer groups, which were then used as codes. After all of the interview transcriptions were coded, emergent themes were identified to group similar codes (Creswell, 2014; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Finally, themes were analyzed to interpret meaning through the lens of the study’s theoretical framework. The researcher then created a qualitative case study report to portray findings of the research data. Details of data analysis are reported in Chapter Four.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

When working to ensure trustworthiness in qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that researchers should consider “How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the finding of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of?” (p. 290). In an effort to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness (Creswell, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004) of this study, the researcher employed triangulation, background knowledge, member checking, and thick description. Triangulation, the collection of multiple forms of data, is used in qualitative research to increase the validity in research findings and reporting (Creswell, 2014). This researcher used multiple sources of data by interviewing six different participants from six different high schools within the county. By conducting interviews with a range of participants, “Individual viewpoints and experiences can be verified against others…” (Shenton, 2004, p. 66). The inclusion of diverse points of view from multiple participants who worked at different schools aided in the construction of credible
research findings concerning the use of the Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA) for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. As a teacher of students with special needs, this researcher has background knowledge of special education and experience administering the GAA, making her a credible data collector for this study. During interviews, the researcher utilized member checking to ensure that all research participants were in agreement with the findings that were reported. The researcher used “on the spot” (Shenton, 2004, p. 68) member checking to clarify meaning and verify participants’ intentions with statements made throughout the interview process. The researcher and interviewees discussed inferences made by the researcher throughout the interview dialogue (Shenton, 2004). The researcher also incorporated thick description in the reporting of her research findings. According to Shenton (2004), “Detailed description in this area can be an important provision for promoting credibility as it helps to convey the actual situations that have been investigated and, to an extent, the contexts that surround them” (p. 69). In an effort to provide a thick description to the readers, the researcher provided details of the GAA and its administration in the state of Georgia, detailed profiles of participating teachers, and background information regarding laws that influenced the implementation of the GAA.

The researcher also provided the reader with direct quotes from interview sessions. By implementing open-ended questions in the semi-structured interviews, participants were afforded the ability to speak openly and freely about their perceptions of the GAA; providing a thick description of their perceptions. Through the use of recorded and transcribed semi-structured interviews with special education teachers who
work daily with high school students with significant cognitive disabilities, and who administer the GAA to their students, the researcher was able to establish trustworthiness in the research findings as she examined and reported direct accounts from teachers involved in the GAA process. The researcher was able to describe, accurately and in detail, the interview sessions with each participant through transcription of the recorded interview sessions.

**Dependability**

Audio recording of the interview sessions allowed this researcher was able to describe, in detail, the interview sessions with each participant and transcribe each interview. Shenton (2004) noted that in order to increase dependability within a study, “…the process within the study should be reported in detail, thereby enabling a future researcher to repeat the work, if not necessarily to gain the same results” (p. 71). Through the utilization of audio recording during the interview sessions, this researcher was able to ensure that direct comments were captured, ensuring that dependable research results were reported.

**Limitations**

The researcher was aware of the following limitations in this study:

1. The study was limited to the data collected in one middle Georgia school system. However, this qualitative study sought to examine the perceptions of six specific teachers who participated in this study, and the researcher did not attempt to generalize findings to a larger population. This study was limited to one specific case that was studied in depth.
2. The researcher conducting this study has administered the GAA in previous years; therefore a bias may have been present at the onset of the research. In an effort to reduce potential bias, this study included six participants from different high schools to ensure that multiple perspectives were included.

3. Although rapport was established and confidentiality was ensured, teachers who participated in this study may not have shared all of their personal perceptions of the GAA.

4. The study was limited to the perceptions of female educators as there were no male teacher participants to volunteer for the study.

Delimitations

The following delimitations were included in this study:

1. The number of participants in this study was limited through the use of both purposeful and convenience sampling of secondary special educators from the school district in which the researcher is an employee.

2. The researcher chose a qualitative case study methodology to include semi-structured interview sessions in order to gather information from multiple teachers from six different high schools within one school district in middle Georgia.

3. The researcher purposefully aligned with critical disability theorists in order to examine the GAA through a critical theory lens in an effort to understand how it affects a marginalized population of high school students with significant cognitive disabilities as well as the teachers who are required by the state to assess the academic progress of these students.
Assumptions

This study was conducted with the following assumptions:

1. The teachers who participated in this study were aware of the guidelines and requirements for administering the GAA to high school students in Georgia.
2. The teacher participants were honest when describing their experience administering the GAA and their perceptions of the assessment of high school students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Summary

Chapter Three described the methodology used to conduct this qualitative case study and included descriptions of the study’s purpose, problem statement, research questions, setting, participants, processes used for data collection and analysis, strategies for ensuring trustworthiness, credibility, and dependability, and the study’s limitations, delimitations, and assumptions. This qualitative case study was conducted in a middle Georgia public school district. Participants included six secondary special education teachers from six different high schools within the district. To ensure trustworthiness, credibility, and dependability, the researcher used background knowledge, triangulation, member checking, and thick description. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with each participant. Interviews were audio recorded with participant permission, then transcribed by the researcher. The interview transcriptions were then analyzed using constant comparison coding, with codes grouped into major themes that were then interpreted based on the study’s theoretical framework. Rich description of data analysis and findings are included in the following chapter.
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS OF DATA ANALYSIS

Under the mandates of the Race to the Top (2009) and No Child Left Behind Act (2001), accountability measures for students with significant cognitive disabilities are currently required. The state of Georgia adopted a portfolio process called the Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA) as a means to measure student progress and growth. Students in Georgia with significant cognitive disabilities are required to participate in the GAA in lieu of the general education state standardized tests in third through eighth grades and in the eleventh grade. Special education teachers are required to develop a detailed portfolio for each student in order to display student progress in the four major content areas of math, science, language arts, and social studies. Students with significant cognitive disabilities are now included in school accountability reporting statewide. Current testing requirements in Georgia for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities do not adequately consider the needs and limitations of this diverse population of students. Special education teachers should be afforded the opportunity to advocate for students in order to ensure that appropriate measures are utilized to assess the ability level and progress of students being tested.

The purpose of this study was to examine six secondary teachers’ perceptions of the GAA as a measure of student progress and growth for high school students with
significant cognitive disabilities and to explore factors that these teachers consider appropriate for assessing this population of students. Grounded in critical disability theory, this study also sought to share the voices of teachers who serve students that have traditionally been marginalized and to advocate for appropriate assessment practices for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities.

This study addressed the following research questions: 1) How do secondary special education teachers perceive the Georgia Alternate Assessment as a measure of student progress and growth for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities? 2) What factors do teachers believe are appropriate for assessing high school students with significant cognitive disabilities?

The researcher employed a qualitative case study methodology (Stake, 1995) to address the study’s research questions. The researcher used background knowledge, triangulation, member checking, and thick description to ensure trustworthiness, credibility, and dependability. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with each participant. Interviews were audio recorded with participant permission, and then transcribed by the researcher. Transcripts were analyzed using constant comparison coding. Codes were grouped into major themes that were then interpreted through the lens of critical disability theory.

Results of the data analysis are presented in this chapter. Participant profiles are presented first, followed by an overview of the interview protocol and procedures. Next, the analysis of interview data is presented, including excerpts to provide thick description. Finally, major themes are presented and described.
Participant Profiles

Six female secondary special education high school teachers volunteered as participants in this study. All of the study participants worked in the same middle Georgia school district, but each worked at a different high school within the county. Each participant had experience administering the GAA to high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. Participants’ years of experience with the GAA ranged from nine to 12 years. Of the six participants, four of them have taught in the current school system for the entirety of their careers. One teacher taught in a neighboring county before transferring to her current system and another teacher taught in the private school sector prior to transferring to public education. All six participants confirmed that they have only administered the GAA while in their current school system. Five of the six participants will be administering the GAA during the 2016 – 2017 school year. The sixth teacher transferred to a position at the county’s new transition academy for students with special needs, and will no longer be required to administer the GAA. The participants in this research appeared to be passionate about sharing their perceptions of the GAA. Four of the six teachers even requested that their identities be revealed in the write up of the research findings; however, pseudonyms were still employed to protect the identity of the school system. Each participant is introduced below.

Ms. Martin has been a special education teacher for nine years and this is her fifth year administering the GAA. She works as a self-contained severe and profound (SID-PID) teacher at one of the district’s local high schools. Her classroom contained five students; four were permanent students who attended class daily and one was served
through the Hospital Homebound method (HHB). When asked about what influenced her to work with this population of students, Ms. Martin replied, “It was a desire to teach at an elementary level. I was just drawn to this. I didn’t choose it, it chose me.”

Ms. Smith has been teaching for 12 years in the special education field. She administered the GAA for the past six years. She worked as a self-contained Moderate Intellectual Disabilities (MOID) teacher at a local high school. Her classroom included seven students with MOID. When describing her career path, Ms. Smith shared,

I always wanted to be a special education teacher, but when I started working, I just really felt drawn to work with those students who had significant issues…. to help them meet their goals. I just enjoyed being around them.

Ms. Torres has been a special education teacher for ten years and has administered the GAA for nine years. She worked in the Mild Intellectual Disability (MID) program at a high school within the county. As there were currently two MID classrooms at her school, she and another teacher split the students; they each had eight students on their caseloads for a total of 16 students. Five of these students will have to complete the GAA for the 2016 – 2017 school year. When asked what influenced her to work with this population of students, Ms. Torres explained that she had wanted to make a change, to “Make a difference, you know. My original degree is in psychology… when the opportunity came up to work with special needs, it felt like that would be rewarding, and it has been…it has been.”

Ms. Bell has been teaching students with special needs for 11 years. She began her career as a resource teacher, but moved over to the lower functioning students after
three years. She has been teaching students with more significant disabilities for the past eight years and has administered the GAA for eight years at the high school level. When asked about what influenced her to work with this population of students, Ms. Bell said, 

I like that better because it’s teaching them life skills, more that’s going to help them in the community to get a job and stuff like that...because that to me that is the ultimate goal, helping them be successful in the community.

Ms. Garrett has taught students with disabilities for 11 years and has administered the GAA for ten years. She recently transferred high schools within the county, moving from teaching students with Mild Intellectual Disability (MID) to teaching students with Moderate Intellectual Disabilities (MOID). She has experience administering the GAA to both populations of students at the high school level. When asked to describe her motivation for working with special needs students, Ms. Garrett said,

I think being a mom… gave me the confidence to be able to nurture these kinds of students. What I really wanted to instill in them was the confidence… I feel like the population that I teach, kind of gets, they fall through the cracks. And I feel like if there weren’t teachers like me and others that do it and do it for the right reasons, and actually teach them how to live life, they would be in the streets, and… they won’t have guidance or direction.

Ms. Peavey has been teaching for 19 years and has administered the GAA for eight years to students with Moderate Intellectual Disabilities (MOID). She recently transferred to the transition academy within the county and will not be administering the GAA for the current 2016 – 2017 school year, but her perspective was valuable for this
study considering her years of experience with GAA administration in the past. When asked to describe her career journey, Ms. Peavey replied,

I started teaching SID-PID and did that for five years and then rolled into Moderate and stayed there for like 13 years… and then went to the transition academy with moderate students. That was just what I had always wanted to do.

Table 1 provides a summary of the teacher participants’ professional experience.

Table 1

Summary of Participants’ Teaching Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Current Role</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Martin</td>
<td>9 years teaching special ed; 5 years of GAA administration</td>
<td>Self-contained severe and profound (SID-PID) high school teacher</td>
<td>5 total: 4 attended class daily; 1 served through Hospital Homebound method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Smith</td>
<td>12 years teaching special ed; 6 years of GAA administration</td>
<td>Self-contained Moderate Intellectual Disabilities (MOID) high school teacher</td>
<td>7 students with MOID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Torres</td>
<td>10 years teaching special ed; 9 years of GAA administration</td>
<td>Mild Intellectual Disability (MID) program high school teacher</td>
<td>8 students on her caseload</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Bell</td>
<td>11 years teaching special ed; 8 years of GAA administration</td>
<td>Works with lower functioning high school students with more significant disabilities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Garrett</td>
<td>11 years teaching special ed; 10 years of GAA administration</td>
<td>Recently transferred high schools within the county; moved from MID to MOID</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Peavey</td>
<td>19 years teaching special ed; 8 years of GAA administration</td>
<td>Recently transferred to the transition academy high school within the county</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interview Protocol and Procedures

The researcher interviewed each teacher individually using a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix D). The interviews were conducted in a small meeting room reserved by the researcher at the local public library, after school hours or on weekends. Meeting in the public library, away from the school setting, allowed the interviewee to speak openly with the researcher. Each interview session was scheduled for approximately 30 minutes. Three of the six interview sessions extended beyond the 30-minute timeframe to allow participants time to include additional insight or to elaborate on their responses.

On the spot member checking was used during the interview process to ensure understanding on the part of the researcher. The researcher chose to incorporate on the spot member checking to ensure that upon transcription of the data, she had a firm understanding of the participant responses. She did not want to report false data or make incorrect implications about the responses. Member checking the data on the spot assisted in ensuring that the reported findings were trustworthy, credible, and dependable. On the spot member checking was employed throughout each of the six interviews by asking questions to confirm responses made by participants. Questions were asked such as; “Is this what you meant?” followed by the researcher repeating her understanding of the response. Another on the spot member checking tactic was, “Let me make sure I understand” again followed by the researcher reiterating her understanding of the participant comment. The researcher also utilized on the spot member checking by asking them to stop and repeat phrases if she could not hear them or did not completely
understand what was said by the participant. Throughout the transcription of data, the researcher confirmed that on the spot member checking was implemented throughout the entirety of each of the six interview sessions. Each interview was audio recorded, with permission of the participant, and then the researcher transcribed and hand-coded each interview.

The first questions on the interview protocol were included to establish rapport, give participants time to feel comfortable, and to collect information about each participant’s years of experience teaching special education and administering the GAA. The questions included to establish rapport were: 1. “What is your name?” 2. “How many years of secondary special education teaching experience do you have?” 3. “How many years have you administered the GAA at the high school level?” Once rapport was established, four open-ended questions were used to encourage authentic responses from participants. The four questions asked of each of the six research participants were: 1. “What do you like about the GAA test administration?” 2. “What do you dislike about the GAA test administration?” 3. “Do you feel that the GAA is an adequate portrayal of your student’s progress and/or growth at the high school level? Why or why not?” 4. “Do you think the GAA is the best method for testing this population of students? Why or why not?”. By conducting interviews with teachers who are responsible for administering the GAA to high school students with significant cognitive disabilities, from various school settings, the researcher gained insight into a collective awareness of secondary special education teachers’ perceptions of the GAA. Stake (1995) asserted that a main purpose of qualitative research interviews “Is not to get simple yes and no
answers but description of an episode, a linkage, and explanation” (p. 65). This researcher was able to ensure interview questions met this purpose by having a specified list of four open ended questions, but by also allowing the respondents to elaborate further on their answers utilizing a semi-structured interview approach. The researcher was then able to both “contextualize and theorize” (Miles, 2015, p. 312) the administration and the effectiveness of the GAA as it is currently used in Georgia.

Analysis of Interview Data

In order to provide thick description (Stake, 1995) of the interview data, direct excerpts from each participant interview are shared below. Selected responses to four questions from the interview protocol are included to provide the reader with a sense of participants’ perceptions of the GAA based on their experience administering it to high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. In determining appropriate questions to ask the research participants, the researcher considered her personal experience with the GAA, unanswered questions that she had about the GAA, and her curiosities about the assessment approach. This evaluation led the researcher to compose the four questions utilized in this study to ensure that teacher perceptions could be fully disseminated by allowing them to speak freely and openly about their personal perceptions of the GAA and its administration to students with significant cognitive disabilities. The following four questions were included in the semi-structured interview protocol and posed to each participant.

First, each participant was asked, “What do you like about the GAA test administration?” Ms. Martin identified a few positive aspects and stated, “I do like that it
is subjective. We’re allowed to be free with how we administer, because it is a portfolio. I do like that, most things, we can take down to a pre-requisite level. You can say that I like that it takes months to do it. It’s not having to all be done in one day or one week.” Ms. Smith, though, did not like any aspect of the GAA. She explained, “I know this is sad, but I can’t think of one thing I like about it… maybe if I felt like it was more appropriate for my students, then I could think of some things…but I don’t think it’s appropriate.” Ms. Torres reported that she liked nothing about the GAA. Ms. Bell concurred, stating, “I do not like it at all.” Ms. Garret said, “I like that it holds teachers accountable for actually doing something… I think that ID [Intellectual Disabilities] teachers do need to be held accountable for what they’re doing, but I’m not sure I like anything else about it.” Ms. Peavey stated that she liked “absolutely nothing” about the GAA.

Next, each participant was asked, “What do you dislike about the GAA test administration?” Ms. Martin replied, “I dislike that it is graded subjectively, by people that are not educators and have never dealt with our population. I really dislike that.” Ms. Smith explained, “Well, I feel like it is more of an assessment for the teacher than the students. I feel that if my students who had a 45 IQ could do that work then they wouldn’t be in my class.” Ms. Torres said, “It’s not a measure of the students, of what they know or what they need to know. It’s not functional. It takes up way too much time, teaching them that, when you need to be teaching them other things, just to be able to survive. It’s measuring the teacher; it’s not measuring the students.” Ms. Bell expressed concern about the assessment, stating,
I don’t feel that it is adequately testing what the kids know… It’s not what we teach them on a regular basis. When the kids pass or fail the GAA, is it mainly because of teacher error. Like, if I didn’t number a page, or… if something wasn’t labeled right, it wasn’t a matter of if they progressed from not knowing the material to now knowing it.

Ms. Garret expressed concern for students and explained,

For MO and SID-PID it’s ridiculous…most students that I know of, their IQ is 50 or below. The standards that they pick for us do not relate in a real world for MO kids or below. And to put Regular Ed, grade level standards for our kids…it’s sort of like setting them up for failure.

Ms. Peavey expressed concern for the stress placed on students, and shared,

I’ve seen kids cry just looking at it because it has to look like an eleventh grade test. The vocabulary looks like eleventh grade test and you’re talking about a child that’s reading at best on a first grade level… it scares them to death. They just can’t do it. They cannot do it. It is just….it is just all a farce. It’s just a farce.

Next, each participant was asked “Do you feel that the GAA is an adequate portrayal of your student’s progress and/or growth at the high school level? Why or why not?” Ms. Martin responded,

No, I do not, because, my students’ cognitive functioning level is six months to two years old. They have no comprehension of even the alphabet. It is very unfair, for lack of a better word, to grade them on a curriculum they don’t understand regardless of how well I explain it… they don’t have an understanding of it… and
they can’t adapt it for use in the real world. It’s not going to be a real life experience for them.

Ms. Smith asserted,

No! I feel like it…it’s not truthful, because they’re assessed on standards that they can’t do independently, so it’s not a truthful measure of the student. They can only do it with help… I tried to do it where it was more on their level so they might could do answering questions about a piece of literature but those GAAs didn’t pass because it wasn’t on the right level.

Ms. Torres said, “No. Because it’s measuring the teacher and you’re picking a standard that is not necessarily what we focus on…we look at their needs, you know, for the IEP… and it’s not associated with the IEP.” Ms. Bell did not feel that the GAA is an adequate measure of students’ progress. Ms. Garret shared,

The workload that it puts on a teacher, to me, is more detrimental to the kids’ education than if you just didn’t assess them at all. I feel like the kids could make more progress, you know, not having a stressed out teacher… I can’t tell you how many hours goes into putting together a portfolio.

Ms. Peavey emphasized,

No, absolutely not! It is not an accurate portrayal of any high school ID child. It just simply is not… a moderate child, say with a IQ of 40, 40-45, they can’t make a peanut butter jelly sandwich. And the truth is, that teacher hasn’t had any time to work on that.
Finally, each participant was asked, “Do you think the GAA is the best method for testing this population of students? Why or why not?” Ms. Martin explained,

There is not another way to test. I don’t think that testing is necessary for the SID-PID population. It may work better for Moderate or Mild students who have an understanding and do some comprehension, but at our level, it’s really pointless to me. I would really like for the state to dissolve the requirements of the GAA for our students in the high school.

Ms. Smith felt that it would be more appropriate to focus on IEP goals, and said, “I know that they have to be assessed, but I feel like if we spent more time writing better IEP goals, more IEP goals that were appropriate for the student, because they’re not all alike.” Ms. Torres offered a suggestion, “I understand that we need to test, you know- to see growth… I kind of like the End of Course (EOC) test better. It needs to be geared towards that level of student and not the Regular Ed class.” Ms. Bell said,

No, it is definitely not the best method… I’m not sure what they can use, but I think they need to do away with the GAA… I don’t think it really demonstrates what the students can do. It’s just a waste and a stressful time period for the teachers and students as well… I really don’t think they need to be assessed. I think our goal is to try to make them productive citizens and being able to know their basic information.

Ms. Garret added,

I feel like we’re wasting teachers’ time and the kids’ time doing this. I just don’t think testing is necessary for these students…especially grade level testing.” Ms.
Peavey explained, “I think that’s just unrealistic. You’re asking an ID student… to meet and master all their annual goals and short term objectives on their IEP which generally speaking deal with daily living skills and survival skills… life skills and functional academics of money and time… so you’re actually putting more on an ID student than you are a Gen Ed student… and that’s just impossible.

Data collected from these questions were coded and included in the thematic analysis, along with additional data ascertained throughout the semi-structured interview process. One area of concern brought up by the six teacher participants were teacher errors that cause student portfolio failures. Ms. Torres stated,

Then like a teacher forgetting to mark a box- how dumb is that? You know- no matter what the kid did- it’s about the kid- that’s why it’s the teacher being tested. If you follow directions- because if you cannot be scored because a teacher didn’t mark something on her paperwork…. It’s not student focused, it’s teacher focused.

Further elaboration on the teacher focused errors, Ms. Bell noted,

And the teacher is more cautious of okay- let me label this right- let me make sure my dates are this amount of time period- you know- or time frame apart- um- so I think it is more stress on the teacher as well just making sure that everything is documented correctly and it seems like that’s where- even when we had our supervisors come in to check it or whatever- that’s where- they didn’t look at the I don’t that much at the content of what we’re doing. It was like did it show this? Or did it show that? Or did it uh- did you have your page numbers numbered?
Did you have the dates on there? Were they- so I mean- so the technical information of it is what they looked at more so than any other standardized test that regular ed students take. They put their name on the top, they bubble in their social and all that information and that’s it- they take the test, but it’s not like that with the GAA.

Three other teacher participants also shared in Ms. Torres’ and Ms. Bell’s frustration of the GAA being teacher focused. Ms. Martin stated, “I just really feel like they are grading me and not my students”. Ms. Garrett and Ms. Peavey also had similar concerns and stated that the GAA was a very stressful and time-consuming process for the teacher.

All six of the teacher participants also expressed frustration with the expectations of the GAA when teachers were not focusing on the content necessary for successful integration into society upon graduation. A true reality of the disservice we are invoking on these students was explained by Ms. Garrett. She noted,

I mean, we still have them young and almost leaving high school and still not knowing their address but we’re focusing on a standard of, you know, one particular standard that we’ve picked out of you know, a list of standards to try to teach them, but they’re leaving not knowing their phone number or address, or not being able to fill out a job application.

The six participants all concurred that they wanted to see the GAA dissolved or changed to more effectively meet the needs of their students, but at the time of the interview sessions, none of the six participants foresaw a change in the current
procedures any time soon. Ms. Martin conveyed to the researcher her thoughts on why there would be no change in the GAA policy and procedures.

Parents of the higher functioning students wanted their students to have access so that they could have, so that they could be given a regular ed diploma now, we used to have a functional curriculum and now we don’t. We have access curriculum. It’s not called access anymore, but it’s not…for the SID PID population, it’s pointless. I really don’t think it’s necessary.

Data collected from the four interview protocol questions, as well as the addition information above, provided by the research participants, were coded and included in the thematic analysis.

Major Themes

Once transcription of the interview sessions was completed for each interview participant and the data collectively analyzed, themes were created based upon reoccurring evidence present in the research findings. Transcripts were analyzed using constant comparison coding, with codes grouped into major categories that were then interpreted thematically. The researcher evoked constant comparison coding while analyzing data by looking for reoccurring words or phrases found within each of the six interview transcriptions. These words and/or phrases were then disseminated into chunks or groups of similar categories. Review and analysis of the categories that evolved led the researcher to the production of the five major themes found within this research study. From the review and analysis of the categories that evolved, five major themes emerged:
1. Loss of Instructional Time

2. Inappropriate Instructional Content

3. Subjective Scoring and Teacher Error

4. Importance of IEP Goals

5. Assessment Practices

Descriptions of each theme are presented below.

Loss of Instructional Time

All six participants stated that they felt time teaching students with significant cognitive disabilities would be better spent focusing on daily living and functional skills instead of administering the GAA. A common trend among the interviews was that the teachers wanted more time to focus on actual IEP goals for this population of students. Repeatedly, all six teachers expressed concern that they do not have the time to teach their students the daily living and functional skills required to become independent members of society. The goal of the six participants was/is to produce students who are capable of becoming fully functioning, independent citizens within the community. By not having the time they need to focus on the functional need of the students, these teachers felt that they were unable to provide their students with the genuine experiences they so desperately require. As Munger and Munger (2011) asserted in their research, the lack of success among the population of students with disabilities is created “…from lack of opportunities to participate as equal and integral members of their communities” (p. 23). Educators of students with significant cognitive disabilities must have the time to provide community exposure and integration practices with their students. With so much
emphasis placed on the GAA at the high school level, these teachers are losing this valuable time with their students.

Ms. Peavey shared several stories of students who have been in the high school setting for four to six years and now attend the local transition academy. She stated that on more than one occasion, she has had students come to the transition academy lacking some of the daily living skills necessary to independently survive within their communities, stating, “You give them a chicken biscuit from the cafeteria, wrapped in foil… in my class, three out of five put it in the microwave in foil.” Ms. Peavey also discussed the amount of time required for teachers to assemble the GAA portfolios:

I mean I used to sit and log it to think about how many hours am I actually spending… making copies, finding the materials… coming up with the ideas, typing the assessments, giving the assessments, not teaching between 1st collection and 2nd collection, just getting the junk ready, and then assembling the portfolio. That’s 100 hours per portfolio. To waste teachers’ time that much! Think about middle school teachers, they’ve got 10 kids in their class… they’re spending 1,000 hours assembling portfolios. I mean how do we do all that and teach because the point is, we’re supposed to teach. You know, we’re here to teach. Students are here to learn. We missed the ball… because teachers aren’t doing a great job of teaching… they’re too busy shuffling papers and kids aren’t doing a great job of learning because we’re not doing the teaching.

Ms. Martin, along with the other educators interviewed, suggested that too much time was spent on the GAA and that takes away time that teachers could be working on
the functional and daily living skills that so many students with disabilities lack. Ms. Smith felt that time would be best spent working with her students on the functional and daily living skills versus grade level content and standards. Based on interview findings and her own experience teaching special education, this researcher believes that if teachers had more time to work on functional skills, students would be better equipped for life after high school. Previously mentioned, but it stands apparent in this context, Derrida’s (1968) eloquent assertion, “Let us stop being pressured into continuing and expanding a special education program that we know now to be undesirable for many of the children we are dedicated to serve” (p. 5).

Inappropriate Instructional Content

We have already confirmed that students with disabilities are all different and have different needs so it is impossible to develop a “‘one-size-fits-all’ model” (Watson, 2012, p. 195) assessment. Teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities are responsible for teaching their students daily living skills and functional skills so that they can live independently in society upon graduation from high school. With the implementation of the GAA, these teachers have had to redirect their teaching focus to also include grade level content and standards for students in their programs. These teachers expressed concern with this new trend in teaching students with significant cognitive disabilities. While they felt that their students should be afforded the opportunity for exposure to the standards, they felt that how that was done should be individualized and student-specific to adequately portray what exactly each individual student is capable of doing. Ms. Smith explained, “For some of my students, they don’t
even know their numbers. I don’t feel like it’s appropriate to ask them to solve for the volume of a cylinder if they have no sense of number value.” Ms. Torres said,

I shouldn’t be teaching my kids the circumference of a cylinder, a Coca-Cola bottle, a Pringle’s can… I mean they need to be doing like area…to figure out how to buy paint at Lowes or area to be able to purchase carpet, and that’s not one of the standards… it just needs to be more functional.

The teachers agreed that their students should be exposed to academic content, but that the exposure level should vary based upon the student’s individual needs. Elaborating on the frustration felt among these teachers and students, Ms. Garrett stated,

You have to have real world examples and… somewhat teach them in this environment… but realistically, they will never be exposed to that. They will never have a need to be exposed to that. My kids, they’re interested in it, but… these kids are in the ID department for a reason and it’s because they can’t keep up with their Regular Ed peers.

Ms. Garrett felt as though the GAA was also a teacher measurement more so than a student measurement, and elaborated, “The GAA isn’t going to matter for this kid’s life. You know, it’s not a quality of life issue for them, it’s a hoop they have to jump through at school.”

Through the GAA, students are being expected to perform in a situation for which they are uncomfortable. Students with significant cognitive disabilities are in the programs that they are in because they are behind their same aged peers cognitively,
socially, and academically. Consequently, these students often become very stressed and the stress they experience may hinder their academic growth rather than increase it.

These teachers all strive to incorporate grade level content and standard within their classroom, but they do not believe that this type of instruction is beneficial for their students nor is it informative of their student’s progress and growth based on the student’s actual ability levels and needs.

Subjective Scoring and Teacher Error

Consistently, among all six interview participants, the perception of subjective grading on the GAA was mentioned. All research participants expressed a dislike for the grading process for the GAA portfolios, with a main concern being that the GAA scorers are not educators of students with significant cognitive disabilities. This contention was confirmed upon research of the GAA scorer qualifications for on the Questar (2016b) website. The qualifications included:

1. BA/BS in field related to content area being scored
2. Excellent written communication and reading comprehension skills
3. Ability to use computer and other technology for basic scoring functions
4. Ability to concentrate and focus on computers for long periods of time,
5. Flexibility and openness to correction
6. Ability to work under pressure to meet deadlines
7. High degree of diplomacy and discretion in working with confidential information
8. Ability to quickly adapt to new technology and easily acquire new technical skills (test scorer/reader, para 4)

None of these qualifications require a scorer to be an educator of students with special needs.

Ms. Peavey stated, “I think it’s way too subjective and I think it just ends up grading the teacher.” Ms. Martin explained, “It is graded by persons that do not have an educational degree. They have never worked with our population. They do not have a clear understanding of what the curriculum is.” Ms. Bell mentioned several times that the GAA, in her opinion, was a measurement of the teacher’s ability to adequately enter information into the desired GAA format, versus a true measure of student progress. She stated that if the teacher made a mistake, such as a typographical error, then “The student would fail and then we would have to redo the whole thing over and then the kids are still wondering what they are doing. They don’t remember, so you have to go through the whole process again.”

Another scoring issue raised by the interview participants was that teacher error can cause a student GAA portfolio to receive a failing score. Ms. Bell explained, “Even if the student did everything they should have done, if YOU made a mistake, then the student would fail.” Ms. Garrett described a testing situation that caused some of her portfolios to fail one portion of the assessment process:

I mean the standard was the same and the work sample was the same for all five, and it was something that would have been my error anyway, not that they didn’t make progress or whatever. It was simply a mis-click of the mouse. It was
something that I picked. So, that wasn’t really grading the student. It was grading me. The kid shouldn’t be penalized for something that I did.

These teachers felt as though the graders of the GAA are more concerned with the process that teachers followed and whether pages were numbered correctly and forms were coded correctly, instead of actually looking at the work and progress of the students.

This researcher also had a similar experience when she administered the GAA several years ago. Four of her students participated in the GAA that school year. One of the forms that must be filled out is called the entry sheet. The teacher downloads the form from the state website. The form contains drop down menus to select the standards used within the work sample. In this case, the researcher selected standard “b” for a section, but inadvertently selected standard “a” on one student’s portfolio entry sheet. Although the work sample included within the portfolio addressed which standard was intended and the write up gave an explicit account of which standard was addressed, and all other portfolios were the same in nature, because of that single simple mis-click of the mouse, that student’s portfolio failed and the student had to be retested. These are the types of subjectivity and irregularity issues that cause teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities who participate in the GAA to distrust the process.

Interestingly, in the particular county that this research study was conducted, the county also has a protocol for extensive GAA review, so it is surprising that GAAs would make it all the way to the state level and then be deemed unscorable or fail all together. Within the county, GAA review checks are completed twice a year. Since the GAA is made up of two collection periods, Collection Period 1 and Collection Period 2, the
county has arranged for the GAAs to be checked by outside sources for both collection periods. At the conclusion of Collection Period 1, two special education program specialist from the board office visit each high school, they take each GAA packet and review them for errors to ensure that teachers are on track, that content is aligned to standards, and that teachers have addressed all aspects of the standards. The program specialists also review the documents for grammatical, spelling, and punctuation errors. They provide the teachers with constructive feedback to ensure the GAAs are up to standards. The two program specialists come again at the end of Collection Period 2; providing teachers with constructive feedback to enhance their GAA documents. Once all corrections are made, the packets are placed in the blue GAA binders provided by the state and then reviewed and signed off on by the building principal or assistant principal of instruction. Once this process is complete, the GAA binders are turned into the board office, where they are once again checked by special education program specialists and then sent to Questar for official scoring. After a GAA has been checked that many times by that many people, it becomes frustrating when any of the binders do not meet the standards to pass; thereby failing a student portfolio.

In particular, the researcher had one section of a portfolio to fail, as previously mentioned. The county filled out an appeal form and proceed with the appeal process with the testing administration, but it was declined. In speaking with the participants of the study, the researcher learned that three of the six participants had also appeal a GAA decision in the past, but none of respondents had a failure status overturned. All appeals were denied, as was the researcher’s experience.
Importance of IEP Goals

Every student with a diagnosed disability has an IEP. Within each IEP are individualized goals and objectives that the IEP committee members determine as fundamental for success for a particular student. Students with disabilities are also active members of their IEP committees and work with all members to establish goals that they themselves want to achieve. In most cases, in the population of students with significant cognitive disabilities, these goals and objectives are functional in nature, as they should be, to ensure that the students will be efficient and productive citizens upon graduation from high school. Goals and objectives will vary depending on each individual student and his/her needs. It is necessary that we provide our students with the opportunity to practice and meet the goals that the committee deem appropriate and important for their individual success. When we take this opportunity away for the students, we are taking away their right to an education in their least restrictive environment that will allow them to become fully functioning citizen of society. If teachers are not allowed to focus on their individual students and their needs, “…then a certain amount of unhappiness with ensure” (Munday, 2011, p. 416). Ms. Smith suggested that a more appropriate approach might be assessing individual IEP goals of individual students, and stated,

Some of my students certainly can read and answer questions so their goals could be appropriate for them, but my student who doesn’t know her address… she may need to know that more when she leaves high school. And if we measured that then we would probably see a lot better progress for the student and better IEP goals written.
Within the IEP for students with disabilities, the goals and objectives match their ability level and committee member recommendations to ensure successful implementation into the community after high school. Ms. Bell was an avid proponent for the assessment of the student based on IEP goals as well. She noted, “I really don’t think they need to be assessed. I think our goal is to try to make them productive citizens and being able to know their basic information”. Later in the interview, she further elaborated, “I think to me, that’s what the focus needs to be on- to make sure that we are able to get them where they’re able to get a job and be productive so no I don’t think they necessarily need to be um-assessed.”

Appropriate Assessment Methods

Thurlow et al. (2005) suggested that in order to effectively utilize and implement alternate assessments, we “need to consider thoughtfully what is the appropriate role of alternate assessments” (p. 238). When discussion arouse concerning the best method for assessing students with significant cognitive disabilities, the findings were unanimous. As Ms. Torres stated, “It needs to be geared towards that level of student and not the Regular Ed class.” This was the consensus among all interview participants. The rationale of all participants was nicely clarified by Ms. Peavey who explained, “If you were to do vertical alignment to what my children really could get and understand, you’re looking at elementary standards.” Prior to administering the GAA, it has been predetermined that these students function lower than their same aged peers cognitively, which is why they are afforded the opportunity to participate in an alternate assessment. The assessment should meet the students where they are at academically.
Ms. Martin suggested, “It’s really pointless. I would really like for the state to dissolve the requirements of the GAA for our students in the high school.” Ms. Smith expressed her concern with the adequate portrayal of the GAA, “It’s not truthful, because they’re assessed on standards that they can’t do independently, so it’s not a truthful measure of the student. They can only do it with help.”

This researcher, as a special education teacher, agrees with components of each interviewee’s interpretation of the best method for assessing this population of students. Most certainly, this researcher would also argue that for a test to be trustworthy, credible, and dependable, when assessing students with significant cognitive disabilities, the test would have to focus on individual student needs and academic level. Having an assessment that focused on the mastery of IEP goals would seem much more beneficial to this researcher, opposed to testing the students on grade level content and standards.

Conclusion

Based on analysis on interviews with the study’s participants, it is evident that the secondary special education teachers interviewed do not perceive the GAA to be an appropriate assessment for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. All six of the research participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the GAA’s portrayal of their students’ progress and individual growth. The participants unanimously agreed that the GAA was not a recommended approach for assessing their students.

While participants did not have a unified response about a specific assessment tool to replace the GAA, all participants agreed that for an assessment of this population of students to be appropriate, the assessment would need to focus on individual student
goals that are more functional in nature. Participants unanimously agreed that assessment for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities should include functional skills, focus on IEP goals, and be individualized for each student.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine six secondary teachers’ perceptions of the Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA) as a measure of student progress and growth for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities and to explore factors that these teachers consider appropriate for assessing this population of students. Grounded in critical disability theory, this study also sought to share the voices of teachers who serve students that have traditionally been marginalized and to advocate for appropriate assessment practices for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. This study is the first of which the researcher is aware to address secondary educators’ perceptions of the GAA.

Chapter One introduced the reader to the background, context, problem, purpose, methodology, theoretical framework, and significance of the study. Additionally, it described the perspective of the researcher and provided definitions of key terms.

Chapter Two described the current research gap and presented a review of literature related to critical disability theory, critical theory, social construction, deconstruction, disability research methods, federal regulations, disability and oppression, history of alternate assessment, the Georgia Alternate Assessment, and GAA participation guidelines.
Chapter Three described the methodology used to conduct this qualitative case study and included descriptions of the study’s purpose, problem statement, research questions, setting, participants, processes used for data collection and analysis, strategies for ensuring trustworthiness, credibility, and dependability, the study’s limitations, delimitations, and assumptions.

Chapter Four presented the results of data analysis. Participant profiles were presented first, followed by an overview of the interview protocol and procedures. Data analysis was described, including excerpts to provide rich description. Finally, major themes were presented.

Chapter Five closes the study and includes an overview of the study, discussion of the findings, implications, recommendations, and the researcher’s final thoughts.

Overview of the Study

This qualitative case study was conducted to address a gap in educational research as it pertains to secondary teachers’ perceptions of the GAA as an adequate assessment tool for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. The researcher was unable to find any relevant research that pertained to the administration of this assessment, to high school students, in Georgia. This research study served to close the educational gap in the research and provide educators, legislators, and stakeholders with research based evidence that the GAA is an inappropriate assessment tool for students who have significant cognitive disabilities. This research study will serve as a basis of consideration for legislators and test designers in reconsidering the current GAA testing protocol.
This qualitative case study was conducted in a middle Georgia public school district. Participants included six secondary special education teachers from six different high schools within the district. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with each participant. Interviews were audio recorded with participant permission, then transcribed by the researcher. Transcripts were analyzed using constant comparison coding, with codes grouped into major categories that were then interpreted thematically. The researcher evoked constant comparison coding while analyzing data by looking for reoccurring words or phrases found within each of the six interview transcriptions. These words and/or phrases were then disseminated into chunks or groups of similar categories. Review and analysis of the categories that evolved led the researcher to the production of the five major themes found within this research study. To ensure trustworthiness, credibility, and dependability, the researcher used background knowledge, triangulation, member checking, and thick description.

In considering the application of the emancipatory research method in this study of the GAA, the researcher chose to interview teachers of students with special needs. While it would be valuable to enlist student participation in this study, this research study was conducted at the height of the GAA test administration window and the researcher did not want to impose any undue stress on the students. As an educator of students with special needs, this researcher determined that the teachers of the students could provide adequate information in regard to this study. The teachers interviewed had direct access to the students on a daily basis as well as knowledge of the students’ perceptions of the GAA. Using the critical disability theory framework, this researcher investigated
secondary teachers’ perceptions of the GAA portfolio model in assessing secondary students with significant cognitive disabilities. Through the semi-structured interview process with the high school special education teachers, the researcher guided the interview session with a set of four specific open-ended questions, but also allowed the participants the opportunity to discuss in further detail, their beliefs for why the GAA was not appropriate for this population of students.

The six secondary special education teachers who participated in this study were passionate about their roles as teachers and equally as passionate about their disdain of the GAA as an assessment tool for their students with significant cognitive disabilities. Four of the six participants were so passionate that they insisted that their names be explicitly included in the write up of the research findings, however, to protect both their identities and the identities of the school system for which the research was conducted, pseudonyms were used in the write up of the findings.

Each participant expressed genuine concern for the population of students with significant cognitive disabilities that they teach. Each participant had been working with students with significant cognitive disabilities and the GAA at the high school level for at least six years, with some administering the GAA for all 14 years that it has been in effect. When asked why they chose to work with this population of students, all respondents displayed a genuine love for the job they do and the population of students for which they work. Each participant had a unique story for choosing their occupation, but they all surrounded around their desire to work with students with special needs and ensure that their students are afforded the best education possible. For the purpose of this
research study, the researcher sought the expertise of the secondary special education teachers as the voice of high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. Since these teachers work beside these students every day, they were able to provide authentic insight into the administration of the GAA.

Discussion of Findings

Five major themes emerged during data analysis: 1) Loss of Instructional Time; 2) Inappropriate Instructional Content; 3) Subjective Scoring and Teacher Error; 4) Importance of IEP Goals; and 5) Appropriate Assessment Methods. Analysis of these themes enabled the researcher to answer the two research questions that guided this study. Themes 1, 2, and 3 were applied to address the first research question, and themes 4 and 5 were applied to address the second research questions.

Addressing Research Question 1

This study’s first research question was: How do secondary special education teachers perceive the Georgia Alternate Assessment as a measure of student progress and growth for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities?

The six secondary special education teachers who participated in this study do not perceive the GAA to be an appropriate assessment for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. All six participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the GAA’s portrayal of their students’ progress and individual growth. The participants unanimously agreed that the GAA was not a recommended approach for assessing their students. These participants found the GAA to be meaningless tool for assessing students with significant cognitive disabilities. These educators advocate that the instructional
practices in their classrooms, for this population of students with significant cognitive disabilities, should focus on the daily and functional living skills that each individual student needs to learn.

Participants in this research study responded similarly to participants of an earlier study of alternate assessments (Katsiyannis et al., 2007) in expressing their frustration concerning the lack of benefits the GAA provides to their students. When a student can barely comprehend lower level reading material, it seems obvious that they would not directly benefit from learning an eleventh grade content standard. Students with significant cognitive disabilities should be focusing on the skills they need to become productive, independent citizens of society upon completion of high school. The participants of this study all felt as though their teaching time was wasted working on grade level content and standards that are meaningless for this population of students. Again, we can refer to Derrida’s (1968) contention that current practices are all wrong and we need to refocus our efforts.

Although these teachers felt frustration with the grade level standards as their required assessment tool, they do not discount the need for academic course work within the special education classroom. However, like the participants in Restorff et al. (2012) study, these teachers suggest that their students would be better served if the content standards to which they were exposed were on their cognitive functioning level. These teachers do in fact incorporate academic content standards into their classrooms; however, the extent to which this is done is individualized based on the needs of each student in their classrooms.
Another aspect to consider is that many special education teachers are not taught academic content, such as Literature, Math, Science, or History in their teacher preparation courses. It was this researcher’s experience, when attending college, that she was trained to be an advocate for her students with special needs, to address and manage behaviors, and to provide supports and interventions to ensure success for all her students. She was not required to take a course of any sort in academic content. This also causes a problem for high school teachers, expected to teach eleventh grade content and standards, when they themselves have not been taught how to teach the content.

The teachers also felt that the time they spent compiling the GAA portfolios would be better spent focusing on the daily and functional skills that their students may be lacking. Like participants in a similar study, they expressed concern for the considerable amount required for the GAA (Kampfer et al., 2001). Ms. Peavey stated that she had evaluated the time requirement at 100 hours per GAA portfolio. It appears that tremendous amounts of instructional and planning time are lost to GAA paperwork.

Addressing Research Question 2

What factors do teachers believe are appropriate for assessing high school students with significant cognitive disabilities?

While participants did not have a unified response about a specific assessment tool to replace the GAA, all participants agreed that for an assessment of this population of students to be appropriate, the assessment would need to focus on individual student goals that are more functional in nature. Participants unanimously agreed that assessment
for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities should include functional
skills, focus on IEP goals, and be individualized for each student.

In researching the effectiveness of Georgia’s Alternate Assessment to evaluate
progress and growth of secondary students with significant cognitive disabilities, this
researcher deconstructed the notion that these students can be effectively evaluated
through the use of an alternate assessment that is guided by grade level state standards.
This researcher does not presume to know the best or most appropriate way to
successfully assess students with significant cognitive disabilities; however, as a special
educator, the researcher plans to investigate more authentic, valid, and reliable ways of
assessing this diverse population of students and agrees with the research participants’
notion that these assessments must be more functional in nature, focusing on
individualized IEP goals.

When administering the GAA in her own classroom, this researcher found it to be
a daunting task at times to instruct students with significant cognitive disabilities on
eleventh grade content and material. In this researcher’s personal experience in the
classroom, many of the students in this type of program struggled with functional and
daily life skills. The students would have been better served if time spent on instruction
and assessment was focused on the functional and daily life skills that they need to learn
in order to succeed after high school.

Implications

This section presents implications of the study for students with cognitive
disabilities and for teachers of students with cognitive disabilities.
Implications for Students with Cognitive Disabilities

Examination of the GAA for assessing high school students with significant cognitive disabilities, through a critical disability lens, allowed the researcher to learn that a change is needed in the assessment of this population of students. With the focus on full inclusion implemented by Race to the Top (2009) and No Child Left Behind (2001), this researcher would argue that the very students who are being left behind are those with disabilities, the population these legislations proclaim to be helping.

If we do not change our assessment measures and approaches for this population of students, we will only be continuing to do them a disservice by teaching them and holding them responsible for content that is not beneficial to them. Instead of producing well-rounded, functional, independent adults, we will have students graduating from our high schools who are unable to function independently within their environments. The researcher previously noted that critical disability theorists’ focus is to express the value and importance of persons with a disability. This task cannot be accomplished if we continue to neglect our student’s ability levels and require them to participate in the GAA assessments that do not adequately measure their personal progress and growth.

Implications for Teachers of Students with Cognitive Disabilities

This researcher posits that if secondary students with significant cognitive disabilities, and their teachers, were able to interact at a level appropriate for the individual students within the classroom, there would be an increase in student integration into society upon completion of high school. According to Biesta (2007), “Teachers are encouraged to follow rules for actions prescribed by evidence-based
research that reports ‘tried and tested recipes’ (p. 16). This researcher, in agreement with Derrida (1967), would suggest that these ‘tried and tested recipes’ might not be effective for all students. Methods and techniques that are effective for one student may not be beneficial for others. This researcher contends that educators of persons with special needs must continuously evaluate and change their methods to best meet the needs of each individual student.

By limiting the time out special education teachers have to teach functional skills to these students, we are debilitating the student’s ability to function in their communities. We must listen to these teacher advocates and change our assessment practices. While accountability is important in all aspects of education, this researcher does not feel that the current method for assessing this population of students is effective. This researcher suggests that special educators are highly aware of the implications for focusing their instructional practices on grade level content, but they are also highly aware of the ramifications for not doing so. This researcher suggests that when educators are allowed to focus on the child, while also focusing on the content, there will be a change in the education of our students with disabilities. This change will be for the betterment of this diverse population of students. As a critical disability theorist, this researcher posits that to continue the GAA assessment would only continue to disable this population of students and hinder their successful independent integration into society upon graduation from high school. We are not teaching them the life skills they so desperately require when we focus on grade level content that has no true bearing on their success.
Recommendations

The following subsections present recommendations for legislators, researchers, and parents/advocates based on the results of this study.

Recommendations for Legislators

After critically examining the findings of this study, the researcher suggests that policy makers and state board of education members should reconsider the implementation of the Georgia Alternate Assessment for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. The findings from the study indicate that secondary special education teachers find the GAA to be a waste of valuable instructional time and ineffective in effectively portraying the ability level of the students in their classrooms. Test developers and lawmakers must realize that this student population functions at varying levels and their assessments should be individualized and highlight their successes in the classroom. State and federal legislators should consider alternate testing options for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities that focus on functional and daily living skills.

By reviewing this research study, and conducting other research studies to extend our knowledge of secondary special education and alternate assessments, Georgia lawmakers may be able to create an assessment tool that would better assess high school students that fall within this category. As Flowers et al. (2005) posited about alternate assessments, “It is unlikely that it will improve the quality of education of students with disabilities until teachers perceive that students benefit from the use of AA procedures and instruments” (p. 91). When lawmakers begin to take into consideration teacher
perceptions and ideas, teachers will then be able to take ownership of the assessment process. Special educators are the experts in their field of teaching students with significant cognitive disabilities. The must be allowed to assist in the development of a more authentic assessment tool for these students.

Lawmakers might also consider allowing the teachers to choose lower grade level standards for assessment versus requiring the eleventh grade content standards. If a student is functioning on a second or third grade level, it is much more appropriate to assess them on standards for which they are better able to complete independently without additional prompts or teacher assistance. Another area of consideration for lawmakers is to consider the use of IEP goals and objectives as the driving forces of individualized assessment tools for students with significant cognitive disabilities, as the six teacher participants suggested in their interviews with the researcher.

Far too often those implementing new testing procedures and policies are far removed from the classroom, if they were ever educators at all. It would serve policy and lawmakers well to visit schools around Georgia to further expand their understanding of the GAA processes and the student population affected. They need to get out in the trenches, talk to the teachers, and incorporate better assessment procedures for students with significant cognitive disabilities, that adequately measure student progress and growth for each individual student based on his/her needs and developmental level.

Recommendations for Researchers

This researcher would also suggest that there needs to be more extensive research done in regards to what the best assessment approach might be for students with
significant cognitive disabilities. Those in charge of designing and implementing the assessments should take into account the student population for which they are targeting. As many of the interview participants suggested, students in these classes are functioning far below their same age peers socially, cognitively, and academically; therefore, assessing them on eleventh grade content and standards is absurd. This research study was limited to the perceptions of only six teachers in a middle Georgia school system. There should be additional research done across the state of Georgia to develop an understanding, across the state, of the perceptions the current assessment approach by Georgia educators. Researchers should continue to conduct interviews with Georgia educators in an effort to further expand on the dissatisfaction of the GAA by high school special education teachers. Continuing the research on this topic could eventually persuade policy and lawmakers to reconsider the current GAA process.

This researcher also recommends that there should be additional research done on differentiated assessments and ways to ensure that the students are prepared for independent living upon graduation of high school. While this researcher acknowledges that there needs to be accountability in all the classrooms, including special education classrooms, she believes that the current alternate assessment approach is not an appropriate measure. Further research should also be conducted in other states on their processes and procedures for assessing high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. Conducting research in this manner could reveal better and more appropriate assessment measures for this population of students.
Recommendations for Parents and Advocates

Considering that students with significant cognitive disabilities function significantly lower than their same age peers socially, cognitively, and emotionally, these students may not possess the communication skills to voice their concerns themselves, therefore the teachers, parents, and other advocates of persons with disabilities must be their voices. It is this researcher’s opinion that while assessment is an important aspect of education and accountability, the GAA process is not the best method for assessing this population of students. She would also argue that any type of assessment of these students, in an effort to yield adequate results, should focus on individual student needs and goals, i.e. their IEP goals and objectives. As advocates and educators of students with disabilities, it is time to demand a change and ensure that our students and others with disabilities are afforded the same opportunities as their same age “normal” peers.

Dissemination of Findings

In an effort to disseminate the findings of this research study, the researcher reviewed the policies and procedures of the county for which the research was conducted. There was no specific protocol for the dissemination of research findings found within the county guidelines and procedures. During the interview sessions, interview participants were asked if they would like to review the transcription of the interview findings. The six participants, at that time, all chose not to review the transcription of the interviews. The researcher also provided the participants with the opportunity to request the transcription the following week. None of them did so. Upon completion of compiling the research and analyzing the findings, the researcher sent an email to all six
participants thanking them for their participation in the research and letting them know that the write up was complete. She again offered the participants the opportunity to read the research findings. Of the six participants, one of them requested to read the report. The research study has been provided to that research participant. In an effort to disseminate this research further, the researcher will offer a report of the research findings to both the county’s Board of Education and the Georgia Alternate Assessment testing supervisor.

Final Thoughts

The GAA causes undue stress on high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. The main goal for this population of students is to be able to become independent citizens in society upon graduation from high school. They need to know how to survive on their own. The students should be learning how to cook their own meals, balance a checkbook, apply for jobs, appropriately interact with others, the importance of personal space, etc. While it is important that students with significant cognitive disabilities have the opportunity to be exposed to grade level content and standards, the research participants and this researcher strongly conquer that this should not be the means for measuring their ability levels. These skills should only be considered second to the student’s personal growth in functional and daily living skills.

Five of the six participants of this research study still work in the high school setting, with the sixth one currently working at the transition academy. The five teachers at the high school level have a coffee shop curriculum at their school. This is a coffee shop run by the students with significant cognitive disabilities. When these students
begin working at the coffee shop at the beginning of the school year, many of them are unable to count change, work a cash register, communicate effectively with their customers, or even correctly pronounce the names of the variety of coffees available. At the end of the school year, if a student who could not initially with customers can now do so, progress has been made. This is a valuable life skill that the student needs in order to become as independent as possible upon graduation. These students must be able to communicate with other. Hence, it’s worth stating again, “The child’s intellectual growth is contingent on his mastering the social means of thought, that is, language” (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 94). If a student once could not count change, but now he/she can, this is progress. These are the types of skills that students in these programs should be working on. It is our responsibility to ensure that our students are as independent as possible and are able to navigate social situations.

The six teachers interviewed also take their students on Community Based Instruction (CBI) trips. This is an opportunity for the students to go out in the community and learn how to navigate various sectors. These learning experiences may be a trip to the store where they practice waiting in line to pay for their items, or out to a fast food restaurant to develop necessary money skills. Sadly, it has been this researcher’s experience, when taking her own students out on CBI trips, that these students could very easily be taken advantage of, at no fault of their own. So many of the students have no concept of money value. They may purchase a two-dollar sandwich, hand the cashier a five-dollar bill, and then walk away, leaving their change behind. There have even been instances, observed by the researcher, when the student will have a
certain amount of money, say five dollars and proceed to order an eight-dollar value meal, completely unaware that they do not have enough money to pay for their order. These teachers also take the students out to restaurants and teach them how to tip their waiter/waitress. Other common practices for CBI trips are to take students to the library to obtain a library card or to the bank to open up a checking or saving account. These are all life skills that most of us take for granted; life skills that students with significant cognitive disabilities often lack. Unfortunately, it was this researcher’s experience as well as the participant experience, that there is not as much time to focus on these important life skills since the implementation of the GAA. Teachers are spending more time preparing and administering the GAA so less time is spent on practicing skills that really matter to these students and will improve their quality of life.

Not only does the GAA demand that this population of students learn grade level content, it also requires them to meet annual goals and short term objectives for their IEPs while also ensuring that they are meeting the goals within their transition plans (a portion of the IEP focused on the transition goals from high school to life after high school). This researcher argues that the goals found within the IEP and the transition plan for students with significant cognitive disabilities, are far more imperative for this population of students. This researcher has had students to graduate from high school, unable to live independently of their parents or some sort of assisted living, but yet they are still required to be tested on and pass eleventh grade content and standards. It is unfair to put so much pressure on a population of students who are already struggling
with basic life skills. We must put the focus back on our students and their needs and alleviate the focus and stress of a state standardized test.

Stake (1995) asserted that an “Intrinsic case study design draws the researcher toward understanding of what is important about the case within its own world…” (p. 252). This researcher posits that the continuing to administer the GAA to high school students with significant cognitive disabilities will not prove beneficial for anyone involved. What is important in the education of this population of students are the students themselves. The individual student, their needs, and their abilities must be at the forefront of any conversation that addresses the academic goals and assessment procedures for the student. While accountability is important and necessary, it should not be the guiding force in educating this population of students; the students must be considered the number one priority.

Far too often, this population of students goes unnoticed. They are unable to advocate for themselves and the struggles they face on a daily basis. This researcher utilized the critical disability theory in an effort to ensure that their voices were heard, through interviews with the student’s teachers. It is this researcher’s contention that we are invoking a major disservice to our high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. The GAA is primarily a measure of a teacher’s abilities to write up the documentation in a manner that will get the student a passing grade. The GAA does not adequately measure students’ ability levels. It is the opinion of this researcher that the GAA should be reconsidered, redesigned, or ended all together as it is not an adequate
portrayal of student progress and growth for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL LETTER
01-Aug-2016

Ms. Misty Salter
Mercer University
Tift College of Education
1400 Coleman Avenue
Macon, GA 31207-0001

RE: Secondary Special Education Teachers’ Perceptions of the Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA) (H1607193)

Dear Ms. Salter:

Your application entitled: Secondary Special Education Teachers’ Perceptions of the Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA) (H1607193) was reviewed by this Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research in accordance with Federal Regulations 21 CFR 56.110(b) and 45 CFR 46.110(b) (for expedited review) and was approved under Category 6, 7 per 53 FR 60364.

Your application was approved for one year of study on 01-Aug-2016. The protocol expires 31-Jul-2017. If the study continues beyond one year, it must be re-evaluated by the IRB Committee.

Item(s) Approved:
New application for qualitative case study using semi-structured interviews as data collection

Please complete the survey for the IRB and the Office of Research Compliance. To access the survey, click on the following link: https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/K77ET8R

"Mercer University has adopted and agrees to conduct its clinical research studies in accordance with the International Conference on Harmonization’s (ICH) Guidelines for Good Clinical Practice."

Respectfully,

Ava Chambless-Richardson, M.ED., CIP, CIM
Member
Institutional Review Board
Mercer University IRB & Office of Research Compliance
Phone (478) 301-4101
Fax (478) 301-2329
ORC Mercer@Mercer.Edu

1501 Mercer University Dr. | Macon, Georgia 31207-0001
(478) 301-4101 | FAX (478) 301-2329
APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT LETTER
Dear Respondent,

My name is Misty Salter. I am a PhD student in the Curriculum and Instruction program at the Tift College of Education - Mercer University. I am conducting a research study regarding secondary teachers’ perceptions of the validity of the Georgia Alternate Assessment to effectively measure student progress and growth of high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. I am emailing to ask if you would like to contribute by participating in a short interview session. Mercer University’s IRB requires investigators to provide informed consent to the research participants.

If you would be interested in participating in the interview session, please provide your consent to participate.

If you have any questions about the study, contact the investigator Misty Salter (478-230-3644) or send an email to Misty.s.salter@live.mercer.edu. Mercer University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed study #(H1607193) and approved it on (01-Aug-2016).

**Questions about your rights as a research participant:**
If you have questions about your rights or are dissatisfied at any time with any part of this study, you can contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board by phone at (478) 301-4101 or email at ORC_Research@Mercer.edu.

Thank you in advance for your time and participation!

Misty Salter
APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM
Title of Project: SECONDARY SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE VALIDITY OF THE GEORGIA ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT (GAA)
Investigator Name: Misty Salter
E-Mail Contact Information: Misty.s.salter@live.mercer.edu

You are invited to participate in an interview session for a research project conducted through Mercer University. Mercer University’s IRB requires investigators to provide informed consent to the research participants.

The purpose of this research study is to examine secondary special education teachers’ perception of the validity of the Georgia Alternate Assessment to effectively measure student progress and growth of high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. Your participation in the study will contribute to a better understanding of the validity of the Georgia Alternate Assessment for measuring student progress and growth of high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. Your participation in the study will also contribute to a better understanding of the method(s) secondary special education teachers consider to be the most authentic, credible, and dependable for assessing students with significant cognitive disabilities. You must be at least 18 years old to participate.

If you agree to participate
The interview will take approximately 30 minutes to an hour of your time. You will participate in the interview to discuss your perceptions of the validity of the Georgia Alternate Assessment. You will not be compensated for your participation.

Risks/Benefits/Confidentiality of Data
There are no foreseeable risks or discomfort which could cause you to feel uncomfortable, distressed, sad or tired. There will be no cost for participating. Although your participation in this research may not benefit you personally, it will help us understand how secondary teachers perceive Georgia’s Alternate Assessments’ effectiveness in measuring student progress and growth of high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. It will also help us understand the method(s) secondary special education teachers consider to be the most authentic, credible, and dependable for assessing high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. Your name and email address will not be kept during the data collection phase. A limited number of research team members will have access to the data during data collection. No identifiable information will be used during the final dataset.
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
### Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to talk with me today. As you know, I am Misty Salter, a PhD student at Mercer University. I will be audio recording our interview today. I will also be asking you to confirm/clarify your responses throughout the interview to ensure that I am correctly interpreting your responses to the questions. I am speaking with secondary special education teachers to determine their perceptions of the Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA) to effectively measure student progress and growth of high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. As a special education teacher of students with significant cognitive disabilities, I would like to discuss your perception of the GAA as an adequate measure of student growth and achievement for students with significant cognitive disabilities. The information obtained from our discussion today will help me increase the research and knowledge of the GAA, in an effort to inform and improve assessment practices for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. Your answers to any and all questions will be strictly confidential. When transcribing your responses, I will not include your name or any other information that might reveal your identity. Do you have any questions about the study before we begin the interview?

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### Before we begin:

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### Interview Questions

1. How long have you been working with high school students with significant cognitive disabilities and what influenced you to work with this population of students?

2. How many years have you administered the Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA) at any grade level?

3. What do you like about the GAA test administration?

4. What do you dislike about the GAA test administration?

5. Do you feel that the GAA is an adequate portrayal of your student’s progress and/or growth at the high school level?
   a. Why or why not?

6. Do you think the GAA is the best method for testing this population of students?
   a. Why or why not?